

Afterword

"I feel fine being in my city, as long as I know I can leave."

—Krystyna Dąbrowska

The art critic and poet Peter Schjeldahl once described Joan Mitchell's paintings as "all wall and all window."¹ I've always loved this notion, that a work of art can keep us out and let us in simultaneously, producing a kind of metaphysical conundrum. Krystyna Dąbrowska's poetry creates this effect. On one hand, her work is direct and rooted in descriptions of everyday life, conveyed with a reporter's commitment to reality; on the other hand, such careful attention to tangible detail functions as a portal into the intangible and ineffable. It is precisely these moments—when the ordinary gives way, however briefly, to the extraordinary—that Dąbrowska seeks out and records, often as a traveler observing the world from a slight remove, waiting to see where a chance encounter might lead. And we are along for the journey.

Dąbrowska herself often mentions walls and windows. The title poem of her second collection, *White Chairs*, which won the Kościelski Award and the inaugural Wisława Szymborska Award, begins with this imperative: "Let dailiness in poetry be like the white / plastic chairs by the Wailing Wall." Many readers point to this poem as an *ars poetica*, which conveys a poetic eye trained on images that connect the mundane and the spiritual. Metaphorically speaking, then, these poems mention walls by way of trying to bridge what they divide. I would add to this a poetic ear alert to other people's stories, specifically those that lead into a sense of what is not resolved, or what is

¹ Peter Schjeldahl, "Tough Love: Resurrecting Joan Mitchell," *The New Yorker*, July 15, 2002.

mysterious or painful. Windows frequently show up in such moments. Like the glass flashing in the sun that becomes “just for a minute, obscure” in the poem “Replacing Windows,” Dąbrowska records the stories of those who might otherwise be passed over without regard for the complexity of their lives.

In broader terms, these poems place us in one situation after the next that hovers at the line between what is solid and what is unseen, what is concrete and what is abstract, bringing our awareness to both states simultaneously. On a rooftop in Cairo, we meet a pack of goats whose bleating exists between the mundane sounds of traffic emanating from the street below and the spiritual realm of prayers wafting from minarets above. Or, in “Yesterday I Saw a Dog at the Tideline,” we witness a dog as it frolics back and forth between states of freedom and constraint. This poem, in particular, serves as the perfect source for titling our collection—her debut in English translation—since it emphasizes the line where two states meet and also marks a turning point in her own poetic development. She would later describe it as the first poem in which she found her own style, one based in the observation of a scene and “written in colloquial language, without the bending of words,”² but with a clarity of image that transcends description to become something more.

Point of view has everything to do with whether an observation has the power to lead us further into a poetic vision. As a highly visual poet, Dąbrowska is like a photographer who is both responsive enough to catch what passes by chance through the camera’s lens and skilled enough to choose just the right framing.³ At the same time—

² Eliza Kącka, “Co siedzi w wierszu: rozmowa z Krystyną Dąbrowską,” *Mały Format*, Web, June 1, 2019.

³ Piotr Matywiecki, “Styl istnienia,” *Mysli do słów. Szkice o poezji* (Kołobrzeg: Biuro Literackie, 2013).

like great photographic images—her poems bring our awareness to the power of framing in general and what remains out of sight, beyond the border's edge. Many poems take up the idea of artistic perspective in and of itself and reveal her background in the study of visual art. The question that opens *White Chairs* provides a key to this aspect of Dąbrowska's poetics: "Where should I look from in order to see you?" To not just look but really see, to not just see but see through, requires the smallest of detail:

Now I'm looking in your eyes, now I'm looking with your eyes,
while you're dreaming, or when you appear in my dream,
and now I'm looking for a detail—an object, a gesture, a word,
may it open wide like a bud and burst into being you.

The poem reminds us how a simple gesture can convey multitudes about a person, depending on the distance and the angle from which we consider them.

