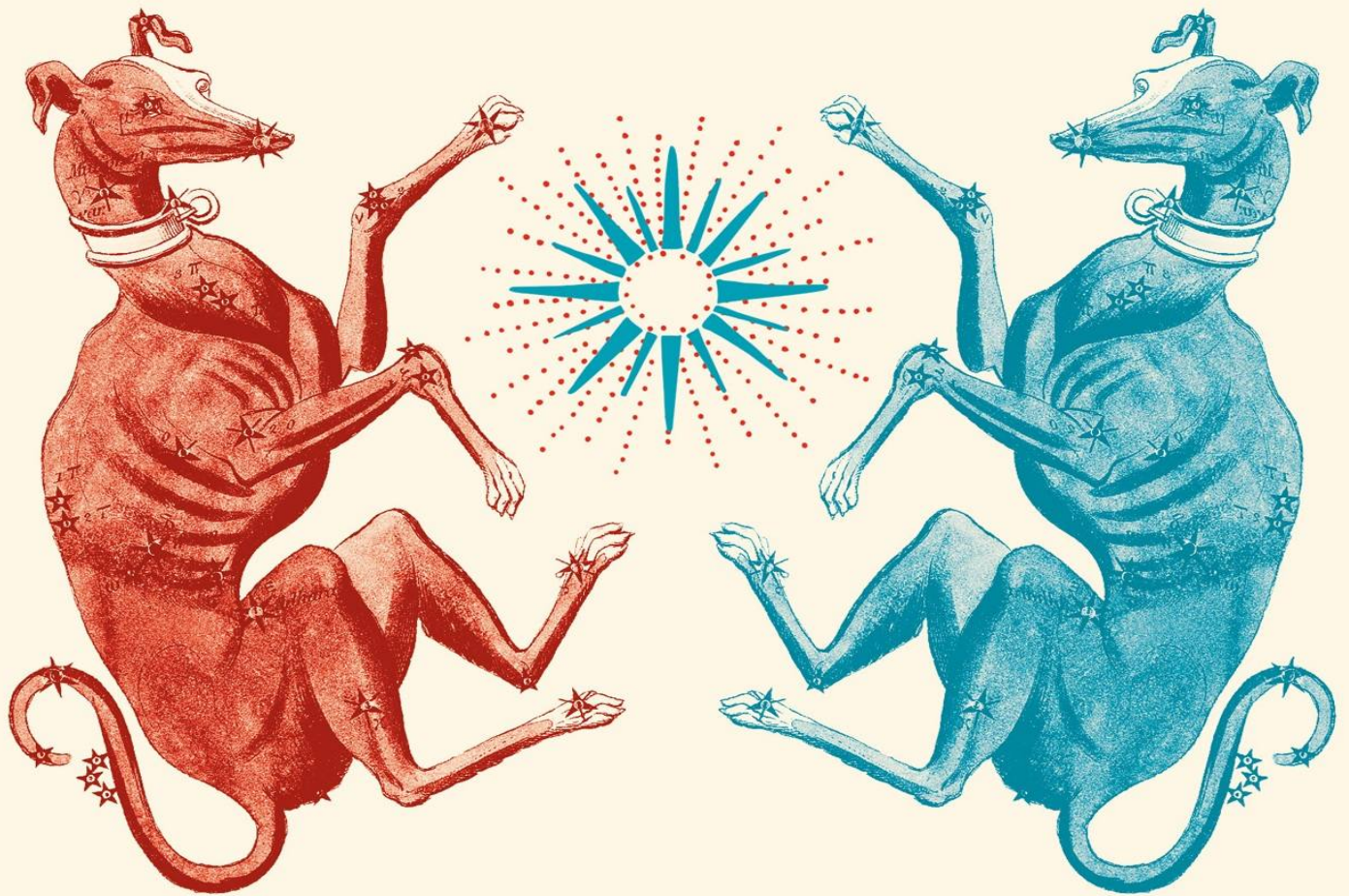
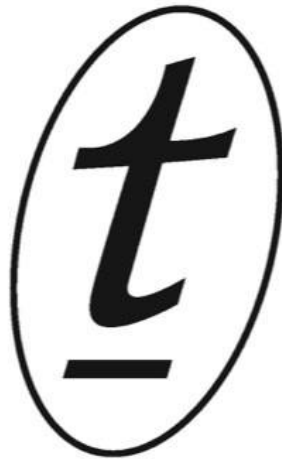


# DRIVE YOUR PLOW OVER THE BONES OF THE DEAD



# OLGA TOKARCZUK

Author of *Flights*, winner of the Man Booker International Prize 2018



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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Drive Your Plow...

