

TWELVE WINNING AUTHORS

2017



EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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Foreword

Every year, the European Union Prize for Literature celebrates and showcases emerging literary talents from different European countries, thereby helping to promote Europe's immense cultural and linguistic diversity. Since 2009, 108 authors from 37 countries across Europe have won the Prize.

The Prize is truly European in its scope, and the selection process relies on the input of national juries. In 2017, national literary juries in Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Iceland, Latvia, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Serbia, Turkey and the United Kingdom have selected the 12 winning authors and books.

European action in the cultural field has two main aims: to protect and promote our cultural and linguistic heritage and diversity and to strengthen the competitiveness of the cultural and creative sectors. With the European Union Prize for Literature we are doing both!

The European book sector is important. Annual revenues from the sales of books amount to more than EUR 22 billion; 575 000 new titles are published every year – and the entire book value chain, including authors, booksellers, printers, designers and others, is estimated to employ more than half a million people. The EU supports the European book sector both through ongoing policy and regulatory work, for example as regards copyright reform, and by funding European cultural cooperation and development through the *Creative Europe* programme.

Translation can be considered a backbone of the creation of a shared European cultural space, as it allows various expressions of culture, and in this case literary works, to reach audiences across borders. A special support scheme under the *Creative Europe* programme is dedicated to literary translations. Over the first three years of the programme, European publishers from a range of countries have received grants for over EUR 10 million, making possible close to 1 500 translations of literary works from and into more than 30 European languages.

Europeans read books. According to surveys, reading is the most common cultural activity for people in most countries. Why do we read fiction? Some will say we want stories that give new perspectives on ourselves and our world. Others may say we are seeking emotional experiences or simply entertainment. Undoubtedly an emotional connection between reader and story is a powerful catalyst. Literature can also be considered a mystery to get involved in and to solve – and translation is part of this picture. A book in translation is the same as the original – and yet all at once a different book!

I trust that you will be impressed by the diversity of this year's prize winners. Apart from their nationality and languages, the topics and themes, cultural contexts and literary and narrative techniques also vary – and they all bring their unique contributions to our understanding of Europe; past, present and future. This anthology presents excerpts from the winning books both in their original languages and in English or French translations. Happy reading!

*Tibor Navracsics,
European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport*



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Rudi Erebara

Epika e yjeve të mëngjesit (2016)

The Epic of the Morning Stars

Publishing House **Ombra GVG**

Biography

Rudi Erebara was born in 1971. He is a poet, novelist and translator. After graduating in 1995 at the Academy of Fine Arts, he embarked on a career as a political analyst, a journalist in several national newspapers and as an editor in chief. He is the author of two books of poetry, *Fillon Pamja* (*There Begins the View*), 1994, and *Lëng argjendi* (*Silver Juice*), 2013. His two novels are *Vezët e thëllëzave* (*Eggs of the Quails*), 2010, and *Epika e yjeve të mëngjesit* (*The Epic of the Morning Stars*), 2016.

His accomplishments include: Translator of the Year 2013, for the translation of *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, and Translator of the Year 2015, for the translation of *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, both awarded by Cult Academy Albania; Translator of the Year 2012, for the book of poetry *The Wind Is My Savior* by A. R. Ammons, awarded by the Jury of Tirana 15th National Book Fair; winner of the national poetry competition Migjeni in 1993 and 1996, organized by Soros Foundation, Albania; winner of the 8th of December Prize with *The House* in 1992; and winner of the Poem of the Year in 1991, awarded by the University of Tirana.

Synopsis

The novel *Epika e yjeve të mëngjesit* (*The Epic of the Morning Stars*) is a testimony to the destiny of Suleyman, an Albanian painter employed at the state decoration company in the capital of Albania. A technical issue occurring on 16 October 1978, the birthday of Albania's dictator Enver Hoxha, is attributed to him by the State Security Services. Around this time, Albania is about to sever its relations with Mao's communist China. Also on 16 October 1978, Józef Wojtyła, a priest from communist Poland, becomes Pope John Paul II in the Vatican. In the late evening of 16 October, a heavy shower washes away the letters of the slogans written by the state decoration company in deep red, the symbol of the blood spilled during the war for freedom by the communist fighters. Even though the festivities are over, the state security, under the direct orders of the communist dictator, starts the hunt for the perpetrators, even though no perpetrators could possibly exist. Suleyman is a man singled out as standing on the other side of the trench of class warfare, conceived and fanatically carried out by the ruling communists. As he feels he is being singled out as a victim, Suleyman tries to change his name to Edmond. He also makes a painting showing some partisans around a fire. This is viewed as a good enough reason for Suleyman to be punished.

Epika e yjeve të mëngjesit

Rudi Erebara

Edmondi hapi shishen e fernetit, akoma me bukën me groshë në gojë. Mbushi gotën. Gromsiu. “Sot me 16 tetor 1978, populli shqiptar feston duarplot me arritje e tejkalime të planit në çdo fushë të jetës, për ditëlindjen e udhëheqësit të shtrenjtë të partisë. Po japim lajmet kryesore në radio Tirana”, por ai nuk u kushtoi vëmendje. Kur mbushi gotën e dytë, jashtë nisi erë e marrë. Dritaret filluan të uturijnë. Pastaj ia dha shiu me pika të mëdha si trumpetë mbi xhama, me pushime, pas çdo shkulmi të erës. “Sikur nuk e përmendin më Kinën në çdo fjali,” mendoi. Hoqi pjatën dhe lugën, i çoi në lavapjatë. I shpëlau me ujë të ftohtë dhe ktheu përmbys pjatën. Lugën ia la përmbi. Fshiu tavolinën. U soll nëpër shtëpi me cigaren në gojë, se nuk donte të flinte aq herët. U ul të marrë një dosje fajaziti. Dontë thjesht të shtynte gjumin, edhe për një gotë tjetër. Me gotën e tretë, sikur i kaloi lodhja e mbledhur. U kujtua me qejf se të nesërmen kishte një ditë të lehtë. Shiu jashtë u kthye në stuhi. Atij i pihej edhe një gotë tjetër, por i erdhi gjumë. Mori radion në dhomë. E çoi te Rai me zë shumë të ulët. Hyri në shtrat dhe pastaj e humbi mendjen. U zgjua më vonë kur u bë fresk, gati ftohtë. Fiku radion. Nesër, tha me zë. Shiu ra me hope pas furtunës së parë. Por pas çdo hopi, ia dha me rrebesh. Mëngjesi zbardhi njëngjyrësh. Dielli kur doli, zgjati sa një pikë qumështi në kafe. Edmondi e pa vetëm një herë në skeep të malit, në mes të vorbullës së reve si një pullë e bardhë në murin ngjyrë blu çeliku të ajrit. Pastaj u tret. Picërroi sytë të shohë orën. Pastaj me zë që ta dëgjonte vetë se qe zgjuar tha: të shohim njëherë mos u zgjodh Papa!

Radio me bateri lëshoi zë si gërrvima e çjerrë e një metali kur kruhet pas një muri. Edmondi fërkoj sytë, sikur kërkonte të lexonte më mirë geramat e fjalëve mbi radion ngjyrë bojëqielli: “Iliria” 2 banda 8 tranzistorë/ volumi/ sintonia, M-çelësi i zi-S, për valët e mesme e të shkurtra. Ngriti pak zërin. Pastaj me kujdes qëroi frekuencën dhe gati krejt kur nuk e priste, buçiti: Kampari eeee alegría! Edmondi uli zërin me aq ngut, sa dëgjoi për së dyti shtrakun. Heshtja e thyer dhe e rivënë iu duk si lëndë që i rrinte pezull në dhomë e shtyhej duke u dridhur me padurim mbas xhamit të dritares. Ai vuri veshin të dëgjonte me zë të ulët lajmet. Ishte ende shumë heshtje. Zëri i spikerit kaloi i padukshëm, nga errësira e valëve, nëpër zorrët e radios, përmes altoparantit, doli në errësirën e freskët të dhomës dhe hyri në errësirën e veshit të tij sikur u ndez një dritë. – Buongioooooo stamattittna aaaa, tuuuutttiiii! Dje, më datë 16 tetor 1978, pas tre ditësh që nga e shtuna, konklava papale zgjodhi papën e ri, kardinalin polak Karol Józef Wojtyła me 99 vota nga 111, në ditën e tretë. Papa e pranoi zgjedhjen me këto fjalë: “Me bindje në besimin në Krishtin, Zotin tim dhe me besim në Nënë e Krishtit dhe Kishën, pa marrë parasysh vështirësitë, unë e pranoj.” Papa ka zgjedhur emrin Xhiovani Paolo Sekondo, për nder të Papës së ndjerë, Xhiovani Paolo Primo. Papa iu drejtua popullit jashtë protokollit të zakonshëm të Vatikanit: Të dashur vëllezër dhe motra, ne jemi të hidhëruar nga vdekja e të dashurit tonë, papës Xhiovani Paolo Sekondo dhe kështu që kardinalët u thirrën për një bishop të ri të Romës. E kanë thirrur nga një tokë e largët... e largët edhe megjithatë e afërt, për shkak të Lidhjes sonë në besimin dhe traditave të krishtera. Unë kisha frikë ta merrja këtë përgjegjësi, megjithatë e mora këtë përgjegjësi, në frymën e bindjes ndaj Zotit dhe besnikëri të plotë ndaj Marias, Nënës tonë më të shenjtë. Unë po flas me ju

në gjuhën tuaj... jo! Në gjuhën tonë italiane. Nëse bëj ndonjë gabim, ju lutem, “më qortoni”... – tha Papa me humor duke shtrembëruar me dashje fjalët “me qortoni”... Papa Vojtila është i 264-ti në listën kronologjike të papëve, edhe është i pari jo-italian në 455-së vite. Në moshën vetëm 58 vjeçare, ai është më i riu i papëve... – këtu heshti radio nga dorë e Edmondit të mbledhur si kërmill. – Me bismillah! – tha ai dhe kërcëu me gëzim përpjetë. – Polaku jonë u bë Papë.

Zëri shkoi nëpër mugun që thyhej nga drita, sikur të ishte një lëndë që e kap me dorë. Ai kërkoi kuturu poshtë në dysHEME të gjente çorapët. Nga goja i dhatej shpejt hukama e gëzimit. Buzëqeshja iu mpiks në fytyrë dhe ngadalë iu kthye në një ngërdheshje nga padurimi. U ul në shtrat me kokën poshtë. Në turbullirën e pllakave prej betoni me granil gri, bllacat e zeza të çorapëve bënë kontrast. I dha hov trupit të mpirë nga gjumi. Tringëllima e xhamit që dridhej nga moti e bëri të shohë përsëri orën. U çua ndezi dritën. Mori radion dhe çoi shigjetën e sintonisë derisa i doli Tirana. Fiku radion. Hapi dritaren. Hukati jashtë nja dy herë të maste të ftohtin. Iu bë sikur ky gëzim i çuditshëm doli fshehtas jashtë me hukamën dhe u end nëpër qytetin me qiell të nxirë, si një fantazmë e vogël e padukshme.

Shkoi në banjë. Ndaloi përpara pasqyrës për të parë me sytë e vet, buzagazin e mpiksuar mbi buzë. Kaloi njëherë dorën në faqen e parruar, mori të dalë, te dera e banjës ndali, pa përsëri orën, rifreskoi fytyrën me një buzëqeshje tjetër ngadhnyese mbi themelet e së parës, edhe tha me zë: Sot duhet një e rruar taze, si për dasëm, tunxe Sulejman: shoku Papë është polaku jonë!

Në kuzhinë vuri xhezven katërshe mbi plitkën elektrike. Shkoi mori radion e la mbi tavolinë. Aty kapi një kore buke. Pa orën. Dëgjoi shtatë minuta Rain me radion te veshi. Pastaj

e ktheu te radio Tirana dhe i ngriti zërin. Për shtatë minuta uji u ngroh. Shkoi të rruhej në banjë. Shkumoi me furçë mbi faqe sapunin e rrojes, ndërsa përtypte koren e fortë të bukës së thatë, duke u rrekur mos i merrte buza shkumë. Nga radio i vinte zëri stoik i spikeres. Numëronte tejkalimet e planit dhe përpjekjet heroike për të plotësuar detyrat e planit të gjashtë pesëvjeçar nga kantjeret heroike të veprave të lavdishme industriale. Spikerja i mëshonte fort germës rr-ë, edhe kur fjala kishte thjesht r-ë. – Për ta bërë më të rreptë, më të rrëndë, më të rrëndësishme, atë që i kishin shkruar të tjerë njerëz, – tha Edmondi me zë.

- Me rritëm rrevolucionarr, marrshojmë! – tha me zë me shumë kujdes Edmondi, ndërsa tërhiqte pas faqes me elegancë, briskun e pabesë “Astra”. – Ne rruhemi me brrisk rroje rrevolucionar, more rrevizionistë kinezë! Rroftë brisku rrevolucionar! Rroftë populli vëlla kinez që nuk e rruan hiç, se nuk ka çfarë të rruajë. Rroftë kafja me fërrnet, fitorre!

Edmondi ndërpreu rrapëllimin e fjalëve kur i hodhi ujë të ftohtë fytyrës. Turfulloi si kalë dhe mori me të shpejtë peshqirin të fshihej. U fërkua fort të ngrohej. – Rrevizionistët sovjetikë na rruajnë bithën me rrënjë katrorre... Maskarrenjtë! Të poshtrrit! Trradhëtarrët! Shkrruaje me gërrma të mëdha: më shpejt, më larrrt, më larrg. – Nga radio në kuzhinë vinte në sfond të lajmeve kollona zanore e një marshi punëtorik dhe Edmondi përshtati refrenin e këngës me rrojen: Në njërrën dorrë kazmëëën, / atdheun trraallala, / në njërrën dorrëëë pushkëëëën/ trrala la trrra lala/ ne eecccim përrpaarra, përrparra, gjithmonë... – shtrak e ktheu rrotullamen dhe pastaj heshtje shiu.

Doli deri jashtë te shkallët, pa orën, pa edhe jashtë motin me një shpresë të pavend, se mos nuk binte shi, përpara se

të kthehej përsëri të marrë çadrën. Një bezdi e përhershme. Kujdesi mos i thyhej. Frika mos e humb, apo mos ia vjedhin. – Katër ditë rrogë, të blesh një çadër shiu, – murmuriti me vete siç bënte gjithmonë, sa herë i fuste bishtin në dorë. Kur ktheu çelësin në bravë tha me zë, por ama aq sa ta dëgjonte vetëm vetë, në sinkron me kërcitjet e bravës: shkrruq, shkrrëq, shkrrëq, shkrruq. Të hiqte atë merakun që i bëhet njeriut kur del nga shtëpia, se mos nuk ka mbyllur portën. Zbriti shkallët duke trokitur majën e çadrës një për një, hap për hap. Katër kate zbriti të dilte prej ndërtesës së ngritur me punë vullnetare nga apartamenti 11, deri jashtë në rrugë, nga hyrja 3. Shtëpia i mbeti pas atje lart, dy dhoma me një kuzhinë, bosh, fillikate. Ai shkoi drejt, e la pas shpine. Mendoj për prindërit si i vdiqën njëri pas tjetrit edhe ia zbrazën jetën. I lanë kutitë boshe të dhomave, kujtime dhe liri, kaq shumë sa nuk i përdorte dot. Një zakon i përditshëm ky kujtim i vështirë, sa herë që i shkante mendja se po linte shtëpinë vetëm; aq sa prej kohësh përpiquej me veten ta luftonte, sikur ta kishte një ves.

