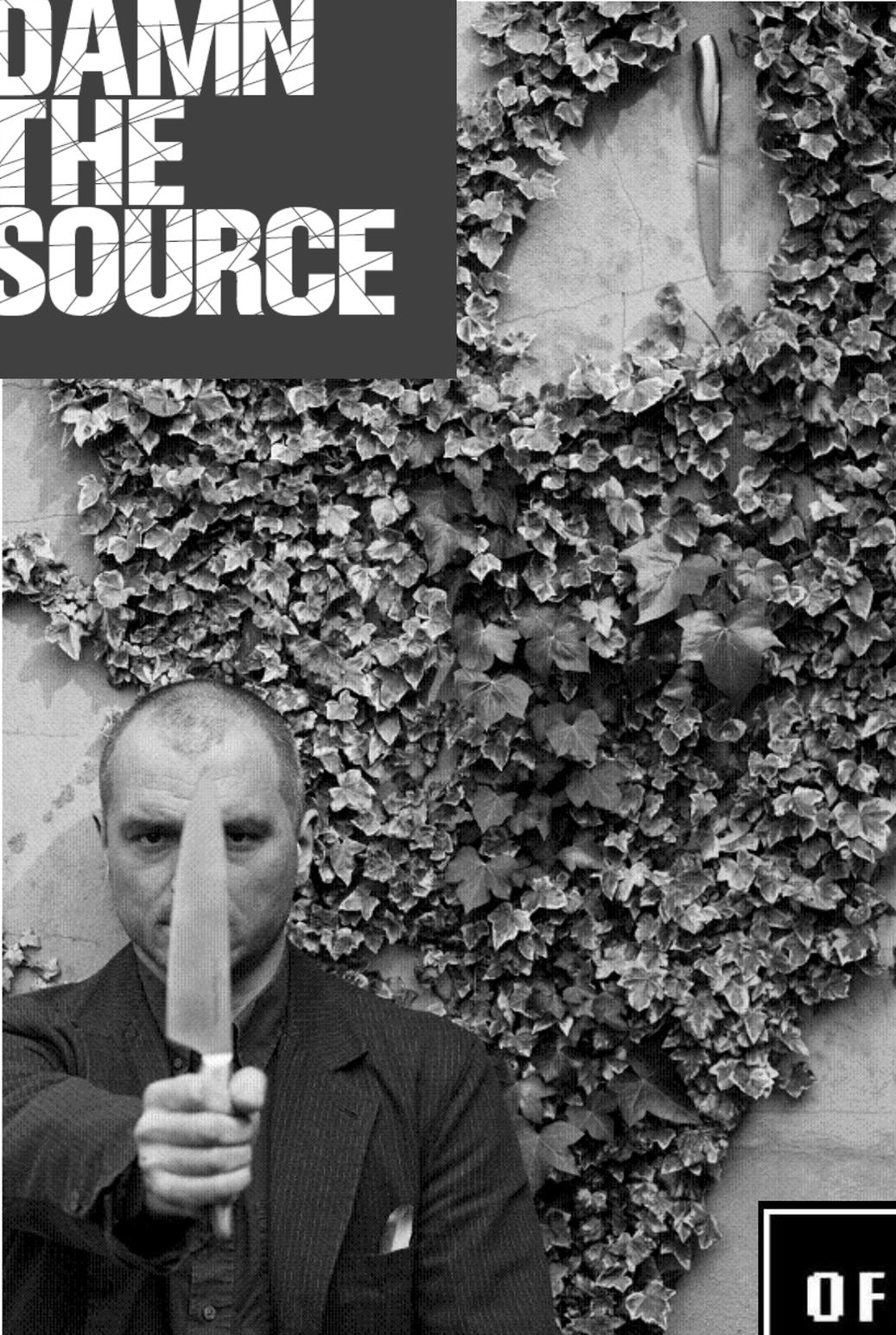


DAMN THE SOURCE



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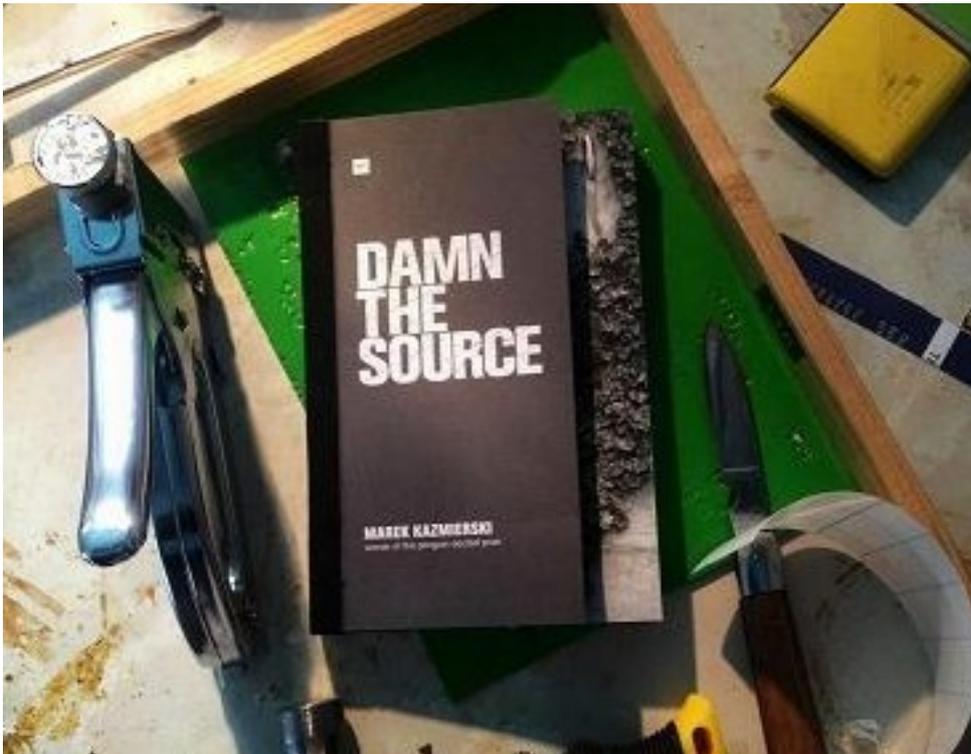
OFF_

“a decalogue for the 21st century”

Marek Kazmierski / winner of the penguin decibel prize

Ten stories, set on a single day. A dozen Poles, scattered across Britain. Labourers, aristocrats, dealers. Each life somehow changed by a blade. A surgeon's scalpel. An artist's knife. An antique bayonet. Each tale based on a true story.

Marek Kazmierski escaped communist Poland and settled in the UK as a child political refugee. He decided to become a writer, then worked as a librarian, a stripper and a prison governor, among others, to have something to write about. Today, he is translating, publishing and running a series of insider art initiatives. Not Shut Up, OFF_PRESS and Intersection are his babies.



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NO WAY BACK WHERE

winner of the 2007 Decibel Penguin Prize

extract

There's something strangely satisfying about being an exile. In a permanently shifting world, when intercontinental travel and multicultural dialogue are no longer the privilege of the wealthy and the adventurous few, being an out, as opposed to an insider, can be a thing of incredible value.

Of course, for most of those forced to abandon their homes by persecution, discrimination or mere economic necessity, the reality of exile is fundamentally traumatic. Yet having fled Communist Poland and settled in the UK as a child political refugee, I look at those born to and settled in the same land and sort of feel sorry for them too. I'm proud to be a compound soul. Not a product of one source, one culture. The stuff I am made of is alloy, stronger than any single substance, and I can't imagine what my life would be like had my immediate family not made its escape those thirty-odd years ago.

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People often ask if I feel more Polish or British, and I've always answered with the stock phrase: I have a Polish heart and a British head and that is why I am happy. Poles are passionate, romantic creatures, but all too chaotic in their thinking. Because of its geographical location, caught between the ever-warring strongholds of Europe and Asia, we have always had to be good at fighting, even when there was no one around, save ourselves, to battle against. Brits, by comparison, are their opposites - not having experienced a single invasion or territorial conflict in a thousand years, we have the grace of a nation used to a peaceful status quo. Being who I am, born in Poland, matured in England, I believe myself to be the best of both worlds.

But now, the more I think about my own experience of migration, the more I realize we are all exiles. Every stage of our lives involves some kind of expulsion - first from the womb, then from the innocence of childhood, then the irresponsibility of youth and eventually the ego-centeredness of pre-parenting age. All the time, we are forced to move on in directions we do not choose, and this is why the experience of real exile can help us define who, and where, we really are.

