

ASTONISHMENTS

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Selected Poems of Anna Kamińska

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
Grażyna Drabik AND David Curzon



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Astonishments: Selected Poems of Anna Kamieńska

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and David Curzon



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION—Grażyna Drabik and David Curzon	ix
A Path in the Woods	xix
1. Early Poems	1
<i>Goodnight to Mother</i> (1959)	
The Mouths of Streets	3
She Gets Up	4
I Was Standing	5
“Look,” Mother Says	6
<i>In the Bird’s Eye</i> (1960)	
Futile	7
<i>Sources</i> (1962)	
A Hand	8
<i>Impermanent Things</i> (1963)	
[The time of harvest and the time of poems is passing]	9
<i>Revocation of Myth</i> (1967)	
Grandparents	10
<i>Exile</i> (1970)	
Anaximander Lands at the Shore of Exile and Founds the City of Sozopolis	11
Angels	14
2. <i>The White Manuscript</i> (1970)	17
[I was born]	19
[Oh Anna Jan]	20
[I don’t know how a day flew by us]	21
[All the photographs come flying]	22
[Where do your dreams sleep now]	23
[To be the earth]	24

3. *The Second Happiness of Job et al.*

Herods (1972)

A Leap 27

The Second Happiness of Job (1974)

The Return of Job 28

The Silence of Job 30

Job and a Woman 33

The Departure of Job 35

Late Summer 37

Trees 38

Grandma 39

Gratitude 40

Doctor Edith Stein 41

The Other World 43

Small Things 45

The Manuscript Found in a Dream (1978)

Cassandra at a Loss 46

Doctor Korczak's Lie 47

Names 49

Dictionaries 51

Summer 52

Mothers 53

The Just 55

Bodies 56

A Prayer That Will Be Answered 57

Emmaus 58

Conscience 60

At the Border of Paradise 61

The Moment of Reconciliation 62

On a Sonnet by Leah Goldberg 63

A Droplet of Blood 64

Silences (1979)

A Hedgehog 65

Souls of Animals 66

The Lamp 67

The Washing of Feet 68

Old Age 69

Beautiful Hands Seen in a Tram 70

Don't Worry 71

A Pink Sweater 72

4. Late Poems

<i>In Mid-Word</i> (1983)	
The Death of Simone	75
The Empty Places	76
In Mid-Word	77
<i>Two Darknesses</i> (1984)	
A Talk with Mother	78
Transformation	79
Thirteen-Year-Old	80
Annunciation	81
Funny	82
Thanks	83
In a Hospital	84
Elijah's Widow	85
Things of This World	86
Dying	87
Lack of Faith	88
Through the Body	89
Hurry up	90
Service	91
Those Who Carry	92
Into Solitude	93
<i>A New Name</i> (1987)	
On the Threshold of the Poem	94
Melancholy	95
Classicism	96
A Witness to Process	97
Alter Ego	98
A City Map	99
Rembrandt	100
The Weariness of the Prophet Elijah	101
<i>Silences and the Shortest Psalms</i> (1988, posthumous)	
A Prayer	102
<i>Two Darknesses and Last Poems</i> (1989, posthumous)	
As When in a Crowd	103
Patience	104
Difference	105
Saint Martha	106
Three Crosses	107
On the Cross	108

5. Extracts from <i>The Notebook</i> (1965–1972) and <i>The Notebook</i> (1973–1979)	109
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	133

INTRODUCTION

ANNA KAMIĘŃSKA BELONGS TO A REMARKABLE GROUP OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY writers, a generation extraordinarily rich in poets. Miron Białoszewski, Julia Hartwig, Zbigniew Herbert, Tymoteusz Karpowicz, Tadeusz Różewicz and Wisława Szymborska (1996 Nobel Prize winner) were all born during the 1920s, coming of age during the Second World War. They had to come to grips with the historical cataclysms of the brutal German occupation of Poland, the large-scale post-war turmoil and the entrenchment of the communist system. Each of these poets created a powerful and diverse body of work. Together with Czesław Miłosz, a slightly older writer and the 1980 Nobel Prize winner, they have transformed the landscape of Polish poetry and made a significant impact on world literature.