Liria dhe vetmia shkonin bashkë, siç shkon dita me natën, edhe i binin rëndë sidomos fundjavave. Mblidheshin bashkë si tojë dore derisa bëheshin njeje, edhe ai ngelej me lëmshin e kujtimeve të pazgjidhshme. Largësia nga koha e ndarjes zmadhohej e thellohej si hendekun e baltës që e hanë ujërat e dimrit dhe e mbushin thatësisirat e verës. Netëve të gjata të dimrit ia hante trishtimi atë që kishin mbushur me gëzim brenda tij, ditët e gjata të verës. Atij i dukej sikur vërtet deri aty në faqen e radios, ngjitur pas faqes së tij, shkante skarpati i hendekut të zbrazët. Vetmia aty kapej e aty thyhej. Pritej nga plastika e kutisë së radios, si nga një pendë e mbyllur metalike. Muzika dhe zëri i të panjohurve në italisht, shpesh e pakuptueshme nëpër këngët e reja, ashtu siç era kur shkon përgjatë hendekut e del në anën tjetër me aroma të

pakuptueshme, sikur i bëheshin një urë, se ia kujtonin që të gjitha pengesat kalohen, ngaqë e hidhnin në kohë më të mira, ku kujtimet e bukura i glazuronin ditën, siç lyen drita e diellit të verës, muret e fasadave të shtëpive të vjetra të plazhit me një ngjyrë gjalpi, gati në atë tonin e butë që u merr lëkura pas gjunjve vajzave të nxira, nga refleksi i fundeve të bardha.

The Epic of the Morning Stars

Rudi Erebara

Translated from Albanian by Rudi Erebara

Edmond popped the Fernet bottle open, his mouth still full of bread and half-chewed beans. He filled his cup to the brim. He burped. “Today, on 17 October 1978, we, the verily exuberant people of Albania, mark the celebration of the anniversary of our beloved Party leader, through a host of achievements and over-fulfilments of the central plan in all fields of life. This is the main news edition in Radio Tirana...” but he paid no attention. A gust of wind blew like mad outside as he filled the second glass. The windows crackled. Then the rain started to fall down in heavy drops, pounding the glass, with small interruptions every now and then when the wind blew anew. “It looks like they stopped mentioning China every second word,” he thought. He put away his plate and spoon on the sink. He washed them in cold water and capsized the plate. He put the spoon on top of it. Then he swept the table clean. He wandered around, cigarette tucked in his mouth as he did not want to sleep that early. He sat down and picked up a folder, then he went to take another sip to scare the sleep away. The third glass wiped away the rest of his hoarded fatigue. It happily dawned on him that tomorrow would be an easy day. The rain outside shifted into a thunderstorm. He wanted to have another glass, but then again he was too sleepy. He took the radio into the room. He tuned in to an Italian channel and kept the volume down to the minimum. He lay in the bed and got lost in revelry. He woke up just a bit later as the room became chilly. He turned off the radio. The rain started to fall with brief intermissions after the first thunderstorm.

The morning dawned in a single colour. The sun broke through dimly as a dot of milk on the coffee. Edmond glimpsed it only once on the tip of the mountain, wrapped in a maelstrom of clouds as a white blotch on the steely-blue wall made of air. Then it vanished. He blinked and looked at the clock. Then he spoke out just to listen himself speak: let's see if we've got a new pope! The battery-powered radio started crackling like a piece of iron sweeping on the wall. Edmond rubbed his eyes and read the letters on the blue top of the radio: 'Illiria 2 bands 8 transistors/volume/tuning/M-black key, 2 for medium and short-range.' He turned on the volume, just a bit. Then he adjusted the frequency, and right when he least expected it, the radio started roaring in Italian: "*Campari ed allegria!*" Edmond abruptly turned the volume control down to the cracking off noise again. The broken and reinstated silence came over him as a substance suspended in mid-air, impatiently vibrating behind the window pane. He pricked up his ears so as to listen to the news at the minimum volume. The silence was still on. The voice of the speaker cut invisibly from the darkness of the radio waves into the viscera of the radio, from the loudspeakers out into the fresh twilight of the room, then into the dusk of his ears, lighting up a flame inside them.

Buongioooooornooo stamattittna aaaa tuuuutttiiii! Yesterday, on 16 October 1978, three days after last Saturday's session, the papal conclave elected the new pope, the Polish cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła, with 99 out of 111 votes. The Pope accepted his election with the following words: "Faithful to my belief in Christ, my Lord, and faithful to Our Lady the Mother of Christ and to the Church, regardless of the difficulties I accept." The Pope has chosen the name of Giovanni Paolo Secondo in honour and remembrance of the late Pope

Giovanni Paolo Primo. The Pope addressed the crowd in the Vatican City with these words that stood out of the protocol: “Dear brothers and sisters, we are saddened at the death of our beloved Pope John Paul I, and so the cardinals have called for a new Bishop of Rome. They called him from a faraway land – far and yet always close because of our communion in faith and Christian traditions. I was afraid to accept that responsibility, yet I do so in a spirit of obedience to the Lord and total faithfulness to Mary, our most Holy Mother. I am speaking to you in your – no, our Italian language. If I make a mistake, please ‘corriect’ me...”

Wojtyła became the 264th pope, according to the chronological list of popes, the first non-Italian in 455 years. At only 58 years of age, he is the youngest pope... here the radio control was promptly turned off by Edmond’s eager hand, curled all around it as a snail’s shell around the snail. Allah is great! He jumped for joy – our Polish mate became pope!

His voice cut through the dusk broken down by the city light, as if it were something tangible. He fumbled haphazardly on the floor to reach his socks. A heavy groan emanated from his throat. His smile turned into a frown and then gradually into an impatient grimace. He sat on the bed with his head down. The silhouettes of his socks gave a faint contrast against the fuzzy background of the tiles cast in grey concrete blocks. He pulled up his body numbed from sleep. The rattle of the glass vibrating under the thunderstorm made him look up to the clock. He stood up and switched on the light. He took the radio and tuned in to Radio Tirana. He switched it off and opened the window. He sniffed a few times outside just to gauge the cold out there. It appeared to him as if his strange feeling of happiness sneaked out with the sniffs and started roaming the city outside, under the bleak sky, as a little invisible phantom.

He went to the bathroom. He stopped in front of the mirror so he could see with his own eyes the frozen smile on his lips. He swept his hand over his unshaven cheeks, made a move to get out, before stopping at the bathroom door. He looked at the clock again as he managed to put up another victorious smile on the ruins of the vanished one, and he said in a loud voice: I need to be clean-shaven, as if I'm going out to a wedding, venerable Tóngzhì Suleyman: our Polish mate is now Comrade the Pope!

He put the coffee pot on the electric burner. He took the radio and put it on the table. He grabbed a bread crust and saw the clock. He heard seven minutes worth of Italian radio, the radio tightly pressed on his ear. Then he switched to Radio Tirana and turned up the volume. The water boiled in seven minutes. He went in the bathroom to shave. He put some foam on his cheek as he gnawed at the dry bread crust, trying to spare his lips from the foam. The brave voice of the speaker rattled the radio case. It enumerated the rate of over-fulfilments of the central plan and the selfless endeavours to fulfil the tasks of the sixth five-year plan in the heroic battlegrounds of the large industrial compounds still under construction. The speaker put a heavy stress on the 'r' sound, she made everything sound strrronger, tougherrr, grrreater, and everything sound like somebody else put it on the script for her, Edmond said loudly.

- We marrrrch forrrward, in a revolutionary rrrhythm! – he prudently chanted, as he elegantly swept his face with the tricky blade of the Astra razor – We shave our faces with the rrrrevolutionary rrrrazor you damn Chinese rrrrevisionists! Long live the rrrrevolutionary rrrrazor! Long live the Chinese folks who don't give a damn about shaving for they've got precious little hair to shave. Long live coffee with Fernet... to victorrrry!

Edmond made an abrupt end to his heroic chanting by splashing a handful of water on his face. He grunted and started to wipe his face dry with a towel. He rubbed the cloth vigorously on his face so as to get warm – may the bloody Russian revisionists lick our asses down to the square root... Bastards! Rascals! Traitors! Let's write it down in huge letters: faster, further, higher – the radio played the soundtrack of some worker's march and Edmond adapted the refrain to the rhythm of his shaving moves: "The pickaxe in the one hand / our country lalala / the rifle in the other hand / lalala, lalala / we press forward, always forward..." He turned the radio control off and the silence of the rain carried on.

He went outside and down to the staircase, glanced at the clock and at the weather outside in the vain hope that there was no rain, and then he turned back to fetch the umbrella. That umbrella was a source of permanent nuisance. One had to take care not to break it. One had to mind so that it did not get stolen. Buying a new umbrella is five working days' worth, he mumbled to himself as he always did, as he grabbed it by the hand grip. As he turned the key in the lock, he said in a loud voice – yet only loud enough for him to hear – and in sync with the cracking of the lock: crick-crack. He did this to convince himself that he actually locked the door. He went downstairs bumping his umbrella at every step, one bump following the other.

He went four floors down and then exited the building, constructed by volunteer work, from exit three. His home, apartment 13, remained up there; two rooms and one kitchen, empty and lonesome. He went straight ahead, turning his back on it. He thought of his parents, about how they died one after the other, about how it emptied his life. They left him with the void boxes of his apartment's rooms, they left him alone with

his memories and his freedom, lots of freedom, so much he couldn't possibly make use of it all. That daily remembrance was quite a difficult feat to accomplish, and it was hard for him every time he thought about leaving his home behind; he struggled with this habit as if it were a vice.

Freedom follows loneliness, as days follow nights. It took its toll on him, especially on weekends. It got entangled into his loneliness until both became a knot, and he was all alone in the whirlwind of his unsolvable memories. The time and space of their absence grew bigger as a trench dug in the mud gets bigger from the water collected in winter. In the long winter nights, the sadness ate up what once filled him with joy in the long summer days. It appeared to him as if the case of the radio pressed on his cheek was the embankment of that empty trench. There the loneliness got finally stuck and ground to a halt. The plastic radio case vibrated with music and unknown voices speaking in Italian. No words were intelligible in the new songs, they sounded like the wind blowing into an empty ditch, blowing out from the other side with unfathomable scents reminding him that all obstacles can be overcome, as they made him reminisce of bridges leading into better times, when fine memories shined up his days, as the summer sunshine brightened the facades of old beachfront houses with a butter-like colour, similar to the reflection of white skirts on the skin of suntanned young girls' knees.



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Yana Punkina

Ina Vultchanova

Ocmrov Kpax (2016)

The Crack-Up Island

Publishing House **Razvitie Corporation**

Biography

Ina Vultchanova is a journalist, writer, producer and translator from French and Russian. She has an MA in Bulgarian Philology from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Her professional career has been dedicated to the art of audio drama. She has worked as a long-time senior producer at the Drama Department of Bulgarian National Radio and has produced numerous audio adaptations of works by writers from Bulgaria and around the world. Her audio productions have won the Croatian Grand Prix Marulic in 1998, the second Prix Europa in Berlin in 1998 and the eighth Muse Prize in Sofia in 2006. Vultchanova is also a freelance writer and dialogist, who is currently working on a new Bulgarian film project. Her first novel, *The Sinking of Sozopol*, was filmed in 2013 and, in 2014, she was awarded a national Golden Rose Award for the film script. In 2015, the film won the Best Foreign Film award at the New York City International Film Festival and the Best Ensemble Cast award at the Milan International Film Festival. In 2016, it received the Grand Prix at the Prague Independent Film Festival. Her third novel, *Ocmrov Kpax (The Crack-Up Island)*, won the Razvitie Literary Contest for unpublished Bulgarian novels in 2016, which led to the work being published later that year.

Synopsis

Ocmrov Kpax (The Crack-Up Island) presents two women telling their singular stories. They barely know each other, yet a magic liaison exists between them, because one of them is a newly self-initiated amateur astrologer and reads in the stars that a coming crack-up is threatening the other. Each of the women knows only her part of the story and the narrative pieces – two personal universes, so dissimilar yet so alike – have to be fitted into one whole by the reader, like in a puzzle. The pieces are stories about women, men, children and cats, plus a story about a remote and fascinating island – presumably the Croatian island of Krk in the Adriatic sea – where the star-foreseen crack-up might occur. The stories are also about land and sea, rain and caves, stars and sun, rooms and houses; but mostly they are about human affairs, about impulses and frustrations, longings and reality, love and breaches of love, about the craving and impossibility to share one's soul. Whether the predicted crack-up will smash the characters, the reader will find out in the unanticipated last page of the novel. The surprising element is that the narrative is not telling the story of a breakdown.

Остров Крах

Ina Vultchanova

И после стана тя, каквато стана. Разгледахме Риека. Намерихме истински ресторант, в който сервират риба, а не пица. Пихме още червено вино и вместо риба ядохме октопод, приготвен по някаква старинна рецепта, която я знаел само собственикът на това заведение, понеже я знаел от баба си. Според мен просто си беше изпечен в тава с масло и чесън, но не знам, какво се прави преди това с октоподите – мисля, че се предприемат някакви специални действия, за да не станат жилави, преди да ги сложиш в тавата. Попитах Емчо дали той знае, понеже аз тази специална рецепта може да се опитам да я направя. Той ме погледна, като че ли съвсем съм превъртяла и кротко попита:

– А откъде ще вземеш октопод?

– От рибарницата.

Емчо продължава да ме гледа притеснено и аз загревам. Той не може да повярва, че можеш да си купиш октопод в София. Емчо си спомня празните магазини и огромните опашки за мляко в студа, спомня си времето, когато кашкавалът беше с купони. Само че нали миналата година беше у нас, нали заедно ходихме да пазаруваме. Заличил го е от съзнанието си и сега разбирам колко е важно това. Колко важни за него са били магазините и безбройните неща, които можеш да си купиш от тях. Колко е важен за него зеленият му джип и лазерната показалка, която ти помага да отрежеш абсолютно правилна филия от хляба. Като ми я показа,

изпаднах в истеричен хилеж. Но сега не ми е смешно. Да, тия неща бяха важни. Тия неща бяха безкрайно важни, понеже ги нямаше. После престанаха да бъдат толкова важни, понеже полека-лека се появиха, после пък направо ни заляха и вече имахме време и да ни писне от тях, обаче някои хора си заминаха преди това. Някои хора си заминаха и е много тъжно да си мислиш, че никак не са били без значение пълните магазини. Да, Емчо, можеш да си купиш октопод в София. От кварталната рибарница. Но не го казвам, защото имам чувството, че ако го кажа, ще се разплача.

