

# No Way Back Where

columns by

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## **No Way Back Where 1**

Now is the time to switch to a new language. Not Polish or English. That is not why Nowy Czas are publishing this column in the "original" (I was born in Poland, but grew up in the UK, therefore my "first" language is English). I am writing "in" the language of a New Europe. A continent which has given up on internal warfare, on pointless borders, on much that was never real in the first place. Meet people in Slask or Catalunya or Transylvania, and you find nations not on the map, languages you've never heard of, stories not available in school history books. Europe is far more complex and diverse than maps allow for, and so are its inhabitants. Before you moved to a new country, how often did you consider your nationality as the characteristic which defined who you are? Drinking with friends, negotiating with colleagues, choosing a gift for someone or discussing a film you'd just seen, how aware were you of your "citizenship"? It is only when we travel, when we move countries, that we begin to seriously consider our roots.

This in itself is good, but there is a catch. As outsiders, struggling to adapt to a place and a people we don't yet know or belong to, we are at a disadvantage. Working strange jobs, speaking an alien tongue, surrounded by new experiences and cultures, we feel lost.

Culture shock is painful for most, though not everyone. In the twenty-odd years I've lived here, I've met migrants from all corners of the world. As an ESOL tutor in community colleges, as a librarian in a prison, as a cultural coordinator for the Home Office, I've worked with refugees, "illegal immigrants" and simple, run of the mill foreigners. Some came from war zones, others from wealthy empires, all united by one characteristic - the strength or weakness of their personalities. This is the key to understanding who someone says they are. The sense that no matter what colour your skin is, how imperfect your accent or how far from the

office which issued your passport you may be, you are who you are meant to be.

Migration is a litmus test of character. Do you only feel confident in your own back yard, like a plant which doesn't re-pot well? Or are you destined to move and discover both yourself and the world around you, comfortable in your own skin, no matter what colour it may be? As an individual, an independent intellect, a free person in a free world? In my experience, Poles ask this question with fear. Sure, we're good at solo actions, "sabre in hand" we can meet any enemy and survive any challenge. But can we "win the peace", as well as any war? Can we, in our own over-developed sense of individuality, also come together?

This is the question I am asking, the language I want to speak. Not the tongue of endless introspection, but one which will answer a simple question - can we, in this new time, become at one with ourselves and the world around us? Now that our "papers" say we are citizens of a new Europe, can we, in our minds, live up to this fresh challenge?

### **Now you're asking**

People often ask "What's your star sign?", usually after I've said something that confused or upset them. I never answer. What's the point? If I think the question is no good, why would I even try to respond?

But when I am asked "Where are you from?", the question of what to say is much more difficult.

I was born in Warszawa, but moved to London at the age of 12. This is where I finished school, fell in love for the first time, graduated, eventually earning myself another citizenship. So, the answer is simple, surely? Any child can add one and one together. I was born there, live here, have two passports, therefore I am... I feel... complex.

I arrived in Britain in 1985 as a "child political refugee". After the painful experience of adjusting to life in a peaceful society, I became a regular, commonplace immigrant. Then, once I'd graduated in English Literature and lost all trace of my original accent, I simply felt like a migrant. Finally, in 2000, I sent off my cheque and received my certificate and swore my oath and became a naturalised, fully-fledged British citizen.

I was living in Brighton then, struggling with my first novel, working in bars and offices and still writing ten, twelve hours a day. But I was lonely, always skint and somehow tired of where I was at. Sick of poverty, still confused about my identity, not satisfied visiting Poland as a tourist, I decided to move "back" in a more permanent sense. The plan was to live in Warszawa for a year, teach as a native speaker, finish the novel (partly set in the city of my birth) and return to the UK to try getting published. I kind of felt I was betraying Britain, as it had only just made me "one of their own", but after years of hard work and good behaviour, I felt I deserved a break.

In the end, I stayed in W-wa twice as long as planned. Speaking and writing in two tongues every day, working and

partying with Brits as well as Poles, I felt at home in this new-found schizoid state. Plus, although I had lived in all kinds of places in Britain, none had felt as "right" as Warszawa. There was something moving about living in a city that seemed, for all its faults and problems, like it was being born again. After so many partitions, invasions, wars and occupations, Warsaw, Poland, we were free for the first time in centuries, and I loved the sense of possibility, of hunger there was about its people. These beautiful, hard-working, curious citizens seemed charged with an energy hard to find in a land as calm and content as Britain.

With a torn heart, a year later than planned, I returned to London to get published. The novel never happened, although I succeeded in other ways, publishing short stories, running arts organisations, becoming a successful painter and filmmaker. I travelled on to Paris, Berlin, Barcelona, always writing, always being asked "Where are you from?" and yet, somehow, always feeling like this was the wrong question all along.

Where am I from? Lots of places.

What is my nationality? It changes from time to time, but I'll always feel at home in Europe.

Where is *home* exactly? Wait... Are you just asking, like you do about my star sign? Or do you really want to know? See, the British have a choice of two words - "house" and "home", where Poles only have the one - "dom" (although it does both jobs, depending on the context). Are you enquiring after my address or my state of mind? Which language are you speaking? What is it *exactly* that you want to know?

I respect people's right to ask about my star sign, while reserving the right to stay silent in reply. But when you ask "Where are you from?", I'm likely to answer with an echo. Not because I'm an Aries and rude, but because I'm no longer a refugee, or an immigrant, or a national of any simple kind. The answer to your question will not be found on any piece of paper or on any label. It is something complex, evolving,

multi-dimensional. Something I am always looking for, without ever feeling lost.

## **The gravity of ghettos**

"The most tender place in my heart is for strangers.  
I know it's unkind,  
but my own blood is much too dangerous."

Neko Case "Hold on Hold on"

What is it about the opening of Case's song that strikes a worried chord every time I play it? Is it the fabulous twin-guitar riff that plays good cop/bad cop with your ears, or maybe something about those first few lines that has poetic, painful relevance to Polish communities in 2007?

Poles seem to be leaving their motherland in force. It is, for those sick of ongoing corruption and inner-conflict, a place they no longer feel like calling home. Surveys conducted recently into the new patterns of EU migration suggest around 40% of us in the UK have no intention of going back. And why would we? Back where? The British know how to integrate migrant communities better than any other state in Europe, and in many ways we feel more welcome here than we do "back home".

But, I ask myself, what does a Pole of average age, education and experience find when they encounter their own kind here, in London? Is the government looking after its own abroad? Are our community centres open to both the old Polonia and the new generation, keen to "strike out" into the future (pardon the Solidarity pun, but it seems ironically relevant today)? Are we at one with ourselves in a land free from the ghosts of our geographical past?

I'm not going to answer those questions here. Not because I'm afraid to, and not because most of the Polish press in the UK cover the bad news continuously anyway. I'm simply too busy doing something about it to whinge on about the "same old, same old".

In trying to solve the puzzle of Poland's future, I look back and see that many of its world-famous children realised their potential in exile. Chopin, Conrad, Kieslowski - did

they have to leave its gravitational pull to flourish? The best-known Polish artist currently at work in the world is Polanski, his most successful film "The Pianist" – both artist and protagonist ghetto survivors, both having to look to the "outside" for freedom and support. Do these striking coincidences tell us something we need to know about ourselves?

When a year ago myself and Bartek Dziadosz, the director of "Portrait – young Polish artists in a New Europe" (a feature length documentary, currently in production), decided to set up a migrant artists organisation, we knew it could not be another "ghetto". Those among us who we saw creating successfully in the UK were always collaborating with other "nationals", showing their work in non-Polonia locations, speaking in many tongues. Their vision guided us in setting up Apart Arts, currently organising events all over Europe, both real and on-line. We have opened a gallery, almost finished shooting our film and are staging two exhibitions at City Hall in the next two weeks, showcasing the work of young Polish artists living and working in the UK. We are also hosting "No Way Back Where", an integration event at Conway Hall the first Saturday in August. Representatives from both Polish and Romanian Cultural Institutes will join speakers from Russia and the Czech Republic, and poets from Poland and Persia, in asking how the different ways in which artists express themselves can be used to shape the future of our continent.

And as for "back there"? Poland itself? I think back to Case's song, this time focusing on the title and its relevance to that "average" Pole abroad today. Although so many are refusing to go back, history teaches us this diaspora will end too, eventually. Many of us will return, with new visions with which to continue rebuilding a land we can't help but be part of. Did you really think, after hundreds of years of conflict and struggle, that we were going to "Cinderella" into a fully-functioning, modern state in the space of a single generation? So, as the song implores, please hold on. Don't look back with



constant grief, but don't burn bridges or bury the past within yourself either. There's little future for any of us in that.

## **Roller-Coaster Times**

Granta, Britain's foremost magazine of new writing, ran a story recently about an American academic who is also the world record holder for roller-coaster endurance riding. This character, a history teacher from New York, doesn't ride these neck-breaking contraptions for mere days or weeks at a time. Not counting toilet and interview breaks, he lasts up to three non-stop months on the world's most extreme playgrounds. Just going round and round. Permanently stuck in "thrill city".

Granta only publishes prose by the world's finest writers, but even though I read the piece end to end, I still couldn't quite grasp why anyone would do this to themselves. Waste whole years of their lives riding a mad loop.

Then I realise my life's been a roller-coaster too of late. Last week, for the historic first meeting between the mayor of London and reps from our own Polonia community, we organised (as Apart Arts) a one-night-only showing of young Polish artists' work at City Hall. Yesterday, we will have launched another, this time proper two-week exhibition in the City Hall foyer, showing specially commissioned photographs by other young Polish artists. All of the above is continually being filmed for the documentary we are making about our lives in the UK. And tomorrow, Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> of August, we are holding an event at Conway Hall in Holborn, to gather artists and cultural activists from all over Europe and beyond.

A week later, we're launching another exhibition at the Titchy Gallery. The week after that, readying our artists work for travel to Warszawa, Gdansk, Wroclaw, Berlin. Then launching a new publication. Then there's Art-Dom, the on-line arts centre we launched in April... Are we stuck on a roller coaster too? All of us at Apart Arts - Bartek, Maria, Tom, Adam, Ela - we're all volunteers, with no guarantee of success and all kinds of discouragement from all kinds of places. Are we mad too? Or stupid? Workaholic? Obsessive?

No. The times we live in demand something - that we enjoy the ride. It is not us who are mad, it is the world around us. Mad in both good and bad senses of the word.

Every time I see my father (born during WWII, he came to the UK in '81, yet still has trouble communicating in English), I realise I'm quantum leaps ahead of his generation. Living in a new millennium, a landscape of fresh possibility. If I have the money, I can fly into space on Virgin Galactic. In my pocket, there's a phone that is also a camera and a computer and a TV and a map. I wake each day without fear of bombing or serious illness or slaving in a sweat shop.

But being a migrant in all this turbulence, displaced, is doubly hard. While trying to adapt to British traditions and customs, we simultaneously have to keep learning new skills. Torn between the past and the future, we are lost in a present that is all too often overwhelming. It does not feel good to be "between homes". Our old country far behind, troubled and unwelcoming. This new land not comfortable yet, ill-fitting. An educated New Yorker coming to work in London (there are no Coney Island amusement parks for them to ride) expects to feel welcome, be well paid, treated with respect. A Polish doctor or businessman or artist, do they not deserve the same? Do we feel our rights, our abilities to save lives or manage businesses or create art, are worth the same in dollars as in zlotys?

Last week I wrote about the "gravity" of migrant ghettos, about how easy it is to get stuck in your own past, weighed down by the troubles you carry in you when you move. Well, I know of one simple way of escaping gravity. Not private flights into space. Not a budget airline ticket home. Come join us next week at the Titchy Gallery. Or visit [www.art-dom.org](http://www.art-dom.org) to see just how much creative people of Polish origin are achieving in the UK. Or better yet, come to Conway Hall tomorrow and join us on our metaphorical "roller coaster". Once you learn how to enjoy the ride, gravity doesn't hurt half as much.

## **New European Soul**

"Time for a break", someone said after the No Way Back Where event at Conway Hall last week. The mess of discussion, poetry and art that the evening had devolved into was fun, but also frustrating. Too much ambition to squeeze into one hot summer night. Time to stop a minute? Too right. Only where to start?

Most people need a kicking to get going. Me, I have trouble slowing down. The modern world offers so many opportunities, so many directions to go into - retro, post-modern, virtual, mystical - where on earth do you turn to for guidance?

Soul-searching time, methinks.

For those of you unfamiliar with the phrase, it has nothing to do with religion or spirituality. If you need to do some "soul-searching", the suggestion is you've lost your way in life. Maybe emotionally, maybe psychologically, either way it's time to take stock, stare deep down inside yourself and work out "where next".

Perhaps the first thing to ask is - what made you stop and question yourself in the first place? I wrote sometime ago that, although I am both Polish and British, fully bi-lingual, co-habiting between two ends of Europe, I never feel lost. Geographically, this may be so. More than that, I am thrilled about future directions, about the possibility of finding yet more new homes. Perhaps there is another nation I haven't yet met, another land I haven't yet set foot in where I would feel even more "me" than I do in either London or Warszawa. Yet right now, caught between a Britain unsure about its guests and a Poland unsure about its exiles, I am on the hunt for other examples to follow.

A couple of years ago, I rode my motorcycle down to northern Spain. My cousin Grzegorz and I had planned to buy an abandoned farm in Catalonia and turn it into a kind of cheap, art-house hostel in the middle of sunny nowhere. The business plan failed to come off, but I will never forget the place and its people. The food was varied and delicious, not unlike East

European cuisine. The landscape ranged from Alpine highlands to immaculate beaches, all within a mile of each other. And the Catalans were amazing - always happy to drink and dance and fight, yet, in their own words, "never go to bed on an argument".

My cousin chose Catalonia after some bad experiences buying land in the Warmia district of Poland. Too much corruption, too far from civilisation and the summer didn't last anywhere near as long as by the Mediterranean. In Catalonia, we found a beautiful vineyard on a hill overlooking the Ebro valley. We then sorted the money and the legalities and a detailed business plan. Then Grzegorz came to visit me in London, met a girl from Krakow, followed her to Poland and never came back. I guess, at the end of the day, his soul was searching for something closer to its roots.

Me, I still miss the Catalans and their little corner of Spain. The ease with which they speak two languages, fly two flags, unlike their neighbours from the Basque Country, is an example to us all. Maybe my soul-searching is at an end there. Maybe my papers are wrong. What if I'm neither Polish nor British, but deep inside more Mediterranean? Maybe I'm just tired of the ongoing tension between West and East, tired of the pointless hustle of capital cities, of forcing myself to believe we can all become integrated at last?

Nah. One day, maybe, I'll retire to the Old Town in Tarragona to finish the novels I've no time to complete today. But not yet. I know post-Blair Britain needs to do some proper soul-searching before it collapses under the weight of complacent citizenship and rocketing house prices. Poland needs it too, badly, before it ties itself into more embarrassing knots. Both need to finally do something honest about the millions suffering in the wastelands of Iraq. And the European Union, fifty years old this year, is only now beginning the process of asking "Who am I and how do I feel about myself?". Personally, I can't wait to find out where the search for Europe's soul will take us.

## **National Self-Harming**

Sometimes, when writing about Poland, I find myself crying. When the tears come, my first reaction is to check myself for self-pity. Am I getting sentimental? Is it automatic need? Everyone needs a good sob now and then. Or is it the overwhelming power of my own prose that has me crying with joy?

Ignoring the comedy value of that last sentence, the answer is far from funny. Poland, it seems to me, has been raped by history. I know this is a dangerous, discomfoting statement, and I'll be contradicting it soon enough, but first let me elaborate.

