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A Treatise on Shelling Beans, by Wiesław Myśliwski, Archipelago Books, 2013,
translated by Bill Johnston

The speaker who seizes our attention at once with a mild yet tenacious grip is the caretaker of a cluster of vacation cabins in a rural part of Poland. He manages his small domain with the precision and rigor of an exacting deity. In his spare time he engraves nameplates for the graves in the nearby woods. One night a visitor arrives who wants to buy beans. The two commence shelling beans together, while our gregarious narrator tells the story of his life, and of Poland under communist rule, after the transforming experience of the war.

This is the simple framework of Wiesław Myśliwski's brilliant and heartbreaking novel, *A Treatise on Shelling Beans*, published in Poland in 2006. Myśliwski is a major literary figure in Poland, winner of many national awards. In addition to this novel, an earlier one, *Stone Upon Stone*, is also available in English, both thanks to the prolific and widely honored translator, Bill Johnston. I read *Shelling Beans* the way I remember reading books in childhood, impatient for the school day to be over so I could return to the story, and especially the narrator, who speaks like an intimate friend.

Within this framework Myśliwski sets a series of digressions, rather like interlocking circles, from the banal details of ordinary life to ongoing philosophical quests, often in the space of a single paragraph. The homely act of shelling beans, for instance, which was a ritual in the narrator's family and indeed his entire village, becomes freighted with metaphorical association.

The site of the resort cabins was once the village where our narrator spent his childhood. He was the sole survivor of a brutal Nazi assault that obliterated the village and all its people: an orphaned boy hidden in the potato cellar until he's discovered and nursed back to health by a group of partisans. After a series of grim picaresque adventures, he finds himself in a military-style orphanage, where he is trained as an electrician and, more important, learns to play the saxophone, his great passion. He plays in bands abroad for many years, then returns to his native village, although, as he puts it, you can never recover your original place: "Places die once they've been left....A person's only place is inside themselves....Everything that's on the outside is only illusion, circumstance, chance, misunderstanding. A person is their own place, especially the last place."

The world of the novel, a *mélange* of chatty anecdote and metaphysical speculation, is in constant flux. Reality and dream sometimes change places. Nothing is stable--not time, not place, and not even character. The narrator often encounters people he seems to have met before; characters echo one another, resonances stretching across years. Even the enigmatic visitor resembles an old acquaintance the narrator cannot quite place. Memory, we are told,

is no more than a function of our imagination. Imagination is the place we feel connected to, where one can be certain that that's where we actually live. Then when we come to die, we also die in it. Along with all those who have ever died before, and who help us die in turn.

The only firm element is the mesmerizing voice of the narrator, full of anecdote and wit and rumination: "The world," he says, "is what is told."

Like the great twentieth-century European writers who evoke

an entire society through the perceptions of a single character and sensibility—Proust in France, Bohumil Hrabal in Czechoslovakia, Saramago in Portugal, Robert Musil in Austria—Myśliwski has not been infected by the American virus of minimalism that counsels: less is more. Quite the contrary: more is more. His esthetic is one of liberal inclusion, and his novel is stunningly rich in detail, encyclopedic. We're regaled with droll passages not only about the ubiquitous beans, but about hats; trail travel; electricity, saxophone reeds; candlesticks; his mother's Christmas dinners; shaving, and dogs—the narrator has two, one of whom he rescued from the nearby forest and nursed back to health as he himself was rescued and nursed.

The nature of life under postwar communism is portrayed with offhand remarks: "These days the soul is a commodity like anything else. You can buy it and sell it and the prices aren't high." The system is illustrated by the complaints of a longtime shopkeeper now forced to operate under absurd bureaucratic restrictions. It's also mirrored in the deprivations, petty cruelties, and strict regimen of the orphans' school where the narrator spends his adolescence. Even the war is replicated in a wild rebellion staged by the boys: tired of the constant power outages leaving them in the dark, they break windows and generally destroy everything in sight. Worst of all, they destroy the musical instruments they've been taught to play by their affectionate and alcoholic music teacher. In their blind fury they even attempt to hang this one teacher they love. When the rampage ends and the investigation begins, the innocent music teacher is arrested. "Long live music, boys," he shouts as he is carried off.

The destruction of the instruments is the most telling and tragic outbreak of violence. For music is the narrator's *raison d'être*. His saxophone teacher at the warehouse where he has his first job, tells him, "You have to play with your whole self, including your pain, your tears, your laughter, your hope, your dreams, everything that's inside you, with your whole life. Because all that is music. The saxophone isn't the music, you are."

By now the narrator's rheumatism prevents him from playing—his fingers are too stiff. Without his music his identity drains away. "Beyond playing it was like I didn't exist. Who knows, maybe I actually didn't, and it was only playing music that kind of summoned me out of non-existence and forced me to be."

The exploration of identity that infuses the entire novel leads to the question of who is the visitor. He assumes various shapes, gradually congealing, as it were, into his true self. At first we take him at face value—a passing stranger who wants to buy beans. At various points he seems a ghost from the narrator's past. Or an incarnation of one of his younger selves. As more details emerge—his age is indeterminate, untouched by time, he has no gray hairs, he doesn't come out in photographs--the narrator grows suspicious. But he is not disconcerted when he—and we—realize that here is the inevitable visitor who turns up at the end of a long life. For beneath the speaker's casual tone is a profound vein of grief and skepticism dating from the early loss of family and home. All is imagination, illusion, and chance. "Death is just a transition from one illusion into another." He is ready, after one last round of checking on the

cabins. "The world is what is told," he concludes, and he has told his story.

And we are transformed by hearing it.
