

***Rust* by Jakub Małecki**

***Book report and sample translation
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IN A NUTSHELL

Jakub Małecki's latest novel *Rust* tells the story of Szymek and his grandmother Tośka. The story is set in the village of Chojny in central Poland, but the narrative jumps back and forth in time, from the Second World War until today, with clear signposting in the 18 chapter headings.

Summer 2002. Szymek, a seven-year-old boy, is staying with his grandmother Tośka, who runs a tiny farm in Chojny. He's playing on the railway tracks with his friend Budzik: they place coins on the tracks and wait for a train to run over them, then they admire the oddly shaped pieces. Normally Szymek would put his precious "twisties" in a secret hiding place, but this time is different. Returning to Tośka's house he learns that his parents were killed in a road accident.

Szymek moves in with Tośka. She is a sober and hard-working recluse, but she's on good terms with her neighbours. In fact, most of the people in the village seem to have a secret from the past. Most of all, Chojny seems haunted by the war. Some sixty refugees were burned alive in a barn when the Germans bombed the village, and thousands of Jews were murdered in the nearby wood (these are historical references to the Luftwaffe attack on 5 September 1939 and the Chełmno Extermination Camp some 10 km from Chojny). Tośka, who witnessed the bomb attack as a little girl, grew up to be an eccentric young woman, but she remained relatively unscarred. The man she would later fall in love with, however, witnesses the mass murder in the woods and is deeply traumatised. Tośka briefly lures him out of his depression, but he hangs himself before he knows she's pregnant. Tośka raises their daughter Eliza, Szymek's mother, on her own.

Szymek has a tough time adjusting to his new life in the village, to his eccentric and reserved grandmother. As we see the boy growing up, falling in love, losing his best friend, leaving his grandmother and dropping out of university, we also learn how Tośka's life story explains her oddness. Szymek knows very little about her life. Then, suddenly, it is too late: knowing that she will only get more and more frail, she takes her own life, thinking about the man she had loved. Ironically, the moment she dies Szymek is, again, on the railway tracks, thwarting a suicide attempt by his friend Budzik, who had saved Szymek's life by pushing him off those same tracks soon after his parents' accident.

While the structure of Małecki's novel is reminiscent of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, the force of his writing lies in the plain but captivating language with which he tells his characters' life stories. What is more, this historically and psychologically realistic narrative is full of uncanny echos. For instance, as a little girl Tośka cuts off two of her fingers while playing with an axe; Szymek, who doesn't know about her accident, plays with an axe, too, but he pulls his hand away just in time. A coincidence? Inherited wisdom? Every ordinary existence, it seems, has a tinge of the magical.

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Jakub Małecki, born 1982, is a highly respected writer of the young generation. His books, though shortlisted and awarded with numerous literary prizes, are still waiting to be translated into English. Małecki began his career writing fantasy, then moved on to mainstream fiction. His novels *Dygot* (Shivers, 2015) and *Ślady* (Traces, 2016) already garnered critical acclaim, now *Rdza* (Rust, 2017) has captivated readers. As Olga Wróbel points out, in *Rust* Małecki uses the same formula that has proven itself in his previous books, namely “to tackle the lives of a few small-town people and to skilfully weave them into an intriguing pattern”.¹ Małecki grew up in a town near Chojny. Although he now lives in Warsaw, he believes that village life makes people more authentic, because in a small community it’s harder to maintain a mask than in an anonymous city. He completed *Rust* thanks to a prestigious young artists’ fellowship from the Polish Ministry of Culture.

ASSESSMENT

Thanks to its lively plot and full-blooded characters, *Rust* has the potential to appeal to a broad international readership. It is also extremely well written, with a gripping structure and readable style.

