

The European Union Prize for Literature

Thirteen winning authors

2014



EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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Forewords

Foreword by José Manuel Durão Barroso, President of the European Commission (September 2014)

I have the great pleasure to introduce the winners of the 2014 European Union Prize for Literature. This year, they come from thirteen different countries from all parts of Europe: Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Iceland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Serbia, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Their work depicts a greatly colourful and diverse mosaic of European societies, culture, traditions and thought.

Since the European Commission launched this unique literary prize in 2009, I have followed its development very closely. And I am now proud to see that, after only six editions, it has become a well-established and respected tradition in European literature that serves to promote Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity, a principle very much at the heart of the European project.

Culture, and literature in particular, is an essential pillar of the foundations of the European project, which is the successful product of dreamers and idealists, people who knew where they wanted to go. Denis de Rougemont, a great thinker and a committed European, used to say that "Europe is a culture, or else it is nothing."

Culture is about fulfilling the individual dreams of each of us. It is for each of us the possibility to realize our own potential. And it also plays a key role in fostering social cohesion, economic growth, job creation and innovation. This is why the European Commission has strongly advocated a robust Creative Europe Programme, the new European funding programme for the cultural and creative sectors, as of 2014. Our aim is to help artists, cultural professionals and cultural organisations so that they can work across borders and ensure that their works reach as many people as possible.

Supported through the Creative Europe Programme, the European Union Prize for Literature, which in just six-year time has become a well-established and respected tradition in the world of European literature, aims at supporting young emerging European talents while promoting Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity. So far this Prize has been awarded to 72 remarkable young authors from 37 different European countries. No other book prize can claim a comparable range and variety. And we actively support efforts to translate the awarded works to all European languages, as much as we generally promote translation of European literature.

This anthology presents extracts from this year's prize winning books, and I invite you to let these new and strong literary voices speak to you and let them draw you into their stories.

Virginia Woolf wrote that "books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately." Each of these books is unique, and yet part of the same story: the story that binds us together as Europeans.



José Manuel BARROSO
President of the European Commission

**Foreword by Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Education, Culture,
Multilingualism and Youth (September 2014)**

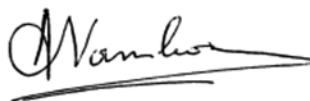
Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity is a tremendous asset. At the same time, our diversity is a challenge for creators and culture professionals who want to access European audiences. For authors and publishers the challenge of reaching a broad readership beyond national borders is even greater. This is why the European Commission has been, for more than 10 years now, actively supporting translation projects and has, since 2009, launched a literary prize: the European Union Prize for Literature.

I am happy to see that the Prize has acquired recognition throughout the European book sector. The contribution of the consortium co-organising the Prize – involving key representatives from the book sector such as the European Booksellers Federation, the European Writers' Council and the Federation of European Publishers – has greatly contributed to this success.

The European Union Prize for Literature, now in its 6th year, is establishing itself as Europe's flagship initiative. Thanks to it, thousands of readers have had the chance to discover a number of European talented writers. Its main aims are to highlight the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature, help cross-border sales of books and foster greater interest in publishing, selling and reading of foreign literary works. And, while it is certainly not the only literary prize to be associated to the word 'European', it is unique in its genre, as it is the only the promoting new and emerging authors, regardless of their age, country of origin or language. Each year, national juries in a third of the participating countries nominate their winning author, covering a mix of big and small countries, different language groups and literary traditions.

The Prize, however important it may be, does not address all the needs. Translation is key to accessing our shared literary treasure and cultural heritage. Over the period 2007-2013, under the previous Culture Programme, the European Commission has helped translate more than 3,200 literary works involving more than 30 languages, with an average €2.5 million annually. We will continue this support through the Creative Europe programme, which is expected to fund the translation of 4,500 books by European authors till 2020.

The Creative Europe programme's 9% budget increase on previous funding levels, as opposed to the first-ever decrease of EU overall budget, is a sign of the political attention the European Commission is putting to the cultural and creative sectors for their contribution to our economies and societies. The European book publishing industry is a global leader. In addition to adequate financial support, we must continue creating incentives for investment and sustain an enabling environment that encourages innovation and rewards creativity. We must accompany the book and publishing sector into the digital era, not only to preserve our diversity, but also to ensure Europe's creative edge. I am proud to introduce the winners of the 2014 edition of the European Prize for Literature and welcome you to this anthology as a small token of the immense wealth of European literature.



Androulla VASSILIOU



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Ben Blushi

Otello, Arapi i Vlorës (2009)

Othello, Arap of Vlora

Publishing House **Mapo editions**

Biography

Ben Blushi, born in 1969, studied at the University of Tirana, graduating in Albanian Language and Literature. He was editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Koha Jonë*, and in 1999 embarked upon a political career in the cabinet of the Prime Minister of Albania. For several months he served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, in late 2000 he became the Prefect of Korça, and in 2011 he was appointed Minister of Education. Blushi is currently a Member of Parliament, representing the Socialist Party.

In April 2008, Blushi's first novel *Të jetosh në ishull (Living on an Island)* was published, which turned into a phenomenal success. Indeed, within a couple of months, the book had sold over 30,000 copies, a record for the Albanian market. His acclaimed second novel *Otello, Arapi i Vlorës (Othello, Arap of Vlora)* appeared one year later, followed in 2011 by his third novel *Shqipëria (Albania)*. With the novel *Otello, Arapi i Vlorës*, Blushi was awarded the Author of the Year prize at the Tirana Book Fair in 2009. In April 2014, Blushi had a book of essays published, *Hëna e Shqipërisë (The Moon of Albania)*.

Synopsis

The book is set in the years 1300-1400, in two well-known urban centres of the Middle Ages, Venice and Vlora. One of the most intriguing elements of the book are the characterisations, which have been adapted from one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies (*Othello, the Moor of Venice*), but set more than 100 years before Shakespeare's birth. Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, Iago, Cassio, etc., are well-known figures in literature, but in this novel they act not only in Venice, but mostly in Vlora, interacting with many interesting characters, such as the famous doctor, Stefan Gjika, the brave lad from Vlora, Andrea, and the Turkish invader, Hamiti.

It is impossible to have Othello, Desdemona and Iago without jealousy, betrayal, intrigue, wickedness, suffering and murder, in a society immersed in unscrupulous habits and interests. But, above all, *Otello, Arapi i Vlorës* is a novel about love: the way it can determine fate and change the course of events, often for entire societies and eras.

Otello, Arapi i Vlorës

Ben Blushi

Megjithëse Otello nuk e njihte dashurinë, zemra e tij kishte masën e duhur për ta mbajtur dhe durimin e mjaftueshëm për ta pritur. Kur jetonte në shkretëtirë, ishte i vogël, kur erdhi në Venedik, ishte i vetmuar, ndërsa në Vlorë ishte i frikësuar. Në këto tri udhëtime të jetës së vet ai nuk kishte menduar për dashurinë, sepse kur je i vogël, kur je i vetmuar dhe i frikësuar mendja të shkon te gjëra më të thjeshta, si gëzimi, miqësia dhe qetësia. Por dashuria rritet bashkë me zemrën e njeriut. Si thoshte Stefan Gjika që ia kishte parë zemrën, ajo ishte më e kuqe se e njerëzve të tjerë. Megjithëse nuk do donte ta zëvendësonte me zemrën e tij, natyrisht për të mos i shtuar më shumë vuajtje vetes, Stefan Gjika mendonte se Otello ishte i gatshëm për të dashur. Prandaj një ditë e pyeti: e di ti ç'është dashuria? Për habinë e tij Otello reagoi si një burrë dhe jo si një fëmijë dhe tha po. Çfarë është, e pyeti. Otello pa nga dritarja dhe duke lëvizur qerpikët për të kujtuar fjalë për fjalë një gjë që me sa duket e dinte, tha: Dashuria është lidhja mes një burri dhe një gruaje. Kaq pak, vazhdoi doktori. edhe një motër dhe një vëlla janë të lidhur me njëri-tjetrin. Dashuria e motrës dhe e vëllait kalon nga prindërit, u përgjigj Otello. Ajo e burrit dhe e gruas kalon nga fëmijët. Stefan Gjikes iu duk sikur fliste me një kaktus shkretëtire që nuk i ka njohur kurrë gjethet, por vetëm rrënjët. Otello kishte një lule në zemër dhe një kaktus në mendje, por këtë nuk e dinte. Natyrisht në shkretëtirë atij i kishin mësuar se dashuria është një djep fëmijësh dhe në rast se burri dhe gruaje nuk bëjnë fëmijë nuk ka pse të dashurohen. Është i papërgatitur

për botën ku ka ardhur, mendoj dhe sytë e vegjël iu hapën sikur kishte gjetur një oaz në mes të rërës. Një burrë dhe një grua mund të dashurohen edhe nëse nuk bëjnë fëmijë, i tha Otellos. Po të ishte kështu, Marko Polo me gjyshen e Albano Contarinit nuk do ishin dashuruar, tha Otello. Stefan Gjika filloi të qeshte. Kaktusi i Otellos kishte nisur të pinte ujë nga duart e tij. Stefan Gjika e njihte çdo cep, çdo venë dhe çdo ind të trupit të Otellos, por kjo nuk i mjaftonte. Ai ishte një kurioz i pandreqshëm që besonte se trupi i njeriut lidhet me kokën ashtu si lidhet toka me qiellin. Nëse qielli nuk derdh ujë, toka digjet dhe nëse toka nuk lëshon avuj, qielli nuk derdh ujë. Po të mos ishte kurioz nuk do ishte bërë mjek, por lulishtar apo tregtar dhe do t'ia kushtonte vullnetin e vet sendeve dhe jo njerëzve. Ai kishte zgjedhur njerëzit duke futur çdo ditë syrin e kuriozitetit të vet në mendjet dhe trupat e tyre. Ishte marrë tre muaj me barkun e Otellos, por mendja e tij ishte po aq e errët dhe duhej ndriçuar, duke u hapur. Marko Polo dhe Muzaka u dashuruan për arsye të tjera, i tha Otellos. Ata nuk e dinin që do të bënin një fëmijë dhe ndoshta kjo ishte një gjë e papritur që i ndodh të gjithëve. Marko Polo e joshi gjyshen e Albano Contarinit duke i folur për gjëra të bukura dhe fantastike që ajo nuk i dinte. Po t'i kishte thënë se donte një fëmijë, jam i bindur që ajo do ta kishte zburar. Fëmijë mund të bësh me çdo burrë, por dashuri nuk mund të bësh me çdo grua. Dashuria lind në mendje dhe pastaj i kalon trupit si një ethe e ëmbël. Fëmija nuk është një arsye për të dashuruar, por është një arsye për të krijuar familje. Por dashuria dhe familja nuk janë e njëjta gjë. Gjyshja e Albano Contarinit kishte një familje, por nuk kishte dashuri. Arsyet e familjes janë tre: Zoti, fëmija dhe ushqimi. Por edhe arsyet e dashurisë janë tre: fjala, bukuria dhe vetmia. Njerëzit dashurohen duke folur. Marko Polo fliste më bukur se çdo burrë tjetër dhe prandaj gratë e

donin. Ai fliste me shumë gra, por u dashurua me gjyshen e Albano Contarinit sepse ajo iu duk e bukur për shijet e tij. Ndërsa ajo, me sa duket ishte e vetmuar dhe donte një lidhje që ia bënte jetën më të gëzuar dhe më të lehtë. Kjo lidhje e çonte në vende të pashkelura ku burri i saj nuk mund ta çonte. Duke kaluar nga fjala, bukuria dhe vetmia, ata u dashuruan.

Otello dëgjonte duke mbajtur dorën mbi zemër sikur donte t'i përcillte aty fjalët e doktorit. Mendimet e Stefan Gjikes ishin të ngatërruara dhe hapeshin si degët e një peme, por ai e ndiente se mund të shkonte në majë të pemës duke u kapur pas çdo dege. Po pse Zoti nuk i thotë njerëzve të dashurohen, por vetëm të bëjnë familje, e pyeti. Sepse Zoti është xheloz dhe mendon vetëm për vete, tha Stefan Gjika. Ai beson se njerëzit duhet të duan vetëm atë dhe asgjë tjetër. Zoti u kërkon njerëzve të bëjnë familje dhe të lindin fëmijë, pavarësisht nëse duhen apo jo. Në fillim ai krijoi një burrë dhe një grua që quheshin Adami dhe Eva. U tha atyre të jetonin bashkë dhe ta adhuronin, e në këmbim ai do t'u siguronte gjithçka: ushqim, qetësi, diell, paqe dhe përjetësi. Sipas tij, kjo ishte parajsja: dy njerëz që rrinë bashkë, që nuk u mungon asgjë dhe që nuk vdesin. Por kjo parajsë iu duk e varfër Evës dhe Adamit. Asaj i mungonte diçka që nuk gjendej në natyrë, nuk rrotullohej në qiell, nuk fshihej nën tokë, nuk ecte mbi bar, nuk fluturonte në erë, nuk hahej dhe nuk pihej. Kërkuan kudo, por nuk e panë asgjëkundi deri ditën që e gjetën brenda trupave të tyre. Kur ata u dashuruan, Zoti u tërbua sepse këtë gjë ua kishte ndaluar. I ndëshkoi dhe u hoqi ushqimin. Kur Eva dhe Adami u bashkuan, lindën dy djem. Lindja e tyre nuk ishte vullnet i Zotit, por fryt i dashurisë. Atëherë ai u hakmor dhe detyroi njërin nga djemtë që të vriste vëllanë. Deri atë ditë vdekja ishte diçka e panjohur. Për t'u hakmarrë ndaj dashurisë, Zoti solli vdekjen mbi tokë sepse duke mos e

kontrolluar, u ngushëllua duke i vënë kufij. Pasi dështoi me Evën dhe Adamin, ai vendosi ta pranojë lidhjen mes një burri dhe gruaje vetëm në martesë, ndërsa martesës i vuri dy kushte, asnjëra prej të cilave nuk është dashuria. Zoti është dinak dhe meqë nuk mund ta frenojë dashurinë e fut në familje dhe aty e vdes. Sipas Zotit, njerëzit duhet të martohen dhe të krijojnë familje vetëm për të bërë fëmijë dhe për t'u ushqyer. Edhe sot, si në kohët e vjetra, burri gjen ushqimin dhe gruaja e gatuan. Në Vlorë burrat dalin për të blerë, për të shitur dhe për të punuar, për të luftuar dhe për të fituar, ndërsa gratë i presin në shtëpi duke gatuar bukën dhe duke ushqyer fëmijët. Gjithandej është kështu. Kjo është familja, por jo dashuria. Dashuria nuk është nevojë për t'u ushqyer dhe as për të bërë fëmijë, ndërsa familja po. Otello merrte frymë si një çezmë. Diçka po i lëvizte nëpër trup si ujë, por burimi i tij nuk ishte në bark, por në kokë. Doktorit ia kishte shëtatur mendimet nëpër një shteg të mendjes, të cilin, me sa duket, ai e kishte, por nuk e kishte zbuluar. Jeta e tij ishte e varfër me mendime dhe e pasur me vuajtje dhe ndoshta nuk do t'i jepte kurrë kënaqësinë të krijonte një familje, të kishte një grua dhe një fëmijë, për të cilët do siguronte ushqim, si thoshte Zoti. Por ajo që po thoshte doktorit ishte një rrugë tjetër. Duke qëndruar mes Zotit dhe doktorit, Otello mendoi se dashuria ishte një ngushëllim, për të gjithë ata fatkeqë si ai që nuk kishin mundësi, kohë dhe punë për të gjetur një familje, por mund të gjenin një grua, pa u martuar. Po nëse nuk di të flasësh bukur si Marko Polo, si e gjen dashurinë, e pyeti doktorin duke u skuqur. Duke e pritur, u përgjigj Stefan Gjika. Fjala, bukuria dhe vetmia do t'i fryjnë velat e dashurisë dhe një ditë do ta sjellin në bregun tënd. njerëz si Marko Polo, bota ka pasur shumë pak. Ata numërohen me gishta. Por njerëz që dashurojnë lindin dhe vdesin çdo ditë. Madje, raca e atyre që dashurojnë është raca

që shtohet më shpejt mbi tokë sepse dashuria është sëmundje ngjitëse. Edhe të dobëtit, të shëmtuarit, të varfrit, të sëmurët, të uriturit, të verbrit, sakatët, çalamanët, jetimët, pleqtë dhe maskarenjtë mund të dashurojnë. Dashuria nuk është pronë e të pasurve, e të fortëve, e të mirëve dhe të bukurve. Bile unë mendoj se këta e kanë më vështirë të dashurojnë sepse jeta i llaston, i ngop dhe i bën përtacë. Dashuria e urren përtacinë dhe prandaj e përçmon. Unë thashë që dashuria vjen duke pritur, por jo duke mos bërë asgjë. Nuk është e thënë që të flasësh aq bukur si Marko Polo, sepse kjo është e pamundur për shumicën e njerëzve, të cilët kanë një jetë të varfër që nuk ia vlen të tregohet. Por mjafton të thuash fjalën e duhur në veshin e duhur dhe aty mund të mbijë dashuria. Mjafton të bindësh veten se një grua e shëmtuar është e bukur dhe mund ta dashurosh. Mjafton të ndihesh i vetmuar dhe të përpiqesh të mbrohesh duke u strehuar në një trup tjetër. Vetmia e zbut shpirtin e njeriut, ia mpreh mendimet dhe ia rrit nevojën për dashuri. Por megjithëse kushdo ka mundësi të gjejë dashurinë, ka shumë të tjerë që vdesin pa e takuar kurrë atë. Ka plot fatkeqë që dinë të flasin, janë të bukur dhe të vetmuar dhe megjithatë nuk kanë dashuri. Shpresoj që ti të mos jesh njëri prej tyre, tha doktori duke parë Otellon në sy.

Otello u drodh. Doktori i ishte dukur gjithmonë si një profet dhe ai i druhej fjalëve të tij. Si kishin ardhur punët, ai mund të mbetej gjithë jetën në Vlorë, pa familje. Aty nuk kishte gra të zeza që mund të martoheshin dhe të bënin fëmijë me të, ndërsa gratë e bardha nuk do t'ia hidhnin kurrë sytë sepse ato i urrenin njerëzit me lëkurë të zezë. Në fillim kishte besuar se doktori e kishte nxjerrë nga ky ankth, por në fund ai e kishte kthyer prapë aty pa i dhënë asnjë shpresë në të cilën mund të kapej, si i mbyturi pas një fjale. Mendova se po më mëson të dashuroj, mendoi, por ky nuk merret me punët e shpirtit dhe

prandaj është i pamëshirshëm. Për shumë muaj kishte pranuar ta linte trupin e tij në dorë të doktorit, por shpirtin nuk mund t'ia jepte. Ai i duhej akoma. I duhej për vete. Dhe si në çdo rast kur truri i tij nuk gjente asnjë përgjigje për fatkeqësitë që i ndodhnin, Otello u kujtua për nënën e vet. Ajo i kishte dhënë shaminë e dashurisë. Shkenca e doktorit mund ta tradhtonte, por mprehtësia e nënës nuk mund ta linte vetëm. Këmbëngulja e doktorit mund ta linte edhe pa familje, por përvoja e nënës nuk mund ta linte pa dashuri. Aq më tepër që me sa dukej, doktori nuk e kishte njohur vetë dashurinë. Ai dinte diçka nga librat, por nëna kishte dashuruar babanë dhe në këtë fushë ajo ishte pa dyshim më e ditur se doktori. Dashurinë ajo nuk e kishte mësuar nëpër libra, por në trupin e babait. Duke i menduar këto, buzët e Otellos u ngrohën dhe lëkura iu mbush me lule. Ishte koha për t'i thënë Stefan Gjikes se ai e kishte armën e dashurisë dhe në këtë luftë nuk kishte nevojë për aleatë të pastërvitur. Mua ma ka dhënë nëna shaminë e dashurisë, i tha doktorit që qeshi ftohtë, por nuk u habit. Ç'është kjo shami, e pyeti. Otellos iu zbutën sytë. E ka qëndisur një magjistare, tha. Ajo ia dha djalit të vet që dashuronte një vajzë të bukur. Shamia është e shenjtë sepse është ngjyer me zemra vajzash dhe çdo njeri bie në dashuri me njeriun që ia jep. Stefan Gjika buzëqeshi duke menduar për Komitën. Ajo do ta besonte fuqinë e shamisë dhe ndoshta do jepte gjysmën e fshatrave të Vlorës që ta merrte qoftë edhe një natë, për t'ia futur Balshës në xhep. Por ai ishte doktor dhe për këtë arsye i urrente besëtytnitë. Ai besonte se besëtytnitë janë tregues i popujve të varfër dhe primitivë, të cilët përpiqen t'i zgjidhin hallet e tyre duke djegur flokë, duke parë fundin e filxhanit, duke lexuar thonjtë e djemve të vegjël, duke lyer pasqyrat me katran apo duke numëruar vrimat e djathit të prishur. Vlora ishte e mbushur me shtriga. një herë ai i kishte

kërkuar Komitës që të burgosnin tri plaka që shkonin nëpër shtëpi dhe lexonin të ardhmen duke derdhur gjak maceje në një kazan me rroba të palara, ku fushnin vajza të vogla dhe u prisnin flokët. Por Otello kishte ardhur nga shkretëtira dhe jeta nuk i kishte dhënë ende arsye të dyshonte te Zoti, te magjitetë dhe te shtrigat. Të tre këta përbindështa kishin lindur në shtratin e varfërisë, aty ku çdo natë njeriu dhe fati përpëliten duke nxjerrë nga koka shami, vaj, gozhdë, qime, gjak, thonj, djersë, temjan dhe qirinj për t'i ushqyer. Për sa kohë që bota do ishte e varfër, Zoti, shtrigat dhe magjitetë do kishin ushqim të bollshëm.

Othello le nègre de Vlora

Ben Blushi

Traduit de l'albanais par Saverina Pasho

Othello ne connaissait pas l'amour, cependant son cœur était assez grand pour le porter et assez patient pour l'attendre. Lorsqu'il habitait le désert, il était petit, arrivé à la Sérénissime il était esseulé, alors qu'à Vlora il était apeuré. Lors de ces trois voyages de sa vie, il ne pensa jamais à l'amour, car quand on est petit, esseulé et effarouché, on songe volontiers à des choses simples comme la joie, l'amitié et la sérénité. Mais, à mesure que le cœur de l'homme grandit, l'amour grandit aussi. Stéphane Gjika, ayant vu le cœur d'Othello, dit qu'il était plus rouge que celui des autres. Stephan Gjika n'aurait pas échangé son cœur pour le sien, pour ne pas éprouver davantage de souffrances, naturellement ; mais il pensait qu'Othello était prêt pour l'amour. C'est ainsi qu'un jour il lui demanda : Sais-tu ce qu'est l'amour ? À son grand étonnement, Othello réagit comme un homme et non comme un enfant, et répondit oui.

Qu'est-ce que l'amour, alors ? demanda-t-il de nouveau. Othello regarda par la fenêtre en clignant des yeux comme pour se rappeler mot à mot quelque chose qu'il devait bien connaître, et dit : L'amour est la relation entre un homme et une femme. Et c'est tout ? continua le médecin. Il y a relation aussi entre un frère et une sœur, n'est-ce pas ? L'amour entre frère et sœur passe par les parents, répondit Othello. L'amour entre l'homme et la femme passe par les enfants. Stéphane Gjika eut alors l'impression de parler à un cactus du désert qui

n'aurait vu que ses racines, jamais les feuilles. Othello avait une fleur dans son cœur et un cactus dans sa tête, mais il l'ignorait. Dans le désert, on lui avait enseigné que l'amour est, évidemment, un berceau rempli de bébés, et que si un mari et une femme n'avaient pas d'enfants, pourquoi s'aimeraient-ils. Il n'est pas encore prêt pour ce monde, se dit le médecin et ses petits yeux se dilatèrent comme s'ils avaient trouvé une oasis au beau milieu des sables. Un homme et une femme peuvent s'aimer même s'ils n'ont pas d'enfants, dit-il à Othello. Si cela est vrai, Marco Polo et la grand-mère d'Albano Contarini ne se seraient jamais aimés, répondit Othello naïvement. Stéphane Gjika se mit à rire. Le cactus d'Othello avait commencé à boire l'eau du creux de sa main. Il connaissait chaque partie, chaque veine, chaque fibre du corps d'Othello, mais cela ne lui suffisait pas : Il était un sacré curieux qui croyait que le corps humain est relié à la tête tout comme la terre au ciel ; que, si le ciel ne versait pas d'eau, la terre brûlerait et que si la terre n'exhalait pas les vapeurs, le ciel ne verserait pas d'eau. S'il n'avait pas été aussi curieux, il ne serait pas devenu médecin, mais jardinier ou peut-être marchand et alors il aurait dédié sa conscience et ses efforts aux choses, non aux hommes. Il avait choisi les hommes et, dès lors, ses yeux fouillaient leur corps et leur esprit. Il avait passé trois mois à s'occuper du ventre d'Othello, mais son esprit était aussi sombre que son ventre et il fallait l'éclairer en l'ouvrant. Marco Polo et Muzaka aimèrent pour d'autres raisons, dit-il à Othello. Ils ignoraient qu'ils auraient des enfants et il se peut bien que ce soit une chose qui arrive à l'improviste et surprend tout le monde. Marco Polo séduisit la grand-mère d'Albano Contarini en lui racontant des choses belles et merveilleuses dont elle n'avait jamais entendu parler. Si jamais il lui avait dit vouloir un fils d'elle, je vous jure qu'elle l'aurait éconduit. On peut avoir des

enfants avec n'importe quel homme, mais on ne peut pas faire l'amour avec n'importe quelle femme. L'amour naît d'abord dans l'esprit, puis envahit le corps comme une fièvre légère et douce. Avoir des fils n'est pas une raison pour s'aimer, mais c'est une raison pour fonder une famille. L'amour et la famille ne sont pas les mêmes choses. La grand-mère d'Albano Contarini avait déjà une famille ; ce qu'elle n'avait pas, c'était l'amour. Dieu, les fils et la nourriture, voilà les trois raisons de l'existence d'une famille. Mais les raisons d'aimer également sont au nombre de trois : la parole, la beauté, et la solitude. Les humains tombent amoureux en se parlant. Marco Polo savait parler. Il parlait mieux que tout autre homme et les femmes le chérissaient. Il parlait avec beaucoup de femmes, quand bien même il tombait amoureux seulement de la grand-mère d'Albano Contarini, parce qu'il la trouvait belle et à son goût. Or, elle était, paraissait-il, trop seule et aurait aimé une relation d'amour qui rendrait sa vie plus gaie et plus facile. Cet amour l'emporterait dans des pays jamais vus où son mari n'aurait pas pu la mener. Passant par la parole, la beauté et la solitude, ils connurent l'amour.

Othello écoutait, la main sur son cœur, comme s'il voulait y porter les paroles du docteur. Les idées de Stéphane Gjika étaient confuses et se ramifiaient comme un arbre ; toutefois il savait que sautant de branche en branche, il parviendrait au faite. Alors pourquoi Dieu ne dit pas aux hommes de s'aimer au lieu de fonder une famille ? Demanda-t-il. Car Dieu est jaloux et ne pense qu'à lui-même, dit Stéphane Gjika. Il pense que les hommes ne doivent aimer que lui, et rien d'autre. Dieu exige que les hommes fondent une famille et mettent au monde des enfants, même s'ils ne s'aiment. Au commencement Dieu créa un homme et une femme qui s'appelaient Adam et Eve. Il leur dit de vivre ensemble et de l'adorer ; et en échange, Il leur

donnerait de la nourriture, du calme, du soleil et l'éternité. D'après Lui, le Paradis serait un homme et une femme qui restent ensemble, qui ne manquent de rien, et qui ne meurent pas. Or, Eve et Adam trouvèrent ce paradis bien pauvre ; il lui manquait quelque chose qui ne se trouvait pas dans la nature, qui ne tournait pas dans le ciel, qui ne se cachait pas sous la terre, ne marchait pas sur l'herbe, ne volait pas dans l'air, quelque chose qui ne se mangeait pas ni ne se buvait. Ils cherchèrent partout avant de le trouver dans leurs propres corps. Lorsqu'ils découvrirent l'amour, Dieu fut enragé, car il leur avait interdit de s'aimer. Pour les punir, il leur supprima la nourriture. Quand Eve et Adam s'unirent, Eve enfanta deux fils. La naissance de ces deux fils ne résulta pas de la volonté de Dieu ; ce fut le fruit de l'amour. Alors, Dieu se vengea et poussa l'un des garçons à tuer son frère. Jusqu'alors, la mort était quelque chose d'inconnu. C'est pour se venger de l'amour que Dieu apporta la mort sur terre : ne pouvant pas le contrôler, il se consola en lui mettant un terme. Ses desseins quant à Eve et Adam ayant échoués, il décida d'accepter l'union d'un homme et d'une femme par le mariage et imposa deux conditions au mariage aucune des deux n'étant l'amour. Dieu est bien rusé, ne pouvant empêcher l'amour, il l'introduit dans la famille et là il le tue. Selon Dieu, les hommes doivent se marier seulement pour mettre au monde des enfants et pour se nourrir. Aujourd'hui, comme dans la nuit des temps, l'homme cherche la nourriture et la femme fait la cuisine. A Vlora, les hommes sortent de chez eux pour acheter, vendre, travailler, pour faire la guerre et pour vaincre, tandis que les femmes les attendent à la maison en faisant la cuisine et en donnant à manger aux petits. Il en a toujours été ainsi, partout. Cela, c'est bien la famille, mais pas l'amour. L'amour ne naît pas des besoins de nourriture ni de la procréation, la

famille si. Othello avait une respiration bruyante comme le gargouillement d'un siphon. Il y avait quelque chose dans son corps qui remuait comme un flot d'eau dont la source n'était pas dans son ventre mais dans sa tête. Le docteur avait engagé ses pensées dans un sentier qui probablement avait toujours été là, dans son esprit, mais dont il ignorait l'existence. Sa vie étant pauvre en idées et riche en douleurs, elle ne lui réserverait peut-être jamais le plaisir d'avoir une famille, une femme et un enfant qu'il prendrait soin de nourrir, comme Dieu le dit. Mais le docteur lui indiquait un autre chemin. Se trouvant entre Dieu et le médecin, Othello envisagea l'amour comme une consolation pour tous les malheureux, ses semblables qui n'ayant ni le temps ni travail, ne pouvaient fonder une famille, mais fréquenter une femme sans l'épouser. Et si l'on n'est pas un grand orateur comme Marco Polo comment trouve-t-on l'amour? Demanda-t-il tout en rougissant. En l'attendant, répondit Stéphane Gjika. La parole, la beauté et la solitude gonflent les voiles de l'amour et un beau jour ils vont le pousser vers ton port. Le monde a connu très peu d'hommes comme Marco Polo. On peut les compter sur les doigts. Mais des gens amoureux naissent et meurent par milliers chaque jour. La race des amoureux prolifère sur terre, parce que l'amour est une maladie contagieuse. Même les faibles, les laids, les pauvres, les malades, les affamés, les aveugles, les estropiés, les boiteux, les orphelins, les vieillards et les canailles peuvent aimer. L'amour n'est pas le bien des riches, des puissants, des hommes gentils et beaux. D'ailleurs, ces derniers, à mon avis, ont plus de mal à aimer car, à force de les combler, la vie les a rendus indolents. L'amour méprise l'indolence et même l'abhorre. J'ai dit que l'amour vient un jour si l'on sait attendre, mais pas sans rien faire. Tous ne peuvent prétendre être de grands orateurs comme

Marco Polo, cela est impossible pour la plupart des gens qui, menant une vie médiocre, n'ont rien à raconter. Mais parfois, il suffit de prononcer le mot juste à l'oreille juste pour semer l'amour. Il suffit de se persuader qu'une femme laide est belle et on finit par l'aimer. Il suffit de se sentir seul pour chercher refuge dans un autre corps. La solitude attendrit l'âme de l'homme, aiguise sa pensée et accroît son besoin d'amour. Même si tout homme peut trouver l'amour, il y a en a plusieurs qui meurent sans le connaître. Il y a beaucoup de malheureux qui savent parler, qui sont beaux, seuls, et ne connaissent pas l'amour. J'espère bien que tu ne compteras pas parmi eux, dit le docteur fixant des yeux Othello.

Othello frémit de tout son corps. Le docteur lui avait toujours paru comme un prophète et il craignit ses mots. Du train où allaient les choses, il se pouvait qu'il reste toute sa vie à Vlora, sans famille. Dans cette ville, il n'y avait pas de femmes noires qui pourraient l'épouser et avoir des enfants avec lui ; quant aux femmes blanches, elles ne daigneraient même pas lui jeter un coup d'œil, tant elles détestaient les noirs. Au début, il avait cru que le docteur le sauverait de cette angoisse, mais il se rendait compte qu'il était toujours au point de départ, tel un noyé sans aucun espoir où se cramponner. J'ai cru qu'il m'enseignerait à aimer, se dit-il, quelle méprise grossière ! Il ne s'est jamais occupé de l'âme, voilà pourquoi il est si cruel. Il lui avait abandonné son corps durant des mois entiers, mais il ne lui livrerait pas son âme. Son âme lui appartenait. Il en avait encore besoin. Et comme il ne lui venait à l'esprit aucune explication à ses malheurs, à son habitude, il pensa à sa mère. Elle lui aurait donné le mouchoir de l'amour. Si la science du docteur pouvait le trahir, la sagacité de sa mère ne l'abandonnerait jamais. La persévérance du docteur pouvait le priver de famille, alors que l'expérience de sa mère ne le priverait pas

d'amour. D'autant plus que le docteur, apparemment, n'avait jamais connu l'amour. Il savait quelque chose sur l'amour grâce à ses lectures, tandis que sa mère en savait long pour avoir aimé son père. L'amour, elle ne l'avait pas appris dans les livres, elle l'avait découvert dans le corps de son père. Songeant à tout cela, Othello senti ses lèvres se réchauffer et sa peau se couvrir de fleurs. Le temps était venu de dire à Stéphane Gjika qu'il disposait de l'arme de l'amour et que dans ce combat, il n'avait pas besoin d'alliés inexpérimentés. Ma mère m'a donné le mouchoir de l'amour dit-il au docteur qui fit un rictus, mais ne fut pas surpris. Et c'est quoi, ce mouchoir ? interrogea le docteur. Les yeux d'Othello se radoucirent. C'est un mouchoir brodé par un une sorcière, répondit-il. Elle l'a donné à son fils afin qu'il tombât amoureux d'une belle fille. Ce mouchoir est sacré, car il est teinté du cœur des jeunes filles. Tout jeune homme tombe amoureux de la fille à laquelle il en fait cadeau. Stéphane Gjika songea à Komita et sourit. Elle aurait cru au pouvoir surnaturel du mouchoir et donné, peut-être, la moitié de sa fortune, pour l'avoir ne fût-ce que pour une seule nuit. Elle aurait glissé le mouchoir dans la poche de Balsha. Mais Stéphane Gjika, lui, était médecin et il ne supportait pas les superstitions. Il jugeait que les pratiques superstitieuses étaient le signe des peuplades pauvres et primitives qui s'évertuent à résoudre leurs problèmes en brûlant des cheveux, en interrogeant le marc de café, en lisant les taches sur les ongles des petits garçons, en enduisant les miroirs de suie ou en comptant les trous dans du fromage rance. Vlora était pleine de sorcières. Une fois, il avait demandé à Komita d'arrêter trois vieilles femmes qui passaient de maison en maison et prédisaient l'avenir en déversant du sang de chat dans un chaudron plein de linge sale où l'on introduisait des petites filles à qui on coupait les cheveux. Othello venait du désert

et la vie ne lui avait encore fourni aucune raison de ne pas croire en Dieu, en les sorcières et aux sortilèges. Ces monstres sont nés sur le lit de la pauvreté, là où chaque nuit l'homme et son destin se retournent et inventent des mouchoirs, des huiles, des clous, des poils, du sang, des ongles, de la sueur, de l'encens et des bougies pour les entretenir. Tant que le monde sera pauvre, Dieu, les sorcières et les maléfices s'empiffreront de nourriture.



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Milen Ruskov

Възвишение (2011)

Summit

Publishing House **Janet 45**

Biography

Milen Ruskov (b.1966) is a Bulgarian writer and translator living in Sofia. He graduated in Bulgarian philology at Sofia University in 1995. After that, he was a PhD student in linguistics at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Since 2001, he has worked as a freelance translator from English for various publishers.

He has written three novels: *Summit* (2011) was awarded the Golden Century Award from the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, the Hristo G. Danov National Award for fiction, and the Elias Canetti Award for fiction. *Thrown into Nature* (2008), about the introduction of tobacco to Europe by the Spanish physician doctor Nicolas Monardes of Seville, was awarded the Bulgarian Novel of the Year Prize. And *Little Encyclopaedia of Mysteries* (2004) tells the story of some European occult traditions of the Renaissance and was awarded the Bulgarian Prize for Debut Fiction.

Synopsis

In Turkish-ruled Bulgaria, year 1872, a feverish period of revolutionary committees, raids on Turkish cash-convoys, brigand freedom fighters and a quest for knowledge and identity, known in history as the Bulgarian Revival. The pretentious pomp of revolutionary ideals is filtered through the consciousness of two lads, the earnest semi-educated Gicho and his credulous kleptomaniac companion Assen. They set out armed with guns and books from the town of Kotel to join a band of brigand-revolutionaries in the mountains. Their characters reflect a mixture of down to earth brigand ruthlessness and revolutionary idealism, while their adventures form a rich comic pageant, enlivened by Gicho's well-meaning attempts to educate his companion.

The narrative is conveyed in Gicho's words – a rich, crude Renaissance language which demands to be read out loud. His character combines a modern curiosity about the wider world with traditional peasant instincts. The resulting internal conflict is comic and revelatory in turns. The novel daringly blows away all the patriotic clichés normally associated with this serious subject, without underestimating the desperate heroism of the times.

Възвишение

Milen Ruskov

На следващия ден в град К. отседнахме в хана да ся наспим. А там, брате, един френец. Кой го знай тоз френец какъв вятър го е запилял насам. Ханджията разправя, че бил някой си инджинерин. Гледам го френецът – един строен такъв человек, с европейски опнати дрехи, сако сложил дълго доколени, на врат му боямба (вратовръзка) златочерна на раета, бомбе си в ръка държи, панталони му и те на раета сивочерни, чепички му лъщят на слънцето. Брате! Изискана работа! Красиво е да си европец, туй ще ви река! Като го гледам така, и на мен бая ми ся поревна – викам си, желал бих и аз тъй да ся обличам, да ся издокарам тъй, като человек сред човеците, а не като азиатский някой поданник, Абдул Азизу грозний подопечник. Ех, рекох си, живот е несправедлив.

Аз ся осведомих и наинформирах (как ся туй зове по французки), че тоз френец работел за аустрийската так називаема железница, проверявал откъде може тя да мине. Ноця знам ли го що прави, но деня ходи да обикаля околние пространства, проучваейки земемерно, откъде, как разправят тукашни местни хора селяци, ще минава так називаемата железница. Аз таквоз нещо никогаш не съм виждал. За Асенчо хич даже не ма и питай. Ш'та шамаросам, заде ми задаваш глупави въпроси и ми ценно революционно време губиш. Ибах та! Мисли малко!

Та значи тоз французой, за кой ви ся издума отгоре, ся помещава на вторий кат при нас, в отсрещний край на пътеката. И гледай Съдба как разпореди, че като ся

напахме ний с Асенча, ставам аз в ранния следобед и отидох долу на двора да пия вода от чешмата и да зема нещо от гостилницата, и го гледам френеца насреща ми, прибира ся чияка и като ся разминавахме, дружески ми кимна и бомбе си от глава надигна. Аз ся след няколко стъпки бързо врътнах да видя где ще отиде, и го видях че ся качва по стълбите и после чух врата да ся затвара – явно си в стая отишъл. Аче ся замислих и отидох, та пих вода, и като ся връщах, заслушах ся тъй пред вратата му да видим дали ще чуя нещо – тишина, брате, чиякът спили, кой го знай. Като ся прибрах в наша си одая, рекох на Асенчо:

– Асенчо – рекох, – иди, братко, долу и запрегни Дяда Ювана, да сме готови немедленно да тръгнем.

– Защо? – учуди ся Асенчо.

– Бе – викам – действуй, не рассуждай! После ш’ти обяснявам.

– Ама защо? – кай.

Та ся принудих да му обясня. Той слезе долу, пък аз ся замислих за френеца. Гледай къде го Съдба зафърлила. Железници да прокарва. Инджинерин человек! Туй не е проста работа. Аз железница може да не съм виждал, но съм чувал какво тя представлява. Железний, кай, кон прогреса! Бре, ибах ва! Тоз ми мяза на человек, що би яздил железний кон. Язди, и с бомбе си народ поздравява.

А ей ти го прочия и Асенчо, що нашый кон язди, върна ся и вика: „Готово”, кай. Аз минах един път по пътеката, като ся заслушах пред вратите дали ще чуя някакво движение вътре, да видим хора дали има, но нищо не чух. По дължко ся застоях пред вратата на френеца и там нещо

чух, някакво движение ми ся счу, ил' затварянето на някоя си вратничка на долап, такова някакво нещо.

После ся върнах, зех другаря си Колта и другите си багажи и с бърза стъпка с Асенчо влязохме в стаята на френеца. Ти си представяш, че той бая ся изненада. Стои в средата на одаята и ни гледа учудено. Аз отидох, та го фанах приятелски за лакътят.

– Дай – викам, – друже, туй сако. И бомбе някое, ако имаш.

А той ся дърпа и говори нещо, но не можеш му разбра. На французки нещо. Нещо като „жужу-мужу, жуа-муа, он-бон”. Но една дума му ясно разбрах – „терибль, терибль”. Не знам що ще рече. Ще видя после в речника на Богоров. Но мисълта ми е – не му ся разбира, европейский человек. Аз си дръпнах кесията и извадих от нея една жълтица, като му обясних, доколкото можах, че повече не можем му даде, защо тия пари ни трябат за революцията. И като казах това, подадох му жълтицата и зех да му свалям сакото. А той:

– Он-бон – нещо, – жуа-муа – и бърка в кесията, още жълтици иска.

– Е, не – викам, – ще прощаваш, но повече не можем ти даде. Туй е за нашта революция. – И ся надигнах към него, приближих си главата до него, белким ма разбере, и му викам: – Революция, революция.

А той пак:

– Терибль, терибль.

– Аче туй нали е френцуска дума, и нея ли не разбираш? – разперих ръце аз. – В чудо ся видях от тебе, братко!

И тогаз мен ма осени тая, да не кажа, блестяща мисъл, и викам на Асенча:

– Я дай „Старината”!

А и на него бързо му сече пипето и ся веднага сети, че аз имам под вид списанието на Раковскога, „Българската старина”, чийто единът брой аз си носех в торбата. И бръкна Асенчо, та ми го даде. А аз го отворих в самото начало, дето е уводът, и показах на френеца онуй място, където пише:

„Ето що говори о тому един учен:

La philosophie Indienne est tellement vaste, que tous les systèmes de philosophie s’y rencontrent, qu’elle forme un monde philosophique, et qu’on peut dire à la lettre que l’histoire de la philosophie de l’Inde est un abrégé de l’histoire entière de la philosophie.”

А туй ще рече, както отдолу ся е пояснило:

„Индийското мъдрословие е толкова обширно, штото сичките системи мъдрословия ся срещат в него; то съставля един цял свят мъдрословия и можи ся каза буквально, чи повестността Индийскога мъдрословия е едно съкращение на цялата повестност мъдрословия.”

Ей туй му показах на френеца, на неговия си язык хем написано, и не е нещо страшно, да речеш, ами за мъдрословието мисъл, а той ма гледа, като че ли е кон с три крака видял, или не знам си що. Аз му викам:

– Ний с добро идим, разбираш ли? Разбираш ли? Хабер алмак?

А той само маха с ръка и нещо бързо-бързо блещореве, жуа-муа, не знам що си, че зе и да ся дърпа да излиза, та аз трябаше да го придържам за ревера.

– Ей – викам му на Асенча, – ний сме попаднали на най тъпия френец в цяло Френско.

А Асенчо вика:

– Ох – кай, – с тоз чияк не можем са разбра. Поради язиците голяма разлика има и полное недоумение.

Но мен вече ми узря мисълта и му рекох:

– Ще зема – викам – да го чукна по главата с тъпото на пищовът, че да ся свърши работата. Той иначе не ни разбира, чиякът.

А през туй време френецът бърка в кесията и си сочи сакото и нещо говори – он-мон, туй-онуй.

