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Scattered Nests of Tenderness: A Note on the Poetry of Dorota Filipczak

In the course of her tragically short life, Dorota Filipczak published—in addition to her work as a literary critic, editor, and translator—six slim volumes of poetry (plus, in 2017, a Selected Poems). She favoured titles that were arresting and enigmatic, even a little odd: *In the Shade of a Perfect Orange* (1994); *The* [or *An*] *Angel's Third Wing* (1995); *Orpheus in* [or *on*] *the Gynaecological Ward* (1997); *The Knife-Sharpener* (2003); *K+M+B* (2009); *Multiverse* (2016). *Scattered Nests of Tenderness: Selected Poems 1994–2016* was her final poetic offering. Were these the titles an artist had given to her paintings and not a poet to her pamphlets, what would we surmise? No doubt that she is a surrealist, whose compositions, rather than being conventional depictions of "reality," offer unexpected or unlikely—or, indeed, impossible—still lives, perspectives, and narratives. Enigmatic titles notwithstanding, her themes of—as Monika Kocot summarises them in her seminal essay on the poet—"spirituality, female empowerment, trauma and Polish history," "unconventional interpretations of the sacred," and "[t]he wisdom of the body," are present throughout her poetic oeuvre (175–76). Her poems consistently address aspects of this thematic spectrum.

W. H. Auden held that "[n]early every good poet has certain emotions and imagery which recur and predominate in the work" (qtd. in Murray 246). The dominant emotions in Dorota Filipczak's poetry could be said to be indignation and tenderness. It is as if each is vying for the reader's attention and sympathy. They are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Indeed, her work profits, Blake-like, from the tension. After all, "[w]ithout Contraries is no progression" (Blake xvi). The progress she is pushing for is twofold: the liberation of women from past and present misrepresentation and, that achieved, a battle of the sexes finally *on an equal footing*.

Her poetry draws strength, too, from her use of myth from unexpected perspectives and her use of dream narrative as a way of dissolving time,

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"mixing memory and desire," we might say. Might the title of her final verse publication, *Scattered Nests of Tenderness*, be a wistful echo of Eliot?

> Is it like this
> In death's other kingdom
> Waking alone
> At the hour when we are
> Trembling with tenderness (Eliot, "The Hollow Men" 84)

Her late poem "Sanna" ["Sledding"] is a fine example of just such an hour—out in the cold, pushing her young son on his sledge, her great love mixed with her fears for his future:

> again I push you and you disappear
> into regions where I have no power
> no influence on
> who you will meet, who you will love or
> the dangers that await you, son (*Wieloświat* 15)

Thus, the title *Scattered Nests of Tenderness* underlines one of her poetry's dominant emotions, with the poet also directing our attention to her preoccupation with the "nests" of family, safety, home. As Bachelard says: "A nest is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us to *daydreaming of security*" (122, italics in the original).

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Asked (in 2018) which books she would most like to translate, Dorota Filipczak cited two: *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* ("Duchowa transfuzja" 46). Lowry's great novel provides the single epigraph to *Scattered Nests of Tenderness*, her final gathering of her verse: "*No se puede vivir sin amar*." The necessity of love, the dominant emotion in her work, had earlier been signalled in another epigraph—this, from *The Song of Solomon*, to her poem "Persefona" ["Persephone"]: "Jak śmierć potężna jest miłość" ["for love is strong as death"] (*Trzecie skrzydło anioła* 40). Lowry's novel itself is prefaced by an epigraph (one of three) which must have struck a resonant chord with the author of *Wieloświat* and, in particular, its concluding poem, "Wieża" ["The Tower"]: "*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, den können wir erlösen*" ["Whosoever unceasingly strives upward . . . him [sic] we can save")—Goethe. In the volume that Filipczak has called her most important, this poem is given added significance through the photograph of the "tower" in question—"niegdyś obserwatorium"—the

