

The Selected Poetry  
of Ryszard Kapuściński

# WROTE STONE

Translated from the Polish by Diana Kuprel and Marek Kusiba

**I WROTE STONE**

THE SELECTED POETRY OF RYSZARD KAPUŚCIŃSKI



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**BIBLIOASIS**

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Originally published in Poland as *Notes* by Czytelnik, Warsaw, in 1986  
and as *Prawa natury* by Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 2006.

Cover and interior photographs by Ryszard Kapuściński

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FIRST EDITION

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Kapuściński, Ryszard

I wrote stone / Ryszard Kapuściński; [translated by] Diana  
Kuprel, Marek Kusiba.

Poems translated from the Polish.

ISBN 978-1-897231-37-1

I. Kuprel, Diana, 1963– II. Kusiba, Marek, 1951– III. Title.

PG7170.A58415 2007

891.8'518

C2007-904555-3

Edited by Daniel Wells and Stephen Henighan

PRINTED AND BOUND IN CANADA

In memory of Ryszard Kapuściński  
4 March 1932 – 23 January 2007



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## INTRODUCTION

**A**T THE DOORWAY to Ryszard Kapuściński's Warsaw study is a pair of bast moccasins—their wide strips of inner bark woven into rough, thick soles, and cross-hatched to secure the feet. The moccasins were hand-crafted in Polesie, formerly one of Poland's eastern borderland provinces, where Kapuściński was born on March 4, 1932.

Until the Second World War, Kapuściński's family had lived in the town of Pińsk, a river port and important marketplace now in Belarus that was remarkable for its cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. After five months of Soviet occupation of eastern Poland, in February 1940, the Kapuścińskis, along with thousands of other refugees, fled this land of forests and rivers, of impenetrable swamps and peat-bogs. They made their way westward, to the environs of German-occupied Warsaw.

There the young Kapuściński experienced, first-hand, extreme deprivation and terror, and was eyewitness to round-ups and executions—subjects that would preoccupy him in his work as a journalist for over fifty years. His shabby, clumsy, wooden shoes would come to be, for him in those destitute years, a sign of abjectness, the mark of a person stripped of all dignity and sentenced to an inhuman existence. A symbolic artifact of the writer's origins, biographical and spiritual, then, the Poleskie bast moccasins seem an apt entrée to this English translation of his poetry.

Kapuściński is not known as a poet, and yet he never quit writing poetry. He is, rather, internationally acclaimed as a reporter who spent the last half of the twentieth century on the front lines, covering (by his own count) twenty-seven

revolutions, rebellions and coups d'état, who ranged and wrote across the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, who bore witness to the collapse of colonialism in the Third World and the crumbling Soviet Empire. He is the bestselling author of such classics of world literature as *The Emperor*, *Shah of Shahs*, *Imperium*, *Another Day of Life*, *The Soccer War*, *The Shadow of the Sun* and *Travels with Herodotus*—works that have been translated into over thirty languages and that have earned him numerous literary and journalistic awards, honorary degrees from universities around the world and fame as one of the most important writers of our time.

In 1986, when Kapuściński decided to publish *Notes* [Notebook], a slim collection of poems written over a period of almost forty years, it created a sensation among Polish critics. For two decades, this work, however, remained untranslated, but for a bilingual edition in Italian of his by then complete published poetry.

Yet a connection exists between his poetry and his larger body of work. There is the value Kapuściński ascribed to the art of poetry, and his belief that poetic discourse was able to illuminate dimensions of human experience that otherwise would remain unknowable. In an interview in 2005, he explained: “I cannot imagine that I would be able to write anything without first having read poetry. It is the highest form of language. . . . I believe that a poet is someone who preserves language and, for that reason, stands at the gates of its inexhaustible wealth, its simultaneous beauty and threat. I value poets and poetry because poetry is something more than a transmitter of information or a well-told story; it's a strange form which is comfortable in what is hidden right before our eyes, where, in a few stanzas, one can raise to a boil a powerful freight of experience and transgression at the same time. Poetry is the greatest alchemy of language

because the poet concentrates on what is happening when words strike against themselves and new meanings arise—meanings thanks to which the world has a more comprehensive form, both visible and invisible.”\*

The significance of poetic discourse, for the writer, is evident in Kapuściński’s grand reportage. He declares in the second volume of his *Lapidarium*, a collage of notes and citations written in 1972 and between 1980 and 2006: “I cannot forsake poetry. It requires that one attend profoundly to language, which is good for prose. Prose must have music, and poetry is rhythm. When I start writing, I must locate the rhythm. It carries me along like a river.” His works of creative non-fiction are, in fact, remarkable for their breathtaking negotiation between the arts of journalism and belles lettres, for the author’s ingenious ability to adapt his literary style to suit topic and context, such that what is described seems to come, organically, from inside a specific climate, culture or situation. Blending the objectivity of a reporter, the disposition of a historian and philosopher, the empathy of a humanitarian and the incantatory power of a poet, he transformed acts of incisive journalism into stunning—and significant—works of literature.