I've spent the last year working with Polish people in the UK on various integration and cultural projects. Time and time again, I've been astounded by the amount of grief we seem capable of inflicting on one another. Fights in the press. Within community groups. Between cultural centres. Not in Poland. Here, in this land of plenty. We all know we do it. We all complain about it. None of us has, so far, come up with a solution.

Why are we doing this to ourselves? Our past is one of progressive thinking in arts, science and politics. Poland, all of her cultural and ethnic heritage, survived over a century of total absence from world maps not that long ago. Shortly after, trapped between two of history's greatest villains, we still managed to lead the way in defeating both fascism and communism. Always on the edge of empires, always hurt by the forces of history, always fighting to preserve who we are. I'll say it again - fate has abused the Polish nation.

Rape, of course, is the wrong word to use, from a purely physical point of view. I only used it to get your attention. Over the past fifteen years, I have worked with survivors of all kinds of abuse, be it sexual, physical or emotional, and the relevant point here is the patterns of reasoning they use to deal with their predicament. The first question they

usually ask themselves is - Was it me? Did I do something which caused the abuse? Did I make my abuser mad or unhappy or sad enough to want to destroy who I am? As absurd as it may seem, the next question is even more shocking - is there something about me, something so useless and low, that it actually deserves abuse?

It is this seeking to blame the self that leads to something as horrific as it is fascinating - self-harm. Recent research into patterns of self-destructive coping mechanisms among Europeans show it's not just girls or teens, but all ages and all genders that seem to need to hurt themselves to survive. Tattooing, abusing drugs, starving or cutting ourselves. We all seem to be at it in one way or another.

Poland's recent squabbles with both Germany and Russia - did they achieve anything apart from more ridicule? Our all-too public dislike of daily freedoms, be they religious or sexual or just in how we dress in the street - is this the best we can be? The long-term effect of such stupidity is to further convince ourselves that we are indeed useless, only capable of being laughed at, then invaded and eventually destroyed. The simple turn to the Church for respite from self-disgust. The complex to exile. Both potentially an escape from the self, and therefore further depletion of one's own sense of self-worth.

The recent rehashing of conflict within the Polish press in the UK is just an extension of that self-destructive mechanism. The battles themselves may be just, but the overall war is as pointless as it is painful.

When I cry thinking of Poland, it is not self-pity or home-sickness or any other dubious motive. I cry, because I hurt in sympathy for a nation which has not only been made to suffer by external forces, but goes on abusing itself now that those enemies are gone. Instead of putting pens down, unclenching fists and seeking new solutions, we repeat patterns of self-harm which are not news to anyone. If we believe in Poland, let's unite. If not, let's work and play

and live with others. Either way, let's quit the inner-conflict before we self-harm to death.



## One Last Fight

Never trust people who write newspaper columns. The whole mechanism of typing to deadlines, to order, is flawed. Contrary to creative patterns.

Me, I don't trust myself at all at times. When I started writing this column, it was on the (self-set) condition that I stop the moment I run out of truly vital things to say. I promised myself never to cover my private life or purely personal opinions or randomly chosen current affairs. Every week, I mean to produce a piece of writing I'd be proud to read on my deathbed. Else I intend to write nothing at all.

Still, as I just said, I don't trust myself to keep that promise either. People change. We break promises all the time. Usually the ones we make to ourselves. Last week I implored Poles to stop fighting. This week, I'm changing my tune completely. Last week, I said we should stop hurting each other. Today, I will show you how to start a war with yourselves. And win.

People sometimes comment on how much anger I have inside me. Frankly, I think they're full of it themselves. Sure, I get angry from time to time, but I think I manage that energy better than most. The "argument" I'm usually confronted with is that arguments are good for relationships.

"Conflict helps people get negative energy out of their systems".

"The odd fight helps clear the air".

Personally, I don't buy it. And it's nothing to do with my being more or less British. I agree - the people of this island have a problem dealing with negative emotions, be they constructive criticism or sheer animal aggression. Both cricket and rugby were invented here, after all. Yet where many Brits find it almost impossible to say harsh things to your face, Poles seem to relish being unpleasant to one another. It might just be a migrant coping mechanism -

aggression is one easy reaction (though not a solution) to the problem of powerlessness.

If I was as angry as some say, I'd have been out of my day job a long time ago. Managing as Culture and Diversity Coordinator in a London prison with six hundred young men, twice that many staff, all races and nationalities under the sun, demands amazing self-control. We are all expected to follow strict rules governing respect and understanding. All negative emotions must be managed in a way which leads to "positive outcomes". We achieve this through "conciliation". A lovely word, that. Much nicer than, for example, "lustration".

Conciliation involves understanding the other parties' point of view. Their needs, and their weaknesses. Something has gone wrong, somewhere, between people, and it is up to them to sort it out. But where do you start that complex journey? Where, if not in yourself?

How can you get angry with others? It's absurd. If someone has let you down, why would you ever allow yourself to feel an emotion as powerful as anger about that person? Why give them the satisfaction?

Some time ago, I realised that I only ever get angry when things go wrong that are in some way my fault. Falling off my motorcycle at speed. Someone betraying my trust. A bank or some other thieving cartel ripping me off. All things I could and should have foreseen and, even if not been able to stop happening, should have prepared for, mentally. Anger is such an inelegant emotion. So lazy. Even a hideous traffic jam or an abusive boss or any other scenario you have no influence over is an opportunity to challenge yourself. To say - today, the best in me takes over. An angry outburst may win a battle against someone or something outside of me, but the big war over my own spirit is lost the moment I lose my temper. End of story. There is no fight in the world worth picking, except the one against that in yourself which is base.

And no matter how angry this article might make you, how much you may feel like arguing with me on this, don't. Count

to ten, go for a walk, write a column that makes more sense than the one you've just read. Anything that takes healthy effort is better than anger. Trust me on that.

## Plains People Drawing Straws

Some ten years ago, I chanced upon a cheap Central Europe travel guide in a South London second-hand book shop. Although it dated back to the Seventies and was full of faded, Communist-era photographs, I learnt surprisingly potent things about philosophy, human nature and my own naïve self from this out-dated volume.

One of the texts, about the Tatra National Park, still has me smiling. Apparently, as far back as thirty years ago, people were already complaining about tourist hordes making climbing the High Tatra mountains impossible. Every year, television and radio repeat this sorry state of affairs. Well, since I was a little boy, I've spent what summers I could in those stunning highlands and not once experienced overcrowding. If you avoid the "Eye of the Sea" during the school holidays, I guarantee you'll find enough space for everyone, especially now that the border between Poland and Slovakia has become an irrelevance. In fact, by the time this column is published, I hope to be up on The Spire or The Swine or the mighty "Scraper", climbing with old friends, staring into my favourite stretches of European abyss.

Still, something else I read in that slim volume continues to fascinate, long after the initial laughter in me subsided. The author (I can't recall if he was Polish or British or some mix of the two) had travelled across Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland and drew one simple conclusion - geography shapes our national characters. Not only that, it is the alcohol we produce and consume which defines who we are.

Hungary, hilly and warm, is suited to growing grapes. And what do grapes make? Wine, the drink of Bacchus, that wicked little god of song and dance. The Huns are, as a result, a fun-loving, light-hearted people, keen on music, theatre and general shenanigans.

Move slowly north, things get cooler and calmer. The summers aren't as sweltering, the soil as rich, so the Czechs

grow hops, which require less sunlight than vines. From hops they brew beer, a slow-sipping, low-alcohol content drink responsible for the hard working, calm character of the Bohemians.

Now, move up the map once more, cross those "crowded" Carpathians and enter "Polska", the Land of the Plains. Here the winters are long and bitter, the soil thinner and even more unwelcoming, so Polacy, "the People of the Plains" plant that most resilient of crops - rye. From rye they then brew something strong enough to survive those harsh winters and even harsher invasions from all corners of the continent - vodka. Our "little water". The secret of our bitter soul.

Now, before you dismiss this admittedly simplistic theory, consider the facts. Geography really does seem to plant the seeds of who we are, in more ways than one.

Some time ago, in some other book, I read another similar theory, this time about Britain and her glorious past as conqueror of foreign lands. The writer suggested that the coastline of this little island is particularly predisposed to ship-building. Naturally deep bays, numerous rivers and plentiful forests (now almost all cut down for, you guessed it, ship building and other industrial uses) meant Britain could build sailing vessels in both greater quantity and quality than her European enemies. Thus, "she" managed to get the jump on them in both colonial expansion and sea warfare. Plus, the waters around its borders created a free and extremely effective barrier against all but the most foolhardy invaders.

Of course, theories are just that - you believe them or you don't. But the cool thing about both versions of history is the suggestion that nations don't have any inherent strengths or flaws. Geography draws straws for us all, and some get luckier in that draw than others. Look at the North/South Italy divide. Compare Czechs and Slovaks and their landscapes. Study Mother Russia and tell me the truth is not this childishly, irrefutably simple. Even if, like our history

and our national drink, it does leave a rather bitter taste in our mouths.

## **Can't live with, can't leave without**

I know this column is meant to be a serious piece of journalism, and not an Agony Aunt appeal for help, but I'm in trouble.

I've just come back from holiday. No, it's not some summer romance. More than that. Worse than that.

She's head-to-toe beautiful. Summer or winter clothes, she's a picture, no doubt. Both a city and county girl, though the two don't mix all that well in her turbulent personality. She loves to enjoy herself, to dance and drink and argue. But then she's also smart as hell. Loves debating politics, religion, philosophy, literature. She knows many languages, and how to use them. Into studying and sport. Into arts and sciences. Into travelling and staying at home. Keeps talking about herself, but not in a proud, boastful way. Not when sober, at least. Always self-critical, usually argumentative, she's her own worst enemy. Unsure about her past, terrified of her future, she is the ultimate siren. The perfect nightmare for anyone looking to love and be loved in return.

We meet several times a year, a week or two here and there, and the highs are always off-set by the lows. Always. It's like she's schizophrenic. When I introduce her to my British friends, she makes the perfect hostess. Generous with her time and "czym chata bogata", she charms all foreigners. But when you get her alone, the mood turns sour, and all too often nasty. She drinks too much, talks too much, and then there's always a bust up at the end. Either an implosion, some kind of inner-fight, or an explosion, a running away, from home, from herself, into the welcoming arms of strangers.

I once thought her habit of always being there for others, yet never herself, was a sign of deep weakness. A need to prove something by pleasing the world without. But it's not that. There is something inherently noble and generous about her. Something that arouses rare emotions, rare loyalties in

people. It's just that she has no idea how to apply the "charity begins at home" principle to her own life.

The two weeks we've just spent together were meant to be a time of pure relaxation. A break from all the jobs I've taken on in the past year. Two weeks without emails or writing or painting or any other demands on my time and energies. And yet the moment I landed at Chopin Airport in Warszawa, got a ratty old bus to the Centrum, sat down in Three Crosses Square, she started on me. Drink, discussions, politics, seduction, tears. It was the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. A national holiday. The Square was swarming with rich families enjoying the sunshine and local low-lives using the holiday as an excuse to drink to a new excess. Sitting in an outdoor beer garden, I listened to her, watched, took in the mass of contradictions and realised three insane things. That I'll always love her, no matter what. That she'll probably never love me back, no matter what I do to try and change that. And that I wouldn't wish it any other way.

Love is a bizarre emotion. Sex I understand. The need to be with others, to talk and do things together. But love? What on earth is it for? I suspect there is a mechanism to it which is very, very simple. Need, and you stick with the animal world. Love, and you show yourself ready for evolution. For something purer, bigger, more permanent.

She's too hurt, too broken, too wild to ever sit still for long enough to take me in. But that's ok. I wish there was some way of helping her heal quicker. Of calming her down enough for us to have chance to really talk, really come together. But I know that too many experts and analysts and other gurus have tried talking sense into her already. She can't hear them either. Too deep into herself, too lost in a world she did not design and doesn't fit into all that well. Not yet. Maybe never. And that's ok too. There are many summers yet to come. Maybe I'll spend them with others, once in a while. Others I'll respect and admire and miss. But to



her I will always return. Always belong. It's permanent, this thing between us. Outside of pain or choice or saner wishes.

## A kingdom in doubt

Tiredness kills. It says so on motorway road signs all around Britain. The warning doesn't just apply to drivers. Boxers face the same risks. And late-night smokers. And directors of virtual arts centres.

Since the mid-April launch of [www.art-dom.org](http://www.art-dom.org), an on-line portal for creative people of Polish origin in the UK, I haven't had a moment to myself. It has literally killed my summer. I'm not complaining. Managing it has been an amazing, enlightening ride, but now it's time for a break. Maybe even a full-stop.

Our own Robert Rybicki recently wrote that "there is no Polish arts scene in the UK", because there is no centre or organisation that represents it. He's quite right. The Polish Cultural Institute only imports established artists for individual events. POSK, not counting the recently opened Jazz Club, rarely has time for anyone outside its own old-school "Polonia" network. So, seeing no one out there answering the needs of our more recently arrived compatriots, back in March I got together with some friends and drew up a simple, three-point plan. First, list all creative people of Polish origin active in the UK. Then, make their work accessible to everyone, in English, not just our own circles of friends. Finally, generate international collaborations, firmly placing us on the cultural world map.

We called the project "Art-Dom", a bi-lingual blend that hinted at "art kingdom", a place where creativity ruled. Our strategy was to start with an on-line portal, then, if successful, to find some office space and, in a year or so, open a real-life multi-cultural arts centre in London. Eventually, we even talked about opening satellite centres in Berlin, Barcelona, maybe even the States.

Of course, even before the website went live, divisions started. Arguments. Over the name. The design. The very spirit and direction of the enterprise. Threats were made. Counter-organisations planned. And everyone, eventually, repeated the deadly mantra - "Polak Polakowi wilkiem..."

Yet, in spite of all that, [www.art-dom.org](http://www.art-dom.org) went on-line in mid-April and grew at an amazing rate. Not only did it list just about all cultural activity generated by our community in the UK, it supported several historic events (such as the recent City Hall exhibitions), archived everything that took place (so we wouldn't forget the past) and generated new

projects, such as publications and festivals (so we wouldn't fear a colourless, divided future).

Alas, the more Art-Dom evolved, the less time the founder members had for it. Summertime excuses, individual projects, unanswered emails and calls. I thought if I ran it alone for long enough, eventually everyone would come back on-board. I spent the summer designing and uploading, phoning round, emailing, organising meetings and funding and so on. New people got in touch, enthused by the concept, but, eventually, the original Art-Dom team dispersed for good.

Maybe it was me. Or the colour schemes. Or the philosophy they didn't like. Or maybe, as I've suspected all along, Poles are not yet ready to unite. All our truly successful artists mistrust Polonia organisations, media outlets and the such. They define themselves by their talent. Their commitment. Their inner language, not their mother tongue or passport.

Perhaps one day the Mickiewicz Institute or PCI or even POSK will take up the challenge of celebrating that which is finest in us all "over here" - our creative and cultural achievements. The task itself is vast. Our universities should be involved. Our Euro MP's. Our business community.

Or maybe someone reading this article is willing to take over the Art-Dom reins from me. With a government day job, other arts organisations I manage already and my own artwork, I'm too tired to run on alone. If you're interested in rescuing one almost-new, already established on-line Dom Kultury (I'm even happy to keep funding it out of my own pocket), get in touch via [marek@apart-arts.org](mailto:marek@apart-arts.org). Try not to use my art-dom.org email. It may not be live for much longer.

