

VERSOPOLIS THREE

Shelters

*Schrony*

Michał Sobol

Translated from the Polish  
by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

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*VERSOPOLIS*  
*is a unique, Europe-wide platform.*  
*It gives emerging European poets*  
*the chance to reach an audience beyond*  
*the boundaries of the language they write in*  
*by translating and publishing their poems*  
*and inviting them to perform at festivals.*



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Michał Sobol was born in 1970. Since 1998 he has been living at Zabierzów Bocheński on the edge of the Niepołomice Forest, and he now works several times a week at the library in a monastery. He is a graduate of philosophy and the history of the Church. He debuted in his thirties with the book *Lamentacje* (*Lamentations*) for which he received the Kazimiera Iłkiewiczówna Award for the best book debut in 2001. He subsequently published *Działania i chwile* (*Actions and Moments*, 2007) and *Naturalia* (*Naturals*, 2010). The interest of critics and readers alike increased along with the publication of the book *Pulsary* (*Pulsars*, 2013), for which the poet obtained the Literary Award of the Town of Radom and in 2014 was nominated for the Wisława Szymborska Poetry Award, and the Gdynia Literary Award.

What are Michał Sobol's poems about? According to Michał Kieżun, a critic, 'anyone who is aware of his biography, even very vaguely, knows that they rarely move beyond the poet's personal experience. We can easily identify scenes from the secondary technical school of forestry, in which Michał studied as a teenager, the Jodłowa (Fir) Forest praised by Stefan Żeromski, in which the poet served his practical training, philosophy and history of the Church classes at the Papal Academy of Theology in Cracow, and pictures from the life of the village in which Michał lives and from which he commutes to Cracow to work in a monastery library during weekdays. Michał's memories of his childhood are also featured frequently, including those of his elder brother, friends, family, animals, or special moments such as the day of the disaster of the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl.'

It seems to me that the power of the poems lies in their rooting – however, there can be no question of the 'small realism.' If there is realism, then it is of a form asking about Reality, about the transcendent conditions of the earthly life. It does not do it too forcefully, and luckily we are not dealing with bigotry. The shade of sainthood delicately covers the daily problems, the hustle and bustle, and arrivals by vehicles and on foot. The little town and the nearby villages with their people coping with things and looking for words, seem to be a part of a larger tale, while the protagonist of these poems seem to be someone who has managed to escape the control

of a super-author to live his own life. The illusion of one's own life is related to the primacy of one's own tale. It follows many tracks, which interconnect in a surprising way, without causing a disaster of the draft of thoughts and images which travel along them. And it is probably the autobiographic-rustic track of expression which has the strongest impact: a village life shown in short, pulsating flashes, gradually begins to reveal something resembling a Secret: not moral piquancies, although these are not to be forgotten either, but something greater, something which can already be read from the book of life which is leafed anew.

Michał's latest book of poetry, *Schrony* (*Shelters*), was published in the same year in which he obtained the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award, i.e. in 2016. In his poems from this collection, as Anna Spólna writes about *Shelters*, the author 'focuses on human efforts to step beyond one's own condition or escape from the inevitable fate. In the fifth collection of his poems, Michał describes, with his singular insight, how – trying to save the feeling of sense – we undertake a fight to understand the world or to impose our own order on reality. Finally, if these solutions fail (and they fail all the time), we move away and, crouching in our hiding places, await the blow.'

It is for this book that Michał Sobol was granted the 2017 Gdynia Literary Award in the category of poetry.

Karol Maliszewski

## Schrony

Każdy schron ma co najmniej dwa wyjścia: potężne i łatwe do wypatrzenia przez połowę lornetkę oraz wąskie usta

ukryte w brzozowym zagajniku na tyłach wroga. Przed jednym wypijamy gorącą kawę z nieskazitelnie białej porcelany,

drugim wychodzimy zbierać pokrzywy i dziką marchew w bezksiężycową noc. Na każdy mocny schron przypada

kilka słabszych, co nie oznacza, że do ich budowy użyto więcej wapna i mniej cementu. W tym względzie panuje równość.

## Shelters

Each shelter has at least two exits: a huge one, easy to spot through field glasses, and a narrow mouth

hidden in a birch copse behind the enemy. Before one we drink hot coffee from spotlessly white china cups,

through the other we leave to pick nettles and wild carrots on a moonless night. For every strong shelter there are

several weaker, which doesn't mean more lime and less cement were used to construct them. In this regard equality prevails.