Октоподът беше адски вкусен, но доста тежък, сготвен по този начин. Изядох си го до последното парченце и после усетих, че съм напълно замаяна, тежка като слон и почти заспала. Че ми е ужасно трудно дори да си представя, че мога да помръдна някоя част от тялото си и искам просто да продължа да си седя тук на дървената пейка завинаги. Вече не бях весела. Този дълъг ден, дете почна сутринта така добре и спортно, а после ставаше все по-странен и по-странен, сега вече ми се струваше, че е бил изключително неправилен и погрешен и че просто ме е унищожил напълно. Оставих се Емчо да ме убеди, че трябва да пием дигестив, понеже сме преяли. Между мен и леглото ми се простираше целият дълъг и опасен път покрай морето, и при това – по тъмно.

Дигестивът беше някаква много силна ракия, която миришеше на хвойна и ми се видя необикновено вкусна и необикновено малка. Тук сме в Европа и ти сиват в чашката само трийсет грама. Повторихме дигестива и този път аз си поисках и кафе.

И наистина хвойновата ракийка и кафето извършиха някакво чудо, натежалите ми килограми просто

започнаха да се разтанят във въздуха, вече нямах чувството, че дървената пейка ще се срути под мен, вече можех да стана и даже исках да стана, вече не ме плашеше, че сме толкова далеч от леглото ми, можех да стана и исках да стана, да видя тази Риека, в която случайно съм попаднала и едва ли някога пак ще попадна. Искях да видя цялата Риека и защо не Риека *by night*. Особено Риека *by night*.

Третия дигестив си го поръчахме заедно със сметката, която ми се видя огромна, но така или иначе, аз пари нямам, изобщо не бях се сетила да си взема, така че, кой ще я плаща тази сметка и как, не ми пукаше. По това време вече пак бяхме започнали да се смеем, очите ни светеха и движенията ни бяха станали трескави и бързи.

– Риека *by night* – каза Емчо. – В този град няма начин да не се танцува.

И после съвсем несприлюдено извади от джоба си една камара пари, плати сметката и остави бакшиш, който ми се видя чудовищен.

Бяхме на главната улица в квартала около пристанището. Отвсякъде примигваха светлини и се отразяваха в морето, и градът вече изобщо не приличаше на Будапеща. Приличаше си на южен пристанищен град през август.

Навсякъде беше пълно с масички, на тях седяха хора и ядяха и пиеха. И на всяка масичка имаше свещ, и свещите също се отразяваха в морето. Беше много красиво, обаче никой не танцуваше. Минахме край едни масички, където всички ядяха само сладолед, но сладоледът на всеки беше в различен цвят и нито един цвят не се повтаряше, и тогава видяхме мястото, което може би търсехме, но то изглеждаше мрачно и неприветливо в

сравнение с многоцветната страна на сладоледа на брега на морето. Изглеждаше направо малко страшно. Беше един мрачен черен куб без прозорци и с луминесцентни букви в най-студения и смразяващ нюанс на синьо-лилавото. Музика не се чуваше, предполагам, защото черният куб нямаше прозорци.

Ние обаче влязохме. И музиката ме блъсна така, че направо болеше. Не беше хубава музика. Беше някакъв местен ди джей, който миксваше някакви мелодични хърватски песнички в стил стара българска естрада от италиански тип с някакво чудовищно техно в стил дум-дум-дум-дум-дум и отново същото дум-дум, което почти напълно ги заглушаваше. Никаква представа си нямах как това нещо можеше да се танцува, но Емчо каза, че било супер, въпреки че веднага ме заведе в най-отдалечения край на бара, където, разбира се, също не можеше да се разговаря, и затова той ми изкрепя в ухото: „Избери си коктейл“, и ми бутна един лист пред лицето. Емчо е единственият човек, който помни колко съм късогледа, но все пак малко прекали – направо ми го залепи на носа. Аз коктейлите много не ги знам. Пила съм „Маргарита“ и си спомням, че имаше много лимон, затова уверено си забих пръста там. После Емчо нещо крещеше на английски, после пак ми изкрепя в ухото, че нямало „Маргарита“, после вече се разбирахме само със знаци и в един момент пред нас цъфнаха някакви огромни чаши, направо по половин литър, тъмнопатладжанени на цвят, почти черни и накачулени с плодове, чадърчета, лимончета и всякакви гадости, включително и бита сметана отгоре. Затворих очи и отпих. Имаше вкус на компот. Изобщи не усецах никакъв алкохол. Запалих си цигара. Ето ти Риека by night. Сега, преди да си тръгнем, трябва да изпия

цялата тази половинлитрова чаша с неизвестно какви гадости. А после ни чака и пътят край морето. Не е възможно да си говорим. Нито пък да се танцува на тази музика.

Обаче хората успяваха. Погледнах към дансинга и той беше пълен с неприлично млади същества, които танцуваха в транс с унесени физиономии. Светлината се въртеше и мигаше като фотографска светкавица и ги виждах само в отрязани от времето мигове – неподвижни, щастливи и унесени. Помислих си, че щом това е достъпно за тях, защо пък да не бъде достъпно и за мен. Вярно, че не съм на осемнайсет години, обаче аз това го мога. Можех го.

Затова си метнах чантата на облегалката на стола и тръгнах към зоната на трепкащата светлина. Тръгнах несигурно и като стигнах до кръглия подиум, направо спрях. Разбрах от какво лицата им са унесени и това нямаше нищо общо с музиката, която си оставаше все така ужасна. Просто изглежда, че подът се върти и от това ти се завива свят. Затова лицата им са такива и единственото, което ме изненадва, е, че не виждам никой да повръща. Морска болест. Много предпазливо се опитвам да разклатя тялото си в несъществуващия ритъм. Успявам, защото всъщност ритъма го задават светлините. Снимка, затъмнение, снимка, затъмнение. Така. Не трябва да се забравя и въртенето. Въртенето на светлините, което изглежда, че е въртене на пода. Така, сега вече започвам да чувам и музиката. Тя е толкова силна, че досега не съм я чувала. Някакъв ритъм, сменя се, сега някакъв друг ритъм, сега пак се сменя с някакъв абсолютно нелеп, но ето че пак се върнаха два такта от първия, значи все пак съществува някаква конструкция

и ето че почти успявам да я танцувам. Поглеждам другите наоколо. Те всъщност точно като мен съвсем леко се поклащат. Съвсем леко. Усещането за динамика идва само от стробоскопа. Снимка, затъмнение, снимка, затъмнение. И въртенето, да не забравяме въртенето на пода, защото подът сега вече наистина се върти и сменящият се ритъм може да бъде улучен, ето така, със съвсем лека промяна, само в стила на поклащането. Сега вече го танцувам като тях. Или по-добре от тях. Предполагам, че отдалеч лицето ми има същото унесено и щастливо изражение в светлината на светкавиците. Обаче аз мога повече. Аз мога много повече. Мога сама да се накарам да полудея от тази музика, която изобщо не ми харесва и няма нищо общо с мен. Обаче аз мога да стана музиката. Мога да стана и най-лошата музика. Мога да се превърна в нея. Мога да беснея на всеки ритъм поотделно, като на съвсем отделна музика, и после на следващия, като непрекъснато сменям стила и стъпките – единственият начин, по който този мишмаш, този турлюгювеч може да бъде танцуван. И вече не се поклащам предпазливо, а направо беснея, нахлувам със ситни стъпки в пространството на другите и се връщам на забързан каданс. Много съм нахална. И около мен вече се е образувал кръг и неприлично младите хора са ме оставили в средата и танцуват с лица, обърнати към мен, и нащрек, готови да ми направят път, щом ми хрумне да се втурна към тях като ненормална или кой знае какво, готови да реагират. И аз вече съм се превърнала в центъра на черния куб без прозорци, и всички светлини излизат от мен. Мога да ги командвам. Ето, сега мога да забавя проблясването на светкавицата. Ако искам, мога да завъртя пода на обратно и тогава всички ще изпадат на земята. Обаче

не го правя. Засега не го правя. Сатурн. Черният куб без прозорци е Сатурн и изобщо не знам откъде ми хрумват такива глупости. Сатурн. А това вече е Емчо, който също е застанал в средата на кръга и танцува срещу мен. Емчо също е нахален и всички са му направили път. Още не е загреял, но вече е включил. Емчо е танцьор. Може да не разбира от музика, обаче е страхотен танцьор. Винаги е бил. И може да му се прости зеленият джип и лазерната показалка за рязане на хляб защото сега вече загреява и неговият бяс вече е повече от моя и сега вече той води а аз съм нащрек за да реагирам при първия сигнал и веднага да схвана каква е следващата парола за маймунстване при следващата безумна смяна на такта и вече съм потна но няма никаква надежда това парче да свърши защото това изобщо не е парче и като такова няма начало среда и край. Само безкрайни начала и безкрайни смени и вече ми е абсолютно все едно че музиката е кофти защото музиката я правим ние и от нас излизат светлините но все пак по едно време свършва и целият кръг ни ръкопляска и подът вече не се върти така че за малко да падна но Емчо ме прегръща през рамо и ме повежда към бара безумно горд. Мога да усетя кога Емчо е безумно горд.

На бара ме чака половинлитровата съмнителна чаша, в която не знам какво има, но я изпивам на екс, понеже съм жадна. Ако в нея наистина има трийсет грама алкохол, не ги усещам и затова изобщо не реагирам, като виждам, че Емчо вдига два пръста към бармана, добре, защо не. Взимаме си новите чаши със същия тъмносин патладжан, в който бялата сметана стои направо неприлично, и тръгваме към чилаута. Там музиката се чува по-тихо, има бели канапета и голям плосък екран, на който са пуснали порно. По-хладно е и ме е страх да

не настина, защото съм потна. Емчо разбира това, без да съм му го казала, затова ме прегръща през рамо. На другите канапета има две двойки, които се натискат, но ние с Емчо не можем да се натискаме, понеже се познаваме прекалено отдавна. Можем само да се докосваме или да се гледаме в очите, можем да се целуваме, но не трябва. Само че така и така вече е късно и затова се целуваме и после излизаме и отиваме на плажа.

Минаваме край сладоледената държава, но там вече е затворено и разноцветните сладоледи ги няма, но затова пък плажът се оказва точно отдолу, като слезеш по едни стъпала. Някакво малко мърляво плажче съвсем близо до пристанището. Няма пясък, разбира се, но камъчетата са дребни и не обиват много.

Тялото на Емчо е като стара дреха, която е била забутана някъде и отново си намерил. Едва ли има нещо общо със секс. Тялото на Емчо е като пещера, като утроба, като дом, в който отново си се прибрал.

The Crack-Up Island

Ina Vultchanova

Translated from Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

And then what happened, happened. We looked around Rijeka. We found a genuine restaurant, where they served fish and not pizza. We drank more red wine and instead of fish we ate octopus, prepared according to some old recipe which only the restaurant proprietor knew, because he'd learnt it from his grandmother. My view was that it had just been baked on a tray of butter and garlic, but I don't know what's done with octopuses beforehand – I think before they're put in the baking tray there are some special procedures so they don't become too chewy. I asked Emcho if he knew, so that I could try to make it. He looked at me as though I'd completely gone off my rocker and asked quietly: "And where will you get octopus?"

"From the fishmonger's."

Emcho continued to look at me with concern and it hit me. He cannot believe that you can buy octopus in Sofia. Emcho remembers the empty shops with the huge queues in the cold for milk, he remembers the time when you needed coupons for cheese. Only that, just this last year, hasn't he been with us, didn't we go shopping together? He's erased it from his memory and I now realize how important this is. How important shops have been for him and the numberless articles that can be bought. How important his green Jeep is for him and the laser beam that helps you cut an absolutely even slice of bread. When he showed it to me, I lapsed into hysterical giggles. But now I don't find it funny. Yes, these things were

important. These things were infinitely important, because they weren't around. Then they stopped being so important, because one after the other they appeared, and then they just flooded in, and now we had the time to get fed up with them, but some folk had left before that. Some folk had left and it's really sad to think that the fully-stocked shops were not at all without significance. Yes, Emcho, you can buy octopus in Sofia. From the local fishmonger. But I don't tell him, because I get the feeling that if I say it, he'll start crying.

The octopus was fantastically tasty, but pretty heavy cooked this way. I polished off the last bit and then felt completely woozy, as heavy as an elephant and almost asleep. Really impossible for me to even imagine that I could move a single part of my body, and I just wanted to carry on sitting there on the wooden bench forever. I wasn't jolly any more. This long day, which began so bright and breezy in the morning, but then became stranger and stranger still, now seemed to me to have been exceptionally irregular and wrong, and had just destroyed me entirely. I left it to Emcho to convince me that we needed to drink a digestif, because we'd eaten too much. Between me and bed there stretched a whole long journey along the shore and, what's more, in the dark.

The digestif was some kind of really strong rakia, which smelled of juniper and seemed unusually tasty and unusually small. Here we were in Europe and they poured me just a 30-gram glass. We ordered another and this time I asked for a coffee as well.

And indeed the juniper rakia and the coffee brought about a miracle. My ponderous kilograms simply began to melt into the air, I no longer had the feeling that the bench was going to collapse under me, that I could now stand up and I even wanted to

stand up, to see this Rijeka in which I'd landed quite by chance and would never likely land again. I wanted to see all of Rijeka and why not Rijeka by night. Especially Rijeka by night.

We ordered the third digestif along with the bill, which seemed huge to me, but one way or another, I have no money, I hadn't even thought of taking any, so that I couldn't care a fig for who paid the bill and how. By this time we'd begun to laugh, our eyes sparkled and our movements had become feverish and fast.

"Rijeka by night," said Emcho. "In this town, there's no way not to dance."

And then quite spontaneously he took a wad of money out of his pocket, paid the bill and left a tip that seemed colossal to me.

We were on the main street in the harbour area. Lights blinked from everywhere and were reflected in the sea, and by now the town didn't look at all like Budapest. It looked like a southern port town in August.

Everywhere was full of tables at which people sat and ate and drank. And on every table there was a candle and the candles were reflected in the sea as well. It was very beautiful, but no one was dancing. We passed by some tables where everyone was eating only ice cream, but each ice cream was a different colour, and not one colour was duplicated, and that's when we saw the place, which maybe we were looking for, but it looked gloomy and unwelcoming in comparison to the multicoloured ice cream strip along the beach. It seemed even a little scary. It was a dark black cube with no windows and luminous lettering in the coldest, even freezing nuance of blue lilac. You couldn't hear any music, I suppose, because the black cube had no windows.

