

Adam Zagajewski. *True Life: Poems.*

Trans. Clare Cavanagh. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023. 80 pp. Notes. \$13.99, paper.

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The passing of Adam Zagajewski in Kraków at the age of 75 in 2021 marked the end of an extraordinary phase in Polish culture. As the last of the internationally-recognized big names of the so-called “Polish school of poetry,” Zagajewski bookends an era in which poets and readers around the world—especially in English-speaking countries—looked to Poland for inspiration and what many revered as the hard-won wisdom of historical experience. Zagajewski himself garnered particular fame in 2001 when his lyric “Try to Praise the Mutilated World” became a touchstone for many American readers grappling with the shock of the September 11 terrorist attacks. A Polish poet reflecting on the devastation of European history in a tone at once intimate and objective seemed to supply a universally applicable vocabulary for historical trauma.

Two years after Zagajewski’s death, his last collection of poems has now appeared in a flawless English translation by his long-time collaborator, Clare Cavanagh. First published in Polish in 2019, *Prawdziwe życie* (True Life) is a thoughtful coda to Zagajewski’s poetic career, recapitulating some of the key themes and styles of his oeuvre in an elegiac mood. The tone of the volume—as of much of his later writing—is of quiet, reflective exhaustion after the storms of history, pausing over the small but telling details of individual human lives and the everyday world to pose existential and historical questions with no clear answers. The twentieth century itself is personified as an “old Tolstoy” walking through the landscapes of Europe’s wars and genocides:

He says: I’ve learned one thing
There is only mercy—
for people, animals, trees, and paintings.
Only mercy—
always too late.

A few key themes run through the collection: death—of poets, friends, and close family; journeys and their end; displacement and lost homes. Several poems dwell on what poets leave behind: words on the page and the “dark forest” of their impenetrable biographies, contrasted in their mutability with the cruel light of enduring stars that “wound like knives.” Multiple poems return to the pre-war Polish city of Lwów (today’s Lviv in western Ukraine)—Zagajewski’s birthplace and an important symbol in his earlier work—seeing it in the rain on a subdued visit or imagining the remnants of its lost past as “a clasp from Herculaneum, a treasure.” More a reflection of postmemory than of memory, since the poet himself was deported from the city along with thousands of other Poles in the year of his birth, Zagajewski’s Lwów poems explore deeper themes of absence and incompleteness—an underlying sense of homelessness in the world.

Zagajewski's style is subtle but unmistakable. The lyric speaker's voice is somehow both abstracted and engaged, observing from a critical distance but always curious and compassionate. The diction combines classical poise with unpretentious colloquiality, shifting easily between pathos and questioning, shot through with irony and a streak of irreverent wit. As in much of Zagajewski's work, the form is mostly free verse, with a strong sense of structure coming more from the development of ideas than from versification. Only the striking repetition of an occasional key phrase suspends the general restraint of his rhetorical approach. Perfectly capturing this style in English, Cavanagh's award-winning translations have always been a crucial part of Zagajewski's international success. In this last volume, she gives another masterclass in recreating the unique voice and tone of a poem, finding subtle solutions that preserve the often-moving economy of expression of the Polish originals together with their flashes of humor.

Published posthumously in English, *True Life* frequently meditates on impending death. The poems are filled with images of final journeys and natural cycles of decline—autumn, encroaching nightfall, evening rain, the anticlimax of a long pilgrimage at its end. Two poems include observations from hospitals, where “compassion [has] stepped out and won't be back anytime soon,” or where the speaker watches the continuing struggle of life outside the ward from a liminal place of “peace and transparency.”

Yet alongside these records of loss and pain, Zagajewski's speaker also expresses an agnostic faith in poetry's power to unveil brief moments of “brightness”—or at least the “dark contentment” of melancholy. The poetic gaze gives access to fleeting epiphanies in a world scarred both by relentless natural processes of destruction and by the cruelties of human history. These insights animate a defiant call to keep on looking to the very end with a hopeful mingling of desire and equanimity:

Look, look greedily,
when dusk approaches,
look insatiably,
look without fear.

Zuzanna Ginczanka. *On Centaurs and Other Poems*.

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Interest in Zuzanna Ginczanka in the Anglophone world has reached unprecedented levels in recent months, with one translation of her poems in press and three in preparation. This follows a decade or so of scholarly publications, exhibitions, and new editions of Ginczanka's poems in Polish, spurred, in part, by the centenary of her birth in 2017 and a general interest in Polish Studies in looking beyond patriarchal and ethnonationalist visions of canonicity.