## Kościół

Chłodne mury kościołów wciąż jeszcze pamiętają o jurajskich  
prapoczątkach i jak rodzice znają nasze dziecięce

choroby, które w każdej chwili znów mogą wybuchnąć  
ze zdwojoną siłą. Wchodzimy między świece

i chorągwie jak w las, szukamy prześwietlonych polan i świeżych  
traw, aby się nimi trochę popaść, choć przez chwilę

nie myśląc, nie myśląc o wygnaniu. Czarodziej ksiądz spala  
nad nami wonne zioła i mówi, że Bóg pocierpi za nas.

## Churches

The cold stone walls of churches still recall their Jurassic  
protoliths and like parents they know our childhood

illnesses, able at any moment to erupt again  
with redoubled force. We walk in between the candles

and banners as into a forest, we seek the sunlit glades and fresh  
new grass to graze on it a little, just for a while

not thinking, not thinking about exile. The wizard priest burns  
scented herbs above us, and says that God will do the suffering for us.

## Sądy

W każdym z nas płynie odrobina czarnej krwi i tę sąd  
wylawia. Na posiedzeniu poziewamy ukradkiem, by brzęk

łańcucha nie odwracał uwagi ławy od procesu, lub tylko  
spoglądamy niemo na nasze hologramowe odbicia w szybie

z pleksiglasu. Sądy za nas wszystko precedzą. Niektórzy  
nawet nie dostrzegą, gdzie przebiega granica między sądem

a zakładem fryzjerskim – możliwe, że wcale nie przebiega.  
W celi na każdego z nas czeka ręcznik i kawałek mydła.

## Courtrooms

In each of us flows a drop of black blood and this the courtroom  
fishes out. At the hearing we furtively yawn, so the clang

of the chain will not distract the jury from the trial, or else we  
just gaze mutely at our hologram reflection in a pane

of perspex. The courts will strain everything for us. Some will even  
fail to perceive where the border runs between the courtroom

and a barber's shop – possibly there isn't one at all.  
Waiting for each of us in the cell there's a towel and a piece of soap.

## Zakłady

W zakładach przemysłowych odbywa się pieszczota  
maszyn. Strusim piórkim do zmiotania kurzu

dotykamy najwrażliwszych miejsc walców, kół  
zamachowych, tłoków i kilkusettonowych pras. Te

nie zostawiają naszej tkliwości bez odpowiedzi. Z otworów  
spustowych wyrzucają blaszane rondle, guziki

do dżinsów i karoserie aut. Krótki dzwonek  
oznacza przerwę, długi – przybycie nowej grupy kochanków.

## Factories

At modern factories the fondling of machines  
takes place. With ostrich feathers for sweeping off the dust

we touch the most sensitive spots on cylinders, flywheels,  
pistons and presses weighing several hundred tons. These

do not leave our affection unanswered. At the end of  
the line they turn out steel saucepans, buttons

for jeans and body parts for cars. A short bell means  
a break, a long one means a new group of lovers has arrived.

## Satelity

Te dziwne loty odprężają nas, pozwalają widzieć  
dalej i przejrzyciej, aż ku światłom dawno wypalonych

gwiazd i popiołom galaktyk. Raz po raz jednak  
i z nieskrywanym zawstydzeniem nasze szybujące w próżni

okołoziemskiej teleskopy, wyposażone za cenę milionów  
dolarów w najczulsze detektory, odwracamy. Eksperyment

znów się nie powiódł, technika wyrzucona w błoto, ale my  
już wiemy, już wiemy, że jesteśmy prawdziwymi astronautami.

## Satellites

These strange space flights calm us down, allow us to see  
further and more lucidly, all the way to the lights of long since burnt-out

stars and the ashes of galaxies. Yet now and again,  
with unconcealed shame, though they're soaring in the void

around the world, equipped at a cost of millions of dollars with all  
the subtlest detectors, we turn our telescopes away. Another

experiment failed, technology thrown to the winds again, but we  
already know, already know we're the real astronauts.



