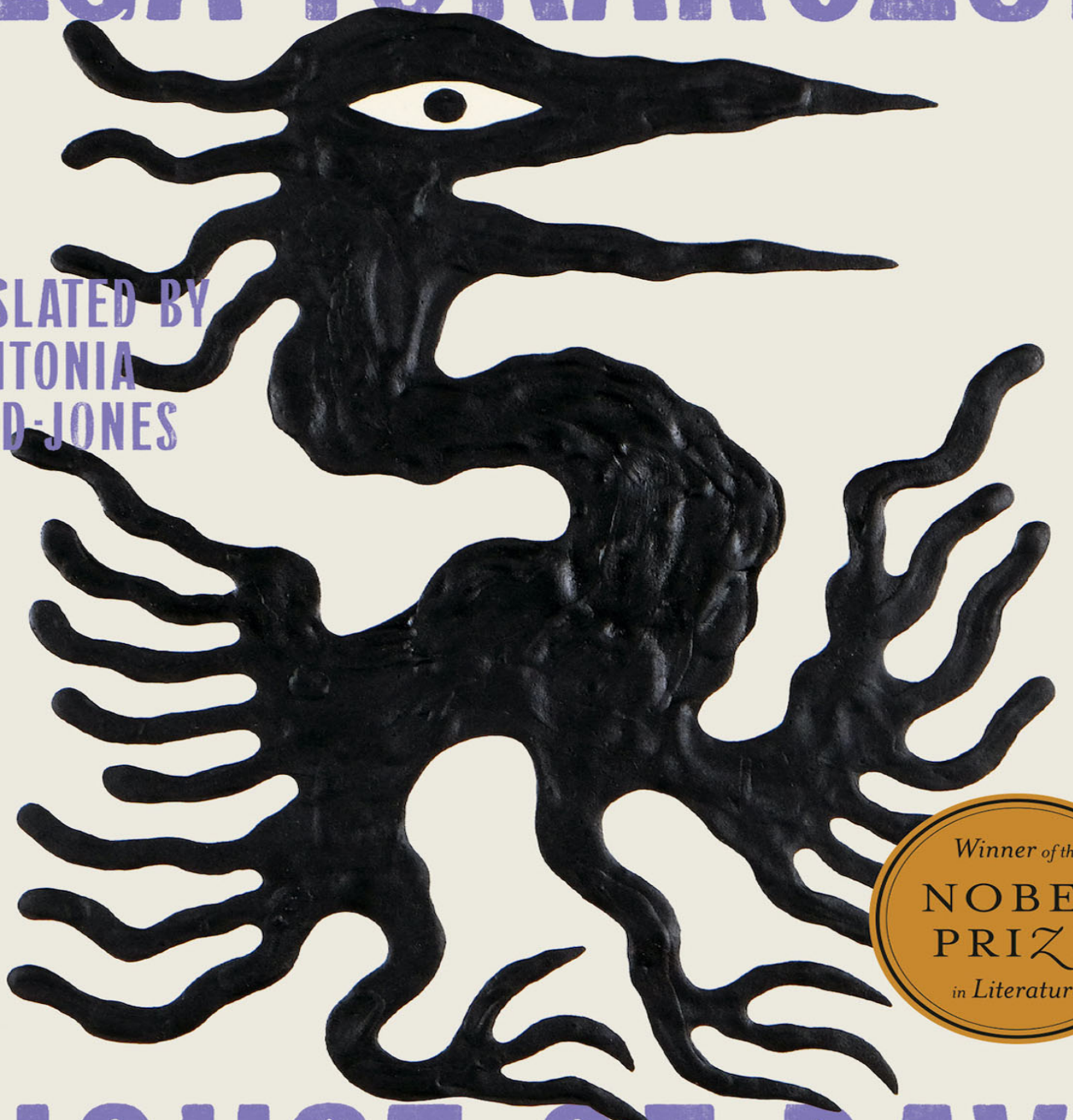
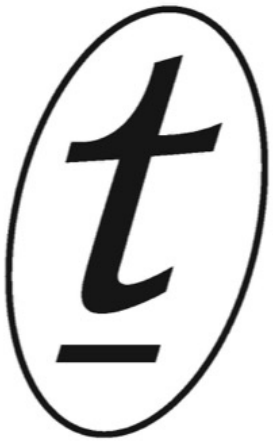
OLGA TOKARCZUK