That Kapuściński should have practised poetry, then, is not surprising. He debuted as a writer in 1949 with a poem in a Polish literary weekly. Throughout his life, he continued to write poems in those moments when he found prose inadequate to express his thoughts.

True to his vocation, his ambition as a reporter was to cast light on worlds undergoing violent transformations. He considered himself, above all, an explorer of Otherness—of other cultures, other ways of thinking, other types of being. His mission was to come into contact with strangeness in order to understand it. For this, personal presence was

crucial: he was the hero of his own books, as he declared in *Lapidarium II*, because they describe a person who travels, looks around, reads, reflects and writes.

Poetry, then, offers a new take on the Kapuściński mission. What he found in poetry was a means of exploring those regions in the human that may otherwise be forever left unexamined. Inspired by his extensive travels, meetings and observations, the poems complement his reportages: the external journeys to faraway places become recast through the poetic form into a journey of the human spirit.

The title of his first volume, *Notes* [Notebook], signals that his poems are a special kind of dispatch—a dispatch from an inner experience that synthesizes, cleanses, fulfills. The poems inquire into the essence of being human, and allude to the spiritual wasteland that is the human condition. They constitute an attempt to locate the individual within the crowd, and examine and confront what the author considered to be a frightful sickness: indifference.

His second volume, *Prawa natury* [The Laws of Nature], was published in 2006, two decades after *Notes*. The poems, employing a fragmentary poetic, reveal Kapuściński's private self as he grappled with the loss of friends and with his own physical vulnerability and mortality. Here he probes a profound loneliness that is, for him, the inability to connect with others.

His poetry, so sparing in expression, so simple and transparent, but also melancholic and impassioned, enters the most humanitarian current in the Polish lyric. While he is sensitive to poetry's magic, he expresses at the same time a suspicion about the nature of language, hardly surprising for someone who lived under the yoke of Communism. Perhaps for this reason his writing is a study in restraint and abbreviation.

Kapuściński was readying himself for a trip to Polesie, which was to be the subject of a future book, when, in December 2006, he was admitted to hospital to undergo cancer surgery. He passed away in Warsaw on January 23, 2007 after succumbing to a heart attack. He was 74.

—Diana Kuprel and Marek Kusiba

\* From Wojciech Kass's interview with Ryszard Kapuściński, "Przeciw odmetaforyzowaniu języka" [Against the de-metaphorization of language] in *Nowa Okolica Poetów* 1/2005.

Some of the figures and writers to whom Kapuściński dedicated, or referred, in his poems:

Jerzy Popiełuszko (J.P.) (1947–1984), Catholic priest from Poland associated with the Solidarity movement who was murdered by the Communist secret police.

Arnold Ślucki (1920–1972), Polish poet and publicist.

Konstantin Biebl (1898–1951), Czech poet.

Tadeusz Nowak (1930–1991), Polish poet and writer.

Edward Stachura (1937–1979), Polish poet and prose writer.

James Dickey (1923–1997), American poet and novelist.

# NOTEBOOK



TATARS' WASTELAND

They left behind sawdust and stalks  
yellowed grass dried-up bush  
cracked earth empty wells  
rock piles cold wind  
just bone and junk  
and mould and dust  
the tetter of rust  
and silence  
    interrupted from time to time  
by an iron clamour and a barked command

NOTEBOOK

*A Summation*

Battered faces  
busted spines  
CVS rewritten  
shredded  
not required

*Barbed Wire*

You write about the man in the camp  
I write about the camp in the man  
for you barbed wire is outside  
for me it rankles the insides of each of us

—You really think there's a big difference?  
These are just two sides of the same torment

*People at the Bus Stop on Wolska Street*

Misery  
misery  
in the evening  
misery's drunk

*Cancer*

Worry lines  
bent inward  
dark substances  
find no outlet

*Pain*

Under siege the body crucified  
a tear seeks a way  
along furrows in the face  
perhaps it can deliver itself  
from this hell

*Autumn in the Park*

Such a crimsoning that  
in a moment fire  
of gold and ochre that  
just-just Sahara  
and yet chill  
and instead of Hosanna  
rustle  
a tread

time withdraws

*Snow*

Walking to the swish-song of boots  
a sudden ray of sun  
fleeing the clouds  
whiteflashes into a bird