## Sklepy

To tam, gdzie nam się wydaje. Nóż, który właśnie zagłębiał się w blok smalcu, skrobie różową

piętę ekspedientki. Motyl chwiejny i płochliwy, więcej w nim blasku niż koloru. Gdy poprosimy,

uleci i zniknie w krwawym bloku szklistej marmolady. Tak też wygląda przyszłość

handlu. Blok biały, lekko słony i blok czerwony, niewyraźnie słodki. Pomiędzy śmiga nóż.

## Shops

It's where we think it is. The knife that has just plunged into a block of lard will scrape the pink

heel of the sales lady. A butterfly fragile and timorous, with more glitter than colour. When we come to ask

off it will fly and vanish in a bloody block of glassy marmalade. And that's what the future of trade

is like. A white block, lightly salted and a red block, faintly sweetened. In between swishes the knife.

## Szkoły

Jedynie szkoły nie udają, czym są naprawdę. To w nich kształtujemy nasze umysły i ciała. Strugi, zdzieraki,

dłuta, z których korzystamy na pracach ręcznych, są esencją szkół. To tam z kilku desek powstaje

skrzynka, w której śpiewa ptak. Gorzkie przypalone mleko wypijane na długiej przerwie i czerstwe

bułki tylko w połowie definiują szkołę. W istocie nie ma w niej niczego poza niezbędnym wyposażeniem.

## Schools

Schools alone do not pretend to be what they really are. It's in them that we shape our minds and bodies. Planes, scrapers,

chisels, the tools we use for handicrafts – those are the essence of schools. It's there from a few planks

that a box is made, in which a bird will sing. Bitter scorched milk drunk in the midday break and stale

bread rolls only half define a school. In fact there's nothing in it apart from essential equipment.

## Salony

Najdroższy jest dotyk. Jaszczurka koronkowych majtek  
zbiega w dół po udzie i na chwilę przystaje

na czerwonym paznokciu najszerszego palca. Powiewa  
zielonozłoty motyl banknotu i uśmiech tą drobną

niezręcznością wywołany przekierowuje wzrok na łożę  
bez pościeli. Płyniemy. W lotnym piasku najgorętszej

z pustyni, śniąc swój wieczny sen o morzu. Burdele  
zwane są dziś salonami masażu, lecz to niczego nie zmienia.

## Parlours

Dearest of all is touch. The lizard of lace-trimmed knickers  
runs down the length of a thigh and momentarily stops

on the dark red nail of the broadest finger. A green-  
and-gold butterfly banknote flutters and the smile prompted

by this minor indiscretion redirects the gaze to a bed  
without sheets. We're floating. In the airborne sand of the hottest

of deserts, dreaming its eternal dream about the sea. Brothels  
are called massage parlours now, but nothing has really changed.

## Piwnice

Pod mostem chłodne otoczaki i delikatna trawa –  
kiedy upał, dobrze jest posiedzieć pod mostem,

ale w najgorętsze dni, gdy wilgotność gwałtownie  
spada, większość z nas wybiera kwaśne piwnice,

by tam zanurzone w słojach z syropem oglądać  
brzoskwinie, eksponaty świata, który przepadł

w ogniu, bo większość wie, że tylko piwnice  
mają moc zachowania najdojrzałych brzoskwiń.

## Cellars

Beneath the bridge there are cool pebbles and fine soft grass –  
during a heatwave it's good to sit beneath the bridge,

but on the hottest days, at a sudden drop in  
humidity, most of us choose to sit in sour cellars,

there to look at peaches steeped in jars  
of syrup, exhibits of a world that's lost

in fire, for most of us know that only cellars  
have power to preserve the ripest peaches.

## Szpital

To tam, gdzie my stygniemy i gdzie ożywa nasz gadzi mózg. Bardziej wytrzymały niż delikatny mózg

ssaczy, który panował w wyższych temperaturach ciała. Tam, wraz z ochłodzeniem, lekkim szumem

płucoserca i zabiegami lekarzy podejmujących ostatnie próby, przez kilka sekund lub minut, które są

epoką, mózg gadzi przejmuje kontrolę. Syty całością, którą połknął, nieskończenie zadowolony.



## Hospitals

That's where we go cold and where our reptile brain awakens. Tougher than the fragile mammal's

brain that ruled at higher temperatures of the body. There, with the cooling, the faint hum

of the iron lung and the efforts of doctors making their last attempts, for several seconds or minutes that constitute

an epoch, the reptile brain is in control. Replete with the whole it has swallowed, infinitely satisfied.