However, we went in. And the music hit me so hard it simply hurt. It wasn't nice music. There was a local DJ, who was mixing some melodic Croatian songs, similar in style to old-fashioned Italian-type Bulgarian pop, with some monstrous techno, dum, dum, dum, dum, dum and again dum, dum, which pretty much drowned them out. I had no idea how you could dance to this, but Emcho declared that it was super, even though he immediately led me to the furthest corner of the bar, where, of course, you still couldn't talk, and so he screamed in my ear, "Choose a cocktail," and pushed a menu in front of my face. Emcho is the only person who remembers how short-sighted I am, but even so he overdid it somewhat, sticking it right on my nose. I'm not a great expert on cocktails. I've drunk a margarita and I remember it had a lot of lemon, so I confidently stabbed my finger there. And then Emcho swore in English, then he screamed again in my ear that there was no margarita, and then we communicated by signals only and at some point some enormous glasses materialized in front of us, that could hold half a litre, dark aubergine, almost black in colour, and crammed with fruit, little umbrellas, lemon slices and every kind of crap, including whipped cream on the top. I closed my eyes and took a sip. It tasted like a fruit salad. I didn't detect any kind of alcohol at all. I lit a cigarette. Here was my Rijeka by night. Now, before we left, I had to drain this half-litre glass of whatever its crap content. And then the path by the sea awaited us. It wasn't possible to talk, nor even to dance to this music.

But people were managing. I looked at the dance floor and it was full of obscenely young creatures, who danced in a trance with rapturous faces. The light revolved and flashed like a camera bulb, and I saw them in seconds cut out of time – motionless, happy, entranced. I thought that if this was

suitable for them, why wouldn't it be suitable for me? True, I'm not 18, but this I can do. I could do it.

And so I threw my bag over the back of my chair and made for the flashing light zone. I started out falteringly, and when I got to the round podium I stopped in my tracks. I realised why their faces were so stupefied and that this had nothing to do with the music. It simply turned out that the floor was revolving and that was why their world was spinning. That's why their faces looked like this and the only thing that surprised me was that I saw no one throwing up. Sea sickness. Very cautiously I tried to wiggle my body to a non-existent rhythm. I succeeded, because the lights set the rhythm. Photo-flash, dark, flash, dark. That way. And you shouldn't forget the revolve. The revolving lights, which made the floor look as if it was turning. So, at last, I began to even hear the music. It was so loud, that up till now I hadn't heard it. Some kind of rhythm, it changed, then another rhythm, then again it changed into something absolutely ludicrous, but there it returned to two beats from the beginning, that meant there was some structure and, look, I almost managed to dance to it. I looked at the others around me. In fact they were just slightly rocking like me. Just slightly. The impression of dynamism only came from the stroboscope. Flash, dark, flash, dark. And the revolve, let's not forget the revolving floor, because now the floor was really turning and its changing rhythm could be caught, there just so, with just a slight change, just in the swaying. By now I was dancing like them. Or better than them. I expect that from far away, my face had the same entranced happy expression in the flashing lights. But I could manage more. I could manage a lot more. I could drive myself crazy over this music which I didn't like at all and had nothing in common with me. But I could become the music. I could become even the worst music. I could turn

into it. I could go wild to every separate rhythm, and then on to the next, as I continuously changed the steps – the only way this mish-mash, this musical stew could be danced to. And now I wasn't swaying cautiously, but I just went crazy, with short steps I broke into others' floor space and returned to a fast cadenza. I am really brazen. And around me now a circle had formed and the obscenely young had left me in the middle and were dancing with their faces turned towards me and alert, ready to make way, when I decided to mow into them like a mad woman or who knew what, ready to react. And now I'd turned into the centre of the black cube with no windows, and all the lights came from me. I could command them. There I could delay the flash. If I wanted to I could turn the floor the opposite way and then everyone would fall on the ground. But I didn't do it. I hadn't done it up till now. Saturn. The black cube without windows is Saturn and I don't know where this rubbish came from. Saturn. And here now was Emcho, who had also got up in the centre of the circle and was dancing opposite me. Emcho is also brazen and everyone made way for him. He hadn't yet warmed up but he was switched on. Emcho is a dancer. Maybe he doesn't understand music, but he's a fantastic dancer. Always has been. And he could be forgiven his green Jeep and his laser-guided beam for cutting bread, because now he'd hotted up and his frenzy exceeded mine, and now he was already leading and I was switched on, ready to react at the first signal and straight off catch on to whatever was the next key for the monkey-moves at the next crazy rhythm switch, and I was now sweating but there was no hope for this piece to finish, because this was no piece at all, and as such had no beginning, middle or end. Just never-ending beginnings and never-ending changes and by now it made absolutely no difference that the music was crappy, because we were making the music and

the lights were coming out of us, but even so, at some point it stopped and the whole circle was clapping and the floor now stopped turning, so that I was within an inch of falling, but Emcho clasped me round the shoulder and led me to the bar, furiously proud. I can tell when Emcho is furiously proud.

At the bar the dubious half-litre glass awaited me, containing I don't know what, but I gulped it down because I was thirsty. If there really were 30-grams of alcohol in it, I didn't detect them, and that's why I didn't react when I saw Emcho lift two fingers to the barman, OK, why not. We got the new glasses with the same dark black aubergine, in which the white cream sat just lewdly, and we proceed to the chill-out. There the music was quieter, there were white sofas and a big flat screen on which porno was playing. It was cooler and I was scared of catching a cold, because I was sweaty. Emcho realised this and without me telling him, he held me round the shoulder. On the other sofas there were two couples who were embracing, but Emcho and I can't embrace, because we've known each other much too long. We can touch or look into each other's eyes, we can kiss, but we shouldn't. It's just that under the circumstances it was pretty late by now and so we kissed and then left and walked on the beach.

We passed the ice cream country, but it was now closed and there were no multicoloured ice creams, but even so the beach could be seen just below, you go down some steps. A small grubby beach, quite close to the harbour. There was no sand of course, but the stones were small and didn't prick much.

Emcho's body was like an old item of clothing, which has been stuffed away somewhere and then found again. It hardly had anything to do with sex. Emcho's body was like a cave, like a womb, like a home, to which you've returned.



© Marta Režová

Bianca Bellová

Jezero (2016)

The Lake

Publishing House **Host**

Biography

Bianca Bellová, born in Prague in 1970, is a translator, interpreter and writer with Bulgarian roots. Her first book, *Sentimentální román (Sentimental Novel)*, came out in 2009 and describes the trials of growing up near the end of the communist totalitarian regime. Two years later, the publisher Host brought out the novella *Mrtvý muž (Dead Man)*, which impressed critics. In 2013, Bellová's novella *Celý den se nic nestane (Nothing Happens All Day)* was published. The title both reflects and does not reflect reality: until the evening nothing much happens, but the reader is able to reconstruct the underlying stories. Her most recent book, nominated for the EU Prize for Literature (EUPL), is the novel *Jezero (The Lake, 2016)*.

Synopsis

A fishing village at the end of the world. A lake that is drying up and, ominously, pushing out its banks. The men have vodka, the women have troubles, the children have eczema to scratch at. And what about Nami? Nami doesn't have anything but a granny with fat arms. However, he does have a life ahead of him – a first love that is taken from him by Russian soldiers, and then all the rest of it. But if a life can begin at the very end of the world, maybe it can end at the beginning. This story is as old as humanity itself. For its hero – a boy who embarks on his journey with nothing but a bundle of nerves and a coat that was once his grandad's – it is a pilgrimage. To get to the greatest mystery, he must sail across and walk around the lake and finally sink to its bottom.

Jezero

Bianca Bellová

Bazar práce je trojstup, místy až čtyřstup mužů oblečených do všech barev smutku, zapáchajících společnou vůní lidství a nepraným prádlem. Většinou mlčí a rezignovaně hledí do země. Upracované ruce s navěky zažranou špínou svírají v pěst. Když na silnici zastaví či přibrzdí auto s potenciálním zájemcem o pracovní sílu, chlapi se narovnají a vtáhnou břicha. Z okénka auta se vysune ruka a kývne na někoho prstem. Tři nebo čtyři muži vyběhnou z řady k autu a začnou se s vlastníkem ruky dohadovat. Po krátké strkanici pak jeden nebo dva z nájemných mužů nastoupí do auta a jejich místa v první řadě rychle zaplní pěšák z druhé. O kus dál napravo stojí armáda ženských nájemných pracovnic, potenciálních uklízeček, zahradnic a paní na hlídání. Ozývá se odtud polohlasný hovor a občas smích, jako když Nami na jaře ležel na zahradě pod třešní a poslouchal bzучení včel v koruně.

Nami se zařadí na konec třetí řady. Za celé odpoledne na něj nedojde, žádný potenciální zaměstnavatel se na něj ani nepodívá, nikdo na něj neukáže prstem a nezeptá se, kolik unese pytlů s cementem. Když padne soumrak, dav se začne pomalu rozptylovat do okolí. I když Nami pořád přeshlapuje z nohy na nohu, je prochladlý. Žena, které pomáhal s nákupem, by mu určitě dala hrnek čaje a možná taky čistou postel, ale při vzpomínce na její ostrý tělesný pach a vrzání gumových sandálů se Nami otřeše.

Noc stráví v parku před Majmunovou klecí. Spí málo a přerušovaně, klepe se zimou, ale ráno vstane vcelku svěží, i když uši a nos má promrzlé. Když začnou trhovci otevírat stánky na

trhu, koupí si Nami sladký černý čaj a zelnou placku. Den je dnes trochu přívětivější, slunce se snaží prodrat mezi mraky, ale fouká studený vítr. Nami se jde znovu postavit na burzu práce, a protože dnes přišel brzy, je hned v druhé linii. Několik tváří rozeznává z předchozího dne. Pozdraví se s nimi pokynutím hlavy, pak už si jeden druhého až do večera nevšímají, leda když si vzájemně drží místo, když se některý z nich potřebuje vymočít.

Nami si spočítá, že si zákazníci na práci každý den vyberou zhruba pětinu z dostupné pracovní síly. Takže by mu pět dní mělo stačit. Trvá to však dvakrát tak dlouho. Peníze už mu docházejí a každá další noc je o něco chladnější. Sám sobě smrdí. Vlasy ho svědí.

Pak přijede chlap v dodávce a ukáže na Namiho a dva další. Bez ptaní je naloží na korbu a odveze je do skladu v přístavu, kde mají vykládat zboží z lodí. Práce je těžká; jeden z mužů, kteří nastoupili do práce s Namim, si hned během první směny roztrhne kotník. Nami nemá rukavice a už za pár hodin se mu na ruku udělají krvavé puchýře. Záda ho bolí z přenášení a zvedání přepravek s mrkvemi a cibulemi. Zdá se mu k neuvěření, že je v celém městě dost lidí, kteří by dokázali sníst tolik cibule. Má patnáctiminutové pauzy na oběd. Ostatní chlapi — stejně jako Nami — šetří a místo oběda si jen zapálí na betonovém molu přístavu. Sedí na dřevěných bedýnkách, potahují z laciných cigaret a mlčky hledí na jezero.

V jímkách na místě, kde kdysi zjevně bylo jezero, usychá červená síra, vedlejší produkt těžby. Mění se ve žlutou hmotu, jejíž konec je v nedohlednu. Z této hmoty, po které se pohybují postavy v bezpečnostních helmách, se nařezou velké žluté bloky a ty se pak na nákladních lodích přepraví síry chtivým kupcům v Africe a Austrálii. V pozadí šlehají ze čtyř černých věží plameny.

Po několika dnech agónie v pracovním procesu se Nami začíná zocelovat. Mozoly ztvrdnou, bolest zad trvá, ale ustoupí za hranici vnímání. Po týdnu dostane první výplatu, je to jen půlka ze slibované částky, protože tu druhou mu strhnou za bydlení na ubytovně. S penězi musí nakládat uvážlivě, zbývá mu sotva na jídlo, ale snaží se uspořit si na nové kalhoty a kabát, aby si nepřipadal jako vesničan. Když má hlad, pije hodně vody, aby ten pocit zahnal. Nejasně cítí, že by si alespoň jednou za týden měl vyrazit mezi ostatní lidi, kteří nesmrdí rybinou a nemají špínu za nehty. Kdesi mezi jeho vědomím a podvědomím se také nezřetelně zjevuje jakási postava, kterou sice nezná, ale z toho, že má dlouhé vlasy a prsa, usoudí, že se jedná o ženu. Nezřetelně cítí, že by ji rád měl, ale pro nejasnost akce, kterou by bylo potřeba v tomto směru podniknout, celou záležitost odloží.

Voda na ubytovně teče jen hodinu ráno, pokud vůbec, a stejně jen studená. V zimě se netopí. Podlaha z překližky pomalu uhnívá. Kyselý zápach ze záchodů prostupuje všechno, vsakuje se do stěn, do oblečení, do vlasů, do polštáře. V oknech místo skel panely z překližky, vítr profukuje skulinami. Postele jsou tvrdé, ale jistě ne tak jako uschlý trávník v parku před Majmunovou klecí. Noci jsou krátké, Nami se budí a slyší vzdalující se kroky některého spolubydlíčího, který odchází na směnu ještě dřív než on.

Na pokoji Nami bydlí s jedenácti dalšími muži. Ti přicházejí tak unaveni, že se večer jen svalí do postele a spí. Na štěnice si zvykli a nesnaží se s nimi bojovat. Jednou zvedne Nami slavník své postele a najde jich v rámu postele tisíce. Chlapi nemají sílu se hádat ani masturbovat. Nami si občas vzpomene na Zazu, ale každá taková vzpomínka je nemilosrdně poznamenaná obrazem rytmicky se pohybuujícího ruského zadku, a tak

ji rychle zažene. Rostou mu svaly. S ostatními téměř nemluví, jen s některými si ráno v umývárně vymění pozdrav.

Jednou ráno se probudí, a ještě než otevře oči, ztuhne. Tělem mu proběhne poznání a on ucítí, jak mu tuhnou všechny svaly. Zavřenými víčky už mu do hlavy teče elektrické světlo z žárovky na stropě. Prsty na ruku jako by se mu s každým tepem prodlužovaly a zase zkracovaly. Srdce mu divoce buší. Ani nemusí sahat pod polštář, aby věděl, že fialová ponožka s úsporami je pryč. Ruce pevně tiskne na deku a oči má stále zavřené. Nepodívá se kolem sebe, nikdo mu stejně nic neřekne. Byl pitomý; úspory na kabát jsou pryč. Odteď si bude dávat peníze zásadně do trenýrek, ke kterým si je přišpendlí zavíracím špendlíkem. Zatne zuby a na ubytovně přečká do jara.