"one-time observatory" on the roof of the poet's former place of work in the Institute of Philology of the University of Lodz—on both the book's cover and within the collection, the latter showing the view it affords of the city, the author in the foreground, her head in the clouds. (One poem in the collection, "Zejście ze szczytu" ["Coming Down from the Summit"], jokes: "ktokolwiek mówił o chodzeniu z głową w chmurach / nie wiedział o czym mówi" ["whoever talked about walking with their head in the clouds / had no idea what they were talking about"] [29].) *Wieloświat*, she said in the same 2018 interview, "was for me the most important [of my poetry books]" ("Duchowa transfuzja" 44). The importance, she explained, lay in the fact that she was then "finally able to express her identity as a native of Łódź," something with which she had previously had "certain issues" ("pewne kłopoty"). She is also, in the final poem in the collection—and therefore now regarded as her last poem—finally able to realise a long-standing ambition and climb to the top of her own tower: "Od zawsze chciałam tam wejść" ["For as long as I can remember / I have wanted to go up there"] (33). "Set all your mind upon the steep ascent," wrote Yeats of modern poetry's most famous tower, a thought perhaps echoed in Filipczak's poem, as she makes her way up her own, unlikely "ancient stair" in downtown Łódź:

> I summon to the winding ancient stair;
> Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,
> Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,
> Upon the breathless starlit air ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul" 234)

"The Tower" brings to a close *Wieloświat*'s preoccupation in a number of poems with high buildings and peaks, with climbing and looking down from a height, with mountains, and, finally, the poet's "tower." "And immediately," writes Philip Larkin in "High Windows," the title poem of his own final collection:

> Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
> The sun-comprehending glass,
> And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
> Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless. (165)

Larkin's transformative vision is reflected in Filipczak's own upward striving (even if she is led—"Idę posłusznie" ["Up I go obediently"]—by a self-important *man*). Like Larkin, Dorota Filipczak sets love against "all the uncaring / Intricate rented world" of his poem "Aubade" (Larkin 209). Indeed, it is tempting to (mis)translate her similar description of the world—"nieuważny świat"—as "the uncaring world" to accommodate Larkin's peerless adjective. Either way, both set love against a world that

is, at best, indifferent. Indeed, it may be Larkin's much-quoted assertion, "what will survive of us is love," that best sums up the overarching message of Dorota Filipczak's verse.

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DOROTA FILIPCZAK

"The Tower"

For as long as I can remember
I have wanted to go up there
and look down on the city
from the roof of my university
the top-floor gallery
that was once an observatory
It's strictly forbidden
says
the important person leading
the way
Up I go obediently,
evidently
mastering Time
for suddenly I'm
a student again, a wise young woman
or a not-so-wise one
writing her thesis on Golding, creator
of *The Spire*
standing as far down in the earth as high
as it does in the sky
How it was constructed
will remain my secret
Like an expedition off to find
The Holy Grail we ascend
the stairs
the several floors
of the Institute
of Philology, our retinue
a slow
procession that includes a woman who has vertigo
and a chivalrous man
eager to help with anything he can
Look, he says, to us all
Here a window and its frame were blown out of the wall
a gap like a door
starting at the floor
Lean against it and the conclusion
will be glass or the illusion
of glass
Our climb continues into darkness
Careful, the stairs are rotten

But I'm undeterred, the city will be mine
Even should Lancelot himself roar
past in that silver car
there below
no-one would see or know
The latticework on the tower
trembles just like Golding's spire
I see my thesis travel
to unravel
in the shredder
by order
of the dean,
(nothing, says the librarian, I could have done)
Built in secret in my room
my tower will evolve to become
a box of matches
that catches
fire
and consumes the entire
distracted world
A sudden urge takes hold
of me
to lean out over the balcony
and I
fly
down I go
passing the window
of my office
My job is
not so bad
something I had
never thought I would hear myself utter
ahead of me now the gutter
the tarmac's
smell and pavement's rocks
but I'm caught
in a net and brought
back up in the fabric
whose threads you could not break
And since you ask
I'm not insane, I give my all to a single task
Just a minute, gentlemen, ladies,
this blood is
not blood
but the colour of my coat Please pass me if you would
my gloves and bag, I'm able

thank you to get up myself As for these books on the table
they'll give you I fear
the wrong idea
My goal I swear
was to climb the tower
on the very day
a truck took me my true self away
to scrapyard and
recycling plant
Like passengers on the Titanic
we sway now on the shifting deck
I take a few photos, for the lens survived the fall
A month from now we shall all
be moving out moving on
we know the hour
high time then
we took the tower

Translated by Cathal McCabe.