Readings from the Other Europe: Recent Eastern European Poetry
by Piotr Florczyk


For many Americans, the idea of Eastern Europe rarely extends beyond a few stereotypes pertaining to the region’s seemingly incomprehensible history and frequent political upheavals, or similar one-size-fits-all cultural stamps. It’s them, not us, we say. How can we possibly understand people who shorten their vowels, who drink too much vodka or plum brandy, and who lived for years behind the Iron Curtain? Indeed, we love Chopin and pierogies; we dream of visiting Prague and the Croatian coast, of searching for Dracula in the mountains of Transylvania, and of cruising down the Danube. Though Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians may see themselves as “Central Europeans,” Romanians as once-removed descendents of the Romans, and the Baltic peoples as more akin to the Scandinavians than to the neighboring Russians, as far as many of us are concerned they all belong in the same pot, and so do their revered poets, who for decades have been marrying the lyric to the public and the philosophical without stilt ing the former or dehumanizing the latter two.

Milosz himself noted that one has no say in choosing one’s place of birth; thus responding to one’s fate is both a natural and a necessary act. Milosz’s own voluminous output bears the mark of a man struggling to make sense of the tumultuous times in which he lived. He was aware of the pitfalls awaiting artists who address moral and existential issues within the airless confines of finicky, repressive governments. Like Milosz’s poetry, the work of Ahkmatova, Herbert, Holub, Venclova, Popa, Celan, Brodsky, Kocbek, and Szymborska is built on human trauma and folly, ashes stirred by the poets’ refusal to be silenced. Regardless of how successful the poets were, however, in employing their art in a way that stirred the hearts, and minds, and wills of both the oppressors and the oppressed, it is rather difficult to see the countries and people of Eastern
Europe as anything but heroes or, in most cases, as victims of their own tragic fate. It is not surprising, then, that some Americans and Western Europeans have given up trying to understand Eastern Europe, and use the term Balkanization for areas of their private lives undergoing massive fragmentation, albeit without the bloody score-settling and ethnic cleansing of the former Yugoslavia. But is it fair to blame the poets for responding to their times, and indirectly influencing our understanding of their cultures? Doubtless without their accounts we would know even less of those times, and of the lessons to be learned from them.

The chief criticisms against the older generation of Eastern European poets came from within their respective cultures. The next generation of poets, ushered in by the revolutions of 1989–1992, vehemently rejected the historically and philosophically freighted poetics of their predecessors and favored a quotidian and colloquial poetics that celebrated the individual. Such a change of aesthetic is nothing new, of course; each generation strives to declass its forefathers. Because of the political and societal changes ushered in by the fall of communism and the subsequent transfer to political republicanism and a market economy, the new poets, mostly born in the sixties, represented more than another cyclical changing of the guard. In Poland, for example, the media and the critics cherished the emerging poets (though the balloon of euphoria has since gone flat) even as many argued that the new poetry lacked the intellectual and messianic value of the poetry that it supplanted. Others believe the new poets freed their art of a burden. Doubtless the truth lies somewhere in the middle, as is the case with the three poets under discussion here.

I

Valzhyna Mort is a young Belarusian poet who, having married an American, resides in Virginia. According to her publisher, hers is the first bilingual Belarusian/English book published in the United States, a cause for celebration in and of itself given how few books from the so-called minor languages are translated and published in English. If we also consider how little most Americans know of Mort’s country, which happens to be the last European country run by a dictator, we cannot help but read Factory of Tears as a kind of testament, a recording of a specific time and place.
Indeed, Mort’s collection is exactly that. More importantly, however, it strives to endow a generation of Belarusians—the poet’s own—with a voice. These often untitled and unpunctuated free-verse poems are bracketed by two poems that address the resurfacing of the Belarusian language. Suppressed in the Soviet era in favor of Russian, Belarusian continues to be marginalized by the political elites. The first of these two poems, “Belarusian I,” evokes a painful birth and abandonment of the language and national consciousness, setting the collection’s poignant tone:

even our mothers have no idea how we were born
how we parted their legs and crawled out into the world
the way you crawl from the ruins after a bombing
we couldn’t tell which of us was a girl or a boy
we gorged on dirt thinking it was bread
and our future
a gymnast on a thin thread of the horizon
was performing there
at the highest pitch
bitch