## **Time for a new ride**

Not that long ago, when even more childish and weak than I am today, I spoke of Polska and Britain as my mother and fatherlands. The fact that my actual mother is a self-absorbed alcoholic and my father an absentee anti-role model is one reason for this surrogate thinking. The other is simply the order in which the two places appeared in my life.

I grew up under Communism, and for all its poverty and oppression, it was a strangely pure time to be born into. No overpriced toy stores. No faux-relationships with tv, video, consoles, internet, mobile phones. No lack of places to play and books to read and dreams of freedom to dream. In retrospect, Polska back then really was a loving mother - innocent, idealistic and kind. I can see why lots of small-minded people might long for her return, even though it's them who, under the old regime, probably wished to escape West.

Well, I got that wish, and then some. My father left us for London on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1981. An ominous date. At the time, me and my sister cried, but it was good that he went. In return for his absence, we got the odd package of toiletries and sweets and a colour TV that worked. We also got a break from the hell my parents were turning our home into. Escaping their failing relationship, my father certainly enjoyed exile. Wife and two children safely trapped behind the Iron Curtain, new cars, women and acquaintances handed him back his youth.

He never expected us to be able to join him here, but when we suddenly did, in 1985, my parents transplanted all their old problems onto new soil. I said goodbye to my childhood and got busy inventing a new home for myself. It was a tough time, but becoming a teenager always is. Actually, being a former political refugee made it easier. I was tall, strong, had an interesting past and an accent English girls seemed to like. Instead of feeling lost, I got busy learning from my new-found "father". Britain got me work, respect, some

interesting action. This is where I became an adult and learnt that having two homes is as natural as having two parents to bring you up, in their own unique fashions.

People will never stop asking me if I feel more Polish or British, even though I outgrew the question long ago, but what's really bothering me today is "her". Polska. I'm no longer a child or a refugee. I don't need anyone to mother me, to paint the world in simple colours again, yet I'm desperate to rediscover the heart of our continent.

It is not a childish longing. Not platonic. I have developed a romantic, physical hunger for Poland. In every word I write of late, every picture I paint, every turn I take, she's there. Not some parent I never had in the first place. Some part of me I've not yet found. It's not the kind of passive warmth you feel about things in the background of your life. I'm "in" love, and it's starting to worry me. I've never been in a proper, stable, long-term relationship. Never wanted to have kids or pets. The only time I've ever felt at peace was the two years I recently spent in Warszawa, but again I was forced to leave, this time by a book I had written in English and wanted to publish over here.

Becoming a literary success has taken longer than I had hoped, but it may yet hold the key to my future. I've decided to write another book. A mystical, anecdotal, illustrated adventure. Next spring, three months in a cheap van, just me, her and piles of paper to be filled with stories, drawings, maybe even a conclusion or two. I will get as close as I can, listen to her people, then hide in my mobile study and record all we've witnessed. And then I'll come back here, yet again, to publish. Maybe she'll like the end result. Maybe she'll hate me for it. Maybe, like most relationships, that length and intensity of time spent together will break us. But I need to go. The trip has already begun. The research. The discussions with publishers. And, in this newspaper, the charting of my preparations. I know spring of 2008 feels a long way off, but I want to use this column to help me

organise thoughts, develop ideas, seek answers. I only hope  
you, dear Reader, feel like coming along for the ride...

## Where maps and scripts collide

Exactly this time last year, based on a novella I once wrote, I started shooting an experimental, feature-length film. It's the story of a young Polish painter who, sick of creative success lined with poverty, comes to Britain to seek an easier existence. This he finds, not through his art, but via a commission to produce some celebrity portraits. As his manufactured canvases begin to bring in ever more wealth, his creative energies wane until a woman, a muse of sorts, crosses his path and unleashes them again. Only thing is, I can't tell you if the story ends happily or not, because, two-thirds of the way through the production, I had to stop filming.

In order to shoot the thing in the first place, I needed lots of paintings, both mass-made and one-off, as props. But, being the idiot that I am, instead of asking painter friends to help, I decided to produce them myself. A disastrous move. Not because they looked bad. The opposite. Once I finished shooting certain scenes, I tried selling the pictures I no longer needed. They all went. I produced more, to finance further filming. Those sold too. Today, I'm turning down commissions, having no time or wish to keep painting to order. Rolls of film are gathering dust in my home, because my life has begun to resemble that of my own protagonist.

What's worse, there seems to be a sequel to this art-reality overlap in my immediate future. I once wrote a novel whose central character disappears into the Scottish Highlands to finish work on a collection of picture/poems (inspired by William Blake's books of Songs). Alone, driving, creating and sleeping in a van, he hopes to finish his masterwork in peace.

Having long forgotten this plot line, I flew to Poland last month, trying to escape the mass of projects waiting for me in London. But the moment I sat down in a Warszawa pub, I instantly hit on a new idea. To write another book, a travelling tale, over three months of living on Polish roads. To study the land, listen to the people, jot down as much

adventure, anecdote and analysis as I could. Having been forced to leave Polska as a child, it is a story I realised I desperately need to tell. For me, for her, for all those both charmed and bemused by this most turbulent of states.

So, next spring, I'm off. In the footsteps of Chatwin, Kerouac, Kapuscinski, Shepard, Stasiuk, Topolski. But, before then, some research and preparation must be done. A few questions answered. For example, knowing why, where and when, I now need to answer - how, exactly?

Take my motorcycle? Romantic, but too impractical. Forget the weather, the danger, the state of Polish tarmac. Motorcycling demands too much physical strength and emotional concentration to serve as a writer's vehicle. Hunter S. Thompson managed it, but he had nitro-glycerine for blood.

Hitchhiking? Sweetly retro, but from actual stories I've heard, there's too much hanging around and not enough action. Times have changed, as Dylan rightly sang of late, and I can't bet everything on the generosity of speeding strangers.

Trains and coaches are easy to write in, and sing the right songs too. PKS and Greyhound have much in common, but I need freedom from timetables and beaten tracks.

A car is the most obvious choice, but I don't feel like living in hotels or tents for that length of time. What I really need is a home on wheels. A machine I can crash in each night (unfortunate turn of phrase, but that's adventure writing for you), without worrying where I parked the day before or where I left my pen and paper. Something I can load up with mattress, folding chair and table, then write in or out of, depending on the views and the weather.

Weighing up all available choices, it seems I'm again being invited to step into one of my own stories. I will go by van. Economical, anonymous and more romantic than a Winnebago (Steinbeck's been there and done that already, with a dog in tow). An all-in-one transport, study and sanctuary.

Now, considering my recent run of bad luck with cameras, I need to decide whether to take one with me. Then, with



visuals sorted, I'll consider the soundtrack I want on this,  
the most important trip I'll ever choose to take.

## Counting on disaster

There is a nasty, half-broken nail buried in the rear tyre of my motorcycle. I noticed it yesterday morning. The tyre itself looked fine. Fully inflated, ready to go. I stood there for a while, half-wishing I hadn't noticed it in the first place, unsure of what to do next. Play it safe and head straight for the nearest tyre fitters? Or just hop on, hoping it wouldn't cause a high-speed blow-out or deflate beneath me later, probably at night, in the rain, when miles from home and help?

A replacement would set me back around £150. A fair bit of cash, considering this one is barely a month old. I spent a few moments worrying, counting and considering, then decided to leave it to chance. Modern tyres are strong things. Not that long ago, when I owned a very quick Triumph Speed Triple, I only noticed a similar problem when the tyre was being replaced because of wear. Probably picked that nail up in Spain, or France, or some other road thousands of miles back. Nothing bad happened in all that distance (not counting lots of self-induced crashes). So, choosing between sense and stupidity, I decided to gamble. Not because I'm tight or short of money, but because I desperately need the excitement.

My current motorcycle is a big, heavy, loud Yamaha, styled like a 70's muscle bike, but only a few years old and, like most modern machinery, just never breaks down. I always ride with the certainty that I'll get to where I'm going, as long as I don't crash. And there lies the problem. What's the point of leaving home every day, if you know exactly where you're going and what's going to happen along the way? Having that nasty sliver of steel embedded in my rear tyre makes every journey, every overtake, every instant of acceleration a bit of an adventure.

It's a pathetic risk, I know, but my life has become so perfectly aligned of late, I'm starting to go crazy at the edges. I like my job of fighting racism in London's biggest

jail, my sunny North London flat, my bike and my friends and my future full-stop. But where do I go from here? I'm satisfied, but not happy, and it's not enough. So, next year, I'm buying a cheap, old van and driving East. Three months of life on Polish roads, meeting people and places and writing about them all, is just what I need. Three months away from everyone I know. Of learning how to see, listen and feel again, without daily blinkers getting in the way.

Why three months? Nothing to do with lucky numbers or other superstitions. I can take one month off work, no problem. Keep my flat, my motorcycle, all my ballast waiting back here, but that's not enough either. I need more time than that to cover a place the size of Polska. And not only the borders as they are now, but beyond. Foreigners have no idea how much she has shifted shape over the centuries. If I feel like driving to Lvov, or Moscow, or the Black Sea, to see more of our past, I want the time to be there, ready to accommodate the unpredictable.

Anything more than three months might be too much. I might start to get comfortable on the road, and that's not the point. I don't want to disappear. Don't want to rediscover or reinvent myself. I plan to return to London, find another flat, publish and get started on the next book.

But then again, maybe I won't. Some days, when I'm done racing about, the bike parked up for the night and I'm alone, thinking about this trip, I imagine myself not ever coming back. Find myself dreaming of something or someone on that road who will make me want to stay.

No. Correct that. I already know I don't want to come back. Britain is great, but how much greatness can one take? I've not started on this trip yet, and new ways of travelling occur to me already. Maybe, if the book sells, I'll hit the road again in 2009, only this time in a double-decker bus or a vintage limo, invite people to party and tell stories onboard, and film instead of writing it all down. Now that, compared to

riding an injured motorcycle to work each day, would really be courting disaster.

## **The Texture of Home**

London has left me disabled. Physically. Emotionally, I'm doing "fine, thank you", but I can't remember the last time I went to a park or a play or the pub just for the hell of it. I leave the house when invited out or on business, but that's it. I've lost all taste for London's streets. All my ability to feel and desire life in it. Maybe it's the size. Maybe I've just lived here too long. Or maybe the answer is less obvious than any of that.

When I was living in Warszawa a few years back, I often took long walks around its night-time streets. Seeing as public drinking is illegal there, I would buy a litre bottle of Coke, pour half of it out, top it up with vodka, then catch the first bus that pulled up outside my house. I'd ride ten, twenty stops, get off wherever, start walking back. Drinking. Looking around. Writing everything down in the notebooks I always carried. By the time I reached home, I'd be in the highest possible spirits. Instead of going straight in, I'd sit in a park or by the river, singing to myself, laughing, breathing more deeply than I ever had before.

It was intense, the connection I felt with the place. And myself within it. Having been rebuilt from scratch after the War, Warszawa felt both ancient and brand new. Parts of it were ugly, others had a near-mystical quality to me, as if long forgotten roots were shooting out from the soles of my shoes and digging straight into its earth.

When I finished the novel I had gone there to write, in English, I had to return to London. I promised myself, and all those I had met and grown close to, that I would return the moment the book found a publisher. Even minor British sales would give me the independent income I needed to live and write and walk in Warszawa again.

I spent the following year sending the manuscript to literary agents and waiting. Meanwhile, I tried to repeat the wonder of those midnight strolls. With a bottle of my vodka-

based Molotov in hand, notebooks at the ready, I boarded the Tube, then walked along the Thames, across the West End, through Royal parks and avenues. And felt crushed. Warszawa paused at night. Even the traffic lights would be off until morning. In London, it was just darkness. No change of pace, no break from the norm. Everyplace full, everywhere buzzing, everything business as usual. The city that never sleeps infected me with energy-sapping insomnia. Left me unable to walk or think or dream straight.

The novel never found an agent, but I wrote on. In November, Penguin and the Arts Council are publishing my mini-autobiography. In it, I repeat the promise I made those few years ago. Next spring, I'm selling what few possessions I have, buying a van and driving to and around Polska. While on the road, I will write a book about the journey. Hopefully, that too will find a publisher, but before I go, I must address the problem of my relationship with London.

Would-be writers are often told "Write what you know". Well, I don't want to follow such obvious advice. I've known this city for over twenty years and would rather explore something strange to me. Someplace like Polska. I left it as a boy and comprehend little of its history, its geography, its mysterious pull on me. But there are other lessons I have learnt in all my years of writing. The real test of one's pen is the ability to describe in an interesting way something that bores you. Do that, and you can consider yourself worthy of readership. Also, don't ever make excuses for not writing. Or get caught up in romantic-sounding hyperbole.

I am not really lost or disabled here. Just because I've known London most of my life doesn't mean I've heard all its stories. If, out of homesickness, I wasn't looking for them hard enough before, I must start now. Not in six months time, when I'm on the road and heading for some easy adventures. I must get moving today, as often and as far as my feet will carry me. Along London's streets. Among its crowds. Listening

out for its secrets. To see if I've missed anything. See where my freshly un-leashed wanderlust can take us.

## **Desolation Road**

A friend asked if I was excited about my plans to write a travel adventure book about Poland next year. Of course I'm excited. Three months of driving round my native lands, looking for people and places to tell tales about sounds fun. But at the same time I'm scared. Many adventures end badly. Some trips, especially those worth documenting, there's no coming back from at all.

A few years ago, I saw a TV programme about Jack Kerouac, the author of *On The Road* and godfather of modern travel writing. Having become an "over-night" phenomenon (after many years of living in New York and failing to get his novels published), Kerouac became the poster boy for the post-War, pre-Hippy Beat movement. World-wide celebrity did not suit him. He drank himself to death in his mother's house some years later, but the documentary focused on a trip he took in his pre-fame days. In searching for his literary voice, Kerouac got off the road and spent a summer living alone on Desolation Peak, watching for forest fires in the high mountains between Canada and the US.

Most of us have, at one time or another, dreamt of such a holiday. Unlimited landscapes. No television, no phones, no distractions from all the hobbies we're always trying to pursue, be they writing or painting or just plain old thinking. But we make a mistake in believing only saints and gods live on mountain tops. In those few months of absolute solitude, Kerouac met something else up on the Peak. Call it what you will. A demon. A mortal truth. A death wish. The documentary wasn't speculating. All we know is that over the next decade he wrote some of the finest literature known to our generation, then withdrew from public view and drank until his liver gave out. And seeing as I've just had my own drink-fuelled near-death literary experience, I'm more than ready to pay attention to those who went, and vanished, before me.



Last week, I made London a promise. To go walking its streets, re-learning a city I've known for decades, both as a means of practicing writing-on-the-go and of learning how to see the original in the world around us. Everyone knows London is a monster. Even if it fits who you are right now, a neighbourhood of ten million souls is too much. For anyone. But anywhere this strange and unique must have its share of hidden secrets, so I set off this week to try and find us some.

I packed my usual creative cocktail - half a litre of Coke mixed with half a litre of vodka, a notebook and pens and the intention not to return until I'd learnt something new about my home town. I started drinking right after breakfast. The rest is as predictable as it is painful. A film premiere. Walking around the West End with a friend's friend from Warszawa. Meeting some people from work in the evening. All of it involved alcohol. Free bars, generous rounds and my home-made brew to finish me off. Coming home, sober enough to still make notes, too drunk to make them make sense, I talked to everyone on the Tube, got off at the wrong station, then found more friends waiting in my flat, beers in hand. I tried opening a bottle of Budwar with a kitchen knife. It slipped, flew up and went into my eye. I was lucky. Half a centimetre to the left would have left me half-blind. A few centimetres further might have killed me. As it was, I made the trip to Moorfields Eye Clinic under my own steam, face covered in blood, but mostly in one piece.