Nami teď pracuje ve výrobě síry. Když ráno za tmy přichází do areálu závodu, oči má ještě zalepené. Chodit musí pěšky, autobusy do závodu nejezdí a závodní nákladák sváží jen kvalifikované dělníky, kteří už ve výrobě pracují tak dlouho, že většinou trpí rozednou plic. Nami je jen mladý a nekvalifikovaný asfaltér, a tak chodí z ubytovny pěšky, s rukama vraženými hluboko do kapes obnošené červené lyžařské bundy, kterou si koupil na trhu; je sice z druhé ruky, ale hřeje. Jde se skupinou dalších mužů, málokdo promluví. Někdy zbytková vzdušná vlhkost vytvoří na cestě v nerovnostech ledovou krustu, která jim křupe pod erárními botami. Boty mají silné podrážky z tvrdé gumy, a přesto skrz ně horký asfalt zanedlouho začne pálit a nepřestane až do konce směny. Na boty musí být Nami obzvláště opatrný, kdyby si je zničil, nové už nedostane.

Celý den pak chodí za vozem, ze kterého vytéká horký asfalt. Namimu připomíná borůvkový rozvar, který mu dělala bába

a lila na lívance; nasává nasládlou vůni tekutého asfaltu, kterou je pak celý prostoupený. Rozhrnuje asfalt dřevěným hřablem.

Domů přichází za tmy a na bundě má poprašek žlutého sírového prachu. Nohy a plíce ho pálí, většinou jen dopadne na kavalec, aniž by ztrácel čas prováděním hygieny. Na tu je čas jen v neděli; když teče voda, rychle ze sebe pod ledovou sprchou smyje týdenní špínu a na chvíli si přestane smrdět. Vypůjčí si nůžky a zastříhne si nehty na nohou i na rukou a vlasy přerůstající přes uši. Pak se vydá do města. Nemá nikoho, koho by se zeptal, s kým by se poradil. Neví ani, jak se má ptát; neví, jak se jeho matka jmenuje ani jak vypadá. Neví ani, jestli vůbec žije. Hledá ženu, jejíž existence je stejně reálná jako existence Duchy jezera.

Chodí na různá místa: do nádražního bufetu, ke stánkům na trhu, do čajoven i lepších kaváren (tam nahlíží jen ode dveří, zpoza těžkých závěsů se zlatým řasením), pátrá ve tvářích žen a hledá něco, čeho by se chytil. Nachází většinou jen nezájem nebo rozmazanou řasenku. Ženy ho ignorují nebo jeho směrem mávnou rukou, jako by zaháněly otravného ováda. Nejradši chodí Nami do přístavu, kde občas potkává lidi ze svých končin, námořníky z ropných tankerů a rybáře s hlubokými prosolenými vráskami. Neví, jak s nimi hovořit, a tak si jen sedne k vedlejšímu stolu, pije ruský čaj z vysoké sklenice a poslouchá jejich hovor. Muži mluví o potrhaných sítích, o uschlých stromech, o svých náladových ženách, kolik sousedů ulehlo s nádorem, a téměř vždy o tom, jak byli v bordelu nebo se do něj teprve chystají.

Po jedné pitce vezmou Namiho s sebou. Veřejný dům Symfonie je místo ještě více skličující, než jeho název napovídá. Hned za dveřmi je cosi jako přijímací místnost s recepčním pultem, kde tlustý chlap v teplákové soupravě vydává klíče od

pokojů a zároveň dělá barmana. Unavené dívky posedávají na ušmudlaných divanech, které jsou místy prosezené. Moc se nepodobají slečnám z katalogu na prádlo; na stehnech mají celulitidu a modřiny a zpod krátkých košilek jim lezou macaté pupky. Pod nosem jim raší knír, alespoň některým z nich. Nehty mají dlouhé a barevné a mezi nimi jim trčí cigarety.

Nami se nedbale opírá o recepční pult a světáčky si dívky prohlíží. Některé z nich jsou spíš zralé ženy, mohly by být jeho matkou. Zachytí pohled dívky v pudrových šatech; musí tu být nejmladší, jistě ne o moc starší než Nami sám. Dívka na něj hledí, ale ne vyzývavě, spíš unaveně, prosebně. Nami se nakloní k chlapíkovi za pultem, ale ten v tu chvíli pustí naplno hudbu, břeskne orientální disko s uřvanou zpěvačkou, takže Namiho dotaz na cenu zanikne v hluku. Podruhé už se nezeptá. Chlapi do sebe lámou jeden stakan kořalky za druhým a ani ne za půl hodiny jsou opilí. Začnou pokřikovat na prostitutky, a ty jim otráveně sedají na klín. Dívka v pudrových šatech objímá tlustý zátylek plešatého muže s postavou vysloužilého zápasníka; Nami se k němu ani nemusí nakláňet, aby si představil, jak čpí potem a cigaretami.

Nami si objedná Pepsi-Colu, poprvé v životě. Stojí tolik, kolik Nami vydělá za den. Zatímco se děvčata s chlapy vytrácejí do pokojů v zadní části zařízení, Nami zůstává sám se svou lahví Pepsi a brčkem. Pije pomalu, chutná to lahodně a sladce. Rukou přejíždí po chromovaném okraji pultu, zatímco recepční a správce bordelu v jednom čte sportovní stránku novin. Nami se zvedne a zeptá se, kolik stojí pronájem jedné dívky. Chlápek se zasměje a sdělí mu základní sazby. Nami mu slušně poděkuje a pomyslí si, že to je hodně. Nasadí si čepici a vyjde ven. U chodníku s kvílením zabrzdí auto, vyskočí z něj chlápek s čepicí na hlavě a ruksakem na zádech a rychle běží pryč. Řidič auta vystoupí a běží za ním.

Ruksak se ztěžka houpe na zádech běžícího muže, řidič ho brzy dostihne, srazí k zemi a začne škrtit popruhem batohu. Oba muži spolu beze slov zápasí, řidič se pak zvedne, ještě do ležícího muže kopne a jde zpátky ke svému autu. Nastartuje a rychle odjede. Nami se skloní nad ležícím mužem a pomůže mu se posadit. Muž má na tváři krvácející šrám a pláče.

Na ubytovně Nami spěšně masturbuje a pak se dlouho pře-
valuje, než se mu podaří usnout.

The Lake

Bianca Bellová

Translated from Czech by Alex Zucker

The labour bazaar is a collection of men garbed in every colour of mourning, reeking of humanity and unwashed clothes, arranged in ranks of three or four across. Most stand silently, staring down at the ground with a look of resignation, their work-worn hands ingrained with dirt, clenched into fists. Every time a car with a potential employer stops on the road, or brakes to slow down and look, the men draw themselves up straight and suck in their bellies. A hand pops out of the car window and beckons someone with a finger. Three or four men dash out of line towards the car, to negotiate with the owner of the hand. Then, after a brief tussle, one or two hired men climb into the car and their places in the front rank are quickly filled in by the foot soldiers behind them. Off to the right stands an army of women workers for hire – cleaning ladies, gardeners, childminders. There is a murmur of conversation broken by outbursts of laughter. It reminds Nami of lying in the garden in spring, underneath the cherry tree, listening to the buzz of bees in the treetop.

Nami stands at the tail end of the third row. He isn't picked all afternoon, none of the potential employers even so much as look at him, nobody points a finger at him and asks how many bags of cement he can carry. As dusk falls, the crowd slowly disperses, but Nami still stands there, shifting his weight from foot to foot, chilled right through. The woman he helped with her shopping would give him a cup of tea, maybe even a clean bed, but he shudders at the memory of her pungent body odour and creaking rubber sandals.

He spends the night in the park, in front of Maimun's cage. He sleeps only intermittently, shaking with cold, but is more or less refreshed when he wakes in the morning, though his ears and nose are frozen. As the market vendors open their stalls, Nami buys a mug of sweet black tea and a cabbage pancake. The day is a bit more welcoming today, the sun trying to break through the clouds, but a cold wind blows. Nami goes to queue at the work bazaar again. He's early today and gets a place in the second row. Some of the faces he recognises from the previous day. He greets them with a nod, then they proceed to ignore each other right through till evening, except when one of them saves the place for someone who needs to urinate.

According to Nami's calculations, the customers choose about a fifth of the available workforce every day. So five days should do it. But it takes twice that long. His money is running out and every night is colder than the one before. He smells. His hair itches.

Then, one day, a guy in a pickup truck comes and points to Nami and two other men. Without any questions, he loads them into the bed of the truck and drives them to a warehouse in the port, where they will be paid to unload cargo from ships. It's hard work; one of the men shatters his ankle during the first shift. Nami has no gloves, and after just a few hours, his hands are covered in bloody blisters. His back aches from lifting and carrying crates of carrots and onions. He finds it hard to believe the city has enough people to eat that many onions. They get a 15-minute break for lunch. The other men, like Nami, are trying to save money. Instead of lunch, they just light up a smoke, out on the concrete pier. They sit atop the wooden crates, sucking on their cheap cigarettes, gazing silently out at the lake.

Red sulphur, a by-product of mining, sits cooling in pits on the lakeside. As it cools it turns to a yellow mass, stretching out of sight. Figures in safety helmets move about on the mass, chopping it into big yellow blocks, which are shipped to sulphur-hungry buyers in Africa and Australia. Flames lick from the four black towers in the background.

After several agonizing days on the job, Nami starts to toughen up. His calluses harden, and the back pain continues, but drops below the threshold of perception. After a week, he gets his first pay. It's only half what they promised. They deduct half his wages for living in the dormitory. Nami has to manage his funds judiciously. He barely has enough left for food, but wants to save up for a new coat and trousers, so he won't feel like a villager. When he's hungry, he drinks water to make the feeling go away. He has a vague notion that he ought to go out at least once a week, to be around people who don't smell of fish and have dirt beneath their nails. Also, somewhere in between his conscious and subconscious is the faint image of a person he doesn't recognise, but judging from the long hair and breasts, he concludes that it's a woman. He has a feeling he should like her, but given how unclear it is what action he should take, he decides to postpone the matter.

The water in the dormitory works just one hour each morning, if at all, and only runs cold. There is no heat. The plywood floor is rotting, and the sour smell from the toilets permeates everything, seeping into the walls, his clothes, hair, pillow. Instead of glass, the window frames are filled with plywood. Wind blows through the cracks. The beds are hard, though certainly softer than the dried-up lawn in the park in front of Maimun's cage. Nights are short. Nami wakes to the sound of footsteps from another worker, whose shift starts even earlier than his.

Nami shares his room with 11 other men. They come home so tired that at night they just collapse into their beds and fall asleep. They're so used to bedbugs at this point, they don't even bother. Once, Nami lifted his mattress and discovered thousands of them, all over the bed frame. The men don't have strength to argue, not even to masturbate. Every so often, Nami remembers Zaza, but the memory is always tainted by the image of a Russian rear end moving up and down, so he quickly banishes it from his mind. His muscles are growing. He scarcely speaks to the other men, apart from exchanging greetings in the washroom in the morning.

One morning, he wakes with a start before he even opens his eyes. A shock of realization runs through him as he feels his muscles stiffen. The light from the electric bulb on the ceiling pours through his closed eyelids into his head. His heart pounds wildly. With each beat, his fingers seem to get longer and shorter again. He doesn't even need to reach under his pillow to know that the purple sock with his savings in it is gone. He presses his hands firmly against the blanket, eyes still shut. No point looking round, no one will tell him anything anyway. He was stupid; the money he was saving up to buy a coat is gone. From now on, earnings go in his underwear, that's it. Attached with a safety pin. He grits his teeth and sticks it out in the dormitory till spring.

Now Nami works in the sulphur plant. His eyes are still glued shut as he walks to work in the dark every morning. He has to go on foot. The buses don't run to the factory, and the factory lorry only takes the skilled labourers who have been working at the plant so long that most of them suffer from emphysema. Nami is just a young, unskilled asphalt layer, so he walks from

the dormitory, hands shoved deep into the pockets of the worn red ski jacket he bought at the market – second-hand, but at least it keeps him warm. He walks with a group of men. Hardly anyone says a word. Sometimes the residual humidity in the air forms an icy crust on the uneven parts of the road that crunches under their factory-issue boots. The boots have a thick sole of hard rubber, but even so, the hot asphalt burns right through them and doesn't stop until the end of the shift. Nami takes particular care of his boots; they won't give him a new pair if he ruins these.

All day long he walks behind a truck with hot asphalt flowing out of it. It reminds Nami of the blueberry syrup his grandmother used to make and pour on top of his pancakes. He breathes in the sweet smell of liquid asphalt, until his entire body is steeped in it. He spreads the asphalt with a wooden rake.

He walks home in the dark with a dusting of yellow sulphur on his jacket. Legs and lungs burning, most nights he just collapses onto his bunk, without bathing or even brushing his teeth. The only day he has time for hygiene is on Sundays, when the water is running. Standing under the icy shower, he quickly washes off the week's dirt and, for a while, ceases to smell. Then he borrows a pair of scissors to cut his fingernails and toenails and the hair growing over his ears, and goes into the city. He has no one he could ask, no one to consult. He wouldn't know how to ask. He doesn't know his mother's name or what she looks like. He doesn't even know whether she's alive. He's looking for a woman whose existence is as real as the Spirit of the Lake.

He makes the rounds: the train station snack bar, the stalls at the market, the tearooms, even the more upscale cafés (where he can only look in from the door, from behind the

heavy, gold pleated curtains), searching the faces of women, looking for something he might latch onto. Mostly what he finds is just indifference or smeared mascara. The women either ignore him or wave him off like they were shooing away a pesky fly. What Nami likes best is going to the harbour, where sometimes he runs into people from his neck of the woods, sailors from the oil tankers and fishermen with deep salty wrinkles. He doesn't know how to talk to them, so he just takes a seat at a table next to theirs and drinks Russian tea from a tall glass as he listens in on the men's conversation. They talk about torn nets, withered trees, their moody women, how many of their neighbours have come down with cancer, and, almost always, their visits to the brothel or their plans to go again.

After one night out drinking, they take Nami with them. The Symphony house of pleasure is an even more depressing place than its name suggests. Just inside the door is a sort of reception area with a counter where a fat man in a tracksuit hands out the keys to the rooms while doubling as bartender. Weary girls lounge on grungy divans sprinkled round the room. They don't look much like the ladies in the lingerie catalogues; their thighs are covered in cellulite and bruises, and their chubby bellies poke from beneath their too-short shirts. Moustaches sprout on the upper lips of at least a few of the girls. Cigarettes jut from between their fingers, with long and colourful nails.

Nami casually leans against the counter, trying to act worldly as he looks over the women. Some are clearly old enough to be his mother. He catches the eye of a girl in a powdery dress – she must be the youngest, can't be much older than him. The girl stares back at Nami, but not in a seductive way; the look on her face is weary, pleading. Nami leans over

to the man behind the counter, but just then the music comes on full blast, a brisk Middle Eastern disco song with a wailing singer, drowning out Nami's inquiry about price. He doesn't attempt it a second time. The men toss back one shot after another, and in less than half an hour they're drunk. They start yelling at the prostitutes, who sit on their laps looking bored and annoyed. The girl in the powdery dress wraps her arms around the fat neck of a bald man with the build of a veteran wrestler. Nami can imagine the reek of sweat and cigarettes, he doesn't even need to get near.

