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Magdalena Tulli. *In Red*. Trans. Bill Johnston. Archipelago Books, 2011. 158 pp. Paper: \$16.00

Early in this novella by award-winning Polish writer Magdalena Tulli there is this statement: “Any kind of enterprise would have run aground in a heartbeat if there’d been a lack of salt, which, as everyone knows, is the essence of tears.” The content of *In Red*, first published in 1998, is enough to provoke seemingly endless tears, as Tulli’s evocation of an alternate Poland, using a mythical port city named Stitchings, takes in the tragedies of that country’s twentieth-century history. Solid and respectable family businesses start crumbling as the Great War approaches, and by the end of the book they’re nothing but purveyors of adulterated products based on counterfeit money, a combination that will conjure up thoughts of Chinese goods and capitalism’s decline. The crammed pages overflow with the often abrupt deaths of major and minor characters, mob activity, anarchist acts, and the strange fate of those who, though declared dead, continue to live. Red silk strands blown about in the air bring trouble to whoever they land on, a bullet fired in anger circles the world repeatedly until it finds its inevitable target, and buildings set on apparently stable foundations sink into the ground. Tulli’s poetic prose gives us imagery that’s as searing as the Weimar paintings of George Grosz as she describes her version of Poland in the style of magical realism. A late remark—“the truth of flaming red, lovely and futile”—takes in the wretchedness of the lives of the residents (who one feels for and finds appalling simultaneously) while speaking to the incendiary nature of the times they live in. Period breaks are heralded by advice to travelling salesmen: “...if you wish to leave Stitchings, you must not hesitate for a moment...” Wise words, considering the context, but readers are encouraged to linger.