The overt pathos of these lines and their use of the plural pronoun make them an easy target for cynics. Mort is aware of the trap; she allows this comment on emerging national consciousness to pivot between the abyss of fatalism and her own youthful exasperation. Moreover, the sudden use of the epithet “bitch,” which acts as a verbal sneer, hints at the poet’s mistrust of simple lyricism as well as her desire to break old rules and establish her own. At the end of the poem, after a list of abuses suffered by Belarusians at the hands of their colonizers, the speaker announces:

we crawled back into the bellies of our sleeping mothers
as if into bomb shelters
to be born again

and there on the horizon the gymnast of our future
was leaping through the fiery hoop
of the sun
In this allegory of the cyclical nation-building process, the poet fixates on the gymnast as an emblem of the future. Spectators are both alarmed and excited by the gymnast’s performance, an indicator of the uncertain nature of what it means to be Belarusian in this day and age. It is a horrifying realization on the speaker’s part, and one totally foreign to an American audience.

How does one live when clinging to a language that is “not a language. / it doesn’t have any system,” as the poet writes in “Belarusian II,” the collection’s penultimate poem? The answer seems to lie in the music of language and in the belongings brought to America by the newly minted immigrant. An accordion helps Mort to maintain visceral contact with her roots. The instrument is not only a physical memento that can be held and carried; it is also, like the poet, a producer of song. Playing the accordion, the poet can deliver the sounds of the old country in a way that language never could:

and my accordion
when it stretches its bellows
my accordion looks
like mountain peaks
it eats from my hands
it licks them and like a kid
won’t get off my lap
but time will come and it will
show its ta ra ta ta

That the accordion has the final say is both ingenious and beautiful, and one only wishes that Mort could maintain this artful practice of making seemingly trivial objects act as keys to a larger whole.

Alas, the book is at its weakest and most uneven when the speaker’s delicate duality—a precocious observer on one hand and an impassioned preserver of national identity on the other—becomes too much for the poet to sustain. No poem illustrates this predicament more painfully than “Juveniles,” in which the speaker describes the troubles of young people. There is nothing wrong with speaking from the ground up; however, it is the tone, a wounded battle cry, that transforms the poet’s innocent intentions into embarrassing triviality. Here are the last three stanzas of the poem:
and if we seem green
it’s only on account of the traffic lights
but in an instant you will see
the lights will tear open their chests
revealing red hearts

because we are children
juveniles

and we fly all airplanes
and all airplanes fly to minsk
because we are children
no one is going to deny us the city we grew up in

The poet seems to be saying that we are lost in the historical moment, but the revelation is so provisional that even the most open-minded and emphatic would have trouble accepting it.

While Mort’s intentions are clear, the unevenness of her project is further accentuated by the poem “White Trash,” a tour de force that spans some dozen pages near the middle of the book. A wonderful poem, it at times reads like prose extracted from a diary. Mort’s speaker seems to have abandoned pathos in favor of open rebellion by declaring: “Sir, I protest against your presence in my apartment. [...] This summer / I protest against everything.” Sure, we have heard about the 2006 Denim Revolution whose adherents camped out in Minsk to protest the draconian policies of Belarusian President Lukashenko—is he, or the government in general, the “Sir”?—but it is puzzling why the speaker later in the same stanza turns against herself and her surroundings:

Mainly, I protest against my
protest and this is the only way to survive this heat, when
everybody is sculpting his life from shit. Everything is from
shit. Absolutely everything. From the shit warmed under
the raging summer sun.

If we take the title of this poem as an ironic rejection of the speaker’s true feelings, then Mort succeeds in doing what has been done by others whose backs are against the wall: turning her primordial desire for change and betterment into nonchalant swagger. In this case “White Trash” becomes matter-of-fact political/social posturing. However, the
onerous conflict between the speaker’s observation of her countrymen and her own experience of a dream-like suspension from reality ultimately ends in a stalemate: “Intolerable heat wakes me up. Summer again. Morning / again. Again white trash are under the window.”