DAMN THE SOURCE / INDEX / BLURBS

THE ANIMAL QUIXOTE

Wal, a young gay man from Poland, has come to London to start over again. Living a comfortable existence with his French boyfriend in a leafy part of Hampstead, its illusory calm is shattered when he receives a disturbing gift.

ELVIS AND THE THIRD SEA

Zofia, a young Polish woman living on the coast of East Sussex, is seeking counselling to help her combat her addiction to self-harm. However, her problem may not be the pain, but the love she feels for a man lost on the other end of the world.

BARBARICS

Michal has been suspended from school for carrying weapons as protection from gang violence. While stuck at home, he composes a plan not just to free himself from the authority of elders, but to turn himself into a modern-day pirate. With machine guns thrown in.

ROUND A ROUND TABLE

Helena is studying media in Oxford, but her life is interrupted by a visit from her parents. The whole of her family's history will play itself out in the space of a simple Christmas dinner, with darkly comic consequences.

WOLF TO A WOLF

Artur and Dawid are young artists sharing a squat in suburban London. Their fragile home hides a dark secret which no amount of denial and drugs can stop from eventually imploding, taking both them and the women they love with it.

I'LL SEE YOU IN THE DARK

Kinga, a young nurse from Lodz, is looking after Countess Lucja, a deranged artist who can still recall her childhood in war-torn Warsaw. Cultures, generations and value systems clash in a comic battle of emigre classes.

WARHEAD

Adam Staropolski, an ageing ex-spy, is taking a final walk around London, a city which was his political playground for many years. Now, as his best friend General Jarzuelki lies in a morgue in Poland, the capital bites back.

JAIL FLOWER

Natalia, a young woman from Pomerania, tells her life story to a Gypsy cellmate while awaiting trial in a Belfast jail. Sex, drugs and a whole lot of racing round the British Isles is a recipe for interesting tales, though far from straightforward endings.

STATIONS OF THE WASTED

A Polish man cuts off his penis in a crowded London restaurant - Jurek Marciniak, the editor of *Nowa Era UK*, goes on a hunt to find and interview the tragic character, an assignment which may yet break his hack future...

LOSING LIGHT

Krystian, a critically acclaimed but permanently impoverished artist, moves to London to escape hunger and falls in love with a young Englishwoman. While their relationship is short-lived, their love takes him on a long, dark journey of cross-continental discovery.

NO WAY BACK WHERE

An autobiographical piece of non-fiction writing which won the author the 2007 Penguin Decibel Prize, originally published in the anthology *From There To Here* (Penguin, 2007)

THE ANIMAL QUIXOTE

extract

Serge gave me the knife a whole month before Christmas. Typical of him, the old dandy. Dropping pointless gifts any time of year. Said it was once habit, that he used to do it for all his trophy fucks, especially the older he got and the rarer they became. But with me it had turned into a deeper kind of generosity. I see it in his eyes every time he hands me an unexpected gift, that joy, and I worry for him. From seeing it in the mirror once, I know what it can do, and I worry. I guess the age difference between us is an issue, and hate the Hampstead queen crew he fits into so well, the giddy shrieks and fumbles I'm greeted with every time we enter his scene. But I think he is starting to realise I am not who he thought I was going to be when he had me at first, and it is that which is starting to trouble everything.

Still, this gift was a particularly strange surprise. Wrapped in his usual, delicate way, metallic blue paper, matching ribbon, a hand-made label. As always, a shame to actually tear the thing open. But then, inside, a heavy-weave canvas pouch; black, mean looking. Inside that, a gun-metal grey handle, small enough to hide in my clenched fist.

I held it there for a moment, along with my embarrassment. What to say? I'd never seen a knife like it, a file-pattern grip carved into the sides, cold and infinitely tough. I pushed the rubber button set in a recess of the grip. The blade swung out, locking in place. I folded it shut, pressed the button once more. Like some razor-minded genie, the blade reappeared instantly, the blink of an eye too slow to follow its trajectory, trying to launch itself from my hand.

I sliced through the torn wrapping, the sigh of parting paper clearly audible in the now curious silence of our airy Hampstead flat. Still didn't know what to say, suddenly feeling like a kid who'd been given a grown-up toy by mistake.