## ECOLOGY

And once we are stuck in the ruts of the Polish road  
once we are mired in the sands of history  
and horses whipped on by our dreams  
are unable to take even one more step  
do not curse heaven or earth  
do not damn the world or fate

look  
a bird soars  
the forest rustles

a dung beetle, cockchafer and ladybug  
crawl along a path

LANGUAGE

Leaving for Warsaw  
he told me not to worry  
I'll keep you in mind  
I just have to figure out what and how

after a year he wrote  
to come  
something's in the works

he had an office with an eagle on the wall  
highly polished etcetera

Miss Bożenka brought in two coffees  
two Georgian cognacs  
it's good for this weather

the day was chilly, dripping  
people at the bus stop buried their heads and hid themselves

you can start tomorrow  
nothing great, he admitted  
but your foot is in

just watch it  
here it's slippery going  
one false step and you're flat  
experts only

his laugh was not jolly

then we'll bring Henry and Wlodek on board  
decent guys who deserve a life  
when there's more of us we'll make our way  
we'll just have to kick that one over  
he pointed at someone behind the wall  
his face darkened

it was obvious that one still had power  
he could still take us down

that's why I began my wrestling lessons  
right off  
ho ho, he chortled  
no fear you'll be disqualified  
for stalling on the mat

SCULPTOR FROM ASHANTI

In the trunk of a teak tree  
he seeks a pair of eyes

he hews and chisels away the first layer  
uncovers nothing  
ever more impatient  
he bores

but sees nothing beneath the barked eyelid  
he peels back  
no pupil

close to the pith  
he comes upon a pair of eyes

he looks  
terror-struck

ON EXHIBIT:

“PHOTOGRAPHS OF POLISH PEASANTS PRIOR TO 1944”

I gaze upon you,  
grandmother,  
as you sit so  
in stiff lace,  
a long skirt,  
in front of the hut in Rakocice  
—the date beneath the photo  
1913.

You don't know yet  
what I've long known:  
in a year everything will shudder,  
armies will mount.

But for now it's quiet here,  
not many people.  
I overhear  
one girl say to another  
—the one in the Austrian uniform  
is the spitting image of Bogdan.

## NIGHTS IN AFRICA

in Africa there are nights so black that standing in the  
midst of darkness we sense the whole world vanish, fallen  
into the maw of Hades

yet how wrong we are: shine a lantern and on the  
threshold of darkness a herd of elephants watch warily

if next we cast a ray to the left or right, we plunge the  
elephants into darkness again and in the grass discover the  
maned lions circling uneasily, awaiting the dawn and their  
time to feed

farther on, timorous giraffes run from even this weak  
light for fear it will wound them deeply

and here crowd the nimble antelope, sluggish but  
dangerous water buffalo, hippopotami sunk in mud,  
unruly baboons—everything sleeps as a mouse upon a box  
sleeps and yet does not for each fears the other; all around  
predators lurk so that should the defenceless zebra or  
quaking kid doze instantly would they feel fangs sink into  
their necks

we rub our eyes and marvel at the lifeless-seeming dark,  
for we have not even mentioned the colourful, silver-voiced  
birds, sly, poisonous reptiles, disgusting toads, exquisite  
butterflies

and what of the tireless bustle of termites? the intrepid  
scarabaeus prodding a wheel of fresh dung?

the trees and shrubbery and herbs? the bougainvillea  
flower whose scent reminds us that it is here and sleeps not?  
the vines curling patiently upward?

when the lantern fails, darkness falls again, but a moment later from out of the deep dusk a pair of human eyes emerge—the eyes of a native, but who? an honest herder, an enigmatic witch doctor or—God forbid—an assassin from Bokassa’s guard? the eyes approach and oh wonder! they’re the eyes of an African girl, in her hair a star

## ANASTASIUS SPEAKS ABOUT THE MONASTERY

I resolved to withdraw because I was becoming worse for people.

It's not that I was wronging them deliberately or that I consciously wanted to hurt them.

I was worse in that I was growing more indifferent to them and my indifference was disillusioning them.

I was no longer able to reciprocate their feelings, I even treated them as irrelevant, a burden.

The other came to represent a constraint, a chokehold, paralysis, his presence agitated me, suffocated, I had to flee in order just to draw a breath. That is why I cast off everyone.

In this I saw my salvation.

I don't know if I'll end up in the monastery cell, a forest retreat or some other seclusion, maybe I'll have to create a hermitage in myself, raise up the walls inside, slam the gates shut.

It's a weakness, a betrayal even, I know, but I no longer have the strength to carry anyone, I cannot do as St. Christopher, I'm not able to bear you across the river.

All in me that had to do with the other refused my bidding.

CUDGEL

*in memoriam to J.P.*

1

. . . when contriving methods of killing  
various techniques are considered

2

yet one always comes back to the simplest  
(to the dismay of technocrats  
convinced only their goddesses exist)  
a cudgel will do—  
a gnarled branch

3

*tree:*

potential armoury for instruments of torture and murder

4

and we struggle so to preserve the forests  
forgetting that  
while on the face of this earth  
but one tree remains  
people will die by the wooden cudgel

5

pegs  
jabbed under the nail  
of the earth

## CLOUD

Primordial creature  
in perpetual search  
of shape and place

some extol prayers for its coming  
others entreat it to be gone

always under pressure of contradictory desires

hence the wandering  
about the sky  
the hesitation

where to take refuge

HOW MANY MORE WORLDS?

