

WANDERINGS, RETURNS, WONDERS...

A book review by Andrzej Gałowicz

After her three poetry volumes, Ściana : The Wall (Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie 1997), Obok : Near (Oficyna Literacka 1999), and The Wall & Beyond (eLectio Publishing 2013), the Chicagoan poetess Joanna Kurowska published Inclusions (Cervena Barva Press 2014), her fourth book of poetry and the first written entirely in English.

The volume starts with the poem “Indian Summer” and ends with “A Feather.” As if following the rules of film-art, these two poems employ background and detail, thus clasping the entire collection in a bracket/interpretive summary. Identifying a “curtain”—which is our lack of attention, blindness, and apathy—these poems tackle mankind’s basic ontological/axiological problem, the impossibility of the fullness of experience. In “Indian Summer,” the curtain is depicted in general terms: “really, happiness was/ within reach; a thin screen/ separated them from it// basking in the sunshine, smiling,/ they passed by, without/ stretching their arms to pick it.” In “A Feather”—a poem dedicated to the poet’s son—the “curtain” is depicted in more individual terms, “You have called me and asked/ what is the sense of life?”

Inclusions entices the reader with its rich metaphors and dramatic personifications, enhancing the volume’s philosophical message about the world’s instability and transience of life. Paradoxical images well reflect the absurdity and grotesque of the world. For example, in the poem “Tsunami” we read:

*the sofa has put on eyeglasses
to see better the knife plunged
into its flesh, up to the handle
the TV forces its way to the backyard
but it’s too late for the news
mother’s scarf floats about the roof*

The volume tackles also moral relativism or the volatility of moral principles inscribed, so it seems, into the human genotype. One needs not to evoke nazism or communism to demonstrate this; Guantanamo or Kiejkuty will suffice, not to mention the drones “made in USA.” “Such is the world, evil world; why there is no a better one?”— one great poet asks. In different times, using different methods, Kurowska poses equally universal questions. For example, her bitter reflections on the state of human affairs—where moral principles are ignored for the sake of some unification—reverberate in the poem “The Price”:

*The lofty pine tree is fifty dollars,
the wave’s whisper is a hundred-
twenty-five and ninety nine cents.
(...)
We will lose nothing; all will come back:
the wave, the honeybee, and the grass.
All will be free—although not for free.*

Nevertheless, the poetry of this Chicagoan poet is not dark. Accepting the world as it is, Kurowska sees in it the jewels of light or joy; for life is also an enchanting journey, joyful ball or interesting performance, occasionally a funny farce. We see this in the short poem “an encounter”:

*he looks at me
I look at him
through the window of my car*

*and the embryo of a smile
begins to grow on our faces*

One can also find in these works the poet's beautiful declarations of faith in humanity, derived from the Renaissance, as well as the echoes of Christian humanism, for example in "In the Image." Kurowska does not ignore the drama of transience and death or linearity and homogeneity of time. "An Invitation"—a poem in which the poet's deceased father asks: "Busy? Then visit me yesterday/ We will sing the songs we have sung tomorrow"—presents multiplicity of times, beings, and places; which brings to one's mind the great tradition of Bolesław Leśmian, for example his "Urszulka Kochanowska." Likewise, the theme of "panta rhei," recurring in Kurowska's works, reminds us of Mark Aurelius's "Reflections" or—to stay within the circle of Polish literature—Asnyk's cycle *Nad głębiami*: "I did not die, /daughter, I passed.../to make room for /others." Springing from those great traditions, Kurowska's poetry adorns and enriches them.

Wise and masterfully constructed is the poem "Nothing": "I am.../ thankful for my nothing./ Living in its presence is like/ "a stroll on the verge of a precipice." This is an excellent poetic illustration of the ideas of the existentialists, such as Jaspers (man is always in a situation and relation towards the world), Sartre ("I" means also my capacities; the idea of being-for-itself), or Heidegger (in the act of projection man establishes the meaning of existence; the idea of *Dasein*). In her uneasy, as if intellectually fettered poetic reflections in "Nothing," Kurowska asks about the quality of human existence amidst oppositions – petrified roles, poses, and ultimate chaos resembling scattered pieces of a kaleidoscope.

Presenting the world as multi-colored and multifarious, *Inclusions* does not usurp the right to the wisdom of the "for ever-and-ever, amen" type. Instead, it merits empathy and compassion (e.g. "The Mirror"). As in Kurowska's previous books of poetry, here too the poet's characteristic method becomes discernible: in the prose and triviality of the quotidian she is able to identify and name another dimension, image or perspective in their deep emotional and intellectual aspects; things unperceivable to an average man in the street. This extraordinary gift of imagination, the poet's ability to create original and daring associations, can be observed for an example in the poem "A Soda View":

*In the mirror
of soda lenses
everything is
distorted*

wonderful

A key to the volume is found also in the excerpt from the poem "now": "inside the churches we have lost the track of/ god's pedigree"; reflecting the poet's persistent effort in searching the Theo/God/Absolute—but one liberated from gaudy religious ornamentations, lofty golden robes, sickening incense, and gigantic cathedrals. For—to quote Leśmian again—"Wara psiarni człowieczej od bytów przyczyny" (Keep the human dog-pack away from the cause of beings"); moreover, "Immortality belongs to God, while God [belongs] to us." Amidst the alleged infallibility of clerical directives, in the chaos of cosmic void, Kurowska wanders on trails marked and unmarked—as in "Prayers answered" and "flurry"—in order to speak to us wisely about difficult things.