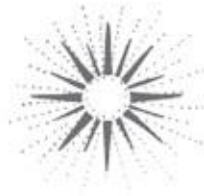
DUSZEJKO IS IN HER SIXTIES, AN ECCENTRIC schoolteacher and caretaker of holiday homes who lives in a remote Polish village. Her two beloved dogs disappear, and then members of a local hunting club are found murdered; she decides to get involved in the investigation. But she has her own theories about things because she reads the stars, as well as the poetry of William Blake.

*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* is an entertaining thriller by the author of *Flights*, winner of the Man Booker International Prize. In this scintillating translation by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Olga Tokarczuk explores ideas about madness, injustice, animal rights, hypocrisy and predestination—and how to get away with murder.

‘A strongly voiced existential thriller.’ *Guardian*

‘Tokarczuk is one of Europe’s most daring and original writers.’ *Los Angeles Review of Books*

DRIVE YOUR PLOW  
OVER THE BONES  
OF THE DEAD



OLGA TOKARCZUK

Translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

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# I

## NOW PAY ATTENTION

*Once meek, and in a perilous path,  
The just man kept his course along  
The vale of death.*

I am already at an age and additionally in a state where I must always wash my feet thoroughly before bed, in the event of having to be removed by an ambulance in the Night.

Had I examined the Ephemerides that evening to see what was happening in the sky, I wouldn't have gone to bed at all. Meanwhile I had fallen very fast asleep; I had helped myself with an infusion of hops, and I also took two valerian pills. So when I was woken in the middle of the Night by hammering on the door – violent, immoderate and thus ill-omened – I was unable to come round. I sprang up and stood by the bed, unsteadily, because my sleepy, shaky body couldn't make the leap from the innocence of sleep into wakefulness. I felt weak and began to reel, as if about to lose consciousness. Unfortunately this has been happening to me lately, and has to do with my Ailments. I had to sit down and tell myself several times: I'm at home, it's Night, someone's banging on the door. Only then did I manage to control my nerves. As I searched for my slippers in the dark, I could hear that whoever had been banging was now walking around the house, muttering. Downstairs, in the cubbyhole for the electrical meters, I keep the pepper spray Dizzy gave me because of the poachers, and that was what now came to mind. In the darkness I managed to seek out the familiar, cold aerosol shape, and thus armed, I switched on the outside light, then looked at the porch through a small side window. There was a crunch of snow, and into my field of vision came my neighbour, whom I call Oddball. He was wrapping himself in the

tails of the old sheepskin coat I'd sometimes seen him wearing as he worked outside the house. Below the coat I could see his striped pyjamas and heavy hiking boots.

'Open up,' he said.

With undisguised astonishment he cast a glance at my linen suit (I sleep in something the Professor and his wife wanted to throw away last summer, which reminds me of a fashion from the past and the days of my youth – thus I combine the Practical and the Sentimental) and without a by-your-leave he came inside.

'Please get dressed. Big Foot is dead.'

For a while I was speechless with shock; without a word I put on my tall snow boots and the first fleece to hand from the coat rack. Outside, in the pool of light falling from the porch lamp, the snow was changing into a slow, sleepy shower. Oddball stood next to me in silence, tall, thin and bony like a figure sketched in a few pencil strokes. Every time he moved, snow fell from him like icing sugar from pastry ribbons.

'What do you mean, dead?' I finally asked, my throat tightening, as I opened the door, but Oddball didn't answer.

He generally doesn't say much. He must have Mercury in a reticent sign, I reckon it's in Capricorn or on the cusp, in square or maybe in opposition to Saturn. It could also be Mercury in retrograde – that produces reserve.

We left the house and were instantly engulfed by the familiar cold, wet air that reminds us every winter that the world was not created for Mankind, and for at least half the year it shows us how very hostile it is to us. The frost brutally assailed our cheeks, and clouds of white steam came streaming from our mouths. The porch light went out automatically and we walked across the crunching snow in total darkness, except for Oddball's headlamp, which pierced the pitch dark in one shifting spot, just in front of him, as I tripped along in the Murk behind him.

'Don't you have a torch?' he asked.

Of course I had one, but I wouldn't be able to tell where it was until morning, in the daylight. It's a feature of torches that they're only visible in the daytime.

Big Foot's cottage stood slightly out of the way, higher up than the other houses. It was one of three inhabited all year round. Only he, Oddball and I lived here without fear of the winter; all the other inhabitants had sealed their houses shut in October, drained the water from the pipes and gone back to the city.

Now we turned off the partly cleared road that runs across our hamlet and splits into paths leading to each of the houses. A path trodden in deep snow led to Big Foot's house, so narrow that you had to set one foot behind the other while trying to keep your balance.