Whosoever creates his own world will live on.  
God lives—He created His own world,  
Homer lives, and Michelangelo and Mozart.  
Raphael created myriad figures—they all live.

Hieronymus Bosch's monstrosities seethe.  
Renoir's women display their flesh—beautiful.  
Chagall's roosters crow, his calves gambol about the sky.  
Don Quixote mends his arms, Sancho Panza philosophizes  
still.

How many more worlds will arise?  
How many characters?  
How many animals?

A second Noah's Ark?

LASH

*Person 1:*

You must stand up  
to what surrounds you  
you must be here  
but be  
otherwise  
you must learn what is singularity  
and that it be  
not arrogance but strength

*Person 2:*

You must and you must  
like the whistle of a lash

THE POET ARNOLD SŁUCKI ON NEW WORLD STREET

Before leaving  
for Jerusalem  
he would stroll down New World Street  
he would look without seeing anyone  
an old coat without a single button  
his forehead always sweated

his pockets full of poems

He took out one after the other

In the doorway  
touching my arm  
he asked me to read

Good?  
Not good

Heart-broken  
he pulled out the next  
five, ten

In the end he pulled out a pigeon

And what is that? I asked

Don't you see?  
My last poem!  
Did you not know a bird is a poem?  
Poetry wing-borne?

POETS

One of them  
writes a poem  
and sends it out into the world  
a second does the same  
and a third

Poems encounter one another  
stand for hours on street corners  
they don't notice night fall  
that it's begun to rain

Perhaps it's insomnia  
thinks a drenched passerby  
perhaps they've nowhere to go  
in such a downpour

Biebl:  
*the sea deforms the response of the drowned*

ALREADY

Already we watch for you always  
already we prepare food and drink  
already the hut is clean, the windows are like mirrors  
already the gate is garlanded in flowers and spruce

Already Mercury and Venus prophesy you  
soothsayers presage your imminent arrival  
they burn incense and pay homage  
at night they keep vigil, prepare for matins

But you show up unnoticed  
you have neither crown nor wings  
you are neither princess nor archangel

just the strongest beating of the heart

THEY

They sit  
facing one another

she thinks  
what a great guy

they drink

outside it's dark  
evening surrounds the town  
occupies the streets  
drives out the pedestrians

suddenly  
he reaches inside himself  
pulls out a toad

she looks  
doesn't believe her eyes

he pulls out cockroaches  
a whole handful  
octopi, polyps  
spiders  
crawl out on their own accord  
creep

he hurries  
there's still  
more

a tramp's stinky clogs  
a bag lady's putrid sack  
filthy midgets  
vampires  
hags

the table at which they sit  
(still life with empty bottle)  
comes to life

the toad croaks  
the cockroaches crawl  
the spiders swell with venom

in the poisoned mist  
he flounders  
stammers

with what remains of his strength  
he trundles outside

and disappears

dragging his feet

A DREAM

I see an iceberg, boreal solitude,  
the Arctic Ocean, I suspect,  
the Far North anyway,  
the pole perhaps.

Clouds are strewn,  
heavy, bouldered fields  
in a dejected,  
lightless sky.

The berg, tall and steep,  
flows imperceptibly along the sea  
in a still vastness  
that is its own kind of absolute.

I see people on its slopes.  
Strange, why are they here  
in this desert fettered  
by a crashing frost?

Could they be castaways from the Titanic?

I see them struggle  
while an inexplicable force  
bears steadily downward,  
their raw fingers grasping at the glassy hulk.

This is their here and now.

I see their swollen hands,  
grey faces, anguish and pain.  
I see their strength trickling away.  
They lose balance.  
If one slips,  
all the ranks tumble down

—a terrifying pantomime  
these wracked bodies.

Now  
a voice reaches me.  
Someone's calling for perseverance  
and as *memento*  
points at the sea,  
and I see their petrified glances,  
and I know their consciousness is paralyzed  
even more than their frozen bodies.  
They're possessed of that thought after which  
no other is possible,  
no humanity.  
They tell themselves,  
our torment, our drudgery is not so terrible,  
somehow we will adapt  
so long as it will not get worse.

Then I began to study them,  
the beggared ones,  
their clothing ripped by the graupel gales,  
the condemned, starving wretches  
were in their own way content.

They hug the glacial cliffs  
with a kind of joy  
and regard the iceberg  
with a shadow of pride  
for they've grown fond of their lot.