The surgeons assure me the eye itself is fine, but some repairs might be needed around the nose, lids and connected waterworks. Tomorrow, I'm going under general anaesthetic to have it all done, so excuse me if this week's column feels a little rushed. Typing is difficult when your eyes don't focus properly. But my real worry is the three months of driving round Polska still before me. In his 30 Essential Laws of Writing, Kerouac put "Try never to get drunk outside your own house" at number three. Considering his end, and my evident

inability to drink responsibly, I fear even his wisdom too weak for the road ahead.

## **A lifetime of possible tears**

Three weeks ago, I wrote about how my stories and scripts seem to overlap with my everyday life. Two weeks back, this very column contained the line "London has disabled me". I was, of course, trying to exaggerate wildly, but after undergoing some emergency surgery last week, I'm starting to get nervous about what I write next. As a journalist, it's good to have a little vision running through one's pen, but not when prophecy is this painful.

That line about London's effect on my body was meant to be pure metaphor. I'm always finding it difficult to get out of the house, look around, engage with the place. Compared to Warszawa, I feel trapped here. The other capital city in my life just seems more accessible. But I also acknowledged that blaming London for my lack of energy or enthusiasm was lazy. I promised I would make the effort to rediscover it, before I leave next year on a three-month journey to write a book about Polska. True to my word, armed with a bottle of vodka and a pocket full of notebooks, last week I went out looking for London. The streets were safe enough. I wrote lots. The accident happened at home. Trying to open a beer bottle with a knife, my hand slipped and stabbed it right in the corner of my left eye.

Dr Bill Katowiz (from Stateside, not Slask) did a fabulous job on the punctured socket. He stitched both eyelids. Repaired the damaged ligament. Checked my retina. Thanks to his skill, I can see fine, feel no pain, but the future may not look as bright as the present. There could be fluid in the eye itself, needing laser treatment. The tendon holding up my upper eyelid may yet fail, leaving me looking half asleep until further surgery. And I've managed to damage the tear canals, possibly beyond repair. If I'm lucky, they'll heal. If not, I may have tears running down my left cheek for the rest of my life.

Bill (you get on first-name terms with your saviour during an hour's worth of surgery) told me I'm lucky anyway. The knife could have gone deeper. A couple of centimetres either way could have had me blind, or dead. I smiled as best I could (half my face was frozen with anaesthetic), but felt neither joy nor gratitude. I'm too old, and have too many real-life plans, to waste time counting lucky stars. I knew, even before the accident, that alcohol was going to be a problem on the trip to Poland. Three months of driving round, looking for interesting people and stories, in a place as generous and thirsty as Polska, is inevitably going to involve repeated offers of serious alcohol.

But as much as I love drinking, I hate the idea of anything "inevitable" around me. Why is it not possible to do three months sober? Kapuscinski's advice to wannabe travel writers was "do as the Romans do". Whatever they eat, you eat. Whatever they drink, drink too. But, as much as I cherish and respect every word that man either said or wrote, I must find my own way. Write my own rules.

There's a lot of thinking to be done in hospital waiting rooms, when you can't read and it's the weekend and the specialist surgeon you need is hours away. I realised that if I am to survive the trip next year and actually return with a finished book, I must sober up now. Mentally, as much as physically. The myth of the alcoholic writer is true. They are, in general, the most miserable of artists, and will drink as often and as heavily as they can. But one thing all the good ones have in common is the ability to quit when it is time to put pen to paper. Any writer of note knows that drink, like any other drug, can open your mind to things. Can make you more sociable, more outgoing, more imaginative. But that is the research bit. Living. Writing is the other side of that coin. It is work, the most difficult, challenging, deeply satisfying work under the sun, and should never be done under the influence.

Which is why, when I set off next year, I can't touch a drop. Three months solid. Can't drink drive. Can't drink write. Can't afford any more accidents. Not if I don't want this journey to end in endless tears.

## Seeing through words

Losing your sight, even temporarily, is a strangely enlightening experience. Like it or not, you have to stop plain looking and think about what it is you've seen already, and what all of it should mean.

Following recent eye surgery, sitting half-blind in a hospital waiting room, my thoughts were racing all over the place. Past, present and future. At one point, they turned to the Matrix movie trilogy. Not because in making parts two and three the Wachowski brothers had evidently lost their original sense of vision. I was thinking more of Neo, the central character, who is blinded towards the end of the final film. Although his eyes are gone, he develops the ability to see things the average, "able" hero can not. He perceives the obvious and the less obvious layers of the Matrix. The computer program itself. The real world, ruined by wars between men and machines. And the final, the essential layer. A different code, not in standard Matrix green, but in gold, the Buddhist colour of enlightenment. The colour of fire. Of pure energy.

You may think the films were awful, and their plot irrelevant to your experience, but you'd be wrong. Terribly wrong. The central idea that the world is more than your naked eye perceives is as old as thought itself. Today, science confirms the theory that the visible is only one version of truth. That everything around and within you is actually made of atoms, which are made of quantum elements, which are made of energy, which is made of something else altogether. Looking at the sky, the ground beneath your feet, your own flesh, you are, like it or not, seeing multiple universes.

Just look at this page. There's bits of ink on paper. These transform into strange symbols. Symbols which translate into language. Which say things to you. Make you feel, make you see, move you in different ways. How often are you thrilled by the reality of all that when you stare at a page

of writing? By the transformation these simple materials undergo when your eye sends their image to your mind?

Last week, Robert Rybicki wished my writing well in his Rybim Okiem column. I'm sorry, Ryba. I know the translations of poems I promised you are weeks overdue, but my excuse is always in writing. I do it all the time. In the diary I keep, always filled at dusk, the most intense hour of the day. In the dozens of emails I send around the world each day, from home and work. In the monthly diversity-themed magazine, Mosaic, I edit for the Ministry of Justice. In the prison library project I manage, encouraging those behind bars to record their life stories in print. In the writers' group I run in North London. In the proposals and funding bids I draft for the arts organisations I'm involved with. In this column, as special to me as any poem or script or novel I've ever sweated over.

In the rare moments I am not writing, I'm usually encouraging others to start. I tell them to imagine a nation without a written history. Without libraries. Without knowledge of past longer than the last conversation they had with someone. That is what you are if you do not write. How many moments have you forgotten, how many feelings, how much life? If you write, a blog, a dream-journal, anything, you know what I'm talking about. If not, you can't even begin to realise how much you've lost to forgetting.

So don't fear, Ryba. I couldn't stop writing, even if I tried. Even if I lost sight in both my eyes, I'd keep on working with words. Else I wouldn't exist. Not fully. Not really. Writing keeps me alive. Not in the simple, bread and butter and breath sense. The eyes are only the lenses for your mind. What you see, your consciousness records in words anyway. Just think about it. See anything? Pictures or names? Shapes or symbols? How many worlds at once?

## Highway music

"I knew a guitar player who called the radio "friendly". He felt a kinship not with the music so much as with the radio's voice... He believed he'd been banned from the Radio Land and was doomed to prowl the airwaves forever, seeking some magic channel that would reinstate him to his long-lost heritage."

Sam Shepard, Motel Chronicles

Discussing my plans to write an adventure travel book about Polska, my friend Elena said no one should set out on such missions without first choosing a soundtrack to go with them. I agreed straight away. Although I can't play instruments or sing to save my life, I love listening. My house is filled with CD's. There's music in my computer, my phone, my alarm clock. But all that wealth of choice presents a problem - if you were planning to live on the road for a few months, and write about it, just how much of your musical collection would you try to take with you?

Last week, I finished reading Bruce Chatwin's "Songlines", an amazing travelogue about the nomadic peoples of our world. It starts and ends among Australia's Aboriginals, for whom song, since time immemorial, has been everything. A means of bringing things into being. The absolute engine of creation. By walking their red country, and mating words with sounds, their "singers" sustain reality, and if the song of a time or place is forgotten, that time or place vanishes with it.

There's quantum theories to support such beliefs. Some physicists claim that without observers there to perceive the universe, it could not exist. Me, I'm not so easily convinced. I see Elena's point about the importance of music to go with movement (she works with the world's finest musicians, and in the film industry, so soundtracks are vital to her art), but I'm not quite sure I want to drag a jukebox on the road with



me. Having an i-Pod plugged into your ears on the way to work every day may make the commute less unpleasant. But if you are to go looking for new experiences, might your old record collection not blunt your ability to see and hear things anew?

In the way of compromise, I've decided to take just one song with me. Dylan's 10 minute epic "Brownsville Girl", co-written with Sam Shepard, the man whose "Motel Chronicles" made me want to be a writer in the first place. I will take just this one genius recording, because it is all about journeys. In time. Across States. Between films and borders and loves. Written by two giants of the road, Dylan, the soundman, and Shepard, the wordsmith, its endless plotlines show where life can take us, as long as we follow its songs.

And Shepard's book points me in another, wilder direction. If I am to travel light, is the radio not a better companion? One of the maddest things about Polska are her airwaves. Why is it that half the radio stations, from the Baltic to the Tatras, play-list mostly 80's songs? Not Jackson or Springsteen or U2 even. Kajagoogoo. Eddie Grant. "Life is life". At parties and weddings, the young and old sing along to this stuff, united in bizarre sentiment. And Radio Maryja, that beacon of fundamentalist paranoia - where does the power of its "song" come from?

If films have soundtracks, if some of the greatest moments of your life are connected to particular songs, are radio stations not the vocal chords of the lands they call across? Shepard's guitar playing friend was right. If I'm to concentrate on writing about Polska, why not let its DJ's choose the melodies for me? CD's grow old. i-pods run low on power. But your car radio is always there, always live, always moving with you, in both space and time. The perfect conductor for any road trip.

Now, I just need to work out how to bring Brownsville Girl along for the ride. Pack a stereo? A walkman? Just for a single song? Or maybe I should buy a harmonica, learn the

words and sing them to myself each day, bring my book into  
being the old nomad way...

## **Crossing States**

I once drank my way through America. Not across it. Through, as in through all the money I had saved for a Stateside trip that never happened. A decade ago, living in Brighton, I had put away enough cash to fly to New York, buy a car, drive it to the East Coast, then sell and return to Britain afterwards. I had no intention of writing anything about the trip. The opposite, in fact. Just wanted to move, escape from the novel I had been failing to finish, see somewhere anew. Instead, I drank my bank account dry. How and why, I'm not quite sure even today, but the places I was between then might have had something to do with it.

Brighton is Britain's most hedonistic place. A beach, two universities, the gay scene and masses of young people from every corner of the world living it up every day and night of the week. Only thing is, fun, like anything, becomes hard work after a while. A few months of driving across the States seemed like the perfect antidote. Ever since I was little, I had dreamt of making such a pilgrimage. Sure, other countries have democracy and dollars and wide open spaces, but for any boy who grew up under Communism these places did not register. The superheroes, the cars, the films, the music, the good and the bad guys, the screen sirens, the jet airplanes... All the biggest, baddest, boldest mythologies came out of the States.

Even after I finished university, in spite of my involvement in left-wing organisations and events and passion for Russian literature and French cinema and Gypsy music, I still longed for the Big Country. And in this I include Canada, with its calm, multicultural soul, and Mexico, its wild opposite. The States, caught between the ice and the heat, the North and the South, the prosperity and poverty, is a land of such complex excess, no artist, no matter how humble, can help but be seduced by it. Journalism, the arts, theatre, architecture, fashion, philosophy - everything, at its best, is the best anyone can do. Europe is limited by

memories of its romanticised past. Asia and Australia are caught in copy-cat mode. Africa and South America are after different things altogether. The US of A, for all its great failures, is absolute in its successes.

Having graduated in English Literature just before the Brighton times, I came to realise American prose, poetry and plays spoke to me the truest. I wanted to fly and touch the land they had risen out of. But it was not to be. I did not yet have a British passport then, and when the woman who had arranged my visa became a widow and got caught up in family litigation, my chance of making it over there was lost. I was heartbroken. I had already quit my job, and had nothing but time and money on my hands. Time and endless opportunities to kill it drinking.

The boozing itself was fun enough. It was the aftermaths that hurt. The lost property, the meaningless fights, the never-remembered conversations. At some point, my body got wise. Following months of being able to ingest endless amounts of alcohol, I suddenly couldn't handle more than half a pint. Something had burnt out in me. Some anger. I sobered up, got another job, went back to writing. All along though, I was still seeing America in my dreams. It was permanently there, in the writers I was trying to emulate, the music I was listening to, the films I was watching in what spare moments I had. The vision of America I grew up with will haunt me forever.

But it's a good haunting. I don't know if I will ever get to make that trip across the Big Pond. It doesn't seem important any more. What counts now is the passion the place generates. The potential. Sam Shepard said about Dylan, its greatest oracle, that he always "played for big stakes". And whatever you think that means, whether bull or brilliance, it is a seductive notion. The lack of borders. Lack of language barriers. Lack of endless in-fighting. A childlike ideal the Old Continent could learn a lot from.

*In memory of Norman Mailer, America's long-lost man-child*

## **Mad, bad, dangerous tongues**

Writing is a dangerous business. Words, like scalpels, can either heal or hurt, depending on who operates them and why. Robert "Ryba" Rybicki, our very own poet/journalist, recently vanished somewhere between Britain and Polska. No one knows where he's got to. Not his friends, nor his employers or his editors. Regular readers of his articles, or his poetry, know how close to the edge the man has always written, and won't be surprised to hear he has become the latest victim of the clash between language and reality.

I last saw him at Pif-Paf, the first independent Polish film festival in the UK, organised by Beata Hughes two weeks ago. Her decision to have young photographers show their work alongside the screenings was inspired. A multi-lingual event indeed. I had also been asked to lead a debate on the relationship between creativity and independence. The discussion, most of it within the audience itself, was short and shallow. Too many "I" opinions, too little desire to explore beyond the world of film. Rybicki was on the panel, but did not say much, already withdrawing from the "alternative Polish arts scene" he had so often campaigned for. Beata was there too, but the really interesting conversation took place afterwards, just me and her in the cinema foyer. We talked about many things, but in the end, I wasn't thinking about film or freedom or which pub Ryba had got to, but about the struggle between creativity and madness.

Is Beata sane? Having watched her self-written, financed, directed and acted feature film "In the name of", I suspect not. I mean that in a good way. You need a little madness to survive as an auteur. Last weekend, I also attended the launch of Steam Control, a new arts initiative addressing issues of modern community and mental health through multi-media storytelling. A wonderful concept, especially the inclusion of literature in the event.

Writing is the maddest of all arts. If I ever had to explain to an alien that, instead of doing real things, like playing or earning or travelling places, I sit for hours each day, inventing characters and scenarios which will never exist, then transcribing this non-reality into thousands of sentences on thousands of pages, I'd think myself crazy too. But that's what I do. For money, for love, for the sake of self-discovery. But while we're on the subject of exploration, what happens when writers find themselves on foreign soil, operating in a language totally alien to theirs? Can the answer to the question also help us rediscover Rybicki?

Migrant painters, filmmakers, musicians and actors all struggle to share their art with audiences abroad. But poets, writers and journalists have it three times as hard. Firstly, they lack the social skills to engage with others like them, which helps create networks of support, learning and self-publicity so essential to all creative communities. Secondly, there's the problem of diluted skills. If every day you are forced to function in a "second" language, it inevitably blunts your ability to write in your mother tongue. Finally, there is the issue of translation. It is an art in itself, but one which requires mastery of two tongues, humility in listening to the needs of others, and much patience. All very hard to come by, especially when you lack the funds to pay professionals to work that alchemy for you.