‘It won’t be a pretty sight,’ warned Oddball, turning to face me, and briefly blinding me with his headlamp.

I wasn’t expecting anything else. For a while he was silent, and then, as if to explain himself, he said: ‘I was alarmed by the light in his kitchen and the dog barking so plaintively. Didn’t you hear it?’

No, I didn’t. I was asleep, numbed by hops and valerian.

‘Where is she now, the Dog?’

‘I took her away from here – she’s at my place. I fed her and she seemed to calm down.’

Another moment of silence.

‘He always put out the light and went to bed early to save money, but this time it continued to burn. A bright streak against the snow. Visible from my bedroom window. So I went over there, thinking he might have got drunk or was doing the dog harm, for it to be howling like that.’

We passed a tumbledown barn and moments later Oddball’s torch fetched out of the darkness two pairs of shining eyes, pale green and fluorescent.

‘Look, Deer,’ I said in a raised whisper, grabbing him by the coat sleeve. ‘They’ve come so close to the house. Aren’t they afraid?’

The Deer were standing in the snow almost up to their bellies. They gazed at us calmly, as if we had caught them in the middle of performing a ritual whose meaning we couldn’t fathom. It was dark, so I couldn’t tell if they were the same Young Ladies who had come here from the Czech Republic in the autumn, or some new ones. And in fact why only two? That time there had been at least four of them.

‘Go home,’ I said to the Deer, and started waving my arms. They twitched, but didn’t move. They calmly stared after us, all the way to the front door. A shiver ran through me.

Meanwhile Oddball was stamping his feet to shake the snow off his boots outside the neglected cottage. The small windows were sealed with plastic and cardboard, and the wooden door was covered with black tar paper.

The walls in the hall were stacked with firewood for the stove, logs of uneven size. The interior was nasty, dirty and neglected. Throughout there was a smell of damp, of wood and earth – moist and voracious. The stink of smoke, years old, had settled on the walls in a greasy layer.

The door into the kitchen was ajar, and at once I saw Big Foot’s body lying on the floor. Almost as soon as my gaze landed on him, it leaped away. It was a while before I could look over there again. It was a dreadful sight.

He was lying twisted in a bizarre position, with his hands to his neck, as if struggling to pull off a collar that was pinching him. Gradually I went closer, as if hypnotised. I saw his open eyes fixed on a point somewhere under the table. His dirty vest was ripped at the throat. It looked as if the body had

turned on itself, lost the fight and been killed. It made me feel cold with Horror – the blood froze in my veins and I felt as if it had withdrawn deep inside my body. Only yesterday I had seen this body alive.

‘My God,’ I mumbled, ‘what happened?’

Oddball shrugged.

‘I can’t get through to the Police, it’s the Czech network again.’

I pulled my mobile phone from my pocket and tapped out the number I knew from the television – 997 – and soon after an automated Czech voice responded. That’s what happens here. The signal wanders, with no regard for the national borders. Sometimes the dividing line between operators parks itself in my kitchen for hours on end, and occasionally it has stopped by Oddball’s house or on the terrace for several days. Its capricious nature is hard to predict.

‘You should have gone higher up the hill behind the house,’ I belatedly advised him.

‘He’ll be stiff as a board before they get here,’ said Oddball in a tone that I particularly disliked in him – as if he had all the answers. He took off his sheepskin coat and hung it on the back of a chair. ‘We can’t leave him like that, he looks ghastly. He was our neighbour, after all.’

As I looked at Big Foot’s poor, twisted body I found it hard to believe that only yesterday I’d been afraid of this Person. I disliked him. To say I disliked him might be putting it too mildly. Instead I should say that I found him repulsive, horrible. In fact I didn’t even regard him as a human Being. Now he was lying on the stained floor in his dirty underwear, small and skinny, limp and harmless. Just a piece of matter, which some unimaginable processes had reduced to a fragile object, separated from everything else. It made me feel sad, horrified, for even someone as foul as he was did not deserve death. Who on earth does? The same fate awaits me too, and Oddball, and the Deer outside; one day we shall all be nothing more than corpses.

I glanced at Oddball, in the hope of some consolation, but he was already busy making the rumpled bed, a shake-down on a dilapidated folding couch, so I did my best to comfort myself. And then it occurred to me that in a way Big Foot’s death might be a good thing. It had freed him from the mess that was his life. And it had freed other living Creatures from him. Oh yes, suddenly I realised what a good thing death can be, how just and fair, like a disinfectant, or a vacuum cleaner. I admit that’s what I thought, and that’s what I still think now.