In a sudden blizzard burst  
I lost sight of the iceberg  
and alone in this stony solitude I realized,  
one should weep for human misery,  
the cruel, boundless misery of man,  
misery of the heart and mind,  
misery of sight and sound,  
misery of arms and legs,  
misery our own and others',  
misery evil and blind,  
misery of fate,  
unfathomable,  
immeasurable  
misery of existence.

Misery of God.

RAVENS

When they enter upon this road  
they hurry but just as time flows  
the frames of film advance more slowly:  
more and more crosses by the road

there are birds too  
I admire the ravens  
their sullen majesty

A CONVERSATION WITH J.

I asked  
if A. committed suicide

I wouldn't say that  
he replied  
it was a leave-taking

A. withdrew slowly  
it went on for some time  
at first he showed up less and less often  
he disappeared  
lost touch

at first  
you don't pay much attention

once I met him on the street  
*here*  
he said, tapping his head  
*I have nothing here*

he walked off  
bent over  
as if sewn up in a sack

he told someone  
that what he sees  
gets smaller and smaller  
it shrivels  
then shatters

there remained only  
scattered points in space

for awhile  
they would whirl about in the air  
like snowflakes  
until they disappeared

the world began to sink  
into non-being

he followed

YOGI RAMAMURTI

Yogi Ramamurti bids  
he be buried in a grave  
he will remain there one week  
doctors will testify it's not a scam

whoever wishes can go down the tunnel  
watch through a window:  
Ramamurti lies in a grave  
not breathing

everyone is asked for a donation  
the buried one wants to earn money  
that's why he went to the grave:  
to survive

after a week they dig up the yogi  
Ramamurti emerges  
weakened  
he's touched the absolute  
that's always exhausting

he bows to the gathering  
counts the donations  
102 rupees  
less than ten dollars

everyone disperses  
an empty grave remains

Ramamurti was reborn  
but he's still a beggar

weeks pass  
he has nothing to eat  
he's dying of hunger

I'm going back to the grave  
he says  
only in death  
life

PROFESSOR KANT

Professor Kant  
strolling along his beloved Lorenzstrasse  
at a certain point breaks off his walk  
and quickly returns home

It's not the rain  
so frequent in Königsberg this time of year  
but an insight  
he wishes urgently to jot down:

*the human being is not a thing  
act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or  
in that of another, always as an end, never as a means only*

He tracks the bird in flight  
this is the instant he forgets about everything  
caught up

Please watch out, Professor,  
the sidewalk is slippery  
please do not rush so

St. Augustine:  
*afterward I again fell towards the things of this earth, weeping.*

A NOTE

Ah yes

it took a long time  
before I learned to think about man  
as a human being  
before I discovered this way of thinking  
before I took this path  
in this salutary direction  
and speaking of man or contemplating him  
I stopped asking such questions as  
is he white or black  
an anarchist or monarchist  
fashionable or outmoded  
ours or theirs  
and I began to ask  
what in him is of human being

and is he

and I also asked whether to be a human being is a given,  
it happens of its own accord, or whether one must bear  
steadily toward it, acquiesce to it faithfully, awaken in  
oneself the desire to be a human being

and henceforth I began to look for him  
in his distinctiveness  
in his uniqueness  
I wanted to draw near  
above all to the human being in myself  
inside my own self

I desired that he exist in me  
without labels, signs, banners  
without a tomahawk  
or plumes

that he cast away his tin bugle

\*

The elderly gent  
holds up  
his spittled finger

checks which way  
the wind is blowing

then  
positions himself accordingly  
and flies off

not high  
not far

## A CHOICE

To walk away  
to slam the lid of silence  
or yet again  
to take up the effort anew

to free the throat from the stranglehold  
to fight to breathe  
to pronounce a word  
to utter a whole sentence  
to speak up  
in haste  
before they once again apply the gag

I know you're waiting  
you  
who listen intently  
who put your ear  
to a deaf wall

\*

To locate the true word  
which is in its prime  
is calm  
breaks not into hysterics  
has no fever  
experiences no depression

it can be trusted

to locate the pure word  
which didn't slander  
didn't snitch  
didn't take part in a raid  
didn't declare black white

one can hope

to locate the wingéd words  
which would allow one  
be it by just a fraction of an inch  
to lift oneself above this all

\*

Why  
did the world  
fly past me  
so quickly

it did not let itself be held  
approached  
addressed in the familiar

it pursued  
the vanishing point  
in fire and smoke

# **THE LAWS OF NATURE**



\*

Perhaps the greatest thing  
expresses itself with silence  
like the universe

the word  
an appearance  
an attempt to grasp  
the ungraspable

the suspicion that words  
erect false signposts  
lead one to dead ends  
lead one into temptation