I believe the solution is in a new project - a multi-lingual writers' collective. I already run Apart Arts, a migrant artists' association, and a writers' group in North London, so it seems logical to now combine the two. Set up a website, publish translations, organise readings and storytelling events... Ryba, if you're out there, reading this, get in touch. We need crazy spirits like you on-board. The same goes for any other writers who might be interested in joining. It's time we stopped working in isolation, writing "for the desk drawer", as they say in Poland, and came

together to stop migrant writers vanishing, either too deep into their own inner worlds, or off our maps full-stop.



## **Porno Devil Blues**

Does the world need any more artists? When you have computer games, why bother with actors? With Photoshop installed, who needs photographers? When synthesisers cost so little, why bother with musicians? Why, I ask myself, suffering with fever and tiredness and huge disappointment, why the hell did I expect anything special from Pidzama Porno's London gig last week?

There are three concerts I shall never forget being at. In 1991, The Pixies were headlining Glastonbury. The night before, I saw them play a top-secret warm-up show in a tiny community hall in Windsor. The Pixies, in case you missed them, were a rock band which inspired everyone from Nirvana to Blur. Pidzama too, I suspect. I snatched the set list from their minuscule stage at the end. Over twenty songs in less than an hour. Mind-blowing.

Then there was Prince in 1992. The massive crowd, the flying bed he played on, the surprise jazz jam on top of three encores. But the moment that will live with me always was the opening of Purple Rain. I've never been a fan of the song. Too rich for me somehow. Over-orchestrated. But the way it sounded that night... Stripped down. Purer. It had me crying within seconds, a shocking reaction, but perfectly fulfilling. The power of live music moving me within and without.

And last, but not least, Pidzama Porno in 2003, their first ever gig in the UK. Everything went wrong on the night. The tickets were misprinted. Habakuk, the support band, were turned back at Dover. The gig hall was almost empty. But, probably because of all of that, Pidzama played like the devil himself was in the audience, looking to strip them of their punk souls. Even though I had quit cigarettes a few months earlier, I was snatching them from friends' pockets and chain smoking, out of sheer amazement, sheer delight at hearing familiar songs played with such fresh, perfectly tuned venom.

Now Pidzama are "splitting up", because Grabaz, their leader, thinks they should do so "while still at the top of their game". Buch told me they would be playing their last-ever concert in London, so I reserved my ticket straight away. Then I heard they were going to play another show later, for the home-town fans in Poznan. Fair enough, I thought, but then read an interview with Grabaz, in which he said they were only "suspending operations indefinitely", and would reform any time they felt like it. Regardless of what their fans had been told, or felt like believing.

By the time the actual gig came along, I was worried. King's Cross is an unpleasant place at the best of times. That night, the rain fell in painful sheets, the streets cold and ugly, the hours slow to move. I waited in the queue with friends, watched a couple of drunk Poles get racist with a black doorman, then get punched to the ground for their trouble. Justice was done, but in a way nobody felt good about. Once inside, we sat down in an upstairs bar, a glass wall between us and the stage. Not punk at all. The place was full, but the sound mix in the main hall was so bad, the only way to listen was through that transparent partition. I felt like I was watching them on MTV. The songs, coming through the bar's speaker system, sounded just like they did on CD, only slower, more muted. I wondered if the reason they were "splitting up" was because they had ran out of steam. Then, after another item of fans' clothing was thrown up onto the stage, I heard Grabaz say "Go easy on us, we have another five concerts left to play".

I left before the end, in sad disgust. I had been cheated out of a promise. The promise of honest passion. If you love language, your writing should honour that. If you paint, you should try to out-do the world for beauty. And if you live for music, play like death was the only other option. I know musicians have to cover the same songs, night after night, year in, year out, but if they're playing live, they should sound like it. Live like a grenade. Like a power cable. Like

themselves, not zombies lying through their teeth, and to a backing track at that. To hell with such art.

## Words Apart

Last week, during the launch of Penguin's migrant anthology "From There To Here", I found myself. In other dislocated, disturbed writers. I felt a sense of apprehension before the event, because as sweet as it is to be published, I had secretly hoped to grab a couple of minds out of that crowd and set up a migrant writers/ poets/ journalists project. Something that would take us out of loneliness, obscurity and preconceptions about who we are and how we should express ourselves.

I know this reeks of silly, almost sinister idealism. But I run a successful voluntary arts organisation which could support such an initiative. Some writer friends of mine have already been consulted. Most have nothing but doubts, which help shape the manifesto. It is already evolving, in order and sensible sequence;

1 - Listen to one another. Too many art projects are the product of one person's vision. This list will be sent to all the migrant writers I know. Their input is essential. As to what we should call ourselves. What our aims are. What we fear when taking something like this on.

2 - Meet. Properly. Talk, drink, argue, all over whether we feel something, believe it to be true, think it original or old-hat. The actual act of writing is done in isolation, but first we must breathe in others.

3 - Link up with a university. First in the UK, then others abroad. They will give us space, support, some intellectual clout. Most won't be interested, but we only need the one to start things rolling.

4 - Organise events. Not old-fashioned, candle-lit evenings with some charisma-less poet reading from anorexic volumes to paper-thin audiences. We want multi-genre bonanzas where words, in all shapes, sizes, volumes and tongues can be seen, heard, talked over and taken away by crowds hungry for complex storytelling.

5 - Launch a website. Words are fluid, abstract things and need a home to match. The internet is it - cheap, easy to develop, perfect for discovering, linking and sharing. I've done the web-surfing research and found a gaping hole right where professional migrant writing should be.

6 - Not publish our own journal just yet. It's easy to talk ambitions, but writers should write, not worry about deadlines, press releases or printing problems. If we can nurture quality voices, publishers will come to us.

7 - Then again, maybe we should go to print straight away. Magazines about fashion, architecture, travel, etc, are legion and lovely to look at. But where is the sudden fiction, the novella and the graphic novel? The modern poem? The punk journalism? The internet can be home to our project, but our words must travel in print.

8 - Crossing the language barrier is tough. I'm tired of seeing my favourite Polish books appearing over here in awful translation. For every good writer there is also an editor and a translator to match. We must be the matchmakers.

9 - Set up satellite writing groups. Encourage those far from home to workshop together. Give them a wise, elegant guide how to make such groups succeed, in any language.

10 - The legal side of things is important. Historically, everyone gets paid before the writer. The agent, the publicist, the printer, the salesman. The Web-driven music trade is showing the way, and we must work together to make sure we do not surrender our rights, do not sign insulting contracts, do not go hungry or cheated while others cash cheques on the back of our talent.

And One More Thing. Words apart, we are no different to the "natives". Everything we do must include everyone, because although migrant writers have specific challenges to face, our output is of universal value. We must not become branded as victim commodities. Must not form ghettos where grief and drugs decimate our talent. Must come together under one simple

banner - the telling of giant stories. A sacred business, no matter how far, or close, we are from home.

## All that we See is Vision

Europe is coming apart. I like watching. Like having to struggle to understand present developments. Predict future directions. Also, its disintegration is a perfect mirror for the state of my spirits right now. If Europe survives the transition into tomorrow, perhaps my heart too, in spite of its currently crazed, solitary state, stands a chance.

For the past three years, Poland has been trapped in a new war. To be precise, in a "no man's land" between the old EU and the new Asia. As long as its border with Germany remained subject to passport controls, it was still in limbo. Friends here keep talking about this question of where Polska is - Central or Eastern Europe? What do Brits think? What do Poles say when they hear their motherland misplaced and mispronounced? Is being "Eastern" really so bad? Next week, when those checkpoints finally shift to its borders with Ukraine, Belarus and Mother Russia herself, the war over Poland's future will finally be over, regardless of what its politicians and enemies say.

And so I wanted this week to question these shifts. Will Europe ever manage without internal borders? Like the US? Belgium is without a government. Denmark is sick with xenophobia. Parts of Poland, like Spain or Croatia, are becoming a British holiday home zone. I wanted to ask - if someone offered to take your passport and replace it with a non-national EU travel document, would you accept? The Euro is already removing currencies from our continent. What will you be like without papers to place you on a map? Will it threaten or empower you, and why?

I was going to ask all this, but I can't. Not this week. Conversations I keep having with women of late have not been about politics. Not about borders or trades or societies. They have been about a line I discovered once and have been stealing across ever since. The border between us and love.

I can still feel and cry over and sing songs to the first time I found it, even today. That the woman who showed me "where" turned out to be a perfect actress who seduced and then left me when she discovered she wasn't who she wanted to be is not important. Although hurt for a long while, I did not fight or seek revenge or turn against love itself. I got up, forgot her phone number and went looking for someone real I could feel the same about. Ever since then, this search has been at the heart of who I am and everything I do. All my journeys, all my conversations, every piece of art I create, are a way to return to that "state". An effort, I am sorry to say, I am failing at miserably.

I'm a little like Europe. Look at a map, a piece of perfectly flat paper, and tell me it is not a betrayal of the living, breathing, evolving world it is meant to represent. Meet me at work, in the street, at a party, and all I will show you is a sketch of who I am. I will appear in the uniform of a smiling boss, an easy-going host, a considerate friend. But all I am ever, ever at heart about is love. In all its variety. The few women I have met who were real and did make me feel home again. The few artists who have moved me to tears, and then to work on my own creations. The few heroes and landscapes and signs that have shown me what love, be it romantic, platonic or purely spiritual, can do to evolve our world.

I have travelled Europe without a map in my hand. On foot, on motorcycle, with friends and with strangers. I did not see borders. Did not lose one place in favour of another. I always felt at home, wherever. Love is like that. Every new experience neighbours every other. Every mind which meets yours overlaps in a way flesh or possessions can never hope to do. I am an adult and smart and responsible and yet I accept so many false borders. Between me and my experience. Between your language and mine. Between our need for love and its mutual source. Which is right here, any time we care to stop studying maps and look up.



*Celebrating the recent 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Blake's  
birth*

## The art of choice

Pole or Brit. Beatles or Stones. Art or commerce. Seems like we are always being asked to decide which side of some imaginary line to stand on. This or that yet never both.

Day or night? Which one are you? I've always thought I was a dusk person. That in-between moment has always spoken to me in a strange way, but only recently have I begun to ask questions about it. When is dusk, exactly? Where does sunset end and how long do I have before darkness takes over? If it is neither night nor day, or is both, how to understand the schism? I decided to experiment. To pause each day at dusk and write about the experience. That I did so in the autumn of this year was coincidence, but enlightening too. As nature dies, the autumn world bursts into colour. Before the onset of winter, and darkness and cold and hunger, trees and bushes fill the world with fireworks. Why does nature care to do this? Why does it not just peter out into dullness and death? Why the apparent celebration?

Dusk is the same. Once the sun has set behind the horizon, there is a short while, maybe ten, fifteen minutes when there is still enough light in the sky for me to write with. One half of the world still awake, the other already asleep. And me in the middle, as witness. Surprises fill the world at this hour. Dark clouds against the blue end of sky, their bright twins set against the black on the other. Leaves and grass, when you look carefully, glow, vivid, loaded with life. The low sun casts noir shadows. Birds scatter noisily, trying to get home before being lost. Streetlights first burn red, then pink, then orange, all against the moody blue air, everything theatrical for a precious while.

When I started the experiment, I worried it would fail. That my every day reality would get in the way of the writing discipline I wanted to develop. I feared leaving my notebooks at home. Or losing the taste for the idea. Or simply seeing nothing to write about. But no. In the past few months, I have

found myself writing almost every day. The skies have not let me down, always catching my attention at the appointed hour. Always giving me some new shape and shade and sense to consider. The movement of dying winds. The smell of falling leaves. The light as it escapes me again. More than that, dusk has helped keep me sane. My days are so busy of late, filled with so many duties, if I don't stop half way through and just reflect, I am likely to get lost myself.

Also, I started a new day job recently. I'm still working in the same place, sitting at the same desk as before, but suddenly it seems wise to come in not at 10 or 11 a.m., as I used to, but at 7 or 8. At first, I hated the idea. Never have been a morning person, I thought to myself. Always loved staying up half the night, drinking, listening, writing up the world.

But I've since rediscovered dawn. My motorcycle ride to work takes me along some wide open roads with the sky uninterrupted above my head. I leave just as sunrise breaks, arrive at work to see our star already apexing low above. The spectacle is less subtle, but even more breathtaking, than dusk. It is as if the world itself is overwhelmed with the realisation that it is alive and awake again. High heavens explode with colour. Clouds burst with light, whether as massive glow lamps or thousands of sparklers. As the sun lifts clear of the edge of the world, distant heat has vapours swirling across the horizon, twisting and tearing. I ride along or stand before entering the office, and laugh out loud, delighted at how shameless nature can be in her performances.

I have since learnt there is no need for me to be at work so early each day. Still, every night, I find myself setting my alarm clock for 6 a.m. It is a sacrifice, but when those skies open up, its ache is instantly forgotten. Every day is now a twin ceremony. A chance to no longer choose between "either or". A freedom so obvious, so ordinary, I laugh just thinking about it.

## **Me, me, You, me, Us**

Me, myself and I. That's the plan for 2008. Forget altruism. Forget green thinking. Forget citizenship campaigns. This year is all about "yours truly", but reading on remember that my egocentricity is very much in your interest too.

No more ecology, for a start. Everyone's found it important all of a sudden. Well, Charles Dickens wrote about industrial waste and urban pollution two centuries ago, so it's not like it's news all of a sudden. Leo DiCaprio is not going to save the polar ice caps, no matter how often he's photographed on icebergs by Annie Leibovitz. Al Gore is not going to make much difference either, Nobel or no Nobel. The Green Party can go to hell too. The universe is big and cold and lonely, all except for this green, lush, beautiful planet of ours. If we kill it, we kill ourselves, so let's start this year by trying to save our own backsides.

And then there's that recent trend for "having an air-travel-free year". Lots of journalists and celebs talking about not using planes for 12 months, and the sacrifice that this forces on their lives. Does anyone actually enjoy flying regular airlines? That's not travel, it's transportation. Tedious. Cramped. Hollow. If we are going to save the planet, might as well get close to it. Walk. Cycle. Take the train. See and maybe even touch the thing, while it's still here.

And while we're on the subject of hippy causes, you can forget vegetarianism. I almost ever eat meat, of course, but that's nothing to do with loving fauna. The problem is I know how badly treated the helpless creatures are, how poorly fed, how viciously killed. Anything produced in such fashion is going to be bad for you, and taste awful. If I'm staying at a small farm, where I know the animals lived and died in some kind of harmony with their environment, I'll eat all the hams and steaks and livers you put in front of me. Otherwise, I'll just keep eating organic veg, thank you very much.

And current affairs. I don't give a damn in principle, but as Hunter S. Thompson said, politics is all about having control over your own environment (he did not mean some far-off rainforest), and there's no arguing with that. It's my tax contributions which pay for bombs dropped on Iraqi and Afghan children. It's my money which goes on pointless roads and sports events and Eurocracy. I want it spent on things I actually need, like schools and hospitals and arts centres. Useful, should I ever get sick (god forbid) or get someone pregnant (god forbid squared, overpopulation considered) or get hungry for culture (god bless). Whatever voting there is to be done this year, I'll do it.