Big Foot was my neighbour, our houses were only half a kilometre apart, yet I rarely had anything to do with him. Fortunately. Instead I used to see him from afar – his diminutive, wiry figure, always a little unsteady, would move across the landscape. As he went along, he’d mumble to himself, and sometimes the windy acoustics of the Plateau would bring me snippets of this

essentially simple, unvarying monologue. His vocabulary mainly consisted of curses, onto which he tacked some proper nouns.

He knew every scrap of this terrain, for it seems he was born here and never went further than Kłodzko. He knew the forest well – what parts of it he could use to earn money, what he could sell and to whom. Mushrooms, blueberries, stolen timber, brushwood for kindling, snares, the annual off-road vehicle rally, hunting. The forest nurtured this little goblin. Thus he should have respected the forest, but he did not. One August, when there was a drought, he set an entire blueberry patch ablaze. I called the fire brigade, but not much could be saved. I never found out why he did it. In summer he would wander about with a saw, cutting down trees full of sap. When I politely admonished him, though finding it hard to restrain my Anger, he replied in the simplest terms: ‘Get lost, you old crone.’ But more crudely than that. He was always up to a bit of stealing, filching, fiddling, to make himself extra cash; when the summer residents left a torch or a pair of pruning shears in the yard, Big Foot would instantly nose out an opportunity to swipe these items, which he could then sell off in town. In my view he should have received several Punishments by now, or even been sent to prison. I don’t know how he got away with it all. Perhaps there were some angels watching over him; sometimes they turn up on the wrong side.

I also knew that he poached by every possible means. He treated the forest like his own personal farm – everything there belonged to him. He was the pillaging type.

He caused me many a sleepless Night. I would lie awake out of helplessness. Several times I called the Police – when the telephone was finally answered, my report would be received politely, but nothing else would happen. Big Foot would go on his usual rounds, with a bunch of snares on his arm, emitting ominous shouts. Like a small, evil sprite, malevolent and unpredictable. He was always slightly drunk, and maybe that prompted his spiteful mood. He’d go about muttering and striking the tree trunks with a stick, as if to push them out of his way; he seemed to have been born in a state of mild intoxication. Many a time I followed in his tracks and gathered up the primitive wire traps he’d set for Animals, the nooses tied to young trees bent in such a way that the snared Animal would be catapulted up to hang in mid-air. Sometimes I found dead Animals – Hares, Badgers and Deer.

‘We must shift him onto the couch,’ said Oddball.

I didn’t like this idea. I didn’t like having to touch him.

‘I think we should wait for the Police,’ I said.

But Oddball had already made space on the folding couch and was rolling up the sleeves of his sweater. He gave me a piercing look with those pale eyes of his. ‘You wouldn’t want to be found like that, would you? In such a state. It’s inhuman.’

Oh yes, the human body is most definitely inhuman. Especially a dead one.

Wasn't it a sinister paradox that now we had to deal with Big Foot's body, that he'd left us this final trouble? Us, his neighbours, whom he'd never respected, never liked, and never cared about?

To my mind, Death should be followed by the annihilation of matter. That would be the best solution for the body. Like this, annihilated bodies would go straight back into the black holes whence they came. The Souls would travel at the speed of light into the light. If such a thing as the Soul exists.

Overcoming tremendous resistance, I did as Oddball asked. We took hold of the body by the legs and arms and shifted it onto the couch. To my surprise I found that it was heavy, not entirely inert, but stubbornly stiff instead, like starched bed linen that has just been through the mangle. I also saw his socks, or what was on his feet in their place – dirty rags, foot wrappings made from a sheet torn into strips, now grey and stained. I don't know why, but the sight of those wrappings hit me so hard in the chest, in the diaphragm, in my entire body, that I could no longer contain my sobbing. Oddball cast me a cold, fleeting glance, with distinct reproach.

'We must dress him before they arrive,' said Oddball, and I noticed that his chin was quivering too at the sight of this human misery (though for some reason he refused to admit it).

So first we tried to remove his vest, dirty and stinking, but it adamantly refused to be pulled over his head, so Oddball took an elaborate penknife from his pocket and cut the material to pieces across the chest. Now Big Foot lay half-naked before us on the couch, hairy as a troll, with scars on his chest and arms, covered in tattoos, none of which made any sense to me. His eyes squinted ironically while we searched the broken wardrobe for something decent to dress him in before his body stiffened for good and reverted to what it really was – a lump of matter. His torn underpants protruded from brand-new silvery tracksuit bottoms.