Е, пресегнах ся аз и го чукнах с приклада по челото, като внимавах да го не нараня, а той ся дръпна назад и изпищя нещо, но не падна, понеже твърде леко го бях ударил. Наложих ся втори път да го чукна, вече по ячко, и той падна на земята в безсъзнание, като чувал някой. А Асенчо ся наведе над него, разглежда го и вика:

– Бачо Гичо, ти да го не повреди чияка? Нидей тый!

– Нищо му няма! – викам. – Туй е европейски чияк. Ще ся оправи той. Но иначе немаше как да ся разберем с него, нали виждаш. Ще полежи тый и ще ся оправи.

Не че бях чак пък съвсем сигурен, но какво да река?

После ний свалихме на френеца сакото, панталонките с раетата свалихме, а тоже ризата. Боямбата и бомбето видях на една окачалка провесени, та ги зех и тях. Накрая и чепичките свалихме. Другите неща как да е, панталоните

като ся леко подгънат, направо ми лепват, га че ли някой терзия ги е нарочно за мен по мярка правил, обаче обувките му на мене са ми леко големшки, и туй то. Чияляк малко по едър от нас пада. Туй е тъй, защо е той от германските народи. Те са едри хора, снажни и левенти.

– Тук ний нещо ще трябва да сложим – викам му на Асенчо,
– да запълниме петите.

Той зе да ся оглежда, горкий, па изведнаж лице му светна, и вика:

– Дай да изтръбушиме възглавниците, па да пълниме.

Ний зехме по една възглавница и ги изтръбушихме, но после аз ся сетих, та му викам „Бе защо са ни на нас две, тя и една стига”, и едната я оставихме настрани, а от другата зехме перушина и напълнихме тъй-тъй където трябва, и ми лепнаха тия чепици като изляти направо!

После аз ся поколебах малко, пък оставих две жълтици на масичката. Ибах та, туй са двесте гроша! Ако не стигат за сичките тез дрехи, то почти за сичките сигур стигат. Иначе ще значи, че не мож’ да ся ти пазариш. А като не можеш да ся пазариш, къде си в тоз свят тръгнал! Пък трябва и да ся има под вид, че туй са носени дрехи, употребени. Двесте гроша може и в повече да дойдат била. Но хайде, от мен да мине, и да е жив и здрав Араба-Конашкий проход.

Освен туй и мои си дрехи внимателно сгънах, та оставих, ако няма що да облече той на първо време, макар че никак не ми ся вярва той да няма друг чифт дрехи. Но все пак, че знае ли чияляк. Да не ходи по вътрешни гащи из улиците. Само кундурите си задържах и навуцата, ако ми трябват за Балкана, едно-друго.

После го погледнах тъй френеца, един вид да ся на ум с него сбогувам, а той си лежи в безсъзнание, уста си леко отворил, га че ли спи като бебе невинно, но сърдце му тупка, как аз на шия му проверих, ще ся оправи.

– Е – рекох, – ако има нещо, прощавай!

– Ако има нещо, няма нищо – обади ся и Асенчо.

След туй ний вече излязохме от там.

Summit

Milen Ruskov

Translated from the Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

Context: The novel is set in 1872. Revolutionary committees have been set up throughout Bulgarian lands to prepare the people for revolution against their Turkish oppressors. It is a time of passionate self-education – known in history as the Bulgarian Revival. Two lads, Gicho and Assen, armed with guns and books, set out from Kotel to join a band of brigand-revolutionaries in the mountains. Their characters reflect a mixture of down to earth ruthlessness and idealism. Their waves of extreme optimism and pessimism speak to an ambivalent contemporary Bulgarian consciousness – resulting from still feeling exiled on the outskirts of Europe.

Next day in the town of K. we were stopping at an inn to sleep. And there's a Frenchie there, boys. Who can tell what wind has blown him here? The innkeeper makes out he's some kind of engineer. I give the Frenchie the once over – he's a well-made bloke, with proper European clothes, a long coat to his knees, and a tie round his neck, striped gold and black, he's carryin' a bowler hat in his hand, his trousers are pinstriped in silver and grey, his shoes are shining like the sun. Friends! It's real elegance! It's not half fine being a European – I tell you truly. When I'm looking at him, like this, my eyes are hanging out – I say to myself, I'd like to be dressed like him, up to the nines, so I'd come out looking like a human being in front of other human beings, not like some grubby oriental vassal, ruled by Abdul Aziz the Sultan. A-ah, I say to myself, life's not fair.

I learnt – or informed myself as they say in French lingo – that this Frenchie worked for the so-called Austrian Railways, finding out where they could push out the line. I don't know what he does at night, but by day he's going round all the surrounding districts, finding out the lie of the land, for

the long-awaited railway line. I have never seen such a thing in my life. And don't even ask about Assen. I'll slap you for asking me stupid questions and wasting my valuable revolutionary time. Don't you have a head on your shoulders? Then use it, man!

And so this Frenchie that I was telling you about, is rooming on the top floor, same as us, on the other side of the corridor. And look how Fate sets things up that after we slept, me and Assen, I go to the yard to drink water and get something from the saddle bag and I see the Frenchie in front of me. He's coming back, and as we pass, he gives me a nod for fellowship and lifts his hat off his head. After a few steps on, I turn around quick to see where he's going and I see he's going up the stairs and afterwards I hear a door close. So he's gone to his room. Then I have a think and I go and drink water, then I come back up and I listen through the door to see if I can hear anything. There's silence, boy. I can't tell if the bloke's asleep, who knows? When I come back to our room, I say to Assen: "Assen," I say, "go downstairs and harness up Granddaddy Yovan so we're ready for a quick getaway."

"Harness up the horse? Why?" Assen wonders.

"Look boy!" I say, "I want action, not a debate. I'll explain later."

"But why?"

So I'm forced to spell it out. He goes downstairs, while I think about the Frenchie. Look where Fate has cast him up. Pushing through the railway. The man's an engineer. That's not simple stuff. I may not have seen a railway, but I know what it is. Railway, my friend, the iron horse of progress. Now that's something impressive, isn't it? Iron horse! And this man – he could very well be riding the iron horse, this kind of man! Riding and lifting his hat to folk.

And I'm just cogitating on this when Assen, who rides our horse, comes back and says, "Ready mate." I step down the corridor and listen in front of the doors – to hear any movement inside, to see if there are people there, but I don't hear anything. I tarry a little longer in front of the Frenchie's door and then I do hear something, some sort of movement, maybe the closing of a cupboard door – or somethin' like that.

Then I come back, pick up my trusty Colt pistol and other stuff and alongside Assen we step into the Frenchie's room. You can imagine, he is pretty surprised. He's standing in the middle of the room and looking amazed. I step up and grab his elbow, friendly-like.

"Hand over that jacket, friend," I say, "and the hat if you got it."

And he pulls back and says something you can't understand. It's Frenchie lingo. Something like "juju muju, jwa, mwa; on bon." But there was one word I got: "terrible, terrible." I don't get what it means, I'll have to look in Bogorov's dictionary later. But what I mean to say is this European bloke can't make himself understood. I pulled out my purse and took out a golden coin while I explained to him, as far as I could, that we couldn't give him anymore because the money was needed for the revolution. And as I said this I gave him the coin and start pulling off his jacket. And he's going: "On bon... something... Jwa mwa." And he's poking at the purse, wanting more gold coins.

"Oh no!" I say. "Sorry, but I can't give you any more. This is for our revolution." And I stand up straight in front of him and bring my face up close to his so he'll understand and I shout "Revolution, Revolution." And he's saying "terrible, terrible," over an' over again.

“Any fool knows revolution is a Frenchie word and you don’t even understand that?” I spread out my arms. “I’m astonished by you, boy!”

And it was then I am struck by what you might call a brilliant idea. And I shout to Assen: “Hand over *Old Times*.” He is quick on the uptake, and immediately guesses that I mean Rakovski’s magazine *Bulgarian Old Times* – I had the one and only issue in my bag. He rummages and gives it me. And I open it at the very beginning, where there is a preface, and I point out the place to the Frenchie where it’s written.

“Here’s what a scholar has written in a book.”

‘La philosophie Indienne est tellement vaste, que tous les systèmes de philosophie s’y rencontrent, qu’elle forme un monde philosophique, et qu’on peut dire à la lettre que l’histoire de la philosophie de l’Inde est un abrégé de l’histoire entière de la philosophie.’

“And, in other words, like it’s translated underneath.”

‘Indian Philosophy is so vast, that all philosophical approaches meet in it; it represents an entire philosophical world and it can be said that the history of Indian philosophy is precisely a summation of the whole history of philosophy.’

E-ey, I’m showing this to the Frenchie, it’s even written in his own lingo, and it isn’t anything terrible, you’ll say, just philosophical stuff, and he’s lookin’ at me like I’m a horse with three legs or I don’t know what. I say to him: “We’ve come with good intentions, boy, don’t you get it? Get it? You nincompoop.”

And he just waves and mumbles something fast – “jwa, mwa” – no idea what. He even makes as if to leave and so I have to grab his lapel. “Ey,” I shout out to Assen. “We landed on the stupidest Frenchie in all France.”

But Assen says, “How you think we’re going to understand each other what with all the differences in the lingo, boy?”

But I have wiped out all thoughts about this from my head. “Here’s what we do,” I say. “We’ll knock him on the head with this here pistol-butt and be finished with all this. The bloke doesn’t understand us anyway.”

And all the time the Frenchie’s prodding my purse and pointing at his jacket and saying something, Oh mon...” this an’ that.

Well, I stretch out and I give him a crack on the forehead with the gun-stock, taking care not to wound him, and he pulls back and screams out something, but he doesn’t fall, because I tapped him too gently. I have to give him another crack, this time harder, and he falls, knocked senseless to the floor like some sack of something. And Assen jumps up over him, looks and cries: “Uncle Gicho! If you haven’t damaged the bloke. I surely hope not.”

“He’s perfectly all right!” I say. “He’s a European bloke. He’ll soon mend. There was no other way to make ourselves understood, don’t you see. He’ll lie down a little and he’ll get better.”

Not that I was really sure, but what can I say?

Afterwards we pull off the Frenchie’s jacket and pin striped trousers, the shirt as well. I see a cravat and hat hanging off a hook and I grab them. Finally, we take off his shoes. The trousers, after you turn them up a little, fit me perfectly, as though some tailor has measured me up exact, but the shoes are a little big for me and that’s it. The bloke’s a bit bigger than us. That’s the way of it because he’s from the German folk. They’re big people, high and mighty.

“We need somethin’ to put here,” I say to Assen, “to stuff the heels.”

He's lookin' about, poor boy, but suddenly his face lights up and he says, "Let's rip the stuff out of these pillows."

We each take a pillow and start guttin' it, but afterwards it hits me, so I say "Boy, why we doin' two when one'll do for us." And we leave one to the side and we take the feathers from the other and push them in here and there, as needed, and so my feet stick to the shoes like they've been poured into them.

Then I ponder a bit, and I leave two gold pieces on the table. Boy, it's 200 pence. If it doesn't cover all the clothes it must be almost there. Otherwise it would mean that you can't haggle, and if you can't haggle where are you goin' in this world? You are pretty much finished, boy, if you can't haggle. Anyway, you have to bear in mind, these are used clothes, they've been worn. Two hundred pennies may be even too much. But never mind! It's from the money we lifted off the Turkish tax-wagon in the Arabakonak pass. A fast buck.

Then I carefully fold up my clothes and leave them, in case he hasn't got anything else to put on, though I doubt a bloke like him wouldn't have a spare set of clothes. But who can tell? We don't want him wanderin' the streets in his underpants. I just keep my heavy boots and stockings, I might be needing them in the mountains.

After that, I look at the Frenchie, as though to bid him farewell, so to speak, but he's just lying, spark out, his mouth open, like he's sleeping the sleep of an innocent baby. But his heart is beating as I check his chest; he'll be right as rain.

"Ey," I say, "If there was anything, forgive us!"

"If there's anything, there's nothing," Assen pipes up.

Then we left the room.



© Anna Nadvornikova

Jan Němec

Dějiny světla (2013)

A History of Light

Publishing House **Host**

Biography

Jan Němec, born in 1981 in Brno, received his MA degree in Religious and Social Studies from Masaryk University in Brno, and in Theatre Dramaturgy from the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Brno. He wrote a book of poems *První život (First Life, 2007)*, followed by a book of short-stories *Hra pro čtyři ruce (Playing Four Hands, 2009)* and a biographical novel about renowned photographer František Drtikol, called *Dějiny světla (A History of Light, 2013)*. Němec works as an editor for the monthly literary magazine *Host*, and as a dramaturgist for the ČT Art TV channel.

Synopsis

Dějiny světla (A History of Light), is a novel about the photographer František Drtikol.

Have you ever wondered what a story written by a beam of light would be like? Firstly, the story would be ordinary but the course of events extraordinary; secondly, its hero would be a photographer, a guardian of light; thirdly, naturally, it would be full of shadow. So who was František Drtikol? A dandy from a small mining town, a world-famous photographer whose business went bankrupt, a master of the nude who never had much luck with women, a mystic and a Buddhist who believed in communism, a man of many contradictions. The conception of Jan Němec's extensive novel is very unusual for contemporary Czech prose – fresco-like, it is an artistic and spiritual *Bildungsroman* that covers over half a century, bringing to life the silver mines of Příbram, Jugendstil Munich and First Republic Bohemianism, with naked models wandering along the lines and light merging unobserved with knowledge...

Dějiny světla

Jan Němec

Muž s kulatým obličejem a krátkými vlasy se dotkne středu brýlí nad kořenem nosu a rozhlédne se po skupině devíti chlapců. Pak říká: Mé jméno je Georg Heinrich Emmerich a vítám vás v Učebním a výzkumném ústavu pro fotografii.

V jedné staré knize jsem narazil na rytinu, na níž mudrc přijímal vnuknutí skrze paprsky světla. A skutečně, takových vnuknutí jsou dějiny plné, poznání bez světla je nemyslitelné a samo světlo se stalo jeho symbolem. Zvláště v posledních stáletích jsme se naučili krotit ho a zapřahat do velkých vědeckých úkolů. Teleskop a mikroskop rozšířily hranice světa oběma směry a odhalily rozměry skutečnosti, o nichž se nikomu ani nesnilo. Náš krajan Wilhelm Röntgen nedávno objevil paprsky, které procházejí hmotou. A rovněž v oblasti umění a zábavy existuje nespočet pomůcek a přístrojů, které využívají souhry světla a lidského oka: připomínám namátkou laternu magiku, *cameru obscuru* a *cameru lucidu*, dioramata, kineoskop, praxinoskopy nebo kouzelné bubny. — Pánové, příkladů bych mohl vršit mnoho, ale je to snad zbytečné, vůbec totiž nepochybuji, že si uvědomujete, proč jste tady: fotografie není ničím jiným než další fascinující manifestací toho, co dokáže světlo v rukou člověka. Tentokrát jsme ovšem nerozšířili prostor jako pomocí teleskopu nebo mikroskopu, ale zastavili jsme čas. Konečně dokážeme zvěčnit prchavost existence, jak se o to před námi pokoušely celé generace básníků.

Emmerich pohlédne z okna a rozepte si knoflíčky u saka. Je mu teprve jednatřicet let, ale na hlavě už má kouty. Když se pohledem vrátí zpět do učebny, přeběhne mu přes rty

takřka neznatelný úsměv. Někteří jste v Mnichově teprve pár dní, říká, a tak možná nevíte, že tu existuje bohémská čtvrť jménem Schwabing; určitě tamní hospody brzy poznáte. Před pár dny jsem tam byl navštívit jednoho malíře a náhoda tomu chtěla, že už hostil dalšího svého známého, básníka. A když se ten mladý muž dozvěděl, že jsem fotograf, vyznal se mi: Jednou jedinkrát bych si přál držet v ruce přímo paprsek světla a psát jím — jednou jedinkrát! Jméno onoho mladého muže vám prozradit nemohu, ale velmi dobře mu rozumím. Fotografie má svůj patos, ostatně část z něj se obráží přímo v etymologii — termín fotografie se skládá z řeckých výrazů pro světlo a psaní. Lze říci, že jako fotografové zapisujeme svět světlem. A naším cílem během následujících dvou let nebude nic menšího než vás naučit krasopisu, chcete-li světelné kaligrafii.

Ovšem hned na začátku musíme vyjasnit jednu věc — vyjasnit, všimněte si, že nás světlo neopouští. Podobně jako hudba a literatura, ani fotografie nevznikla jako umění, ale jako zábava, avšak na rozdíl od hudby a literatury není dosud za umění obecně považována. Vy jste se však ocitli ve škole, která si klade za cíl naučit vás právě fotografickému umění. Jak vás můžeme učit něčemu, co snad ani neexistuje?

Podívejme se na to blíže: Zdá se, že hlavním důvodem, proč se na fotografii pohlíží svrchu, je její technický a chemický charakter. Má se za to, že jednotlivé snímky jsou mechanickými otisky skutečnosti, fotografický proces údajně neposkytuje žádný prostor k tvůrčímu zásahu. Francouzský básník Charles Baudelaire tvrdil, že fotografy se stávají leda líní a neobdaření malíři, protože fotografie není schopna imaginativního vyjádření vyšších myšlenek a citů a může být nanejvýš velmi skromným služebníkem umění a věd, podobně jako tiskařství nebo stenografie.

Dovolte, abych vám něco ukázal. Předvedu vám dvě díla, která obvykle visí na stěně v mé kanceláři. Emmerich uchopí obraz položený dosud sklem k desce stolu a říká: Toto je první z nich — reprodukce známého Baudelairova portrétu od malíře Émila Deroye. Nato zvedne druhý obraz. A zde vidíte rovněž básníkův portrét, pořízený ovšem Étienne Carjatem ve slavném Nadarově fotografickém ateliéru. Dám vám čas, abyste se na tyto dvě podobizny pozorně podívali.

Ponechme teď stranou, pokračuje po chvíli, že prsty pravé ruky působí na Deroyově malbě poněkud křečovitě. Zřejmě se mnou budete souhlasit, že míra básníkovy přítomnosti je na těchto dvou portrétech nesrovnatelná. Obraz snad výrazněji zachycuje vidění malíře, ale co se uměleckého účinu týče, je to spíš k neprospěchu věci: osobnost portrétovaného je tu zatlačena do pozadí pod vrstvu barvy a za tahy štětce, jako by tu jedna subjektivita soupeřila s druhou. Baudelaire označil fotografii za skromného služebníka umění a věd, ale slovo, které použil, má ještě jiný význam: pokorný. Připomenu si to vždy, když se pozorně zadívám na Carjatův snímek: je pokorným, ale ve své prostotě současně neobyčejně mocným zachycením básníkovy osobnosti. Jen se podívejte na ty oči unaveného honičího psa, který kdesi v dálce stále cítí lovnou zvěř. A který malíř by si dovolil nakreslit lidské rty tak rovné, že mohou vyslovit i tu nejnežádanější pravdu?

Ano, jako technický a chemický proces je fotografie pouhým prostředkem a služebníkem; rovněž slovo lze užít různě, to je každému jasné. Předě dvěma lety byli zde v Německu odsouzeni Max Priester a Willy Wilcke za to, že se vloupali do pokoje, kde jako velryba na mořském dně skonala Otto von Bismarck, a pořídili několik snímků, které se pak snažili prodat tisku. Byla z toho velká kauza a soud, samotné snímky nebyly oficiálně

zveřejněny. Ve stejném roce pořídil italský fotograf Secondo Pia první snímky Turínského plátna, které záhy obletěly svět. Legendami opředený artefakt mohl konečně spatřit každý. Šokovaný Pia navíc zjistil, že otisk těla na plátně je de facto negativ, protože teprve na skutečném fotografickém negativu tvář vystoupí ve své lidské podobě. — Dva mrtví muži, dva snímky z téhož roku. Nabídl jsem vám tyto příklady, abych ukázal, že to, čím fotografie je, a případně také není, se mění podle toho, v čích rukou a v jakém kontextu se ocitne.

Nad hojnými karikaturami a kritikami v novinách, jež fotografii zesměšňovaly, než si ji samy osvojily, můžeme dnes mávnout rukou. Závažnější je, že naši odpůrci pocházejí často jako v případě Baudelaira přímo z řad umělců. Averse mnoha malířů vůči fotografii je všeobecně známa, stejně jako nenaplňené proroctví z doby jejího vynálezu, že malířství přivodí smrt. Ale stalo se něco jiného a já si na tomto místě neodpustím poznamenat, že vztah našich malířů k fotografii připomíná často vztah váženého muže k vydržované milence. Veřejně ji zapírají, ale v soukromí nejenže ji obdivují, ale nechávají se jí mocně inspirovat: běžně ji používají místo skicáře, hledají s její pomocí originální kompozici nebo gesto a jednou jsem dokonce viděl malíře, jak pomocí zvětšovacího přístroje promítá negativ přímo na plátno, na něž maluje.

Pánové, pro začátek vám tato škola nabízí své heslo: *Ars una, species mille*. Umění existuje jedno, ale způsobů je na tisíc. Pokud nerozumíte, pomohu vám přirovnáním: Jako může jeden jediný zdroj světla vrhat nekonečné množství stínů podle toho, jaký předmět před něj postavíte, tak se záměr skutečného tvůrce může manifestovat v nekonečném množství podob podle prostředků, jakých užívá.

Nechápejte mě ovšem špatně: vůbec vám nechci podsouvat, že fotografie je uměním za všech okolností. Nic mi není vzdálenější než považovat všechny ty bezduché duplikáty skutečnosti, které zaplavují svět, za umělecká díla. Víte, s jakým sloganem zakladatel firmy Kodak George Eastman právě dobývá americký trh? You press the button — We do the rest. Vy zmáčknete spoušť — my uděláme zbytek. Zdá se, že právě začíná éra zbytečných fotografií, takzvaných momentek, které odpůrcům umělecké fotografie poskytnou nekonečné množství levné munice.

Pánové, začal jsem tuto uvítací řeč slovy, že před sta miliony let umožnily chemické vlastnosti světla vznik života na této planetě. Ale teprve před šedesáti lety člověk objevil, jak pomocí chemických vlastností světla život na této planetě zachytit dříve nemyslitelným způsobem. Teprve před šedesáti lety světlo objevilo možnost, jak zaznamenat své vlastní dílo. Lze to vyjádřit i tak, že se naplnilo proroctví našeho velkého filosofa Georga Wilhelma Friedricha Hegela: světový duch skrze člověka opět novým způsobem rozpoznává sám sebe.

Buďte dobrými pastýři světla.

• • •

Mnichov na přelomu století — málokteré evropské město má tak skvělou pověst. Prst pro Prsten Nibelungův! Athény na Isaře! Město piva a umění! Město lidu a mládí! Nejsevernější město Itálie! Zatímco Berlín úpí pod vilémovským diktátem, v Mnichově dějiny dosud spí, osud mátožně vyčkává. Přijíždějí sem rozjívění Američané, zádumčiví Rusové, rafinovaní Francouzi, národy balkánské. Co studuješ? je první otázka, při níž sedá pěna na pivě. Jsem malíř! Dělán pro Simpla. Budu slavným fotografem!

Ty taky? Já taky! Zum Wohl!

Učební a výzkumný ústav pro fotografii sídlí v nízké budově na Rennbahnstrasse. Je odtud slyšet supění a skřípání vlaků, které brzdí před budovou Hlavního nádraží směrem na severovýchod, hned za rušnou Strasse Bayer, kde se dají koupit orientální sladkosti, nábytek, kubánské doutníky i místní holky. Směrem na jih se po minutě chůze ocitneš na Bavaria Ringu, okrouhlé ulici s výstavními vilami, která lemuje rozlehlou Terezinu louku. Současně se začátkem školního roku na ni dosedne Oktoberfest. Thomas Mann poznamenal, že typický místní umělec je rozený pořadatel slavností a karnevalů, a není lepší příležitost, jak se o tom přesvědčit. Nad Terezinou loukou se tyčí monstrózní socha Bavarie a soucitně shlíží na své děti, jimž teče pivo po bradě.

Všude ruch a vzruch, nevíš kam dřív s očima. Přijel jsi z malého provinčního města a Mnichov ti začíná roztáčet spirálu v hlavě — roztáčet a žhavit. Kromě běžného jarmarečnického zboží tu má svůj stan Mnichovská secese nebo Sjednocené dílny pro umění a řemesla, jakási křivá budka je vylepená karikaturami z oblíbeného *Simplicissima*, řečeného *Simpl*, a o kousek dál narazíš na odvážné obálky týdeníku *Jugend*. Máš pocit, že kdybys přistoupil blíž, odvede tě nějaký četník, ale lidé se jimi volně probírají, ba ukazují si, smějí se a příkládají si ruce k ústům. Na jedné obálce hledí muž s dýmkou do kypře naditého dekoltu zlatovlásky, na druhé je akt tak realistický, až zaváháš, zda nejde o fotografii, a poprvé tě napadne, jaké by to bylo snímat nahou ženu. Nejvíc tě však zaujme ještě jiná obálka, z níž potutelně vzhlíží elegantní dámička s liškou kolem krku a za ní se na zahradě zubí obrovský sněhulák — vypadá to, jako by odcházela z dostaveníčka, přerostlý sněhulák má křivě zapnuté knoflíky a její prs vytátý v hrudi.

To číslo si koupíš — aby ses pocvičil v němčině, natürlich.

Procházíš kolem stánků a pódii a necháváš se unášet davem. Všude se něco děje, zpěváci a herci stojí uprostřed hloučku nestálých diváků jen na bedně, skotský dudák v kiltu rozráží dav, snědý eskamotér v turbanu drží pomalovanou klec s tlustým hadem, dívky v bavorských krojích utvořily kruh a točí se, hlavy zakloněné k nebi, na němž zasychají poslední zbytky světla. Ne zcela bezdůvodně si připadáš jako kluk z malého města, který poprvé vidí svět.

Asi po hodině a půl tě to křížem krážem dovede k dřevěnému stolu, u nějž sedí a pijí tví noví spolužáci.

Franz, komm her! mává na tebe Bruno.

Musí se sesednout, aby ses vešel. Ale hned se zas zvedáš a jdeš si také pro džbánek. Alkohol zbavuje jazyk křeče. Ve větší společnosti jako bys na něm měl mlýnské kameny, ale pivo je rozpouští na jemný žlutý písek a ten spláchne do žaludku jako nic. Pamatuju si tě ze zkoušek, říká Peter. Přišel jsi pozdě a vypadalo to, že se ženeš snad z Ruska.

Jsem z Příbrami, z Čech.

Odkud?

Je to docela díra. Ale máme tam velký stříbrný doly.

Co máš z toho, Aichach, odkud jsem já, to je taky díra.

Každý jsme odněkud, říká Martin, ale teď jsme tady. A na to si přijíme.

A já jsem z Füssenu! hlásí růžolící Friedrich a cosi zanotuje.

Konverzace přeskakuje z jedné strany stolu na druhou, z tématu na téma. Máš co dělat, abys to zvládal sledovat, němčinu a všechny ty narážky a dvojsmysly, co chvíli ti nějaký vtíp ujde a směješ se naprázdno, jen abys mezi ně zapadl.

A History of Light

Jan Němec

Translated from the Czech by Melvyn Clarke

The man with the round face and the short hair touches the mid-point of his spectacles above the bridge of his nose and looks around a group of nine boys. Then he says: My name is Georg Heinrich Emmerich. Welcome to the Photography Training and Research Institute.

I came across an engraving in an old book, which showed an old sage receiving inspiration through rays of light. And indeed history is full of such inspiration, knowledge without light is unthinkable and light itself has become its symbol. Particularly over the last few centuries, we have learnt to tame light and to harness it for our grand scientific tasks. The telescope and microscope have expanded the world's boundaries in both directions, revealing undreamt of dimensions of reality. Our fellow countryman, Wilhelm Röntgen, recently discovered rays that penetrate matter. And, likewise in the fields of art and entertainment, there are countless aids and devices that take advantage of the interplay between light and the human eye: for instance, I might mention at random the *lanterna magica*, *camera obscura*, *camera lucida*, diorama, *kinetoscope*, *praxinoscope* and magic drum. Gentlemen, I could pile up example upon example, but this might well be needless, as I do not at all doubt that you are aware why you are here: photography is nothing more than another fascinating manifestation of what light can do in man's hands. But this time, of course, we have not expanded space by using a telescope or a microscope, we have actually stopped time.

At last we can immortalize transient existence, just as whole generations of poets have tried to do before us.

Emmerich looks out of the window and undoes his jacket buttons. He is just thirty-one-years-old, but his hair is already receding. As he returns his gaze to the classroom, an imperceptible smile seems to pass his lips. Some of you have only been in Munich a couple of days, he says, so perhaps you don't know there is a bohemian quarter here called Schwabing: you will surely soon get to know the local hostelrys there. A couple of days ago I went there to visit a painter, and as chance would have it, he was already entertaining another of his friends, a poet. And when this young man found out I was a photographer he admitted to me: Just once I would like to hold a ray of light right there in my hand and to write with it – just once! I cannot tell you this young man's name, but I do understand him very well. Photography does have its pathos. This is partly reflected directly in the etymology – the term photography is made up of the Greek words for light and writing. We photographers might be said to be writing down the world with light. And our aim over the next two years will be no less than to teach you, if you will, calligraphy with light.

However, we do have to elucidate one thing right from the start – notice how light never leaves us. Just like music and literature, photography didn't come into being as art, but as entertainment, and in contrast to music and literature it is not yet generally considered to be art. Nevertheless, you have found yourselves here in a school that aims to teach you this photographic art. How can we teach you something that may not even exist?

Let's look at this more closely: it would appear that the main reason people look down on photography is its technical

and chemical nature. Individual photos are considered to be mechanical reprints of reality, and the photographic process allegedly does not provide any space for creative intervention. The French poet Charles Baudelaire said that only lazy and untalented painters become photographers, because photography is not able to imaginatively express higher thoughts and feelings and may at most be a very modest servant of art and science, just like printing and stenography.

Let me show you something. Here are two works that normally hang on my office wall. Emmerich takes a picture that had been placed glass-side down on the tabletop and says: This is the first one – a reproduction of the famous portrait of Baudelaire by the painter Émile Deroy. He then picks up the second picture. And here you also see the poet's portrait, but this time taken by Étienne Carjat at Nadar's famous photography studio. I'll give you time to look carefully at both portraits.

After a while he continues: Now let us pass over the fact that the fingers on the right hand look somewhat stiff in Deroy's painting. You will surely agree with me that the extent of the poet's presence is incomparable in these two portraits. The first one perhaps captures the painter's vision more distinctly, but this is more of a disadvantage as far as the artistic effect is concerned: the portrait subject is pushed into the background here under a layer of paint and brushstrokes, as if one subjectivity were struggling with another here. Baudelaire described photography as the modest servant of art and science, but the word that he actually used has another meaning: humble. I always remember this when I am looking attentively at Carjat's picture: it is humble, but in its simplicity it is at the same time an unusually powerful portrayal of the poet's personality. Just look at these, the eyes of a tired bloodhound that still scents its prey in the distance somewhere. And what painter

would dare to draw human lips so straight that they can express even the most undesirable truth?

Yes, as a technical and chemical process, photography is a mere servant and means to an end; clearly, the word can be used in various ways. Two years ago here in Germany, Max Priester and Willy Wilcke were convicted of breaking into the room where Otto von Bismarck was on his deathbed, like a great whale at the bottom of the sea, and taking several pictures, which they then tried to sell to the press. There was a big court case and the pictures themselves were not officially published. That same year, the Italian photographer Secondo Pia took the first pictures of the Shroud of Turin, which were soon winging their way around the world. This legendary artefact could at last be seen by everybody. The shocked Pia also found that the print on the shroud was *de facto* a negative, because it was only on the actual photographic negative that the face emerged in its human form. Two dead men and two photographs from the same year. I offered you these examples to show you that what photography is and is not varies depending on whose hands and what context it finds itself in.

Nowadays, we can dismiss the numerous caricatures and criticisms in newspapers that deride photography, rather than absorbing them. More importantly, as in the case of Baudelaire, our opponents are often artists themselves. The aversion of many artists to photography is generally well-known, just like the unfulfilled prophecies at the time of its discovery that it would be the death of painting. But something else happened and here I would not fail to note that the relationship between painters and photography is often reminiscent of that between a respectable man and his kept woman. They ignore each other in public, but in private not only do they admire one another, but they are also greatly inspired by each

other: photography is commonly used instead of a sketch-book. It is used to find original compositions or gestures and once I even saw a painter using an enlarger to project a negative directly onto the canvas he was painting.

Gentlemen, to begin with, this school offers its motto: *Ars una, species mille*. There is only one art but a thousand approaches. If you do not understand, I will help you to compare: Just as a single source of light can cast an endless number of shadows depending on the object that you place in front of it, so the intention of a real-life creator can be manifested in an endless number of forms depending on the means that he uses.

Do not misunderstand me: I do not wish by any means to make out that photography is an art form under all circumstances. Nothing could be further from my mind than to think that all those soulless duplicates of reality flooding the world are works of art. You know the slogan that Kodak founder George Eastman uses to conquer the American market? You press the button – we do the rest. It looks like the age of pointless pictures is now upon us – so-called snapshots that provide opponents of artistic photography with an endless supply of cheap ammunition.

Gentlemen, I began this introductory speech by saying that a hundred million years ago the chemical properties of light enabled life to emerge on this planet. But it was only 60 years ago that man discovered how to use the chemical properties of light to record life on this planet in a way that was previously unthinkable. It was only 60 years ago that light discovered a way of recording its own work. This can also be expressed by saying that the prophecy of our great philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel has been fulfilled: the world spirit again recognizes itself in a new way through man.

Be good shepherds of light.



Munich at the turn of the century – few European cities have such an excellent reputation. A finger for the Ring of the Nibelungs. Athens on the Isar. City of beer and art. City of the people and youth. The northernmost Italian city. While Berlin languishes beneath the Wilhelmine diktat, in Munich history has slept and fate has drowsily been biding its time. It is visited by unruly Americans, brooding Russians, the refined French and the peoples of the Balkans. What are you studying? That is the first question while the foam is still frothing on your beer. I'm a painter! I work for Simpla. I'm going to be a famous photographer!

You too? So am I! Zum Wohl!

The Photography Training and Research Institute is housed in a low building on Rennbahnstrasse. From there you can hear the puffing and screeching of trains as they brake in front of the Hauptbahnhof building to the north-east just beyond the busy Strasse Bayer, where you can buy oriental confectionery, furniture, Cuban cigars and the local girls. Walking southwards for a minute you find yourself at Bavaria Ring, a circular street of prestige villas bordered by Theresienwiese, where the Oktoberfest takes place just as the academic year is beginning. Thomas Mann noted that the typical local artist is a born organizer of festivals and carnivals and there is no better opportunity to find this out for yourself. Above Theresienwiese looms a huge statue of Bavaria, compassionately looking down on her beer-swilling offspring.

Hustle and bustle everywhere; you don't know where to set your eyes first. You came from a small provincial town and Munich starts to spiral in your head – spinning and glowing hot. Apart

from the usual fairground goods there are also stalls for the Munich Secession and the United Arts and Crafts Workshops, while pasted up all over a kind of lopsided booth are caricatures from the popular *Simplicissimus*, often just called *Simple*, and a little further on you come across the bold front covers of the weekly *Jugend*. You get the feeling that if you stepped any closer the police would come and take you away, but people freely browse through them, show them to each other, laugh and put their hands to their mouths. On one cover, a man smoking a pipe is peering at the well-endowed décolletage of a golden-haired girl, while on another the nude is so realistic that you are not sure if it is a photograph, and for the first time it occurs to you what it would be like to photograph a naked woman. But most of all you are taken by another cover, from which an elegant little lady with a fox stole round her neck is slyly looking up, while behind her an enormous snowman in the garden is grinning – she looks like she has just been on a date, the overgrown snowman has buttons done up askew and his chest is imprinted with her breasts.

You buy that issue – to practise your German, natürlich.

You walk around the stalls and platforms, going with the flow of the crowd. Something is always happening, singers and actors stand on boxes in the middle of drifting audiences, a kilted Scottish piper weaves through the crowds, a swarthy beturbaned juggler holds a large snake inside a painted cage, while girls in Bavarian costumes have formed a circle and walk round staring upwards at the sky, where the last rags of light are drying. Not without good reason do you feel like a small-town boy seeing the world for the first time.

After about an hour and a half you criss-cross your way to a wooden table where your new classmates are sitting drinking.

Franz, komm her! Bruno waves at you.

They have to crush together for you to squeeze in. But then you immediately get up again and go for a jug. Alcohol loosens the tongue, which is tied down by millstones in larger company, but the beer dissolves them into fine yellow sand and washes it down into the stomach like nothing at all.

I remember you from the exams, Peter says. You came late and looked like you'd just come running from Russia or somewhere.

I'm from Příbram, in Bohemia.

Where?

It's a real hole. But we have big silver mines there.

So what? Aichach, where I'm from, is a hole too.

We're all from somewhere, says Martin, but now we're here. So let's drink to that.

And I'm from Füssen, rosy-cheeked Friedrich announces as he starts to sing something.

The conversation leaps from one side of the table to the other, from one subject to another. It's all you can do to follow it, in German and with all those allusions and double entendres. Every so often you miss a joke and smile blankly just to fit in.

Joachim butts in. I liked the way Emmerich made the connection with Hegel at the end. Gentlemen, it will soon be 70 years since he died.

Martin: Have you already been a student?

Joachim: I dropped out of philosophy at Jena.

Ty: Why?

Martin: You don't want to take pictures of ideas, do you?

Joachim: Ideas? Maybe you should have listened to Emmerich properly. Their motto *ars una, species mille* is just dressed-up Plato. And he only confirmed it when he came out with that simile on the single source of light and the innumerable shadows.



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Makis Tsitas

Μάρτυς μου ο Θεός (2013)

God is my witness

Publishing House Kichli

Biography

Makis Tsitas was born in 1971 in Giannitsa, Greece. He studied journalism in Thessaloniki and worked in radio. Since 1994 he has lived in Athens and works in publishing. He is the director of *diastixo.gr*, a literary and cultural internet journal.

His work (stories, plays and poems) has been included in anthologies and published in journals and newspapers in Greece and abroad. His one-act plays, *On the Square* and *Television*, were performed at the Theatro ton Kairon in Athens. His short stories have been translated into German, Spanish, English, Hebrew, Swedish and Finnish.

His published work includes a novel (*God is my witness*, 2013), a collection of short stories (*Patty from Petroula*, 1996) and many books for children.

Synopsis

In this humorous, moving, and perceptive novel, an anti-hero of our time who wants nothing more than to live with dignity – having reached his fifties with no job and uncertain health – narrates the trials and betrayals he has suffered from employers, from the women he meets, and from his own family.

Through his torrential monologue, replete with everyday occurrences and ebullient fantasies, we follow a simple man's struggle to remain upstanding. As his story veers from wildly humorous to unconsciously self-mocking or even disturbing, Makis Tsitas' hero becomes representative of the enmity a human being must withstand. His child-like naivety becomes the deformed and deforming mirror of a cynical and vicious society which, despite its apparent tolerance and prosperity, is fading towards decadence, intolerance and racism. The novel's anti-hero comes to reflect the monstrosity of a society that must inevitably exclude him.

Μάρτυς μου ο Θεός

Makis Tsitas

(pp. 11-15)

Υπάρχουν τεσσάρων ειδών αφεντικά: οί πετυχημένοι, οί χρεωμένοι, τὰ καθίκια και οί τρελοί. Ἐγώ ἔπεσα στοῦ τέταρτο.

Πολλές φορές μουμίλαγε και σκεφτόμουνα ὅτι δὲν ἤξερε ἂν εἶχε ἀπέναντί του ἐμένα ἢ κάποιον πού μου ἔμοιαζε. Δηλαδή ἂν ἤμουνα ὁ Χρυσοβαλάντης — ὁ ὑπάλληλος και φίλος— ἢ ὁ δίδυμος ἀδερφός μου. Μόνο πού δὲν ἔχω δίδυμο ἀδερφό, δύο ἀδερφές ἔχω.

Ἔτσι και τύχαινε νὰ συναντηθοῦμε στήν εἴσοδο τῆς ἐταιρείας, μου ἔλεγε «τρέχα νὰ μὲ προλάβεις!» κι ὁρμούσε στοῦ ἀσανσέρ, κι ὅπως ἀνέβαινε μου φώναζε «μὴν κλέβεις!» και μ' ἔβαζε ν' ἀνεβαίνω τρέχοντας ὀχτῶ ὀρόφους, μετρώντας δυνατὰ τὰ ἑκατὸν σαράντα τέσσερα σκαλιά, και οὔρλιαζε μέσα ἀπ' τὸ ἀσανσέρ: «Πιὸ δυνατὰ, ρὲ χοντρέ! Δὲν ἔχεις ψυχὴ μέσα σου;».

Ἡ ἐταιρεία του ἔκλεισε τέλος τοῦ '80 κι ἔμεινα ἀνεργος στὰ καλὰ καθούμενα. Δούλευα κοντὰ του ἔντεκα χρόνια, ἀλλὰ δυστυχῶς πιάστηκα ἀπροετοιμαστος, ἐνῶ οἱ ὑπόλοιποι συνάδελφοί μου ἔκαναν ἐργασιακὸ μάρκετινγκ γιὰ μῆνες και πῆγαν σὲ ἄλλα ἀτελιὲ γραφικῶν τεχνῶν ἀμέσως. Ἐβλεπα βέβαια ὅτι βούλιαζε τὸ καράβι, ὅτι τὸ πρᾶγμα πῆγαινε ἀπ' τὸ κακὸ στοῦ χειρότερο, ὅτι δὲν ὑπῆρχε πλέον μέλλον, ἀλλὰ δὲν ἤθελα νὰ τὸ πιστέψω. Γιατὶ εἶχα φάει τὸ παραμῦθι τοῦ Ἐξαποδῶ: «Και ὅλοι οἱ ἄλλοι νὰ φύγουν, ἐσὺ δὲν ὑπάρχει περίπτωση νὰ μείνεις χωρὶς δουλειά». Ἔτσι τὴν πάτησα.

Είδα τὸν ἑαυτό μου νὰ παλεύει μὲ τὸν ἑαυτό μου στὴ λάσπη.
Ἔβριζε ὁ ἕνας τὸν ἄλλο καὶ προσπαθοῦσε νὰ τὸν πνίξει. Ταυτοχρόνως ἔψαλλαν μὲ κατάνυξη τὸ τροπάριο τῆς Κασσιανῆς.

Ἔστερα οἱ δύο γίνανε ἕνας ἄλλος Χρυσοβαλάντης, πού τὸν ἔλεγαν Ψυχοβαλάντη, καὶ φώναξε τρίς «μὲ πνίγει αὐτὸς ὁ ἄνεμος». Ἀπὸ κάπου ἀπροσδιόριστα ἀκουγόταν μιὰ ἄρια ἀπὸ τὴν Τόσκα.

Περίεργο ὄνειρο.

Δὲν μπορῶ νὰ φανταστῶ τὸν ἑαυτό μου ζητιάνο ἢ παιδι τῶν φαναριῶν. Ἀλλὰ οὔτε καὶ τοὺς γονεῖς μου μπορῶ νὰ τοὺς φανταστῶ νὰ πέφτουν θύματα ἐκμετάλλευσης ἀπὸ τρίτους, καὶ εἰδικὰ ἀπὸ μιὰ μέλλουσα νύφη.

Ὁ πατέρας μου τώρα εἶναι ὀγδόντα ἕξι ἐτῶν, ἀπόστρατος ἀξιωματικός, ἄνθρωπος τῆς οἰκογένειας, τῆς μελέτης καὶ τῆς Ἐκκλησίας. Ἦσυχη ζωὴ. Πάντα μὲ φρόντιζε, μοῦ δάνειζε καὶ μὲ ἐξυπηρετοῦσε.

Μοῦ ἔλεγε «πρόσεχε, πρόσεχε, πρόσεχε!» ἀλλὰ ἐγὼ ἤμουνα τέντζερης ξεγάνωτος χωρὶς καπάκι κι ὁ, τι ἤθελε ἔμπαινε μέσα. Αὐστηρὸς ὁ πατέρας μου, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑποχωρητικός. Δηλαδή, ὅταν ἐγὼ πίζα, αὐτὸς ἔκανε πίσω. Ναί.

«Μπαμπά, θὰ πάω στὸ Λονδίνο, δῶσε μου ἑκατὸ χιλιάδες». Μοῦ τίς ἔδωσε.

«Μπαμπά, ἔχω ἕνα μικρὸ χρέος στὴν τράπεζα». Τὸ ξόφλησε ἀμέσως.

«Μπαμπά, ἔχω πρόβλημα, μπορεῖς νὰ μοῦ κάνεις μιὰ ἐξυπηρέτηση;» Ἔτρεξε.

