

ANDRZEJ STASIUK
Translated by Bill Johnston

Rite of Spring

When the frogs come out from beneath the earth and set off in search of standing water, it's a sign that winter has grown weak. White tongues of snow still lie in dark gullies, but their days are numbered. The streams are bursting with water; its animated, monotonous sound can be heard even through the walls of the house. Of the four elements, only earth has no voice of its own.

But this was supposed to be about the frogs, not the elements. So then, they crawl out of their hiding places and make their way to ditches and puddles, to stagnant, warmer water. Their bodies look like clods of glistening clay. If the day is sunny the meadow comes to life: dozens, hundreds of frogs moving up the slope. Actually it can barely be seen, for the color of their skin matches the dull hue of last year's grass. The eye catches only light and motion. They're still cold and half asleep, so they hop slowly, with long rests between bursts of effort. When the sun is shining at a particular angle, their journey is a series of brief flashes. They light up and go out again like will-o'-the-wisps in the middle of the day. But even now they join into pairs. Frogs' blood, as everyone knows, has the same temperature as the rest of the world, so as they push through patches of shadow on a clear but frost-sprinkled early morning, it's quite possible that red ice is flowing in their veins. Yet even now, one is seeking another, and they cling to each other in their strange two-headed, eight-legged way that makes Tosia call out: "Look! One frog's carrying the other one!"

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All this is happening in a roadside ditch. The sun warms the water all day long, it's only in the late afternoon that the leafless willows cast an irregular network of shadows. There's no outflow here, it's sheltered from the wind, no stream runs into it, yet the surface of the water is dense with life. It's like the back of a great snake: it shimmers and coruscates, reflecting the light; the cold gleam slithers, melts away,

divides, and does not come to a rest even for a moment.

To begin with it's only the frogs. Some are dark brown, almost black, with tiger stripes on their pale yellow legs. Others are bigger, the color of dusty fired clay—the ones in the water turn slightly red, take on warmer tones, and you can tell they're made of flesh. Pairs join into foursomes, lone frogs adhere to couples, then there are eights, dozens, frog-balls appear with untold numbers of legs. They look like bizarre animals from the beginning of time, when the familiar forms of life had not yet been established, and the material expression of existence was still an experiment. Soon frogspawn appears. At first it's clear as condensed water, then there's more and more of it and it acquires a luminous dark blue sheen. The water disappears completely, the inert shapeless substance reaches all the way to the bottom of the ditch, and when the frogs are startled by the shadow of an approaching human they dive in clumsily and only with effort. The substance, slimy and mercuric in its weight and its inertness, pushes them back to the surface. All this is accompanied by a sound that recalls an underwater rumbling of the belly.

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When everything is over, the sky remains blue across its whole breadth. The surface of the water is equally still. The frogs have left, all that remains is the spawn and the bodies of those that didn't survive. They float up on their backs, they have white bellies, while pale pink filaments of intestine unravel from their mouths like some delicate species of water plant. This is the sign that spring has now arrived.

Crayfish

The fish were dead already. The water had disappeared. The sky had burned itself a mirror in which it had been reflected for the last month. The bright, wan fire had reached the stones. It looked like a road made of white bones, something like that. The way wound across a ruddy-colored meadow, deep and absurdly convoluted, filled with the buzzing of flies. The willow-green and ink-black insects had the hardness of metal, the mobility and gleam of mercury. Everything else—the air, the woods on the hillside, the buzzard circling around the sun—was motionless.

We walked up the creek. The rounded rocks gave out a wooden thud when they were kicked. The short sound started up, rose into the air, and immediately ceased. A dozen or so alders grew in a bend by the crag. In the place where the current had once dropped down a series of steps, there was silence. The puddles had the color of dirty bottle glass. Kamil said a beer would be good, and I answered that it'd be better to wait till evening, because it was pointless to drink and drink like that.

Then we saw them. Just the eyes. The round brown beads still retained their shine. The rest of their bodies had already come to resemble minerals. Their exoskeletons were covered with drying mud. They moved sluggishly, they didn't so much as try to get away. They simply retreated among the rocks, pulling their pincers behind them. A low scraping noise could be heard. They moved like weakened mechanisms, like wound-up toys about to fall still. Some were already motionless, like the rest of the river.