Cautiously I unwound the repulsive foot wrappings, and saw his feet. They astonished me. I have always regarded the feet as the most intimate and personal part of our bodies, and not the genitals, not the heart, or even the brain, organs of no great significance that are too highly valued. It is in the feet that all knowledge of Mankind lies hidden; the body sends them a weighty sense of who we really are and how we relate to the earth. It's in the touch of the earth, at its point of contact with the body that the whole mystery is located – the fact that we're built of elements of matter, while also being alien to it, separated from it. The feet – those are our plugs into the socket. And now those naked feet gave me proof that his origin was different. He couldn't have been human. He must have been some sort of nameless form, one of the kind that – as Blake tells us – melts metals into infinity, changes order into chaos. Perhaps he was a sort of devil. Devilish creatures are always

recognised by their feet – they stamp the earth with a different seal.

These feet – very long and narrow, with slender toes and shapeless black nails – looked prehensile. The big toe stood slightly apart from the rest, like a thumb. They were thickly coated in black hair. Had anyone seen the like before? Oddball and I exchanged glances.

In the near-empty wardrobe we found a coffee-coloured suit, slightly stained, but obviously rarely worn. I had never seen him in it. Big Foot always went about in thick felt boots and threadbare trousers, with which he wore a check shirt and a quilted waistcoat, whatever the time of year.

Dressing the dead man was like a form of caress. I doubt he ever experienced such tenderness in life. We held him up gently by the arms and pulled the clothing onto him. As his weight rested on my chest, after a wave of quite natural disgust that made me feel nauseous, it suddenly occurred to me to hug this body, to pat it on the back, to soothe it by saying: don't worry, it'll be all right. But on account of Oddball's presence I did no such thing. He might have thought I was being perverse.

My aborted gestures changed into thoughts, and I began to feel sorry for Big Foot. Perhaps his mother had abandoned him, and he'd been unhappy throughout his miserable life. Long years of unhappiness cause a Person worse degradation than a fatal illness. I never saw any visitors at his place, no family or friends had ever appeared. Not even the mushroom pickers stopped outside his house to chat. People feared and disliked him. It seems he only kept company with hunters, but even that was a rare event. I'd say he was about fifty years old; I'd have given a lot to see his eighth house, and whether Neptune and Pluto were conjoined in there by some aspect, with Mars somewhere in the Ascendant, for with that jag-toothed saw in his sinewy hands he reminded me of a predator that only lives in order to sow death and inflict suffering.

To pull on his jacket, Oddball raised him to a sitting position, and that was when we noticed that his large, swollen tongue was trapping something in his mouth, so after a brief hesitation, clenching my teeth with disgust and withdrawing my hand several times, I gently took hold of the something by its tip, and saw that what I had between my fingers was a little bone, long and thin, and sharp as a dagger. A throaty gurgle and some air emerged from the dead mouth, making a soft whistle, exactly like a sigh. We both leaped back from the corpse, and I'm sure Oddball felt the same thing as I did: Horror. Especially seconds later, when dark red, almost black blood appeared in Big Foot's mouth. A sinister trickle came flowing out of it.

We froze on the spot, terrified.

'Well, I never,' said Oddball, his voice quavering. 'He choked. He choked on a bone, the bone stuck in his throat, the bone got caught in his throat, he

choked,' he nervously repeated. And then, as if to calm himself down, he said: 'Back to work. It's no pleasure, but our duties to our neighbours aren't always going to be pleasant.'

I could see that he had put himself in charge of this night shift, and I fell in line behind him.

We fully abandoned ourselves to the thankless task of squeezing Big Foot into the coffee-coloured suit and placing him in a dignified position. It was a long time since I had touched anyone else's body, never mind a dead one. I could feel the inertia rapidly flowing into it as it grew more rigid by the minute; that was why we were in such haste. And by the time Big Foot was lying there in his Sunday best, his face had finally lost all human expression – now he was a corpse, without a doubt. Only his right index finger refused to submit to the traditional pose of politely clasped hands but pointed upwards, as if to catch our attention and put a brief stop to our nervous, hurried efforts. 'Now pay attention!' said the finger. 'Now pay attention, there's something you're not seeing here, the crucial starting point of a process that's hidden from you, but that's worthy of the highest attention. Thanks to it we're all here in this place at this time, in a small cottage on the Plateau, amid the snow and the Night – I as a dead body, and you as insignificant, ageing human Beings. But this is only the beginning. Only now does it all start to happen.'

There we stood in the cold, damp room, in the frosty vacuum prevailing at this dull, grey time of night, and it crossed my mind that the thing that leaves the body sucks a piece of the world after it, and no matter how good or bad it was, how guilty or blameless, it leaves behind a great big void.

I looked out of the window. Dawn was breaking, and idle snowflakes were gradually starting to fill the nothingness. They were falling slowly, weaving their way through the air and spinning on their own axis like feathers.