«Μπαμπά, πρέπει νὰ κάνω εἰσαγωγή στὸ νοσοκομεῖο». Μὲ बोήθησε.

Δέ μοῦ εἶχε πεί σέ κανένα θέμα «ὄχι». Τώρα πού τὸ φιλοσοφῶ, ἦταν ἓνα σκυλί πού γάβγιζε μὰ δὲ δάγκωνε — ἐγὼ δὲν τὸ εἶχα καταλάβει. Τὸν σέβομαι καὶ τὸν ἐκτιμῶ. Μέχρι τὰ εἴκοσί μου τὸν φοβόμουν πολὺ. Μετὰ ἀπλῶς τὸν σεβόμουν, γιατί πέρασε πάρα πολλά. Εἶναι ἓνας ἄνθρωπος μὲ πείρα στὴ ζωὴ. Ἕνας πατέρας δὲ θέλει ποτὲ τὸ κακὸ τοῦ παιδιοῦ του. Χαιρόταν πού εἶχα πάντα σχέσεις μὲ μοναστήρια καὶ ἐκκλησίες, εἶναι κι αὐτὸς θεοσεβούμενος ἄνθρωπος. Ὅλη ἡ οἰκογένεια ἔτσι εἴμαστε.

Ὅταν στὰ δεκαοχτώ μου πέρασα στὴ σχολὴ ὑπαξιωματικῶν στὰ Τρίκαλα, μοῦ εἶπε «μπράβο», ἀλλὰ κι ὅταν τὰ παράτησα κι ἔφυγα, γιατί δὲν ἄντεχα ἄλλο, δὲ μοῦ ἔφερε καμία ἀντίρρηση. Δὲ μοῦ ἔκοψε ποτὲ τὸ δρόμο. Ναί.

Ἴσως, σκέφτομαι, γι' αὐτὸ δὲν ἔχω φύγει ἀκόμη ἀπὸ τὸ σπίτι, παρόλο πού πενηντάρισα. Ἐπειδὴ αἰσθάνομαι ἀσφάλεια καὶ θαλπωρή.

Τηλεφώνησα σὲ μιὰ παλιὰ συνάδελφο γιὰ νὰ τῆς πῶ «χρόνια πολλά» καὶ νὰ τῆς ζητήσω καὶ καμιά συνεργασία κι αὐτὴ μοῦ τὸ ἔκλεισε λέγοντας: «Χρυσοβαλάντη, μὲ πέτυχες στὴν πόρτα, τὰ λέμε ἄλλη φορά».

Βλέπεις, ἡ κυρία δὲ μὲ ἔχει πιά ἀνάγκη, εἶναι βολεμένη στὸν «Ἀθήνα 2004» καὶ παίρνει δύο χιλιάδες εὐρῶ τὸ μῆνα σὺν τὰ μπόνους, ἀλλὰ θὰ τελειώσει κάποια στιγμή τὸ πανηγύρι καὶ τότε νὰ δοῦμε...

Πολλοί, ἄλλωστε, παλιοί μου συνάδελφοι πού εὐεργετήθηκαν πολλαπλῶς ἀπὸ μένα, τώρα πού τοὺς ζήτησα βοήθεια, μοῦ φέρθηκαν κυνικά. Τὸ ἴδιο καὶ κάποιοι ἐπιχειρηματίες μὲ μικρὲς ἐταιρεῖες, πού ὅταν ἤμουν στὸν Ἐξαποδῶ μὲ εἶχαν στὰ ὄπα ὄπα γιὰ νὰ τοὺς πηγαίνω δουλειὲς καὶ τώρα πού τοὺς κόψαμε τὴ σαντιγὶ κάνουν πῶς δὲ μὲ γνωρίζουν. Δὲν πειράζει,

ἔχει ὁ Θεός. Ἄς εἶναι ὅλοι τους καλά. Αὐτὸ εἶναι εὐλογία ἀπὸ τὸ γέροντά μου, νὰ λέω «ἔχει ὁ Θεός» καὶ νὰ λέω ἀκόμα καὶ σ' αὐτοὺς ποὺ μὲ ἀδίκησαν «εὐχαριστῶ», γιὰ νὰ ἔχω καθαρὴ συνείδηση. Ὅσο μπορῶ τὸν ἀκούω τὸ γέροντά μου. Μοῦ ἔχει πεῖ τί πρέπει νὰ κάνω στὴ ζωὴ μου, πῶς νὰ τὴν κοντρολάρω γιὰ νὰ μὴν καταλήξω στὸ τρελάδικο.

Ὅταν κάποιος ἔχει πτωχεύσει, κοιτάει πῶς νὰ τὴ βγάλει χωρὶς λεφτά. Θέλει νὰ πιεῖ κάπου ἕναν καφὲ δωρεάν. Θέλει νὰ καθίσει κάπου καὶ νὰ μιλήσει. Ἐχω κάνει μεγάλη ἔρευνα ἐπὶ τῆς ἀφραγκίας.

Γι' αὐτὸν τὸ λόγο κάθε Κυριακὴ πρωί, μετὰ τὴ λειτουργία στὴν Ἁγία Εἰρήνη, στὴν Αἰόλου, περνᾶω ἀπὸ τὴν Ἀγγλικανικὴ Ἐκκλησία, ὅπου προσφέρουν καφέ. Κι ἂν μάλιστα μπεῖς μέσα καὶ παρακολουθήσεις τὴ λειτουργία τους, σοῦ κάνουν δῶρο κι ἕνα θρησκευτικὸ βιβλίο. Στὰ ἀγγλικά βέβαια. (Μπορεῖ νὰ μὴ μιλάω τὴ γλώσσα, ἀλλὰ κανένα βιβλίο δὲν πάει στράφι μαζί μου.)

Προσπαθῶ νὰ τὴ βγάλω λάθρα. Ναί.

...

(pp. 16-17)

Ἀλλὰ ἔχω μετανιώσει. Μάρτυς μου ὁ Θεός. Ἐχω μετανιώσει πικρὰ γιὰ ὅλα ὅσα ἔχω κάνει. Θέλω νὰ τὰ ἀφήσω πίσω μου καὶ νὰ ἀποτολμήσω ἕνα νέο ξεκίνημα.

Δὲ θέλω οὔτε ἐρωμένες οὔτε ἐλαφρὲς γυναῖκες οὔτε πορνείες. Θέλω νὰ εἶμαι κοντὰ στὸ Θεό. Κι ἂν Ἐκεῖνος μοῦ χαρίσει γυναῖκα σοβαρὴ, τότε ἐντάξει, εὐχαρίστως νὰ ἔλθω μαζί της εἰς γάμου κοινωνίαν. Ἄν δὲ μοῦ χαρίσει καὶ θέλει γενῶ καλόγερος, πάλι ἐντάξει.

Πολύ κόσμο ἔχω κάνει πέρα, γιατί εἶδα πὼς αὐτοὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι δὲν ἔχουν τίποτα νὰ μοῦ δώσουν. Εἶναι τρύπιοι κουβάδες. Ἄπατοι.

Θέλω νὰ μ' ἀκούει ὅταν προσεύχομαι σ' Αὐτόν. Μακριὰ ἀπὸ ἔμένα οἱ πειρασμοί, Κύριε.

Καὶ λιγότερους φίλους θέλω ἐπίσης. Λίγους καὶ καλούς. Ἡρεμους, τίμιους, νὰ μὴ μὲ πνίγουν. Νὰ μὴ μοῦ δίνουν μὲ τὸ ἓνα χέρι ἀντιασφυξιογόνο μάσκα ἐνῶ μὲ τὸ ἄλλο ρίχνουν διοξειδίο τοῦ ἄνθρακος. Τί περιμένουν, νὰ χαλάσει ἡ μάσκα γιὰ νὰ σκάσω; Ἔτσι ἔχουμε γίνει. Αὐτὴ εἶναι δυστυχῶς ἡ σύγχρονη ἀθηναϊκὴ νοοτροπία, ποῦ δὲ μᾶς ἀφήνει νὰ παλαντζάρομε οὔτε τὰ χρέη μας οὔτε τίς δουλειές μας. Ἀπὸ πόνου ψυχῆς μιλάω αὐτὴ τὴ στιγμή.

...

(pp. 18-17)

Ὁ κύριος Ἰ. καὶ ὁ κύριος Τ., ὅταν μὲ βλέπουν, μὲ φωνάζουν πάντα στὴν παρέα τους καὶ μὲ κερνᾶνε. Αὐτοὶ ἔχουν γερὸ πορτοφόλι, παίρνουν παχυλὲς συντάξεις, εἰσπράττουν κι ἔξι-ἑφτὰ νοίκια ὁ καθένας. Βλέπουν ἔμένα ποῦ εἶμαι χωρὶς λεφτὰ καὶ μὲ κερνᾶνε. Τὶς προάλλες ποῦ μοῦ εἶπαν «ἔλα, Χρυσοβαλάντη, νὰ πιεῖς κάτι», ἔβαλα τὰ κλάματα — δὲν ξέρω γιατί. Πιθανὸν ἀπὸ ἀγάπη.

Προχθές, ποῦ μὲ εἶδαν πάλι καὶ μὲ φώναξαν, δὲν κάθισα μαζί τους, μὲ πιάσαν οἱ ντροπές. Νὰ εἶμαι πενήντα χρονῶν καὶ νὰ μὲ κερνᾶνε οἱ ἄλλοι. Ποῦ μὲ κατάντησε ὁ Ἐξαποδῶ...

...

(pp. 90-92)

Θέλω, ἂν γίνεται, σ' ἓνα χρόνο νὰ ἔχω παντρευτεῖ καὶ νὰ ἔχω ἀφήσει ἔγκυο τὴ γυναῖκα μου, νὰ γίνω σύντομα πατέρας. Νὰ δώσω στὸν ἑαυτό μου μιὰ καταξίωση, καὶ πιστεύω πῶς τὸ αἰδοῖο θὰ μπορέσει νὰ μοῦ τὴν προσφέρει. Ἐλπίζω νὰ μὴν κάνω λάθος. Θέλω ἐπίσης ἓνα σπίτι δικό μου γιὰ νὰ ζῶ μὲ τὴ γυναῖκα καὶ τὸ παιδί μου. (Δὲ γίνεται νὰ ζήσουμε μὲ τοὺς γονεῖς μου καὶ τὶς ἀδερφές μου, δὲν εἶναι πρέπον.) Ἕνα σπίτι μικρὸ καὶ ταπεινὸ, κάπου παραλιακά, μεταξὺ Ἀθήνας καὶ Κορίνθου, ἢ ἓνα διαμερισμάκι, τῶν πενήντα ἔστω τετραγωνικῶν, στὸ Λονδίνο.

Θέλω μέσα σ' αὐτὰ τὰ λίγα τετραγωνικά νὰ στεγάσουμε τὴ ζωὴ μας, τὸν ἔρωτά μας, τὰ ὄνειρά μας. Ἄν τώρα διαπιστώσω ὅτι, ὅσο ἔλειπα στὴ δουλειά, αὐτὴ πῆγε καὶ μοῦ ξενοπηδήχτηκε, τότε ἔχω δύο ἐπιλογές: ἢ νὰ τρέξω νὰ κλειστῶ σὲ μοναστήρι ἢ νὰ πάω ντουγροῦ στὸ ψυχιατεῖο. Καὶ τότε ἴσως νὰ τὴν κάνω νὰ μετανιώσει γιὰ τὴν ἀμαρτωλὴ τῆς πράξη. Νὰ τῆς δημιουργήσω, μὲ τὴν ἀξιοπρεπή μου στάση, τεράστιες ἐνοχές.

Ἡ ζωὴ μου ὅλη εἶναι μιὰ κυρία
μιὰ μὲ ρίχνει στὰ ζεστά
καὶ μιὰ μὲ πάει στὰ κρύα.

Τὸ νὰ ὑποπέσει μιὰ γυναῖκα στὸ ἀμάρτημα τῆς μοιχείας σημαίνει ὅτι ἔχει προσπεράσει ὅλα τὰ στάδια τῆς μεταμέλειας κι ἔχει φτάσει στὴν πώρωση. Ἀπὸ τὴ μοιχεία ὁ ἄντρας παίρνει ἡδονή, ἐνῶ ἡ γυναῖκα τὸ μετάλλιο τῆς διαφθορᾶς. Στὸ ψυχιατεῖο θὰ πῆγαινα γιὰ ἐκδίκηση, γιὰ νὰ τῆς λένε ὅλοι: «Φτού σου, ξεφτιλισμένη γυναῖκα, τὸν τρέλανε τὸν ἄνθρωπο». Ἐνῶ στὸ μοναστήρι θὰ πῆγαινα πιὸ πολὺ γιὰ τὴ δική μου ἡρεμία, γιὰ νὰ μπορέσω νὰ τὴν ξεχάσω. Γιατὶ πιστεύω πῶς ὅταν καθίσεις καὶ πεῖς σὲ ἓνα γεροντάκι μὲ τριμμένα ράσα τὸν πόνο σου, τότε ὁ Θεὸς θὰ σοῦ προσφέρει ἡρεμία ψυχῆς.

Στὸ θέμα τῆς ἡλικίας δὲν ἔχω ξεπεράσει κάποια ταμπού. Θέλω δηλαδή ἢ γυναίκα μου νὰ εἶναι τουλάχιστον δέκα-δεκαπέντε χρόνια μικρότερή μου. Καὶ μεγαλύτερη διαφορά δὲ θὰ μὲ πείραζε, κι ἄς ἔλεγαν ὅλοι «ὄ παππούς μὲ τὸ μανούλι». Πάντως τὸ Μαρινάκι ἦταν ὄντως μανούλι — σκέτο μοντέλο. Ἐνῶ ἢ Ρωρῶ δὲν ἦτανε τόσο ὡραία, ἀλλὰ ἦταν καυλοπρεπής. Ἀπὸ μακριὰ φαινόταν ἢ γυναίκα, ἔστελνε σινιάλα. Αὐτὸ δὲ σημαίνει ὅτι ὅσες ντύνονται κάπως εἶναι πουτάνες καὶ οἱ ἄλλες εἶναι οἱ καλές. Γιὰ νὰ ἐξηγούμεθα: Καὶ ἢ Μέγαιρα, παρόλο πὺν φοροῦσε συντηρητικὰ ταγεράκια, ἦταν στὴν ψυχὴ πουτάνα. Καὶ ἢ γυναίκα τοῦ Ἐξαποδῶ ντυνόταν σεμνά, ἀλλὰ στὴν καρδιά εἶχε φίδια. Ὅποτε ἐδῶ δὲν κρίνουμε τὸ ντύσιμο ἀλλὰ τὸ ἀπομέσα.

Μοῦ εἶπε ὁ φίλος μου ὁ Ξ. ὅτι εἶδε τὴ Ρωρῶ μὲ τὸν καινούργιο της γκόμενο, ὁ ὁποῖος εἶναι τόσο ἄχαρος, πὺν ἀπορεῖ πῶς τὸν κυκλοφορεῖ. Δυὸ μέτρα ψηλὸς καὶ πολὺ ἀδύνατος, σὰν τηλεγραφόξυλο. Πιστεύω λοιπὸν ὅτι οἱ περισσότερες γυναῖκες ἔχουν τὰ σκατὰ μέσα τους. Θεωρεῖ τώρα αὐτὴ ἢ βλαμμένη ὅτι τὸ ξυλάγγουρο πὺν ἔχει κοντὰ της, αὐτὸς ὁ ἄχαρος, εἶναι ὁ τύπος ὁ ἐξτρίμ;

Σκέφτομαι στὴν αὐτοβιογραφία μου νὰ βάλω τὸν τίτλο «Ἀναμνήσεις μιᾶς κακόγουστης ζωῆς». Γιατὶ ἀλλιῶς ξεκίνησα τὴ ζωὴ μου• πίστεψα σὲ ιδέες, σὲ μεγαλεῖα, σὲ ἀνθρώπους, καὶ στὸ τέλος κατάντησα ἀσθενῶν ἐπαίτης.

...

(p. 101)

Ἐρευνῶ τὸ πρόσωπο τῆς κάθε γυναίκας συστηματικῶς. Εἶναι προβληματισμένο; Εἶναι χαμογελαστό; Εἶναι περιποιημένο; Ἐχει μιὰ ἔξαψη ἢ ἴσως μιὰ ἀλλοπρόσαλλη θλίψη; Μήπως ἡ λεγάμενη τὸ ἔχει πετάξει τελικὰ τὸ καπίστρι; Ἄμα τὴ βλέπεις ξυρισμένη στὰ φρύδια, νὰ ξέρεις ὅτι θὰ σὲ ξυρίσει. Ἐγγυημένα. Καταλαβαίνω πιά μὲ τὴν πρώτη ἂν ἡ γυναίκα μὲ πλησιάζει γιὰ λεφτά, ἂν πραγματικὰ μὲ γουστάρει ἢ ἂν μὲ δουλεύει. Τὸ ξέρω. Εἶμαι περπατημένος.

...

(p. 234)

Χρόνο προσωπικὸ δὲν ἔχω καθόλου• τρέχω ὅλη μέρα, καὶ παρακαλῶ τὸ Θεὸ νὰ βρῶ μιὰ δουλειὰ νὰ στεριώσω, νὰ ξαλαφρώσω λίγο τὰ χρέη μου. Καὶ θέλω κάποια στιγμή, πρὶν κλείσω τὰ μάτια μου, νὰ φορέσω τὸ μοναχικὸ σχῆμα καὶ νὰ πάω στὸ Ἅγιον Ὄρος, σὲ μιὰ ὁμορφὴ καὶ ἡσυχὴ σκῆτη. Σὰν λύτρωση βλέπω τὸ μοναχικὸ ράσο, νὰ ἀπαλλαγῶ ἀπὸ αὐτοὺς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ποὺ ὀνομάζονται οἰκογένειά μου. Νὰ ἔχω τὸ κελάκι μου, τὴν ἡσυχία μου, γιὰ νὰ ζήσω ἐπιτέλους σὰν ἄνθρωπος. Γιατί ὁ ἄντρας, ὡς γνωστόν, μετὰ τὰ ἐξήντα θέλει τὴν ἡσυχία του. Ἐγώ, δυστυχῶς, ἔχω χάσει ἀρκετὰ χρόνια — βρέθηκα ὑπὸ τὴν ἐκμετάλλευση πορνιδίων καὶ στυγνῶν ἐργοδοτῶν. Ἡμουν κακορίζικος.

...

(p. 250)

Ἦ γιαγιά Χρυσοβαλαντία τὰ εἶχε χάσει στὸ τέλος.

Ὅποιος ἐρχόταν στὸ σπίτι μας τὸν ρωτοῦσε: «Νὰ σοῦ βγάλω μιὰ φωτογραφία;». Καὶ πρὶν προλάβει νὰ τῆς ἀπαντήσει, σήκωνε τὴ φούστα της καὶ τοῦ ἔδειχνε τὸ βρακί της.

Τὸ ἔκανε σὲ ὅλους τοὺς ἐπισκέπτες μας ἀνεξαιρέτως. Γινόμασταν ρεζίλι. Εἰδικὰ ἂν εἶχε προλάβει, κρυφὰ ἀπ' τὴ μάνα μου, νὰ ξεβρακωθεῖ. Καὶ νὰ σκεφτεῖ κανεὶς ὅτι μᾶς ἐπισκέπτονταν τότε ἱερεῖς, ἐκκλησιαστικοὶ ἐπίτροποι, στρατιωτικοὶ μὲ τὶς κυρίες τους. (Βέβαια, τὰ παιδιά τους κάναν πανηγύρι μὲ τὴ γιαγιά.)

Στὸ τέλος δὲ βάζαμε κανέναν στὸ σπίτι. Ὁ πατέρας ντρεπόταν γιὰ τὴ μάνα του καὶ ξέσπαγε στὴ μαμά. Ὁ Θεὸς νὰ τὴν ἀναπαύσει, μᾶς δημιούργησε μεγάλο πρόβλημα στὰ τελευταῖα της.

Μ' ἔχουν πιάσει πάλι οἱ φοβίες μου. Ἄν πάρω κι ἐγὼ ἀπὸ τὴ γιαγιά μου; Ἄν τὸ ἔχω κι ἐγὼ στὰ γονιδιά μου; Τρέμω στὴν ἰδέα.

God is my witness

Makis Tsitas

Translated from the Greek by Irene Noel-Baker

(pp. 11-15)

There are four kinds of employer: successful ones, debtors, losers, and the insane. I got the fourth.

Often he spoke to me and I wondered if he knew it was me standing there or someone like me. Was I actually Chrysovalantis – his employee and friend – or my twin brother? Except I have no twin brother, just two sisters.

If ever we met in the lobby at work, he would tell me to “run up and get there first!”, then he would make a dash for the lift and shout “no cheating!” as it went up, and force me to run up eight floors counting the 144 steps out loud, while he yelled at me from inside the lift: “Run faster fatty! Where’s your get-up-and-go?”

His company closed at the end of 1980, and out of the blue I was jobless. I had been with him for 11 years, but sadly I was caught unawares, though my colleagues had been busy doing their own marketing for months and went straight on to work for other graphic designers. Naturally, I saw that the ship was going down, that things were going from bad to worse, that there was no future anymore, but I didn’t want to believe it. Old Nick was telling tales and I fell for it: “Let them all go, there’s no way you’ll be out of work.” That’s where I screwed up.

I saw myself grappling with myself in the mud. The two of us were swearing and trying to strangle one another. While simultaneously chanting the *Hymn of Kassiani*.

Then the two of us became another Chrysovalantis, a different one, whose name was Psychovalantis, and he shouted thrice, “this wind is choking me.” While from somewhere in the distance could be heard an aria from *Tosca*.

A peculiar dream.

I don't see myself as a beggar or a down-and-out. But neither do I see my parents being exploited by a third party, and in particular a bride-to-be.

My father is now 86-years-old, a retired officer, a family man, well read, a churchgoer. He leads a quiet life. He has always taken care of me, lent me money and helped me out.

He would always tell me to “be careful, be careful, be careful!” but I was a battered old pot without a lid. Anything that wanted to, got in. He was strict, my father, but not unyielding. Meaning that when I insisted, he would give in. Yes he would.

“Dad, I'm going to London, give me 100,000.” He gave it to me.

“Dad, I have a small overdraft at the bank.” He paid it off at once.

“Dad, I have to be admitted to hospital.” He rushed to sort it out.

He never said “no” to me about anything. Now that I think about it, he was all bark and no bite – I hadn't realised. I honour and respect him. Until I was 20, I was extremely afraid of him. Then I simply respected him, because he's been through such a lot. He's a man with experience of life. A father never wishes his child ill. He liked it that I was always in and out of monasteries and churches, he's a god-fearing man too.

All our family are.

When I was 18, and I got into the academy for non-commissioned officers in Trikala, he said, “Well done.” But when I chucked it in and left, because I couldn’t stand it anymore, he made no objection.

He never stood in my way. No he didn’t.

Maybe, I think, that’s why I haven’t left home yet, although I’m 50 now. Because I feel safe and secure.

I phoned a former colleague to wish her well on her Name Day, and ask if we might put a project together. She put the phone down on me, saying, “Chrysovalantis, you’ve caught me at the door, let’s talk another time.”

You see, the lady no longer has any need of me. She’s got a job for ‘Athens 2004’, earning 2,000 euros a month plus bonuses. But the party will be over soon and then we’ll see...

So many of them, old colleagues who’ve benefitted frequently from me in the past, are turning nasty now when I ask them for help. It’s the same with the small businesses. When I was with Nick, they were all over me to bring them work and now it’s dried up they pretend not to recognise me. Never mind, God will provide. I wish them well. That’s a saying I’ve got from my old man, I say “God will provide” and I even say “thank you” to people who have behaved badly to me, so that my conscience is clear. I try to listen to my old man as much as possible. He has told me what to do in life, how I should handle things so I don’t end up in an asylum.

When you fall on hard times, you find ways to get by without money. You want to get a free cup of coffee somewhere. You want to sit down somewhere and talk. I have done major research into penury.

Which is why every Sunday morning, after the service at Agia Eirini in Aiolou, I pass by the Anglican Church where they give out coffee. And if you go inside and follow their service, they present you with a religious book. In English, naturally (I may not speak the language, but no book is wasted on me).

I try to get by on the cheap. Yes I do.

...

(pp. 16-17)

But I regret it. God is my witness. I bitterly regret everything I have done. I want to leave it all behind me and start again.

I don't want lovers or tarts or prostitutes. I want to be close to God. And if He grants me a serious woman, then fine, I will happily join with her in holy matrimony. If he does not grant it so, and wants me to be a monk, that's fine too.

I've pushed away a lot of people, because I saw they have nothing to offer me. They are leaky buckets. Swindlers.

I want Him to hear me when I pray. Keep me away from temptation, Lord.

I would actually prefer to have fewer friends. Few but good. Calm, honest, I don't want to be smothered. I don't want them to give me an oxygen mask with one hand and spray me with tear gas with the other. What's the point, as soon as the mask breaks I'll suffocate. Which is where we've ended up. This, unfortunately, is the current Athenian mentality, that will not let us juggle our debts and our jobs. It pains my heart to say so.

...

(pp. 17-18)

Mr I and Mr T always call me over when they see me and offer me a drink. They have full wallets, they get big fat pensions, and they each take in five-six rental incomes. They know I have no money so they buy me drinks. The other day when they said “Come on over, Chrysovalantis, have a drink,” I started crying – I don’t know why. Most likely out of love.

They saw me again recently and called me over but I didn’t sit with them. I felt ashamed. To be 50 and have my drinks paid for by others. That’s what I’ve been reduced to by old Nick...

...

(pp. 90-92)

I would like, if possible, to be married within the year and have made my wife pregnant, to become a father soon. To have a sense of achievement, and I think the pudenda may be able to offer me that. I hope I’m not mistaken. I also want a home of my own to live in with my wife and child. It’s no good living with my parents and my sisters, it wouldn’t be proper. A home, small and humble, somewhere by the sea, between Athens and Corinth, or a little flat, even if it is only 50 square metres, in London.

I would like within those few square metres to build our life, our love, our dreams. If I found out that while I was away at work she had gone and had it off with someone else, I would have two choices: either to shut myself away in a monastery, or to go directly to a psychiatric hospital. And then maybe I’d make her regret her sinful deed. And generate in her, with my dignified attitude, a massive sense of guilt.

My whole life is one woman
one moment she's hotter than hot
the next she freezes me out.

When a woman falls into the sin of adultery, it means that she has gone past all the stages of repentance and arrived at corruption. In adultery, a man takes delight, whereas a woman sets the seal upon her vice. I would go to the psychiatric hospital for the sake of revenge, so that everyone would say: "I spit on you, worthless woman, you have driven the man mad." To the monastery I would go more for my own peace of mind, so that I could forget her. Because I do believe that when you sit down and tell a little old man in a worn cassock your pain, then God will offer you spiritual peace.

On the question of age, there are certain traditions I cannot overcome. In other words, I would like my wife to be at least 10 or 15 years younger than me. Even a greater age difference wouldn't bother me, and let them all say, "There goes granddad with his bit of skirt." Anyway, Marinaki was truly a nice bit of skirt – as good as any model. Whereas Roro was not all that lovely, but you could get it up for her. You could feel the woman in her from a long way off, she sent out signals. That doesn't mean that women who dress up somewhat are sluts and all the others are good. Let there be no mistake: even Megaera, who wore conservative twinsets, was the soul of prostitution. And old Nick's wife always dressed decently, but at heart she was a snake.

My friend X told me that he saw Roro with her new man, who is so unattractive one wonders how she can bear to go out with him. Two metres tall and thin as a telegraph pole. Consequently, I believe that most women are full of shit. Does that halfwit really think the scarecrow she has with her, that ugly mug, is such a big deal?

I am thinking of making the title of my autobiography, *Memoirs of a Tawdry Life*. Because I didn't begin my life like this. I believed in ideas, in greatness, in people, and I ended up a worthless nobody.

...

(p. 101)

I study the face of every woman, methodically. Is she troubled? Is she cheerful? Is she nicely made up? Does she breath vitality or an unaccountable melancholy? Has the woman in question finally thrown down the reins? If you see that she's shaved her eyebrows, you know that she will shave you. Guaranteed. I can tell straight away if a woman is approaching me for money, if she really fancies me or is just having me on. I can tell. I've been around.

...

(p. 234)

Time for myself I don't have at all. I run around all day, and pray to God that I'll be able to hold down a job, to lighten my debts a little. And some time, before I lay me down finally, I would like to wear a monk's habit and go to the Holy Mountain, to a beautiful and peaceful hermitage. The monk's habit I see as a deliverance, a refuge from the people who call themselves my family. Just to have my little cell, my peace and quiet, so that I can finally live like a human being. I have, unfortunately, wasted too many years – I have been taken advantage of by whores and ruthless employers. I was born unlucky.

...

(p. 250)

Grandmother Chrysovalantia had lost it by the end.

Whenever anyone came to our house, she would ask: “May I take your photograph?” And before they had a chance to answer, she would lift up her skirt and show them her knickers.

She did it to all our visitors without exception. We became a joke. Especially if she’d managed, without my mother noticing, to take off her knickers. And to think that at that time we were being visited by priests, church committees, military men and their wives (of course, their children had a whale of a time with Grandma).

By the end, we didn’t let anyone into the house. Dad was embarrassed by Grandma and took it out on Mum. God rest her soul, she created huge problems for us by the end.

I’m having panic attacks again. What if I take after Grandma? What if I have it in my genes? I tremble at the thought.



Oddný Eir

Jarðnæði (2011)

Land of Love, Plan of Ruins

Publishing House **Bjartur**

Biography

Oddný Eir Ævarsdóttir was born in 1972. She completed a doctoral minor degree at Sorbonne University, as well as carrying out research in Icelandic museum field studies. She has written three autobiographical novels, translated and edited literary works, organised visual arts events and ran a visual arts space in New York and Reykjavík (Dandruff Space) in collaboration with her brother, archaeologist Uggi Ævarsson. Together they run the publishing company Apaflasa (Monkey Dandruff). She has also worked as editor of the environmental web site Náttúra.info. *Heim til míns hjarta* was nominated for the cultural prize of the newspaper *DV* in 2009. *Jarðnæði* was nominated for the Icelandic Literary Award in 2011 and won the Icelandic Women's Literature Prize in 2012.

Synopsis

Land of Love, Plan of Ruins is written in the form of a diary, describing a period in the narrator's life where she is preoccupied by the search for a place to belong and an urge to settle down. Paradoxically enough, this drives her to embark on all kinds of journeys, physically and mentally, through time and space, in order to find answers to questions that not only concern her personally but also the whole of mankind. She explores various modes of living, ponders different types of relationships and contemplates her bond with her family, land and nation; trying to find a balance between companionship and independence, movement and stability, past, present and future.

As in her two earlier novels, Oddný Eir's text verges on the autobiographical and is thus highly personal. At the same time it is philosophical in nature, even scholarly at times. Furthermore, her inclination towards fantasy always shines through, as she creates her own version of the reality around us, making her descriptions of the dilemmas of daily life first and foremost an inner journey of a vivid imagination.

Jarðnæði

Oddný Eir

Basel, blöðruselsdagur, stórstreymi, fullt tungl

Við sátum inni í eldhúsi fram undir hádegi og ræddum um rými og hús. Ég sagðist halda að ég vildi eiga eitt hús við sjó og annað inni í landi. Eyugla sagði okkur þá frá húsi Anaïs Nin í Kaliforníu, það er í japönskum stíl með risastórri vinnustofu þar sem hún hafði algjört næði til skrifta. Þangað fór hún reglulega árin sín í Ameríku, var gift tveimur mönnum og fór á milli þeirra, átti heima í tveimur mjög ólíkum húsum. Ja, hérna, þetta þóttu mér tíðindi. Að hún hefði lifað svona algjörlega tvöföldu lífi.

Litli kofinn hans Strindbergs er úti á lítilli eyju inni í skógi og þar stendur skrifborðið hans enn, aleitt, sagði einn Seppi sem kom sterkur inn í umræðuna. Einhvern veginn finnst mér eins og næðið sem Strindberg sóttist eftir hafi verið tómt eða neikvætt, næði í einhverskonar hvergi því hann sótti sköpunarkraft sinn í einveru og sjálfsvorkunn. Ég held að Nin hafi frekar sóst eftir næði sem var hlaðið fjöri og minningum því hún virðist hafa sótt sinn kraft í samskiptin, sagði Seppi.

Ég veit ekki hvort þetta er rétt greining en líklega þarf ég hvort tveggja, algjöra einveru og ástrík samskipti. En vonandi þarfnast sköpunarkraftur minn bara eins eiginmanns! Hann verður að vera jafningi minn. Maður sem ég er ekki háð og sem er ekki háður mér en sem kýs af viljastyrk og í gleði að vera bara með mér. Og ég vil auðvitað bara vera með honum þótt ég skreppi hugsanlega suður til Kaliforníu.

Ég sit í næturlestinni, stefni á Gare du Nord.

Hveragerði, bænadagur að vetri, tungl lægst

Mér gengur ágætlega að vinna hérna. Best finnst mér að vinna fram eftir nóttu. Vakna við bank bró þegar hann kemur úr borginni á leið til embættisstarfanna úti á landi. Fer á sloppnum niður að opna, svo upp í eldhús að steikja bókhveitiskonsur og hita kaffi. Við erum með sófa í eldhúsinu, gamlan leðursófa sem afi hannaði og lét smíða. Þar er gott að leggja sig eftir kaffið og ræða um forsendur minjaverndar og önnur grundvallarmál áður en hann rýkur af stað, má engan tíma missa. Oft fær hann þó að kúka áður, en það er mesta traustsyfirlýsing um heimili; ef maður finnur næði til svo persónulegra athafna í annarra hóbýlum þá er þar sannkallað náðhús.

Minn maður nýtur þessara samverustunda líka. Þá er hann yfirleitt búinn að vinna sína vinnu og er afslappaður og á milli þeirra tveggja hefur myndast enn meira traust. Þeir gera grín hvor að öðrum, það grín byrjaði eiginlega strax en er mjög góðlátlegt, en þeir dást líka mjög reglulega að búningum hvor annars og spekulera mikið í efni og vefnaði. Annar segir að skoskur vefnaður sé bestur og hinn að ítalskur sé betri og svo rifja þeir með söknuði upp ullarfötin sem voru ofin í verksmiðjunni hans afa.

Einn daginn sagði Fugli okkur undarlegan draum, hann sagði mér reyndar frá honum fyrst en ég hvatti hann til að segja Uglu hann. Þeir urðu báðir mjög vandræðalegir, hlógu hátt en áttu ekki orð. Ja, hver andskotinn.

Draumurinn var svona: Fuglafræðingurinn stakk þumal fingri á bólakaf upp í afturenda minjavarðarins. Já eins og ekkert væri og hló. Og hvað svo? Ég man það ekki, sagði Fugli vandræðalegur.

Hveragerði, Valentínusardagur, tungl hæst

Ég var að átta mig á því að við hittumst nú orðið eiginlega aldrei í hjónarúminu, hann er sofnaður þegar ég kem upp í og hann er löngu farinn fram úr þegar ég vakna.

Ég spurði hann hvort við ættum að hittast reglulega inni í svefnherbergi um miðjan daginn. Jú, hann var til í það. Mætti til leiks á mínúttunni þrjú með sperrt eyrun en þá hafði ég gleymt tímanum og sat í druslulegum morgunslopp með hreiður í hnakka og stírir að reyna að búa til krossgátu. Við ákváðum þá bara að tefla í staðinn, hann er að kenna mér mannganginn. Hann er þolinmóður kennari og leyfir mér stundum að vinna. En ég er ekki alveg komin í tengsl við skákmeistarann í mér. Paníkin er minn veiki hlekkur. Og þegar ég paníkera get ég ekki einbeitt mér að leiknum, fer að pæla í taflinu sem fyrirbæri, það er sjálfsagt einhver vörn í heilanum. Hvort hrókurinn gæti hugsanlega verið kallaður Bessi eða hvort það nafn eigi ekki betur við biskupinn sem í raun er með klofið höfuð eins og fífl.

Ég hef verið að velta fyrir mér örþrifaráðum. Hvort væri sniðugt að skipuleggja eggjandi stundir, leigja ljósbláar myndir í sjoppunni niðri og skokka út í álnavörubúð eftir sokkaböndum. Hin alræmda flóaerótík. Verst að ég gæti aldrei sett á svið leikrit fyrir hann, ég færi alltaf að hlæja. Er þá samband okkar orðið eins og systkinasamband? Þar sem hláturinn og hlýjan í nándinni tekur svo mikið pláss að kynferðisþráin rúmast þar ekki?

Er burleskan þá okkar næsta tilraun? Eða er það eins og klámið, endastöð, fyrirsjáanleg skrumskæling á þrám fyrir þá sem eru ekki búnir að vinna sig út úr niðurlægingunni sem fylgir valdafíkn eða valdaleysi? Klámið snýst um skömmina en það opnast aldrei inn að auðmýktinni, það króar þrána af

svo hún nær ekki að umbreytast. Endurtekningin leiðir til þroskastöðnunar. Sumir virðast þó ná að braggast furðuvel og fagurfræðilega í klámi en ég hef ekki enn hitt þann sem hefur samhliða þróast á tilfinningasviðinu.

Ég man hvað ég varð fyrir sárum vonbrigðum með klámið sem gegnumbrot vestrænnar kynskynjunar. Er þetta þá öll transgressjónin? Verður það ekkert frumlegra? Nei, ég meina ekki ljótara, ýktara, heldur meira inn á við, meira sálfræðilega ögrandi án þess að verða að ofbeldi? Er ekki meira spennandi að reyna á þölmörk samlífsins án skammhlaups yfir í ofbeldið?

Cumbria, Þorláksmessa á sumri, aukanætur

óskast

Systirin skrifar í dagbókina sína að þau hafi legið saman í móanum systkinin og hlustað á andardrátt hvort annars og á vatnið í loftinu og að hann hafi sagst ímynda sér að svona yrði það í gröfinni, í algjöru næði að hlusta á kyrrð jarðarinnar í nánd við sína nánustu. Undir ýviðartrénu. Mig langaði að leggjast þar og hvíla mig. Nema hvað. Ég mundi eftir orðunum hennar Eyuglu, baráttusystur minnar. Þegar hún var upptendruð að fatta hver væri munurinn á okkar baráttu og annarri eldri: Nei, ekki back to nature heldur forward! Áfram til náttúrunnar!

Ég sá að krákurnar flugu allar í humátt og voru að flýta sér. Svo ég tók bara einn köngul upp af götu minni og hljóp á eftir þeim, kvaddi Vatnahéraðið.

Af hverju fór Dorothy ekki bara að búa með Coleridge til dæmis? Af hverju bjuggu þau ekki til vinabú saman? Hefðu þá getað búið til dýnamískari tengsl við bú Williams. Í staðinn var hún alveg ofan í honum og varð á endanum þunglynd af

nándinni sem kannski hefur ekki náð að þroskast eftir allt saman.

Þá sá ég lítið skilti: Uglusvæðið. Velti fyrir mér þunglyndi og nánd, hvaða tengsl gætu verið þar á milli. Hvað með ugluna? Hún verpir í annarra hreiður, oft fálkahreiður, en er samt engum háð. Var Dorothy um of háð bróður sínum? Var það meinið? Að vera háður nándinni, þá er kannski stutt í þunglyndið.

Ó, óhæfa er að tefja í rómantískri geðfró, gæla við að búa með bróður sínum og konu hans, í afhýsi, skonsu, skrifa og mjólka geiturnar. Nú má ég engan tíma missa! Af stað, gamli geldfugl, soðna skynfífl, bjöllurnar verða hljómlausar og rendurnar upplitast á kloffnu húfunni þinni nema þú hlaupir núna! Bimm-bamm og bomm, froskur í bauk og ormur í á.

Ég er að lesa um hinn gotneska anda í bók Ruskins, það er rauð flúruð bók, laufskreytt. Þar greinir hann hinn gotneska anda niður í nokkur samvaxin element:

villieðli, fjölbreytileiki, breytingaþrá, nán tengsl við náttúruna, fjarstæðukennd tengslamyndun eða gróteska, óhamið ímyndunarafli, agi og þrjóska, örlæti, eyjumynstur?

Hólsfjöll, djámosadagur, vaxandi tungl

Það er heldur kalt úti í dag og við kúrum okkur inni í kofa og lesum. Fugli heggur við í eldinn, hér inni er funheitt og notalegt. Hann er að lesa aðra bók eftir Thomas Bernhard, Leiðrétting, um tvífara Wittgensteins sem áætla að byggja systur sinni hið fullkomna hús. Wittgenstein kom til Íslands á sínum tíma og ferðaðist um landið á hesti með vini sínum. Var víst meðal annars að leita sér að jarðnæði. Byggði sér síðan kofa uppi í hlið í Noregi, pínulítinn kofa þar sem hann

gat verið í næði til að hugsa. Það er nefnilega ótrúlegt hvað maður þarf mikið næði vilji maður hugsa heila hugsun.

Ég er að lesa núna skýrslu eftir Uglya sem er fæddur sama dag og Wittgenstein. Skýrsla hans um rannsókn á uppruna byggðarinnar á Hólsfjöllum. Hann gerði rannsóknina á Hóli, hér enn lengra úti í auðninni. Hann sagði við mig í vor að þarna ættum við systkinin jafnvel helst að setja upp okkar bú. Geitabú. Þarna væri okkar staður, hann væri að hugsa um að bjóða í jörðina og byggja okkur hús þar sem fjölskyldur okkar gætu búið og pabbi og mamma og ömmurnar komið til okkar og búið með okkur. Mér leist ljómandi vel á það. En þessir draumar voru til umræðu áður en Kínverjinn sprengdi upp prísinn...

Í ritgerðinni segir hann frá þjóðsögu um fyrstu ábúendur á Hóli. Það hafi verið ein Guðrún úr Jökulsárhlíðinni, hin fráa Fjalla-Gunnsa sem var gerð útlæg þegar upp komst að hún gekk með barn bróður síns undir belti, fór til fjalla með tveimur geitum, gróf sig inn í hól og ræktaði svo jörðina, veiddi silung og kom upp blómlegu búi. Þá kom bróðir hennar til hennar ásamt hinum systkinunum og þau bjuggu í sátt og samlyndi fjarri mannabyggðum og í trássi við lög um langa hríð.

Nú eru aðrir tímar. Stóru fjárhúsin eru eins og minnisvarði um ömurlega búskaparstefnu. Stórbúskaparstefna, stóriðjustefna. Af hverju ekki smáíðnaður, smábúskapur í öðru hagkerfi? Það fengust engir styrkir til hægfara uppbyggingar, allt átti að gerast strax og verða stórt. Í stað þess að hlúa að litlum sjálfstæðum einingum í gagnkvæmum tengslum var keyrt á útþenslustefnu sem hafði ekkert viðnám nema eigin hnignun sem var fyrirsjáanleg því það var aldrei stefnt að því að gera búskapinn sjálfbæran.

Ég held að bændur ættu að fara í sálgreiningu og endurhugsa tengsl sín við jörðina og karlmennskuna. Og ekki bara bændur. Öll fósturbörn jarðarinnar þurfa að læra að fósra hana.

Land of Love, Plan of Ruins

Oddný Eir

Translated from the Icelandic by Jane Appleton

Basel, Hooded Seal Day, spring tide, full moon

We sat in the kitchen until midday talking about space and housing. I said I thought I'd like to have one place by the sea and another inland. Owlie then told us about Anaïs Nin's house in California, in the Japanese style with a huge studio where she had total peace and quiet to write. She went there often during her years in America, was married to two men and went between them, had a home in two very different houses. Well, this sure surprised me. That she'd lived such a completely double life.

Strindberg's little cabin is out on a small island in a forest where his desk still stands, all alone, said Snoopy, who took an active part in the discussion. Somehow I feel as though the space that Strindberg sought was empty or negative, space in some kind of nowhere because he looked for his creative strength in solitude and self-pity. I think Nin looked rather for space that was shaped by vitality and memory because she seems to have drawn her strength from interaction, Snoopy said.

I don't know which is the correct analysis but I probably need both: complete solitude and affectionate interaction. But hopefully my creativity only needs one husband! He has to be my equal. A man on whom I am not dependent and who isn't dependent on me but who chooses willingly and gladly to be just with me. And of course I want only to be with him even though I might pop south to California.

I'm on the night train, heading for Gare du Nord.