We went home. We took a child's pink toy pail. An open Gazik jeep drove down the road. The firefighters wore dark glasses and were naked to the waist. "A patrol," I said. "Right," answered Kamil, and we entered the cloud of hot dust from the car.

They didn't put up any resistance. We took them in our hands. They moved their pincers. They cut the dense, stinking air at an

infinitely slow tempo. We threw them into the pail. They made a grating noise like a handful of pebbles. The dried-up creek entered a larger one that was still flowing. We went there. The water was cold and clear. Small trout were twisting in patches of sunlight. We dropped the crayfish in one by one. The small ones swam away at once, the larger ones sank slowly, their limbs spread wide, and came to rest without moving on the bottom. They became less gray. Now they resembled those kinds of shalelike stones that acquire a vivid, greenish color when you immerse them in water. Red showed through at their bent joints. They crawled slowly, stunned by the sudden chill; they paused, moved on, and eventually disappeared in the tangle of roots hanging from the bank. We went to get more, and then one more time again. On the way we found a slowworm. It was flat and stiff, completely dry. We picked out anything that moved. Even the tiny little ones no bigger than grasshoppers.

In the evening we went for that beer. The sun was done for the day and had gone behind the mountain, leaving strips of red like scraps of meat in the sky. The firefighters were also drinking.

Later, the other creek dried up too.

Green Lacewings

“My mother used to call them ‘glass bugs,’” said Wieś, blowing the insect from his hand.

We would come across them from time to time over the summer. They possessed a beauty rare among the hymenopterans. Their transparent wings were a delicate yet at the same time vivid shade of green. Their eyes were not at all golden, despite their Polish name of *złotook*, or “gold-eye.” Rather, they looked like flecks of copper, or the eyes of lizards. In full sunlight, the juxtaposition of the two colors created an impression of extraordinary purity: metal, precious stone, and light. The glare passed through them; they barely cast any shadow.

As they crawled across the table they tested the way with their curving feelers. Most of all they liked scattered sugar granules. Perhaps they were attracted to forms resembling their own.

As autumn progressed they began to gather in the house. At that time it turned out that, as well as belonging to the mineral realm, there was also something about them that linked them to the world of plants. As there was less and less sunlight, the green of their wings began to fade. By November they looked like a precision drawing made with the finest pencil.

In the evenings, when we lit candles, these scarcely visible sketches would flutter from dark corners, from crevices in the wooden walls, and speed toward the flames, till in a final flare even their outline was lost.

Rain in December

On Monday it began to rain. For several days there'd been a thaw. We were on our way home. Darek cursed, turned the wheel, and the car skidded on wet ice. We tried to use the sides of the road, where there were rocks sticking up. The way was clear, straight, climbing gently for four or five miles. The houses on both sides looked abandoned. Their windows reflected blackness, though the sky was the color of dirty water. A motorcycle was coming down the hill. The rider was sliding along the sheer surface, his feet spread wide. He looked like a stiff horseman whose mount had suddenly shrunk to the size of a WSK motorbike.

We crawled higher. The village was left behind. The rain was trying to wipe it off the map. A mile before the pass Darek said, "Dammit, it's raining and freezing." The windshield wipers were scraping against the glass like they were trying to get inside the car.

Then we came to the woods: it was strange, translucent, like something from a dream. Young alders leaned over the road. Their crowns rubbed against the roof of the car. Elder bushes, pussy willow, hazel trees, all spread like clumps of silvery seaweed frozen still in their underwater swaying. Everything was covered in ice. Every branch, every tiniest blade of grass was sheathed in a transparent cover. Once, long ago, they sold colored candies in glass tubes with a stopper at one end. It was a little like that: glass tubes, and in each one a stalk, a twig, even the pine needles had been dressed individually, with great care. A blackthorn plunged in ice looked like a living corporeal being surprised by the flash of an X-ray.

We pulled over. We'd never seen anything like it. The snow was covered by a hard skin. Drops of rain fell with a soft rattling sound. Trees were bent every which way in the motionless air. The tips of the huge firs by the pass leaned toward one another in a puppetlike dance. It was exactly as though a great wind had passed over the area and had suddenly come to a halt. It had ceased, but had kept on blowing. It had

stopped dead in place. I thought to myself that the feathers of birds, if there were any birds at all that day, must be making a crunching sound in flight, from their icy carapace.

We drove on. The gray-green trunks of the young ashes had the glassy shine of man-made things.