By now Big Foot had gone, so it was hard to feel any pity or resentment towards him. All that remained was his body, lifeless, clothed in the suit. Now it looked calm and satisfied, as if the spirit were pleased to be finally free of the matter, and the matter were pleased to be finally free of the spirit. In this short space of time a metaphysical divorce had occurred. The end.

We sat down in the open kitchen doorway, and Oddball reached for a half-drunk bottle of vodka that was standing on the table. He found a clean shot glass and filled it – first for me, then himself. Through the snowy windows, dawn was gradually flowing in, milk-white like hospital light bulbs, and in its glow I saw that Oddball was unshaven; his stubble was just as white as my hair, the faded striped pyjamas protruding from under his sheepskin coat were not buttoned, and the coat itself was soiled with every imaginable sort of stain.

I swallowed a large shot of vodka, which warmed me from inside.

‘I think we’ve done our duty by him. Who else would have done it?’ said Oddball, more to himself than to me. ‘He was a wretched little bastard, but so what?’

He poured himself another shot and drank it in one, then shook with disgust. He plainly wasn’t used to it.

‘I’m going to make that call,’ he said, and went outside. I reckoned he must be feeling faint.

I stood up, and started scanning the terrible mess in the hope of finding Big Foot’s identity card. I wanted to know his date of birth, in order to check his Score.

On a table covered with worn-out oilcloth I saw a roasting tin containing burned pieces of an Animal; in a saucepan next to it there was some stagnant beetroot soup, coated in a film of white fat. A slice of bread cut from a loaf, butter in gold foil. On the floor, covered with torn linoleum, some more Animal remains lay scattered; they’d fallen from the table, along with a plate, a glass and some broken biscuits. All this was crushed and trodden into the dirty floor.

Just then, on a tin tray on the windowsill, I caught sight of something that my brain took quite a while to recognise, in its efforts to shy away; it was a cleanly severed Deer’s head. Beside it lay four little hooves. The half-open eyes must have been closely following our labours throughout.

Oh yes, it was one of those starving Young Ladies that naively let themselves be lured in winter by frozen apples, are caught in snares and die in torment, strangled by the wire.

As I slowly became aware of what had happened here, I was gradually filled with Horror. He had caught the Deer in a snare, killed her, then butchered, roasted and eaten her body. One Creature had devoured another, in the silence and stillness of the Night. Nobody had protested, no thunderbolt had struck. And yet Punishment had come upon the devil, though no one’s hand had guided death.

Quickly, with trembling hands I gathered the remains, those poor little bones, into one spot, in a heap, to bury them later on. I found an old carrier bag, and one after another I put those little bones inside this plastic shroud. Then I carefully placed the head in the carrier bag too.

So eager was I to know Big Foot’s date of birth that I nervously began to search for his identity card – on the sideboard, among some papers, pages from a calendar and newspapers, then in the drawers; that is where documents are kept in rural homes. And indeed there it was – in tattered green covers, surely out of date by now. In the picture Big Foot was twenty-something, with a long, asymmetrical face and squinting eyes. He wasn’t a pretty sight, not even then. With the stub of a pencil I wrote down the date and place of birth. Big Foot was born on 21 December 1950. Right here.

And I should add that there was something else in that drawer as well: a wad of photographs, quite new, in colour. I flicked through them, just out of habit, but one of them caught my attention. I looked at it more closely, and was about to lay it aside. It took me a while to understand what I was looking at. Suddenly total silence fell, and I found myself right in the middle of it. I stared at the picture. My body tensed, I was ready to do battle. My head began to spin, and a dismal wailing rose in my ears, a roar, as if from over the horizon an army of thousands was approaching – voices, the clank of iron, the creak of wheels in the distance. Anger makes the mind clear and incisive, able to see more. It sweeps up the other emotions and takes control of the body. Without a doubt Anger is the source of all wisdom, for Anger has the power to exceed any limits.

With shaking hands I put the photographs in my pocket, and at once I heard everything moving forwards, the world's engines firing up and its machinery taking off – a door creaked, a fork fell to the floor. Tears flowed from my eyes.

Oddball was standing in the doorway.

'He wasn't worth your tears.' His lips were pursed as he focused on tapping out the number. 'Still the Czech operator,' he said. 'We'll have to go up the hill. Are you coming with me?'

We quietly closed the door behind us and set off, wading through the snow. On the hilltop, Oddball began turning on his own axis with a mobile phone in each outstretched hand, seeking a signal. The whole of the Kłodzko Valley lay before us, bathed in the silver, ashen glow of dawn.

'Hello, son,' said Oddball into the phone. 'I didn't wake you up, did I?'