Hveragerði, wintertime day of prayer, moon on the horizon

Working here is going very well. I like working late at night best of all. Wake with a start when my brother Owl knocks, on his way from the city to official business out in the countryside. Go down in my dressing gown to open, then up to the kitchen to make buckwheat pancakes and coffee. We have a sofa in the kitchen, the old leather sofa Grandpa designed and had made. It's good to lie down after coffee and talk about the premises for conservation areas and other fundamental matters before he rushes off, no time to waste. Often he takes the chance to poo first, the biggest vote of confidence in a home; if a person feels at ease for such a personal act in another's dwelling then that's a true restroom, room of rest.

My husband Birdy enjoys these moments together too. He's usually finished work by then and is relaxed, and between the two of them even more trust has formed. They make fun of each other, have done from the start actually, but it's very congenial, and they also very often admire each other's outfits and reflect a lot on material and fabric. One says that Scottish fabric is best and the other that Italian is better and then they reminisce with a sense of loss about the woollens that were woven in Grandpa's workshop.

One day Birdy told my brother and me about a peculiar dream he'd had, he told me about it first in fact, but I urged him to tell Owl too. They both became very embarrassed, laughed loudly but didn't say anything. Yes, what the fuck.

The dream went like this: Birdy the ornithologist stuck his thumb deep into Owl's behind. As though that were perfectly normal, and laughed. And what then? I don't remember, said Birdy awkwardly.

Hveragerði, Valentine's Day, crazy moon

I just realized that we hardly ever meet in bed anymore, he's asleep when I come to bed and he's long gone when I wake.

I asked him whether we should meet regularly in the bedroom during the day. Yes, he was in for that. Showed up right on time, all ears, only I'd lost track of time and sat in my shabby nightgown with bird's nest hair and sleep in my eyes, trying to do a crossword. We decided just to play chess instead, he's teaching me how the pieces move. He's a patient teacher and sometimes lets me win. But I haven't yet connected with the chess master inside me. Panic is my weakness. When I panic I can't concentrate on the game, start thinking about chess as a phenomenon, some defensive mechanism of the mind of course. Whether the castle could possibly be called Teddy or whether that name would be better for the bishop who in fact has a cloven head like a fool.

I've been considering desperate measures. Whether it would be a good idea to organise rousing evenings, rent blue movies in the shop downstairs and get some garters from the general store. The erotic cliché. It's a shame I could never stage a play for him, I would always start laughing. Has our relationship then become like between siblings? Where the laughter and warmth of intimacy take up so much space that there's no room for sexual desire?

Is the burlesque our next experiment then? Or is that like porn, a terminal, a predictable parody of desire for those who haven't worked through the humiliation that comes with tyranny or powerlessness? Porn is about shame but never opens up to humility, it corners the desire so it never manages to transform. The repetition stunts development. Still, some seem to make good progress in porn, aesthetically, but I'm yet to meet anyone who has made parallel progress emotionally.

I remember how sorely disappointed I was with the porn as an affront to western sexual perception. Is this then the whole transgression? Won't it be more original than this? No, I don't mean coarser, more effusive, but more inward, more psychologically provocative without turning into violence? Isn't it more exciting to test the limits of cohabitation without crossing the thin line over to violence?

Cumbria, summer feast day of St Thorlac, the additional nights wishing

The sister, Dorothy, writes in her diary that they have lain together, the siblings, on the heath, and listened to each other's breathing and to the water in the air, and that he said he imagines it would be like this in the grave, in complete peace listening to the stillness of the earth, close to those closest to you. Under a yew tree. I wanted to lie there and rest. Except what. I remembered Owlie's words, my sister in arms. When she was euphoric to realise the different between our fight and the older one: No, not back to nature, but forward! Forward into nature!

I saw all the ravens flying home after each other in a hurry. So I picked up just one cone in my street and ran after them, farewelled the Lake District.

Then I saw a small sign: Owl Area. I thought about depression and intimacy, what connection there could be between them. What about the owl? She lays eggs in another's nest, often a falcon nest, but is still dependent on no one. Was Dorothy too dependent on her brother? Was that the problem? Perhaps being dependent on intimacy is just a short step away from depression.

Oh, it's inappropriate to linger in romantic solace, live with one's brother and his wife, in an annexe, a closet, writing and milking the goats. Now I have no time to lose! Get on with it old fool, the bells will fall silent and the edges will fade on your cloven cap unless you run now! Bimm-bamm and bomm, frog in a box and worm in a river.

Why didn't Dorothy just go and live with Coleridge for example? Why didn't they build a place together as friends? They could then have made a more dynamic connection with William's place. Instead they were joined at the hip and she ended up depressed by the intimacy that perhaps hadn't managed to develop despite everything.

I'm reading about the Gothic spirit in Ruskin's book, a red flowery book, decorated. In it, he boils the Gothic spirit down to a few integrated elements:

wild nature, multiplicity, longing for change, close connection with nature, absurd networking or grotesque, uninhibited imagination, discipline and obstinacy, generosity, island patterns?

Hólsfjöll, Marsh Moss Day, waxing moon

It's rather cold outside today and we snuggle up inside the cabin and read. Birdy chops wood for the fire, it's boiling hot and cosy inside. He's reading another Thomas Bernhard book, *Correction*, about Wittgenstein's doppelganger who plans to build the perfect house for his sister. Wittgenstein came to Iceland in his time and travelled the country on horseback with his friend. Was probably looking for a piece of land among other things. Later built himself a cabin up in the Norwegian mountainside, a tiny cabin where he could

be alone with his thoughts. It's unbelievable how much peace and quiet a person needs to be able to think whole thoughts.

I'm now reading a report by Owl who was born the same day as Wittgenstein. It's an investigation into the origins of the settlement at Hólsfjöll. He did the research at Hóll, even further out into the wilderness from here. He said to me in spring that that's really where my brother and I should set up a place. A goat farm. That would be our place. He was thinking about making an offer on the land and building us a house where our families could live and Dad and Mum and the grandmothers come and live with us. I very much liked the sound of that. But these dreams were being discussed before the Chinese man inflated the price...

In the article he tells of a folktale about the first settlers at Hóll. There was a Gunnsa from Jökulsárhlíð, the quick Mountain-Gunnsa who was outlawed when it was discovered she was carrying her brother's child, went into the mountains with two goats, dug herself into a hill and then farmed the land, fished trout, and the place she built flourished. Then her brother came to her along with the other siblings and they lived in peace and harmony far from town and beyond the reach of the law for a long time.

How times have changed. Big sheep sheds are like a monument to a dismal agricultural movement. Big farming movement, big industrial movement. Why not cottage industry, small-scale farming in another economic system? There were no grants for slow development, everything was supposed to happen immediately and become big. Instead of nurturing small independent set-ups across the board, they drove an expansion that had no resistance except its own decline, and that was predictable because there were no moves towards making farming sustainable.

Should farmers be psychoanalysed and rethink their connection with the earth and masculinity? And not just farmers. All mother earth's foster children need to learn to foster her.



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Janis Jonevs

Jelgava '94 (2013)

Publishing House **Mansards Publishers**

Biography

Born in 1980 in Jelgava, Latvia, Janis Jonevs was educated at the Jelgava State Gymnasium and the Latvian Academy of Culture where he was awarded a Master's Degree. Jonevs works as a copywriter and, since 2002, he has also worked as a reviewer and translator from French.

Synopsis

Even though *Jelgava '94* is Jonevs' debut novel, the book quickly proved to be a big hit and best-seller in 2013. The story is set in the 1990s in the Latvian city of Jelgava and looks at the craze during this period for the alternative culture of heavy metal music. Jonevs takes the reader deep inside the world described in the novel: combining the intimate diary of a youngster trying to find himself by joining a subculture, as well as a skilful, detailed and almost documentary-like depiction of the beginnings of the second independence of Latvia. This is a story that is even more captivating for the generation that lived through the events described in the book – Jonevs is the first writer to stir up memories of this period through a fully-fledged literary depiction.

Jelgava '94 is a portrait of a generation in the 1990s who are searching for their own identity and are fans of alternative culture. This is a touching story about us as youngsters, when everybody is against the whole world and tries not to become 'one of them'. But is it for real? Can one keep the promise?

Jelgava '94

Janis Jonevs

././ Tas ir neticami, viņš šo kreklu atrada humpalās. Tas bija brīnums. Mēs visi pēc tam metāmies pārmeklēt humpalu kaudzes. Es arī uzrakstīju mammai sarakstu, kādi krekli jāņem, tikko tos ierauga: Death, Cannibal Corpse, Anal Count, Brutal Truth, Carcass, Hypocrisy. Nevienu tādu viņa neatrada, viņa atnesa kreklu ar uzrakstu Michael Learns to Rock un trīs smaidīgu puisi à la Zaks Moriss fotogrāfijām. Par spīti dumpnieciskajam nihilismam, mana sirds gandrīz salūza no mīļuma. Tomēr to kreklu es uzvilkt nespēju.

Bet Nāve atrada humpalās Obituary kreklu par piecdesmit santīmiem. Un vēl viņam nebija labi. Viņš bija tāds kā drusku mānīticīgs un uzskatīja, ka ar šo kreklu nopircis nelaimi (tas, protams, viņu necik neatturēja to citīgi nēsāt). Tā arī tagad viņš teica:

— Es teicu! Es teicu! Vienmēr kaut kas neveicas, kad man mugurā tas kreklis!

Mēs nupat bijām izmesti no vilciena Jelgava–Rīga. Par niekiem. Mums nebija biļešu. Konduktoru brigāde nokomentēja mūsu matus un izlika mūs ārā, ka noplīvoja vien. Vilciens aizbrauca tālāk, bet mēs stāvējām šeit, Olainē.

— Ko darīsim, kungī?

Nāve paskatījās pakaļ vilcienam, nekas no tā vairs nebija saskatāms. Edgaram nekad netrūka padoma:

— Es domāju, mēs varam sist suņus un tirgot ādas!

Viņš neapšaubāmi bija jucis. Viņš dzīvoja Nāvem kaimiņos.

Jukuma un pārliemas mīlestības pret šausmu kino dēļ viņu dēvēja par Zombi.

— Drīz vietējie tirgos mūsu ādas.

Mēs ērgļu acīm nopētījām pilsētu, kas pletās mūsu priekšā, krūmiem aizaugusi. Nemanīja nevienu pašu cilvēku. Bet krūmi izskatījās aizdomīgi.

— Pazūdam.

Un mēs gājām uz šoseju.

Te Zemgales līdzenums bija aplūkojams vēl labāk, Jelgavas puses pamale šķita vēl mīļāka, mīļāka nekā ilgotā Rīgas puse. Rīga mūs neinteresēja, bet, izbraucot tai bezmaz cauri, varēja nonākt Biržā. Tā bija pasaules galvenā vieta. Dažkārt saukta arī par Panku Biržu. Mamma stāstīja, ka tur jau septiņdesmitajos hipiji mainījušies ar platēm. Biķernieku mežā, līdz kuram varēja tikt ar astoņpadsmito trolejbusu vai varbūt tramvaju. Cilvēki pulcējās mežā — atstumtie, ārpus likuma esošie, kuri negribēja citu vietu, pulcējās mežā un darīja tur savas lietas, par kurām nenojauta pilsēta un pasaule apkārt.

Ko viņi tur darīja? Pagaidām zinājām tikai, ka mainījās ar kasetēm. Ar to pietika. Kasetes mums vajadzēja. Vairs nepietika ar Nirvana un Pearl Jam.

Es pa klusam vēl dažreiz klausījos Nirvanu. Tomēr biežāk jaunās kasetes. ././ Mūzika, kurai līdzīgu es nekad agrāk nebiju dzirdējis. Es vispār nekad nebiju spējis iedomāties, ka kaut kas tāds pastāv. Šī patiešām bija cita pasaule. Bija labi sēdēt te uz asfalta, kopā ar Nāvi un Zombi, ceļa vidū uz citu pasauli.

— Sprāgala! Pērtele! ! Ibanāts! ! !

Zombis lādējās tīrā deviņdesmito manierē. Atkal mašīna slaidi aizšalca mums garām. Lai cik atraktīvi Zombis vicinājās un

ieņēma teatrālas pozas, stopēšana nevedās. Un tā jau minūtes piecpadsmit, spriežot pēc saules (mums nevienam nebija pulksteņa). Nāve drūmi pareģoja:

— Tā mēs uz biržu netiksim. Tur sākas desmitos.

— Tad varbūt beidziet sildīt kules uz asfalta un nāciet kaut ko darīt? Man jau roka nopuvusi.

Es gan neticu, ka Zombis jelkad nogura. Tagad viņš ceļmalā plūca garākās nātres un slānīja ar tām neredzamus pretiniekus.

Pie stopēšanas ķēros es. Nāca satiksmes mikriņš, un es atrāvu roku, aizliku aiz muguras un novērsos no ceļa. Naudas taču mums nebija. Tad nāca otrais žigulītis, vīrs stabili turēja abas rokas uz stūres un skatījās tikai uz ceļu, sieva smaidīja un noraidoši kratīja galvu. Bet aizmugure viņiem taču bija tukša. Viņi izskatījās viena gadagājuma ar maniem vecākiem, kuri vienmēr ņēma stopētājus. Tad nāca pavisam vienaldzīgs auģiks vai kas tamlīdzīgs (es neatšķiršu mašīnu markas, zinu tikai tēta žigīti). Vēl kāds ārzemju lūznēns, tajā sēdēja kāds pieklājīgs cilvēks, viņš parādīja ar īkšķi pa labi, sak, tūlīt griežos, citādi paņemtu. Īss, cilvēcīgs kontakts. Nākošās mašīnas vadītājs man pamāja pavisam mīkļainu garāmbraucēja žestu. Ko tas nozīmēja? Audz, zēn, nelien ārā no mājas, kamēr nav pašam savs fordiņš?

Tā es sarunājos ar autobraucējiem, manai sarunai bija ilgstamība un attīstība, bet viņiem — tikai mirklis. Es sarunājos ar pašu tūkstošgalvaino ceļa gājumu, apturēts savā punktā — lūk, mašīna mums pamirkšķina un sāk bremsēt, Nāve jau griežas skatīties, kur Zombis pa pļavu aizcīnījies, bet iekšā pilns knapi par mums vecāku deģenerātu, noteikti no Olaines, viņi smejas un uzgāzē, viņi tikai gribēja mūs piemānīt, un prom ir, pat viņi, kas veltīja mums uzmanību, jau ir mūs aizmirsuši pēc divām minūtēm, pēc trim kilometriem.

— Man piegriezās. Neķeras. Pamēģini tu.

Nāve nāca, skumjš uz visu pasauli, nošņaukājās un ietrieca roku telpā virs ceļa. Viņš skaitīja mantru:

— Stājies taču, idiot!

Mašīna bija gara kā zvaigžņu kuģis, tās mirdzošajam, garāmslidošajam sānam nemanīja gala. Mašīna apstājās. Tas laikam bija no dārgajiem auto, spīdīgs. Monsieur paliecās ārā un jautāja:

— Kur tad džekiņiem jābrauc?

Uz Plakanciemu, man nez kāpēc nikni iešāvās prātā, bet Nāve atbildēja lietišķi:

— Uz Biržu.

— Hā, hā. Birži uz otru pusi, džekiņi. Lietuvā.

— Uz Rīgu.

— Nu kur tad?

— Uz Rīgu!

Šis atkal pasmējās.

— Nu, pavedīsim. Varam pavest.

Zombis skrēja no pļavas, aplipsis zaļumiem kā jukušais Līrs, un pirms iesēšanās saņēma norādījumu:

— Nopurinies.

Automobilis slīdēja klusāk par žiguli, un pār otra priekšējā sēdekļa pleciem kaskādē plūda brīnišķīgi mati, to spožums cirta acīs, kad trāpīja saule, bet ēnā tiem piemita asinskrāsas romantika — blakus saimniekam sēdēja metālists! Nē, es paskatījos spogulī, tur skatījās meitenes acis. Viņas tēvs piespieda gāzīti, un es piespiedu degunu logam, lai atsāktu

sarunu ar ceļu. Lūk, deģenerātu auto, viņi sēž klusi, katrs skatās citur, viņiem nav ko darīt bez mums, lūk, es pašaujos viņiem garām un parādu slepenu fakucīti. Tad mēs apdzenam mīklaino mājēju, viņš ir tikpat nopietns. Tad pieklājīgais pagrieziena kungs, kāpēc viņš nav nogriezies? Lūk, arī žigulis ar padzīvojušo pāri, sieviete groza galvu un pamana mani, un atkal smaidot krata galvu, nē, nē.

— Ko tad Rīgā džekiņi darīs?

To, protams, jautāja mūsu laipnais pavedējs. Katrs no mums klusēja, gaidīdams, ka atbildēs kāds cits.

— Ko?

Viņš jautāja vēlreiz. Nāve un Zombis atbildēja reizē, pie kam Nāve teica:

— Iesim uz veikalu.

Bet Zombis:

— Skaitīsim pensionārus.

Neviens vairs negribēja pieminēt Biržu, nez kāpēc tā šajā pēc „Wunderbaum“ un ādas smaržojošajā mašīnā šķita neaizsargāta.

— Hā, hā. Jociņi džekiņi jūs esat.

Vispār jau ir tāds likums, ka stopētājiem jāsarunājas ar laipno vadītāju. Lai darījums sanāk savstarpēji izdevīgs. Es jau domāju pateikt, ka labs laiks vai ko tādu, bet viņš pats nelikās mierā:

— Kas jūs tādi esat?

Eksistenciāls jautājums. Tiešām, kas mēs esam? Zombis lēni atbildēja:

— Zē-ni.

Balsī, kas signalizēja, ka viņam nenormāli nāk zviēdzienš.

— Nu, es domāju, kas jūs esat, nu, visiem mati, jūs esat no kaut kādas vienības, vai?

Mēs raustijām plecus — ko nu mēs, mēs tāpat vien.

— Jūs taču neesat tie trakie metālisti?

Bznn, nu, kā lai pasaka... Esam it kā, vai kā? Čāļi, sakiet kaut ko? !

— Kādu mūziku jūs klausāties?

Nāve vairs negribēja izlocīties.

— Cannibal Corpse.

— Ko, ko?

Saimnieks pat pagrieza klusāk savu mūziku, tā bija visklasiskākā no klasiskās mūzikas, turklāt baisi samiksētā popūrijā. Viņš pagrieza klusāk un pagriezās uz mūsu pusi, ko?

— Cannibal Corpse.

— Ko tas nozīmē?

— Tulkojumā no angļu valodas – kanibāla līķis.

— Domā, es nemāku angļiski?

Un pagrieza skaļāk ar bumsīgu ritmu piesmieto Bēthovenu. Pēc minūtes viņš jautāja atkal:

— Tu domā, es neprotu angļiski?

— Nedomāju.

— Tad kāpēc tu tā saki?

— Nesaku.

— Kā, nesaki? Tie bija tavi vārdi!

— Atvainojos.

Šis stūrēja tālāk, cik nu pa Jelgavas šoseju vispār jāstūrē.

— Man, piemēram, patīk laba mūzika. Jūs tādu zināt? Zināt vispār, kas skan?

Bēthovena piektā bija neticamā veidā pārmiksējusies uz Brāmsa „Ungāru dejām“. Bet es neko neteicu.

— Nezināt!

Nez vai meitene viņam blakus, droši vien viņa meita, joprojām skatījās spogulī ar savām meitenes acīm? Es neskatījos.

— Un kāpēc jums nepatīk laba mūzika?

Nāve bija skaidri apņēmies neko vairs neteikt, pat skatienu bija izslēdzis, to viņš mācēja perfekti. Zombis kaut ko mēģināja:

— Gribas kaut ko interesantu.

Saimnieks tikai piespieda gāzīti, es gribēju iemest aci spidometrā, lai piedzīvojums nepaiet garām un vēlāk varētu pastāstīt, uz cik mēs nesāmies ar šo trako, bet neuzdriksējās, jo tā es noteikti ieskatītos spogulī, un tur varbūt būtu meitenes acis. Skatījos atkal uz ceļu. Tur bija lapsa, sabraukta.

— Un kāpēc jūs neizskatāties normāli? Zini, kāpēc? Es pateikšu, kāpēc!

Komandieris bija uzvilcis:

— Jūs nemaz negribat būt normāli. Jums tas liekas stulbi. Jūs domājat, ka esat par visiem gudrāki.

Viņš vairs nebija valdāms. Un mēs vēl necik nebijām pietuvojušies Rīgai.

— Tagad jūs iesēdāties manā mašīnā, redzat, laba mašīna. Vai es ar to izpelnījos kaut kādu jūsu cieņu? Nē!

Tagad man palika pa īstam baigi. Jo viņš runāja tieši to, ko es šobrīd domāju.

— Jums vienalga, ka cilvēks ir kaut ko sasniedzis. Jūs domājat — nu un, ka cilvēks labi dzīvo, gan jau zaglis vai pārdevies, nē, jūs vispār par to nedomājat. Jums viss ir vienalga.

Es jutos ļoti neērti par šo savu monologu.

— Šitā pasaule jums nav laba diezgan. Jūs esat tie īpašie. Normāli dzīvot, censties — tas jums liekas stulbi! Lai tie lohi paved mašīnā, lai uzsauc aliņu! Bet mums vajag kanibālus studēt.

Viņš uzmanīgi pārvietojās uz labo joslu, tad apturēja mašīnu šosejas malā.

— Esam atbraukuši.

Mēs paskatījāmies ārā. Tā noteikti nebija Rīga. Parasta šosejas mala. Ievērojamākais objekts te bija krūmi. Mēs laikam kavējāmies pārāk ilgi.

— Ko tieši es pateicu nesaprotami?

Mēs kāpām ārā. Vai Nāve nepateica paldies? Tas būtu viņa garā. Auto aizbrauca. Zombis saldi smējās, it kā būtu noticis kaut kas ļoti labs. Bet Nāve rezumēja:

— Es jums teicu — kreklis! Nu mēs uz Biržu nepaspēsim.

Es atkal skatījos uz ceļu, ko citu lai es darītu. Aizbrauca žigulītis, auģiks, fordiņš, tā vadītājs mums atkal mīklaini pamāja, varbūt nu jau kā paziņām, bet varbūt bija mūs aizmirsis, jo mājiens bija tieši tāds pats. Bet pieklājīgo cilvēku, kurš solīja nogriezties, vairs neredzēja. Viņš tiešām bija nogriezies. Tolaik cilvēki bija godīgi un atcerējās, ko nolēmuši darīt. Arī deģenerāti, kuriem tūlīt vajadzēja būt klāt, noteikti nebija aizmirsuši manu fakucīti.

Jelgava '94

Janis Jonevs

Translated from the Latvian by Ieva Lešinska

././ Incredible, I know, but he found that shirt in a used clothing shop. A real miracle. The rest of us rushed to dig through the piles. I even made a list for Mum of shirts that she should buy as soon as she sees them: Death, Cannibal Corpse, Anal Cunt, Brutal Truth, Carcass, Hypocrisy. She did not find any of these, she brought me a shirt with Michael Learns to Rock on it and pictures of three smiling guys à la Zack Morris. My rebellious nihilism notwithstanding, my heart almost broke to pieces, I felt such a surge of love for her. That didn't mean I could ever wear that shirt, however.

So Death found an Obituary shirt in a used clothing pile and paid 50 santims for it, and still he was not happy. He seemed to be a little superstitious and felt he had bought a disaster in the shape of this shirt (that, of course, did not prevent him from wearing it all the time). So now again he said, "I told you! I told you! I always have bad luck when I wear this shirt!"

We had just been kicked off the Jelgava-Riga train. For nothing, really. We did not have tickets. Having made comments about our hair, the team of conductors kicked us out, hair flying. The train continued on, whereas we were stuck here, in Olaine.

"What are we going to do, gentlemen?"

Death looked at the train, which had already disappeared from sight. As usual, Edgars had a plan: "We could kill dogs and sell their pelts!"

He was certifiably crazy, no doubt about it. He lived next-door to Death. Because of his craziness and excessive love of horror movies, he got the nickname Zombie.

“Soon the locals will sell our pelts.”

We trained our eagle’s eye on the town that spread before us, overgrown with bushes. Not a single soul seemed to be around. Yet the bushes looked suspicious.

“Let’s roll.”

And we started walking towards the highway.

Here the Zemgale plain offered an even better view of itself, the horizon on the Jelgava side seemed even more loveable – much more loveable than the much-coveted Riga side. We were not interested in Riga, but once you got almost through the city, you got to the Burse. That was the place to be in this world. Mum told me that hippies had exchanged records there as early as the 1970s. It was in the Biķernieki Forest, which could be reached by trolley-bus No. 18. Or was it by tram? People gathered in the woods: the outcasts, the ones on the other side of the law, the ones who did not want another place, just gathered in the woods and did their thing, about which the city and the outside world had not the slightest idea.

What did they do there? For now we only knew that they exchanged cassette tapes. That was all we had to know. We needed cassette tapes. Nirvana and Pearl Jam were not enough anymore.

Sometimes, I still secretly listened to Nirvana. More often to the new cassettes, however. ././ It was music like nothing I had ever heard before. No, I had not even thought it possible that such music existed. It was a totally different world. It was good to sit here on the tarmac together with Death and

Zombie on our way to another world.

“Tasser! Slag! Dickfuck! ! !”

Zombie was cussing in a pure nineties style. Another car swished elegantly by. No matter how attractively Zombie was flailing his arms, no matter how theatrical his poses, hitchhiking was a bust. Judging by the sun (nobody had a watch), this situation had lasted a quarter of an hour. Death had a dire prediction to share:

“We won’t make it to the Burse. They start at ten.”

“So maybe you should stop warming your bollocks on the tarmac and get to work? My arm is falling off.”

Though I found it hard to believe that Zombie would ever tire. Now he made himself busy plucking the tallest nettles and whipping invisible opponents with them.

Then it was my turn to try to stop someone. A public transportation van was coming. I lowered my arm, put it behind my back and turned away from the road. After all, we had no money. It was followed by a second-generation Lada; the man kept both hands firmly on the wheel and his eyes on the road while his wife was smiling and shaking her head. Yet their back seat was empty. They looked to be about the same age as my parents, who always picked up hitchhikers. Then a totally indifferent Audi or something like that drove by (I don’t really know the makes of cars, the only one I recognize is a Lada, like my Dad’s). Then came some foreign heap with a polite man inside: he pointed right with his thumb, meaning, I am turning in just a moment, otherwise I’d take you. A brief, civilized interaction. The driver of the next car waved at me in a totally mysterious way. What was that supposed to mean? Grow up, lad, don’t leave the house unless you have your own little Ford?

That's how I kept conversing with the drivers, and this conversation possessed sustainability and development, whereas for them it was just a passing moment. I was talking to the manifold denizens of the road, having been stopped right here and now, and look, a car blinks at us and begins slowing down. Death is already turning to see where Zombie is fighting his enemies on the field, but it turns out that the car is full of plonkers just slightly older than us, definitely from Olaine; they are laughing and then step on the gas, they'd only wanted to have some fun at our expense, so now they're gone; even they who paid us some attention will forget us in two short minutes, after three short kilometres.

"I'm fed up. They just don't bite. You try."

Death came over; sad about the entire world, he sniffled and pierced the space over the road with his hand. He kept reciting a mantra:

"Stop, you idiot!"

The car was long like a starship, there seemed to be no end to its gleaming side that was sliding by. Then it stopped. Must be one of the expensive cars, very shiny. Monsieur leaned out the window and asked:

"So where are you lads going?"

To Plakanciems, I thought, for some reason annoyed, but Death was all business:

"To the Burse."

"Ha. Biržai is the other direction, lads. In Lithuania."

"To Riga."

"So where then?"

"To Riga!"

The driver laughed again.

“All right. We’ll take you for a ride then.”

Zombie was running out of the field, all covered with green stuff like some demented Lear and received an admonishment before getting into the car:

“Shake it off.”

The car glided more quietly than a Lada, and beautiful hair cascaded over the shoulders of the other front seat passenger; its brilliance hurt the eyes when hit by the sun, whereas in the shade they took on a romantically blood-red tinge: a metalhead was sitting next to the owner! But no, I looked in the mirror and met the eyes of a girl. Her father stepped on the gas and I pressed my nose to the window to resume my conversation with the road. See, there’s the plonkers’ car, they are sitting there quietly, each looking in a different direction, they are bored without us, and see, I whizz by them flipping a secret bird at them. Then we overtake the mysterious waver, and he is just as serious as before. And after that it’s the turning gentleman, so why hasn’t he turned? And finally here’s the elderly couple, the woman is turning her head this way and that, then she sees me and again shakes her head with a smile, no, no.

“So what are the young lads going to do in Riga?”

That of course was a question asked by our kindly driver. Each one of us kept silent, expecting someone else to reply.

“Huh?”

He asked again. Death and Zombie answered at the same time. Death said:

“We’ll go shopping.”

But Zombie said:

“We’ll count pensioners.”

No one was inclined to mention the Burse; for some reason it seemed too vulnerable in this car whose interior smelled of Wunder-Baum and leather.

“Ha, ha, funny lads you are.”

There is of course the rule that hitchhikers have to keep up a conversation with the nice driver. So that the deal is to the advantage of both parties. I was about to say something about the nice weather or such, but he was not going to let go.

“Who are you?”

An existential question. Really – who are we? It was Zombie who slowly answered:

“We’re boys.”

He did it in a voice that suggested that he is really cracking up.

“No, I mean, who are you, like you all have this hair, are you from some group or something?”

We just shrugged: whatever.

“You’re not those crazy metalheads, are you?”

Duh, what can we say, man... We kinda are, you know? Hey, guys, say something.

“What kind of music do you listen to?”

Death had decided to stop trying to wriggle out of this.

“Cannibal Corpse.”

“Whaat?”

The owner even turned down his music; it was the most classical of classical music, plus it was mixed in a terrible potpourri.

He turned it down and turned to us, what?

“Cannibal Corpse.”

“What does that mean?”

“To translate: it’s the dead body of a man-eater.”

“You think I don’t know English?”

And he turned up his Beethoven that had been adulterated with an oompah rhythm. A minute later he asked again:

“You think I don’t understand English?”

“I don’t.”

“Then why are you saying this?”

“I don’t.”

“What do you mean you don’t? Your exact words.”

“I am sorry.”

The man kept on steering. As much as you really need to steer down the Jelgava highway.

“I, for one, like good music. Do you know of such a thing? Do you know what we are listening to?”

Beethoven’s Fifth had somehow transformed into Brahms’ Hungarian Dances. But I kept my mouth shut.

“You don’t!”

I wonder if that girl next to him, probably his daughter, was still looking into the mirror with her girl’s eyes? I didn’t look.

“And why don’t you like good music?”

Death had apparently resolved not to say a word, he had even turned off his gaze, he was perfect at that. Zombie gave it a try:

“Just feel like something interesting.”

The owner of the car just stepped on the gas again. I felt like glancing at the speedometer, so as not to miss the adventure and later be able to tell everyone how we were just flying down the highway like crazy, but I didn't dare, because then I would probably glance into the mirror and there I would probably meet the girl's eyes. So I turned back to the road. There was a fox, run over.

“And why don't you look normal? You know why? I will tell you why.”

The captain was all whipped-up.

“You simply don't want to be normal. You think it's stupid. You think you are smarter than anyone.”

He could no longer contain himself. And we were still far away from Riga.

“Now you got into my car, and you saw that it was a really nice one. Did that earn me any respect? No!”

Now I was really horrified. Because he was saying exactly what I was thinking at the moment.

“It is all the same to you if a person has achieved something. You are thinking: so what if this chap is living well, he's probably a thief or has sold out. But no, you don't even think about that. It's all the same to you.”

I felt very uncomfortable with this monologue.

“This world is not good enough for you. Like you are something special. To live a normal life, to try for something – you think it's stupid! Let these nincompoops drive you around, let them treat you to a beer! Whereas we must study cannibals.”

He carefully changed lanes to the right one, and then stopped the car by the side of the road.

“We’re here.”

We looked out the window. That most assuredly was not Riga. It was just a side of the road. The most noteworthy object here was bushes. We must have taken our time.

“What exactly did you not get from what I said?”

We got out of the car. Did I hear Death saying thank you? That would be exactly like him. The car took off. Zombie was laughing his head off, as if something great had happened. But Death summed it up:

“I told you, it’s that shirt! Now we’ll be late for the Burse.”

I stared at the road again, what else could I do? There was the Lada, then the Audi, then the Ford, whose driver once again waved at us mysteriously, perhaps even in a familiar way now, as if we were acquainted, but maybe he had already forgotten about us, because the wave was exactly the same. The polite one, the one who said he was turning, was nowhere to be seen. He must have turned. People were honest then and remembered what they had set out to do. Even the plonkers who must be here any second, surely had not forgotten my bird.



Armin Öhri

Die dunkle Muse: Historischer Kriminalroman (2012)

The Dark Muse

Publishing House **Gmeiner-Verlag**

Biography

Armin Öhri, born in 1978, studied history, philosophy and German linguistics and literature. Since 2009, he has published a variety of stories and novels in two independent publishing houses, including the well-respected German publisher Gmeiner. His works tend to be set against a historical backdrop and are based primarily on literary examples of the 19th century, such as entertaining feuilleton novels that fall into the crime genre. Öhri works in the education field at a business school in Switzerland.

Synopsis

The Dark Muse – the first part of a chronological series of linked novels – is a complex historical crime story that turns the established formula of a whodunnit upside-down: on the very first pages the reader already gets to know the murderer, a gentle professor of philosophy. The semi-professional detective in Armin Öhri's novel, Julius Bentheim, is a young Prussian student that (due to his drawing talents) helps the local police as a draughtsman for crime scenes. Through the eyes of this protagonist, the reader follows the ambitious story through the streets and infamous sites of late 19th century Berlin.

Major historical events in *The Dark Muse* are not just a convenient frame to stage the narrative: quite the reverse, the writer wants to gain perspective on society and on the human condition. Extensive research work has been done by Öhri to portray the historical backdrop and atmospheric local colour. Many descriptions of Berlin in 1865 were formulated on the basis of original sources and scientific works and are embedded in the narrative. Furthermore, the handful of non-fictional characters who appear and play prominent parts in Öhri's series include Fontane, Virchow, Bismarck, Moltke, and Retcliffe.

Some of the published praise for *The Dark Muse* include the words "unique", "thrilling and highly recommended", "striking milieu descriptions", and "a psychologically crafty game of cat-and-mouse".

Die dunkle Muse: Historischer Kriminalroman

Armin Öhri

Zweites Kapitel

Die Nachricht von Lene Kulms Ermordung erreichte den Kriminalkommissar Gideon Horlitz in den frühen Morgenstunden. Als der pausbäckige Polizeiaspirant, den man mit einer Eilnotiz geschickt hatte, ihn endlich fand, war er gerade dabei, den Ort einer menschlichen Tragödie zu besichtigen. Mehrere Leute schwärmten um ihn herum, die meisten in Uniform, angeregt diskutierend, mit Maßbändern und Richtschnüren das Zimmer absteckend. Einer allein bewegte sich nicht mehr: Er hing an einem Seil von der Decke, unter ihm ein umgekippter Stuhl.

Die besagte Gruppe hatte sich etwas außerhalb des alten Stadtkerns in einer jener Nebengassen eingefunden, die nicht von Pferdekarren, Arbeitern und Bummelanten verstopft war. Der Raum selbst, in dem die Männer den Selbstmord untersuchten, gehörte zu einer Laube im hinteren Teil eines ausgedehnten Grundstücks, die ihrem Besitzer wohl als Rückzugsort gedient hatte, um vom Wüten der Welt Erholung zu finden.

Kommissar Horlitz beugte sich vor, um die Arbeit seines Tatortzeichners besser betrachten zu können. »Gute Arbeit, Bentheim. Da zeigt sich wieder mal Ihr Talent.«

Julius Bentheim sah kurz auf und lächelte dankbar. Er war 19 Jahre alt und verdiente sich dank seines Talents ein Zubrot für sein Studium der Rechtswissenschaften. Mit dem Daumen fuhr er auf dem Pastellpapier über eine Stelle, die

er für schlecht gelungen ansah, und verwischte einen kleinen Flecken Kohle. Er griff vorerst nach einem Kreidestift, dann nach einem Wachsstift und verbesserte den Bildausschnitt. Hin und wieder riefen ihm die Polizisten Längen- und Höhenangaben zu. Den Grundriss des Tatorts hatte er im Maßstab 1: 25 angefertigt und nun fehlten lediglich einige wenige Details, um die Zeichnung zu vollenden.

Bald war seine Arbeit getan und er verfolgte konzentriert das Gespräch zwischen Gideon Horlitz und dem Boten aus dem ehemaligen Palais Grumbkow, dem Standort der Polizeiverwaltung.

»Professor Goltz, sagten Sie?«

Der junge Mann nickte und ein aufgeregtes Funkeln schoss aus den Augen seines Vorgesetzten.

»Potttausend! Ein kapitaler Fang.«

»Deswegen ist auch dringend Ihre Anwesenheit vonnöten, Herr Kommissar. Das ist ein gefundenes Fressen für die Zeitungsfritzen. Wenn die Wind von der Sache bekommen, ist es aus mit der Ruhe.«

»Wer ist vor Ort?«

»Vier, fünf Gendarmen, ein Untersuchungsrichter, ein Anwalt und Kommissar Bissing.«

Horlitz hob eine Augenbraue. »Sagen Sie mal, wenn Sie schon einen Kommissar haben, wozu brauchen Sie dann mich bei der ganzen Chose?«

»Bissing kennt den Professor persönlich«, erklärte der Bote.

»Aha, verstehe.« Der Blick des Kommissars schweifte unstedet im Zimmer umher, bis er auf seinen Tatortzeichner fiel. Später sollte sich Julius Bentheim mit quälender Schärfe an diesen

Zeitpunkt zurückerinnern. Es war der kritische Moment, an dem die Weichen in seinem Leben gestellt werden sollten. Und die Schicksalsgöttin hatte sich unerbittlich entschieden, ihn in die Abgründe der menschlichen Seele blicken zu lassen. »Herr Künstler«, sprach Horlitz ihn an, »es tut mir leid; Ihre Arbeitszeit wurde soeben verlängert.«

Das Leben in der Marienburger Straße erwachte allmählich. Die ersten Fuhrwerke holperten über das Kopfsteinpflaster, die Bäuerinnen brachten ihre Waren von außerhalb zu den Märkten in der Stadt. Von dem Verbrechen im Dachgeschoss hatten die Bewohner der Mietskaserne jedoch nichts mitbekommen. Julius Bentheim saß gegenüber dem Kommissar in einem Landauer, einer viersitzigen, vierrädrigen Kutsche, die sich von einem offenen in einen geschlossenen Wagen umwandeln ließ. Da die Julinacht schwül gewesen war, fuhren sie mit offenem Verdeck. Schweigend hatten sie etwas weniger als eine halbe preußische Meile zurückgelegt, als der Kutscher ihr Ziel erreichte und die Pferde anhielt.

»Steigen wir aus«, brummte Horlitz.

Sie schwangen sich aus dem Wagenschlag. Der junge Bentheim war gespannt wie ein Flitzebogen. Wenngleich sein Studium ihm kaum Freizeit ließ, liebte er doch die Aufträge, die ihn an die absonderlichsten Orte Berlins führten. Außerdem war die Bezahlung nicht schlecht. Es war hauptsächlich Nacharbeit, die er verrichtete, und so bekam er einen Aufschlag zur üblichen Entlohnung. Zumeist wurde er gerufen, um die Spuren eines Einbruchdiebstahls abzubilden. Hin und wieder kam er auch mit Kleinkriminellen, Huren und Zuhältern in Kontakt. Die Arbeit war vielfältig und voller Überraschungen; und das war es, was Julius daran mochte.

Vor dem Eingang wartete bereits ein Gendarm auf sie. Er nickte zur Begrüßung und öffnete den zwei Neuankömmlingen die Tür. In der Hand hielt er eine Laterne, deren Lichtschein den Eingang ausreichend erleuchtete. »Es ist ziemlich unübersichtlich hier drin. Ein wahres Labyrinth. Der Anwalt meinte, ich sollte unten auf Sie warten. Wo er recht hat, hat er recht.«

Sie erklommen die Treppenstufen, die wenige Stunden zuvor Lene Kulm gegangen war. Gideon Horlitz bemerkte schnaufend: »Der Anwalt, der heute Dienst hat – ist der groß und hager, trägt seine Haare von einer Seite zur anderen über den Glatzkopf gekämmt?«

»Ja, Herr Kommissar.«

Bentheim glaubte, im flackernden Licht der Laterne ein Lächeln zu erkennen.

»Dann ist es Theodor Görne.«

»Ja, so heißt er.«

»Hm.« Der Kommissar murmelte Unverständliches vor sich hin. Er war ein 53-jähriger Mann mit Bauchansatz. Seine grau melierten Haare trug er tadellos frisiert. 15 Jahre lang hatte er als Obristwachtmeister in einem Dragonerregiment Dienst geschoben, bis er in den Polizeidienst wechselte. Im November 1848 war er an der Auflösung der Preußischen Nationalversammlung durch die Armee beteiligt gewesen; ein Umstand, viel zu peinlich, um ihn je zu erwähnen.

Die Szenerie, die sich ihnen bot, als sie das oberste Stockwerk erreichten, hatte etwas Bizarres an sich. Mehrere Leute drängten sich auf engem Raum zusammen und behinderten sich gegenseitig. Rechts wurde eine Hausbewohnerin mit bleichem Gesicht von einem Gendarmen befragt; links

im Flur erkannte man den blutbespritzten Leichnam einer jungen Frau. Ringsherum standen Männer in der Uniform der Schutzmannschaft Berlin.

Julius zog seine Mercier, die ihm ein Onkel einst vermacht hatte, aus der Westentasche und blickte auf das Zifferblatt.

»Wie spät?«, fragte Horlitz.

»4 Uhr 15.«

»Dann werden die ersten Mieter bald aufstehen. Das wird mir ein Theater geben, wenn die merken, dass die Polizei im Haus ist. Kommen Sie, Bentheim.«

Der ehemalige preußische Soldat bahnte sich einen Weg zu den Gendarmen am Tatort. An der rechten Mansardentür kauerte ein Mann am Boden. »Lene«, murmelte er unablässig, »meine Lene.« Das Gesicht wirkte ausdruckslos und die Augen schimmerten glasig. Man konnte an seiner verstörten Miene deutlich das Leid ablesen. Gideon Horlitz waren volkstümliche Instinkte wie Mitleid für einen völlig Fremden unbekannt, doch den jungen Bentheim dauerte diese Kreatur.

Einer der Gendarmen deutete mit einem Kopfnicken zur zweiten Mansardentür, und Horlitz und Bentheim wandten sich um. Gemeinsam betraten sie die Dachwohnung des Professors. In dem Ofen in der Raummitte knisterte ein Feuer und verbreitete wohlige Wärme. Auf einem Stuhl vor der hinteren Paneelwand saß ein unförmiger kleiner Mann mit fuchsrotem Haarschopf. Der Anwalt namens Görne hatte sich über ihn gebeugt und redete ununterbrochen auf ihn ein. Etwas abseits, vor dem Gaubenfenster, unterhielten sich zwei Männer, von denen der eine Moritz Bissing war, jener

als befangen geltende Kommissar. Als er Horlitz erblickte, winkte er ihn heran.

»Gideon! Schön, dass du kommen konntest. Darf ich vorstellen? Der Herr an meiner Seite ist Untersuchungsrichter Karl Otto von Leps.«

Sie reichten sich die Hände. Die des Richters, eines greisenhaften Mannes mit hagerem Schädel, war eiskalt.

»Sehr erfreut«, sagte Horlitz ehrerbietig.

Bissing fuhr fort: »Ich habe den Herrn Richter darüber informiert, dass der geständige Mörder wie ich Angehöriger des anthropologischen Renan-und-Feuerbach-Vereins sowie korrespondierendes Mitglied der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften ist. Herr Professor Goltz und ich haben uns bei verschiedenen Anlässen bereits getroffen und sind einander bekannt. Ich habe mir deshalb erlaubt, einen Boten nach dir auszusenden, Gideon, da ich wusste, dass du heute Nachtdienst schiebst.«

»Kannst du mich aufklären, was inzwischen alles veranlasst wurde?«

»Herr Kommissar, verzeihen Sie, wenn ich mich einmische«, sagte der Richter. »Aber da Sie nun vor Ort sind, ist die Anwesenheit von Kollege Bissing nicht mehr vonnöten. Seine Bekanntschaft mit dem Täter ist heikel und ich entbinde ihn hiermit von seiner Aufgabe.«

Moritz Bissing verbeugte sich wortlos, klopfte Horlitz freundschaftlich auf die Schulter und zog sich zurück. Karl Otto von Leps bäugte scharf den jungen Maler, der zwei Schritte hinter dem Kommissar stand und alles mit angehört hatte.

»Und Sie sind... ?«

»Mein Protegé«, antwortete Gideon an Bentheims Stelle.