THE LAWS OF NATURE

In this place  
the earth gives way  
forms a valley  
along its bottom a river runs

a narrow current  
seeks a great water  
visible even on school maps  
it would immerse itself in the abyss  
vanish into verdant depths

it becomes an ocean  
dangerous, unfordable  
engulfs the daredevil, madman, castaway  
wipes them from the restlessly undulating surface

what remains are the very laws of nature  
after life—death  
at the end of a sunlit valley  
Styx and icy murk

and another river drowns  
in the ocean chasm

I WROTE STONE

I wrote stone

I wrote house

I wrote town

I shattered the stone

I demolished the house

I obliterated the town

the page traces the struggles

between creation

and annihilation

## DISCOVERIES

Pain bursts your heart:  
you begin to sense the heart

your eyes suddenly go blind:  
you begin to sense the eyes

your memory drowns in darkness:  
you begin to sense memory

you discover yourself  
through the denial of the self

you exist  
through the negation of existence

\*

From the recesses of memory  
shades emerge,  
they roam the streets,  
cross the town square,  
their silhouettes vague,  
unable to stay anyone,  
say a word.

Sometimes they lift their faces,  
visible briefly in the bled light  
of a distant even lost recollection,  
their features marred and cracked  
—it's an effort to put names to them.

The final experience of life  
is always painful,  
either lengthy and brave  
or sudden,  
a piece of lead in the back of the head.

After a time  
they show up on the square,  
then disappear around the corner.

Let's summon them all,  
no, not the roll of a drum or a call  
but an encounter, an  
“it's good that you are,  
you disappeared for so long,  
I can't believe you were all that busy.”

Yesterday a weary Christ came to me  
in a dream and said,  
“It’s gotten so it’s hard to get  
a glass of clean water.”

I know that when you’re far away  
I feel it every night,  
my body shifts about in the emptiness  
“On a bed of gravel”.\*

Obscure cosmic events  
created a planet so vast  
that I can see but not touch you.  
If the cosmos were comprised of planets  
small like a grain of sand,  
we could like a fleck of dust  
vanish in the sun.

To exist in purgatory,  
circulating between those who’ve passed away  
and the keepers of their memory,  
delivering letters, smuggled notes, dispatches,  
signals,  
passwords,  
glances.

Nothing so unites people  
as death.

Contemplating St. Theresa of Avila  
we begin to comprehend what is God:  
*God is exultation.*  
If your wings are folded or clipped  
you will not draw nigh.

\*From James Dickey's poem, "A Folk Singer of the Thirties,"  
in *Helmets*

OXFORD

Saturday night  
in this town  
does not sleep

Along the main street  
tires hum, raised voices  
pass beneath the window  
in arguments elated and banal

Unable to sleep  
I read the paper:  
heart attacks claim their victims most often  
between 8 and 9 A.M.

It's 2:15

\*

A leaf  
torn from its limb  
shivers, shakes  
it quiets itself only  
when it touches the ground

BRITRAIL TO WALES

Through the window the leas, trees  
untiring rivers  
the kingdom of silence and patience  
welcomes you should you take the step  
England green on both sides of the rail  
the cars lull each of us  
confined to our own destinies

Evesham  
come back  
will you?  
waiting—a thorny dream  
my world acquired a new dimension  
from here on I am other  
the earth upon which I tread  
is other

A horse, then three, one stock-still  
now up and up the scape  
soars and arches

In Monmouth copper cobbled (copper beech)  
a grand tree  
looked at from a distance a reddish gold  
close up it changes to green

for a second I cannot descry the beauty  
I am not able to focus

## GEOGRAPHY

The road  
once walked  
vanishes behind you  
ceases to exist

geography—a subjective concept  
a kind of agreement

\*

Roots have verticality  
they descend into the earth  
they bore down deep  
their being invisible, dark  
they strain to push aside grains of sand  
stones, rock  
to push through lava and mineral  
cast up to the surface  
idle  
they wither  
their knotted fingers stretched to the heavens  
their prayer confused and untranslatable

the knowledge of roots:  
life comes from penetrating depth

ROSARY

of wood  
of bone  
of glass  
ten after ten  
strung  
knotted

lathed particles  
with which you lay the road  
to heaven

## SUFFERING AND GUILT

Only those clad in sackcloth  
are able to take upon themselves  
the suffering of another  
to share his pain

clothed in the armorial ego  
sensing the imminent moan—  
we turn deaf  
describing the wound and blood—  
we grow blind

we tell ourselves:  
the path to Golgotha is narrow  
it won't admit two people  
each one must go alone

they say:  
beware the suffering one  
though unwillingly  
he will stick you with a thorn

ON THE PASSING OF A POET

Perhaps before he died  
he would reach for the shelf  
where his volumes lay  
as many as a few blades of grass  
and tremble, the yield so insignificant  
overlooked by the hasty eye

but what they left behind  
after a stoic life  
Spinoza's neighbours  
diamond cutters  
(The Hague, Amsterdam)  
did it not fit barely  
in the palm of a child?