Eastern European poetry often eludes easy explication, but Mort’s poetry does not. Although Factory of Tears is uneven, Mort is clearly a poet to watch, and what’s more exciting, to follow as she adjusts to her American surroundings. There are a number of fine poems here, and one of the best—untitled and, like the book, dedicated to the poet’s grandmother—owes its success to its insight on what makes us humans so alike, whether we are in Belarus, America, or elsewhere.

You see your life as something borrowed for the time being from your neighbor. You say – be careful with it, it’s not ours. We’ll have to give it back. Beside your life, as if beside the first black-and-white TV set, we all sit amazed.

II

The award-winning Polish poet Tomasz Różycki lives in Opole, where he was born in 1970. The preceding generation of his family was expelled from the east of Poland (now part of Ukraine) and forcibly resettled on lands reclaimed from the Third Reich at the end of World War II. Unlike many of his peers, Różycki, who teaches French language and literature at Opole University, has bridged the generational divide in Eastern European poetry. His verse is not only filled with references to history, identity, memory, and politics, but also includes the now customary peppering of everyday trials and tribulations. But what helps Różycki to stand apart from the other young poets of his generation is his success in developing his own voice by means of the the sonnet, which he employs for a wide range of subject matter.

Complete with a highly informative introduction, The Forgotten Keys presents ample selections from the poet’s previous four volumes, all of which were published in Poland between 1997 and 2006. Even an informal skimming of this books confirms that Różycki is a talent to cherish, and reading him in the chronological arrangement chosen by the translator allows us to trace the poet’s development. The book’s second poem, “Entropy,” sets the tone for the collection as a whole:
This June, as sun douses the lawns by the Odra
and the bridges continue to crumble, I say,
we have no fatherland. It went missing during transport,
or maybe the cavalry scattered it in their horses’ manes,

the poets twisted its name, and the typeface in newspapers
shredded it. That is why each of us collected what we could
under our eyelids, earth, sand, bricks, whole flakes
of the sky, the scent of grass, and now no one knows

what to do with it all, how to close the eyes, how to sleep
or to cry. It is June, and it is getting harder to go on.
I am asking, why didn’t they burn down Lwów, why
didn’t they turn it to ash, light smoke. Then no one

would have had to carry such weight throughout
life and fall down a hundred times over, even in dreams.

A Polish reader would immediately recognize the loaded
geographical references, and it is hard for anyone to miss the gravity
of these lines. Here is a poet in his mid-twenties acting as the register
of his family’s tumultuous history. One imagines the speaker as a little
boy sitting under the dining table or behind a sofa while his older
family members trade memories of a bygone era. The details, both
natural and man-made, turn the poem into a kind of material litany
uttered by the communal ‘we.’ However, one also hears keen irony in
the poet’s voice. The refugees, having arrived in their new homes, are
trapped by nostalgia and their sense of having been manhandled by
history and fate. They cling to the past to the point of no return, their
predicament skillfully evoked by the image of the Odra River and its
crumbling bridges. Indeed, the refugees’ burden of history and personal
memory lends itself to the reclaimed territories as well, turning the
landscape into a patchwork of landmarks and monumental struggles.
The potential for melodrama in depicting such struggles is kept in
check by the poet’s harnessing of the subject matter to irony. The poet
suggests that the harm and injustice experienced by the refugees can
be mitigated not by fastidiously clinging to the past but rather by the
resourcefulness of one’s imagination, as in the last two stanzas of “The
Recovered Lands”: 
To escape, to escape, to find fatherland a little farther, to establish a country with borders of rusty gates and provinces made of overgrown gardens and a capital that overlooks the orchard.

Yes, to draw up a constitution from decaying letters, to collect forgotten keys, to summon the dead to the scorched parliamentary table, to declare a great return, the independence of dreams.