»Gut, gut. Also, beginnen wir von vorn: Die Nachbarsfrau, eine verwitwete Frau Bettine Lützow, hat Alarm geschlagen. Ihrer Aussage nach pochte Professor Goltz in aller Seelenruhe an ihre Tür und eröffnete ihr, soeben einen Mord begangen zu haben. Die Lützow erschrak natürlich – wer kann ihr das verdenken? An den exakten Wortlaut des Geständnisses erinnert sie sich nicht, aber ungefähr tat Goltz dies mit folgenden Worten kund: Ich habe gerade Ihre Nachbarin umgebracht.«

»Sagte er ›umgebracht‹ oder ›getötet‹? Oder sogar ›ermordet‹?«

»Eine unbeabsichtigte Tötung ist auszuschließen, wenn Sie darauf hinauswollen. Er muss methodisch vorgegangen sein. Opfer ist übrigens die 21-jährige Schlachtereigehilfin Magdalene Kulm, von allen kurz Lene gerufen. Sie ist bei uns aktenkundig, da sie nebenberuflich der Prostitution nachging und auch schon aufgegriffen wurde.«

»Magdalene«, wiederholte der Kommissar sinnierend. »Nomen est omen. Und was geschah dann?«

»Der Professor ging seelenruhig in sein Zimmer zurück, wo er auf die eintreffenden Beamten wartete.« Der Alte deutete mit einer raschen Armbewegung auf den rothaarigen Mann. »Seither sitzt er auf seinem Stuhl und schweigt beharrlich.«

»Wer ist der arme Kerl auf dem Flur?«

»Wenn es nach der Lützow geht, der Verlobte von Fräulein Kulm. Meiner Meinung nach wohl eher ihr Liebhaber und Zuhälter. Aber man muss ihm zugestehen, dass er arg gebeutelt ist. Nun zu Ihnen, Horlitz: Machen Sie was aus dem Fall. Gehen Sie dem Staatsanwalt zur Hand, bevor er wieder einen Bock schießt.« Er senkte die Stimme, als er hinzufügte: »Unter uns gesagt, alle wissen, dass er eine Schande seiner Zunft ist.«

Julius Bentheim sah beschämt zu Boden. Wenn es schon so weit kommt, dass ein Richter die eigenen Staatsanwälte kompromittiert, festigt dies nur noch den schlechten Ruf, den die Justiz in den Augen der Bevölkerung besitzt. Am Mollenmarkt befanden sich Polizeipräsidium und Stadtvogtei gemeinsam im ehemaligen Palais des Oberfeldmarschalls von Grumbkow. Gleich daneben, im früheren Palais des Grafen von Schwerin, hatte seit 1771 das Kriminalgericht seinen Sitz genommen. Der gesamte Gebäudekomplex galt wegen der oft willkürlich ausgeübten Polizeigewalt als Ort des Schreckens.

Der Kommissar warf einen betäubten Blick auf Theodor Görne, der sich mit dem Verdächtigen abmühte, und zuckte ergeben die Achseln. »Mein lieber Julius, sehen Sie zu und lernen Sie. Und führen Sie das Protokoll. Das können Sie doch? Stifte und Papier haben Sie ja ausreichend zur Hand.« Er machte einen Bogen um den Ofen und bot dem Anwalt an, die Befragung zu übernehmen. Görne fuhr sich mit der Linken über den Kopf, um ein paar Haare glatt zu streichen, und nahm das Angebot erleichtert an.

»Ihr Mann«, sagte er knapp.

Gideon Horlitz ging vor dem feisten Kerl mit dem roten Bart in die Hocke und musterte ihn. Wie Rübezahl erschien ihm dieser mit seinem Bauch, seiner wilden, gesinnungslosen Miene. Zu seiner Überraschung zeichnete sich auf dem Gesicht des Professors ein Lächeln ab, und er sprach ihn sogar an: »Ah, der neue Herr Kommissar. Dann können wir endlich an die Arbeit gehen. Wir wollen doch keinen Justizskandal verursachen. Es ist löblich, dass der gute Moritz von sich aus in den Ausstand getreten ist. Nun, wie kann ich Ihnen dienlich sein?«

Verdutzt sah Horlitz zu Bentheim, der inzwischen einen Graphitstift angespitzt und das Gesagte bereits in kursiver deutscher Stenografie zu Papier brachte. Er verwendete das System des Franz Xaver Gabelsberger, eines vor 16 Jahren verstorbenen Ministerialbeamten aus Bayern. Es war praktisch und leicht zu entziffern, und Julius benutzte es auch für seine Vorlesungen an der Universität.

»Tja, äh«, stammelte Horlitz, »haben Sie uns etwas zu sagen, Herr Professor?«

»Ganz und gar nicht. Was diesen vertrackten Fall angeht, berufe ich mich auf mein Schweigerecht. Sobald Sie mich ins Palais Grumbkow überführt haben, möchte ich, dass mir ein Pflichtverteidiger an die Seite gestellt wird. Der soll sich um alles kümmern. Das wird es mir erleichtern, mich wieder meinen Studien zu widmen. All dieser Polizeikram ermüdet einen nur. Finden Sie nicht auch, Herr... ?«

»Gideon Horlitz.«

»Ah, Gideon. Einer der sechs Richter der Stämme Israels. Ein schöner Name. Übersetzt heißt er ›der Hacker, der Zerstörer‹. Hoffen wir, dass Sie diesen Kriminalfall nicht zerstören werden, Gideon. Oder dass der Fall nicht Sie zerstört.«

Ein diabolisches Grinsen huschte über seine Backen, bevor er wieder lebenswürdig und lammfromm aussah.

»Sie verweigern die Aussage?«

»Korrekt.«

»Gut, wenn Sie nicht reden wollen, hat das keinen Sinn. Ich werde Ihre Überführung an den Molkenmarkt veranlassen.«

»Sehr lebenswürdig. Es ist aber nicht so, dass ich mich völlig in Schweigen hüllen möchte, Kommissar. Für eine kleine

Plauderstunde bin ich leicht zu haben. Sie dürfen das Thema wählen. Literatur, Philosophie, Musik – was hätten Sie gern?»

»Wie wäre es mit Medizin? Die Pathologie der Irren?«, entfuhr es Horlitz heftig.

»Na, na, Herr Kommissar! Warum denn gleich so aufbrausend? Um Ihnen in Ihrer schwierigen Situation Verständnis entgegenzubringen, werde ich Ihnen einen Rat geben.«

»Einen Rat?«

»Ja, einen Rat. So etwas wie eine Empfehlung, ein Fingerzeig, wenn Sie so wollen: Lassen Sie eine Inventarliste anlegen.«

Gideon Horlitz richtete sich zu voller Größe auf. Seine Miene war wieder undurchdringlich. Julius Bentheims Graphitstift ruhte untätig auf dem Papier. Interessiert beobachtete der Tatortzeichner seinen Mentor, der den Kiefer bewegte und mit den Zähnen knirschte. Mit einer unwirschen Handbewegung forderte der Polizeibeamte den Professor schließlich auf, sich zu erheben. Ein Gendarm, der die Szene vom Flur aus mitverfolgt hatte, trat heran.

»Führen Sie ihn ab.«

Botho Goltz ließ sich widerstandslos zur Tür geleiten. Der junge Bentheim blickte ihm nach. Bevor der Mann mit den roten Haaren im Flur verschwand, hörte er ihn noch sagen: »Wird allmählich kälter, meinen Sie nicht? Ist wohl an der Zeit, noch ein Stück Brennholz nachzulegen...«

The Dark Muse

Armin Öhri

Translated from the German by Jonathan Huston

Chapter 2

The news of Lene Kulm's murder reached Inspector Gideon Horlitz in the early morning. When the chubby-cheeked police trainee who had been entrusted with the urgent message finally found him, he was just visiting the site of a different human tragedy. Several people swarmed around him, most of them in uniform, talking excitedly among themselves, surveying the room with measuring tapes and plumb lines. Only one person was no longer moving: he was hanging from the ceiling on a rope, an overturned chair beneath him.

The group had come together just outside the old city centre in a side alley that was not clogged with horse carriages, workers and dawdlers. The room itself where the men were investigating the suicide was at the back of an extensive property, part of an arcade that probably had served as a retreat for its owner from the raging of the world.

Inspector Horlitz leaned over to get a better look at the work of his crime scene artist. "Good work, Bentheim. That's another fine display of your talent."

Julius Bentheim looked up briefly and smiled with gratitude. He was 19-years-old and used his sketching to earn some extra money for his legal studies. On the pastel sheet of paper, he thumbed over part of the drawing he thought was less successful, and he rubbed out a small splotch of coal. First, he reached for a piece of chalk, and then a wax pencil, improving the

detail. From time to time, the policemen called out length and width measures to him. He had sketched the crime scene on a 1:25 scale, and now only a few small details were missing to complete the drawing.

Soon his work was done, and now he focused on the conversation between Gideon Horlitz and the messenger from the former Grumbkow Palace, where the police headquarters were located.

“Professor Goltz, you said?”

The young man nodded and an excited sparkle shot out of his superior’s eyes.

“My Lord! A major catch.”

“This is why it’s urgent that you come, Inspector. This is just what the mob of journalists has been waiting for. Once they hear what happened, there will be no stopping them.”

“Who’s on site?”

“Four or five gendarmes, one investigating judge, a prosecutor, and Inspector Bissing.”

Horlitz raised an eyebrow. “So tell me, if you already have an inspector on site, why am I needed for this matter?”

“Bissing knows the professor personally,” the messenger explained.

“I see.” The inspector’s gaze wandered restlessly around the room until it found the crime scene artist. Later, Bentheim would look back on this moment with excruciating clarity. This was the critical moment when the course was set for the rest of his life. When the goddess of fate had mercilessly decided to force him to look at the abyss of the human soul.

“My dear artist,” Horlitz said, “I apologise, but your working hours have just been extended.”

Marienburg Street slowly came back to life. The first horse-drawn cart started to rumble over the cobblestones and peasant women brought their goods to the city's markets. The tenement dwellers knew nothing about the crime committed on the top floor, however. Julius Bentheim sat across from the inspector in a landau, a convertible four-seat, four-wheel carriage. Because the July night had been muggy, they drove with the carriage hood down. In silence, they had ridden a bit less than half a Prussian mile when the coachman reached their destination and stopped the horses.

"Let's get out," Horlitz grumbled.

They swung themselves out of the carriage door. Young Bentheim was filled with nervous excitement. Although his studies afforded him hardly any free time, he loved the assignments that took him to the most outlandish places in Berlin. And his pay wasn't bad. He mainly worked nights, and so he received extra compensation. Usually he was called up to sketch the evidence for burglaries. From time to time, he also came into contact with small-time criminals, whores, and pimps. Work was multifaceted and full of surprises, and that's what Julius liked about it.

A gendarme was already waiting for them at the entrance. He greeted the two new arrivals with a nod and opened the door for them. He held a lantern that provided sufficient illumination for the entryway. "It's hard to find your way around here. A real labyrinth. The prosecutor told me to wait downstairs for you. When he's right, he's right."

They climbed the steps that Lene Kulm had ascended just a few hours before. Out of breath, Gideon Horlitz said, "The prosecutor on duty today – is he tall and haggard and has his hair combed over from one side to the other to hide his bald head?"

“Yes, Inspector.”

Bentheim thought he saw a smile in the flickering light of the lantern.

“Then it’s Theodor Görne.”

“Right, that’s his name.”

“Hmm.” The inspector mumbled something unintelligible. He was 53-years-old with the beginnings of a paunch. His greying hair was perfectly coiffed. For 15 years, he had served as a major in a dragoon regiment before switching to the police. In November 1848, he had been involved in the dissolution of the Prussian National Assembly by the army, a fact too embarrassing to ever mention.

There was something bizarre about the scene presenting itself to them when they reached the top floor. Several people crowded together in a small room and got in each other’s way. On the right, a pale-faced woman who lived in the building was being questioned by a gendarme; on the left in the hallway, the corpse of a young woman lay splattered with blood. Around her stood men wearing the uniforms of the Berlin police force.

Julius took the Mercier he’d inherited from his uncle out of his vest pocket and looked at the watch face.

“What’s the time?” Horlitz asked.

“4:15.”

“The first tenants will be getting up soon. All hell will break loose when they notice the police are in the building. Come with me, Bentheim.”

The former Prussian soldier cleared a path to the gendarmes at the crime scene. A man was kneeling on the ground at the

right attic door. “Lene,” he kept muttering, “my Lene.” He looked stunned and his eyes were glassy. Anyone could tell from his distraught expression that he was suffering. Vulgar instincts like pity for a complete stranger were unknown to Gideon Horlitz, but young Bentheim felt bad for this creature.

With a nod of his head, one of the gendarmes pointed toward the second attic door, and Horlitz and Bentheim turned around. Together they entered the professor’s attic flat. A fire was crackling in a stove in the centre of the room, spreading a welcome warmth. A small misshapen man with a fox-red mop of hair sat on a chair in front of the panelled back wall. The prosecutor named Görne had leaned over him and was talking to him without interruption. Somewhat to the side in front of the dormer window, two men were talking; one of them was Moritz Bissing, the inspector said to be biased in the case. When he saw Horlitz, he waved him over.

“Gideon! I’m glad you were able to come. May I introduce you to Investigating Judge Karl Otto von Leps.”

They shook hands. The hand of the judge – an ancient man with a bony skull – was icy cold.

“Pleased to meet you,” Horlitz said deferentially.

Bissing continued: “I have informed His Honour that the confessed murderer is, like myself, a member of the anthropological Renan and Feuerbach Society and a corresponding member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences. Professor Goltz and I have already met at various gatherings and are acquainted with each other. I therefore took the liberty of sending a messenger for you, Gideon, because I knew you were the inspector on night duty.”

“Can you tell me what steps have already been taken?”

“Forgive me, Inspector, if I interrupt,” the judge said. “But now that you’re here, Inspector Bissing’s presence is no longer required. His acquaintance with the perpetrator is a sensitive matter and I hereby release him from his duties.”

Moritz Bissing nodded wordlessly, gave Horlitz a friendly pat on the shoulder, and withdrew. Karl Otto von Leps took a sharp look at the young artist, who was standing two steps behind the inspector and had heard everything. “And you are...?”

“My protégé,” responded Gideon at Bentheim’s side.

“Good, good. So let’s start at the beginning: the neighbour, a widow named Bettine Lützow, gave the alarm. According to her statement, Professor Goltz calmly knocked at her door and informed her that he had just committed a murder. Mrs Lützow was terrified – who could blame her? She can’t remember the exact wording of the confession, but Goltz said something like: I’ve just killed your neighbour.”

“Did he say ‘killed’? Or ‘murdered’?”

“Unintentional homicide can be ruled out, if that’s why you’re asking. He acted methodically. The victim, by the way, is a 21-year-old helper at the slaughterhouse, Magdalene Kulm, whom everyone called Lene. She has a record with us because she was a part-time prostitute and has been arrested before.”

“Magdalene,” the inspector mused. “Nomen est omen. What happened then?”

“The professor calmly went back to his room, where he waited for the officers to arrive.” With a quick arm movement, the old judge pointed to the red-haired man. “Since then, he’s been sitting on his chair and refusing to speak.”

“Who’s the poor fellow in the hallway?”

“According to Mrs Lützow, he’s Miss Kulm’s fiancé. I think he’s more likely her lover and her pimp. But you have to admit he’s badly shaken. Now it’s your turn, Horlitz: do something with this case. Lend the prosecutor a helping hand before he blunders again.” He lowered his voice and added, “Between you and me, everyone knows he’s a disgrace to his profession.”

Julius Bentheim looked at the floor, embarrassed. If it’s already come this far that a judge is compromising his own prosecutors, that only makes the justice system’s bad reputation worse in the eyes of the public. At Molkenmarkt, Police Headquarters and the Town Magistrate were both housed in the former palace of Field Marshall von Grumbkow. In 1771, the Criminal Court had moved in right next door, into the former palace of Count von Schwerin. Because police power was so often arbitrary, the entire complex of buildings was considered a place of horror.

The inspector cast a sorrowful glance at Theodor Görne, who was struggling to get the suspect to talk, and he shrugged his shoulders in resignation. “My dear Julius, watch and learn. And take down the report. You can do that, can’t you? You have plenty of pencils and paper, in any case.” He walked around the stove and offered to take over the questioning from the prosecutor. Görne patted down a few stray hairs with his left hand and was relieved to accept the offer.

“Your suspect,” he said tersely.

Gideon Horlitz crouched down in front of the stout man with the red beard and looked at him carefully. He looked like the mountain spirit Rübzahl with his paunch and his wild, shameless expression. To his surprise, a smile appeared on the face of the professor, and the man even spoke: “Ah, the new inspector. Then we can finally get to work. We don’t want

to cause a justice scandal now, do we? It's commendable that good old Moritz recused himself. So, how can I help you?"

Horlitz gave Bentheim a perplexed look. Bentheim had already sharpened a graphite pencil and written down what had been said in cursive German shorthand. He used the system created by Franz Xaver Gabelsberger, a ministerial official from Bavaria who had died 16 years before. It was practical and easy to decipher, and Julius also used it to take notes for his lectures at the university.

"Well, ah," Horlitz stammered, "do you have something to say, Professor?"

"Not at all. As far as this tricky case goes, I invoke my right to silence. As soon as you have transferred me to Grumbkow Palace, I want you to provide me with a public defender. I want him to take care of everything for me. This will make it easier for me to continue my studies. All this police business just tires everyone out. Don't you think, Mr...?"

"Gideon Horlitz."

"Ah, Gideon. One of the six judges of the tribes of Israel. A beautiful name. Translated, it means 'the feller, the destroyer.' Let's hope that you won't destroy this criminal case, Gideon. And that the case won't destroy you."

A diabolic smirk flitted over his face, and then he looked genial and as meek as a lamb again.

"Are you refusing to testify?"

"I am."

"Fine, if you don't want to talk, there's no sense in continuing. I will arrange your transfer to Molkenmarkt."

“Very kind of you. But it’s not as if I want to wrap myself completely in silence, Inspector. I’m happy to have a chat now and then. You can choose the topic. Literature, philosophy, music – what would you like?”

“How about medicine? The pathology of the insane?” Horlitz retorted.

“Well, well, Inspector! Why so irascible? To show understanding for your difficult situation, I would like to give you some advice.”

“Advice?”

“Yes, advice. Like a recommendation, or a hint, as it were: be sure to compile an inventory.”

Gideon Horlitz straightened up to his full height. His expression had become impenetrable again. Julius Bentheim’s graphite pencil rested on the paper without moving. The crime scene artist observed his mentor with interest. Horlitz was moving his jaw and grinding his teeth. With a gruff movement of his hand, the police officer finally asked the professor to get up. A gendarme who had observed the scene from the hallway approached.

“Take him away.”

Botho Goltz let himself be escorted to the door without resisting. Young Bentheim’s eyes followed him. Before the man with the red hair disappeared down the hallway, he heard him say, “It’s getting colder, isn’t it? It must be time to put on another piece of firewood...”



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Pierre J. Mejlak

Dak li l-Lejl Iħallik Tgħid (2011)

What the Night Lets You Say

Publishing House **Merlin**

Biography

Born in Malta in 1982, Pierre J. Mejlak has been writing since he was young. Mejlak has written books for children, adaptations, a novel for adolescents and two collections of short stories, winning numerous awards, including five National Book Awards, the Commonwealth Essay Writing Award and the Sea of Words European Short Story Award.

Mejlak worked as a journalist from 1999 to 2005 and was twice the winner of the Malta Journalism Award. He was a BBC correspondent, a regular columnist for Maltese daily newspaper *In-Nazzjon* and produced radio shows – including 60 one-hour documentaries on rock legends – for various national radio stations.

Synopsis

The 10 stories in this collection, just like any self-respecting collection of medieval tales, are framed by a prologue and an epilogue. And some of the characters in the stories, like the bishop in 'Il-Barranija' ('The Foreign Woman') or the dying father in 'Mort Naraha, Pa' ('I Went to See Her, Pa'), could easily have inhabited Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

The tension in many of the stories arises from the coming together of the past (or, at least, a previous way of life) and the present. Many of the narrators are travellers, moving from one point of their existence to another, trying to understand a life that they have lived but never fully comprehended, or trying to undo a part of the past that did not go according to plan. Very often their travels take them from metropolitan Europe to the periphery or the other way round, and these seemingly opposite worlds that have become so close in contemporary Europe serve as background to the lives of the different characters, who realize, or at least help us readers realize, that life is still lived at different rhythms in different parts of the world.

In fact, this could be read as a book about storytelling, not only as a form of pleasure that is shared between writer and reader, or narrator and listener, but more importantly as a gift that's given with love and needs love to be appreciated.

Dak li l-Lejl l'ħallik Tgħid

Pierre J. Mejlak

Mort naraha, Pa

Tbaxxejt u b'għajnejja moħbija fil-pali ta' jdejja – qisni tifel qed iħares minn tieqa mżellġa bix-xemx kontriħ – pespistielu.

“Mort naraha, pa. Mort naraha.”

*

L-aħħar darba li żortu ma tantx kien jidher tajjeb. Oħti ż-żgħira kienet għadha kemm ħarġet u kienet ħaditlu rasu tgħidlu li qed tarah sejjer lura. Is-soltu tagħha. U ħassejt li almenu jien għandi nibdel id-diska. U allura staqsejtu f'liema mara qed jaħseb l-iżjed u l-kliem waqa' fuq l-Ispanjola.

Kien jieħu pjaċir meta nkellmu dwar in-nisa ta' ħajtu. Donnu dak il-ħin l-uġiġħ kien jinsieh u għajnejh bħal jikbru u jiffukaw. Għax kemm kien ilu li marad u daħal l-isptar, in-nisa li ħabb f'ħajtu kienu saru għalih album ta' ritratti li ma seta' jieqaf iqalleb qatt. U taħt kull ritratt kien hemm mija oħra moħbija. Ma kienx hemm dettall wieħed li ma kienx għadu jiftakar b'ċarezza. Kultant kont naħseb li qed jaqla' minn żniedu iżda meta xahar jew tnejn wara jerġa' lura bl-istess dettall, bl-istess konvinzjoni, bl-istess ħarsa u tbissima, kull dubju li kien ikolli kien jisfuma fix-xejn. “Allahares m'għandix lilhom,” kien jgħidli meta konna nkunu weħidna. “Għidli int – kieku kif se nqatta' dawk l-iljieli li ma jkunu jridu jgħaddu qatt?” U mbaġħad kien ikompli dejjem bl-istess mistoqsija. “Għax, ngħid jien, fuq xiex joqogħdu jaħsbu dawk ix-xjuħ bħali – weħidhom – li f'ħajjithom qatt ma ġgennu wara mara?” U meta kien ikun

jidher b'saħħtu biżżejjed għal argument kont ngħidlu li forsi jkun qed jaħsbu dwar il-pajjiżi li żaru, il-ħbieb li kellhom, l-avventuri li għexu, l-istejjer li semgħu, ix-xogħol li ħadmu, u dwar dak kollu li għaddew minnu. U kien isikkritni b'tixjira tal-idejn tipika tan-nies ta' żmienu. "Le, le, ibni. Mhux l-istess. Daqskemm għamilt xogħlijiet f'ħajti. X'niftakar minnhom? Xejn. U daqskemm żort pajjiżi u għaddejt minn affarijiet..."

"Kem m tieħu gost jekk tarak!" reġa' qalli meta rgajna lura għall-Ispanjola. "Isma', twegħedni li tmur iżzurha qabel immut?" U bla ma ħallieni nwiegħbu, kompli. "Mur. Ghidilha b'kollox u ġibli aħbarha."

Riedni bilfors immur inzurha. U meta rani qisni qed naħsibha, iżjed talabni b'herqa. "Qabel immut, ibni, mur kellimha!" Fakkarni fija meta kont zgħir u kont nibgħat lil ommi tgħaddi messaġġ lil xi hadd li jien ma kellix il-kuraġġ ngħaddihulu. U spjegali t-triq bl-istess ton u bl-istess ismagħni sew tal-bidu li bihom fi tfuliti kien qalli kif għandi nagħmel biex immur għand in-nanniet. Jew għand tal-grocer biex nixtri l-ħalib.

"Ismagħni sew. Kif tasal l-ajruport ta' Alicante, ikri karozza," qed jgħidli, b'xufftejh jingħafsu flimkien, bir-roġħda ta' idu moħbija fil-komma u bi tbissima nofsha mqarba u nofsha ma nafx xiex. "Oħroġ mill-parking tal-ajruport u segwi t-tabelli li b'ittri kbar, fuq nett, jgħidulek Murcia."

Imbagħad iħares lejja u jinduna li ma jien qed innizzel xejn. "Ikteb!"

U noħroġ biro mill-but tal-glekk u nikteb fuq l-ewwel karta li nsib – l-irċevuta tal-gallettini u tal-ilma li xtrajtlu jien u diehel l-isptar.

"Suq f'dik id-direzzjoni sakemm it-triq wiesgħa tinqasam fi tnejn u fin-nofs l-ieħor jibdew jidhru tabelli oħra kbar bil-kliem Grenada Almeria. Ixgħel l-indicator. Attent għal ta' warajk u aqleb fuq in-naħa l-oħra. U suq bil-mod!"

Nitbissem imma t-tbissima tiegħi ma jarahie x għax fil-frattemp għalaq għajnejh u ntilef isuq lejn dar l-Ispanjola.

“Issa suq bid-dritt sakemm tara t-tabella Mazarron.”

Ninnota idu. Qisha l-vlegga fuq GPS.

“Mur fejn tibagħtek dik. Suppost, issa, bdew jidhru d-djar, l-appartamenti għall-kiri u għall-bejgħ u l-baħar qieghed fil-qrib. Imma mhux qed tarah. Fhimt?”

“Fhimt.”

“Ma’ kull ftit kilometri qed jizdiedu t-tabelli u fuq kull waħda issa tista’ tinnota Puerto de Mazarron. Suq fid-direzzjoni tal-port sakemm tara l-ewwel vlegge li jimmarkawlek id-dahla għal Aguilas.”

Jiftaħ għajnejh u narahom jixegħlu hafna iżjed milli kienu qabel għalaqhom.

“Inti qed tikteb?”

“Iva, iva, qed nikteb. Kompli.”

“Jekk tasal s’hemm u m’intix tilmaħ kilometri shaħ ta’ serer bojod mimlija tadam fellaqt xi mkien. Jekk qed tara s-serer, mela issa m’hemmx fejn tinfixel. Triq waħda sakemm tasal f’salib it-toroq u tara tabella ċkejkna fuq il-lemin li tghidlek Puntas de Calnegre. Idhol f’dik it-triq dejqa, itfagħha free u halli r-roti jduru wehidhom. U niżżel it-twieqi halli thoss iż-ziffa tal-baħar tiffriskak. Xi ġmiel...”

“Pa, evita l-poezija. Iffoka fuq it-tabelli!”

Jagħfas għajnejh. Jitbissem u jerga’ lura għad-direzzjonijiet.

“Suq bil-mod li ma jmurx jaqsamlek tifel minn xi mkien. U minn hemm għandek taraha – fit-tarf tat-triq – villa maqtugħa mill-bqija. Kompli sejjer sa hdejha. Ipparkja bil-kwiet. Ohroġ.

Mur fuq il-bankina, fejn probabbli se ssib qattus jilgħaq skeletru ta' xi ħuta, u doqq il-qanpiena.”

Missieri kien qed jibgħatni nara lill-mara li dam jara – bil-moħbi t'ommi – għaxar snin. U m'iniex sejjer biex nikkuntentah. Sejjer għax nixtieq insir nafha lil din il-mara li għamlitu tant ferħan. Sejjer biex bla kliem niringrazzjaha. Ridt naraha lil din il-mara li kull darba kienet tinjettalu doża ferħ li kienet tmantnih xhur sħaħ. Imbagħad, meta jgħib kull hjiel tagħha, jerga' lura Spanja bl-iskuża tax-xogħol. U aħna nistennewh ġej lura b'xi tanbur, żugraga, ċimblu, borża žibeg b'elf kulur u bi tbissima ta' xi ħadd mimli bil-ferħ.

U bl-irċevuta tal-ħanut tal-isptar magħfusa mal-istering tal-Ford Ka li krejt, qed insuq u nitbissem u nammira l-memorja ta' missieri. Għax anke li kieku ħallejt il-karozza f'idejn xadina probabbli kienet tasal ħdejn il-villa tal-Ispanjola bla ebda xkiel. U issa għaddej mit-triq tal-villa u nizzilt it-tieqa tal-karozza u qed nidħak qisni iblah għax iż-żiffa tal-baħar

qieghda tabilhaqq tiffriskali wiċċi. U qed nisma' wkoll l-eċċitament tat-tfal ħafjin jiġru wara l-ballun fuq il-bajja u t-tgergir t'ommmhom quddiem tal-grocer u t-tisbit ta' missierhom ħiereg mill-bar fuq in-naħa l-oħra tat-triq. U qed naħseb li, li kieku ma qtajtlux kliemu meta kien wasal f'dan il-punt tal-vjaġġ, dawn id-dettalji kien isemmihomli wkoll.

Imbagħad daqqajt il-qanpiena u tfaċċat quddiemi lista ta' possibbiltajiet li lanqas biss kienu għaddewli minn moħħi tul il-vjaġġ. Forsi l-mara mietet. Jew marret tgħix band'oħra. Forsi qieghda ma' raġel ieħor u l-istorja ma' missieri nsietha. Jew trid tinsieha. Forsi fid-dar m'għadu joqgħod ħadd. Jew xtraha ħaddieħor li, dwar l-istorja ta' missieri mal-Ispanjola, ma jaf xejn. Jew forsi l-Ispanjola se tiftaħli u ma tkunx trid tilqagħni. Jew forsi se jiftaħli binha u mbagħad x'se ngħidlu?

Jinfetaħ il-bieb u titfaċċa quddiem i l-Ispanjola ta' missieri. Ma kellix dubji li ma kenitx hi. Għajnejha kien pittirhomli. U pittirhom tajjeb. Kbar. Hodor. Fl-isfar. Sbieħ. U wiċċha ta' anzjana li qed tixjieħ bil-grazzja kollha tad-dinja.

“Xhin tiftaħlek għidilha li inti t-tifel tiegħi u li smajt ħafna dwarha. Għidilha li qed immut bil-mod il-mod imma li għadha f'qalbi u bla ma taf qed iżzomml i ħafna kumpanija. U mbagħad se tgħidlek tidħol ġewwa u tistaqsik elf mistoqsija. Għax dik hekk – għal kull kelma tiegħek, mistoqsija. U mbagħad ara tferragħlekk ftit tal-45.”

“Għaraftek,” qaltli fil-bieb. “Għandek għaj-nejn missierek. Ma tantx inbdilt mir-ritratti li kien urieni. Imma toqgħodx fil-bieb. Idħol. Għaddi ġewwa.” Imbagħad daret fuq qattusa li kien hemm iċċassata lejja bejn saqajha. “¡Tira de aqui! Tenemos una visita.”

U wara li kilna fi kċina mimlija borom u taġnijiet imdendla dawramejt, semmejtilha l-45 u għajnejha f'daqqa nksew b'kisja oħra dmugh. Qaltli nimxi warajha. Nizzlitni l-garigor u fil-frisk tal-kantina writhomli stivati hdejn xulxin – flixxkun hdejn l-ieħor – ilkoll bin-numru 45 miktub fuqhom bl-idejn.

Kienet ilha tistiva flixxkun hdejn l-ieħor minn dakinhar li telaq u ma reġax mar lura.

“Kont ċerta li għad jiġi. Mhux l-ewwel darba li qalli li kellha tkun l-aħħar darba li qed narah. Kien ilu jgħidli li xi darba ż-żjarat tiegħu se jieqfu u ma jerġgħux jibdew. Imma qatt ma emmintu għax – orrajt – ġieli kienu jgħaddu ftit tax-xhur... imma dejjem ġie lura. U bqajt minn dakinhar li rajtu l-aħħar – noħroġ fil-ġnien naqta' l-berquq, bl-istess ingwanti li kien jilbes meta kien joħroġ jaqtagħhom hu.”

U tant dratha r-rutina li għadha tagħmilha sal-lum. Għadha tidħol bil-kaxxa tal-berquq u tbattalha fuq il-bank il-kbir

tal-kċina u bl-istess mus taqta' berquqa berquqa fi tnejn u twaddab kollox f'borma tagħli. U hemm thalli l-berquq joqmos fl-ilma jbaqbaq għal minuta. Biex xi dudu żgħir u iswed li seta' kien hemm moħbi ġo fihom jinkewa bla jinduna u jisparixxi qisu qatt ma kien.

“Kif sparixxa hu,” qed tgħidli b'nofs tbissima gherja minn kull hjiel ta' rabja. “La ittra. La telefonata. Xejn. Hekk kien missierek. Jew faċċata ta' dar kollha dwal qawwija li jgħammxulek għajnejk jew ix-xejn.”

U mbagħad ittella' b'kuċċarun il-berquq sħun u mxarrab u twaddbu f'ħames litri cognac u hemm thallih xahar u nofs. Ħamsa u erbghin jum. La wiehed żejjed u 'qas wiehed nieqes.

“Kif kien jgħidli nagħmel hu.”

Ħamsa u erbghin jum, li matulhom tittama li hekk kif tbattal il-kontenitur fil-passatur biex il-cognac jibqa' għaddej u l-berquq jinqabad ġewwa, ikun hemm hdejha fil-kċina, sorpriż li x-xarba tiegħu baqgħet tagħmilha. Imbagħad bil-cognac li jgħaddi mill-passatur timla flixkun tal-ħġieg. U twaħħal fuq il-flixkun stiker safra u fuqha, b'felt pen iswed, thażżeż 45 – kif kien jagħmel hu – għal kull jum li għamel lix-xarba dak li saret. “Għax ix-xarba qisna aħna,” kien jgħidilha, probabbli bl-istess ton li bih kien spjegali minn fejn għandi ngħaddi biex immur l-iskola waħdi. U mbagħad – l-istess bħalu – tikteb fir-rokna t'isfel tal-istiker is-safra d-data ta' dakinhar.

“Joghgbok?”

“Ħafna.”

“Hadd ma johroġ minn hawn qabel iduq ftit minnu. U kull darba li ngħollu t-tazzi naħseb fih. Kemm xhur għamilt hekk, ara,” qed tgħidli thares lejn il-ġnien b'tazza 45 f'idha.

“Inħares fil-ġnien u naħseb fih u dwar jekk hux qed jaħseb fija. Dwar x’qed jagħmel dak il-ħin. Dwar jekk nesinix bħallikieku qatt ma kont. Dwar x’tifkira ħa miegħu tiegħi. Dwar jekk iddiżappuntajtux l-aħħar darba li ġie hawn. Dwar jekk għidtlux xi kelma li ma kellix ngħid jew jekk għidtlux xi ħaġa li fehem ħażin. Dwar jekk hux qed jaħsibha li xi darba jerga’ lura. Jekk hux qed jittama li b’xi mod, xi mkien, nerġgħu niltaqgħu. U dwar jekk qattx għad iddoqq dik il-qanpiena li daqqajt int u xħin niftaħ insib lilu.”

Tieqaf. Tħares lejja. Tinduna li m’għandi xejn xi ngħid. U tkompli. “Domt ħafna biex irrassenjajt ruħi li lil missierek ma kellix nerġa’ narah. Ħafna, ħafna domt. Bqajt noħroġ fil-ġnien u naqta’ kaxxa berquq wara l-oħra bit-tama li meta xahar u nofs wara nimla flixxkun iehor ikun ħdejjja.”

Qed inħoss li għandi ngħid xi ħaġa. Izda ma nista’ nsib xejn aħjar mis-silenzju.

“Għall-bidu, meta ntbaħt li forsi lura mhu ġej qatt, ippruvajt nirrabja għalih. Ħsibt li forsi b’hekk il-vojt tiegħu ma nħossux tant. Izda ma stajtx nirrabja għal xi ħadd bħalu. Ma kienx hemm x’taħfirlu. Missierek ma gideb qatt. L-affarijiet kienu ċari mill-ewwel lejla li fiha ltqajna fil-port. Kont jien li aċċettajt li narah kumdità tiegħu. Kont jien li ħsibt li forsi nista’ narah u ngawdih bla ma niftaħlu qalbi. Imma meta ntbaħt li qalbi kienet hu u hu kien qalbi kien ftit tard.”

Issa daħlet il-qattusa u qabżet fuq kuxxtejha.

“Missierek għallimni ħafna. U daħħakni ħafna wkoll. U ħabbni. Żgur.”

It-tazza tiegħi żvojtat. Terġa’ timlihieli. Imbagħad tħares lejja.

“Se ddum hawn?”

*

Missieri miet ma' sbieħ it-tielet jum li għamilt għandha. Ċemplitli oħti filgħodu kmieni u qaltli li miet matul il-lejl. Hadd ma stennieh se jitlaq hekk malajr.

U fi triqti lejn Alicante bkejt. U hi bkiet miegħi.

“Mort naraha, pa. Mort naraha,” pespistlu b'għajnejja moħbija fil-pali ta' jdejja qed jagħfsu mal-kawba tleqq tat-tebut.

“Għadha thobbni?” qed jistaqsini.

“Iffissata, pa. Iffissata fuqek baqgħet, pa! U ma taqtax kemm għandha fliexken tal-45? Kantina shiħa mimlija bihom, pa! Kantina shiħa!”

U qed jitbissem it-tbissima tiegħu.

“U ġibtlek xi ħaġa miegħi, pa. Ġibtlek xi ħaġa miegħi.”

“Flixxun 45 żgur!”

“Le. Mhux flixxun 45. Xi ħaġa oħra. Stenna ffit. Issa taraha daqt... qalb dawn il-ħafna nies.”

What the Night Lets You Say

Pierre J. Mejlak

Translated from the Maltese by Antoine Cassar

I Went to See Her, Pa

I bent down, cupping my hand over my eyes, as if shielding them from the sun, and I whispered to him, “I went to see her, Pa. I went to see her.”

*

The last time I visited him, he didn't look so good. My younger sister had just left and, as usual, she had kept harping on about how he seemed to be getting worse. I felt I should keep things light and so I asked him about the women who had marked his life. That's how we ended up talking about the Spanish woman.

He used to enjoy talking about the women he had known. In those moments he would seem to forget his pain, his eyes would sparkle and suddenly focus. Because, since he had gotten ill and been taken to the hospital, the women he had loved during his life had become for him a photo album, which he never tired of thumbing through. And beneath every photo there were another 50 hidden. There wasn't one single detail that had escaped his memory. Sometimes I used to think he was making it all up, but when a month or two later, he would repeat it all with the exact same details, the same conviction, the same look and smile, my doubts would disappear. “Thank God I have them,” he would tell me when we were alone. “Tell me how else would I get through these interminable nights?” and then he would usually go on reflectively, “Sometimes

I wonder, what do they think about, those other old men like me – alone – if they’ve never known the thrill of loving another woman?” And when he’d be strong enough to argue, I would tell him that maybe they would think about the countries they had visited, old friends they had had, adventures they had lived through, stories they had heard, the work they had done, dogs they had raised, days they had spent swimming in the sun, beautiful moments they had shared. And he would stop me with a wave of his hand, typical of people his age, “No, no, my son. It’s not the same. Oh, the number of jobs I had in my life! What do I remember about them all? Nothing. And the number of countries I visited and the walks I took...”

“How she’d love to see you,” he told me when we got back to the Spanish woman. “Listen, will you promise me to go and visit her before I die?” And he went on without giving me time to reply, “Go tell her everything and bring me news of her.” He was adamant about my going, and when he saw I was seriously toying with the idea, he pleaded earnestly with me to go.

“Go talk to her, my son, before I die.”

He reminded me of myself when I was young. How I used to ask my mother to deliver messages that I lacked the courage to deliver myself. And he directed me to her house in the same urgent tone of “listen carefully” that he had used before, when in my younger days he would explain the way to my grandparents, or to the grocer to buy milk.

“Listen carefully. When you arrive at Alicante airport, rent a car,” he’s saying through pursed lips, his shaking hand hidden in his sleeve and with a smile halfway between mischievous and slightly mysterious.

“Leave the airport and follow the signs, written in big letters, saying Murcia.”

Then he looks at me and realizes I’m not taking any notes. “Write it down, dammit!”

And I take out a pen from my blazer pocket and start writing on the first piece of paper that comes to hand – the receipt for the biscuits and water I bought for him on arriving at the hospital. “Drive in that direction until the highway splits in two and, on the other side, you’ll be able to see new big signs saying Grenada Almeria. Put on the indicator lights, watch out for the cars behind you, and cross over to the other side. And drive carefully.”

I smile, but he doesn’t see it because in the meantime he has closed his eyes and lost himself driving towards his Spanish lady.

“Now keep going straight ahead till you see the sign saying Mazarron.”

I notice his hand. It looks like the arrow on my GPS.

“Go where it directs you. By now you should start seeing the buildings, apartments for rent and for sale, and the sea is close by, but you still can’t see it. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“With every few kilometres, you’ll see more signs, and on each one you’ll notice Puerto de Mazarron. Drive in the direction of the port until you see the first arrows that point the way to Aguilas.”

He opens his eyes and I can see them shining and much clearer than they had been before.

“Are you writing it all down?”

“Yes, yes, I am writing. Go on.”

“If you get to that point and you can’t see whole kilometres of white greenhouses full of tomatoes, then somewhere you must have taken a wrong turn. If you can see them, then you have no problem. Straight down the road till you come to a crossroad and on the right you see a small sign which says Puntas de Calnegre. Drive down that narrow road, take your foot off the break and let the wheels roll. Open the windows so you can feel the breeze from the sea fresh on your face... what beauty.”

“Pa, cut the poetry. Focus on the signs.”

He squints his eyes, smiles, and goes back to giving directions.

“Slow down. Be careful of children crossing the road. And from there you should see it – at the end of the road – a villa set apart from the others. Drive up to it. Park. Go out. Move to the sidewalk, where you’ll probably find a cat licking clean the skeleton of some fish, and ring the bell.”

My father was sending me to meet the woman he had secretly seen for 10 years. And I’m not doing it to please him. I am doing it because I wish to get to know this woman who had made him so happy. I’m going so that I can wordlessly thank her. I wanted to meet this woman who, every time, had filled him up with enough joy to keep him going for months. Then, when every hint of that joy disappeared, he’d go back to Spain on the pretence of business. And we would wait for him to come back carrying a drum, a top, a pair of cymbals, a bag of beads of a thousand colours, and the joyful smile of someone deeply sated.

And with the receipt from the hospital canteen stuck to the steering wheel of the Ford Ka that I rented, I am driving and

smiling. Marvelling at my father's memory. Because even if I had left the driving in the hands of a monkey, it would probably have arrived at the villa without mishap.

And now I'm driving down the road to the villa, and I've wound down the car window and I am laughing like an idiot, because the breeze from the sea is so fresh on my face... and I'm listening to the excitement of the barefoot children running after a ball on the beach, and their mothers muttering at the grocers and the slam-bang noises of their fathers coming from the bar at the other end of the road. And I'm thinking that if I hadn't cut him short when he came to this part of the trip he would have added these details as well.

Then I rang the bell and suddenly I was struck by a hundred doubts. Maybe the woman had died, or moved somewhere else, maybe she's living with another man and has completely forgotten my father, or wishes to, maybe the house was not lived in now, or had been bought by someone who knows nothing about my father's affair with the Spanish lady, or maybe she would open but wouldn't welcome me, or maybe her son would open, and then what would I tell him?

The door opens and there in front of me was my father's Spanish lady. I had no doubt it was her. He had painted her eyes for me. And he had done a good job. Green. With a hint of yellow. Beautiful.

And her face! A woman ageing gracefully.

"When she opens, tell her you're my son, and that you've heard a lot about her. Tell her I'm dying but that she is still in my heart, and keeping me company. And then she'll invite you in and ask you a thousand different questions. Because she's like that – for your every word she has a question. And then she'll pour you a little 45."

“I know you,” she said at the door. “You’ve got your father’s eyes. You haven’t changed much from the pictures he showed me. But don’t stay on the doorstep. Come in. Come inside.” Then she turned to a cat who was staring at me from between her legs. “Get away with you! We’ve got guests.”

And after we ate in a kitchen full of pots and pans hanging all around, I mentioned the 45, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears. She asked me to follow her. We went down a spiral staircase and, in the cool interior of the basement, she showed them to me, stored one next to another – bottle after bottle – all of them sporting the number 45 written on them by hand. She had been storing bottle after bottle since the day he left never to return.