Nami orders a bottle of Pepsi-Cola, first time in his life. It costs as much as he earns in a day. The girls drift off with the men to the rooms in back, leaving Nami alone with his Pepsi. He drinks slowly, through a straw, the taste is sweet and delicious. He runs his hand along the chrome edge of the counter, while the receptionist-slash-brothel manager reads the local sports pages. Nami gets up and asks how much it costs to hire a girl. The guy laughs and tells him the basic rates. Nami thanks him politely and thinks to himself, *That's a lot*. He puts on his cap and walks out.

Outside, a car squeals to a stop at the kerb. A man with a cap on his head and a knapsack on his back jumps out and runs away. The driver of the car gets out and chases after him. The knapsack bounces heavily on the man's back as he runs. The driver soon catches up, knocks him to the ground and starts strangling him with one of the straps on the backpack. The two men struggle wordlessly for several moments, then the driver gets up, kicks the man on the ground and walks back to his car. He starts the engine and speeds away. Nami bends over the fallen man and helps him to sit up. The man has a bleeding scratch on his face and is crying.

Back at the dormitory, Nami hurriedly masturbates, then tosses and turns a long time before managing to fall asleep.



© Phaedra Bei

Kallia Papadaki

Δενδρίτες (2015)

Dendrites

Publishing House **Polis**

Biography

Born in 1978 in Didymoteicho, Kallia Papadaki grew up in Thessaloniki and studied economics in the United States, and film at the Stavrakos Film School in Athens. Her third book, the novel *Δενδρίτες (Dendrites, 2015)*, received a Centre national du livre development grant in 2012, was shortlisted for Best Novel (*Anagnostis* magazine) and won a Young Author Award (*Clepsydra* journal). Her short story collection *The Back-Lot Sound* (2009) won the New Writers Award (*Diavazo* journal). In 2011, she was selected to participate in the Scrittura Giovani project at the Mantova, Hay and Berlin literary festivals.

Papadaki works as a professional screenwriter. *September*, her first feature script, won the International Balkan Fund Script Development Award, received a Nipkow scholarship, and premiered at the 48th Karlovy Vary Film Festival.

Synopsis

When Minnie's teenage troublemaker brother goes missing, her Puerto Rican mother dies of sadness. The Campanis family decides to take Minnie in: Susan, the ex-hippy mother; Basil, the second-generation Greek-American stepfather; and Leto, Minnie's classmate.

Adolescents and adults in crisis-ridden 1980s Camden, New Jersey, must deal with hard times, as action gains perspective through flashbacks to previous generations of Greek and other immigrants. Dendrites is a term used to describe a form of snowflake, and like snowflakes, Minnie and Basil, Leto and Susan are unique as they swirl in the air and melt away. This is a novel about wanting to belong; a story about immigration and its quest for a meaningful life; a tale of lost second chances, failed marriages, and broken careers; a book about how big dreams, small gestures, and unspoken words can create minute cracks that bring down walls, buildings and lives. Some cracks come from family history; others from current decisions. There is a crack in everything. But, as Leonard Cohen has said, that's how the light gets in.

Δενδρίτες

Kallia Papadaki

Ο ήλιος δύει νωχελικά πίσω από την πόλη του Κάμντεν, τη στιγμή που η Λητώ παραπατά και σκύβει να δέσει το λυτό της κορδόνι στην άκρη του δρόμου, κι ενώ απέναντί της το σχολικό λεωφορείο του δήμου διασχίζει νοτιοδυτικά τη λεωφόρο με μότο στο σκαρί του τις «ίσες ευκαιρίες στην εκπαίδευση», διατρανώνοντας το δικαίωμα κάθε μαθητή ανεξαρτήτως φυλής, χρώματος και οικονομικής επιφάνειας ν' απολαμβάνει τα ίδια προνόμια στη δημόσια εκπαίδευση, στο παράθυρό του βλέπει γαντζωμένη τη Μίνι, με τις μαυριδερές σγουρές, κουτσουρεμένες κοτσίδες, να κοιτάζει πέρα, πέρα μακριά, προς το ποτάμι του Ντέλαγουερ, και ακόμη πιο πέρα, προς τη Φιλαδέλφεια όπου ζει ο πατέρας της που τους εγκατέλειψε όταν η ίδια ήταν μωρό και δεν τον γνώρισε ποτέ, κι αν έχει μια εικόνα του φυλαγμένη στη μνήμη είναι οι ξεθωριασμένες του μπότες που βρήκε στο πατάρι, νούμερο 48, και τις έκανε γλάστρες, έβαλε χώμα και λίπασμα και φύτεψε μέσα τους τα μωρά φασόλια της για το μάθημα της βοτανολογίας.

Η Μίνι μένει σε μια γειτονιά κακόφημη, με γκριζα πέτρινα σπίτια που 'χουν χάσει το χρώμα τους, ο χρόνος τα 'χει ρημάξει ομοιόμορφα, και μέσα στη διαμοιρασμένη ασχήμια τους υπάρχει αρμονία, δεν σε ξενίζει η εγκαταλειμμένη πέτρα, είναι σαν να τη λάξεψε σοφά ο χρόνος, τα ερείπια κουβαλούν το παρελθόν σχεδόν ευλαβικά, μαρτυρούν την ανθρώπινη φιλοδοξία που τη ματαίωσε ο ρους των γεγονότων, κάτοικοι και ερείπια συνυπάρχουν έχοντας πια αποδεχτεί τη φθορά, και μόνο τα βράδια που νυχτώνει νωρίς, τώρα που 'χει πιάσει να χειμωνιάζει, φοβάται κανείς, τότε που κρύβεται η μιζέρια των

κτιρίων στην πάχνη της σκοτεινιάς και η μορφή τους ανακτά κάτι από την πρότερη αιχμηρή αίγλη της και οι άνθρωποι, για να ξορκίσουν την καλοσύνη της νύχτας που πέφτει σαν βάλαμο πάνω στη ρημαγμένη πέτρα και την καλύπτει, γίνονται τέρατα, μη τυχόν κι ονειρευτούν πως τους άξιζε κάτι καλύτερο και απαρνηθούν τη δύστυχη μοίρα τους. Η Μίνι κατεβαίνει από το λεωφορείο και βάζει τη σάκα της στην πλάτη, χαιρετά μ' ένα βιαστικό κούνημα του χεριού τον μεξικανό της φίλο, τον Μιγκέλ το χταπόδι, τον οδηγό, τυλίγεται στο ελαφρύ της τζάκετ, και με το βλέμμα μπροστά, τρέχει παράλληλα με τον κολπίσκο του Νιούτον που εφάπτεται στο μόργκαν Βίλατζ για να ενωθεί στα δυτικά με το ποτάμι του Ντέλαγουερ, που καταδυναστεύει την πόλη και τη βουλιάζει σε μια παντοτινή θλιβερή υγρασία και στα εποχιακά αιμοβόρα κουνούπια που τρέφονται από τα στάσιμα νερά και τα ανθρώπινα ναυάγια του παραπόταμου Κούπερ.

«Νωρίς ήρθες», την πληροφορεί η μάνα της από το εσωτερικό της κουζίνας και η Μίνι, ξέπνοη, αφήνει τη σχολική σάκα στον διάδρομο του ισόγειου διαμερίσματος και εφορμά στο σαλόνι, παίρνει το τηλεκοντρόλ κι ανοίγει την τηλεόραση, «τζίφος», δεν έχουν δώσει ακόμη ημερομηνία για το πότε θα προβληθεί το επεισόδιο του Ντάλας, πρέπει επιτέλους να μάθει ποιος πυροβόλησε τον Τζέι Αρ, πάνε έξι μήνες από τον περασμένο Μάρτη που το ερώτημα παραμένει αναπάντητο, κοντεύει να μπει ο Νοέμβρης κι ακόμη δεν έχουν εξιχνιάσει την υπόθεση, όλο το καλοκαίρι αναλώθηκε στα ποιος και γιατί, μπήκε Σεπτέμβρης κι αναθάρρησε η Μίνι, ήταν να ξεκινήσει η τηλεοπτική σεζόν, θα έμπαιναν τα πράγματα στη θέση τους, μα για κακή της τύχη οι ηθοποιοί απεργούσαν, κι αυτό επ' αόριστον κι από Σεπτέμβρη είπανε Οκτώβρη, κι από Οκτώβρη Νοέμβρη, κάπου στα μισά, αγανάκτησε ο κόσμος να περιμένει, και για να τον ιντριγκάρουν και να τον κρατήσουν

ζεστό οι παραγωγοί του ΣιμπιΕς έριξαν λάδι στη φωτιά και στην οθόνη των τηλεθεατών παρέλασαν ολιγόλεπτα τρέιλερ με πιθανές εκδοχές για το ποιος ήταν ο παραλίγο δολοφόνος, φούντωσαν ξανά οι συζητήσεις, μα τι κακό κι αυτό, το μισό καστ ήταν δυνάμει δολοφόνοι, κι η Μίνι όλο το καλοκαίρι έβαζε στοίχημα πως τον Τζέι Αρ τον πυροβόλησε η μάνα του η μισ Έλλη, τόσα της είχε κάνει της κακομοίρας, γιατί σαν τον πόνο που δίνουν οι συγγενείς δεν έχει μεγαλύτερο, κι όσο πιο στενοί οι δεσμοί, τόσο πιο βάνουσα σε σημαδεύουν, κι ο Πητ, ο μεγάλος της αδερφός, 3 Σεπτέμβρη ήταν, σήκωσε το αεροβόλο και την πέτυχε στον αριστερό της ώμο κι έβγαλε η Μίνι μια κραυγή, σήκωσε στο πόδι τη γειτονιά, κι εκείνος γελούσε και της ζητούσε συγγνώμη, πως δεν το 'θελε, το 'κανε τάχα κατά λάθος, λάθη γίνονται, ανθρώπινα είναι, και τα όμορφα μάτια της Μίνι είχαν γίνει σαν κουμπότρυπες από τον πόνο, κι από τα δάκρυα που ανάβλυζαν θόλωσαν, και τότε ήξερε στ' αλήθεια πως εκείνη σκότωσε τον Τζέι Αρ.

«Είκοσι μία Νοεμβρίου είπαν θα το δείξουν», η Μίνι στρέφει το κεφάλι για ν' αντικρίσει τη μάνα της να μασουλάει κάτι που μοιάζει με τηγανισμένη μπανάνα και το ονομάζουν πλάτανο στο Σαν Χουάν, η ίδια το σιχαίνεται στη γεύση και την υφή από τότε που της το 'χωσαν πρώτη φορά στο στόμα με το ζόρι, κι ας προσπαθεί να την πείσει η πολύξερη κι αεικίνητη Λουίσα πως είναι χαμηλό σε σάκχαρα και έχει μεγάλη περιεκτικότητα σε κάλιο και καλά θα κάνει ν' αφήσει τις κόνξες και τις ιδιοτροπίες και να συμβιβαστεί με το τι είναι καλό γι' αυτήν, γιατί η γνώση έρχεται αργά για να προφτάσει αυτά για τα οποία η θυγατέρα της θα μετανιώσει, και η Μίνι με την πλάτη γυρισμένη και την τηλεόραση να παίζει, πάνω που ετοιμάζεται να ρωτήσει τι θα φάνε το βράδυ γιατί πεινάει σαν λύκος, νιώθει άξαφνα την ατμόσφαιρα ηλεκτρισμένη, κι όπως το φως ξεπερνά τον ήχο σε ταχύτητα, έτσι και οι λέξεις

έρχονται αμέσως μετά, ξεσπούν σαν μανιασμένες βροντές, «τι πήγες κι έκανες στα μαλλιά σου, πανάθεμά σε;» και σαν να μην έφτανε αυτό, τα λιγδιασμένα από το μαγείρεμα δάχτυλα της Λουίσα τραβούν ό, τι έχει απομείνει από τις κοτσίδες να ξεχειλώσει, λες και το τράβηγμά τους θα επαναφέρει ό, τι έχει πια χαθεί.

Κοντεύει έντεκα το βράδυ κι ο Πητ δεν έχει φανεί, η μητέρα της πηγαινοέρχεται στο σαλόνι και η Μίνι, τυλιγμένη με τη μάλλινη παιδική της κουβέρτα στην άκρη του καναπέ, προσποιείται πως καταπιάνεται με δυσεπίλυτες ασκήσεις μαθηματικών. «Τι ώρα πήγε;» ξαναρωτά η Λουίσα για πολλοστή φορά, και δεν περιμένει ούτε παίρνει απάντηση, «πότε τον είδες τελευταία φορά;» και η Μίνι δίχως να σηκώσει το βλέμμα από το βιβλίο της ψελλίζει, «μαμά, σου είπα, ήρθε στο σχολείο», κι η Λουίσα βγαίνει από το σαλόνι, ανοίγει την εξώπορτα κι ακροβατεί στα λιγιστά τετραγωνικά του πεζοδρομίου, σαν να συλλογίζεται αν πρέπει να διασχίσει τον δρόμο, λες και στο αντίπερα άκρο του κυλάει μανιασμένα ένα απειλητικό ποτάμι, και η ανήσυχη φιγούρα της διαγράφεται αλαφροϊσκιωτη να παραπαίει μέσα από τις δαντελωτές κουρτίνες, κι η σκιά της γιγαντώνεται στους τοίχους κι αιωρείται πάνω από τον καναπέ, πάνω από το κεφάλι της Μίνι, σαν κακό μαντάτο. Είναι τώρα περασμένες δώδεκα, η Λουίσα με τα δυο της χέρια στηρίζει το κεφάλι της στο τραπέζι της κουζίνας, η Μίνι λαγοκοιμάται στον καναπέ, κι ανάμεσά τους κείτεται το τηλέφωνο σιωπηλό, κανείς δεν γνωρίζει τίποτα, οι δυο του κολλητοί βρίσκονται από νωρίς στα σπίτια τους, η αστυνομία δεν έχει κανένα διαφωτιστικό στοιχείο, αν κάτι προκύψει θα ειδοποιήσει να μην ανησυχούν, και το τηλέφωνο στη θέση του, βουβό κι απόκοσμο σαν τις σκέψεις που φτιάχνει με το νου της η Λουίσα κι ονειρεύεται από σπόντα η Μίνι.