“My literary generation didn’t enter poetry accompanied by fanfares of critics,” noted Kamięńska in an introduction to one of her books. “We were learning to write amidst the rat-tat-tat of firing squads and bomb explosions.” These experiences marked their poetry with a sense of the tragic dimension of the human condition, yet they were expressed without sentimentality, often softened by a touch of subversive humor.

These “skeptical humanists,” as they might be called, searched for a renewal of artistic creation using different devices. Białoszewski and Różewicz built their poems out of fragmented colloquial speech and scattered details of everyday reality. Szymborska continues to amaze with her laconic philosophical precision and finesse of wit. With mature awareness of political and personal dilemmas, these poets salvaged out of the ruins faith in the dignity of every individual life.

*

Kamieńska shares her generation's existential and ethical concerns as well as their radical distrust of language, in particular of poetic rhetoric. Her voice is restrained and unadorned, her diction almost ascetic. In many ways, it is "anti-poetic" poetry, stubbornly anti-romantic and anti-declaratory.

What sets her apart, however, is a principled rejection of ironic distance, that mark of modernity. While most contemporary artists employ irony and allusion as their main weapons, Kamieńska strives to speak in a straightforward manner, without any defensive masks. Within this intentional linguistic simplicity, she addresses the problems of loneliness, uncertainty, and the transient nature of human existence. She searches for explicit and exact words to confront death, the yearning for love, the unknowable.

"I write in order to comprehend, not to express myself," she declares. Her quest for understanding is marked by empathy and self-questioning. The poet invites the reader to accompany her in this process of discovery and transformation.

*

"All words are lies in the face of death, because all hopes are lies. Words are futile hopes," Kamieńska wrote in January 1968, as the first entry in her *Notebook* a couple of weeks after the death of her husband, fellow poet Jan Śpiewak. His death was a shock that made her question the world of the professional commitments and family life she had constructed over two decades. She worked as a book reviewer at the prestigious literary monthly *Twórczość* (*Creative Output*), regularly published volumes of her poetry, was a respected translator from several Slavic languages, gained recognition as an author of popular fiction for young adults, and raised two sons.

Kamieńska was only forty-seven at the time of Jan Śpiewak's death. The slim volume of poems *The White Manuscript* marks the turning point. It was written, as she records it, in one burst, during one March day, "on the very border of life and death, next to the wall that divides and unites at the same time." These poems are attempts to master an unmanageable personal loss. They are also songs of love, almost shameless in their intimacy. They sing of precious physicality, evoking the warmth of the embrace, the touch of skin, the smell of hair. As a kind of white magic, they are incantations against the loss, in defiant rebellion against its finality: "Someone who loved so much, couldn't die. Someone who was so loved—couldn't die."

Facing death, the poems negate Kamieńska's earlier statement, affirming the creative act of writing. Words, though fragile and imperfect, are not "futile hopes." They name our fears. They resist the chaos of suffering and seductive power of inertia. They are "efforts to transcend pain."

*

Personal tragedy prompted Kamieńska to embark on an unexpected journey. Turning towards metaphysical issues took her by surprise, since she was a self-declared nonbeliever at that time, comfortable in the rational culture of her sophisticated intellectual milieu. A great sequence of poems on Job was born of her new concerns and engagement with the Bible, which she began to discover at that time. Her imagination took her to the time after God has restored Job's wealth and given him a second family, offering the chance of a second happiness:

But happy Job didn't have the strength to be happy
afraid he'd betray happiness by a second happiness

A wealth of poetry, the crucial cycle of *The Second Happiness of Job*, came from this biblical location and the emotional concerns it allowed her to explore. Similarly, the book of Ruth offered Kamińska the means to present an older woman returning home after the death of her husband but still filled with desire and yearning for love that will not be granted. Many other poems are addressed to specific biblical characters or offer meditations on biblical situations. In some, the poet follows the rabbinic tradition of *midrash*; she quotes a line of Scripture and continues it with her own thoughts. In “Psalm,” for example, a slightly recast version of a line from Psalm 71, “Cast me not off in the time of old age,” prompts a reflection on the ravages of age, ending with a variant on the opening line: “In a time of weakness do not desert us.”