“I was certain he’d come back one day. It wasn’t the first time he had told me that this would be the last time I saw him. He told me many times that one day he’d stop coming. But I never believed him because – well, yes – sometimes months would pass, but he always came back. And since the last time I saw him, I kept going to the garden, gathering the apricots, wearing the same gloves he used to wear when he would gather them himself.”

It had become a ritual which she followed to that day. She would come in laden with a box full of apricots, and empty them onto the huge kitchen bench. And with the same knife he had used, she would cut them in half, one by one, and throw the lot into a large boiling pot. And she would leave the apricots bubbling in the boiling water for a minute, so that if there happened to be a small black worm hidden inside any of them, it would be scorched and disappear as if it had never been. “Just like that he disappeared,” she’s telling me with a half-smile which excludes any hint of anger. “Not a letter. Not

a phone call. Nothing. That was your father. Either a brightly lit façade that dazzles your eyes or nada.” And then with a large ladle she would scoop the hot wet apricots and throw them in five litres of cognac, and there she’d leave them for a month and a half. Forty-five days. Not one more, not one less.

“As he used to do.”

Forty-five days, during which she hopes that by the time she’s passing the cognac through the sieve while leaving the apricots out, he would be there, by her side, in her kitchen, surprised that she had continued to make his drink. Then she’d filter the sieved cognac into a glass bottle. On it she’d stick a yellow note, and in a black felt pen she’d write 45 – as he used to do – for each day that made the drink what it was. “Because the drink is like us,” he used to tell her, probably in the same tone he used to give me directions on how to get to school on my own. And then – just as he used to do – in the lower corner of the yellow sticker, she’d write the day’s date.

“Do you like it?”

“Very much.”

“No one goes out of here before tasting some of it. And every time we raise a glass, I think of him.”

“You see... I’ve spent whole months like this,” she is now telling me with a glass of 45 in her right hand, and with her eyes fixed on the apricot trees outside. “I look at the garden and wonder about him, wonder what he’s doing right now, whether he’s forgotten all about me or what memories he’s got of me. If maybe I had disappointed him the last time he was here. Whether I had said something I shouldn’t have, or if maybe I had said something which he misunderstood. Whether he was thinking of coming back one day. Whether

he was hoping that somehow, somewhere, we'd meet again. And whether one day, the bell you rang would ring and I'd open the door and find him there."

She stops. Looks at me. Understanding that I have nothing to say, she continues. "It took me a long time to accept the fact that I'd never see your father again. A long, long time. I continued gathering the apricots, box after box from the garden, in the hope that by the time I filled another bottle, he'd be here with me."

I feel I should say something but I can't find anything worth breaking the silence for.

"At first, when I understood he wasn't coming back, I tried to feel angry at him. I thought maybe the anger could fill up the emptiness in my heart. But I couldn't be angry at someone like him.

"There was nothing to forgive. Your father never lied. Things were clear from the first time we met down at the harbour. I accepted the arrangement to see him at his convenience. I had thought that maybe I could see and enjoy him without giving him my heart. But by the time I realized that he was my heart and my heart was him it was too late." Now the cat came in and jumped onto her lap.

"Your father taught me a lot. And made me laugh a lot. And loved me. I'm sure of that."

My glass is now empty. She fills it up again. Then she looks at me.

"Are you staying long?"

*

My father died on the dawn of the third day I spent with her. My sister called me early and gave me the news. No one had expected him to go so fast. And on my way to Alicante I cried. And she cried with me.

“I went to see her, Pa. I went to see her,” I whispered, my eyes hidden behind my hands pressing the cold shiny mahogany of the coffin.

“Does she still love me?” he’s asking me.

“She’s crazy about you, Pa. She’s still crazy about you. And guess how many bottles of 45 she has? A cellar full, Pa! A whole cellar full!”

And he’s smiling his special smile.

“And I brought you something with me, Pa. I got you something.”

“A bottle of 45?”

“No, not a bottle of 45. Something else. Wait a minute. You’ll soon see what I brought you... she’s here among the crowd.”



© Ivan Cojbasic

Ognjen Spahić

Puna glava radosti (2014)

Head Full of Joy

Publishing House **Nova knjiga**

Biography

Ognjen Spahić was born in 1977 in Podgorica, Montenegro. Prior to *Puna glava radosti*, Spahić published two earlier collections of short stories: *Sve to* (*All That*) in 2001, and *Zimska potraga* (*Winter Search*) in 2007. His novel *Hansenova djeca* (*Hansen's Children*), published in 2004, won him the Meša Selimović Prize for 2005, awarded to the best new novel from Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. To date, *Hansenova djeca* has been published in French, Italian, Slovenian, Romanian, Hungarian, Macedonian and English. His short story 'Rejmond je mrtav. Karver je umro, rekoh' ('Raymond is No Longer with Us – Carver is Dead') was included in the anthology *Best European Fiction 2011*, published by Dalkey Archive Press in the USA. In 2007, he was a resident writer at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. In 2011, he was the recipient of Romania's Ovid Festival Prize awarded to a prominent young talent. *Puna glava radosti* is Spahić's most recent work, his fourth book of fiction to date.

Synopsis

Puna glava radosti (*Head Full of Joy*) by Ognjen Spahić, published this year by the Podgorica-based publisher Nova knjiga, presents a corpus of 16 unusual tales featuring episodes from the life of each story's hero. Each story is told by an omniscient narrator or the hero himself, and they paint a picture showing the collision of the outer and inner world of modern man, providing a distinct interpretation of the universal values of life. This peculiarity of style contains a range of genres, a diversity of themes and abundant associativity, which gives much pleasure to the modern reader, making them feel like they are privileged participants in the book's events.

Puna glava radosti

Ognjen Spahić

1.

Dok gledam kroz špijunku, čini se kao da ta žena pridržava koplje, ono drveno, dugačko, nefunkcionalno i aljkavo zašiljeno koje bi jedan vitez trebao da, jašući galopom, razbije o grudi isto tako galopirajućeg konjanika. Pridržava ga stišćući za sredinu, te tako balansira nezgrapnim predmetom dok u drugoj ruci drži kesu punu crnog grožđa i paradajza.

2.

Ta žena, moja je majka, a zvono ne radi već nekoliko mjeseci. Da bi skrenula pozornost, prinuđna je da čelom lupa o debelo drvo. Moj sluh je u redu. No tupi udarci koje sam čuo sjedeći u fotelji i ne radeći ništa, činili su se stranima, nepodobnim za ovaj svijet. Jednom kratko i snažno, a potom tri puta u nizu, čelom, ispostaviće se. Jer kad sam primakao zenicu vratima, to čelo se zalijetalo da još jednom viteški raspali lakiranu i crnu površinu. Pustio sam da udari i tek onda otvorio. Zamirisalo je na majku. Njen dah ima aromu cigaret-filtera, a graške znoja isparavaju uz šištanje koje ja ne mogu čuti ali koje se širi haustorom pogađajući rezonance sluha pritajenih glodara, velikih muva i vrabaca što čuče u potkrovlju.

3.

Lift...

Da mama... Toliko čuda iznijeti do četvrtog sprata...

Lift ne radi...

Nečuveno. Žao mi je. Grožđe ide u frižider. Dozvoli da ti pomognem.

Prvo ga operi i pusti vodu neka teče. Želim hladne vode, to je sve što želim.

Razumijem gospođo. A čim sjedneš, želim da saznam sve o tom koplju.

Gluposti. Možeš da pretpostaviš. U školi su insistirali da je odnesem sa sobom. Projekcija nekog sentimenta, šta li... Vjeruju da taj predmet pripada meni i samo meni.

A taj predmet je...

Čašu vode, molim te.

Stiže. A taj predmet je...

I stavi krišku limuna. Jedan je ostao u vratima frižidera.

Taj predmet je... Daj...

Mapa svijeta. Promaklo ti je nekoliko košpica. Glupava mapa svijeta koja je trideset godina visila iznad moje glave. Natoči još jednu, molim te.

Kojeg svijeta?

Ne podsmijevaj se. Uostalom, htjela sam da te zamolim... Oduzi je u podrum, spali je u dvorištu, pokloni gladnoj i nezbrinutoj djeci jer ne želim da je imam pred očima. Taj miris u kući. O ne! Penzija, kraj. Za školu više ne želim da čujem.

Velika mapa svijeta iz kabineta geografije u kojem si provela neke od najljepših trenutaka tokom dugogodišnje karijere srednjoškolskog profesora? To je ta mapa? Zaboga mamice! Spaliti? Baciti? Moje ruke neće biti umrljane krvlju i tačka.

Kakve sad ruke, kakva krv. Patetičan si na oca. Tačno mogu da zamislim te iste rečenice u njegovim ustima. A da je možda uokvirimo pozlaćenim ramom i zakačimo evo ovdje, iznad trosjeda?

Pa da mamice! Ja ću se pobrinuti. Što da ne? Tanko matirano staklo i ram od četiri santimetra. To bi osvježilo prostor. Cio svijet na jednom mjestu. A onda lagano, uz jutarnju kafu, možemo da posmatramo sva ta mora, gibraltarske moreuze, amerike, indije, arhipelage, zabačena ostrva na Pacifiku i sve ostalo. Svijet! Naš Svijet! Mama.

Sad si ironičan. Da li je to ironija? Usudio si se, je li?

Ne... Mama... Ja? Kako možeš?

Skloni se od mene. Sklanjaj se, kažem. Odaju te detalji. I donesi još vode. Da posmatramo gibraltarske moreuze? Kao da ih ima šest.

Čini mi se da je jutros mutna i toplija nego inače.

Šta?

Pa voda mamice. Pogledaj.

Voda kao voda.

Da. To si divno rekla. Voda kao voda.

4.

Rijeka dijeli grad. Njeno ime i lik ne postoje na mapi svijeta. To je mikronska, nepoznata geografija i činjenica o ovom mjestu koju je moguće doznati samo na licu tog mjesta.

5.

Dijalog pod brojem tri nikad se nije dogodio. No dogodilo se sve ono zaključno sa trenutkom u kojem moja majka udara čelom o debelo drvo ulaznih vrata. Kurtoazna razmjena pravilnih prostoproširenih i složenih rečenica koja zauzima nešto više od jedne stranice, čista je laž. Nikada nismo razgovarali tim načinom. S mukom razlučiva mumljanja, fragmenti bijesa ili tek najosnovnije informacije o hrani i pristiglim računima – to smo bili mi. Broj tri se nikad nije dogodio no on je i pored toga, veoma važan u cijeloj pripovijesti. Kratkom dijaloškom formom sam želio ilustrovati laž koju sam mnogo puta pročitao u različitim lešinama moderne literature koja pretenduje da predstavlja ni manje ni više do život sam. Razgovori majke i sina, oca i djeteta, prepirka dva brata, najbolja prijatelja, partnera u ljubavi, u zločinu, svejedno, redovi ispunjeni predvidivom i lažnom gorčinom, šuškanje papira i miris plastike, ukus vještačkog praha sa aromom vanile, apokaliptični tonovi i male apokalipse, nedovršene rečenice prepunjene vještačkim cvijećem, napunjene vještačkim očima, vještačkim srcima i vještačkim emocijama, otvoreni krajevi, zatvoreni krajevi, kurčevi, i po koji palac. Tragedija do tragedije, paradoksi na svakom ćošku, svijet je loš zar ne, ti ćeš da mi objasniš prijatelju, ali prije toga, molim te, pokušaj da živiš sa mojom majkom na četvrtom spratu betonske sedmospratnice koja se proteže u pravcu sjever-jug. Ni to nije strašno. O tome ću govoriti samo s vremena na vrijeme jer moj život nije ni bolji ni gori od milijardi drugih života čije brujanje katkad osjećam u kapima kiše koja izvršava samoubistvo padajući na limenu nadstrešnicu zapadne terase iskošenu ka jadranskom slivu. A sve ovo, razumije se, radim tek da bih sebi objasnio kako ova priča nema smisla. Ko u njoj pronade smisao, zaslužio je moje debelo govno nasred čela. Ako si ti taj, onda čestitam od srca, nasred srca.

6.

Ja sam pisac i imam trideset šest godina. Čelavost, naznake impotencije, problemi sa stolicom, nikotinski kašalj, duboki i tamni podočnjaci, bol u kičmi: ništa od toga se nije dogodilo mojem tijelu. Zdrava i snažna individua visokog čela, prosječnog obrazovanja, privlačan ženama, prihvatljiv muškarcima, ja, volim da napišem to ja od kojeg ništa ne očekujem, od kojeg niko ništa ne očekuje, a ipak, ja, redovi se nižu, pod brojevima kličaju male i ružne biljke koje će se na koncu uplesti poput nižih spratova amazonske prašume u čijem hladu redovito uživam gledajući beskrajno dosadne programe kablovske televizije koji se trude da cjelokupan entuzijazam voditelja i urednika sažmu u još jednu do bola ispražnjenu laž, u jednu jedinu rečenicu: život je čudo. Osjećam smrad.

7.

Otvaram vrata, a ona odbacuje veliko koplje. Klima znojavom glavom i nadima podbradak, a zatim kaže: Penzija. Ja kažem: Čestitam, i pripaljujem cigaretu, a ona s gađenjem posmatra dim koji lagano gmiže kroz moje nosnice. Književnost? Opet smrdi. Požutjeli komadi kravljeg sira na trpezarijskom stolu. Ona kaže: Mogao si barem... Otvara kantu za otpatke i struže otpad sa zelenog tanjira. Ja kažem: Da.

8.

Bilo koja vrsta obračuna me ne zanima. Pogotovo ne dvoboj sa samim sobom. Ali to me ne sprječava da katkad preko zamišljenog nišana duge cijevi gledam mater svoju. Gađao bih posred nadutog trbuha ne bih li rasparčao satrule ostatke jajnika koji su me porodili. I ne zbog toga da bih simboličkim činom utvrdio besmisao sopstvenog trajanja i života, već

tek tako. Veliki kalibar praznine, u veliko zamašćeno tkivo. Materija protiv materije, razaranje i smrt. Razmišljanje u metaforama. Zadovoljstvo na klozetskoj šolji. Kratki uzleti lucidnosti koji nestaju kao velika govna nošena mlazom hladne vode. Fragmenti kao rešenje. Govna u djelovima. Minijature, partiture, garniture presahle imaginacije rasute u nečemu što bih mogao objediniti naslovom: Moj gangrenozni život. Ali to nije nesreća. I to nikad neće biti književnost.

9.

Nakon što je sa tanjira otrešla i posljednje komadiće sira, majka je počela da povraće klečeći na malom pravougaonom tepihu kraj trpezarijskog stola. Prepoznao sam nekoliko aljkavo sažvakanih kriški mandarine. Jajnici, pomislio sam i osmotrio mandarine na trpezarijskom stolu. Kad je završila, pomogao sam joj da ustane i opere lice. Nikada više nisam posegnuo za tim voćem.

10.

Tri mjeseca sam proveo u zatvoru zbog nanošenja teških tjelesnih povreda maloljetnom licu. Kazna nije bila duža zahvaljujući vještaku psihijatrijske struke koji je u svom nalazu tvrdio da se moj gest ne smije okarakterisati kao pokušaj ubistva već kao neartikulisana kompulzivna radnja psihički oboljelog lica. A bilo je ovako: stojim i čekam veliki lift ne bih li se uspeo do kafea na drugom spratu tržišnog centra u kojem povremeno ispijam kafu. Nije to ambijent koji me uzbuđuje na bilo koji način: filtrirani vazduh, slatki mirisi i cvrkut vrabaca koji žive ispod metalnih krovnih greda prelijećući s jednog na drugi televizijski ekran duž velikog hola. Boravak u tržišnom centru mi donekle garantuje anonimnost jer u neonsko grotlo ne zalaze lica koja srijećem

za šankom kafea Berlin. Ta galerija ljudi se sastoji od individua koje bi se u terminološki širokom registru mogli nazvati poznanicima, prijateljima u nekoliko slučajeva, manje ili više dragim osobama čije nezgrapne rečenice bivaju prigušene muzikom sa metar i po visokih zvučnika. Vrapci u tržišnom centru su mehaničke naprave koje aluminijski ambijent konzumerističke oaze treba da približe majkama i djeci. Jer šta je dobro za životinje, dobro je i za ljude. U skrivenim zakucima potkrovlja, među suvim gipsanim zidovima, nalazi se radionica čovjeka koji se stara da te ptice rade upravo ono što se od njih očekuje. Njegovo ime je Ferdinand, Fernando, Zigmund ili u najgorem slučaju Esteban. Čovjek-ptica, strogo čuvana tajna, precizni mehaničar i strpljivi analizator čestih kvarova koji su se dešavali zbog jeftinih materijala kojim je radionica opskrbljivana. To što stojim pred vratima lifta ne bih li se uspeo do espresso kafe, nema nikakvog uticaja na fernandijansko-zigmundovsku realnost tako da ovog puta sebi neću dozvoliti slast pričanja jedinstvene i iznimno zanimljive biografije tog čovjeka.

Cupkam u mjestu. Široka čelična vrata se zatvaraju negdje u visinama betonskih pročelja. Kutija sporo silazi. Elektronski pisak objavljuje dolazak i vrata se otvaraju, a na sredini velikog lifta stoji petogodišnjak spreman na krik i suze. Zagledao se ravno u moje oči kao da će tu pronaći nuklearnu energiju potrebnu za histerične izlive koji će uslijediti.

Počeo je da urla u trenutku kada sam zakoračio u namjeri da ga izvedem vani i utješim. Pretpotstavio sam da njegova majka tumara po drugom spratu zaražena iracionalnim pretpotstavkama o nestanku sopstvenog djeteta te sam s toga samo želio da ga prigrlim uz sebe i sačekam da se žena pojavi. No kada sam nježno obgrlio sićušna ramena, kad sam primakao lice njegovim crvenim obrazima, ta mala bogato

nazubljena čeljust se otvorila i šćepala me za nos. Bio sam iznenađen demonskom snagom ugriza koji je učinio da hrskavica zaškripi, a da iz očiju poteku suze zasoljene oštrim bolom. Sve što se potom dogodilo, zamagljeno je bijesom. No izjave dvojice svjedoka bile su gotovo identične. S toga i ne sumnjam da sam malog uhvatio za glavu i odbacio desetak metara izvan lifta, u pravcu prodavnice intimnog rublja. Vjerujem da sam oči držao čvrsto zatvorene pa je to još jedan od razloga zašto se taj nevaljali trenutak svodi na zvučne impresije. Jer dok sam slušao svjedoke u sudnici, misli su dozvale udarac tijela o besprijekorno ulaštene keramičke pločice tačno u trenutku kada je sa zvučnika postavljenih duž hodnika shopping-malla David Bowie podvriskivao Lat's dans. Sve to sam rekao pred sudijom i roditeljima djeteta, a moj advokat je kazao da je tih nekoliko rečenica upropastilo njegov posao te da su one razlog zašto sam umjesto šest mjeseci uslovne kazne, dobio dva mjeseca zatvora. Mama je samo tužno vrtjela glavom.

11.

Veliku mapu koju je dovukla iz škole, skupa sa rješenjem za penziju, prislonila je uza zid spavaće sobe, pored daske za peglanje. Predstava svijeta smotanog u dugačkoj plastičnoj kutiji mirisala je naftalinom. Kada sam prvi put skinuo poklopac zapahnuo me je taj cmizdravi miris koji me je natjerao da razmišljam u metaforama definišući besmisao egzistencije sopstvene majke u odnosu na besprizornu glupost tog predmeta. Plastična kutija bila je prekrivena potpisima kolega među kojima se isticao nešto veći natpis sa uskličnikom: Sretno!

12.

Zbivanja pod brojem deset su izmišljena. Nikada nisam imao probleme sa zakonom, a u tržišnom centru uvijek koristim pokretne stepenice. Godine književnih pokušaja su me uvjerile da se moj intelektualni mehanizam sastoji od nekoliko modela čitalaca-imbecila koji od proze uvijek očekuju krajnosti. Ti, reći ću, ljudi, su dotukli pisca u meni. Jer više niko ne pristaje na uobičajene nesreće koje se žive u sobama nevelikih ali sasvim udobnih stanova poput ovog u kojem boravimo moja majka i ja. Potrebno je gurnuti stvari ka ekstremnim vrijednostima shodno lažnoj logici književnog djela. A kad kažem laž, nije to visokokalorična riječ koja predstavlja gorki opozit istini. Ne. Mislim na besprizorno pretvaranje, ponizno i podlo skrivanje iza blago uljepšanih maski jezičke stvarnosti koja za cilj nema predstavljanje estetske ideje u književnom djelu, već brblja, umnožava i množi najbanalnije tragedije trudeći se da saopšti kako je naš svijet loš. Laž kao stanje svijesti, a ne kratkoročna namjera. Podilaženje pametnima, nerviranje glupih. Književne nagrade i poza zabrinutosti nad haosom svijeta. Stil kao inercija. Zato sam i odlučio da prvo ponudim maglu iz tržišnog centra: nagovještaj mračne estetike koja s jedne strane plijeni pripovjedačkom vještinom, a s druge strane zadovoljava čitaoca informacijom dostojnom crnih stubaca u žutoj štampi. Jer čovjek može kvalitetno lagati samo kad govori o sebi. Želim izgrebati sa književnosti tu vječitu deklaraciju istine koja se presijava poput markica na satrulim bananama. Želim biti neko drugi, a ne ovo što sam sad.

Head Full of Joy

Ognjen Spahić

Translated from the Montenegrin by Celia Hawkesworth

1.

As I watch her through the peephole in the door, it looks as though the woman is holding a lance, one of those long, wooden, non-functional, sloppily sharpened ones which a knight was supposed to use, at a gallop, to break against the breast of another similarly galloping rider. She is holding it in the middle, balancing the awkward object while carrying a bag full of black grapes and tomatoes in her other hand.

2.

That woman is my mother, and the bell has not worked for several months now. In order to attract my attention, she is obliged to bang her forehead against the thick wood. There's nothing wrong with my hearing. But the dull blows I heard as I sat in an armchair, doing nothing, struck me as strange, not quite of this world. One short and hard one, then three in a row with her forehead. Because when I put my eye to the peephole, that forehead was just preparing for another knightly assault on the black, varnished surface. I let her hit it and only then opened the door. There was my mother's smell. Her breath had the aroma of filter cigarettes, while beads of sweat evaporated from her with a hiss I couldn't hear but which spread through the hallway, setting up resonances in the hearing of hidden rodents, large flies and sparrows twittering in the loft.

3.

“The lift...”

“Yes, Mother... Humping all this stuff to the fourth floor...”

“The lift’s out of order...”

“You don’t say. I’m sorry. The grapes go into the fridge. Let me give you a hand.”

“Wash them first and let the water run. I want some cold water, that’s all I want.”

“At your service, madam. And, once you’ve sat down, I want to hear all about that lance.”

“Idiocy. You know the kind of thing. People at school insisted that I take it with me. Projecting emotion or something... They think this object belongs to me and no one else.”

“And this object is...”

“A glass of water, please.”

“Right away. And this object is...”

“And put a slice of lemon in it. There’s a piece left over in the fridge door.”

“This object is... Come on...”

“A map of the world. You’ve left some pips. The stupid map of the world that hung over my head for 30 years. Pour me another, please.”

“Which world?”

“Don’t mock. In fact, I want to ask you... Take it to the cellar, burn it in the yard, give it to hungry, neglected children, because I don’t want ever to set eyes on it again. That smell in the house. Heaven forbid! I’ve retired, it’s over. I never want to hear anyone mention the school again.”

“The big map of the world from the geography room where you spent some of the finest moments of your lengthy career as a secondary-school teacher? This is that map? For heaven’s sake, Mama! Burn it? Throw it out? My hands won’t be tainted with blood and that’s that.”

“Hands? Blood? You’re sentimental like your father. I can just imagine the same words coming from his lips. Maybe we should put it in a gilt frame and hang it here, over the stool?”

“Why, yes, Mama! I’ll sort it. Why not? Fine matt glass and a frame four centimetres wide. It would freshen up the space. The whole world in one place. And then, slowly, over our morning coffee, we can examine all those seas, the Straits of Gibraltar, the Americas, the Indies, archipelagos, the far-flung islands of the Pacific and all the rest. The world! Our world! Mother.”

“Now you’re being ironic. Is that irony? You’ve got a nerve!”

“What, me? No... Mother! How could you?”

“Get away from me. Get lost, I say. It’s the details that give you away. And bring me some more water. Study the Straits of Gibraltar, indeed? As though there were six of them.”

“It seems cloudy and warmer than usual.”

“What does?”

“The water, Mama. Take a look.”

“Water’s water.”

“Yes. You put that well. Water’s water.”

4.

This town is cut through by a river. Its name and shape don't exist on the map of the world. That's micro, unknown geography, and a fact that can only be ascertained on this very spot.

5.

The dialogue under the number three above never happened. But everything ending with the moment when my mother banged her forehead against the thick wood of the front door did happen. The courteous exchange of correct simple, compound and complex sentences that occupies a bit more than a page, is a complete lie. We never conversed like that. Barely intelligible mumblings, fragments of fury or just the most basic information about food and recent bills – that was us. Number three never happened but it's nevertheless very important in this whole story. I wanted to illustrate in short dialogue form a lie that I have often read in contemporary literature that purports to represent nothing more or less than life itself. The conversations of a mother and son, a father and child, a quarrel between two brothers, best friends, partners in love, in crime, whatever, lines filled with predictable and false bitterness, the rustling of paper and the smell of plastic, the taste of fake powder with a vanilla flavour, apocalyptic overtones and small apocalypses, unfinished sentences overflowing with artificial flowers, filled with artificial eyes, artificial hearts and artificial emotions, open endings, closed endings, pricks and the occasional thumb. Tragedy after tragedy, paradoxes on every corner, the world is bad isn't it you'll explain my friend, but first, please, try living with my mother on the fourth floor of a seven-storey concrete building stretching north-south. And that's not so terrible. I seldom mention it because my life is no better or worse than billions of other lives, whose hum

I sometimes hear in drops of rain committing suicide as they drip onto the tin porch of the west terrace angled towards the Adriatic basin. And I do all of that, of course, only in order to explain to myself that this story is pointless. Whoever can find a point in it has earned a great turd from me in the middle of his forehead. If you are that person, then I congratulate you from my heart, right in the heart.

6.

I'm a writer and I'm 36-years-old. Baldness, hints of impotence, bowel problems, nicotine cough, deep, dark bags under the eyes, back pain: none of that has happened to my body. A healthy, strong individual with a high brow, of average education, attractive to women, acceptable to men, I, I like writing that I from whom I expect nothing, from whom no one expects anything, but still, the lines keep on coming under the numbers; small, ugly plants germinate to twine eventually like the lower levels of the Amazon rainforest in whose shade I regularly delight as I watch endlessly tedious programmes on cable television, that attempt to condense the entire enthusiasm of the presenter and producer into one painfully hollow lie, into one single sentence: life is a miracle. Something stinks.

7.

I open the door, and she throws the big lance down. She nods her head, lifts up her chin, and says: Pension. I say: Congratulations, and light a cigarette, and she watches in disgust as the smoke worms its way out of my nostrils. Literature? Something stinks again. Yellowing pieces of cheese on the dining room table. She says: You might at least... She opens the rubbish bin and scrapes the scraps off the green plate. I say: Yes.

8.

I'm not interested in any kind of score settling. Particularly not a duel with myself. But that doesn't stop me sometimes looking at my mother through an imaginary sight on a long barrel. I would aim for her swollen belly to shatter the putrid remains of the ovaries that gave birth to me. And not in order for that symbolic act to confirm the pointlessness of my own existence, but just for the hell of it. A large calibre of emptiness into large larded tissue. Matter against matter, devastation and death. Thinking in metaphors. Satisfaction on the toilet. Brief onrushes of lucidity, which vanish like large turds swept away by a spurt of cold water. Fragments as a solution. Crap in sections. Miniatures, partituras, garnitures of a dried-up imagination scattered into something that I could put together under the title: My gangrenous life. But that's not hardship. And it will never be literature.

9.

After shaking the very last crumbs of cheese from the plate, my mother started to vomit, kneeling on the little rectangular rug beside the dining room table. I recognised a few sloppily chewed slices of tangerines. Ovaries, I thought, considering the tangerines on the dining room table. When she had finished, I helped her get up and wash her face. I never reached for one of those fruits again.

10.

I spent three months in prison for causing grievous bodily harm to an underage person. That sentence was not longer thanks to a master of the psychiatric profession, whose report affirmed that my action could not be characterised as attempted murder, but as the unarticulated compulsive

act of a psychologically disturbed individual. This is what happened: I'm standing, waiting for the big lift in order to reach the café on the second floor of the shopping centre where I occasionally go for a coffee. These are not surroundings that excite me in any way: filtered air, sweet aromas and the twittering of sparrows that live under the metal roof girders, flitting between television screens the length of the large hall. A spell in a shopping centre to an extent guarantees me anonymity, because the people I meet at the Berlin café bar never enter that neon abyss. That gallery of people consists of individuals I could in a terminologically broad register call acquaintances, friends in some instances, more or less agreeable people whose ungainly sentences are smothered by music from the metre-and-a-half-high loudspeakers. The sparrows in the shopping centre are mechanical devices, intended to bring the aluminium surroundings of the consumer oasis closer to mothers and children. For, what is good for animals is also good for people. In hidden crannies of the ceiling, between the dry plaster walls, there is a workshop where a man endeavours to make those birds behave exactly as expected. His name is Ferdinand, Fernando, Zigmund or at worst Esteban. A man-bird, a strictly kept secret, a meticulous mechanic and patient analyst of the frequent glitches that occur because of the cheap materials with which the workshop is supplied. The fact that I am standing in front of the lift door on the way for an espresso coffee has no bearing whatever on Ferdinand-Sigmund's reality and so this time I shall not allow myself the pleasure of telling the man's unique and exceptionally interesting biography. I shuffle from foot to foot. The wide steel door closes somewhere in the heights of the concrete façade. The box slowly descends. An electronic whistle announces its arrival, the door opens, and

in the middle of the big lift stands a five-year-old ready to scream and cry. He stares straight into my eyes as though he was going to find in them the nuclear energy required for the hysterical outpourings that are to follow.

He began to yell just as I stepped forward with the intention of bringing him out and comforting him. I presumed that his mother was roaming round the second floor, infected by irrational assumptions about the disappearance of her child and so I wanted to hug him to me and wait for the woman to appear. But when I put my arm tenderly round his tiny shoulders, when I brought my face close to his red cheeks, that little richly-toothed jaw opened and seized hold of my nose. I was taken aback by the demonic power of the bite that made my cartilage creak, and tears salted with sharp pain spring from my eyes. Everything that happened next was blurred by fury. But the statements of two witnesses were almost identical. So I have no doubt that I grabbed the boy by the head and threw him some ten metres away from the lift, in the direction of the underwear counter. I believe I had my eyes tightly closed and that is another reason why this unfortunate episode is reduced to aural impressions. Because, as I listened to the witnesses in the courtroom, my thoughts conjured up the thud of the body against the faultlessly polished ceramic tiles at precisely the moment when David Bowie began to scream *'Let's Dance'* down the length of the shopping-mall corridor. I said all that to the judge and the child's parents, but my lawyer said that those few sentences had ruined his case and they were the reason I got two months in prison instead of a six-month conditional sentence. Mother just shook her head sadly.

11.

She leaned the large map she had dragged from the school, together with the document about her pension, against her bedroom wall, beside the ironing board. The representation of the world wrapped in a long plastic box smelled of mothballs. When I first removed the lid, I was struck by an aroma that made me think in metaphors, defining the pointlessness of the existence of my own mother in relation to the unutterable stupidity of that object. The plastic box was covered with the signatures of colleagues, among which one rather larger one stood out followed by the exclamation: Good luck!

12.

The events under number 10 are invented. I have never had any problems with the law, and in the shopping centre I always use the escalator. Years of literary endeavour have convinced me that my intellectual mechanism consists of a few models of imbecile readers who always expect prose to deliver extremes. These, let's call them people, have put paid to the writer in me. Because no one any longer accepts the commonplace unhappiness lived out in the rooms of small but perfectly comfortable apartments such as this one in which my mother and I live. We have to push things to extreme values such as the false logic of a literary work. And when I say false, that is not a high-calorie word representing the bitter opposite of truth. No. I mean unutterable dissembling, obsequious and abject hiding behind a wealth of beautified masks of linguistic reality which do not aspire to the representation of an aesthetic idea in a work of literature, but prattles, multiplying and proliferating the most banal tragedies in an attempt to communicate how bad our world is. Falsity as a state of consciousness, and not a short-term intention. Pandering to

the intelligent, irritating the stupid. Literary prizes and a pose of concern at the chaos of the world. Style as inertia. That's why I decided to present the fog from the shopping centre first: the hint of a dark aesthetic that on the one hand snares through its narrative skill and on the other satisfies the reader with information worthy of the crime columns of the gutter press. Because a person can produce high-quality lies only when talking about himself. I want to claw out of literature the eternal declaration of truth that glistens like the labels on rotten bananas. I want to be someone else and not what I am now.

The Netherlands



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Marente de Moor

De Nederlandse maagd (2010)

The Dutch Maiden

Publishing House **Querido**

Biography

Marente de Moor (b. 1972) worked as a correspondent in Saint Petersburg for a number of years and wrote a book on her experiences, *Peterburgse vertellingen* (*Petersburg Stories*), which was published in 1999. She made a successful debut as a novelist in 2007 with *De overtreder* (*The Transgressor*), the German translation of which, *Amsterdam und zurück*, was well received there too. For her second novel, *De Nederlandse maagd* (*The Dutch Maiden*, 2010), de Moor was awarded the AKO Literature Prize 2011.

Synopsis

The greater scope of the novel covers the uncertainty and tensions preceding the Second World War.

In the summer of 1936, Dutch doctor Jacq sends his 18-year-old daughter Janna to stay with Egon von Bötticher, a German he befriended as a young man. This aristocratic fencing master, who is to help Janna perfect her own fencing skills, while away his days on a country estate, where he organizes the forbidden Mensur for students: a duel in which participants inflict visible injuries on each other as a sign of courage. Egon is an enigmatic figure, as attractive and irresistible as Heathcliff, and Janna inevitably falls for him.

However, *De Nederlandse maagd* is much more than just a story about love and the loss of innocence. A new, unfamiliar world opens up for Janna, full of riddles about the exact nature of the relationship between her father and Egon. The men met during the First World War, in an era that has gone forever now that the Nazis are on the rise. Janna's initiation into the adult world is a contradictory, confusing experience. The aristocratic code of honour, with its notions of courage and heroism, has proved futile, and an era of barbarism is dawning with the arrival of the Nazis. Through Janna's experiences, de Moor evokes the unsettled atmosphere of an era as a major historical shift occurs, vividly portraying the uncertainty and tensions that preceded the Second World War. As Janna reflects, when she returns to the Netherlands at the end of the book: "I could no longer return to the past. This had been a one-way journey."

De Nederlandse maagd

Marente de Moor

Je zou kunnen zeggen dat Von Bötticher verminkt was, maar na een week merkte ik zijn litteken al niet meer op. Zo snel went een mens aan uiterlijke afwijkingen. Zelfs gruwelijk mismaakten kunnen gelukkig zijn in de liefde, als ze iemand vinden die op het eerste gezicht niets om symmetrie geeft. De meeste mensen hebben echter de hebbelijkheid om, in weerwil van de natuur, de dingen te delen in twee helften die elkaars spiegelbeeld moeten zijn.

Egon von Bötticher was mooi, zijn litteken was lelijk. Een slordige wond, toegebracht met een bot wapen in een onvaste hand. Omdat mij niets was verteld, leerde hij mij kennen als een geschrokken meisje. Ik was achttien en veel te warm aangekleed toen ik uit de trein stapte na mijn eerste buitenlandse reis. Maastricht-Aken, een ritje van niks. Mijn vader had me uitgezwaaid. Ik zie hem nog staan voor het wagonraam, verrassend klein en mager, terwijl achter zijn rug de stoomzuilen oprijzen. Hij maakte een gek sprongetje toen de wagenmeester met twee hamerslagen vroeg de remmen te lossen. Naast ons trokken de rode wagens uit de mijnen voorbij, daarachter een rij loeiende veewagens, en in dat kabaal werd mijn vader steeds kleiner, tot hij in de bocht verdween. Geen vragen stellen, gewoon vertrekken. In zijn monoloog, een avond na het eten, was niet eens ruimte geweest om te ademen. Het ging om een oude vriend, eens een goede vriend, nog steeds een goede maître. Bon, verder, we moesten eerlijk zijn, we wisten dat ik deze kans moest aangrijpen om iets te bereiken in de sport, of wilde ik soms in de huishouding gaan werken,

nou dan, zie het als een vakantie, een paar weekjes schermen in het mooie Rijnland.

Tussen die twee stations lag veertig kilometer, tussen de twee oude vrienden twintig jaar. Op het perron van Aken stond Von Bötticher de andere kant op te kijken. Hij wist dat ik wel naar hem toe zou komen, zo'n man was het. En ik begreep inderdaad dat hij die zongebruinde reus met de roomwitte Homburg moest zijn. Bij de hoed droeg hij geen pak, alleen een kamgaren poloshirt en een soort zeemansbroek, zo eentje met een brede band in de taille. Heel modieus. En daar kwam ik, de dochter, in een opgelapte overgooier. Toen hij zijn gescheurde wang naar mij toe draaide, stapte ik terug. Het wilde vlees was met de jaren verbleekt, maar nog steeds roze. Ik denk dat mijn schrik hem verveelde, hij zag die blik natuurlijk wel vaker. Zijn ogen weken uit naar mijn borst. Ik pakte mijn medaillon om te verbergen wat in zo'n jurk toch nauwelijks te zien is.

‘Dat is het?’

Hij bedoelde de bagage. Hij kneedde mijn schermtas, voelde hoeveel wapens erin zaten. Mijn koffer moest ik zelf dragen. Heel snel vervaagde het zoete beeld dat ik van mijn maître had voordat ik hem ontmoette.

Dat beeld was ontstaan uit een wazig kiekje uit ons familiealbum. Twee mannen, de ene ernstig, de andere bewogen. Eronder een datum: januari 1915.

‘Dat ben ik,’ had mijn vader gezegd, wijzend op de ernstige man. En van de andere, van wie alleen te zien was dat hij een losgeknoopte kapotjas en een bontmuts droeg: ‘Dat is je maître.’

Mijn vriendinnen vonden de foto reuze. Het onscherpe gezicht liet zich wel invullen. Hij was fors en galant, dat telde, en hij had een landgoed waar ik kon gaan lanterfant, zoiets moest toch aflopen als in een film. Ik zag alleen een afgesloofde man zonder wapen. Boven mijn bed hing niet Gary Cooper of Clark Gable, maar de gebroeders Nadi. Een unieke foto, die ik nergens heb kunnen terugvinden: Aldo en Nedo, olympische helden, beiden rechtshandig, saluerend voor een partij. Schermers worden niet vaak in deze pose gefotografeerd. Hier staan ze nog in dezelfde houding tegenover elkaar, tussen hun kaarsrechte lichamen ligt precies vier meter, beiden houden de kling voor het ongemaskerde gezicht. Op de foto lijkt het alsof ze elkaar langs het staal van hun wapen de maat nemen, maar bij wedstrijden duurt zo'n groetritueel nooit lang. Niet zo lang als vroeger, toen dualisten voor de laatste maal het leven in de ogen van de ander bekeken.

Herr Egon von Bötticher kreeg zijn gezicht door Oorlog en vrede, waar ik hem als boekenlegger in had gestoken. Als ik het opensloeg, ontweek hij mij zoals hij voor de lens had bewogen. Las ik door, dan kreeg hij vorm. In de mist van de onscherpe vereeuwiging was hij zijn trots verloren. Eigenlijk droeg hij geen bontmuts, maar een steek, gouden epauletten op zijn schouders, links van zijn schoot een sabel in een rode schede. Dat wist ik zeker. In de trein probeerde ik snel door te lezen, maar ik werd afgeleid door een loerende passagier. Steeds als ik opkeek, keek hij weg. Ik las een paar zinnen, voelde dan weer zijn verhitte blik dwars door het ruitje van de coupé over mijn lichaam gaan, en begon nog sneller te lezen. Hele passages sloeg ik over om te komen waar ik wilde zijn: de kus van Bolkonski en Natasja. Die bereikte ik precies op tijd, toen we de tunnel binnen reden. De passagier was verdwenen. De foto stopte ik weg. Ik had geen gezicht nodig, mijn

Bolkonski zou ik herkennen uit duizenden. Op die nazomerdag in 1936 was hij de statigste van alle mannen op station Aken. Dichterbij gekomen bleek hij een verminkte vlerk, die me mijn koffer zelf in de auto liet tillen.

‘Uw vader heeft verteld wat de bedoeling is?’ vroeg hij.

‘Ja meneer.’

Niet, dus. Geen idee waar hij het over had. Beter leren schermen, dat was mijn bedoeling, maar mijn vader kende de maître uit een verleden dat niet lang meer duister zou blijven. Duitser, adel, landgoed Raeren. Mijn moeder begon hoofdschuddend te snikken toen ze het hoorde. Een andere reactie hadden we niet verwacht. De pastoor had haar gewaarschuwd voor de nazi’s, die zouden katholieken slecht behandelen. Mijn vader zei dat ze zich niet zo op stang moest laten jagen. Eerlijk gezegd, ik heb er niet op gelet. Nazi’s zeiden me niets. Von Bötticher daarentegen was onvermijdelijk. Hij reed me de stad uit zonder te remmen, langs onverharde haarspeldbochten; als hij schakelde, stootte zijn hand ruw tegen mijn been terwijl zijn knie, rechts van het stuur, tegen de mijne had geleund als ik niet schuin in de cabriolet was gaan zitten. Hij kleedde zich niet naar zijn leeftijd. Hij droeg sandalen die met een koordje om zijn enkels waren geknoopt. Mijn vader zou gezegd hebben: een pigeon.

‘We zijn er,’ was de derde zin die hij tot me richtte, na een tocht van zeker een uur. Voor de poort remde hij zo abrupt dat ik van de zitting schoot. Hij smeed het portier achter zich dicht, beende naar de hekken, duwde ze grommend open, sprong terug in de auto, scheurde de oprijlaan op en stapte weer uit om de poort te sluiten. De geluiden van die handelingen maakten duidelijk dat ik voorlopig niet meer buiten zou komen. Tussen de uitgebloeide kastanjes naast de oprijlaan

zag ik eerst de oude dakruiter, die gebruikt werd als duiven-til. Het zou een week duren voordat ik door het getrippel en gekoer heen zou slapen. Daarna zou ik wakker liggen van een veel grotere onrust.

Zet een spiegel tegenover een andere en ze tonen zichzelf in elkaar. Steeds kleiner en vager, maar de ene zal voor de andere niet verdwijnen. Zo is dat ook met sommige herinneringen. Ze ontkomen niet aan die eerste indruk, waarin een oudere herinnering is besloten. Vóór de jaarwisseling had ik in de bioscoop *The Old Dark House* gezien, met in de hoofdrol Boris Karloff, bekend van *Frankenstein*. Ik herkende het Raeren uit die film, althans, vond het er toen op lijken. Ik wist toen al dat ik in mijn herinnering altijd het huis uit de film zou blijven zien, dat de ramen altijd open zouden staan, met wapperende gordijnen, dat de spiegels gebroken zouden blijven en de wingerd rond de voordeur morsdood.

[...]

De eerste nacht op het Raeren kwamen de duiven mijn kamer binnen. Ik droomde dat ze met hun gerimpelde klauwtjes over me heen liepen. Een dikke grijsaard met een krop probeerde een moedervlek uit mijn hals te pikken. Omdat het zo benauwd was, had ik de balkondeuren op een kier gelaten, maar nu durfde ik niet meer op te staan om ze te sluiten. Het leek erop dat ze overal waren, scharrelend door de kamer. Op de stoel vlooiden de silhouetten van hun vleugels. Door het fladderende gordijn bescheen de maan de kamer alleen bij vlagen, ik was te moe om het lichtknopje te vinden en trok de lakens op tot mijn kin. 's Ochtends rook ik het meteen, de vogelravage. Romige kledders op het tapijt. Neerdwarrelend dons

toen ik uit bed stapte. Op het balkon was slag geleverd, heftig rondstappend in hun eigen uitwerpselen en een half verendek verliezend waren ze in en uit gelopen. Wat hadden ze gewild? Nu was het doodstil op het dak.

‘Dit is toch om je dood te schamen,’ zei Leni, die me kwam roepen voor het ontbijt. ‘Duivenstront is zeer bacterieel. Je kunt er longontsteking van krijgen, dat las ik in *Die Woche*. Ik zal Heinzi vragen een afrastering te maken. We kunnen ook proberen een van de kamers hieronder te meubileren.’ Ze pakte de lampetkan van het wasstel en gooide een plens over het balkon. Er moest een bezem uit de gang aan te pas komen, die hanteerde ze wijdbeens en voorovergebogen, vloekend. ‘Weet u hoeveel drollen ik al heb moeten ruimen vandaag? Hiervoor ben ik niet aangenomen. We zijn geen mestrapers, we hebben altijd bij de koekfabriek gewerkt.’