A muffled voice gave an answer that I couldn't understand.

'It's that our neighbour's dead. I think he choked on a bone. Just now. During the night.'

The voice at the other end spoke again.

'No. I'm just about to call. There wasn't any signal. Mrs Duszejko and I have already dressed him, you know, my other neighbour' – at this point he cast a glance at me... 'so he wouldn't stiffen...'

I heard the voice again, sounding more nervous.

'Well, anyway, he's in a suit now...'

Then the Person at the other end started gabbling at length, so Oddball held the phone away from his ear, casting it a look of distaste.

Afterwards we called the Police.



## II

# TESTOSTERONE AUTISM

*A dog starv'd at his Master's Gate  
Predicts the ruin of the State.*

I was grateful to him for inviting me home for a hot drink. I felt completely drained, and the thought of having to return to my cold, empty house made me feel sad.

I said hello to Big Foot's Dog, who had been resident at Oddball's for the past few hours. She recognised me and was clearly pleased to see me. She wagged her tail – by now she'd probably forgotten about the time when she'd run away from me. Some Dogs can be silly, just like people, and this Dog was certainly one of them.

We sat in the kitchen at a wooden table, so clean that you could lay your cheek on it. And that is what I did.

'Are you tired?' he asked.

Everything in here was clean and bright, warm and cosy. What a joy it is in life when you happen to have a clean, warm kitchen. It has never happened to me. I have never been good at keeping order around me. Too bad – I'm reconciled to it by now.

Before I'd had time to look around, I had a glass of tea in front of me. It was in a sweet little metal basket with a handle, and it was on a saucer. There were sugar lumps in the sugar bowl – a sight that reminded me of happy childhood hours, and really did improve my rather dismal mood.

'Perhaps we shouldn't have moved him,' said Oddball, and opened a drawer in the table to fetch out some small teaspoons.

The Dog stayed close to Oddball's feet, as if refusing to let him out of the orbit of her small, emaciated body.

‘You’ll knock me over,’ he told her with gruff affection. I could see it was the first time he’d ever had a Dog, and he wasn’t sure how to behave.

‘What are you going to call her?’ I asked, as the first sips of tea warmed me from the inside, and the tangle of emotions caught in my throat began to melt a little.

Oddball shrugged. ‘I don’t know, maybe Fly, or Tray.’

I didn’t say anything, but I didn’t like it. Those names didn’t suit this Dog, considering her personal history. Something else would have to be thought up for her instead.

What a lack of imagination it is to have official first names and surnames. No one ever remembers them, they’re so divorced from the Person, and so banal that they don’t remind us of them at all. What’s more, each generation has its own trends, and suddenly everyone’s called Magdalena, Patryk or – God forbid – Janina. That’s why I try my best never to use first names and surnames, but prefer epithets that come to mind of their own accord the first time I see a Person. I’m sure this is the right way to use language, rather than tossing about words stripped of all meaning. Oddball’s surname, for instance, is Świerszczynński – that’s what it says on his front door, with the letter ‘Ś’ in front of it. Is there really a first name that starts with the letter Ś? He has always introduced himself as ‘Świerszczynński’, but he can’t expect us to twist our tongues trying to pronounce it. I believe each of us sees the other Person in our own way, so we should give them the name we consider suitable and fitting. Thus we are polyonymous. We have as many names as the number of people with whom we interact. My name for Świerszczynński is Oddball, and I think it reflects his Attributes well.

But now, as I gazed at the Dog, the first thing that occurred to me was a human name, Marysia. Maybe because of the orphan in the classic children’s story – she was so emaciated.

‘She wouldn’t be called Marysia, would she?’ I asked.

‘Possibly,’ he replied. ‘Yes, I think that’s right. Her name’s Marysia.’ The naming of Big Foot occurred in a similar way. It was quite straightforward – it suggested itself to me when I saw his footprints in the snow. To begin with, Oddball had called him ‘Shaggy’, but then he borrowed ‘Big Foot’ from me. All it means is that I chose the right name for him.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t choose a suitable name for myself. I regard the one that’s written on my identity card as scandalously wrong and unfair – Janina. I think my real name is Emilia, or Joanna. Sometimes I think it’s something like Irmtrud too. Or Bellona. Or Medea.

Meanwhile Oddball avoids calling me by my name like the plague. That means something too. Somehow he always finds a way to address me as ‘you’.

‘Will you wait with me until they get here?’ he asked.

‘Sure,’ I readily agreed, and realised I’d never have the courage to call him ‘Oddball’ to his face. When you’re such close neighbours, you don’t need names to address each other. Whenever I see him weeding his small garden as I’m passing by, I don’t need his name to speak to him. It’s a special degree of familiarity.