SHE

*In memory of Tadeusz Nowak*

How she walks between us  
how she observes us

sure of herself  
sure of her own

as close as life  
like life inseparable  
(the voice suspended, silence)  
sometimes she is violent  
she snatches up a newborn

but she also knows how to be patient  
well-disposed, indulgent  
she will wait for you to finish *Hamlet*  
*The Brothers Karamazov*, The Ninth Symphony  
until you finish your tower, Mr. Eiffel Engineer

but in truth we exist  
in various ways

through a note  
a painting  
a word

you crossed the border  
towards which we all measure

*ECCE HOMO*

Every thing that is  
our strength  
is also our weakness  
everything carries within itself  
the stigma of its opposite  
like a number tattooed on a prisoner's arm  
like a letter sewn onto a deportee's coat

there's no escaping it

even if we were to walk at a certain pace  
head held high  
number and letter warn:  
here is a victim of those clothed wolf's skins  
here branded by history  
*ecce homo*

ANYWAY

Anyway  
come to the meeting  
there is so much to explain  
we need to look each other in the eye  
take on this burden  
together

Anyway  
don't avoid it  
the most difficult task  
is before us  
barb and thorn  
gravel of Golgotha

Anyway  
let's tell each other everything  
cast off the stone  
and let that which has already been  
breathe  
its last

GOD KEEPS SILENT

God keeps silent  
He allows us to think in His name  
speak in His name  
is but a great passivity  
we're free to imagine Him

Place Him on a cloud  
or draw Him a beard  
cover His temples with grey hair  
blacken His brow  
darken His gaze

Perhaps He is a strongman  
one of the eternally youthful  
ready to improvise to the end  
to play the most difficult games  
to think up the bloodiest sports  
to pull us all into them

Until tormented, wearied by the journey  
through this wasteland's wrinkled skin  
in a voice that roves through the cracked  
corridors of the throat  
we raise a shout:

*God have mercy!*

MAGELLAN REACHES TIERRA DEL FUEGO

They stand gazing—

what's on the horizon?

There it's dusk, a storm approaches  
an avalanche of flashes, heaping blacks  
Apocalypse in the rumble and fire

They stand gazing—

they wonder:

is there something beyond that spectacle?  
A peaceful valley? Shaded harbour?  
A path leading to a sunlit clearing?

They stand gazing—

they hope for paradise

and the caravel reaches the shore  
and they see sand, stone and cliffs

a dead horizon

DISPATCH FROM THE OTHER WORLD

I received a letter from London:  
“Linda Brendon died  
peacefully and mercifully without pain.”

A few days earlier we had agreed to meet in one month’s time.

How happy I am, she’d said.

There was something in her eyes—  
fever? anxiety?  
the light of darkened mirrors?

Her skin was clammy.

Distracted  
I didn’t notice  
she was already speaking to me  
from the other world.

\*

The man who  
walks along the street  
waits at a bus stop  
stands in line  
is concealed by his indistinctness  
we don't know  
if it is him  
or someone else

whether

which

who

NATURE'S ALMANAC

*Everything is poetry*

—Edward Stachura

1

“The swallow-tail butterfly  
is yellow  
with black spots and veining  
on its rear wings  
blue spots  
on black background

the chrysalis is green

the swallow-tail butterfly  
procreates twice annually  
the flight of the second set of offspring  
falls at the end of the summer”

2

“The mountain wag-tail  
has nice plumage  
a black throat-band  
dark brown wings  
black beak

the torrents' banks are its habitat  
it calls attention with its movements  
and ceaseless singing  
tsissis  
tsissis  
tsier  
tsissis”

3

“The larger bark beetle  
is black or dark brown  
it mates in April

the females lay eggs  
from which larvæ hatch and  
eat out pathways beneath the bark

young cockchafers  
appear in July and  
destroy fresh shoots

we find the fallen shoots  
until autumn”

From Henryk Sander and Zdzisława Wójcik's *Kalendarz przyrody*  
(*Nature's Almanach*), Wiedza Powszechna, 1983

\*

To find you, the lost man  
to offer you a hand, offer a word  
a shred of care, a crumb of understanding  
a star of perseverance  
candle and flint

To find you, to say  
you have in you  
soil and seed  
let them unite  
seed will swell, will sculpt roots  
you will grow a tree immune to winds

To find you, who

Will it be thus? you ask  
hand extended

## BIBLICAL PARABLE

Sometimes  
you behold a mote  
in your brother's eye

and you watch  
as it matures  
as it climbs upward  
as it grows into  
the tree of good and evil  
into a strong cedar  
that Lebanese lumberjacks fell  
and the Old Carpenter crafts into  
a stout, evenly hewn beam  
that you will carry ever after in your eye  
though you do not notice it