The encounter with the Bible acquired additional importance for Kamińska during the mid-1970s, when she became *persona non grata* because of her association with the nascent democratic opposition movement in Poland. Prohibited for several years to publish or to function in any public capacity, she used the time of her official isolation to deepen her studies and writings. She learned Hebrew, a language “of incomparable conciseness and creative force,” in order to read the Bible in the original. She immersed herself in the writings of the ancient classics and major religious thinkers of the twentieth century. She wrote commentaries on the Old and New Testaments. She devoted an enormous amount of time to adapting into Polish *The Imitations*, a cycle of medieval Latin hymns of the Dominican monks. She prepared to fulfill her “one creative dream”: to translate the Psalms, which she admired as “verse free but exact,” the “ultimate poetry.”

*

The *Notebooks* provide a direct record of a transformative religious experience. They come close to aphorism in form, making her statements even more startling. The entries for January 1970 describe with incredulity moments of “illumination” and a resulting change in disposition: “The immense light. I didn’t know I’d have such an experience. A state of inner emergency and waiting. . . . This luminosity does not negate reason or any rational sense. It simply exists. A kind of poetic sensibility open to the world, to everything—grand and small.” A few months later, she records, “I was looking for the dead, and I found God.” And perhaps with even greater astonishment, she states, “I have hands full of this radiance. It flows through my fingers. It doesn’t diminish.”

The poems reflect the new direction of her ethical and spiritual preoccupations in more oblique ways. Many attest to the enduring importance of the individuals who shaped her life: her husband, “present even in his absence”; her mother and grandmother, ghostly witnesses of her return to faith; her grandfather, whom she assisted over the course of his dying.

Other poems talk about people she didn’t know personally but whom she greatly admired. She considered Janusz Korczak, Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, or Simone Weil as “my saints, the carriers of some inner truth, to which they dedicate their life and death. My witnesses.” Several powerful poems deal with the tragic impact of the war or refer to specific war incidents. They celebrate courage and self-sacrifice.

Poems in the form of prayers and meditations express a clear-eyed acceptance of the inevitable passing. Others, built as catalogues of paradoxes, highlight human vulnerability and contradictions. Still

others suggest an essential unity of the living and the dead, a “kind of one shared time in which we exist and will exist.”

Two contradictory strands of thought and of emotional need testify to Kamińska’s active struggle with faith. On the one hand, dreams of return to a childlike innocence carry a promise of relief from self-questioning and uncertainty. The desire to take a “leap,” “to renounce all,” “to allow yourself to be led / like blind Saul / to Damascus” speaks of the longing for ultimate transcendence. On the other hand, faith is inevitably edged by doubt, and the only accessible certainty is the “certainty of uncertainty.” Even the disciples at Emmaus speak to us about the evanescent nature of what they saw: “Is it Him / He remains silent / Is it You / He disappears.” The relatively late poem “Lack of Faith” sums up:

Yes
even when I don’t believe
there is a place in me
inaccessible to unbelief
a patch of wild grace

The limits of comprehension is our drama, but a lack of clear resolution can be a mobilizing force. Tentative answers prod us further in the search for meaning:

So it’s necessary to keep on shedding skin . . .
We live among question marks

Poetry that results from such struggles and the “hard labor of faith” welcomes with equal generosity “believers” and “nonbelievers.” It doesn’t overwhelm us with the truths of its discoveries. It is open-ended and marked by multiple points of reference. Kamińska works within a Judeo-Christian symbolic framework, but rejects narrowly defined dogma. She finds inspiration in the Book of Job

and the Song of Songs, in the Gospels and the Talmud, in the poetry of Horace and in the Polish Romantics, in the writings of Thomas Merton, Viktor Frankl and Albert Camus, in the courage of Janusz Korczak's life and death, in the music of Brahms and the expanse of the sea.

