

Feliks Skrzynecki

My gentle father
Kept pace only with the Joneses
Of his own mind's making –
Loved his garden like an only child,
Spent years walking its perimeter
From sunrise to sleep.
Alert, brisk and silent,
He swept its paths
Ten times around the world.

Hands darkened
From cement, fingers with cracks
Like the sods he broke,
I often wondered how he existed
On five or six hours' sleep each night –
Why his arms didn't fall off
From the soil he turned
And tobacco he rolled.

His Polish friends
Always shook hands too violently,
I thought... *Feliks Skrzynecki*,
That formal address
I never got used to.
Talking, they reminisced
About farms where paddocks flowered
With corn and wheat,
Horses they bred, pigs
They were skilled in slaughtering.
Five years of forced labour in Germany
Did not dull the softness of his blue eyes.
I never once heard
Him complain of work, the weather
Or pain. When twice
They dig cancer out of his foot,
His comment was: "but I'm alive".

Growing older, I
Remember words he taught me,
Remnants of a language
I inherited unknowingly –
The curse that damned
A crew-cut, grey – haired
Department clerk
Who asked me in dancing-bear grunts:
"Did your father ever attempt to learn English?"

On the back steps of his house,
Bordered by golden cypress,
Lawns – geraniums younger
Than both parents,
My father sits out the evening
With his dog, smoking,
Watching the stars and street lights come on,
Happy as I have never been.

At thirteen,
Stumbling over tenses in Caesar's *Gallic War*,
I forgot my first Polish word.
He repeated it so I never forgot.
After that, like a dumb prophet,
Watched me pegging my tents
Further and further south of Hadrian's Wall.