Add drugs to that. I'll be doing lots of those too. Every civilisation in the history of humankind has discovered and used mind-altering substances. Some took them in moderation, as a group event, others criminalise and abuse this natural gift. Using drugs sensibly makes you calmer, happier and more aware. If you don't agree, go back to work, TV and frequent arguments with your loved ones - far healthier habits, as our anti-drug streets and homes evidence on a daily basis.

And nothing and no one is going to bore me this year. Some of my friends accuse me of having a short attention span, but they're wrong. It's not novelty I crave, but the satisfaction of knowing each new day will contain bigger and better things. Excitement. Evolution. London is full of fascinating people and events, and in 2008 I shall accept no substitutes.

I want, I want, I want. And it's all good. Good because it's honest. Good because it's humble. Good because it recognises something most miss. There is no need to see the world in separate, sacrificial colours. Forget campaigns. Forget movements. Forget Making Poverty History™. One third of the children in this country live below the poverty line. Let's start with us, right here, today. Doing things that make us aware, healthy and sane. Emptying charity shops. Going to

the theatre. Walking away from gyms. Pulling as one. Now that would make me happy in 2008.

## **A shot of hate**

Being threatened with a gun is never nice. Especially not when it's someone you live with. A friend of mine was moving out of his house a few days ago, and temporarily into mine, but before he could finish talking about keys and refunded deposits, he and his flatmate exchanged hard words. Then shouts. Then deadly threats.

When I left work that day, I found my friend's worried voice on my mobile's answering machine. I work in a prison and can't take my phone in with me, so I collect messages after I finish. As my workplace contains some truly dangerous people, I do not take kindly to having friends of mine threatened with firearms. Especially not when all I want to do is go home and be at peace.

We ended up paying his former flatmate a visit. My friend drove us to their now almost-empty house, partly to take the last of his stuff out, but mainly to see if we could talk some sense. I'd met the guy a few times. He's small, temperamental. Schizophrenic rather than psychotic. But instead of him, we met his elder brother, an even smaller and weaker version of the man we were trying to say goodbye to. The brother greeted us with a smile and asked us to sit at a table. He started talking about misunderstandings and future friendships, but I cut him short. The man talking to us in broken English was half my size and clearly sorry to be there, having to talk for others, but I was in no mood for explanations. He wanted money. We wanted his brother's keys. We made the exchange and went our separate ways with cool handshakes.

I had hoped that, by then, the unpleasant surprises were finished, but there was one more shock yet to come.

Safely back at mine, over a cup of calming tea, my friend decided to sum up the experience by saying; "I'm not racist, but I'm never going to live with black people again". His now-former flatmate was from Africa, a migrant arrived in London not long after my friend had done the same. As is often the

case, however, this African émigré did not grow ever more at home as time went by. The opposite, in fact. Ever more lost, ever more isolated, ever more unhappy. More argumentative. More confused. Eventually, more keen on fantasising murder.

Still, nothing justifies racism. I've lived in the UK for over two decades. My sister is married to a former war refugee from Angola. My job in prison is to coordinate diversity - meaning I am paid to promote understanding and challenge discrimination on behalf of all prisoners, staff and visitors. And there I was, in my own kitchen, still trying to relax after a rather intense evening, now hit with one of the ugliest phrases known to human kind - "I am not racist, but..."

Confronting these kinds of statements is something I do eight hours a day, five days a week, in prison cells, in courts of law, in conference halls across the country. At home, I just want to drink tea and write, but rather than leave my friend's statement be, I calmly, patiently said; "All Poles are racist, because all people are, in some way, racist, because we all are, in some times and places, weak."

Racism, like all hate, is absurd. If you really believe a group of people is in some way beneath you, why shout, why hurt, why exterminate? Leave them to it. Exploit them. Win them over. Anything, but don't verbally or physically attack. That is weak, cruel and stupid.

And I had to challenge his attitude, because I was at fault too. When I heard that phone message earlier in the day, my friend's distressed voice made me angry. I didn't for one moment believe his flatmate had access or the desire to use guns. But I was still furious. Furious that someone could say such things to a friend of mine. Furious that my friend would choose to live with such imbalanced people. Furious that I was allowing myself to get dragged into their conflict. I was at fault, because I knew my friend, I knew his flatmate, I had agreed to help and now I was angry at myself for all that. Which was weak, stupid and in some way cruel. Over that late cup of tea, we had to admit we had all failed that day, and



how. So me and my friend would not be looking for guns against one another in weeks to come.

## **Vote Marek & Marylka**

Marek walks into the prison where he works and hears some officers discussing the upcoming US elections. One of the them says "Schwarzenegger will be next, you'll see", although Arnie was not born in the US and technically can not become president. Another officer says "They'll never choose a Nazi", to which Marek wittily replies "It's nothing to do with him being a Nazi. See, Obama is black. America is ready for that. But a black-black president? Never." There is a moment's hesitation while the officers work out what Marek is on about, then they laugh. Though not all that loud.

What does this joke prove (apart from that I know a bit of German and can't write comedy)? That even in prisons people are interested in the US elections? That the old myth about Brits disliking political discussion is untrue? Or that just because Arnold's dad was a card-carrying member of the Nazi party, his son will always live with that label?

Hmm, stupid anecdotes prove nothing, of course. But does anyone, and I mean *anyone*, know what policies Obama and Hilary stand for (apart from gender vs race)? I know politics is meant to be all show-business these days (look at Polska - we had two bonafide movie stars as Prime Minister and President not that long ago), but Herr Terminator? Herr Commando? Herr Conan the Destroyer in charge of the most powerful nation in the world™? In Red Heat, a terrible 80's film, Schwarzenegger played a KGB agent. He was more believable in that than in all of his Governor of California appearances. With Putin in charge for a long time to come yet (forget their "democratic" szoubiznes), the Kremlin would win the Cold War we thought was ours when Communism fell.

But let's talk sane for a minute. Ten years from today, I could be President of the Polish Commonwealth. Unlikely? Forget Herr KGB and his ugly muscles. Our own "Duckies" stole the moon, as kids, on national TV, and look at them! I have been in prison, of course, but that's just work. Plus, I have

acted in various amateur short films, so that's my showbiz credentials sorted. What would I do with such power... pardon, responsibility? Considering the actual likelihood of my becoming President, I'd better watch what I write here. I've no idea how I would handle national deficits, the Black Mafia or the healthcare crisis, but my first edict... sorry, policy, would be to scrap Poland's military service. And not just scrap, but swap it for "enforced international travel".

Yes, rather than just get rid of the regular army, which does nothing but eat, drink and bully itself, I would give every Pole a gift of a passport and a train ticket to anywhere in the EU on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (air travel is too eco-unfriendly, sorry!). Every coming-of-age citizen would be "asked" to pack their stuff and leave, for no less than 12 months. Every 18<sup>th</sup> birthday would be spent either crying with overprotective families or toasting me, your generous and visionary Head of State. Either way, you're on your way.

Polska needs this. Free movement. A kick in its stubborn backside. I don't care if it upsets a few people. Your children will not always be your children - they will become adult sons and daughters, with responsibilities, with futures, with offspring of their own soon enough. Where will their wisdom spring from? Their perspectives? From your street? Your kitchen? Your past?

Travel is freedom, because only travel allows you the ultimate luxury - to have a home to go back to. I am sick and tired of Poles criticising each other, or their country, or both. If I managed to expand our young people's horizons, we'd learn to appreciate who we are and why. How valuable was a Polish passport thirty, even twenty years ago? And how problematic a document has it become today? Are you ashamed of the crest on its cover? Of the complex sound of your own name? The original cut of your accent? Vote Marek instead. I'll set you free of all those insecurities. And lock up your kids if they refuse to follow my script... sorry, policies.

Dedicated to Marylka Rodowicz, the Grand Dame of sentimental  
journeys

## **Mafia, Vietcong and My Granddads**

Two years ago, my beloved Mac Powerbook died. For those of you who don't know or don't care, Macintosh home computers are beautiful machines. If George Walter Bush were a PC, a Mac would be a Clinton - glamorous, original, intelligent (even if they both basically do the same job). My Powerbook shut down, for what turned out to be its last time, two days after Xmas. Having promised myself to finish writing a film script before the year was out, I was forced to visit PC World and invest in one of their cheapest laptops. A heavy, ugly, slow beast, I had thought it would only let me type, maybe email and that's it. Well, what do you expect for four hundred quid? Many mobile phones these days cost more.

Since then, however, I have managed to write endless stories and articles, build websites, design graphics, edit films and download all kinds of music on it. Although I can now afford to buy a brand new Powerbook, I've just had my humble "stop-gap" machine serviced and yet again it has come through the scans without a flaw or a virus. Yet keeping it that way does not seem to be just about security programs or firewalls. While travelling to the said computer superstore last Saturday, I was reading a book on Sicilian history. No such volume could avoid the subject of the Cosa Nostra, Sicily's own brand of mafia. No such book, in fact, could be anything other than the story of how the "family" has ruled Italian politics, and therefore all its society, since the Roman times.

And yet what do I find on the shelves of PC World in Tottenham Court Road? An invitation to join this most infamous of criminal organisations. Become "a trusted man", it says, a "friend", and set about manipulating and killing your way "to the top". Right next to it was another, similar invite. This one was called "Vietcong" and, for the meagre sum of £5, promised to deliver me into the jungles of Vietnam, where

"ultra-realistic combat" was enhanced with vivid "sounds of heavy gunfire".

Jesus, I thought. My maternal grandfather spent all six years of WWII in a German "offlag", while my paternal "dziadek" managed to survive several concentration camps, both eventually returning to find their families among the smouldering remains of Warszawa's Bielany and Zoliboz districts. Standing there, in that brightly lit shop, filled with Saturday shopper/commuters, I felt strangely feverish. Properly infected. I have no idea how it felt for either of my granddad's to be taken prisoner by foreign soldiers. How it felt to have their lives and futures in the hands of the enemy. How it felt to want to fight and escape and find your loved ones and not be able to until the world's superpowers decided to intervene. Both men passed away before I was old enough to ask. And now I wanted to. Desperately wanted to ask whether they would approve of their grandson playing such "games", or whether they would disown me for it.

Waiting for my little laptop to be health-checked, I wondered round the superstore, overwhelmed by the amount of choice open to me. 15 different kinds of "mouse". 30 printers. 50 laptops. 1000's of games. Giddy, I walked out into the busy West End streets, watching shiny shops and even shinier limos and taxis whizzing past. Will this last? This period of permanent, virtual fun our society seems to be in love with? This more-than-refusal to accept the past? This obvious desire to spit not just in the face of the old, but the new too? On the same shelves, I had seen video games that could transport me to the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan at the flick of a joystick button. Was this right, Granddads?

I guess I am a coward. I refuse to buy a computer and programs powerful enough to let me answer such questions. I refuse to play such games. I am stuck in the past. Refusing to upgrade. To forget. To "upload" myself into the Matrix of our own making. It is not machines I fear. Not artificial intelligence. Not ecological disaster. For all those, there is

a technological cure. It is the future without real memory  
that me and my little laptop fear, in our own humble ways.

## Speak to me, London

A frost-bitten Saturday night. London, February. Always a betrayal. January starts the year with longer days and warmer nights, but February takes all that back and shocks with unwelcome bursts of ice.

The air is clear at least. No wind to amplify the cold. Everyone on the Finchley tube platform is talking. Two young Poles, both wearing pale grey hooded tops, walking stereotypes (or rather sitting, on a bench, drinking cans of lager, as per legend). Their speech is almost all swearwords. It's an incredible performance. They are actually managing to communicate. Express so much through so little vocabulary. Could I do it if I tried? It's what great actors are meant to be able to do.

Then some skinny Cockney lad, all baggy jeans and cheap beanie hat, bounces onto the platform, jabbering into a hands-free mobile cable without posing for breath. Betting. Birds. Bruvva! There's a long, shiny can in his hand too. He gets on the train and starts talking to the people nearest to him. Two young, smiling blokes, also drinking from cans of Stella. They laugh politely and nod, but say nothing. I try to guess if they are Polish, or just wise enough not to interrupt.

Our brightly lit carriage is rushing us into the heart of town. *The* night of the week. The weekend. But half the seats are empty and everyone is curled into themselves, compressed somehow. Fallen already. It's like it's not 8pm, but 8am, and we are all "coming down". The train driver announces the destination of our train has changed. Now via Bank. No one moves. No one seems to care where we are going. A young, recorded female voice tells us over the speakers where we are. Highgate. Archway. Mornington Crescent. Ancient, evocative names, but no one registers their beauty. We are all asleep.

I look around to see if anyone notices me scribbling, but I am safe. No one will interrupt me staring, studying them. I am in my element, living now, in the journey, not just hoping to get places, have some fun somewhere far, loud and expensive. I am busy with my tiny notebook and my old



fashioned pen. I am a ghost. No laptop, no palmtop, no Blackberry. My pen and paper mark me out as so retro as to be incomprehensible, irrelevant to others.

Fifteen minutes into the journey, I realise I haven't once bothered to read the ads lined up along the carriage, right between the windows that show nothing but tunnel walls and the long list of stations above them. I do not appreciate ads at the best of times, but the tube train variety is the worst. Travel insurance. Skin creams. Cheap gas and electricity. No film ads. No perfumes. No sexy lifestyle choices as alternative destination.

Its been ages since I've been on a Tube Saturday night. Seems like not since school, since we travelled up from Acton and Ealing to get the Marquee for rock and Leicester Square for films. That's where I'm going today, but not sit in a cinema. There's a rickshaw rider waiting for me by the Swiss Centre, ready to be interviewed for an article I'll be writing tomorrow. But for now, I'm still deep underground, moving but not moving, watching and being watched.

Past Camden, crowds suddenly pile in. More men with cans of lager in their hands. When did public drinking become acceptable in London? Since Poles flooded in? Since "lad culture" hit? Since they banned smoking in public places? I still remember the days you could light up on the top deck of London buses. A long time ago. The women on this train all look attractive. Smiling. When did that change? Once upon a time, you had to look long and hard to see a photogenic face in our capital streets. Is it me? Has my eye got lazy?

At Leicester Square, notebook in hand, I alight, swim along long tunnels, carried by the crowd, up jagged mechanical stairs and up for air. Past the checkout gates, the crowd stops. There are so many people trying to make it out, the stairs up to the street are grid-locked. Pressed close against my neighbours for a still second, gripped by expectation, I whisper under my breath. *Speak to me, London. Show me what you got. Show me why so many love you so.*

## **King Kazmierski the First**

Some time back, I mentioned in this very column my plans to write a travel book about Polska. I had intended to start the trip in April, drive around for a few months, come back with a fantastic collection of drawings and anecdotes as a mosaic portrait of my motherland. Alas, those plans are now postponed. On the backburner (as the Brits say). I will go and write my book next year, but before then I have bigger fish to fry (as the Brits also say).

I don't know how you feel about literature. Maybe you're not a big fan of reading and theatre and all that culture stuff. But I bet you're interested in politics. Even if you say you are not. Even if you believe it. I'm not talking about the kind of politics discussed in serious newspapers or in universities, but about the everyday kind. Money. Crime. Housing. Wars. These are the things everyone cares about, because they have to. It's just our ordinary reality.

However, modern politics is profoundly unsexy. Tony? Ken? Hilary? Jeez, what a bunch of dull, power-hungry monsters. In the age of celebrity, we need some proper stars to be in charge of our lives, but politics in a democratic state is too messy and complicated to be truly glamorous. Too many policies and budgets and all that boring stuff. What we need is an original, revolutionary solution, and this week two news events have helped me come up with a perfect answer.