Κοντεύει να ξημερώσει και ο Πητ δεν έχει ακόμη φανεί, η Λουίσα παραμένει στην ίδια θέση, κι είναι το σώμα της αποκομμένο βαρίδι που έχασε το ζύγι του, η Μίνι τυλιγμένη στη μάλλινη κουβέρτα κάνει ανήσυχο ύπνο στον καναπέ, κι ο ήλιος μπαίνει διστακτικά από το παράθυρο και φωτίζει όλες τις σκονισμένες γωνίες, τους χτεσινούς ιστούς από τις εργατικές αράχνες, τα ψίχουλα του ψωμιού στο πάτωμα, τη φθορά και την εγκατάλειψη που προκάλεσε μια νύχτα βαθιάς θλίψης, και η Λουίσα σηκώνεται άψυχα από την καρέκλα, ανάβει το μάτι της κουζίνας κι ετοιμάζει με μηχανικές κινήσεις αυγά μάτια με λεπτές λωρίδες μπέικον και φρυγανισμένο ψωμί αλειμμένο με ζάχαρη και μαργαρίνη.

Πίσω της στέκεται η αγουροξυπνημένη Μίνι με τα μαλλιά ανάκατα από τον ύπνο και το στομάχι άδειο να γουργουρίζει από την πείνα, τραβάει την άκρη της ξεθωριασμένης ρόμπας μα δεν παίρνει απάντηση, «μαμά, τι ώρα είναι;» ρωτά χαμηλόφωνα μην την τρομάξει με την παράταιρη απαίτησή της, κι η Λουίσα μοιάζει με φάντασμα, τα παραπανίσια της κιλά δεν αγκαλιάζουν πια το σώμα όπως πρώτα, θα έπαιρνε όρκο κανείς πως τα ρούχα της κρέμασαν μέσα σε μια μονάχα νύχτα και οι στρογγυλεμένοι της ώμοι έγειραν μπροστά κι απόκαμαν, «τι ώρα είναι;» επιμένει η Μίνι, και η Λουίσα σαν υπνωτισμένη ανοίγει τα ντουλάπια, βγάζει τα θαμπά από τη χρήση και τον χρόνο σερβίτσια, «ώρα για πρωινό, ώρα για πρωινό» μονολογεί και στρώνει από συνήθεια το τραπέζι για τρεις.

Τρώνε μαζί την ώρα που τα διπλανά σπίτια είναι ακόμη σκεπασμένα με την πρωινή αχλή κι οι δρόμοι ολόγυρα πεισματικά σιωπούν, σε μισή ώρα όλα θ' αλλάξουν, η Λουίσα το γνωρίζει πως σαν ξημερώσει τίποτα δεν θα 'ναι το ίδιο κι έχει εναποθέσει τις ελπίδες της σ' αυτό το μεσοδιάστημα που οι σκέψεις της σαν σκιές συστέλλονται και διαστέλλονται στον χρόνο, να καλύψουν όσα τετραγωνικά προσμονής της αναλογούν

ακόμη, πριν τη βρουν τα μαντάτα που ψυχανεμίζεται, γιατί ο γιος της είναι μπλεγμένος με συμμορίες και ναρκωτικά, της το 'πανε από την εκκλησία των Βαπτιστών για να τη συνετίσουν και να τη φέρουν στον δρόμο του Κυρίου, και κείνη δυο βδομάδες ταλαντεύτηκε, τι και ποιον ωφελεί να απέχει από τον εκκλησιασμό, να διαφέρει και ν' αντιστέκεται στην προσταγή της τοπικής κοινότητας, μα είναι που μέσα της δεν έχει μείνει πίστη κι ελπίδα για δεύτερες και τρίτες ευκαιρίες που πέφτουν σαν μάννα εξ ουρανού και τρέφουν να χορτάσουν τους χρόνια στερημένους.

Η Μίνι ετοιμάζει την τσάντα της και τρέχει να προλάβει το σχολικό λεωφορείο, η Λουίσα τραβά το σκαμπό της κουζίνας και κάθεται μπροστά στο παράθυρο με την κουρτίνα τραβηγμένη, η Μίνι τρέχει πίσω από το λεωφορείο που επιταχύνει, η Λουίσα αφουγκράζεται την αναπνοή της, ένα σούρσιμο από ετεροχρονισμένα «γιατί, εάν και μήπως», την εγκλωβίζουν στο σώμα της και τη σφυροκοπούν, η Μίνι χάνει από τα μάτια της το λεωφορείο που αναπτύσσει ταχύτητα στη λεωφόρο, και γίνεται μια τόση δα τρεμάμενη κουκκίδα στην άκρη του βαθυκόκκινου ορίζοντα, και η Λουίσα παίρνει ανάσες βαθιές, πιάνει το στήθος και σωριάζεται στο πάτωμα, γιατί η καρδιά δεν θέλει πια να κατοικεί μέσα σ' αυτό το σώμα, και η σφιγμένη της, σηκωμένη γροθιά είναι η απόδειξη της έσχατης κι ατελέσφορης μάχης.

Dendrites

Kallia Papadaki

Translated from Greek by Irene Noel-Baker

The sun sets indolently behind the town of Camden, while Leto trips and bends down to tie her shoelaces at the side of the road, and opposite her the municipal school bus crosses the avenue south west, a motto along its side with “equal opportunities in education,” proclaiming the right of every pupil regardless of race, colour or wealth to enjoy the same privileges of a state education. She sees Minnie’s face glued to the window, her darkish, curly braids cropped short, gazing far, far away, to the Delaware River, and further still towards Philadelphia, where her father lives, who abandoned them when she was a baby, and whom she’s never known, and if there is one image she has kept in her memory it is the worn out boots she found in the attic, size 14, which she made into flower pots, putting in earth and fertiliser and planting bean sprouts, for her botany class.

Minnie lives in a run down neighbourhood, with grey stone houses that have faded, time has worn them down evenly, and in their uniform ugliness there is harmony, the neglected stone does not seem out of place, it’s as if time has wisely sculpted it, the ruins bear the past almost with reverence, witness to a human ambition thwarted with the passage of time, the people and ruins co-exist, having accepted by now the decay, and only in the evenings when night arrives early, now, as winter sets in, is one afraid, when the wretchedness of the buildings is hidden beneath the rimy blackness, and their shapes recover something of their early, piercing glory and

the people – to exorcize the benevolence of a night that falls like balsam on the battered stone and covers it – turn into monsters, lest they dream of deserving something better, and reject their unlucky fate. Minnie gets off the bus and puts her school bag on her back, waves a quick goodbye to her Mexican friend, Miguel the octopus, the driver, and shrugs down into her thin jacket, looking straight ahead, and runs alongside the gulf of Newton adjacent to Morgan Village and joining the Delaware River to the west, where it dominates the town and floods it in eternal, gloomy damp and seasonal blood-sucking mosquitoes, that thrive on the stagnant waters and human shipwrecks of the Cooper tributary.

“You’re early,” her mother informs her from inside the kitchen and Minnie, out of breath, leaves her school bag in the hall of the ground floor flat and goes straight to the living room, picks up the remote and turns on the television, “nothing,” they still haven’t given a date for when they’re showing the next episode of *Dallas*, she needs to find out finally who shot JR, it’s been six months since last March and the question is still left hanging, it’s almost November now and they haven’t solved the mystery, the entire summer was taken over with who did it and why, it turned September and Minnie took heart, the television season was due to begin, everything would be sorted out, but she was unlucky, the actors were on strike, indefinitely, and after September October came and went, and after October November, and somewhere along the line people got tired of waiting, and to keep their viewers interested and eager the producers of CBS threw oil on the flames and put trailers onto TV screens lasting a few seconds each with possible versions of who was almost a murderer, the debates flared up again, and how wicked was that? Half the cast were potential murderers, and all summer Minnie laid

a bet that JR was shot by his mother Miss Ellie, he'd treated her badly enough, the poor thing, because there is no pain greater than what your relatives bring, and the closer the ties, the more brutally they scar you, and Pete, her older brother, it was the 3rd of September, picked up his air rifle and caught her in the left shoulder, and Minnie let out a shriek, roused the entire neighbourhood, and he was laughing and saying sorry, he didn't mean it, he did it by mistake, mistakes happen, it's human, and Minnie's lovely eyes had turned to pinpricks from the pain, and her welling tears had dimmed them, and then she knew for certain that she had shot JR.

"21st of November they said they'd show it," Minnie turns her head and sees her mother chewing something that looks like fried banana and they call it plantain in San Juan, she herself can't stand the taste and feel of it ever since they shoved it into her mouth for the first time, and however much the omniscient and tireless Louisa tries to persuade her it's low in sugars and has a high concentration of potassium, and that she would do better to stop being so stubborn and difficult and adapt to what's good for her, since knowledge arrives too late to prevent the things her daughter will regret, and Minnie with her back turned and the television blaring, about to ask what they're having for dinner because she's as hungry as a wolf, feels the electricity in the room, and as light travels faster than sound, so the words come directly after it, like a thunderclap, "What have you gone and done to your hair, dammit?" and as if that wasn't enough, Louisa's fingers, greasy from cooking, yank at what's left of her braids to undo them, as if pulling them will bring back what's gone.

It's almost 11 at night and Pete hasn't turned up, her mother wanders in and out of the living room and Minnie, wrapped in her old woollen baby blanket at the end of the sofa,

pretends to be caught up in intractable mathematical problems. “What time is it?” asks Louisa for the 100th time, and doesn’t wait for or get a reply, “when did you last see him?” and Minnie without looking up from her book mutters, “Mum, I told you, he was at school today,” and Louisa goes out of the living room, opens the front door and weaves about on the few squares of pavement, as if she is deciding whether to cross the road, as if on its far side a threatening river flows wildly, and her worried figure is faintly delineated, staggering, through the lace curtains, and her shadow grows giant-like on the walls and hovers above the sofa, above Minnie’s head, like a bad omen. It’s now after 12, Louisa sits at the kitchen table with her head in her hands, Minnie catnaps on the sofa, and between them the telephone sits silent, nobody knows anything, his two best friends came home early, the police have nothing enlightening to say, if anything turns up they’ll call, not to worry, and the phone sits in its place, dumb and unearthly like the thoughts conjured up in Louisa’s mind and rebounding in Minnie’s dreams.

It’s nearly daybreak and Pete hasn’t appeared yet, Louisa is still in the same position, her body a dropped weight with its counterweight gone, Minnie wrapped in the woollen blanket sleeps uneasily on the sofa, and the sun hesitantly comes in through the window and lights up all the dusty corners, yesterday’s webs left by busy spiders, the breadcrumbs on the floor, the decay and neglect provoked by a night of deep sorrow, and Louisa gets up listlessly from the chair, turns on the gas ring and mechanically prepares fried eggs with thin slices of bacon and pieces of toast spread with sugar and margarine.

Minnie stands behind her, just woken up, with her hair dishevelled from sleep and her empty stomach rumbling with hunger, she tugs at the edge of the faded dressing gown but

gets no answer, “Mummy, what time is it?” she asks softly not to startle her with unnecessary demands, and Louisa looks like a ghost, her excess weight no longer hugging her body as before, you could swear that overnight her clothes have started to hang off her, and her curved shoulders have slumped forward and given up, “what time is it?” insists Minnie, and Louisa as if hypnotised opens the cupboards, brings out tableware dulled by years of use, “Time for breakfast, time for breakfast,” she says to herself and lays the table for three, out of habit.

They eat together while the neighbouring houses are still obscured by morning mist and the roads around are stubbornly silent, in half an hour everything will change, Louisa knows that by morning nothing will be the same and she rests all her hope on this interval, when her thoughts like shadows contract and expand in time, to cover as large an area of hope as is her due, before she is found out by the bad news she instinctively knows, because her son is mixed up in gangs and drugs, they told her so at the Baptist church to make her see sense, and to bring her to the way of the Lord, and she for two weeks has been wavering as to what and who benefits by her not going to church, and rejecting and resisting the strictures of her local community, but it’s because there is no faith and hope left inside her for second and third chances to fall like manna from heaven and nourish and feed people who’ve been deprived for years.

Minnie packs her bag and runs to catch the school bus, Louisa pulls out the kitchen stool and sits at the window with the curtains open, Minnie runs beside the bus which speeds away, Louisa hears her own breath, a wave of inopportune *whys, ifs* and *maybes*, they trap her in her body and hammer her down, Minnie loses site of the bus which gathers speed down the

avenue, and becomes a tiny trembling dot at the edge of the deep red horizon, and Louisa takes deep breaths, clutches at her breast and crumples to the floor, because her heart no longer wants to live inside this body, and her clenched, raised fist is the evidence of her ultimate and futile battle.



© Ásdís Thoroddsen

Halldóra K. Thoroddsen

Tvöfalt gler (2016)

Double Glazing

Publishing House **Sæmundur**

Biography

Halldóra Thoroddsen was born in 1950 and is a resident of Reykjavík. She graduated from Iceland College of Education in 1976 and from the Iceland Academy of the Arts in 1986. Thoroddsen has worked as a teacher, designed layout for a newspaper, supervised the arts curriculum for elementary schools, and worked as a programme director in radio. She writes poetry, short stories, microfiction and novels. Her first poetry collection, *Hárfinar athugasemdir*, was published in 1998, and was followed in 2002 by a popular collection of microfiction, *90 síni úr minni mínu*. A second collection of poems, *Gangandi vegfarandi*, was published in 2005, the short story collection *Aukaverkanir* in 2006, and her novel *Tvöfalt gler* in 2016. *Tvöfalt gler* (*Double Glazing*) was awarded the Icelandic Women's Literature Prize (Fjöruverðlaunin) in 2016.

Synopsis

Modern life separates generations and isolates both youth and those in old age. The often overlooked passions of old age are captured exquisitely in the novella *Tvöfalt gler* (*Double Glazing*). Death is closing in on an elderly woman in her small apartment; her husband recently passed away, her friends gone, her body failing and her role in society diminished. As she observes the world through her window pane, she feels simultaneously exposed and isolated. A sudden chance of romance swirls up into her lonely existence, filling her with exuberance but also with doubt. Knowing that the love life of the elderly is still a taboo to be frowned upon or even ridiculed, she will have to find strength to go against the norm – to not back down from living life to the fullest, like a fly in autumn still buzzing at the window.

Tvöfalt gler

Halldóra K. Thoroddsen

Sverrir er önnur manngerð en hún hefur heillast af til þessa. Hann er fulltrúi hins venjulega manns. Karla sem henni hafði alltaf fundist of skrautlausir, grunaði þá um skort á ímyndunaraflí. Hún hallast æ meir að hinu tilgerðarlausa. Grunndvallarmanninum. Það er eitthvað göfugt við hann. Ekki svo að skilja að hún sé haldin ranghugmyndum um hinn venjulega mann. Hvar sem hann er að finna. Hann er, líklega vegna einhverrar þróunarvillu, fasisti í grunninn. Hún skynjar það skýrt af bloggsíðum sem hún les stundum. Það er ósköp stutt í hetjudýrkunina. Sennilega vorum við með einn stóran foringja og óhagganlega goggunarröð í kjörlendinu. Ógnarröð sem riðlaðist ekki nema með styrkleikastríði í ættbálknum. Hitt er allt tillært. Siðmenningin myndar gisna slæðu yfir kraumandi kenndunum. Sverrir er siðaður maður, óvenjulega venjulegur. En hann er ekki fauti, hún hefur ekki smekk fyrir fautum.