*

One of the particularly attractive qualities of this poetry is its tone of appreciation and quiet humor. Confronting metaphysical dilemmas, Kamińska finds recourse in the ordinary and makes it a source of renewal. Her poetic sensibility sustains a sense of wonder that transforms even the most common things. Out of the fog of the general and abstract, she draws out a specific object or a particular gesture making it glow in the light of our attention.

If a fundamental sense of gratitude for existence is considered a religious disposition then a great deal of Kamińska's poetry is deeply religious, even when the subject matter is a hedgehog busily "stomping on his way" or young leaves "willing to open up to the sun." This grateful acceptance extends to the most common and simple, and many of her poems record thanks to cats, a desk, a fragile teacup.

"Faith is a feeling of connection with the fate of others, a special kind of pity," Kamińska observes. Writing in this sense is an act of love, against the "impermanence of things." The poems become a record of our passing. But they also defy time, building "not from the grand / but from every tiny thing." In the quiet space of Kamińska's poems "the tenderness of things enfolds you" and words speak as eloquently as the silence.

*

Kamińska left an impressive body of poetic work. She is the author of 20 volumes of poetry; two volumes of *Notebooks*; several collections

of literary essays; and translations from Bulgarian, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, French, Hebrew, and Latin.

In this selection we dedicated greater space to her mature poetry rather than to her often superb early work. We aimed at providing an adequate sense of major groups of poems (on the deaths of her mother and her husband, the Job cycle) and the wide range of her themes. The selection follows the chronology of composition.

The extracts from the *Notebooks* focus on entries that have a direct bearing on poems included here or offer a guide to her poetic intent.

In general, Kamińska's poems are straightforward, and her level of diction is that of ordinary conversation. She often addresses someone directly and literally: her dead grandmother, an inanimate object, a biblical character, God. We tried to preserve this straightforward and intimate tone of voice.

In several poems Kamińska uses the vocative case, which sounds more natural in Polish. Occasionally, she relies on tender diminutives that have no exact equivalent in English or emotional exclamations unusual in contemporary poetry. We indicate her intended effect by using "my darlings" or similar approximations, but are aware they sound more forced in English.

In her early work, Kamińska wrote in full sentences with normal punctuation; we translated these poems idiomatically line for line. From *The White Manuscript* on, she eliminated all punctuation marks apart from a very spare use of capital letters and aimed at a telegraphic succinctness. This sometimes poses problems. Polish is an inflected language and English is not, so lines that are clear in Polish without punctuation may sound ambiguous or are more difficult to read in the English versions. In a few cases of such

linguistic difficulties, we made small changes in line breaks or added a capital letter to indicate the beginning of a new sentence. In poems with more than one speaker, we introduced indentation to indicate who is speaking.

Otherwise, we stay close to the Polish text, remaining as faithful as possible to the original. However, we also firmly believe that the translated poem has to be a poem in the new language. We hope that Kamińska's poems in this collection sound and breathe as poems in English.

GRAŻYNA DRABIK
DAVID CURZON

A PATH IN THE WOODS

I don't trust the truth of memories
because what leaves us
departs forever
There's only one current of this sacred river
but I still want to remain faithful
to my first astonishments
to recognize as wisdom the child's wonder
and to carry in myself until the end a path
in the woods of my childhood
dappled with patches of sunlight
to search for it everywhere
in museums in the shade of churches
this path on which I ran unaware
a six-year old
toward my primary mysterious aloneness

from *A New Name*

1.

Early Poems

from

Goodnight to Mother

1959

In the Bird's Eye

1960

Sources

1962

Impermanent Things

1963

Revocation of Myth

1967

Exile

1970

THE MOUTHS OF STREETS

The mouths of streets are silent, windows go blind,
Cold veins of tracks tremble noiselessly.
In the mirror of wet pavement the sky hangs
With lead clouds full of hail.