It follows that clarity of observation governs intimacy, which is another driving force of these poems. A hedgehog who falls in love with a scrubbing brush, a tongue that caresses the edges of an envelope, a woman who tells the story of her exile to a stranger—so many of these poems explore the moment when the self blurs into another, either erotically or emotionally. Or, more precisely, they waver at the line—yes, we're at a border again—where "we meet halfway / between your solitude and mine." For Dąbrowska, the metaphorically resonant image is precisely that which brings our attention to the various types of "hidden isolation" in the world, people and states of being that remain separated by unseen barriers in order to maintain concord, like the invisible glass dividers in "Oceanarium." But, like the shadows that are able to cross over into the other tanks of the aquarium, intimacy allows

a meeting that disrupts easy harmony, however ephemeral or fleeting that intensity might be.

I am reminded of Rilke's formulation in *Letters to a Young Poet*, for the painful but essential struggle of human love, "the love that consists in this: that two solitudes protect and border and greet each other."⁴ It is this kind of intimacy that, he says, induces the individual to ripen and "become world" (without the definite article) for the sake of another person. Through her travels and relationships with other people, both those unfolding in the present moment and those revisited through memory, I hear the struggle of someone trying to become world.

Because of this, Dąbrowska approaches language and poetic idiom as a means rather than an end—a means nonetheless finely focused. "It's easy to say that I'm a picture poet, for whom language is less important," she recently explained in an interview. "And yet any worthwhile poem is a work of language, though in my case it's done without ostentation. For me, language is a tool, a way of struggling with reality, not an end in itself."⁵ This quality poses a translation challenge: how to convey a controlled and elegant lyricism without burdening it with embellishment or mannerism. I find this achieved in many translations by my collaborators, with whom I feel lucky to share an enthusiasm for Dąbrowska's empathic voice and lack of concern for literary fashion. Take the wonderful sonic play of silence/reticence/response at the end of Karen Kovacik's translation of "Grandmother's Voice." Likewise, I love the strong rhythmic feel in so many of Antonia Lloyd-Jones' renditions, such as the iambic lilt of the line "Like unsealing someone else's letter over steam?" in "The Darkness of Eyelids."

⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, "May 14, 1904," *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

⁵ Kačka, *Maly Format*.

I would add to this elegant lyricism the fact that, if epiphany exists in these poems, it exists in moments of tension created by a subtle precision of words. There is little adornment or explication of images done for us. (“I try not to use too many words,” Dąbrowska told me early on.) Instead, we are led into making connections on our own, based on clues within a description. Take, for example, the juxtaposition of sound and silence in the poem “Wall,” which ends with the image of a “Chorus of hidden slips of paper / tucked in a wall full of silence.” The Polish word *wielogłos*, which I have rendered as *chorus*, emphasizes polyphony, itself made up of a combination of the words for *many* and *voice*. In this way, the poem highlights the multiplicity of the prayers of various individuals, each tucked into a crack in the Wailing Wall, where they are united, ironically, by silence. The setup, which invites us to compare this type of polyvocality with “protest songs” of graffiti on the Israeli West Bank barrier, makes this irony even more layered. The prime question for me as a translator is how to keep the language simple without simplifying. While *chorus* loses some of the emphasis on disparate voices coming together, it retains the idea of sound produced by many voices, put into tension through the chime of assonance with *tucked* that suggests a silencing.

So it is that I’m back again to thinking about walls and—if not windows, at least cracks within a wall. And this leads me to one last element of Dąbrowska’s poetics: wry humor. Tucked within these poems as within the cracks in a wall are many observations about the comical side of life. In the reversal of “security questions” into “insecurity questions,” I see a similar sensibility to Szyborska’s desire to look at pre-conceived ideas from novel and amusing vantage points. There’s a love of the flawed, the imperfect, the overlooked. As illustration, I’ll end with one last wall. In “A Church in Georgia,” we meet a renovated building that is described “as sad as an aging woman / after plastic surgery,

devoid of any wrinkles.” But the song of five singers soon gives shape to the silence of what was there before, opening “chinks of light” in the smooth, blank façade. As a poet who encompasses both the serious and the amusing, the spiritual and the mundane, Dąbrowska reminds us that we hold these chinks of light inside us as we go on about our days.

—*Mira Rosenthal*