A SOLDIER, 1975

On a plane to Luanda  
a young soldier  
lies on a stretcher

that morning a bullet shattered his skull

an iv hangs from a hook  
the man tosses  
he's delirious

perhaps he's relating what happened

we never found out  
where he flew to

in the end

ADAM AND EVE

March trees wait for sap for leaf until a drop of  
water somewhere in the earth between grains of  
sand throbs swims up under the tiny beak of a  
root and disappears

Whereupon in the shade of a tree  
Adam and Eve

\*

I withdrew so far from myself  
that I am no longer able  
to speak about myself  
or what I feel  
when I get wet in the rain  
or when I transform myself  
into a blade of dry grass  
burnt by the sun  
I am unable to disclose  
my self  
describe  
its figure  
name it  
be certain  
it exists

# LAST POEMS



JANUARY 24, 2006 IN L'AMPOLLA

The clouded sky above me,  
the palm-lined square before me  
and farther on the gulf.  
A hunched fisherman disentangles his nets.  
The sea closed upon itself  
silent and grey.  
A waiter in the restaurant serves a round of red wine.  
Empty streets.

(“On the street, in the car—I note down,  
so as not to forget a thing.” —Czesław Miłosz)

## ILLNESS

I did not want to see daylight  
only darkness.  
I shut my eyes  
so not a single ray  
would penetrate,  
so I would not see  
the emptiness everywhere,  
from the unseen beginning  
to the unseen end.

\*

You'll never make up  
a day you've lost,  
the world went on,  
you stayed behind—  
your hands empty  
your eyes empty.

You sit on a park bench  
staring at an ant,  
but even it went on.

You were left alone.

IN LIEU OF A PRAYER

I raise you on high  
I raise you above the clouds  
I raise you to the stars

You are so near the sun  
its rays blind me  
I can no longer see you

I close my eyes  
darkness enfolds me  
loneliness and fear engulf me

Why did I raise you up so high  
that I can no longer behold you?





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our deepest appreciation to Alicja Kapuścińska for her boundless support and for permission to translate and include four previously unpublished poems by her husband, and Iza Wojciechowska for her generosity with her time and expertise in locating two photographs from Ryszard Kapuściński's archive to accompany this volume. As well, the translators wish to thank Dan Wells and Stephen Henighan for their editorial guidance and for their faith and care in delivering a collection with which we hope the author would have been pleased.

\* \* \*

"A Choice" and "*Ecce Homo*" appeared in *The New Yorker*.

"Yogi Ramamurti," "Tatars' Wasteland," "Sculptor from Ashanti" and "The elderly gent" appeared in *Books in Canada*.

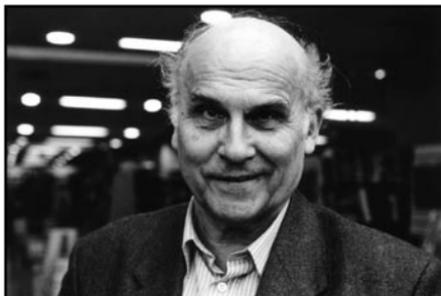
"Tatars' Wasteland," "Barbed Wire," "Autumn in the Park," "Snow," "On Exhibit: Photographs of Polish Peasants Prior to 1944," "Lash," "The Poet Arnold Ślucki on New World Street," "They" and "On the Passing of a Poet" appeared in *Exile*.

"Cudgel," "Anastasius Speaks about the Monastery," "Ravens," "Geography" and "A Conversation with J." appeared in Alphabet City's *Social Insecurity*.



## BIOGRAPHIES

PHOTO BY MAREK KUSIBA



Ryszard Kapuściński, Poland's most celebrated journalist and author, was born in 1932. His first book, *Busz po polsku* [*Bush in Polish*] appeared in 1962 and was an immediate bestseller. Many of his later works, which include *The Emperor*, *Another Day of Life*, *The Soccer War*, *Shah of Shahs*, *Imperium*, *The Shadow of the Sun* and *Travels with Herodotus*, have been translated into 31 languages and become part of the modern canon. He was, moreover, a poet, and published his poetry throughout his fifty-year writing career. One of the most acclaimed writers of our time, Kapuściński died in Warsaw in January 2007.

\* \* \*

Diana Kuprel's translation of Zofia Nałkowska's *Medallions* was published by Northwestern University Press. She is also the editor of *idea&s: the arts & science review*.

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## COLOPHON

*I Wrote Stone: The Selected Poetry of Ryszard Kapuściński* was designed and typeset in Adobe Minion Pro and FF Clan Narrow by Carleton Wilson and printed offset on 70 lb Rolland Opaque Natural at Marquis Printing in an edition of 1000 copies.



BIBLIOASIS

EMERYVILLE, CANADA