TRANSLATED BY
ANTONIA
LLOYD-JONES

Winner of the
NOBEL
PRIZE
in Literature

HOUSE OF DAY, HOUSE OF NIGHT



TEXTPUBLISHING.COM.AU

About the Book

A woman settles in a remote Polish village. It has few inhabitants, now, but it teems with the stories of its living and its dead. There's the drunk Marek Marek, who discovers that he shares his body with a bird, and Franz Frost, whose nightmares come to him from a newly discovered planet. There's the man whose death–with one leg on the Polish side, one on the Czech–was an international incident. And there are the Germans who still haunt a region that not long ago they called their own. From the founding of the town to the lives of its saints, these shards piece together not only a history but a cosmology.

Another brilliant 'constellation novel' in the mode of her International Booker Prize–winning *Flights, House of Day, House of Night* reminds us that the story of any place, no matter how humble, is boundless.

HOUSE OF DAY, HOUSE OF NIGHT

OLGA TOKARCZUK

TRANSLATED FROM THE POLISH BY
ANTONIA LLOYD-JONES

TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

CONTENTS

WHO WROTE THE LIFE OF THE SAINT AND HOW HE KNEW IT ALL

Your house is your larger body. It grows in the sun and sleeps in the stillness of the night; and it is not dreamless. Does not your house dream?

And dreaming, leave the city for grove or hilltop?

KHALIL GIBRAN, ‘ON HOUSES’, *THE PROPHET*

Translator's Note: The book is set in southwest Poland, in the region known as Silesia. This was part of the German Reich until 1945, when at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences the Allies agreed to move the borders of Poland westwards. Many Polish citizens were transported from the land lost to the east (annexed by the USSR) and resettled in formerly German territory to the west, where they were given the homes and property of evacuated Germans.

Readers are advised that some of the recipes in this book should carry the health warning, 'Don't try this at home!'

THE DREAM

The first night I had a static dream. I dreamed I was pure looking, pure sight, without a body or a name. I was suspended high above a valley at some undefined point from which I could see everything, or almost everything. I could move around my field of vision, yet remain in the same place. It was as if the world on view below were yielding to me as I looked at it, moving towards me and then away, so that I could see either everything at once or only the tiniest details.

I could see a valley with a house standing right in the middle of it, but it wasn't my house, or my valley, because nothing belonged to me. I didn't even belong to myself. There was no such thing as 'I'. Yet I could see the circular line of the horizon enclosing the valley on all sides. I could see a turbulent, murky stream flowing down between the hills. I could see trees set deep into the ground on mighty feet, like one-legged, immobile creatures. The stillness I saw was only on the surface. Whenever I wished, I could penetrate this surface. Under the bark of the trees I could see rivulets of water, streams of sap flowing to and fro, up and down. Under the roof of the house I could see the bodies of people asleep, and their stillness too was only superficial—their hearts were beating gently, their blood was rippling in their veins, not even their dreams were as they seemed, because I could see what they really were: pulsating fragments of images. None of these sleeping bodies were closer to me, none further away. I was simply looking at them, and in their tangled dream-thoughts I could see myself—this was when I discovered the strange truth, that I was purely vision, without any reflections, judgements or

emotions. Then at once I discovered that I could see through time as well, and that just as I could change my point of view in space, so I could change it in time too, as if I were the cursor on a computer screen moving of its own accord, or at least oblivious to the hand that is moving it.

I seemed to dream like this for an eternity. There was no before and no after, no sense of anticipation of anything new, because there was nothing to gain or lose. The night would never end. Nothing was happening. Even time would never change what I could see. I went on looking, not noticing anything new or forgetting anything I had seen.

MARTA

When we moved in three years ago, we spent the whole of the first day inspecting our property. Our gumboots kept sinking into the clay. The earth was red, it stained our hands red, and when we washed them the water ran red. R. examined the trees in the orchard again. They were old, bushy and rambling in all directions. Trees like that probably won't bear much fruit. The orchard stretched down to the forest and stopped at a dark wall of spruces, standing there like soldiers. In the afternoon the sleet began to fall again. Water collected in pools on the clay-clogged earth, creating streamlets and rills that flowed straight down to the house, seeping into the walls and disappearing somewhere under the foundations. Worried by the constant trickling sound, we went to the cellar with a candle. Water was pouring down the stone steps, washing over the stone floor and flowing out again towards the pond. We realized that the house had been unwisely built on an underground river, and it was too late to do anything about it. The only option was to get used to the relentless murmur of water disturbing our dreams.