Firstly, Gordon has once again decided to mess with Britain's drug laws. He will make cannabis a B class, instead of a C class, drug. What a waste of time. Anyone in their right mind knows all drugs are bad. Caffeine, cannabis, crack cocaine. They should all just be banned, end of story. But what kind of politician will be strong and clever enough to make such a move? None, because they are trying to please too many people too much of the time. They are servants of a civilisation which doesn't know what's good for it.

Then there was Ewa Sowinska, the politico in charge of Poland's children, making Washington Post's 2007 Idiot of the Year shortlist. She took on the Teletubbies and lost. I don't know if you were hoping for a new age with the election of Mr Tusk and his "new" government. I certainly wasn't. Just listen to the man. Boring, hesitant, and he looks like a secondary school maths teacher. The whole thing is embarrassing - the war on the Teletubbies, the twins that stole the moon, the orange-faced nightmare that is Lepper (look his name up in an English dictionary...). Poland really needs a new time, and where better to look for answers than to Britain, our favourite choice of travel destination.

What makes Brits so strong as a nation? They manufacture little of value, have awful weather, even worse food, are not particularly charismatic (unlike the French) or hard working (unlike the Germans). The secret of their unity, I believe, is their Royal Family. Ask any Brit, regardless of their social, financial or educational status, if they would consider getting rid of the Windsors and they all pause. Smile. And say "Well, you know, why not, but then again, perhaps its best to keep them..." and so on. No logic, no reasoning, just the quiet, patriotic acceptance of the power of the Crown.

I therefore conclude that Polska needs a king. Or a queen. I don't care which. A monarch can get things done quickly and with maximum drama. Parades. The giving of honours. Executions. Great TV, international publicity, lots to be proud of in a dark and difficult time.

So, in the coming weeks, I shall present in this very column further reasons why I think appointing a monarch is the only way forward. And, while I'm at it, I'll put myself forward for the job. A great sacrifice, you say? Yes, I know it will be hard, but somebody has to do it and of all the people I know (and I know a few), I have the finest credentials. The right name, the right character, and the right vision. Drugs, marriage, the army, the church, education, elections... you name it, I have answers for

everything, and will present them here. So, as the Brits say, watch this space. I order you already.

## **For a crown, the world**

People often say I think too much. I think it is people who talk too much. Last week, I introduced my campaign to become the next King of Poland. It was a mistake. I wish I had thought bigger then. Thought more about the idea, because now, a week later, not only am I even more certain that the campaign makes sense, I now realise Polska is only the beginning.

Recent conversations with friends about politics, elections and Europe's future had me confused. I kept asking everyone, what is better - to be the prime minister or the president of Poland? Who has more power? Who has less work? Who gets more airtime on radio and TV? I kept getting different answers, and in the end was none the wiser. Still, never one to give up on thinking, I opened my copy of The Illustrated Chronicles of Polish History (free with any purchase from EMPIK stores in Warsaw last year). Crazy book, written by someone evidently obsessed with the Church and its influence on the Polish past, but I was most surprised by the tales of our earlier kings. What a murderous, treacherous, fun bunch. Bolek, Mietek, Wlodek, Przemek. Looking at the portraits Matejko painted of them, you would think they were all Hollywood stars. Strong, handsome, wild-eyed. Compared to these grand old faces, Donald and the Duck Twins are too pathetic to live with.

So, the idea occurred to me. Elegant, traditional, easy for both the educated and the illiterate to understand - Polska needs a king. Someone who would take the president and the prime minister by the hair, knock their heads together, get them working like good little civil servants should, and could then sit back and watch as Poland once again becomes a proud and healthy state. Yes, sir. It became clear to me that only a man with a gold crown on his head could achieve such a miracle.

But knowing something yourself, believing its wisdom, is only the start. Having thought it through, I now have to design a strategy, a plan to convince all Poles, here, there, everywhere, that to restore the Polish monarchy and, what's more, give the throne to me, is the right thing to do.

Before I go into detail in the coming weeks, let me say one thing. I do not believe my mission is for the good of Polska alone. I am certain that what is a blessing for us is also a blessing for everyone else. How? Let me explain. Yesterday, I was at a conference in Covent Garden, entitled "Multiculturalism without Culture". Boring? God, just read that title again! Of course it was boring, but I go to these things sometimes just to learn how not be boring myself. How not to think like everyone else. The speech and discussion was all about Western culture, Middle Eastern processes, Far Eastern economies. Rather than listen to all that, I switched off and thought for myself. And had a genius brainwave... West, East, Far East... wait a minute - where the hell is the Centre? If western Europe and America are the West, and everything Turkey onwards is East, then isn't Polska the heart of everything?

And not only did I have this great moment of enlightenment, being a man of action (like all those born to rule), I knew what to do next. If I manage to restore Poland's fortune's from my throne, I will share my wisdom and my power with other states. A little franchising, if you will. First poor little places, like Belarus and Ukraine. When they see what a good and sensible leader I am, they will ask for my patronage. Sure, I will say. I will rule over you too. Then, I think I'll go after Romania, Austria, Italy. Back to the good old days, when Poland ruled half of Europe. We did it once, we'll do it again. And more. Once we've got them on our side, we'll declare London the second capital of the Polish empire, then put our knowledge of ship building (if you're reading this, Mr Walesa, call me) to good use and expand across the oceans.

Polish heroes won two World Wars, now we will win the first World Peace. The white eagle and white dove, together at last. What do you think of that?

## **Non-return of the King**

My campaign to become the next king of Poland is over. Only two weeks since I started writing about my vision for a restored Polish kingdom, I have already received death threats. Well, only the one, actually. From the editor of this newspaper. She said, "Marek, the king-joke was funny for a while, but drop it now, please." And when your Editor asks, you don't argue. Not in print, anyway.

And so, my dream lies dead. Killed by the true Queen of my world - the lady who says what does and doesn't get published in these pages. For a moment there, I thought that the New Time belonged to me. My New Kingdom. But, as Dylan once sang, "Well, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you've gotta serve somebody", and I'm not going to argue with Bob. Or Pani Teresa.

Pity. I had wonderful plans for transforming Polska. For example, I was going to turn the whole country into a national park. A kind of giant nature reserve. How, you ask? What about cities, factories, pollution? Easy! Taking a leaf out of that great visionary artwork "Seksmisja", I was going to get Polish miners back to work, bury all business and industry below the surface of the earth, and have everyone live in traditional houses, just like in the Old Days. Kazmierski the Great - found Poland concrete, left her wooden (an illiterate translation of a great Polish saying, if you will).

But how to restore our post-Communist landscape to its former glory? Easy - close schools and send children to plant trees. University would last ten years, but you wouldn't start until you were in your thirties. Before then, it would be up to you what books you read and what stories you wrote. Between planting trees, of course. My other reforms involved the army managing prisons, prison officers helping the police, the police helping the fire services, and the fire services helping build my new castle. I've always thought Poland needed something to equal the Pyramids or the Eiffel Tower or maybe



both. My castle would be a kind of hybrid. A giant pyramid with a tower on top. I'd make sure it could be seen from space, and that's what matters, right? The alien point of view.

Anyway, I'm not an architect, more an ideas man. Another of my royal edicts would have been to re-open Stadion X in Warszawa, and have all political parties based there, not at the Sejm. All politicians would wear football kits instead of suits. Easier to tell which side is which, and politicians always choose awful ties anyway. Just like Market Europa, they would have stalls all the way around the top, and debates in the stadium itself, Roman republic style. And on Sundays, they would have to play each other at rugby. I hate rugby, so it would be my little bit of torture. "Lepper tackles Kwasnieski! Donald grabs Leszek by the neck, but is counterattacked by the other twin, who grabs the ball (a crooked ball, perfect for politicians to play with!), until referee Walesa whistles and interrupts play for a five minute prayer. Well, it is Sunday, after all..."

While I'm on the subject of faith, I would make Vegetarianism the state religion. Why not? No debates on the nature of God needed, nobody gets hurt, not even animals, and everybody would be that little bit healthier and fitter. Of course, it would not be a compulsory religion. I am not a vegetarian, and never will be. I just think it funny that there are people out there who think animals dying for nothing is a good idea. And kielbasa and schabowe bad. If you are that nuts, you deserve a church of your own, where you can hide and not get in the way of the rest of us predators.

Still, none of that is going to come true now. Sorry. Maybe it's better that way. Writers are born to have ideas. Editors are born to quality check them. Never listen to writers. They've no idea where ideas come from and what thinking is for in the first place. Writers are kings, and kings are all idiots. Editors are the true masters of the world. The jesters that rule the roost. Who decide what kind

of history gets written and published. And maybe, just maybe,  
it's better we keep it that way.

## Brak powrotu króla

Moja kampania, by zostać kolejnym królem Polski, dobiegła końca. Zaledwie dwa tygodnie od kiedy zacząłem pisać o mojej wizji przywróconego polskiego królestwa, otrzymałem już groźby śmierci. Właściwie tylko ten jedną. Od redaktora tej gazety. Powiedziała: „Marek, żart na “króla” był przez chwilę zabawny, ale skończ już, proszę”. A kiedy redaktor pyta, nie kłóć się. W każdym razie nie w druku.

A więc moje marzenie leży martwe. Zabite przez prawdziwą Królową mojego świata - kobietę, która mówi, co tak, a czego nie publikuje na tych stronach. Przez chwilę myślałem, że *Nowy Czas* należy do mnie. Moje nowe królestwo. Ale, jak kiedyś śpiewał Dylan, „Cóż, może to być Diabeł lub może Pan, ale musisz komuś służyć”, a ja nie zamierzam kłócić się z Bobem. Lub Redaktor Tereską.

Szkoda. Miałem wspaniałe plany przekształcenia Polski. Na przykład zamierzałem zamienić cały kraj w park narodowy. Rodzaj gigantycznego rezerwatu przyrody. Gdy pytasz „a co z miastami, fabrykami, zanieczyszczeniami?” Łatwo! Wyciągając liść z tego wspaniałego wizjonerskiego dzieła „Seksmisja”, zamierzałem sprowadzić polskich górników do pracy, zakopać cały biznes i przemysł pod powierzchnią ziemi i pozwolić wszystkim mieszkać w tradycyjnych domach, tak jak w Dawnych czasach. Kazmierski Nowy Wielki – zastał Polskę betonową, zostawił ją drewnianą (niepiśmienne tłumaczenie wielkiego polskiego powiedzenia, jeśli wolisz). Ale jak przywrócić nasz postkomunistyczny krajobraz do dawnej świetności? Łatwe - zamykaj szkoły i wysyłaj dzieci do sadzenia drzew. Uniwersytet trwał dziesięć lat, ale nie zacząłeś, dopóki nie skończyłybyś trzydziestki. Wcześniej to od Ciebie zależałyby, jakie książki czytasz i jakie historie napisałeś. Oczywiście między sadzeniem drzew.

Inne moje reformy obejmowały armię zarządzającą więzieniami, funkcjonariuszy więziennych pomagających policji, policję pomagającą straży pożarnej i straż pożarną pomagającą w budowie mojego nowego zamku. Zawsze myślałem, że Polska potrzebuje czegoś, co dorówna piramidom, Wieży Eiffla, a może obu. Mój zamek byłby rodzajem hybrydy. Gigantyczna piramida z wieżą na szczycie. Upewnię się, że można to zobaczyć z kosmosu, i to jest ważne, prawda? Obcy punkt widzenia.

W każdym razie nie jestem architektem, a raczej człowiekiem pomysłów. Innym z moich królewskich edyktów byłoby ponowne otwarcie Stadionu X w Warszawie i ulokowanie tam wszystkich partii politycznych, a nie Sejmu. Wszyscy politycy nosiliby stroje piłkarskie zamiast garniturów. Łatwiej powiedzieć, która strona jest która, a politycy i tak zawsze wybierają okropne więzi. Podobnie jak Market Europa, mieliby stragany na całej górze i debatowali na samym stadionie w stylu rzymskiej republiki. A w niedziele musieliby grać w rugby. Nienawidzę rugby, więc to byłaby moja mała tortura. „Lepper walczy z Kwaśniewskim! Donald chwyta Leszka za szyję, ale kontratakuje go drugi bliźniak, który chwyta piłkę (krzywą piłkę, idealną dla polityków do zabawy!), Aż sędzia Wałęsa gwizdnie i przerwie grę na pięciominutową modlitwę. W końcu jest niedziela...”

A gdy już mowa o wierze, uczynię wegetarianizm religią państwową. Dlaczego nie? Żadne debaty na temat natury Boga nie są potrzebne, nikt nie doznaje obrażeń, nawet zwierzęta, a wszyscy byliby trochę zdrowsi i sprawniejsi. Oczywiście nie byłaby to religia obowiązkowa. Nie jestem wegetarianinem i nigdy nie będę. Po prostu myślę, że to zabawne, że są ludzie, którzy myślą, że zwierzęta umierają bez sensu to dobry pomysł. I kiełbasa i schabowe złe. Jeśli jesteś szalony, zasługujesz na własny kościół, w którym możesz się schować i nie przeszkadzać innym drapieżnikom.

Jednak nic z tego się teraz nie spełni. Przepraszam. Może tak jest lepiej. Pisarze rodzą się z pomysłami. Edytorzy rodzą się, aby sprawdzić ich jakość. Nigdy nie słuchaj pisarzy. Nie mają pojęcia, skąd się biorą pomysły i na czym polega myślenie. Pisarze są królami, a wszyscy królowie są idiotami. Redaktorzy są prawdziwymi mistrzami świata. Dowcipnisie rządzące kurnikiem. Kto decyduje, jaki rodzaj historii zostanie napisany i opublikowany. A może, może po prostu lepiej, żeby tak było.

## **W-wa-on-Thames**

When you love someone, how close do you have to be to be together? Holding hands? Making love? In the same room? The same city? The same country? Is it possible to be together outside of space and time? Where is love when it is in our lives, exactly?

This week, the Łódź school of film is running the "Łódzia po Wisle" documentary script competition. The title of this year's round is simple - "Moja Warszawa". Being from there myself, I thought I would write something and enter... but when I started thinking, I realised the title was not simple at all. What does "My Warsaw" mean? Or, more importantly, what could it mean? Should I look for a simple or a complex answer? Who is Warszawa to me? Is she many things? Is she people, times, places? Is she the past or the future? Or, most interestingly, is she the present too?

In the first novel I wrote, she was there. In my short stories she appears, time and time again. In my journalism, my conversations, my thoughts, I am always somehow inside her. But how do you show that on film? There is a special art to any kind of storytelling. Film is both beautiful and dangerous, a complex mix of sound, vision and language. There are movies I can watch again and again without becoming bored or tired. Alphaville. Paris, Texas. Psy. Works of such fresh, vital beauty, I am forever grateful to those who created them.

I know how hard it is to shoot a film. I have written, directed and starred in a number of "shorts". Some never seen by anyone but me. Some shown in international competition. The first story I ever published was turned into a short-short film, shot in a single take. I even played a goal keeper in a very silly movie made by an editor friend of mine. It was a bad film, almost pointless, but making it was still an illuminating challenge. The same friend put over twenty five thousand pounds into a half-hour film which made him exactly zilch in return. He even had to pay for flights to the

festivals where it was shown. Two years of work, dozens of professionals involved, a fortune invested, all for a crazy dream - to put some moving pictures on a giant screen for people who might hate or love or care nothing for your vision.