Ze was nog wel even bezig, ik moest zelf de keuken maar vinden. Trappen af naar de hal, deur rechts van de spiegel, gang daarachter helemaal uit, trapje omlaag, zou ik er zo tegenaan lopen. Niet bang zijn, de baas had een opperbest humeur. Had een wandeling gemaakt, een jonge haas geschoten, maakte zelf het ontbijt klaar. En o ja, ze moest van ’m zeggen dat hij zich verheugde op mijn gezelschap. Het bloed steeg naar mijn wangen. Met die galante uitnodiging was graaf Bolkonski weer ten tonele verschenen. Ik stak mijn haar op, strekte mijn hals en ging naar hem toe. Op de trap probeerde ik mijn voeten zo neer te zetten dat het niet kraakte. Maar eenmaal beneden vielen alle verwachtingen weer in duigen. Von Bötticher zat niet aan het andere eind van een wit gedekte tafel, hij stond met zijn rug naar mij toe gehakt te kneden bij de gootsteen.

Zoals ik het mij nu herinner, heb ik eigenlijk heel mijn jonge leven dagdromend doorgebracht. De toewijding waarmee ik dat deed, maakte het tot een vermoeiende gewoonte. Ik had nooit genoeg tijd om het verhaal af te maken, moest op een volgend ongestoord moment de draad weer oppakken en stuitte dan op onvolkomenheden, want, noem eens wat, zo'n luchtkasteel moest worden schoongemaakt, een jonge meid ging er misschien met je geliefde vandoor terwijl een oude feeks het plaatje bedierf met haar bemoeizucht, en wat deed zo'n prins eigenlijk de hele dag? Voordat ik alle struikelblokken uit de weg had geruimd was ik al gauw een uur verder. Dagdromen hield me 's nachts uit de slaap, met sommige verhalen leefde ik jaren, die werden steeds gedetailleerder, tot aan de motieven op de manchetten van mijn bruidsjurk aan toe. Zo verbeterden mijmeren alleen meisjes, dat weet ik zeker. Alle jonge mensen idealiseren de toekomst, maar meisjes ook het heden.

The Dutch Maiden

Marente de Moor

You might say that von Bötticher was disfigured, but after a week I no longer noticed his scar. How quickly one adjusts to outward flaws. Even the horribly misshapen can be lucky in love, if they find someone who from the start attaches no importance to symmetry. Most people, however, have the tendency, in defiance of nature, to divide things into halves that they expect to be mirror images.

Egon von Bötticher was handsome, it was his scar that was ugly: a messy wound, inflicted with a blunt weapon by an unsteady hand. Because I had never been warned, he first encountered me as a frightened girl. I was 18 and much too warmly dressed when I alighted from the train after my first trip across the border. Maastricht-Aachen, no distance at all. My father had seen me off. I can still picture him standing at the window of my railway carriage, surprisingly small and thin, the columns of steam rising behind his back. He gave an odd jump when the conductor struck two hammer-blows, the signal to release the brakes. On the next track over, red wagons carrying coal from the mines were followed by a line of bellowing cattle trucks, and amid the hullabaloo my father gradually dwindled until he disappeared around the curve. Don't ask questions now, just go. During his monologue, one evening after dinner, he'd left no pause for breath. He spoke of an old friend, once a good friend, still a good maître d'armes. Bon, in all honesty, we knew I had to seize this opportunity to achieve something as an athlete – unless I preferred to become a housemaid? Well, see it as a holiday then, a fortnight of fencing in the scenic Rhineland.

Between the two stations lay 40 kilometres, between the two old friends 20 years. On the platform in Aachen, von Bötticher was looking the other way. He knew I would come to him, he was that kind of man. And he was right: I understood that he must be the suntanned giant in the cream-coloured homburg. He wore no suit to match the hat, just a worsted tennis shirt and vaguely nautical trousers with a wide waistband. Very fashionable. And there I was, the daughter, in a patched-up pinafore. When he turned his torn cheek to face me, I backed away. The savage flesh had paled over the years but was still pink. My shocked expression probably bored him, it must have been all too familiar a response. His eyes drifted down to my chest. I clutched at my locket, to hide what is hardly visible anyway in a dress like that.

“That’s all?”

He meant the luggage. He squeezed at my fencing bag, checking how many weapons were in it. I had to carry my own trunk. The sentimental image of my fencing master that I’d cherished before our meeting was fading fast.

That image had grown out of a hazy photograph from our family album: two men, one solemn, the other a blur. Below them was a date: January 1915.

“That’s me,” my father had said, pointing to the solemn one. All that could clearly be seen of the other man was his shaggy, unbuttoned cloak and fur hat. “And that’s your maître.”

My friends had adored the photograph. His blurred features left plenty to the imagination. He was brawny and gallant, that was in his favour, and he had a country house where I could while away the days. It would be like a picture show. But all I saw was a weather-beaten man without a weapon. The picture above my bed was not Gary Cooper or Clark Gable, but the

Nadi brothers, a unique photograph I've never since been able to track down: the Olympic champions Aldo and Nedo, both right-handed, saluting before a bout. Not many photographs show fencers in that pose. In this one they were facing each other, both in the same stance, stock-straight, with exactly four metres between their bodies, holding their blades in front of their unmasked faces. They appeared to be sizing each other up along the steel of their weapons, but at competitions this opening ritual never lasts long. Not as long as it used to, when duellists took their last look into each other's living eyes.

Herr Egon von Bötticher had borrowed his face from *War and Peace*, where I'd stuck him as a bookmark. When I started the book he eluded me, just as he'd evaded the lens. Yet, as I read, he took shape. In the mist of his out-of-focus immortality, he had lost his pride. He didn't really wear a fur cap but a cocked hat, golden epaulettes on his shoulders and a sabre in a red sheath at his left hip. I was sure of this. In the train, I tried to hurry through the novel, but I was distracted by a passenger eyeing me. Whenever I looked up, he looked away. A sentence or two later, again I felt his hot gaze wandering over my body straight through the window of my compartment, and I began to read faster, skipping whole passages to arrive at my destination, Bolkonsky and Natasha's kiss. I reached it with perfect timing, just as we entered the tunnel. The passenger had vanished. I put the photograph away. I didn't need a face; I could spot my Bolkonsky in any crowd. That afternoon in the late summer of 1936, he was the most distinguished of all the men at Aachen station. But, at close range, he proved to be a scar-faced scoundrel who made me lift my trunk into the car myself.

"Your father explained the plan?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

Well, no. I had no idea what he was talking about. My plan was to become a better fencer, but my father knew the maitre from a past that would not remain murky much longer. A German aristocrat, Raeren Hall – my mother had shaken her head and sobbed when we told her about it. We'd expected no better. Our priest had warned her against the Nazis, saying they mistreated Catholics. My father told her not to get so worked up. To be honest, I didn't pay much attention. Nazis meant nothing to me. Von Bötticher, in contrast, was unavoidable. He drove me from the station to Raeren without once using the brakes, navigating hairpin turns on unpaved roads. When he switched gears his hand roughly collided with my leg, while his knee, to the right of the steering wheel, would have pressed against mine if I hadn't turned to the side of the convertible. He did not dress his age, wearing sandals with straps round his ankles that made him look, as my father might have said, rather like a pigeon.

“Here we are.” After an hour in the car together, it was the third sentence he had uttered to me. At the entrance he hit the brakes so abruptly that I was jolted off my seat. He slammed the car door behind him, sprinted to the gate, pushed it open – grumbling all the while – leapt back in the car, surged forward onto the driveway and stepped out again to close the gate behind us. Among the bare limbs of the chestnut trees lining the drive, I caught my first glimpse of the old roof-turret, which was in use as a dovecote. It would take me a week before I could get a good night's sleep, what with all the scratching and cooing. By the end of that week, I would have much greater worries to keep me lying awake.

Place two mirrors face to face and they show you images of each other. Each successive image is smaller and fainter, and none displaces the first. Some memories are like that. They never break free of the first impression, caught in the frame of an older memory. Before New Year's Eve, I had seen the film *The Old Dark House*, with Boris Karloff of Frankenstein fame playing the lead. I recognized Raeren Hall from that film, or at least I imagined a resemblance. That first day, I knew that in my memories of Raeren I would always see the old dark house, that the windows would always be open, the curtains blowing in the wind, the mirrors forever broken and the ivy round the front door withered and dead.

[...]

That first night at Raeren Hall, the pigeons came into my room. I dreamed they were walking all over me with their wrinkled claws. A plump grey one with a puffed-up chest was trying to pluck a birthmark from my neck. In the oppressive heat I'd left the balcony doors open, but now I didn't dare get up to close them. The birds seemed to be everywhere, scurrying about the room. On the chair, a silhouette was checking its wings for fleas. With the curtain blowing in the wind, the moonlight came into the room in flickers and starts. Too tired to search for the light switch, I pulled the covers up to my chin. In the morning I could smell it as soon as I woke up, the bird-spattered mess, creamy splodges all over the carpet, down fluttering to the floor as I got out of bed. The balcony was a battlefield. They had wandered in and out, strutting about in their own faeces and shedding half their plumage. What had they wanted? The roof was now deathly quiet.

“Shocking!” Leni said, when she came to fetch me for breakfast. “Pigeon shit is highly bacterial. You could catch pneumonia, it said so in *Die Woche*. I’ll ask Heinzl to make you a screen. We could also try to furnish one of the rooms downstairs.” She picked up the jug by the washbasin and splashed its contents out onto the balcony floor. Then she found a broom in the corridor and wielded it, cursing, as she straddled the mess with widespread legs. “You know how many turds I’ve cleaned up already today? This isn’t what I signed up for. We’re not dung collectors, we always worked at the cake factory.”

This was going to take her a while, she told me. I’d have to find my own way to the kitchen. Down the stairs to the entrance hall, first door to the right of the mirror, all the way down the passage behind it and then a few more steps, I couldn’t miss it. Not to worry, the boss was on top of the world today. He’d gone out for a walk, shot a young hare and was making breakfast himself. And, oh yes, he had asked her to tell me that he was looking forward to the pleasure of my company. The blood rose to my cheeks. With this gracious invitation, Bolkonsky returned to the scene. I put up my hair, lifted my chin and set off to meet him. I did my best to glide elegantly downstairs without a sound. But once I reached the kitchen, all my expectations were shattered. Von Bötticher was not at the far end of a table laid with white linen. Instead he stood with his back to me, kneading minced meat by the sink.

Looking back, it seems to me now that I spent all my young life daydreaming with exhausting dedication. I never had enough time to finish my stories, I had to pick up the thread at the next available opportunity and then got tangled up in contradictions, because – for instance – castles in the air need

cleaning, some young maiden might run off with your beloved while an old shrew spoils your fantasy with her interfering ways, and what does a prince do all day anyway? It would take me hours to tie up all the loose ends. Daydreaming kept me up at night. Some stories stayed with me for years, growing ever more detailed, down to the intricacies of buttons on my wedding dress. Only girls daydream so fervently, I'm sure. All young people idealise the future, but girls idealise the present too.



Uglješa Šajtinac

Sasvim skromni darovi (2011)

Quite Modest Gifts

Publishing House **Arhipelag**

Biography

Uglješa Šajtinac was born in 1971 in Zrenjanin. He graduated in 1999 from the Department of Dramaturgy, Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. He won the Josip Kulundžić Award for the best student of dramaturgy, as well as the Slobodan Selenić Award for the best graduation text. Between 2003 and 2005, he was a dramaturge for the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad. He edited a collection of new dramatic texts by young authors, PROJEKAT 3, which were staged at the festival of the same name in May 2005 at the Serbian National Theatre. Since 2005, he has been teaching Dramaturgy at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad.

He has received the Biljana Jovanović literary award, the Vital Prize, and three screenplay awards (Novi Sad, Vrnjačka Banja and Warsaw). His drama *Hadersfeld (Huddersfield)* won the Jovan Sterija Popović Award for the best contemporary dramatic text at the Sterijino Pozorje Festival in 2005. He has been a member of the Serbian Literary Association since 2007.

Synopsis

Quite Modest Gifts is a novel that draws its power from immediate and passionate experience, marked by impressive energy and sincere emotions. It is an epistolary novel in which two brothers exchange emails about their seemingly ordinary, but essentially unusual and exciting existence in Serbia and the United States. Through a form of family chronicle, the novel intertwines numerous narratives about the personal experiences of individual characters, while raising a number of challenging questions about the world we live in. By insisting on the key importance of family as the source and the outcome, as man's elementary purpose, the author pushes to the background all other motives and problems, and reconciles all the opposites: from the generational gap to contrasts between the fervent centre, full of events, and the sleepy province; between the eastern cultural code and western mores, and between ideological differences and historical changes.

Sasvim skromni darovi

Uglješa Šajtinac

Zaista, deco, mi bismo propali da već nismo propali.

Temistokle

I

Dragi brate,

Negde sam na Brodveju, niže, kiša ne pada već udara u naletima. Ispod mokrih slušalica još čujem „Tri laka komada“ Džona Kejdža. Stao sam ispod tende i sad pokušavam da zapalim cigaretu. Starica se okreće za kišobranom koji joj je vetar istrkao iz ruku. Ona se samoj sebi smeje. Smejem se i ja. Iz potoka koji juri niz ulicu, tamo gde je nestao njen kišobran, sada iskače ogroman crni pas s povocem. Izgleda da je to tako ovde. Stvari se pretvaraju u bića a bića u predmete. Ovo i nije kiša, pre je oluja koja dolazi pravo sa okeana. Pušim i gledam u svoje čizme. Ja već stojim u vodi. Kao i svaki stranac, zamišljam da pored mene stoji neko ko razume jezik kojim govorim. Već imam duhove, da, red je da ti pomenem i to. Udišem kišu i „laki strajk“, ushićen kao ono kad smo bili mali, čujem Gordinin vrisak i vidim te kako nas skupljaš kao ćuriće ispred kapije. Otac je na poslu. Majka takođe. Tetka Juliška stoji na vratima i briše ruke kuhinjskom krpom. Ti nas uteruješ a ona nas hvata i govori nam da ne mrdamo iz predsoblja, pola na mađarskom, pola na srpskom. Gordana mi tegli majicu natopljenu vodom i smeje se. Posle negoduje dok nam tetka Juliška peškirom trlja glave a ti stojiš na pragu kuće i gledaš u dvorište. Onda si otrčao. Nikad nisam mogao

da pogodim kuda i zašto. Bio si stariji. Uvek si imao nešto više sopstvenih razloga od nas mlađih. Ti si tada već imao toliko stvari koje su samo tebe brinule. Tvoj bicikl, tvoji zečevi, tvoje baštenske instalacije kao onaj drveni avion-vetrenjača kojem se propeler na kljunu okretao kad duva vetar. Kako bi se sad klatio i okretao! Ako ne budem znao šta sa sobom više nego sada, jer ni sad ne znam, pokrenuću proizvodnju baš takvih aviona-vetrenjača jer to ovde nedostaje. Ni Menhetn nije savršen. Eno, našli su se gospodar i njegov pas. Sad čovek kleči u bari i mazi crno pseto kao da dodiruje važan deo sopstvene duše. Ti to razumeš. Nekad si bio bolećiv prema nemoćnima.

Da ti kukam, neću. Osim što nije dozvoljeno pušenje u lokalima koji prodaju kafu i alkohol, Njujork je dobar prema meni. Stigao sam pre tri dana. Na aerodromu me je sačekao Džoi, porodični čovek u ranim pedesetim godinama. On je koordinator projekta na koji smo pozvani, brine o tome da se snabdemo mapama, kartama za „sabvej“, novcem. Dobijaću sedam stotina zelembaća nedeljno! Uzimajući u obzir da smeštaj imamo, novac je tu da sebi obezbedimo hranu i piće. Zašto sam spominjao Džoija? Verovatno jer je on prva osoba s kojom sam pričao ovde. O japanskim automobilima. I on vozi „hondu“, nije patriota. Kad sam ga pitao kako je u Njujorku, on se nasmejao i rekao: „Nemam pojma, ja se dovezem na posao, odsedim pola dana u kancelariji i onda odem kući, ženi i deci u Konektikat.“ Tamo je priroda. A ti znaš da ne podnosim prirodu. Kad smo prošli naplatnu rampu i spustili se na Menhetn, srce mi je zaigralo od sreće.

Umalo da zaboravim! Uostalom, ako te bude zanimalo mogu potanko da ispričam kako smo se svi sakupili ovde u roku od dvadeset četiri časa. Dramski pisci iz istočne i srednje Evrope. Zanimljiva stvar se desila na putu ovamo, to ne smem da propustim. Sećaš se da mi je ona službenica

JAT-a rekla kako će se „potruditi da u Minhenu ne zakasnimo na avion koji leti za Njujork“. Dakle, izgrlili smo se tada i ti si me tešio kako će „sve biti okej čim napustim vazdušni prostor usrane otaDžbine“. Onda si se okrenuo i izašao sa aerodroma. Nekog si zvao mobilnim telefonom, stajao ispred. Gledao sam te sve dok nisi prešao put i izgubio se među automobilima na parkingu. Tu počinje moja avantura. Prvo, u Minhen smo sleteli sa zakašnjenjem. Tamošnji aerodrom je dugačak ali ne toliko glomazan da bi bio loše organizovan. Ipak, do terminala koji je vodio u letelicu za Njujork nije se moglo stići za pet minuta. Upravo smo toliko vremena imali, mi koji smo leteli dalje, da pokušamo. Bilo nas je troje. Jedan stariji čovek iz okoline Beograda, žena četrdesetih godina i ja. Uvidevši da smo u procepu, zaustavim stjuardesu JAT-a i pitam je: „Gospodo, kako mislite da mi stignemo do tamo za pet minuta?“ „Požurite, požurite“, rekla je unezvereno. Tabla s brojem terminala videla se u daljini, ali taj je broj bio toliko sitan da je postalo jasno da do nje nema manje od trista metara. Skoro da sam već potrčao, ali onda su nas zaustavile nemačke službenice. „Ne možete sad, terminal je već zatvoren“, govore su i već uspostavljale radio vezu s nekim. Stjuardesa JAT-a je bukvalno nestala iz aerodromske hale. Čovek, žena i ja gledali smo se bespomoćni. Onda je starina odlučio da kaže šta ima: „Šta mi, koji kurac, šalju kartu da idem da ih obilazim, lepo sam rekao da mene to ne zanima. Sedeo bih sad kod kuće i bio miran, jebem ti i decu i unučiće...“ Žena se vidno uzrujana primakla meni i čak me dohvatila za podlakticu: „Vi znate engleski, da, odlično, ja ne znam ni da beknem, dobro je, vi ćete nam pomoći?“ Posle nekoliko sekundi došla su dva policajca i sve troje smo privedeni u policijsku stanicu na aerodromu. Da, uhapsili su nas. Glupi, plavušni, germanski drot gegao se za nama kao

da u čmaru drži rezervnu konzervu „beksa“. U stanici su nas smestili u голу sobu s klupama, a onaj isti „Fric“ gledao nas je s vrata kao da smo tri iguane. Govorio je kroz groktaj, glasno i zadovoljno, s nekim koga nismo videli. Taj glas iz daleka već sam mogao da razaznam. Govorio je da treba pripremiti fotoaparata. Starina je sedeo na klupi s namerom da zapali cigaretu, ali ubrzo je odustao. Pušenje nije dozvoljeno ni van ove policijske stanice a kamoli nakon što ti se pogled susretne s pogledom bavarskog policajca. „Pitaj ti njih da li oni mene mogu da puste kući, jebeš ti ovo“, mrtav ozbiljan zamoli me starac. Nisam stigao da odgovorim jer su me već odvodili na slikanje. Tri poze, nemačkim aparatom, objektivom Karl Cajs moglo bi biti, jer, sad su opet ujedinjeni, Nemci! Nešto sam rekao na nemačkom u tom trenutku, recimo: „Zašto smo ovde?“ ili tako nešto, a onda je „Fric“ poskočio kao da je video verglaša s majmunom na ramenu. Doviknuo je „Hansa“ i mogao sam da razumem kako ponavlja: „Ovaj zna nemački“. Ima nečeg nesvarljivog u tome da te Nemci privode, pomislio sam. Prvo, meni stvarno nije bilo jasno zašto smo morali biti uslikani i to u prostorijama policije, drugo, slušati da ti Nemač nešto naređuje nije nimalo prijatno. „Da, znam nemački, učio sam ga u školi“, odgovorio sam. Ne govorim ga dovoljno dobro pa nisam u brzini mogao da ga pitam: „Zar je tolikim Jevrejima, od kojih je velika većina znala nemački, to znanje išta pomoglo onomad?“ A hteo sam. Onda su uslikali ženu i na kraju starca koji je tako vidno potonuo u nezadovoljstvo da sam pomislio da će oteti pištolj nekome od policajaca i sve nas poubijati. Uzeli su nam po dvadeset evra. Onda smo dobili po nalepnicu u pasoš i objašnjeno nam je da više nismo ilegalni imigranti i da sad imamo tranzitnu vizu za Nemačku. Do sledećeg aviona možemo mirno da negodujemo u aerodromskoj hali. Tako je i bilo.

Po svim pravilima dobro komponovanog epa, lepo je ubrzo zamenilo ružno. Počeli su da se izvinjavaju. Za nepunih pola sata bio sam u avionu za Frankfurt odakle će biti organizovan najbrži transfer ka Njujorku. Pride, nisam više sedeo već ležao u biznis klasi. „Lufthanzino“ iskupljenje je bilo potpuno. Za samo dvadeset evra, onih koji su završili u rukama germanskih pandura, što je svakako mnogo manje od razlike u ceni avionske karte u ekonomskoj i biznis klasi, sad sam leškario, imao u ruci daljinski za upravljanje video kanalima, ćebence. Pogledao sam dobro avionsku kartu kojom su zamenili moju, sada već sasvim beskorisnu. Recimo da je bila izdata nekoj ili nekom „Ramajani Upanišadi“, toliko sam skontao. Umesto nekog Indijca ili Indijke, moja slovenska barbarska telesina, moja skitska trupina, protezala se duž oborenih udobnih sedišta. Pronašao sam kanal klasične muzike na audio plejeru i uživao u adađu za gudače Semjuela Barbera. Kakav obrt! Animirana projekcija našeg aviona koji sledi putanju preko Atlantika šarenila se sa ekrana. Gledao sam i čekao da ukebam trenutak kad će mala letelica da se pomeri. Očajnički posao. Kad je došlo vreme klope bio sam upitan da li želim azijsku ili evropsku ponudu. Šta bi Orvel naručio? ! Verovatno slatki pasulj i dve prženice. Povrh svega, mene je oduševljavalo ćebence. Zgurio sam se pod njega i pokušao da spavam. Nije išlo. Pitao sam se i tada, i sad se pitam, dragi brate, čime sam ja ovo zaslužio. Ko je baš mene odabrao da iz Srbije dođem ovamo? Zašto? Nikad to nisam tražio. Nisam siguran ni da sam zaslužio. Sve je tako tajnovito i toliko neobavezno u isto vreme. Nije me pratila nikakva delegacija. Recimo, dramskih umetnika ili dramskih pisaca. Ne prenosim ničije poruke, nemam nikakav zadatak od opšte koristi. O ovome jedva da iko zna nešto tamo odakle dolazim. Zvanično, niko me nije ispratio, osim tebe. Hvala ti, uvek.

Pokušaću da odspavam malo. Pišem ti iz male sobe koja ima dva kompjutera i koja je posvećena sećanju na mladog dramskog pisca koji je prerano napustio ovaj svet. Njegovi roditelji su dali da se uredi mali studio i nazove njegovim imenom. Danju je ovde gužva a sada, u pola noći, nema nikog i oni koji su smešteni u samoj zgradi instituta već odavno spavaju. Odavde ću ti pisati tokom ove tri nedelje. Nerviraš me tim odbijanjem da instaliraš „skajp“, onda bismo mogli da se čujemo i pričamo do mile volje. Gordanu sam zvao telefonom. Jako je srećna zbog mene. Kaže, da vidim ima li načina da ostanem ovde, njoj se čini da je to dobra šansa za mene. Malo je tužna ispod svega, rekao bih. Da li se vas dvoje uopšte čujete nekad? Možda postoji nešto čime neće da me opterećuje. Molim te, proveri i porazgovaraj s njom. Zvao sam i roditelje. Dedi je zvučao okej, mađa malo umorno. On predlaže da nađem neku ribu ovde, klasika. Keva je zaposlena, to sam shvatio. Nije mi pominjala rešenje za penziju, to je verovatno boli. Kako ti vidiš sve to? Jebi ga, setio sam se. Mislim, to što ne mogu da nađem odgovore zašto sam ja zaslužio da me jedna američka institucija dramskih pisaca poziva da tri nedelje o njenom trošku tumaram centrom sveta. Samom sebi ne izgledam dovoljno dobar za tako nešto. To nije doživio ni naš baba, nisi ni ti. Za mene su keva i on heroji, heroj si ti. Gordana je najsvetlija duša, pa eno je gde već deset godina živi kao podstanar, putuje na posao u neku selendru, ponižavajuće.

Oprosti mi ovakav kraj, a sad stvarno idem da legnem jer već sviće. Napiši mi šta da ti kupim. Pravim spisak. Stežem ti ruku i volim te.

Tvoj brat Vukašin, plod čreva iste matere!

Quite Modest Gifts

Uglješa Šajtinac

Translated from the Serbian by Professor Randall Mayor

Indeed, my sons, we would fail if we had not already.

Themistocles

I

My dear brother,

I'm somewhere on Broadway, further on down, and the rain is not just falling but is rather pelting me intermittently. Even so, in my wet earphones, I can still hear 'Three Easy Pieces' by John Cage. I've stopped under an awning and I'm trying to light a cigarette. An old woman turns after her umbrella which the wind has ripped from her hands. She's laughing at herself. I'm laughing too. From the stream rushing down the street, over where her umbrella disappeared, a huge black dog on a leash now leaps out. That's just how things are here, it seems. Things turn into beings, and beings turn into things. This actually isn't just rain, it's more like a tempest coming in from the ocean. I'm smoking and looking at my boots. The water has already covered them. Like every other foreigner, I imagine that there is someone standing next to me who understands the language I speak. I do have ghosts, yes, it's only fair that I mention it to you. I inhale the rain and my Lucky Strike, as excited as when we were little and I heard Gordana's voice and I see you gathering us like a flock of turkeys in front of the gate. Father is at work. Mother, too. Aunt Juliška is standing in the doorway and wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

You herd us in and she grabs us and tells us, half in Hungarian, half in Serbian, not to leave the entranceway. Gordana pulls at my t-shirt soaked in water and laughs. Later, she grumbles when Aunt Juliška rubs our heads with a towel, and you stand at the threshold and look out into the yard. Then you ran off. I could never guess where to or why. You were older. You always had more of your own reasons than we, the younger ones, did. Even back then you had so many things which worried only you. Your bicycle, your rabbits, your inventions in the garden, like that wooden airplane-windmill, whose propeller spun on its shaft when the wind blew. How it would be rocking and spinning in this storm! If I ever don't know what to do with myself more than now, because even now I don't know, I'll start producing just such airplane-windmills because they don't have them here. Not even Manhattan is perfect. There, the dog and its master have found each other. Now the man is kneeling in a puddle and petting his dog as if he is touching an important part of his own soul. You understand that. You used to have a weakness for the powerless.

I don't mean to gripe. Except for the fact that smoking is not allowed in places where they sell coffee and alcohol, New York is good to me. I arrived three days ago. I was met at the airport by Joey, a family man in his early fifties. He's the coordinator of the project we've been invited to participate in, and he makes sure we have maps, subway tickets, money and so on. I'll get 700 bucks a week! Taking into account the fact that our rooms are provided, they give us the money so we can eat and drink. Why did I mention Joey? Probably because he's the first person I spoke to here. About Japanese automobiles. He also drives a Honda, he's not a patriot. When I asked him how life is in New York, he smiled and said, "I have no idea, I drive in to work, sit half a day in the office and then go

home to my wife and kids in Connecticut.” There is a lot of nature in Connecticut. You know I can’t stand nature. When we went through the toll booth and glided into Manhattan, my heart jumped with joy.

I almost forgot! Among other things, if you’re interested, I can tell you in detail about how we all gathered here within 24 hours. Playwrights from Eastern and Central Europe. An interesting thing happened on the way here, I mustn’t forget to tell you about that. You remember that the JAT check-in clerk told me, “in Munich, try not to be late for your connection to New York.” Remember, we hugged and then you comforted me that “everything will be all right as soon as you leave the airspace of this shitty country you call a homeland.” Then you turned and went outside the terminal. You called someone on your cell, standing in front of the building. I kept watching you until you crossed the street and disappeared among the cars in the parking lot. That’s when my adventure began. First, we landed late in Munich. The terminal there is a long one, but it’s not so spread out that it is poorly organized. Even so, there was no way in five minutes to get to the terminal that led to the plane for New York. That was precisely how much time we had to try, those of us who were travelling on. There were three of us. An older man from outside Belgrade, a woman of fortysomething, and me. Seeing that we were in a tight spot, I stopped a JAT flight attendant and asked, “Pardon me, Ma’am, but how do you expect us to get there in five minutes?” “Hurry, hurry,” she said haggardly. The board with the terminal number could be seen in the distance, but the number was so tiny it became clear that it was at least 300 yards away. I was on the verge of running, but then some German attendants stopped us. “You can’t make it now, the gate is already closed,” they said and called in over

the walkie-talkie to someone. The JAT stewardess had literally disappeared from the airport terminal. The man, woman and I all looked on helplessly. Then the old fellow decided to say what was on his mind. “Why, why the hell, did they send me a ticket to visit them, I told them I didn’t really care. Right now I’d be sitting at home in peace and quiet, goddamn kids and grandkids.” The woman, visibly upset, moved closer to me and even grabbed me by the forearm, “You speak English, yes, great, I don’t know a word, it’s good, you’ll help us, right?” A couple of seconds later, two policemen came up and all three of us were taken to the police station at the airport. Yes, they arrested us. A stupid, blond, Germanic cop stomped after us as if he had a spare can of Beck’s stuck up his anus. At the station they put us in a bare room with benches, and that selfsame ‘Fritz’ watched us from the door as if we were three iguanas. He spoke with a rasp, loud and happy, to someone we couldn’t see. I could make out the other voice down the hall. It said that they needed to get the camera ready. The old man sat down on a bench in order to light a cigarette, but he quickly changed his mind. Smoking is not allowed even outside the police station, much less after a Bavarian policeman gives you one of his looks. “Ask them if they can just let me go home, screw this,” the old man asked me dead seriously. I didn’t get to answer him because they were already taking me off to photograph me. Three poses, with a German camera, it might have been a Carl Zeiss lens, because they’re united again, the Germans! I said something in German at that moment, something like, “Why are we here?” or something like that, which made ‘Fritz’ jolt like he had just seen an organ grinder with a monkey on his shoulder. He called out to ‘Hans’ and I understood him as he repeated, “This guy speaks German?” It doesn’t sit well when the Germans arrest

you, I thought. First of all, it really wasn't clear to me why we had to be photographed in the offices of the police at that, and second, hearing a German giving you orders isn't pleasant in the least. "Yes, I speak German, I learned it in school," I told him. I don't speak well enough so that I could quickly ask him, "Did the fact that so many Jews knew German help any of them, you know, back then?" And I wanted to. Then they photographed the woman and finally the old man, who had sunk so deeply into his dissatisfaction that I thought he might grab one of the policemen's guns and kill us all. They took 20 euros from each of us. Then they put a sticker in each of our passports and told us that we were no longer illegal immigrants and that we now had a transit visa for Germany. We were free to complain all the way to our next airplane in the airport terminal. And so we did.

Like in the principles of a well-composed epic poem, the beautiful quickly replaced the ugly. They began apologizing. In less than half an hour I was on a plane for Frankfurt, where the quickest possible transfer to New York was to be organized. Moreover, I was no longer sitting, but reclining in business class. Lufthansa's redemption was complete. For just 20 euros, those that ended up in the clutches of the Germanic cops – which was certainly a lot less than the difference in price between an airplane ticket in economy and business class – I was now lounging about, I had a remote control to change the video channels, a blanket. I looked carefully at the plane ticket they used to replace mine, now quite useless. It was issued to some man or woman called 'Ramayana Upanishad' as far as I could tell. Instead of some man or woman from India, my Slavic barbarian bulk, my Scythian hulk, was stretched out on the comfortable reclining seat. I found a classical music channel on the audio player and lavished in

Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. What a turnabout! An animated representation of our airplane following its path across the Atlantic flickered on the screen. I watched and waited to catch the moment when the tiny aircraft would move. A desperate job. When mealtime came, I was asked if I preferred an Asian or a European selection. What would Orwell order? ! Probably baked beans and two slices of French toast. Above all, I was enthralled with the blanket. I huddled beneath it and tried to sleep. Without success. I wondered then, and I wonder now, my dear brother, what I did to deserve this. Who was it that chose my humble self to come here? Why? That's something I never asked. I'm also not sure I deserved it. It's all so mysterious and so laid-back at the same time. I was not accompanied by, say, any sort of delegation of playwrights. I'm not carrying anyone's message; I have no real worthwhile task to do. Back where I come from, hardly anyone knows about all of this. Officially, no one saw me off, except you. Thanks, as always.

I'll try to go and sleep for a while now. I'm writing to you from a small room which has two computers and which is dedicated to the memory of a young playwright who died before his time. His parents donated the money to set up a small studio which bears his name. During the day it's crowded, in the middle of the night there's no one, and those staying in the building of the institute have long since gone to bed. I will write you over the next three weeks from here. You irritate me with your refusal to install Skype, because then we could see each other and talk as much as we wanted. I called Gordana on the phone. She's quite happy for me. She says that I should try to find a way to stay here, she thinks it's a good opportunity for me. She's a little sad deep inside, I would say. Do the two of you ever talk at all? Maybe there's something that she

doesn't want to bother me with. Please, check it out and talk with her. I also called our parents. Daddy sounded all right, if a little tired. He suggested I find myself a girl over here, the classic tale. Mom is really busy, I got that. She didn't even mention her retirement settlement, it probably hurts her feelings. What is your take on all that? Shit, I just remembered. I mean the fact that I can't find an answer to why it was I who deserved to have an American institution of playwrights invite me to spend three weeks on their tab to wander around the centre of the world. To myself, I don't seem to be good enough for something like that. Our dad didn't get to do that, nor did you. To me, he and mom are heroes, you are the hero. Gordana is the brightest of souls, and yet there she's been for the last 10 years living as a tenant, traveling to work in some backwater village, it's humiliating.

Forgive me for ending this way, but now I really must go off to sleep because dawn is breaking. Write me what you want me to buy for you. I'm making a list. I grasp you by the hand and I love you.

Your brother,

Vukašin, the fruit of the womb of the same mother!



© Emre Efendi

Birgül Oğuz

Hah (2012)

Aha

Publishing House Metis

Biography

Birgül Oğuz (b. 1981) received her BA in Comparative Literature and MA in Cultural Studies from İstanbul Bilgi University. She is the author of two short fiction books, *Fasulyenin Bildiği* (2007) and *Hah* (2012). Her short stories, essays, articles and translations have been published in Turkish literary magazines and newspapers. In the winter of 2013, she was invited to be a writer-in-residence by quartier21 in MuseumsQuartier, Vienna. Currently, she is studying a PhD in English Literature at Boğaziçi University, and she lectures on text analysis and the European novel at Moda Sahnesi and Nazım Hikmet Academy in İstanbul.

Synopsis

The eight and a half stories in *Hah*, a collection that reads like a novel, contemplate the psychology of mourning and melancholia, and the politics of mourning in particular. *Hah*, in search of a new literary agency to transform traumatic loss into meaningful narrative, seeks to answer these questions: how can one mourn when mourning is impossible? How can one write about mourning when it is impossible to find the means to narrate it? And how can one not write when writing is the only way to mourn?

In *Hah*, the intervention of time into mourning manifests itself as the intervention of mourning into language. *Hah* searches, finds, tries, uses and disposes of many types of literary devices in order to articulate the Loss (that is, 'loss' with a capital 'L') which defies articulation. It is a text that signifies the literariness of every discourse, politics included.

Highly intertextual, *Hah* draws upon a plethora of texts, from the Old Testament to 20th century European poetry, from 16th century ghazals to contemporary Turkish verse, from cornerstones of Turkish literature such as Leyla Erbil, Oğuz Atay, and Bilge Karasu, to the likes of James Joyce and William Shakespeare, from workers' anthems to folk songs. It is a work that – while a product of a specific time and place – resonates with anyone who has ever experienced loss. Therein lies its particular universality.

Hah

Birgöl Oğuz

Tuz Ruhun / "De" (ss.29-30)

Ağırlığımı çay kaşığıyla ölçtüğüm günlerdi.

Dur duraksız yağın tebeşir tozu gözkapaklarımda birikip ağırlaşırdı. Eve dönerken hiç konuşmazdım. Günün ışığı eğrilip soldukça, beni dünyayla bir arada tutan dikiş tıkrır tıkrır çözüldü. Bir yanım uyur, öbür yanım susardı.

Akşam kapıya dayandığında, tak tak, gözkapaklarımdaki tozu silkeleyip kim o? derdim. O zaman kapıdan baba girerdi. Dünyanın uğultusu girerdi. Kapkara ve kocaman türbinlerin uğultusu, asitli sıvıların fokurtusu, eğ ve çekicinin sesi, yanmış yağ ve polyesterin kokusu girerdi. Ayaklarını sürüyerek girerdi. Tanıyarak büyüdüm. Sofraya tuzkarabibeklemek götürürdüm.

İcraatın İçinden programı başladığında, ha-ha, buğday taneleri uçuşurdu ekranda, sofradan patates yemeği geçerdi ve pilav ve turşu ve traktörler, (örtmene bok denmez kızım), dap dap dapdağınaktı her yan, ekmek kırıntıları, tuz, iplikler, boş makaralar, (ha Zebra ha Cebra, üzülme kızım), tabaklar boşalınca masadaki kırıntıları tek tek toplardık tek parmağımızın ucunda, göz göze gelemezdik çünkü doymanın utancı girerdi aramıza, (ama bir daha kendini duvara çiviletme, gerekirse devrime inkılâp de, tamam mı kızım?), sağcı kestanelerin göbekleriye çoktan çatlamıştı işçi kanı içmekten ama güneşin zaptı yakındı, (dünyanın tuzu sensin, unutma), ama akın yoktu, benim gibi kıcı puntolu aksaklar vardı,

anımsamanın gürültüsü ağırdı ve herkesi evine mıhlamıştı, buğday yağıyordu her yana, sanki kar yağıyordu ama, (anımsamak için unutmak gerek kızım, sen sakın unutma), böyle böyle, sofranın en ortasında birikiyordu üç parmak kadar, iki gözümüzün ikisine de birdi tuz ya da kar, saygıyla susup bekliyorduk ve çok geçmeden geliyordu Lenin, bir tuzluk kadardı boyu, (dünya ne yener ne yenik düşer kızım), hep devrimin seksen ikinci gününde geliyordu, düşe kalka dans ediyordu karın üstünde, neşeyle geçip gidiyordu soframızdan, sevinçten gözlerimiz doluyordu her seferinde, ama kederli bir şey vardı o ayak izlerinde, kederli ve ağır ve susuyorduk, (ve ölüm yalnızca ölüleri ilgilendirir), biz sustukça buğday taneleri havada dört dönüyordu, bir acılık vardı, buğdayda da buğdaya bakmakta da, (bu yüzden yetmişinde bile zeytin dikeceksin ve olduğundan güçlü görüneceksin), başımızı kaldıramıyorduk, başımız ağırdı, çünkü bilmek ağırdı, çünkü bir buğday tanesi bin buğday tanesi demektir, (ve üreteceksin ama unutma: Onlar senden ama senin değil), taneler havada dört dönüp duvara çarpıyordu, sallandı koca duvar, sallandı ve yıkıldı, uzaktı, ağırdı, sırtımız üşüdü, alnımız karıştı, (sen bendensin, cânımın şırası, ama benim değilsin), çay içiyorduk, derken körfezin sularına petrol mavi bir kum yağdı, kum değildi buğdaydı, sulara yağdı, haklıydık, haksız kıldı bizi, haklıydık, haksız kıldı bizi, haklıydık, haksız kıldı bizi.

Ve sofrada bir başıma kaldığımda kaşığın sapını masaya vurup “iyi değil,” dedim, çünkü bir buğday tanesi kavuşup da toprağa yok olmazsa hiç –ama hiç- hiç iyi değildi ve sofradan tuzkarabiberekmek götürdüm.

Aha

Birgül Oğuz

Translated from the Turkish by Amy Spangler

From 'Your Soul of Salt' (pp. 29-30)

It was back in the days when I measured my weight by the teaspoon.

An incessant rain of chalk dust would weigh heavy on my eyelids. I never spoke on the way home. As the light of day bent, fading away, stitch by stitch the thread binding me to the world would come undone. One half of me would fall asleep, the other, silent.

At the knock-knock on the door in the evening, I would shake the dust from my eyelids and ask, “Who’s there?” That’s when father would enter. And with him, the drone of the world. And the drone of giant black turbines, the burble of acidic plaster, the noise of files and hammers, the smell of burnt oil and polyester, all of these would enter. He would enter, dragging his feet. I would grow up, knowing. I would take the saltpepperbread to the table.

When ‘A Nation at Work’ came on, ha-ha, right!, corns of wheat would fly across the screen, a potato dish would traverse the table and rice and pickles and tractors (you shouldn’t call the teacher “shit” sweetheart), it was a massive mess all over, bread crumbs, salt, threads, empty spools (God very well could have spoken to “noses” rather than “Moses” sweetheart, don’t be hard on yourself), when the plates were emptied we would gather the individual crumbs on the tips of our individual

fingers, we could not let our eyes meet because the shame of being full would come between us, (but don't let yourself get nailed to the wall like that again, okay, sweetheart, just keep the word proletariat to yourself), meanwhile the stomachs of right-wing chestnuts had already burst, having gorged themselves on the blood of workers, but the conquest of the sun was near, (you are the salt of the earth, don't forget that), but there was no surge, just the limping likes of me with headline fonts on their butt, the noise of remembering was thick and had glued everyone to their homes, wheat rained down, as if snow falling but (to remember you have to forget, sweetheart, whatever you do, never forget), falling and falling, piling up on the middle of the table, three fingers thick, salt and snow were one and the same to our eyes, we would wait in respectful silence and before long he would come, Lenin, no taller than a salt shaker, (the world neither defeats nor is defeated, sweetheart), he always came on the 82nd day of the revolution, dancing a jumbled dance on the snow, merrily making his way across the table, each time our eyes would swell up with joy, but there was something sad in those footprints, sad and heavy and we would grow silent, (and death only concerns the dead), as we remained silent the grains of salt would somersault through the air, there was a bitterness, to the wheat and to watching the wheat (and that's why, even at 70 you'll plant olive trees, and you'll appear stronger than you are), we couldn't raise our heads, our heads were heavy, because knowing was heavy, because a single corn of wheat meant a thousand corns of wheat, (and you shall produce but don't forget: though it be of you, it is not yours), the corns turned somersaults, crashing into the wall, the giant wall shook, it shook and it fell, it was distant, heavy, our backs grew cold, our foreheads creased, (you are of me, the milk of my soul,

but you are not mine), we were drinking tea, when an oil-blue sand rained down on the waters of the gulf, it wasn't sand but wheat, it rained down on the water, we were right, it made us wrong, we were right, it made us wrong, we were right, it made us wrong.

And when left alone, I slammed the stem of the spoon onto the table and said, "It's no good," – just no no no – no good and I took the saltpepperbread from the table.

The United Kingdom



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Evie Wyld

All the Birds, Singing (2013)

Tous les oiseaux du ciel

Publishing House **Vintage**

Biography

Evie Wyld is the author of one previous novel, *After the Fire, A Still Small Voice*, which was short-listed for the IMPAC Award, the Orange Award for New Writers and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. In 2013, she was named as one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists, having previously been named by the BBC as one of the 12 best new British writers. *All the Birds, Singing* was longlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction. She lives in Peckham, London, where she runs the Review Bookshop.

Synopsis

Jake Whyte is the sole resident of an old farmhouse on an unnamed British island, a place of ceaseless rains and battering winds. It's just her, her untamed companion, Dog, and a flock of sheep. Which is how she wanted it to be. But something is coming for the sheep – every few nights it picks one off, leaving it in rags.