There was a second river outside, a stream full of cloudy red water that blindly washed away at the roots of the trees before vanishing into the forest.

From the window of the main room we can see Marta's house. For the past three years I have wondered who Marta really is. She has told me many different versions of the facts about herself. Every time, she has given a different birth year. For me and R., Marta has only ever existed in the summer; in winter she disappears, like everything else around here. She is

small, her hair is white as snow, and some of her teeth are missing. Her skin is wrinkled, dry and warm. I know this because we have sometimes greeted each other with a kiss or an awkward hug, and I have caught her smell—of damp forced to dry out quickly. This smell lingers forever, it can't be got rid of. Clothing that has got wet in the rain should be washed, my mother used to say, but then she was always doing a lot of unnecessary laundry. She used to take clean, starched sheets out of the wardrobe and throw them in the washing machine, as if not using them made them just as dirty as using them. The smell of damp is usually unpleasant, but on Marta's clothes and skin it smells nice and familiar. If Marta's around, everything is in its place.

She came by on our second evening. First we drank tea, then last year's wild rosehip wine, thick and dark, so sweet it made you feel dizzy at the first gulp. I was unpacking books. Marta held her glass in both hands and watched without curiosity. It occurred to me at the time that perhaps she didn't know how to read. It was possible, as she was old enough to have missed out on state education. I have seen since that letters simply don't hold her attention, but I have never asked her about it.

The dogs were excited and kept coming in and out of the house, bringing the scent of winter and wind on their fur. As soon as they had warmed up in front of the kitchen stove, they felt the lure of the garden again. Marta stroked their backs with her long, bony fingers, telling them how beautiful they were. She spoke only to the dogs all evening. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as I arranged the books on wooden shelves. A lamp on the wall lit up the crown of her head with a plume of fine white hairs, tied at the nape of her neck into a little pigtail.

I remember so many things, but I can't remember the first time I saw Marta. I remember all my first encounters with the people who have subsequently become important to me: I can remember whether the sun was shining and what they were wearing (R.'s funny East German boots, for instance), I can remember how things smelled and tasted, and the texture of the air—whether it was crisp and sharp or cool and smooth as butter. That's what first impressions are made of—these things get recorded somewhere in

a detached, animal part of the brain and can never be forgotten. But I can't remember my first encounter with Marta.

It must have been early spring—that's when everything starts here. It must have been in this rugged part of the valley, because Marta never goes further afield on her own. There must have been a smell of water and melted snow, and she must have been wearing that grey cardigan with the loose buttonholes.

I've never known much about Marta, only what she has revealed to me herself. I have had to guess most of it, and I've been aware of fantasizing about her, of inventing an entire past and present for her. Whenever I've asked her to tell me something about herself, about when she was young, about how something that now appears obvious looked then, she has changed the subject, turned to face the window or simply fallen silent, concentrating on chopping up a cabbage or plaiting the hair that she uses to make wigs. It's not as if she has seemed reluctant to talk, but just as if she simply has nothing to say about herself, as if she has no history. She only likes to talk about other people—some I might have seen once or twice by chance, others I may never have seen at all, and never could, because they lived too long ago. She also likes to talk about people who never actually existed—I have since found proof that Marta likes to invent things—and about the places where she has chosen to plant these people. I've known her to talk for hours, until I've had enough and find an excuse to interrupt her politely and go home across the green. Sometimes she breaks off these narratives of hers suddenly, for no reason, and doesn't return to the subject for weeks, until one day out of the blue she says, 'You remember how I was telling you…' 'Yes, I remember.' 'Well, what happened next was…'—and she carries on with some tired old story while I'm racking my brain to remember whom she's talking about and where she left off. Oddly, it's never the actual story that comes back to me but the memory of Marta telling it, a small figure in the cardigan with the loose buttonholes, with round shoulders and bony fingers. Did she tell this one while staring at the windscreen as we were driving to Wambierzyce to order planks, or was it the time we were picking