Despite the euphemistic title, the poem affirms the human need to belong, even if only in reverie, to a specific locale. But what if the specific locale acts as a proverbial ball-and-chain? Różycki seems to realize that freeing oneself of the past just to replace it with imagination provides only temporary relief, so he decides to extend his reach beyond the known and familiar. For example, in “Sea-Mail Letter,” the speaker personifies the world in order to assuage his own aimless wandering:

I will never come back. As a memento, I am throwing into the bay an empty port bottle that I bought with my last scavenged change. Years later, maybe somewhere it will clog up the aorta of the world, if one believes the world has a similar bloodstream as ours made of water, vodka, and liquids, and if one begins to believe that all of our gazes flow somewhere in the end, that somewhere the tracks, cables, and railings cease, that at the end one finally finds the damn closet that holds all the lost gloves. When the bottle arrives there, I will already be occupying a fold-down seat in the interstellar lounge car. And although the world will not stop, at least it will feel a sharp pain in its heart.

However, Różycki knows that the world’s pecking order is not at all predictable. In the poem, the bloodstream of the world acts as a connector and conductor of the natural and metaphysical ecosystems of which man is a part. But the poet undercuts the sheer intensity of being in the world with his refusal to acknowledge his own powers, emphasizing instead his fallibility. Różycki understands that our
existence is terribly fragile. Traveling to a distant place by an ocean, as if it were the next stop on his existential journey, Różycki announces the end to his fantasy of finding the remaining pieces of the puzzle, even though, paradoxically, the gesture of throwing the castaway’s bottle in the water signals his desire for the journey to continue. The mayday bottle will both cause the world pain and attract attention to the poet. Discarding the bottle evokes the fatalism and martyrdom at the core of the Polish mentality, and it reminds us of our need for closure, however unattainable it is.

If one had to point out something negative in Różycki’s poems, it would doubtless be their repetitiveness. Most of them are more-or-less rhyming sonnets packed with details and images, and while the cataloging, of course, has a purpose befitting a man burrowing through personal and collective memory, at times it can feel tedious and formulaic. That the musicality of the lines doesn’t always come across in translation does not help matters. Still, Różycki has the talent, stamina, and imagination to entertain and move even the most seasoned reader. In “Cocoa and Parrots,” the poet wants us to believe that his project is only a child’s game—initiation into a world that remains pure—as he describes his son learning to speak. Even as the son renders words incomprehensible, the words will still “grow into / notebooks and dictionaries, a whole mythology.” The speaker continues, “And although he repeats after me, it is unlike / any known language. My son speaks the truth.” Clearly, repetition itself has a place in one’s search for the forgotten keys and codes that can unlock the true nature of one’s identity. Who wouldn’t go the distance for that?

III

In the Albanian poet Moikom Zeqo’s case, the search is for the most part expressed figuratively, though its genesis undoubtedly lies in the real. Zeqo’s use of metaphor is a shield against the oppressiveness of Communism and its dictatorial elite. Though this may sound like escapism—especially if one is familiar with Wayne Miller’s detailed introduction on the recent political and cultural history of Albania—the poet’s decision to forgo a realistic portrayal of his country should be viewed as such. All the so-called Eastern European countries endured periods during which social realism was hailed as the dominant and desired trend in art and culture, and any deviation from the official line would mean censorship
or worse. The art world itself was divided between the official artists and those who tried to bend the rules. Periodically, these two groups would see eye-to-eye, though such moments would hardly last long enough to influence the thinking of those in charge of national ideologies. It was during one of these thaws that Zeqo began working on *Meduza*, a collection of a hundred and fifty-two poems, though he wouldn’t see it printed until the mid-1990s.

*I Don’t Believe in Ghosts* selects sixty-seven of “the strongest and most translatable” of those poems, all written between 1971 and 1974. Miller arranges the poems chronologically, a section for each year, and hopes that the selections engage in a kind of dialogue with each other. For the most part they do, though the question of how such a book should be read lurks in the background, not least because the poems were written thirty years ago. We read books in translation to find out about other cultures and their poetries, often hoping that the result will be the enrichment of our own. But in this case, Miller, a fine poet in his own right, invites us to step into the past. Some will not care to join in, especially since the introduction informs us that the original collection “caused a lot of trouble, was so difficult to publish, and represents the beginning of what [the poet] sees as his mature work.” Are these good enough reasons to read this book? Not quite, unless one is squarely interested in digging up and correlating human lives with that of politics and history, a rather dusty approach. Fortunately great art is timeless, and there is plenty of it here.

