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This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen by
Tadeusz Borowski, translated by Barbara Vedder,
Penguin Classics 1992

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Recommended Readings



This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen

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Reviewed by Ulf Goebel

An incident recounted in the title story renders the entire horror Borowski lived through. It is the narrator's "fortune" to be taken along one day to work on the ramp, where the plunder from the new arrivals is shared by the SS and the inmates whose survival it assures. A girl descends lightly from the train. She straightens her blouse and skirt and impatiently tosses back her soft, blonde hair. Noting the narrator staring at her, she confronts him. "Listen, tell me, where are they taking us?" He knows what awaits this girl with "a wise, mature look in her eyes." Her head shaved, she may live awhile in "the sickening, stale odour of dirty, damp female bodies." Or she will quickly find "disgusting and ugly" communal death. He cannot tell her. "I know," she says with a shade of proud contempt in her voice. "The last he sees of her is her blonde hair "flying in the breeze" on the truck driving off with her among its human cargo.

The author lives to tell the story because he was "Aryan." In 1951, not yet 30 and leaving behind "masterpieces of Polish literature," he chooses gas to kill himself. The stories he left show us life as it was lived where to live was to kill.

- Ulf Goebel is a German instructor at Butler University.