Our hamlet consists of a few houses situated on the Plateau, far from the rest of the world. The Plateau is a distant geological cousin of the Table Mountains, their remote harbinger. Before the war our settlement was called Luftzug, meaning ‘current of air’, and nowadays it’s still called that unofficially, because we don’t have an official name. All you can see on the map is a road and a few houses, no letters. It’s always windy here, as waves of air come pouring across the mountains from west to east from the Czech Republic. In winter the wind becomes violent and shrill, howling in the chimneys. In summer it scatters among the leaves and rustles – it’s never quiet here. Many people can afford to have one house in the city, their year-round, official home, and another – a sort of frivolous, childish one – in the country. And that’s how these houses look as well – childish. Small and squat, with steep roofs and tiny little windows. They were all built before the war and they’re all positioned exactly the same way: long walls facing east and west, one short wall facing south, and the other, with an adjoining barn, facing north. Only the Writer’s house is a little more eccentric – it has terraces and balconies built onto it on every side.

It’s no surprise that most people leave the Plateau in winter. It’s hard to live here from October to April, as I know very well. Every year heavy snow falls here, and the wind carves drifts and dunes out of it. Recent climatic changes have made everything warmer, but not our Plateau. Quite the contrary, especially in February, when the snow is heavier and stays put for longer. Several times over the winter the temperature drops to minus twenty, and the season only ends for good in April. The road is poor, the frost and snow destroy whatever the local council tries to repair with its limited expenditure. To reach the asphalt you must drive four kilometres on a dirt road full of potholes, but in any case there’s nothing to be gained from the effort – the bus to Kudowa leaves each morning from down the hill and comes back in the afternoon. In summer, when the few pallid local children have school holidays, the buses don’t run at all. In the village there’s a highway that changes it imperceptibly, like a magician’s wand, into the suburbs of a small town. Should you so wish, you could drive along that highway to Wrocław or to the Czech Republic.

But there are some for whom these conditions are ideal. There’d be lots of Hypotheses to put forward if we wanted to amuse ourselves by looking into it. Psychology and sociology would have plenty of potential lines of enquiry to

suggest, but I don't find the subject in the least bit interesting.

For example, Oddball and I show a bold face to the winter. In any case, what a silly phrase: 'show a bold face'; in fact we belligerently stick out our lower jaws, like those men on the bridge in the village. If provoked with some unflattering phrase, they respond aggressively: 'What do you mean by that? Eh?' In a way, we provoke the winter too, but it ignores us, just like the rest of the world. Old eccentrics. Pathetic hippies.

Here the winter does a beautiful job of wrapping everything in white cotton wool, and shortens the day to the maximum, so that if you make the mistake of staying up too late at night, you might awake in the Gloom of the following afternoon, which – I frankly admit – has been happening to me more and more often since last year. Here the sky hangs over us dark and low, like a dirty screen, on which the clouds are fighting fierce battles. That's what our houses are for – to protect us from the sky, otherwise it would pervade the very inside of our bodies, where, like a little ball of glass, our Soul is sitting. If such a thing exists.

I don't know what Oddball does through the dark months, because we're not in very close contact, though I won't hide it – I would have hoped for more. We see each other once every few days, and when we do, we exchange a few words in greeting. We didn't move here for the purpose of inviting each other to tea. Oddball bought his house a year after I bought mine, and it looks as if he'd decided to start a new life, like anyone whose ideas and means for the old one have run out. Apparently he worked at a circus, but I don't know if he was an accountant there, or an acrobat. I prefer to think he was an acrobat, and whenever he limps, I imagine that long ago, in the beautiful 1970s, during a special act, something happened that caused his hand to miss the bar, and he fell from a height onto the sawdust-sprinkled floor. But on further reflection, I must admit that accountancy isn't such a bad profession, and the fondness for order that's typical of the accountant inspires my approval and total respect. Oddball's fondness for order is plain to see in his small front yard: the firewood for the winter lies piled in ingenious cords arranged in a spiral. The result is a neat stack of golden proportions. Those cords of his could be regarded as a local work of art. I find it hard to resist their beautiful spiral order. Whenever I pass that way, I always stop a while to admire the constructive cooperation of hands and mind, which in such a trivial thing as firewood expresses the most perfect motion in the Universe.

The path in front of Oddball's house is so very neatly gravelled that it looks like a special kind of gravel, a collection of identical pebbles, hand-picked in a rocky underground factory run by hobgoblins. Every fold of the clean curtains hanging in the windows is exactly the same width; he must use a special device for that. And the flowers in his garden are neat and tidy, standing straight and slender, as if they'd been to the gym.