The plot is set in the Polish countryside, against the backdrop of history from 1939 until today: World War II and the Holocaust, Communism, post-Communism. One of the book’s strong points is that it doesn’t assume much prior historical knowledge but introduces readers to it through the characters’ lived experiences. Chapters alternately focus on Szymek and Tośka, so that we move forward in time from 2002 till today and from 1939 until today. The structure is easy to follow but also allows to build up tension. For instance, it is only in chapter 17 that we find out how Szymek’s parents died.

Rust can be read as a double *Bildungsroman*, telling the stories of not one but two characters – a boy (Szymek) and his grandmother (Tośka). With two different perspectives and two different time scales, the narrative is not dominated by either the “male” or the “female” perspective, neither that of the “younger” generation nor that of the “older” one. The greatest asset of Małecki’s novel lies in the empathy with which he portrays his characters. They come alive through the use of dialogue and free indirect speech, which gives us insight into their thoughts. Thanks to this, it would be hard not to identify with them, no matter where in the world we read about their lives.

One of the key themes of *Rust* is the lack of communication between people who love each other. The inability to talk about traumatic experiences and private feelings is perhaps the greatest tragedy of the generation that survived the war, while coming to terms with this heritage is the younger generations’ greatest challenge. Another recurring theme is the toxic effect of extreme gender-related expectations, be they macho masculinity or

¹ Olga Wróbel for culture.pl, transl. by T. Bhambry
<http://culture.pl/pl/artykul/cztery-tendencje-w-literaturze-2017-roku-w-obrazkach>

chaste femininity. Above all, however, the novel deals with the universal themes of family and friendship.

The title *Rust* is a reference to time passing and to the way objects and people shape the landscape even after they're gone. Interestingly, this idea does not reflect Tośka's experience, nor even Szymek's, but Budzik's. In one of his erratic letters to his dead father (chapter 11), the young aphasic observes:

Yesterday on my way to the wind turbine I stopped where that barn
had burned down
During the war. Those people that were burned in it, perhaps with them it's the same as
with that plough that's turned into a trace of rust in the soil. Maybe they, too, have
remained here, in part
and in part continue to be somewhere around here?

The underlying question of how history, place and individual lives shape one another is perhaps the most philosophical aspect of Małecki's novel.

Małecki has created a novel that is realistic both historically and psychologically. Still, reading it we feel the magic of a carefully crafted story. The language feels authentic, precise and subtle, and poses no major translation difficulties. And yet, there is also variety in the style. There is something wonderfully playful about the parts where Małecki fast-forwards in time. For instance, chapter 7, which deals with Szymek's relationship with Wera, begins with a series of snapshots showing the seven-year-old boy turn into a teenager:

Over the next eight years Szymek got to know the multiplication table, the pain of having a tooth pulled, the course of the Battle of Grunwald, the taste of beer, the names of the planets in the Solar System, the sound of his nose being broken, the syntax of a subordinate clause and the shape of Wera's breast.

In this time he went abroad twice and had tonsillitis three times. Once he fell off the stairs on his bike. Once he swam across the lake in Lipiny. His fashion sense was not great, his study skills were not terrible, he was bad at football. He loved Wera and other girls at the same time. The other girls for a month, sometimes two, Wera the whole time, because after all, Wera was Wera.

To mention a few other more "experimental" passages, in chapter 13, the rhythm is anxious and breathless, mimicking Szymek's desperate rush to save his best friend's life. When he pushes Budzik off the tracks in chapter 18, what we read is an exact mirror image of the scene in chapter 3, where Budzik had pushed Szymek off those same tracks some 14 years earlier. Their names are interchanged, and if Szymek had felt the heat of the sun on his neck, Budzik now feels cold rain on his cheeks. Other than that, the two paragraphs are literally identical. This is the culmination of several more delicate echoes in the novel. For instance, when Tośka, aged 7, has a crush on Karol, we read: "Tośka felt different, worse – better and yet worse" (p. 43). Many years later Szymek falls in love with Wera: "From now on things only got worse. That is to say, they got better. Meaning worse" (p. 55). These

echoes show how deeply the characters are interlinked, even when they're not aware of it. Mostly, however, the language is transparent with a "traditional" narrative style.

MAIN CHARACTERS (sorted by generation, with pronunciation)

Sabina: Mother of Tośka and Michał

Józek Kłoda [Yoozek Kwoda]: Sabina's lover and companion

Tośka [Toshka]: Szymek's grandmother

Michał [Meehow]: Tośka's brother

Karol: Tośka's lover

Eliza [Eleeza]: daughter of Tośka and Karol

Telesfor/Telek: Eliza's husband

Budzik's father: Tośka's friend and (briefly) lover

Julia Duszna [Yoolia Dushna]: Eliza's friend

Gracjan Knop/Hołowicz: [Gratsyan Knop/Howovitch] Eliza's first love interest; Michał's drinking buddy

Uncle Roch: a relative of Szymek, Julia's ex-fiancé

Szymek [Shimek]: son of Eliza and Telek

Budzik [Boojik]: Szymek's best friend

Wera [Verah]: Szymek's girlfriend

PLOT SUMMARY

Chapter 1---2002: pp. 3-29

Szymek, 7, is staying with his grandmother Tośka, who runs a tiny farm in Chojny. He's playing on the railway tracks with his friend Budzik: they place coins on the tracks and wait for a train to run over them, then they admire the oddly shaped pieces. Normally Szymek would put his precious "twisties" in a secret hiding place, but this time is different. Returning to Tośka's house he learns that his parents were killed in a road accident.

It takes a while for the little boy to understand that his parents will never come back. During the funeral, an aunt tells him that God took them away. Szymek worries that God might also take away his favourite comic books, so he hides them in Tośka's washing machine – after all, the cartoon characters on his T-shirts were safe in his mum's washing machine. Tośka buys a new machine, allowing the boy to have the old one to himself. When he smiles at her for the first time since the accident, she goes to her bedroom and cries, then she quickly collects herself – crying is a sign of weakness. She thinks about her life as a girl, the only man she loved, and how everything is beginning to fall away: people

are dying, her health is failing, the house is in need of repair. And now, aged 71, she must look after this little boy. She pities him, but can she love him?

Szymek longs for his parents, their flat, their routines. Life with Tośka is boring, she's much stricter and doesn't seem to understand him. But little by little they grow closer. When Tośka notices that Szymek ties himself to the radiator at night because he's afraid God will take him away, she tells him that if God ever got into his room, she would come and "shoot that pest". Szymek is not convinced, so she shows him her revolver.

Michał, Tośka's younger brother, is plagued by a sense of guilt about the accident, though he knows it's irrational. He's an alcoholic and lives in a trailer and re-reads the same book over and over again. On some level he seems close to his sister, though they barely talk.

Szymek goes to the tracks again with Budzik. Things aren't going well generally, and when he's not lucky with the twisties he gets very angry and upset. A train approaches. Szymek, breathing slowly, walks onto the tracks and closes his eyes.

Chapter 2---sixty-three years earlier: pp. 33-47

Tośka wakes up during an air raid on Chojny. No one in her family is harmed, but they all witness a neighbour's barn burning down. Dozens of refugees are killed in the fire. After the mass burial Tośka's father tells his family how the neighbour who had sheltered them was beside himself with grief. Tośka finds a severed hand in the field. She's confused and starts to cry when a neighbour shouts at her to drop it. The adults keep telling her "it's alright now," but Tośka knows that's not true.

During a village dance in defiance of the German occupants, Tośka, 7, develops a crush on Karol, 25. Her father catches the flu and dies, inconsolable because his death would be unheroic and useless. After the funeral, Tośka wonders where her father is, but she is happy because Karol is moving to the village. Normality sets in again, and half a year later Tośka barely remembers her life as it used to be. The next summer the Germans brutally evict her family.

Chapter 3---2002: pp. 52-66

Budzik saves Szymek's life by pushing him off the tracks just before a train would have hit him. He punches Szymek hard, then Szymek curls up near him and cries. Afterwards, they don't talk about what happened. Szymek tries to keep busy. He helps on Tośka's farm and rarely goes to play with Budzik.

Szymek falls in love with Wera, 7, a sheltered girl from a comparatively well-to-do family. We also learn that Budzik's father is obsessed with the old poplar tree near their house and that he wants to teach his son to respect the tree's power. Budzik tells Szymek that his father expects them to bury their cat's litter. They dig a hole and place the living kittens inside, but Szymek runs away at the last moment; it's unclear what Budzik does,

but Szymek is impressed with Budzik's nerve. Then Tośka sells his parents' flat. When he finds out that she had thrown away his father's notebooks he doesn't talk to her for two weeks. Then he has his first day at school.

Chapter 4---sixty-two years earlier: pp. 69-86

Many of Chojny's inhabitants are deported. In the city of Łódź their valuables are confiscated, then they are put on freight trains to Nowy Sącz in Poland's mountainous south. Tośka's family is assigned to the friendly Goral Kłoda. His son Józek and Tośka's mother Sabina bond quickly. Sabina gets a letter from a neighbour in Chojny: German families – friendly folks – had been brought to their village, but those who got the farm with the burned-down barn left because it was haunted. Tośka is well fed and comfortable in the mountains. These are happy days. But when almost all the Germans leave their “haunted” village (their neighbour implies he had a hand in that) Sabina decides to return. Józek and Sabina make love for the first and last time. In Chojny, Tośka wants to put up a sign: “Our Home”. Trying to sharpen a stick with an axe, she hacks off two of her fingers.

Chapter 5---2002: pp. 89-106

At school a boy teases Szymek about his lizard-like appearance. Szymek, surprising himself, punches him in the face. This – not his parents' accident – is when his childhood ends for him. He fears the harshest punishment, but nothing happens. “Lizard” becomes his nickname at school, and without doing anything more, he acquires the reputation of a troublemaker. We learn a little bit about Tośka's neighbours – the former beauty Julia Duszna and the disabled alcoholic Gracjan Knop, aka Hołowczyc (after the Polish rally driver – a reference to the speed with which he moves on his wheelchair).

Budzik's father, who keeps urging his son to “be a man,” teaches the boys how to split wood. When he leaves them alone to practice, Budzik challenges Szymek to place his hand on the chopping block so he could bring the axe down close to his hand. Szymek feels honour-bound to play along. He pulls his hand away just in time.

Aware that her health will only decline, Tośka keeps a revolver at home. She knows exactly how and where she will use it to escape feeble old age.

Chapter 6---sixty-one years earlier: pp. 109-126

Sabina lives mostly for her correspondence with Józek Kłoda (they would send each other letters for decades). Tośka slowly comes to terms with having a crippled hand. Because of the war, she doesn't go to school and spends her time daydreaming about Karol. He, a forester, is suspicious about the Germans' huge demand for firewood. When he is suddenly dismissed, he goes to sneak on the Germans and finds disturbing evidence of mass murder.

The deprivation and boredom of the war suddenly come to an end and Tośka attends several grades at once; she lives like a normal teenager and almost forgets about Karol. He, meanwhile, sinks into a profound depression. At 26, Tośka has had a single brief affair and people are beginning to think of her as an old maid. Then she sees Karol again, for the first time in years, and falls in love with him all over. She brings him food and flowers; he doesn't respond, so she punches him in the face. Then she undresses them both. He finally begins to come alive again. One day, however, he hangs himself. Two months later, Tośka realises she's pregnant.

Chapter 7---2002-2014: pp. 129-151

Even though Szymek has crushes on other girls, his abiding love interest is Wera. When they are about 13 years old, she takes his hand in front of the whole class. This is at the Chełmno Extermination Camp, during an excursion Tośka had forbidden Szymek from joining (without explaining why). Wera doesn't understand why Szymek likes her – she feels she's a bore who just obeys her parents.

Budzik's father is terminally ill and blames the poplar. Szymek thinks about his childhood best friend, who has turned into a (rather pathetic) bully. He knows that Budzik has never been fooled by his reputation as "the Lizard," and he can't bring himself to challenge him to a fist fight. Szymek tears a photograph of his great-great-grandfather off the wall – the man who killed a bear with his bare hands. Budzik's father, meanwhile, visits Tośka every day, reminiscing about their brief affair and asking her not to come visit him once his condition worsens. Tośka ages, both physically and mentally. Szymek and Wera go through phases of closeness and distance. When Budzik's father dies, he leaves a note asking his son to cut off the tree. Budzik is hurt that his father had nothing more personal to say. Having passed their A-levels, Szymek and Wera – now apparently in love – apply to university while Budzik gets a factory job. One day Budzik and his friends beat up Szymek, and Wera's father – perhaps influenced by Szymek's reputation and misinterpreting how the fight happened – forbids him from associating with his daughter. Szymek decides not to go to university but to become "the Lizard". Through his uncle Roch he gets a job reading undeliverable letters at the post office in the nearby city of Koluszki. Tośka now feels lonely and very old. Budzik finally decides to cut down the poplar, but having climbed high up, he slips and falls.

Chapter 8---fifty-seven years earlier: pp. 155-170

Throughout her pregnancy, Tośka thinks about Karol. Her mother seems strangely relieved, her brother Michał (who turns out to have an unusually keen sense of smell and seems to live in a world of his own) cares for her. Eliza is born the same day as Gracjan Knop (later Hołowczyc). Eliza is a precocious child, then a rebellious teenager. The only people she seems to like are the clever but withdrawn Gracjan Knop and Julia Duszna.

Julia has rejected many men – not because she was too proud but because she feels uncomfortable about her attractiveness, which seems to her accidental and unimportant. Finally she gets engaged to Roch, her most tenacious suitor. Józek Kłoda suddenly arrives in Chojny. After decades of separation he becomes Sabina's companion in old age. But there's another scandal: Roch doesn't show up at the wedding and Julia is humiliated in front of the whole community.

Chapter 9---2014-2016: pp. 173-184

Szymek lives and works with uncle Roch, who lives alone and has a male friend over every once in a while. Szymek "the Lizard" hangs his great-great-grandfather's photograph above his bed. He enjoys the simple routine of his work, but he seems to be in a daze. He finds out Budzik never recovered his ability to speak after he fell off the poplar. Finally he gets in touch with Wera, who, following her father's wishes, is studying law in Warsaw. He visits her regularly and entertains her with stories about the letters he reads at work. One day Szymek recognises Budzik's handwriting on a letter addressed to "FATHER".

Chapter 10---forty-one years earlier: pp. 187-203

After Roch's non-appearance at the wedding, Julia turns to promiscuity to erase all thoughts and feelings. Sabina and Józek find her during one of their forest walks and console her. Two years later Sabina dies, then Józek. Eliza asks Gracjan to dance but he declines. She leaves the party while he, trying to defend Julia, gets into a fight with several drunken men. His injuries are so bad he will never walk again. Eliza visits him a few times, but she can't bear his anger and suffering. She decides to go to university in Kiev.

Chapter 11---2016: pp. 207-217

Budzik's letters – increasingly desperate and almost poetic – keep arriving on Szymek's desk. He feels there is no running away from Chojny. Back in the village, Budzik ritually visits Tośka, who talks to him about her past and about his father. Julia gradually emerges from her torpor and develops a liking for a man who reminds her of Roch.

Wera announces that she'd dropped out of university and that she's pregnant – two acts of defiance against her parents. Szymek knows his life will change forever. The same day at work he reads Budzik's last letter.

Chapter 12---thirty-nine years earlier: pp. 221-230

Eliza is a student in Kiev. At a football match she sees a tall blond youth – another Pole – play an outrageous prank. She is impressed with the way he seems to enjoy himself.

Michał turns to drink, as does Gracjan. Michał is obsessed with smells and the question why some people have a different sensory experience of the world than others. Eliza returns after a year in Kiev and decides not to go back. She goes to the station to watch her train depart, taking away her chance for a better future. At the station she meets the young man from the stadium in Kiev – Telesfor or Telek.

Chapter 13---2016: pp. 233-237

Szymek just manages to catch the train to Chojny. He desperately tries to reach Budzik and Tośka, but none of them pick up, then his phone dies. In his pocket he carries Budzik's letter, addressed to his father: he implies that on the anniversary of his father's death – today – he wants to kill himself on the tracks. Szymek wonders if he could possibly make it on time. Suddenly it occurs to him that the only friend he's ever had might throw himself under the very train he is on. It doesn't happen. At Chojny station, Szymek jumps off the moving train.

Chapter 14---thirty-eight years earlier: pp. 241-252

Eliza is charmed by Telek's verve and carefree manner and they soon get married. He works as a zootechnician in the nearby town. Eliza seems to bet closer to her family. After fifteen years of happy married life, she accidentally gets pregnant and Szymek is born.

Tośka gives her brother Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume*, which is a revelation to him. He drinks less and talks more, and he starts leaning German because he wants to read the book in the original language.

Gracjan can't bring himself to hate Eliza's husband – he's too friendly.

Chapter 15---2016: pp. 255-259

Jumping off the moving train Szymek almost falls under the wheels. He runs towards the place where he and Budzik used to play as children.

At the same time, Tośka fetches her revolver. She knows that she must act while she still has the strength, and yet she wonders if she will have the courage. An hour earlier she'd been too weak to pick up the phone (she thinks it was some obnoxious marketing company – we know it was Szymek). She doesn't believe in an afterlife, but if there is one, she thinks, she's going to find Karol and slap him hard across the face.

Michał, meanwhile, gets off the train in Berlin and makes his way to a bookshop.

Tośka puts Szymek's "twisties" in her pocket and sits under the tree where her grandfather Lucjan was buried. She places the revolver in her mouth for practice.

Chapter 16---twenty-one years earlier: pp. 263-267

Eliza thinks her new-born son looks like a lizard. She wonders why no one else seems to notice and wants to protect him from the world. As Szymek grows up, she tries to convince herself that he looks less strange. Dropping Szymek off in Chojny Eliza notices that Tośka never smiles other than at her grandson. Then Szymek's parents drive off.

Chapter 17: pp. 271-273

Michał is nervous about his trip to Berlin the next day.

Telek and Eliza are driving back to Chojny. She thinks about the Roger Waters concert in Warsaw, about the night in the hotel, with Telek, wine and almost no sleep. They talk about Szymek and about their regrets, esp. about Gracjan, whom they decide to have over. Eliza falls asleep, and so does Telek, the driver.

Chapter 18---2016: pp. 277-281

Szymek is running. He thinks how unlikely it is that he might save Budzik, who might have chosen any place, who might have changed his mind. He feels silly for imagining that the place on the tracks might be as meaningful to Budzik as it is to him. Then he sees the lights of a locomotive and a slim figure. He pushes Budzik off the tracks just before the train would have hit him. He punches Budzik hard, then Budzik curls up near him and cries.

In Berlin, Michał buys several copies of *Das Parfum*. This is his second attempt at making his dream come true: the first time he changed his mind at the last minute and fate punished his cowardice with the deaths of Eliza and Telek. He feels he's doing something real, rather than simply necessary, for the first time in his life.

Tośka lets her earliest memories run through her head. She thinks about Karol, their first meeting, their lovemaking. She doesn't want to think about Eliza, Michał, Julia, Roch, Budzik or his father. "Don't be silly," she tells herself.

Szymek offers to help Budzik fell the poplar. After a while, they both burst out laughing. A revolver shot resounds and fades away. Szymek and Budzik walk back to Chojny.