Still, there is something remarkable about entering a dark hall and turning your mind over to the imagination of a stranger for a few hours. Many say this year's Oscars were the best ever. I hate this kind of comparison. This desire to say "Nothing will ever be as good as it was once..." or "This time it will be better, will be the best...". But Hollywood is thinking. Viewers are demanding. Even television seems to have learnt how to tell stories again (I have no time to watch myself, but I'm told the "home cinema" renaissance begun with *The Sopranos*). And now, I am writing for film again. Only this time, it is not fiction. It is the story of my relationship with a city I have been moving in and out of all my life.

The first time I left Warszawa was in 1985. I did not return for a whole decade. Nothing to do with politics. I feared going back. Feared memories of childhood would be ruined, but when I did finally gather the courage to revisit my past, I found Warszawa did not disappoint me as an adult.

The opposite, in fact. I travelled there again and again, until 2000, tired of being a tourist in the place of my birth, I moved back there again. I only meant to stay a year, finish the novel I was writing, but the year turned into two, and would have lasted longer, if I hadn't had to return to London to chase dreams of literary success. Still, even though London's been good to me, as always, I think about her constantly. Speak and write to friends and family who live there every day. Perhaps the making of a film about her will be the start of the end of my return. A short, vital step in a journey which begun a long, long time ago.

There will not be a third farewell. The pendulum must stop. As soon as my work in here is done, I will take everything I have, all my memories, my visions, my dreams, and return to their source. Me and my W-wa. Together, for good.

## **Polish Irish Fisticuffs**

Researching Ms Maslowska on the Web this week, I found an interesting review of her first book. Written by a man with a name like a woman who lives on the Internet (or Canada, as I eventually found out via email), it is both intelligent and entertaining ([www.wolfiedarling.com](http://www.wolfiedarling.com)). Something of a rare combination in on-line reviews.

There was only one thing I disagreed with in the whole text. Not the wild idea that Maslowska could be James Joyce reincarnated. No. It was the section where Wolfie, the reviewer, imagines what would happen if a Pole and an Irish man were to box each other.

I quote: "If you ask me Poland has to deal with harsher shit, but Irish people would win in a fistfight". Wolfie could be right. Could be wrong. To prove such a bold statement either way would take a lot of pain and pointless bloodshed. In fact, a couple of weeks ago, such a confrontation took place in Dublin. Only, in our real-life scenario, it did not end in a macho clash of two romantic nations, no mano-a-mano test of strength. It involved a screwdriver and left two bodies lying in a dark street. Killed over some alcohol which was never bought and never drank - the start of a timely lesson for both our nations.

A fist fight is one thing. What happened in Dublin is where I could begin asking serious questions about violent video games and gory horror films which seem to be "all the rage" of late. But, with all due respect to the dead and the living who lost them, I will not get carried away complaining about modern manners this week. Reading the media coverage around the murders, nobody seems to care that the victims were Polish. Or the (still unknown) perpetrators Irish. The tragedy is universal. And touches us all.

Not that long ago, when there were no Poles in Britain (or none that anyone noticed), the Irish were the black sheep of the migrant community. They "catered" for the need the weak

and the cruel have for racist stereotypes. Unscrupulous workmen. Abuse of social services. Drinking in public places at all hours of the day. All this the Irish supposedly brought to this sweet, little island.

The same weekend those two lads were murdered, a friend asked me to a poetry reading. I've always known Niall as the poet-in-residence at the Irish Centre in Hammersmith, but that weekend we met a handful of poetry lovers from various nations on the Soho street where William Blake was born 250 years ago. Songs were sung. Poems read. Jokes cracked. When the rain started, we moved to a local pub, where Niall and an actor friend of his told me about the various Irish cultural centres in London. I don't recall their exact names, but one catered for the "upper class" of Irish man and woman (not unlike Ognisko Polskie in South Kensington). The other, in a small, hidden-away building in Hammersmith, was its opposite - for the ordinary Irish person, without wealth or status or hollow ambition (more like the White Eagle Club in Balham, I suppose).

Today, the Hammersmith centre is in trouble. For years, it survived on funding provided not by homeland sources, but by the local London council. Recently, this money has been withdrawn, and the centre has been taken over by new, Irish owners who want to modernise and make profits. It is no longer enough to have a community. To sustain tradition. To represent culture. Today, one must make money or close.

And here perhaps lies the most painful lesson of all. For us all. Niall is soon-to-be out of his poet-in-residence job. Perhaps the same fate awaits those still staffing POSK and the Polish Cultural Institute. Although the Institute recently moved into sexy new premises in Soho, Mr Potoroczyn has now quit as its director. Is this another sign? Is migrant culture dying at the expense of baser, more pragmatic forces? Is there a fight left in us that is not about competition, not about self-hatred, but about rescuing that which represents the hearts of our communities - the cultural centres meant to



bring us together and show what we're about... Free to flourish,  
not be stabbed in the back, at all costs.

## **We are who we are**

We are Poles.  
We are Slavs.  
We are Europeans.  
We are Central Europeans.  
We are East Europeans.  
We are hard-working.  
We are better educated than most.  
We are a romantic people.  
We are emotional.  
We are drunkards.  
We are ashamed of ourselves abroad.  
We are our own worst enemies.  
We are Europe's secret heroes.  
We are all political experts.  
We are in huge political trouble.  
We are a nation of farmers.  
We are a nation of rebels.  
We are all untamed individuals.  
We are good-looking.  
We are well-dressed.  
We are poor.  
We are only interested in money.  
We are liars and cheats and con artists.  
We are keen to attract tourists.  
We are keen to attract foreign investment.  
We are calmer than Russians.  
We are cooler than Germans.  
We are braver than Czechs.  
We are racist.  
We are rude.  
We are over-intellectualised.  
We are over-qualified.  
We are the cultural heart of the continent.  
We are full of insecurities.

We are patriotic.  
We are patriotic to suicidal extremes.  
We are passionate travellers.  
We are happy anywhere but at home.  
We are homesick all the time.  
We are homesick when at home.  
We are tired of the past.  
We are afraid of the future.  
We are only good at fighting.  
We are tired of fighting all the time.  
We are tired of public attention.  
We are desperate to hear what others think about us.  
We are always comparing ourselves to others.  
We are better than you.  
We are hated.  
We are envied.  
We are welcome.  
We are unwelcome.  
We are well-established in the UK.  
We are the newcomers to the UK.  
We are all fluent in English.  
We are all afraid of not being fluent in English.  
We are the success story of the EU expansion.  
We are sick of the EU.  
We are the pioneers of modern state democracy.  
We are addicted to Liberum Veto.  
We are wolves to each other.  
We are catholic.  
We are Catholic.  
We are experts in our own history.  
We are terrible at learning from history.  
We are all and none of the above.  
We endure.  
We evolve.  
We escape the past.  
We wait, with baited breath.  
For a moment in time that does not threaten our sanity.

## **With gods on our sides**

How scary is god? In modern times, it is OK to talk about how depressed we are, our sexual lives, even to openly discuss the various elections we are continually forced to endure. But religion? Now there is dangerous territory.

Beliefs are fascinating things. In some ways, even more so than art. More than sex even. Art is just the drive to reshape the world to our liking. A purely evolutionary mechanism. Sex? Great between lovers, rubbish between people who don't care about each other. Full stop. But belief in a "god"? The idea that there is a being so powerful that they can create and destroy whole worlds is so colourful, so important, it must be looked into, regardless of whether Easter is still here or not.

Last week, Nowy Czas published two interesting articles, on pages facing each other. The heading on the left - "Roots are important", on the right - "A different world around the corner". Both expressed valid points of view, although both in some ways opposed each other. The first article related to our situation here in the UK, to national identity and the problems suffered by migrants. The second covered travel, freedom and the wonder of discovering new cultures. There was another clear difference between them. The first article related to our old, Catholic system of beliefs. The second to the faith most likely to generate heated debate today - Islam.

At university, in Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, alongside English Literature, I studied Comparative Religion. One of the Doctors of Theology who lectured there, a Catholic priest, was a huge fan of Islam. Comparing the histories of Christian and Muslim expansion around the world, he always sided with the latter. He taught us that Christian soldiers would usually destroy the temples and kill the priests of any other religion they encountered. Islamic armies, on the other hand, in establishing an empire which stretched from Portugal to China, and deep into middle Africa, let the buildings and the priests

stand, as long as they submitted to the ruling influence of the "new bosses". A grand and probably inaccurate generalisation, but I have never forgotten this strange man and his passion for two systems of belief - one he had been born and trained into, the other which he had learnt to admire from afar.

Still, in three years of studying, I failed to find god. I simply can't see why anyone would choose to put faith in, rather than logically explore, the most important aspects of our reality - moral values, the forces behind nature, the truth about love.

But god is one thing, and religion another. University did help me invent a model for understanding most religions. It is based on a simple cartwheel. The central hub/truth, around which the spokes/religions revolve, is the same for all; "Love that which created everything and love the creation itself". Simple. But then people build theories around that core. Rituals, laws, sins. With each new variation on the central truth, the spoke of each religion grows longer. And as the distance from the centre becomes greater, so does the distance between individual spokes/religions. Therefore, the more advanced and complex a faith, the more separate it becomes from both god and god's creation. And therefore, the more absurd. The more at odds with its original purpose.

Who cares that the Vatican recently reinvented the Seven Deadly Sins? Or the difference between Islam and Islamism? If there is a god, we really should focus on how far our society is from any kind of spiritual path. Xmas? Easter? At least Ramadan has a powerful and purifying effect on Muslim communities. And the obligation to pray five times a day a real manifestation of faith. For the rest of us, what is there apart from spending and eating? In a post-existentialist, quantum century, what new directions are religions going to go in? How far from the centre?

Love all. And leave it at that. If you're not sure how, or why, I don't think even prayer will help. And if you don't approve of my point of view, in the words of the great, late Bill Hicks - forgive me. And leave it that too.

## **Para Biednych, Polsko-mowiacyh Rumunow na Soho**

Masłowska Na Soho. No bo gdzie indziej? Royal Court Theatre na Sloane Square? Może dawno temu. Za czasach młodego Albee lub Pintera. Roundhouse Theatre na Camden? Za wczesnie. W latach '60 to był dom awantgardy, eksperymentacji, przyszłości. Ale potem spłonął. A to że otworzyli ponownie parę lat temu, reklamując się legendą i nowiutkim Audi na pedestalu przed wejściem (sponsor) to jeszcze nie to. Może Barbican? *Pleeez*. Ten moloch dobry na operę lub cyrk, ale nie na młodą pisarkę z za skromnej żelaznej kurtyny. Stratford? Tam stary teatr, młoda ekipa, ciekawy program, ale recenzenci boją się jeździć. Okolica kojaży im się z wycigami psów i gangsterami. O krok za daleko w multikulturalizm.

Więc mamy teatr w sercu Soho. I gdzie lepiej zaczynać podróż napędzaną klejem, wodą i kwasem? Soho słynie z całonocnych tajnych knajp i burdeli, ale przecież to już nie to co kiedyś. Dziś wszędzie siłownie, gastro-puby i firmy post-produkcji & dystrybucji filmowej. Stańcie przed wejściem i sami popatrzcie. Małe plakaciki i duży napis Soho Theatre Bar. A wewnątrz IKEA. I Phil Collins w wersji „trendy jazz” w tle. Zamawiam modne hinduskie piwo i płace słono. Znowu ten multikulturalizm.

Bar prawie że pusty. Kto tu recenzentem? Kto turystą? Kim jest Masłowska? Jak ja mam na to pytanie odpowiedzieć? Jako pisaż, wychowany i wykształcony w Anglii, jak mam zbliżyć się do tego eksperymentu? Do przedstawienia w Londynie twórczości pisarki która słynie z manipulacji językiem polskim? Sztuka została przetłumaczona, ale nie tylko o słowa chodzi. Doroto, czemu nie film? Nie TV? Czemu ten retro świat? Nagroda Nike wystarczy? Nie chcesz Bafty? Oscara? Może chcesz żyć, a nie stać się niesmiertelna? Ekran? Klisza? To obce nam wymiary. Teatr. Scena. Na żywo. Czy to odważniejsze, prawdziwsze? Jutro nie będzie tak samo jak dziś. Nie ma gwarancji. Nie ma poprawek w post-produkcji & dystrybucji. Nic z plejbaku.

Czekając, pijąc, myślę o aktorach. Dzisiaj nie grają dla nas. Nie dla ludzi na widowni, ale dla gazet które jutro i pojutrze będą o nich mówiły setkom tysięcy. Tu, tam, na końcu świata. Dzisiaj więc będą popisywać się dla wszystkich, wszędzie. Dla wszechczasów. Sala jest pełna. Sama Masłowska siedzi w pierwszym rzędzie. Republiki „Moja Krew” jak grad spada na nas z ukrytych głośników. Pamiętam tą wojnę. Czarno-biała kontra punkowa. Jeśli nie wiesz o co chodzi, nie ważne.

Światła gasną. Na scenie pojawia się nagi maluch. Krzesła, koła i kierownica. Że młodzi pasarzerowie to Rumuni widać po dresach i akcentach. I złotych zębach. Ale kierowca wygląda, mówi i myśli jak Anglik, a nie przeciętny Polak. Pseudo-Rumuni (on i ona udają tylko, uchodźcy z imprezy na przebierańców) szaleją. Narkotyki dały im odwagę aby eksperymentować ze sobą. Ze językiem, z wyglądem, z celem podróży w życiu. On wygląda jak blond-rudy demon. Ona jak chudziutka, źle zreperowana lalka. „Good luck in hell” słysze z ust Rumuno-demonia (aktora który podobno gra Ojca Grzegorza w prawdziwej telewizyjnej Plebanii... w prawdziwych przebierancach). Na scenie węgiel rozsypany. Pachnie Polską. Ściany z granatowej stali. Światło słabe, bez pomysłu. Nie ma kurtyny. Tylko żelazne ścianki przesuwające się tam i tu. Ciekawa metafora.

Tłumaczenie świetne, trafne, lecz głosy aktorów nie zawsze dosięgają i przekonują nas. Nie przekonują przede wszystkim facieci. Ani postaci ani aktorzy. Poca się naprawdę, wyją fałszywie. Ale kobiety są świetnie napisane i zagrane. Nawet ta grana przez meszczyźne (aktorzy wcielają się w różne role). Po chwili, Anglik ubiera się za polskiego Robola, ale nie jest tak groźny jak pseudo-transwestyta w małym wiejskim Barze. Tu kobiety panują. Mężczyźni to ofiary. Na zawołanie. Na kpiny. Kobiety wybierają wszystko. Kiedy dać lub nie dać dzieciom życia. Kiedy i jak i gdzie zginąć. Wszystko, tylko nie to jak być szczęśliwym.

Ale nikt nie powinien iść do teatru z apetytem na „happy ending”. Teatr powinien budzić, nie koić. Nie po to się

Masłowska męczy przy pisaniu by nam dać metaforyczny Ibuprofen. Po przedstawieniu, po średnich oklaskach, pytam ją w teatralnym barze „Doroto, dlaczego teatr?” Widać że autorka nie chce się tłumaczyć, ale usmiecham się do niej i czekam. W końcu odpowiada: „Bo mam najnudniejszą pracę na świecie”. Nie wierzę jej. Nie do końca wierzę jej kreacjom. Ale to poważna podróż. Ważna sztuka. Dla wszystkich londyńczyków, z kąd by nie byli. Masłowska zmusza nas do myślenia jej językiem. I do wybierania. Po której stronie jesteśmy. Której postaci? Której Europy? Którego Soho, tak naprawdę?

Dodac jeszcze mala notke o 11/03/2008