I shoved it deep into the pocket of my jeans and pulled him close. Kissing a thank-you onto his proud, thin lips, I felt it sandwiched between us, right where our hips met.

ROUND A ROUND TABLE

extract

"Mum, Dad, I have something to tell you... When I graduate, I'm becoming a priest."

Ignacy stopped slicing the tiny turkey Helena had roasted for their pre-Christmas dinner and stared at his daughter. She was standing by the window, looking out at the late December sun descending over Oxford's Wellington Square gardens, still far brighter than the lines of Christmas lights sagging between down-cast lamp posts. Monika was the first to respond.

"What did you just say?"

"I've decided to join the church, Mum."

"Dear god..."

"Iggy! Don't be pathetic," Monika shot her husband a dismissive glance. "Darling, Helenko, sit down. Now, can you explain what it is you mean by 'become a priest'?"

Helena remained standing.

"I mean, lead mass and marry people and baptise their babies and then bury them all afterwards."

"Oh, no! Impossible!" bellowed Ignacy, the carving knife trembling in his hand.

"Dad, in England they let women in too."

"We know that, dear..." Monika shut her eyes against the developing scene. "But why exactly do you intend to become a priest? Why on earth would you do such a thing?"

Helena turned to look out from her tiny halls of residence out over Oxford's darkening spires. Her dry, mousy hair was in her eyes, as usual, something to hide behind as her father kept on shouting.

"Is this what I drove a thousand miles to hear? Is it?!" His greying eyebrows did their classic porcupine act. "We get you into a half-decent university, drive all this way to spend a few relaxing days buying you presents, alcohol even, and this is how you repay us?"

"Darling," Monika interrupted him again. "We are about to start heading back. A long drive ahead. Don't spoil things now."

"Me, spoil things?"

"Yes, you. We've had a lovely couple of day's rest..."

"I said nothing when she got her piercings! Nothing when she decided to do this whole lesbian thing! I even kept my mouth shut when, of all the things she could take here, she chose media and bloody gender studies! But this," he turned back to Helena. "This, this... I don't know the hell to say!"

"Hallelujah," Monika quipped.

WARHEAD

extract

Satellites streamed images of the old General's demise from the other end of Europe straight into Adam Staropolski's North London living room. Slow-mo, constant repeat, pixellated blow-ups on all Polish news channels. The same ghastly scene of a bald, speckled man of eighty, thick dark glasses slipping from his nose, breathing his last on trial for high treason.

After a whole night of watching and drinking, Adam's failing eyes were having a hard time focusing. He had seen enough of General Jaruzelski, his old childhood friend, in the dock for the supposed crime of crushing Solidarity and declaring martial law those thirty years ago, to know his demise had not been accidental. Someone must have slipped something into his prison breakfast. Or his customary glass of water. Or even the little microphone pinned to his lapel. Death injected or vapourised or swallowed. None in their game cared about traces of evidence, not since Litvinienko and his execution in that little sushi place in the heart of London. A radiation pill in a cup of black tea, flown over all the way from the Kremlin. The insane cheek of it. Litvinienko been ex-secret police too. FSB, KGB, and so what? With his Putin-backed killers still at large, nothing and no one could think themselves sacred or safe.

The sound of envelopes crashing through the letterbox in the hallway jolted him. Christmas was almost here, but was it too early for the real post man? Could it be a set up? Sarin in a greetings card? Even an old-fashioned letter bomb, pretending to be a seasonal gift?

Swaying, Adam rose from his armchair and walked through a forest of empty Guinness bottles towards the window and the old television set stood by it. Early light streamed through the lace curtains, piercing the low crowd of brown glass all around his slippers. During the weeks of hearings, as he had got drunker and drunker and the number of empty bottles grew, he had stopped taking them into the kitchen and simply let them collect on the living room floor, entertaining himself in breaks between hearings by arranging the little brown soldiers in various patterns. Simple military parades at first, lined-up regiments of empties, in honour of the old general. Then more complex arrangements, a detailed map of Britain, stretching out across the carpet, and now a large eagle, the Polish national emblem, cut in half by the path he had left to the TV.

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“a decalogue for the 21st century”

Thu 20 June, 5pm

**Maria Jastrzębska and
Marek Kazmierski
in dialogue with SJ Fowler**

**UCL / SSEES
London**

image by Bogdan Frymorgen

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