Hún missti sig einu sinni á fauta. Hann var fagur eins og grískt goð, fór fimum höndum um líkama hennar, brást við hverri snertingu svo úr varð algleymisvíma. Þau áttu fátt annað sameiginlegt. Hann var harmleikjapersóna. Hver bruggaði honum seyðinn? Og hver stýrði svipunni sem hún hlýddi í blindni. Hún man varla eftir sér á þessu niðurlægingartímabili, meðan taumlausar fýsnir sátu við völd. Ári seinna varð hún skyndilega allsgáð og skildi þá ekkert í sér.

Þessi dimmi maður breyttist í óargadýr. Á þeim tímum var auðvelt að verða sér út um eiturlyf. Kannski var sitthvað

af ólgandi listalífi Parísar á þessum árum ættað beint úr apótekunum en nú er þetta flest orðið lyfseðilsskyt. Hann bruddi allt sem linaði kvöl og hlíft gat við óbærilegum hversdegi. Endaði í fullkomnum tryllingi. Og þegar hún hefði samkvæmt öllum siðaboðum átt að hjálpa manningum eftir fall niður af þaki, gat hún það ekki eða vildi ekki. Hún horfði á hann í hjálparleysi og hrærði sig ekki. Engar tilfinningar bærðust með henni, hún var köld sem ís og atburðinn sér hún enn fyrir sér utan frá eins og um einhverja aðra manneskju hafi verið að ræða. Ekki hana. Þetta var aldrei hún.

Sker sig á hnífi, heitt blóð brýst út á hvítt skinnið

Jú þetta var hún. Ill og góð í einu. Hluti þessarar eilífu baráttu sem háð í hverri svitaholu, á milli yfir og allt um kring. Hví skyldi hún ekki taka virkan þátt í þessu villta stuði? Varla var honum Kristi fórnað fyrir einhvern tittlingaskít. Það væri hrein móðgun við guðslambið að fremja ekki alvöru glæpi.

Hún spjallar enn við Guðjón, svona er hún fjöllynd, spyr hvernig honum lítist á stöðuna. Veit hverju hann svarar, Þessi strákur. Hann er náttúrulega rosalega beisikk. Venjulegur læknagæi. Láttu mig þekkja þá. Lokuðust inni í níu ára námi á þeim tíma sem þeir hefðu átt að taka út þroska. Komu heim með þessa einu uppáhaldsplötu frá gelgjuskeiðinu og settu hana á fóninn uppúr því þegar þeir fengu sér í glas”.

„Svona svona, viðraðu fordóma þína annars staðar.”

„Jæja, hafðu þetta eftir þínu höfði, það hefur oft reynst vel.”

Þannig talaði Guðjón gjarnan þegar hann gafst upp fyrir henni. Ekki svo að skilja að hún hafi ráðið öllu. Að hennar mati helgaði hún líf sitt Guðjóni og strákunum.

Líf hennar snerist um að frjóvga hverja stund. Fylla dagana af mikilvægi og söng. Bægja burt vonleysi og doða. Það var

ekki lítið lagt á eina konukind. Var á tímabili farin að anda fyrir allt umhverfi sitt, taldi það skyldu sína. Þar til hún fékk andarteppuna, þá dó hún einhvern veginn sjálfri sér um hríð, sagði engum frá því. Hætti öllu um skeið og viti menn, það tók enginn eftir andlátinu. Allt gekk sinn vanagang.

Greniilmur, annar glugginn heiðinn, hinn kristinn

Hreiðurgerð, hvenær er henni lokið? Þau hafa augastað á ellihúsi í Vesturbænum. Sækja um kaupleiguíbúð með aðgangi að þjónustu, ætla að hreiðra um sig í furðulandi ellinnar, þar sem erillinn er útmáður og allt gengur varlega fyrir sig. En það er stutt í bæinn og þau geta tekið á móti gestum. Þau völdu sér Vesturbæinn eftir strangar samningaviðræður. Hún hefði heldur viljað kaupa íbúð í Lindargötuheimilinu en Sverrir er gamall Vesturbæingur og getur ekki gleymt því.

Hús fullt af gömlu fólki gengur þvert á fegurðarskyn hennar. Hugmyndin er leiðinlegri en kvenna- og karlklúbbar, leiðinlegri en barnaheimili. Af hverju höfum við sammælst um að hafa þetta svona leiðinlegt? Blinduð af draumsýn, þar til afskræmingin blasir við. Alltaf of sein til að höndla fegurðina sem gægist fram úr hverri glufu. Það tekur Sverri langan tíma að sannfæra hana um raunsæið sem í þessu felst. Í þeirra stöðu geti hjálparleysið tekið yfir með engum fyrirvara. Veruleikinn blasi við, þetta sé bara spurning um tíma.

Meira að segja kettirnir renna til á svellbunkunum

Símon vinur hennar bregst ævareiður við fréttinni um elliíbúðina. Hringir margsinnis frá París. Segist hafa séð þetta fyrir, frá því að hann sá Sverri fyrst. Innst inni hafi hann greint kviksetningarperra. Hún er lengi að róa Símon og skynjar varnarviðbrögð hans gagnvart eigin umkomuleysi.

Biðsalur dauðans er bjartur og fagur. Í skoðunarferð um ellihúsið spjalla þau við nokkra íbúa. Símon hafði fullyrt að væg hlandlykt svifi þar yfir vötnum en þau eru blessunarlega varin af skynjunarskortri ellinnar. Þeim líst vel á og hlakka til. Úr einni íbúð hljómar tónlist. Það er ekki um að villast „Return to sender” með Elvis Presley. Ný kynslóð er sest að á elliheimilinu., „Blessuð sértu sveitin mín” á nú í vök að verjast. Þau skipuleggja framtíðina eins og ástfangnir unglingar. Liti á veggi, gluggatjöld.

Sólskinstundir í febrúarmánuði: tvær klukkustundir, hún eyðir þeim í Tryggingarstofnuninni

Raupið er allsráðandi, það er sammerkt með þeim íbúum sem þau spjalla við. Hvað kemur yfir fólk á þessum aldri? Skyldi hún vera orðin svona? Hún reynir að gæta sín á grobbinu, því hún hefur merkt þetta hjá gamalmönnum. Meira að segja pabbi hennar sem hafði næman smekk, datt í grobbið undir lokin. Þau raupa af heilsuhreysti, úthaldi og unnum hetjudáðum. „Ekki hefði maður vílað þetta fyrir sér forðum.” „Hvað sýnist þér ég vera gamall?” Karlarnir eru verri, fallið er hærra hjá þeim. Þau minna hana á yngstu börnin sem hún kenndi. Þegar þau byrja í skóla, áður en þau læra að fela. „Sjáðu mig,” „sjáðu mig,” hljómar úr hverju horni og kennarinn á fullt í fangi með að svara, „ég sé þig, þú ert þarna í fullum rétti. Þú ert til.” Svona æpum við vísast alla ævi, sjáðu mig, sjáðu mig, sjáðu mig.

Víst veit hún það. Geld ást sem ekkert frjóvgar nema sjálfa sig hefur aldrei verið vel séð. Við heimtum tilgang í gjörðir okkar, höldum okkur heljargreipum í skiljanlegan söguþráð. Hræðumst það sem hnökrar hann. Þráðinn um okkur í samhenginu, sem er löngu orðinn farsí. Ástir gamalmenna eru ekki heilbrigðar hjónabandsástir sem miða

að uppfyllingu jarðarinnar. Slíkar ástir tengjast heldur ekki estetík og hyllingu holdlegra nautna í hugum fólks, þvert á móti þykja þær heldur ókræsilegar þegar glær ellin á í hlut. Sjálfst ímyndunaraflið verður feimið við hugmyndina um krumpuð og þurr gamalmenni að riðlast hvort á öðru með aðstoð sleipiefna. Kynlíf er það eina sem því dettur í hug, enda andsetið af þessari einu hugmynd um brautir á milli manna. Erfingjar verða órólegir. Ástfangnir gamlingjar eiga það til að eyða í lystisemdir og gleyma höfuðskyldu sinni í genabaráttunni að tryggja kyni sínu framgang.

Æður, sendlingur og tjaldur, brimandi erótík í fjörunni á Eiðisgranda

Kristín úr hjónaklúbbnum, sú goðumlíka, rís upp úr kör sinni til þess að vara hana við. Hún hefur aldrei áður haft samband að fyrra bragði. Maðurinn sé áreiðanlega besti maður og hún samgleðjist henni innilega. En hún sé bara persónulega ekkert fyrir svona samkrull á gamals aldri. Sjálf hafi hún hafnað ótal biðlum. Hún vilji umfram allt varðveita sjálfstæði sitt. Þær eru gegnsæjar ástríðurnar hennar Kristínar. „Ég er ekki svona manneskja,” segir hún og kemur upp um sig í afneituninni.

Fólk kemur yfirleitt þannig upp um sig. Þetta hefur hún oft greint þegar hún hlustar eftir því í heita pottinum í Sundhöllinni. Það er gjarnan andstæða þess sem það heldur fram um sig. Það eru afar fáir að reyna að segja sannleikann um sjálfan sig heldur að leyna svívirðunni sem gín við: augljósum göllum sínum. Hver segist vera öfundsjúkur. Ekki hún Kristín.

Sýnir af sér fullkomið kæruleysi, fer í rauða kjólinn

Það kemur uppúr dúrnum að Sverrir er ekki ekkjumaður eins og hún hélt, heldur fráskilinn. „Það bara kláraðist,” er það eina sem hann vill um það segja. Hann segir að konan sé

besta manneskja en dálítið ósjálfstæð og lítil í sér, hafi alltaf þurft mikla hjálp.

„Hvernig þá” spyr hún, „er hún barnsleg?”

„Kannski dálítið. Ég heillaðist af hjálparleysinu forðum og fegurðinni.”

„Og hvar er hún?”

„Í Ameríku.”

Sverrir flytur inn til hennar á meðan þau bíða eftir íbúðinni. Ást þeirra er laus við ýmsa kvilla, valdabaráttan er víðs fjarri. Það væri hægt að búa hana til en þau skortir til þess ástríðu. Samvinnan gerir þeim kleift að segja söguna um hvert verk, til þess þarf að minnsta kosti tvo. Þegar útvarpið segir þeim frá verðfalli hlutabréfa á fjármálamörkuðum heims, talar hún ekki bara við sjálfa sig og tækið heldur við Sverri. „Þá er nú gott að eiga ekki of mikið af þessu,” segir hún, „þeir reyndu ekki svo lítið að selja mér þessa snepla sína, langaði í ellilaunin mín.” Þau leggja sig fram, æfa takt og samhljóm. Hvort elskar hitt meira og sú valdastaða sem af því hlýst er hálfvegis út í hött í þeirra samkeppnisumhverfi.

Klukkurnar í Hallgrímskirkjuturni spila laglínu, alltaf jafn falska

Forstjóri ellihússins segir þeim að það verði í mesta lagi árs bið, það sé svo mikil umsetning hjá þeim. Þau kíma bæði við orðalagið en forstjórinn sem er kona um fimmtugt virðist halda að það feli staðreyndir lífsins. Það er eins og allt þjóðfélagið sé á flóttu undan þessu óþægilega orði. Enda höfum við afmarkað dauðanum bás utan alfararleiðar.

Double Glazing

Halldóra K. Thoroddsen

Translated from Icelandic by Philip Roughton

This story deals with, among other things, the gap between generations in our society and the isolation of both youth and old age. The main character is a 78-year-old widow. She has fallen in love with a man named Sverrir, and they are planning to move together into an apartment in a retirement home. In this excerpt, the widow ponders old, disturbing memories, makes up a conversation with her late husband about her new fiancé, and then goes with Sverrir to take a look at the retirement home where they are planning to move.

Sverrir is a different type of man than she's normally been attracted to. He's representative of the ordinary man. Of men she'd always found too unadorned, suspected of lacking imagination. Now she finds herself ever more inclined towards unpretentiousness. The fundamental man. Who has something noble about him. Not that she has any delusions about the ordinary man. Wherever he's to be found. He is, probably due to some evolutionary mistake, basically a fascist. She senses this clearly in the blogs that she occasionally reads. Hero worship is never far off. We probably had one big chief and an unwavering pecking order in our primal habitat. A repressive order that never became disorganized except through intratribal battles for dominance. The rest is learned. Civilization forms a thin veil over these simmering instincts. Sverrir is a civilized man, unusually ordinary. He's no brute; she has no taste for brutes.

She lost herself to a brute once. He was as beautiful as a Greek god, ran nimble hands over her body, each touch sparking a dizzying euphoria. They had little else in common. He was a

character in a tragedy. Who concocted his potion? And who wielded the whip that she obeyed blindly? She barely remembers herself in that period of humiliation, when unrestrained lusts reigned. A year later she suddenly sobered up, and could barely understand what she'd been up to.

That murky man turned into a wild beast. In those days, it was easy to score drugs. Maybe something of the swirling artistic life in Paris in those years was derived directly from the pharmacies, but now most of it requires a prescription. He swallowed anything that eased pain and could protect against unbearable mundanity. Which ended in perfect madness. And when she, according to all moral standards, should have helped the man after his fall from a roof, she could not or would not. She stared at him in his helplessness and didn't budge. No feelings stirred within her, she was as cold as ice and still envisions that incident from the outside, as if it involved an entirely different person. Not her. It was never her.

Cuts herself with a knife, warm blood breaks out onto the white skin

Yes, it was her. Bad and good at the same time. A part of the eternal battle waged in every pore, between above and all around. Why shouldn't she take an enthusiastic part in that wild party? Christ was hardly sacrificed for peanuts. It would be a blatant insult to the Lamb not to commit real crimes.

She still chats with Guðjón – promiscuous as she is – asks him what he thinks of the situation. Knows his answer: “That guy. He's really basic, of course. A regular doctor dude. I know the type. Got locked into nine years of study at a time when they should have been doing some maturing. Came home with that one favorite album of theirs from adolescence and put it on the record player every time they drank.”

“Easy there, you can air your prejudices elsewhere.”

“Fine, suit yourself, we know how well that always works out.”

This is how Guðjón usually spoke when he yielded to her. Not to say that she controlled everything. In her opinion, she devoted her life to Guðjón and the boys.

Her life was about making every moment fertile. Filling the days with importance and song. Fending off despair and numbness. Which was no small thing for one little woman. For a certain period, she did the breathing for all of her surroundings, considered it her duty. Until she could no longer breathe, and then died to herself for a while, without telling anyone. Quit everything for some time, and sure enough, no one noticed her death. