



## White Nights

**Urszula Honek**

**Kate Webster, Translator**

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The interlinked short stories of Urszula Honek's unapologetically stark novella *White Nights* focus on ordinary lives that are subject to savage turns of fate.

There are beautiful days in Binarowa, Poland, where the sky goes aflame just before dusk—a brilliant display before the shadows swallow all of the village's shapes. In seasonal turns, there are stretches of snow and ladybugs in fields, too, and flourishing apple trees and the babble of the winding river. But these bits of loveliness belie the unceasing brutality of the villagers' lives, which are marked by disappointments, abandonment, death, and assaults.

Herein, a handful of the villagers' stories are seen from different vantages: a girl's grandmother tells her how to stock a coffin; the girl's mother abandons her briefly to chase after a migrant worker whose seductive words were deceptive. Elsewhere, an immigrant digs a pond to make his mark on the landscape; his childhood friend absconds town for better opportunities, and another childhood friend practices suicide when suspicions fall upon him.

In one story, an unmarried woman's mysterious death is somewhat covered up; in another, a woman's suicide attempt is thwarted. A house goes ablaze in a lightning storm; children die and are buried; a woman has difficulties remembering who's alive and who's dead. Unvoiced thoughts embarrass complicated hearts, tangled thoughts go unspoken, and unmet needs prove fatal.

The language is disturbing and poetic by turns—sometimes both at once. In one tale, a girl intuits that if the silence around her were broken,

*the glass in the windows would break, the desiccated roof over the well would crumble to dust, and the raspberry bushes would slump to the ground like after a heavy downpour.*

Eventual ghosts walk the fields by homes whose residents are already haunted from early ages—by past misdeeds, by inevitabilities, and by secrets.

*White Nights* is a spectral and affecting novella-in-stories that illumines postwar life in an out-of-the-way Polish village.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May / June 2026)

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