My mother is dying in a hospital.
From bed-sheets burning white
She raises her palm—and the arm drops down.
The wedding ring, that hurt when she was washing me,
Slips off her thinned finger.

The trees drink in the winter damp.
The horse, his cart filled up with coal, hangs down his head.
On a record, Bach and Mozart circle
Just like the Earth circles the Sun.

There, in a hospital, my mother is dying.
My mama.

SHE GETS UP

She gets up, moves away from her closed mouth,
She, immobile for so long,
Walks! Steps carefully, like someone
Getting up after a long, long illness.
She walks through his forehead, through my heart,
Through another's tangled hair. She walks — on her own.
For a moment she looks, puzzled,
At the abandoned body and, without regrets,
At us, bent in pain in a morning fog
Like roadside branches. She pushes them
Aside and departs. She fades into radiance.

If I could only believe it! But I didn't see anything
Besides the eyes congealed with tears
And the cold indifferent hands. Mama!

I WAS STANDING

I was standing with my sister over the patch of grave
And we were speaking about some very important things.
The boy is doing better at school. The youngest already chatters.
If you aren't mean to people, they'll be good to you.

The apartment's freshly painted. We bought a table, chairs.
A neighbor stops by sometimes, and says, 'Your place looks nice.'
The plant that mother liked so much is in bloom.
I wanted to bring flowers but was afraid they'd wilt.

The air, tree, stone and earth all listen as we talk
And only the one for whom we bring this news can't hear.
But perhaps she stands behind us and smiles at life's affairs
And whispers, 'I know, my darlings. No need to tell me any more.'

“LOOK,” MOTHER SAYS

“Look,” mother says in my dream,
“Look, a bird soars up to the clouds.
Why don’t you write about it,
How heavy it is, how swift?

“And here on the table—the smell
Of bread, a tinkling of plates.
You don’t need to speak of me again.
There is no me where I rest.

“I’ve passed, I’ve ceased,
It’s enough for me: goodnight!”
So I write this poem about birds,
About bread . . . Mama. Mama.

FUTILE

I carry from childhood all this baggage:
Father's violin in a black case,
A wooden plate with an inscription
To break bread with friends is best,
One narrow road
With a passing shadow of a horse and cart,
A wall marked with mold,
A child's folding bed,
A vase painted with doves,
Objects
More durable than life,
A stuffed bird
On top of a beat-up cupboard,
Ah, and this huge
Pyramid of stairs and doors.
It's not easy
To carry so much.
And I know that until the end
I won't dispose of a single piece.
Until my wise mother
Comes from nowhere to nowhere
And says,
"Give it up, my darling daughter.
It makes no sense."

A HAND

This thing is called a hand.

This thing brought closer to the eyes
covers the world.

Bigger than the sun, a horse, a house,
a cloud, a fly.

This thing of fingers.

This thing with a lovely pink surface.

It is me myself.

It's not merely lovely.

It grabs, holds, pulls, rips off
and its other works are numberless.

It's not merely lovely.

It directs armies,

works the soil,

murders with an axe,

spreads women's thighs

and its other works are numberless.

Its five fingers—five crimes.

Its five fingers—one merit.

THE TIME OF HARVEST AND THE TIME OF POEMS
IS PASSING

The time of harvest and the time of poems is passing.
Sorrel, fern and wild strawberries covered my notebook.
Pine cones and dry seeds of trees
mixed with shreds of sentences.

Not a single poem has yet matured.
The crossed-out words return with clamor.
Light glitters in patches on mowed fields.
This hour too will be more lovely in recollection.