The title poem, “I Don’t Believe in Ghosts,” which appears near the beginning of the collection, contrasts the real with the phantasmagorical. In stanza one, we read that “Boredom often creates strange ghosts, / white fogs in which the buildings sway” and, in stanza two, “Rain in Europe. Clouds on the horizon / open and close for the tragedies of our time. / Sober above Shakespeare’s statue, / Romeo and Juliet have fallen out of love.” The mood is clearly tired and melancholic. It is tempting to classify this poem as another example of poetry-of-witness authored by a speaker pitted against oppressive government, but the poet disarms this assumption by turning inward—“Often I get up in the night, / but you need to know I never sleepwalk”—thus internalizing the effects that the political climate has had on his own mind and body: “I stretch out my arms like two streets, / blood moving through them like traffic.” He “believes in life, everything I love,” without the ability
to move on, because “It’s more difficult to leave / than to take gloves off icy hands.” For the speaker there is no escape, but paradoxically the chafing boredom and constricting predictability are sources of strength and medusa-like adaptability.

The strength of the collection rests in part on the speaker’s refusal to use language that is simple and direct. That said, the poem “Trouble” is an example of the contrary. Its opening reads, “When I write poems / I don’t want to overwhelm you with metaphors,” and later, “I dive into the depths / of simple words, everyday words, / to retrieve myself,” just to add, “I’m searching / for the poetry of the people. // But beauty doesn’t come / quickly or easily…” Is it that the poet yearns for simple, unadorned speech, but cannot have it because such speech is equated with the unequivocal language of the Party? The speaker of many of these poems does in fact grapple with a desire for language that is free of embellishment. He also realizes that beauty lies in layered details and allegories rather than in the crude pronouncements of propaganda. Indeed, Zeqo’s most popular figures and symbols are the moon, stars, and horses. In “For the Arrival,” a beautiful poem in the third section of the book, the speaker says, “The horse of my body / and my words / carries time and motion / separately, his mane blossoming,” a passage that hints again at the conflict between physical progress and personal growth. Yet we can sense the progress of both pursuits: “Saddle the horse—,” says the speaker, “I can imagine the end, / continue what I’ve left half done.” Is the speaker preparing for the end of his life? The end of oppression? The poet bravely suggests that man is able to deal simultaneously with time, his archenemy, and with something less abstract—say, freedom of speech—and that he does this by going inside himself and thus ensuring that his message is carried on and “nourished by deep roots.”

This kind of self-examination makes it easier for us now to see why he doesn’t believe in ghosts—but isn’t Zeqo, or his speaker, presented as ghost-like himself? To the paranoid dictators running his country—tiny and impoverished Albania has one of the largest systems of bunkers in the world—Zeqo doesn’t exist unless he writes something of which the authorities disapprove. By turning inward he preserves the chance to remain who he is. The poem “I Try to Travel,” in the final section of the book, addresses this quandary:
I try to travel toward you, I can’t.
I’m the man in the fable
whose legs turned to stone.

I change the storm of my dreams
into a river, a passage through my memory.
I go to be buried but I don’t die.

I try to travel toward you, I can’t.
I touch the wind like a cold monument
to your forgotten name.

I try to travel toward you, I can’t.
Like sandals, metaphors
have carried the centuries.

I’m here
even when I’m gone.

In a way, the speaker of this poem couldn’t be any more real; though he claims absence, the poem in fact preserves his presence. The addressee of the poem may be the speaker himself. No longershouldering the burden of living in an oppressive state, he hovers between reality and reverie. Indeed, the motif of traveling is the key to understanding the poem, the poet’s intention, and much of Eastern European poetry itself. Whether in a physical or metaphorical sense, Zeqo, Rōżycki, and Mort explore the possibilities afforded to them by language that, just like us, departs and reappears more adept, each and every instance giving meaning to our most profound questions and predicaments.