It could be anything. There are foxes in the woods, a strange boy and a strange man, rumours of an obscure, formidable beast. And there is Jake's unknown past, perhaps breaking into the present, a story hidden thousands of miles away and years ago, in a landscape of different colours and sounds, a story held in the scars that stripe her back.

All the Birds, Singing

Evie Wyld

1

Another sheep, mangled and bled out, her innards not yet crusting and the vapours rising from her like a steamed pudding. Crows, their beaks shining, strutting and rasping, and when I waved my stick they flew to the trees and watched, flaring out their wings, singing, if you could call it that. I shoved my boot in Dog's face to stop him from taking a string of her away with him as a souvenir, and he kept close by my side as I wheeled the carcass out of the field and down into the woolshed.

I'd been up that morning, before the light came through, out there, talking to myself, telling the dog about the things that needed doing as the blackbirds in the hawthorn started up. Like a mad woman, listening to her own voice, the wind shoving it back down my throat and hooting over my open mouth like it had done every morning since I moved to the island. With the trees rattling in the copse and the sheep blaring out behind me, the same trees, the same wind and sheep.

That made two deaths in a month. The rain started to come down, and a sudden gust of wind flung sheep shit at the back of my neck so it stung. I pulled up my collar and shielded my eyes with my hand.

Cree-cra, cold, cree-cra, cold.

‘What are you laughing at?’ I shouted at the crows and lobbed a stone at them. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and breathed in and out heavily to get rid of the blood smell. The crows were silent. When I turned to look, five of them sat in a row on the same branch, eyeing me but not speaking. The wind blew my hair in my eyes.

The farm shop at Marling had a warped and faded sign at the foot of its gate that read Free Baby Guinea Pigs. There was never any trace of the free guinea pigs and I had passed the point of being able to ask. The pale daughter of the owner was there, doing a crossword. She looked up at me, then looked back down like she was embarrassed.

‘Hi,’ I said.

She blushed but gave me the smallest of acknowledgements. She wore a thick green tracksuit and her hair was in a ponytail. Around her eyes was the faint redness that came after a night of crying or drinking.

Normally the potatoes from that place were good, but they all gave a little bit when I picked them up. I put them back down and moved over to tomatoes, but they weren’t any good either. I looked up out the window to where the farm’s greenhouse stood and saw the glass was all broken.

‘Hey,’ I said to the girl, who when I turned around was already looking at me, sucking the end of her pencil. ‘What happened to your greenhouse?’

‘The wind,’ she said, taking her pencil to the side of her mouth just for a moment. ‘Dad said to say the wind blew it in.’

I could see the glass scattered outside where normally they kept pots of ugly pink cyclamen with a sign that said, The Jewel for your Winter Garden. Just black earth and glass now.

‘Wow,’ I said.

‘Things always get mad on New Year’s Eve,’ said the girl in an older voice that surprised both of us. She blushed deeper and turned her eyes back to her crossword. In the greenhouse, the man who normally ran the shop sat with his head in his hands.

I took some oranges and leeks and lemons to the counter. I didn’t need anything, the trip was more about the drive than the supplies. The girl dropped her pencil out of her mouth and started to count oranges, but wasn’t sure of herself and started again a few times over. There was a smell of alcohol about her, masked by too much perfume. A hangover then. I imagined an argument with her father. I looked up at the greenhouse again, the man in it still with his head in his hands, the wind blowing through.

‘Are there nine there?’ she asked, and even though I hadn’t counted as I put them in the basket I said yes. She tapped things into the till.

‘Must be hard to lose the greenhouse,’ I said, noticing a small blue bruise at the girl’s temple. She didn’t look up.

‘It’s not so bad. We should have had an order over from the mainland, but the ferry’s not going today.’

‘The ferry’s not going?’

‘Weather’s too bad,’ she said, again in that old voice that embarrassed us both.

‘I’ve never known that to happen.’

‘It happens,’ she said, putting my oranges in one bag and the rest in another. ‘They built the new boats too big so they aren’t safe in bad weather.’

‘Do you know what the forecast is?’

The girl glanced up at me quickly and lowered her eyes again.

‘No. Four pounds twenty please.’ She slowly counted out my money. It took two goes to get the change right. I wondered what new thing she’d heard about me. It was time to leave, but I didn’t move.

‘So what’s with the free guinea pigs?’

The flush came back to her face. ‘They’ve gone. We gave them to my brother’s snake. There were loads.’

‘Oh.’

The girl smiled. ‘It was years ago.’

‘Sure,’ I said.

The girl put the pencil back in her mouth and her eyes fluttered back down to her crossword. She was just colouring in the white squares, it turned out.

In the truck, I found I had left the oranges in the shop. I looked out of my rear-view mirror at the smashed greenhouse and saw the man inside standing up with his hands on his hips looking at me. I locked the doors and drove away without the oranges.

It started to rain heavily, and I turned up the heating and put the wipers on full speed. We drove past the spot I usually stopped to walk Dog and he sat in the passenger seat and stared at me hard, and every time I turned to look at him he put his ears up, like we were mid-conversation and I was avoiding his look. ‘So what?’ I said. ‘You’re a dog.’ And then he turned around and looked out the window.

Midway home it caught up with me and I pulled over into the entrance to an empty field. Dog gazed stoically out the window, still and calm, and I pressed my thumb into the bridge of my nose to try and take away the prickling, clung on to the skin of my chest with the nails of my other hand to melt away that old -thudding ache that came with losing a sheep, a bead of blood landing in an open eye. I cried drily, honking and with my mouth open, rocking the truck and feeling something grappling around inside me getting no closer to coming out. *Have a good cry*; it was the kind of thing Mum'd say to a triplet in the hope a visit to the hospital wasn't necessary. Like the time Cleve fell out of a tree and cried it out, and we found out later he had a broken arm. But there was nothing good in my crying – it prevented me from breathing, it hurt. I stopped once my nose began to bleed, cleaned it up with the shammy I used on the days the windows were iced on the inside and drove home, calmly. On the Military Road near to the turning home, some teenagers fondled about at the bus stop. When they saw me coming one of the boys pretended to put something in his mouth, another mounted him from behind and humped him while he mimed throwing a lasso. The girls laughed and gave me the finger. As I rounded the corner the boy with the lasso dropped his trousers and showed his white arse.

I put a pot of coffee down on the stove harder than I needed to. 'Fucking kids,' I said to Dog, but he had his back to me and wasn't listening.

I slammed the fridge and leant my head against it. Stupid to have become so comfortable. The fridge hummed back in agreement. Stupid to think it wouldn't all fall to shit. That

feeling I'd had when I first saw the cottage, squat and white like a chalk pebble at the black foot of the downs, the safety of having no one nearby to peer in at me – that felt like an idiot's lifetime ago. I felt at the side of the fridge for the axe handle.

My sleeve was brown where some of the dead sheep had leaked onto it and I took my jumper off and rubbed the spot with soap in the downstairs bathroom. I smelled like billy goat but the idea of a full wash with the cold deep in my shoulders didn't interest me, so I just splashed under my armpits. My hands clenched and unclenched to warm up, the right one aching and clicking in the way that it did in damp weather where the bones hadn't knitted back together.

I smoothed back the skin of my face in the mirror. The last fringe I'd given myself had been an inch too short and I looked like a mad person. I found a blooded thumbprint below my ear.

I lit a cigarette, holding it with my lips and clasping my hands together in front of me to tense my arms as I inhaled to check the muscle tone and it was still there even if I hadn't sheared in a couple of months. *Strong lady*. I watched the smoke snake its way out of my mouth and disappear in the cold air. The coffee pot began its death rattle, and I moved to take it off the hob. I still had a fear of the thing exploding.

Out the kitchen window, the flash of a windscreen across the valley. Don in his Land Rover. I spat my cigarette into the sink, ran the water over it, and then bolted out into the yard to get the wheelbarrow, and Dog nipped me on the back of the knee for running. I huffed up to the top of the drive, the barrow squeaking to buggery, and stood, blocking the road. Don pulled up and cut the engine. Midge stayed patiently in the passenger's seat eyeballing Dog with her pink tongue lolling out.

‘Christ alive. You’re making my balls shrink,’ Don said as he swung himself out of the truck. It was sleeting and I only wore my singlet. He passed a glance at me that I rolled off my shoulders. ‘You look like shit. Not sleeping?’

‘I’m fine.’ I nodded to the wheelbarrow. Don looked at it.

‘What’s that you got there?’

‘Another dead ewe. Reckon it’s those kids.’

He looked at me. Our breath puffed white between us. He shook his head.

‘What’s a kid want to go and do that for?’

‘Why does anyone do anything? Bored and shitful.’

Dog jumped up at Midge sitting in the truck and barked at her while she looked back coolly.

‘No,’ said Don, ‘can’t blame everything on the kids. Even if some of them’s vicious little buggers.’

‘What’s gone on here then?’ he asked the dead sheep, bending forward and taking a closer look; his hands were on his hips. It was very cold. I folded my arms over my chest and tried to look comfortable.

‘I found her this morning out by the woods.’

‘By the woods?’

I nodded.

He shook his head and walked around the wheelbarrow. ‘She’s dead all right.’

‘Oh really? You a vet?’

Don narrowed his eyes at me.

I cleared my throat. ‘These kids...’

Don tipped his cap up off his eyes and looked at me. ‘Good night last night – you shoulda come down the pub last night like I said.’

Here we go, I thought. ‘Not my sort of place, Don.’ I pictured the men who would be there, leaning up against the bar and talking in low voices, their eyes flicking up when a woman walked by. The same sort as the three who had showed up in the first week, whistling farmer-wants-a-wife. Don was different. I’d called on him with my first breech birth and he’d come with me, calmly sewed the prolapsed innards back into the ewe and saved her triplets, poured me a drink and said lightly, *All gotta learn one way or the other.*

Still, he could go on for ever.

‘Three years. You haven’t been out to the pub once.’

This was a lie. I’d been there once, but Don liked to say it so much that he never listened when I told him.

‘You show up, arm in a sling, looking like a lesbian or a hippy or something, and you move in and we don’t have many of either of those round here. You’re not careful, they’re going to use stories about you to scare the nippers.’

I shifted my weight, feeling the cold setting into my jawbone.

‘It’s a lonely enough job sheep farming without putting yourself in isolation.’

I blinked at Don and there was a long pause. Dog whined. He’d heard it all before as well.

‘So what killed my sheep then?’ was all I could say.

Don sighed and squinted at the sheep. He looked about a hundred in the morning light; the age spots on his cheeks

were livid. ‘Mink might tear a sheep up, after she’s dead. Or a fox.’ He lifted the ewe’s head to take a look at the eyes. ‘Eyes are gone,’ he said; ‘could be something killed her and then everything else took their pickings.’ He lifted the head higher and looked underneath where her ribs made a cave. He frowned. ‘But I’ve never seen anything round here flense an animal like that.’

I patted the pocket of my trousers, where I kept my cigarettes, then I touched Dog on the top of his greasy head. A crow called out, *Caaa-creee; and caaa-creee*. Midge stood up on her seat and we all looked over the fence at the dark trees there.

‘Just tell those kids if you see them, and anyone else who wants to hear about it, that if I catch anyone near my sheep I’ll shoot them.’

I turned the wheelbarrow around and started walking back down the hill towards home.

‘Yep,’ said Don, ‘happy new year to you too.’

Tous les oiseaux du ciel

Evie Wyld

Traduit de l'anglais par Mireille Vignol

1

Une autre brebis mutilée et saignée dont les entrailles encore visqueuses dégageaient des vapeurs de pudding bouilli. Des corbeaux au bec luisant se pavanaient en croassant; quand je brandis mon bâton, ils s'envolèrent et poursuivirent leur observation du haut des arbres en écartant les ailes et en chantant, si l'on peut parler de chanter. Je flanquai un coup de botte dans la gueule de Dog pour l'empêcher d'emporter un lambeau en souvenir et il marcha sur mes talons tandis que je brouettais la carcasse hors du champ et la déposais dans le hangar à laine.

Réveillée et sortie avant la lumière du jour ce matin-là, je parlais tout haut, j'expliquais au chien ce que nous avions à faire; les merles s'annonçaient dans les aubépines. J'écoutais ma voix de folle que le vent me renvoyait et me fourrait dans la gorge, avant de mugir dans ma bouche ouverte, comme tous les matins depuis que j'avais emménagé sur l'île. Les arbres frémissaient dans les bosquets, les moutons bêlaient derrière moi... toujours les mêmes arbres, le même vent et les mêmes moutons.

Cela faisait deux morts en un mois. Le temps se mit à la pluie et une rafale de vent me projeta une volée cinglante de crottes de mouton sur la nuque. Je relevai mon col et, de la main, protégeai mes yeux.

Cri-cra, caille, cri-cra, caille.

– Qu'est-ce qui vous fait rire ? Hurlai-je aux corbeaux en leur balançant une pierre.

Je m'essuyai les yeux du revers de la main et respirai à fond pour évacuer l'odeur de sang. Les corbeaux se turent. Lorsque je me retournai pour les regarder, j'en vis cinq en rang sur la même branche qui m'observaient en silence. Le vent m'envoyait les cheveux dans les yeux.

Sur un écriteau tordu et défraîchi au pied du portail, la boutique de produits de la ferme de Marling indiquait : **DONNE BEBES COCHONS D'INDE**. Je n'avais jamais vu la moindre trace des cochons d'Inde gratuits et j'avais dépassé le stade où je me sentais capable de me renseigner. La fille du propriétaire, une pâlotte, faisait des mots croisés. Elle leva les yeux sur moi puis les baissa d'un air gêné.

– Salut, lui dis-je.

Elle rougit et me répondit d'un signe à peine perceptible. Elle portait un épais survêtement vert et ses cheveux étaient retenus en une queue de cheval. Elle avait les yeux un peu rouges, comme si elle avait passé la nuit à pleurer ou à boire.

D'ordinaire, leurs pommes de terre étaient bonnes, mais quand je les pris dans ma main, elles me semblèrent un peu ramollies. Je les reposai et arrivai aux tomates, qui n'étaient pas plus appétissantes. En regardant par la fenêtre, je m'aperçus que les vitres de la serre étaient toutes brisées.

– Tiens, dis-je à la fille qui m'observait en suçant son crayon lorsque je me tournai vers elle. Qu'est-ce qui est arrivé à votre serre ?

– C'est le vent, répondit-elle en poussant le crayon à la commissure des lèvres. Papa m'a dit de dire que c'était la faute du vent.

Le sol était jonché de bris de verre devant la serre, là où ils disposaient habituellement d'horribles pots de cyclamens roses à côté de la pancarte : LE JOYAU DE VOTRE JARDIN D'HIVER. Il ne restait plus que de la terre noire et du verre.

– Ouah, dis-je.

– Le réveillon du nouvel an tourne toujours au vinaigre, m'informa-t-elle d'une voix mûre qui nous surprit toutes les deux.

Elle rougit de plus belle et se pencha à nouveau sur ses mots croisés. À l'intérieur de la serre, l'homme qui tenait habituellement la boutique était assis, la tête dans les mains.

Je choisis quelques oranges, des poireaux et des citrons. Je n'avais besoin de rien ; je faisais le déplacement pour sortir, pas pour les courses. La fille ôta le crayon de sa bouche et se mit à compter les oranges, mais elle n'était pas sûre d'elle et dut s'y prendre à plusieurs reprises. Je sentais des relents d'alcool sur elle, masqués par trop de parfum. Elle devait donc avoir une gueule de bois. J'imaginai une dispute avec son père. Je me tournai à nouveau vers la serre où l'homme se tenait toujours la tête entre les mains ; le vent s'engouffrait autour de lui.

– Y en a bien neuf ? Me demanda la fille.

Je n'avais pas compté les oranges en les mettant dans le panier, mais je confirmai. Elle entra les prix dans la caisse.

– C'est un coup dur, pour la serre, lui dis-je en remarquant un petit bleu sur sa tempe.

Elle détourna les yeux.

– Pas si dur. On devait recevoir une commande du continent, mais il n'y a pas de ferry aujourd'hui.

– Pas de ferry ?

– Il fait trop mauvais, répondit-elle avec cette voix de femme mûre qui nous embarrassait toutes les deux.

– C'est la première fois que je vois ça.

– Ça arrive, dit-elle en mettant les oranges dans un sac et le reste dans un autre. Ils ont construit les nouveaux bateaux trop gros et ils sont dangereux en cas de mauvais temps.

– Tu sais ce que prévoit la météo ?

Elle me jeta un coup d'œil rapide avant de rebaisser les yeux.

– Non. Quatre livres vingt, s'il vous plaît. Elle compta mon argent avec lenteur.

Elle s'y prit à deux fois pour me rendre la monnaie correctement. Je me demandai quel nouveau ragot elle avait entendu à mon propos. J'aurais dû m'en aller, mais je restai.

– Au fait, c'est quoi cette histoire de cochons d'Inde gratuits ? Son visage rosit à nouveau.

– Ils sont morts. On les a donnés au serpent de mon frère. Y en avait tout un tas.

– Ah bon.

– Ça fait des années, me dit-elle en souriant.

– Évidemment.

Elle se remit à sucer le crayon et battit des paupières pour reprendre ses mots croisés. Je constatai qu'en fin de compte elle ne faisait que noircir les cases blanches.

Une fois dans le pick-up, je m'aperçus que j'avais oublié les oranges. En regardant la serre détruite dans le rétroviseur, je vis que l'homme s'était levé et m'observait, les mains sur les hanches. Je verrouillai les portières et filai sans les oranges.

La pluie se mit à tomber à verse; je montai le chauffage et réglai les essuie-glaces sur la vitesse maximale. Nous passâmes devant l'endroit où j'avais l'habitude d'emmener Dog se promener. Assis sur le siège du passager, il ne me lâchait pas des yeux et chaque fois que je me tournais vers lui, il dressait les oreilles comme si nous étions en pleine conversation et que j'évitais de croiser son regard.

– Et alors ? Lui dis-je. T'es un chien. Sur quoi il tourna la tête et regarda par la vitre.

À mi-chemin de la maison, le sentiment me rattrapa et je dus me garer à l'entrée d'un champ vide. Dog, stoïque, fixait l'extérieur avec calme et sérénité. J'appuyai du pouce sur l'arête de mon nez pour essayer de stopper les picotements et plongeai les ongles de l'autre main dans la peau de ma poitrine pour tenter d'apaiser la douleur sourde qui accompagnait la perte d'un mouton, la perle de sang dans un œil ouvert. Je sanglotais sans larmes, ma bouche ouverte cornait, le pick-up se balançait et je sentis une sorte de grappin qui chahutait en moi sans trouver la moindre issue. « Pleure un bon coup », c'est le genre de conseil que maman donnait aux triplés en espérant éviter ainsi une visite à l'hôpital. Comme la fois où Cleve était tombé d'un arbre, avait pleuré un bon coup, et où l'on s'était aperçu plus tard qu'il avait le bras cassé. Mais mes pleurs n'avaient rien de bon – ils m'étouffaient douloureusement. Quand je sentis mon nez saigner, je m'arrêtai et me nettoyai avec la peau de chamois que j'utilisais pour désembuer l'intérieur des vitres, puis je repris calmement la route de la maison. Sur Military Road, près de l'intersection pour aller chez moi, un groupe de jeunes se tripotaient près de l'arrêt de bus. Lorsqu'ils me virent arriver, un gars fit semblant de glisser quelque chose dans sa bouche, un autre le chevaucha en un simulacre de coït tout en mimant un lancer de lasso.

Les filles ricanèrent en me faisant un doigt d'honneur. En prenant le virage, je vis le garçon au lasso baisser son pantalon et me montrer son cul blanc.

Je posai la cafetière sur la cuisinière avec une brutalité futile.
– Putain de gamins, dis-je à Dog, mais il me tournait le dos et ne m'écoutait pas.

Je claquai la porte du frigo et y appuyai ma tête. Quelle idiote d'avoir pris mes aises. Le frigo fredonna son approbation. Quelle idiote d'avoir cru que tout n'allait pas se barrer en couilles. le sentiment que j'avais éprouvé en voyant le cottage pour la première fois, blanc et trapu comme un galet crayeux au pied noir de la colline, la sécurité de n'avoir aucun voisin proche qui pût m'épier – j'avais l'impression que tout cela datait déjà de plusieurs vies d'idiote. Je glissai la main derrière le frigo et palpai le manche de hache.

Le bras de mon pull était bruni par le sang du mouton mort ; je l'enlevai et frottai la tache avec du savon dans la salle de bains du rez-de-chaussée. Je puais le bouc mais avec le froid qui me glaçait l'intérieur des épaules, je n'avais pas envie de me laver de la tête aux pieds ; je me contentai de m'asperger les aisselles. J'ouvrais et serrais les mains pour me réchauffer, la droite craquait et me lançait comme elle le faisait toujours par temps humide, là où les os ne s'étaient pas ressoudés.

Je me lissai la peau du visage dans la glace. La dernière fois que je m'étais occupée de ma frange, je l'avais coupée plusieurs centimètres trop courte, ce qui m'avait donné un air de folle. Je m'aperçus que j'avais une empreinte de pouce ensanglantée sous l'oreille.

J'allumai une cigarette, la coinçai entre mes lèvres, puis je tendis et serrai les mains devant moi en retenant mon souffle pour

vérifier si mes muscles étaient tonifiés, ce qui était le cas même si je n'avais pas tondu de quelques mois. « Une fille solide. » Je regardai les panaches de fumée s'échapper de ma bouche et disparaître dans l'air froid. La cafetière commença son rôle d'agonie, je la retirai de la plaque. Je craignais toujours qu'elle n'explose.

Par la fenêtre de la cuisine, je vis l'éclat d'un pare-brise traverser la vallée. La Land Rover de Don. Je crachai ma cigarette dans l'évier, fis couler l'eau, puis me précipitai pour prendre la brouette; Dog me punit de courir en me mordillant l'arrière du genou. Je regagnai le haut de l'allée à bout de souffle avec la brouette qui grinçait à tire-larigot et je me plantai au beau milieu de la route. Don s'arrêta et coupa le moteur. Midge resta patiemment sur le siège du passager et reluqua Dog en déroulant sa langue rose.

– Nom d'une pipe! Rien qu'à te voir, j'ai les couilles qui se ratatinent, dit Don en descendant de son pick-up.

J'étais en débardeur sous l'averse de neige fondue. Il me lança un regard dont je me débarrassai d'un roulement d'épaules.

– T'as vraiment une sale gueule. T'arrives pas à dormir?

– Je vais bien, répondis-je en montrant la brouette du menton.

– Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce truc? Demanda Don.

– Encore une brebis tuée. Je crois que c'est un coup des jeunes. Il me regarda. Des bouffées d'haleine se formaient entre nous. Il hocha la tête.

– Pourquoi veux-tu qu'un gamin fasse une chose pareille?

– Pourquoi fait-on n'importe quoi? Ils s'emmerdent et c'est une bande de petits cons.

Dog aboya et bondit vers Midge qui le toisa en restant assise dans le pick-up.

– Non, on ne peut pas les accuser de tous les maux. Même si y a de sacrés petits salopards parmi eux. Alors, qu'est-ce qui t'est arrivé ? demanda-t-il à la brebis morte en se penchant pour mieux voir, les mains sur les hanches.

Il faisait très froid. Je croisai les bras sur ma poitrine en faisant semblant d'être à l'aise.

– Je l'ai trouvée ce matin près du bois.

– Près du bois ? J'acquiesçai. Il fit le tour de la brouette en hochant la tête.

– Pour être morte, elle est morte.

– Sans blague, tu serais pas véto, par hasard ? Don me lança un regard noir. Je m'éclaircis la gorge.

– Ces jeunes...

Don dégagea la casquette de ses yeux et me regarda.

– C'était sympa hier soir. T'aurais dû venir au pub avec nous comme je te l'avais dit.

« C'est reparti », pensai-je.

– C'est pas mon truc, Don.

J'imaginai les types qui devaient fréquenter le pub, accoudés au zinc et conversant à voix basse, les yeux s'éclairant lorsqu'une femme passait. Du même genre que les trois qui étaient venus chez moi la première semaine, en sifflant l'air de l'amour est dans le pré. Don était différent. J'avais fait appel à lui pour mon premier agnelage par le siège. Il était venu, avait calmement recousu le prolapsus de masse viscérale de la brebis et sauvé ses triplés, avant de me servir un coup à boire en me disant d'un ton léger : « Faut bien apprendre un jour ou l'autre. »

Mais bon, il rabâchait toujours la même chose.

– Trois ans. Et t’as jamais mis les pieds au pub.

C’était faux. J’y étais allée une fois, mais Don préférait présenter les choses comme ça et il refusait de m’écouter si je tentais de rectifier sa version des choses.

– Tu déboules ici un beau jour, le bras en écharpe, avec ta touche de lesbienne ou de hippie ou je ne sais quoi encore, tu t’installes et y en a pas beaucoup des comme ça par ici. Fais gaffe sinon ils vont raconter des histoires pour faire peur aux gosses à ton sujet.

Je dansais d’une jambe sur l’autre et sentais le froid s’installer dans ma mâchoire.

– L’élevage de moutons est déjà assez solitaire, tu devrais arrêter de t’isoler comme ça.

Je clignai des yeux et il y eut une longue pause. Dog gémit. Lui aussi avait déjà entendu tout ça.

– Qu’est-ce qui a tué ma brebis, alors? Fut tout ce que je trouvai à dire.

Don soupira et regarda la bête en plissant les yeux. Dans la lumière matinale, il paraissait avoir cent ans; les taches de vieillesse étaient livides sur ses joues.

– Un vison est capable de déchiqeter un mouton, s’il le trouve mort. Un renard aussi. (Il leva la tête de la brebis et examina ses yeux.) Il lui manque les yeux. Si ça se trouve, une bête l’a tuée puis toutes les autres se sont servies. (Il leva la tête encore plus haut et scruta le creux formé par les côtes. il fronça les sourcils.) Mais j’ai jamais rien vu dépecer un animal de la sorte.

Je tapotai la poche de mon pantalon où je gardais mes cigarettes, puis je caressai les poils gras de Dog sur le sommet de sa tête. Un corbeau lança son caaa-criii et caaa-criii. Midge se redressa sur son siège et nous nous tournâmes tous vers les arbres sombres au-delà de la clôture.

– Si tu les vois, dis aux jeunes et à tous ceux que ça intéresse, que si j’en surprends un près de mes moutons, j’ouvre le feu. Je fis demi-tour avec la brouette et redescendis la colline vers chez moi.

– Ouais, répondit Don. Et bonne année à toi aussi.

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Catherine Taylor, Deputy Director of English PEN.

She currently writes for the Guardian and Telegraph among other publications.

EUPL 2014 Jury Reports

Albania

After detailed consideration, the Albanian jury for the European Prize for Literature 2014 unanimously decided that the prize would be awarded to Ben Blushi, for his novel *Otello, Arapi i Vlorës* (*Othello, Arap of Vlorë*). This novel, Blushi's second work, comes after his debut *Të jetosh në ishull* (*Living on an Island*), which broke records with over 60,000 copies sold within the first two years. *Otello, Arapi i Vlorës*, is an accomplished work: mature, perfect in form and profound. It's a condensation of a lifetime's experience of thought, ideas, history, vision, and even artistic strength. A work which breaks many taboos and literary stereotypes, which for a number of reasons have conditioned the tastes of some readers for a sweetened and glorified image that exaggerates aspects of Albanian history and national characteristics.

Otello, Arapi i Vlorës is a startling novel that sends us back in time and immerses us deep in thought. The narrative style, rich language and profound erudition put the novel among the most beautiful and accomplished works of Albanian literature. This novel is a work that honours Albanian literature and shows an original talent who has the ability to create other great works. It is a cultural phenomenon that deserves to spread beyond Albanian speakers.

Bulgaria

Bulgarian writer and translator Milen Ruskov definitely merits the European Union Prize for Literature for emerging authors because, as many literary critics and readers would agree, his novel *Summit* well and truly lit up contemporary Bulgarian literature.

Milen Ruskov is 48-years-old and graduated in Bulgarian philology from Sofia University. He is the author of three novels: *Pocket Encyclopedia of Mysteries* (2004), which was awarded the National Prize for a debut author; *Thrown into Nature* (2008), which received the Bulgarian Novel of the Year Prize and was published in English in 2011 by Open Letter Books, USA; and *Summit* (2011), selected by the Bulgarian Jury for the EUPL in 2014.

Ruskov, who is also a distinguished translator from English into Bulgarian, made his name in Bulgarian literature 4-5 years ago. His first novel deeply impressed readers with its original narrative style and daring approach to describing life, with a contemporary mindset and use of bitter irony. His second novel added to his reputation as a writer of great erudition and demonstrated a desire to broaden his themes.

Summit is an extraordinary novel set in the last decade of the Bulgarian Revival (1870s), the culmination of a period of Bulgarian struggle for liberation against the five centuries long Ottoman occupation – a feverish time of turmoil and idealistic exaltation, traditionally represented in Bulgarian literature in a one-dimensional heroic style. Yet Ruskov bursts all these clichés and depicts the period in a mock-heroic manner. The idealism of the era and the real-life historical events and characters are filtered through the consciousness and the condensed simple speech of two individual rebels belonging to the class of ordinary people. These rebels, accompanied by their old horse Grandpa Yuvan, set out to raid a Turkish cash-convoY on its way through the

Arabakonak gorge in the Balkan mountains. This adventure is only the beginning of their vicissitudes, which Ruskov presents in a vivid and inventive vocabulary. *Summit* contains a brazen, gripping and hilarious narrative, which also leads to deeper reflection. In conclusion, let us once again highlight Ruskov's amazingly rich, succulent and expressive language, as well as his masterful representation of a dramatic and proud age.

Czech Republic

A History of Light is a voluminous biographical novel, following the life story of the first Czech photographer whose accomplishments merited world recognition. František Drtíkol made a name for himself as an author of portraits and nudes, now sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction. However, in the second half of his life, Drtíkol gave up photography and turned to mysticism. Consequently, in the Czech Republic, he is also known as a spiritual teacher and one of the first practising Czech Buddhists.

The novel begins with the 1892 mining disaster which Drtíkol witnessed as a nine-year-old boy. It follows the steps of the protagonist as a young man, leaving a Czech provincial town for Munich to study photography. Having returned to his homeland, Drtíkol started his famous Prague photographic studio, portraying Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first Czech president, the composers Leoš Janáček and Bohuslav Martinů, as well as foreign visitors to Prague including Filippo Marinetti, Paul Valéry, Rudolf Steiner and Rabindranath Tagore.

The author's interest in Drtíkol was inspired by his multifarious personality, full of contradictions: a dandy from a mining town, a soldier never sent to the First World War front, a world-famous photographer twice made bankrupt, a master of the photographic nude who is unlucky with women, a mystic and a Buddhist turning, after the Second World War, to Communism.

Formally, *A History of Light* is written in a second-person narrative, turning into a dialogue between the writer and the protagonist, which pulls in readers only for them to realise that the narrator is not the writer, but the Absolute searched for by Drtíkol for all of his life.

We are convinced that Jan Němec's novel is a valuable Czech contribution to the contemporary European narrative. In an innovative way, it represents the life of an important, world-acclaimed artist and, focuses on a unique human fate, demonstrating the contradictory character of more than half a century of modern Czech history.

Greece

The anti-hero of this story, finding himself unemployed and in poor health in his fifties, narrates – usually without comprehension, occasionally in good humour and often enraged – the trials and betrayals he has suffered from his employers, women he has met as well as his family. His insistent and sometimes explosive monologue highlights an apparently prosperous and tolerant society as it moves into decline and intolerance, including xenophobia. His child-like naivety is the deforming and deformed mirror of a cynical and vicious environment.

Iceland

Oddný Eir has written three novels, each one a special brew of genres, all of them excursions of autofiction and ideology. Her work continually mixes autobiography with fiction, the lyrical with the abstract, and the regional with the universal. In *Opnun kryppunnar* (*Opening the Hump*) she introduced the reader to her special world, where fantasy constantly bleeds into reality, focusing on her urge to write and the tension between the philosophical and the fantastical, the personal and the sociopolitical. *Heim til míns hjarta* (*Home to my Heart*), which got nominated for the cultural prize of the newspaper DV in 2009, takes the reader on a fantasy journey in search of a cure for the narrator's exhausted heart. In *Jarðnæði* (*Land of Love, Plan of Ruins*), which was nominated for the Icelandic Literary Award in 2011 and won the Icelandic Women's Literature Prize in 2012, Oddný uses diary form to further explore the bond and tension between the public and the personal, between fantasy and a didactic urge, using her own life, family and friends as fuel for philosophical musings (e.g., on global and political concerns like nationality, our need for a place to call our own and our roles as a part of an international society).

As a diary, *Land of Love, Plan of Ruins* is a description of the present, but it also digs into the past and contemplates the future. Its theme is the search for a niche, a place to belong – a search which takes us through ancestral ties to certain places as well as through international theories of sustainability and global unity. Oddný has developed a unique style, which is at once poetic and philosophical, and her approach to literature through a mixture of the personal and the scholarly has made her an original voice in Icelandic literature. *Land of Love, Plan of Ruins* clearly shows that she is not afraid of exploring and stretching further the limits of her autofiction, continuing her highly relevant dialogue with our past, present and future.

Latvia

Jelgava '94 has already been praised and widely discussed by critics and readers alike, and the book has received many awards: in 2014, it received the "1kg of Culture" Prize, awarded by the LTV1 culture programme 100g of Culture; the TV show Great Reading placed it in the 100 best Latvian books of all time; the Children's Jury (a project involving young readers from all over Latvia) chose the book as the favourite reading in the age group 15+; and it was also awarded the most prestigious Latvian literary prize (the Latvian Annual Literary Prize) for the best debut in 2013.

The majority of the jury members selected Janis Jonevs as the best candidate for EUPL 2014 as a truly emerging and promising author. *Jelgava '94* is a prose work endowed with a European dimension, both in terms of the recent history of Western culture and the never-ending struggle of an individual to explore him/herself in a historical context.

Liechtenstein

Armin Öhri's mystery novel *Die dunkle Muse* was published in 2012 by Gmeiner Verlag, a reputable publisher specializing in crime and detective fiction. It is intended as the start of a series revolving around Julius Bentheim, a somewhat unusual protagonist: still quite young, he is a university student who gets recruited into freelance police service as a draughtsman for crime scenes.

The novel opens with a chapter that depicts the gruesome murder of a young prostitute, apparently for no reason. The killer, a highly regarded professor of philosophy, admits his deed to one of the victim's neighbours and is arrested without resistance. However, he almost immediately becomes obstinate when questioned by the authorities. Before long, the reader suspects that the professor committed a crime for intellectual reasons. As one would expect from a gripping crime novel, he almost gets away with it. In fact, the official investigators turn out to be compromised, and the crime only gets solved due to Bentheim's persistence and intelligence.

Considering Öhri's previous novels, the jury noticed a considerable development and qualitative leap in *Die dunkle Muse*. We believe that it constitutes a very competently narrated mystery novel that transcends many of the standard examples of the genre. Öhri is especially good at constructing a narrative arc that creates suspense, as well as writing in a pleasing and informative style that pulls the reader deeply into the mystery and makes him/her care about the characters' fate. Although there is still room for improvement – there is the occasional clumsy sentence structure as well as an over-reliance on genre clichés – the novel is a serious effort by an emerging writer who clearly has worked hard to improve his writing skills and has come a long way since his earliest efforts. For instance, Öhri manages to convey a lot of historical information in passing, without overwhelming the reader. He weaves technical details about the history of photography, the geography and social history of Berlin, and the literary and philosophical discussions of the day almost effortlessly into his story, which is always enhanced by them. He is also very good at conveying the general atmosphere of the age and in explaining the motivation of a seemingly inexplicable crime as an outgrowth of some of the worst tendencies of the age.

In short, Öhri's writing is straightforward and unassuming. The style is intended to be in the service of the plot. He is not an experimental writer who deconstructs language and expresses a deep-rooted linguistic scepticism. On the contrary, he is a pragmatic, popular writer who aims primarily at telling a story and telling it well. His efforts go into constructing a plot that entices the reader and develops the story he wants to tell in a logically consistent and suspenseful manner. As already mentioned, Öhri has honed his skills as a storyteller for some time, and his newer work is a great improvement over his earlier efforts. We are confident that this emerging writer is now at a point in his career when a significant award will be a great motivation to continue along this trajectory and regale his audience with further Bentheim novels that display all the qualities of the initial contribution to the series and may even improve on it.

Armin Öhri strikes us as a worthy winner of the 2014 European Union Prize for Literature and a good representative of Liechtenstein literature.

Malta

Dak li l-Lejl Ithallik Tghid (*What the Night Lets You Say*) is Pierre J. Mejlak's second collection of short stories, published in 2011. The stories vary in length and subject, but are similar in that they are all tight narratives, urged on by the narrator's need to tell his story from beginning to end without pausing for a break or a digression. Many of the stories take their cue from ordinary situations: people moving house or meeting each other at the funeral of a friend or relative. However, most of the stories are really about difficult human relationships in contemporary European society – both the mainland Europe that the much-travelled writer often refers to, and the small island of Gozo that he returns to time after time, both physically and through his narratives. In a sense, this collection is the diary of an islander who has come to terms with his southern European origins but is just as comfortable with an acquired European identity. If anything, it is his environment which finds it hard to adjust to the inevitability of becoming increasingly multicultural, as stories like 'Nixtieq Ngħajjat lil Samirah' ('I Want to Call Out to Samirah') or 'Il-Barranija' ('The Foreign Woman') show. It is also a love song to the ancestors, the people who created and populated this environment, perhaps best expressed by the strong but ultimately futile urge of the female traveller in 'Il-Kubu ta' Rubik' ('Rubik's Cube') to advise a young girl to "go into the kitchen and listen to your grandmother's stories, which if you don't hear them, will die with her."

Montenegro

Puna glava radosti is a collection of short stories. This is modern fiction with a fine touch of postmodern literary experience, exploring the anxieties of the post-transition, post-war Montenegrin society. Deeply rooted in high modernism (James Joyce's *The Dead*), American short story masters (Hemingway and Carver) and a Borgesian line of South American magicians of text, Ognjen Spahić manages to transcend the sad, painful reality of a simple Montenegrin man to tell a universal story about hope and salvation.

The Netherlands

The jury's shortlist reflects the range and versatility of Dutch literature. The shortlist was derived from a longlist that consisted of the titles that had been awarded the seven most important literary prizes in the Netherlands (and Flanders) that were also eligible for this prize.

Stephan Enter's *Grip* underscores style and structure, Joost de Vries' *De Republiek* explores narrative structures in a postmodern way, and *The Dutch Maiden* by Marente de Moor connects Dutch and world history with beautifully drawn, intriguing characters in a very personal novel. These three authors belong on a European platform and any one of them could be selected as the winner, but a choice had to be made. Above the two male authors, the jury unanimously chose Marente de Moor with *The Dutch Maiden*.

De Moor's balanced narrative fascinates from start to finish. Her vivid style carries the reader through the story.

A classic triangular relationship involving two men and one woman (principal character Janna) is magnificently brought to life against the backdrop of a crumbling manor house in 1936. Janna's reason for being there is also fascinating: she wants to become a fencing master. The manner in which de Moor describes and revives this old art, making it a leitmotif throughout the book, impressed the members of the jury.

The international setting, the original approach to a classic triangular relationship, her style and her compelling characters make *The Dutch Maiden* the most convincing book on the short list.

Serbia

Quite Modest Gifts (2011) introduces Uglješa Šajtinac as one of the leading authors in contemporary Serbian literature. It is a novel that draws its power from immediate and passionate experience, marked by impressive energy and sincere emotions.

It is an epistolary novel in which two brothers exchange emails about their seemingly ordinary, but actually unusual and exciting lives in Serbia and the United States. Through a form of family chronicle, the novel intertwines numerous narratives about the personal experiences of individual characters, while raising a number of challenging questions about the world we live in.

Turkey

This book introduces a new style and a new form of language to Turkish literature. Birgül Oğuz succeeds in expressing sociopolitical traumas through the eyes of a sensitive child. Initially, the book may seem to be local or national, but it is an elegant display of painful experience, which makes it a universal work of art. As the National Jury of Turkey, we are also convinced that the author has a cultivated personality. We are sure that she can represent the positive aspects of our society and become an asset in international relations, while promoting EUPL.

The United Kingdom

The UK jury were impressed by the vision, power and scope of Evie Wyld's novel *All the Birds, Singing* and felt that she would be a very worthy winner. She was a unanimous choice from an extremely strong shortlist. All the jury members are very interested to see how she develops and where her next novel takes her.

The following is taken from the review of the novel in the *Daily Telegraph* by Catherine Taylor, a member of the jury: -

"Whenever I daydream, it's about Australia," Evie Wyld has said. Her debut, the soaring, brutal, *After the Fire, A Still Small Voice*, set in Queensland, was less the stuff of dreams, and more of psychological nightmare, as experienced by a Vietnam War veteran. It won several prizes and was shortlisted for many more. Recently, the half-Australian, British-based author was announced as one of Granta's best young British novelists.

This dual nationality – and perhaps identity – informs Wyld's second novel, set alternately on an unnamed northerly British island at the storm-ridden end of winter and amid the searing heat of the Australian bush.

Jake Whyte is struggling to maintain her small sheep farm at the start of lambing season. Reclusive, a mistrusted incomer in an island community hostile to strangers, she refuses to integrate. She is vaguely menaced by bored local teenagers, but a greater threat lies with the mysterious assailant that is systematically, violently, killing her flock.

From flashbacks to a renounced life in Australia, Jake is revealed as forever in flight, estranged from her family for reasons that initially appear obvious but are incrementally, dramatically revised due to the author's considerable skill with plot.

Wyld's two narratives proceed in opposite directions – while the British one propels forward, the Australian scenes run backwards. In both, Jake's outsider status is firmly underlined.

She is the sole woman in a tense sheep shearing set-up; the hunted escapee from an effective kidnapping. We witness, in reverse, her prostitution and the destitution that led to it.

While Jake and a homeless man, Lloyd, to whom she gives shelter and wary friendship, are gruffly inarticulate, the natural world is eloquent with careening, frequently bloody life. In this environment, "wet wool and rain dampened sheep s---" replace the longed-for "sugar and eucalyptus, the hot breath of trees". As the novel concludes, it seems that Jake's redemption lies with the sheep, which gather "like a field of ghosts". These passive sentinels recall the horses in fellow Australian Tim Winton's *The Riders* – a writer with whom the fearless Wyld deserves serious comparison.

The European Union Prize for Literature

The aim of the European Union Prize for Literature is to put the spotlight on the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature in the field of fiction, to promote the circulation of literature within Europe and encourage greater interest in non-national literary works.

The works of the selected winners (one winning author per country participating in the Prize on a rotation basis) will reach a wider and international audience, and touch readers beyond national and linguistic borders.

The Prize is financed by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union whose three main objectives are: to promote cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector; to encourage the transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output; and to foster intercultural dialogue.

Selection process

The winning authors are selected by qualified juries set up in each of the 13 countries participating in the 2014 award.

The nomination of candidates and the final selection of one winner in each country took place between February and July 2014.

The new emerging talents were selected on the basis of criteria stipulated by the European Commission and fulfil in particular the following requirements:

- Be a citizen of one of the 13 countries selected
- To have published between 2 and 4 books of fiction
- The winning books should have been published during the five years before the Prize

Juries

Jury members are appointed by national members of EBF, EWC and FEP. National juries are composed by minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 members.

The jury reports were delivered in the national language, and in English or French translation, justifying the jury's choice and providing relevant information on the winner and his/her work.

The European Commission, DG Education and Culture

www.ec.europa.eu/culture

The Consortium

The European Booksellers Federation

www.europeanbooksellers.eu

The European Writers' Council

www.europeanwriters.eu

The Federation of European Publishers

www.fep-fee.eu

The European Union Prize for Literature

www.euprizeliterature.eu

Thirteen winning authors

Ben Blushi

Otello, Arapi i Vlorës (2009)

Milen Ruskov

Възвишение (2011)

Jan Němec

Dějiny světla (2013)

Makis Tsitas

Μάρτυς μου ο Θεός (2013)

Oddný Eir

Jarðnæði (2011)

Janis Jonevs

Jelgava '94 (2013)

Armin Öhri

*Die dunkle Muse:
Historischer Kriminalroman (2012)*

Pierre J. Mejlak

Dak li l-Lejl l'hallik Tghid (2011)

Ognjen Spahić

Puna glava radosti (2014)

Marente de Moor

De Nederlandse maagd (2010)

Uglješa Šajtinac

Sasvim skromni darovi (2011)

Birgül Oğuz

Hah (2012)

Evie Wyld

All the Birds, Singing (2013)