GRANDPARENTS

Our grandparents are happy
in the photo, green as a leaf.
Our young grandmother in love
lays her head on her husband's shoulder.
Grandfather doesn't know yet he has died.
He puffs up his chest garlanded with a fob-chain.
Indulgently he holds his arm around
our young dead grandmother.
He doesn't know yet that next to them
strange cousins rest, and their dead children,
under the porch where breakfast was served
on past mornings of a pleasant summer.
Our grandmother doesn't know at all
that her hands clasp a cold rosary.
In the tilt of her neck happiness plays
like music in a dead instrument.

ANAXIMANDER LANDS AT THE SHORE OF EXILE AND
FOUNDS THE CITY OF SOZOPOLIS

It's me,
Anaximander of Miletus,
exiled from my country.
I can still hear the clatter of black balls
falling into the clay urn.
Guilty.
But one should weigh carefully
what exile is.
Is it only once that a man
experiences exile?
To begin with
you are exiled from mother's womb.
It's the first misfortune, and the cause of all the others.
Later on you are pushed away
from her breast, from her lap.
Exiled from the child's charming ignorance,
then from youth, strength
and from the small hearts of women.
Exiled, one after another, from all ideas
that people value as good.
Finally, after you suffer through all exiles,
you'll be exiled from life,
from this mere sliver of breath.
But exiled from your country?
From that scrap of earth
no more fertile than any other,

from that throng of raucous fellow citizens
who stink of garlic and onions?
So I'm exiled
from brawls, squabbles, stench.
But this isn't punishment. It's almost a favor.
If I were a poet
I'd compose hymns of thanks
to extol my country,
so pleasant from a distance.

It's as hot here as in the oven of an Athenian potter.
The sea's the same
and surely the stars won't be different when they rise.
Here, on this promontory, we'll found
a city of deliverance
from homeland squabbles.
I can already see red tiles,
on which seagulls will rest,
windows shaded by a fishing net,
porches covered by grapevines, among fig trees,
where we'll enjoy the evening.

Exiled — from what privileges?
From the swindles of merchants?
From the insolence of petty bureaucrats?
From the conceit of philosophers?
From the corruption of judges?
From the whorishness of writers?
Or perhaps from the privilege of a crowd's laughter
when jugglers set themselves up near the agora?

And yet,
I, Anaximander
of Miletus,
exiled from my country!
Denied the right to tremble about its fate,
to suffer with it and to cry.

ANGELS

There are angels there really are angels
dressed in jackets in out-of-fashion dresses
they sit at a table drink beer chat
yawn go to bed late
and there in the wardrobe a white wing rests
They don't feel disgust at the dead
at their toil and sweat
because to die is as hard as to pull a plough in spring
In a doctor's white coat they bend over the ill
and to the old they say Well you have to accept it all
In halos of baldness in braids of gray
they pretend sometimes to be a priest who cries alone
with forehead resting on a table
Suddenly they call out a poet's word
their high voice pushes its way through a symphony
and they die young in place of those who don't want to die
or disappear suddenly from under the surgeon's knife
The anesthetist runs shouts Tie up the veins
but they're already far
already in heaven
and only a cloud rustles nearby only a cloud rustles
There are angels there really are angels
they catch every sound idea with the fishing-rod of intelligence
and from pails full of truth pour a bit for good luck
they bake cake poach fish in white wine
they like good jokes
the whites of their eyes shine with laughter

and we don't know whether in a moon-bound vehicle
one won't on the sly squeeze into a space suit
Their calves are too strong as in Flemish paintings
they are corporeal like pale oxen at the stream
but a fiercely kind force is in them
a friendly breeze billows their robes
They sit quietly in a waiting room at the dentist
in an empty chair and are the last to enter
A long silence trails behind them
that's how you can recognize there are angels

2.

The White Manuscript

1970

I WAS BORN

I was born
and I died
I don't remember anything else
a green river perhaps
a green tree
green eyes
and about this so much ado
such regrets about this

OH ANNA JAN

Oh Anna Jan

poor holy images of wood of love and despair

Oh Anna Jan

pagan gods of flesh braided with knots

Oh Anna Jan

a shattered bird of clay

Oh Anna Jan

two words torn apart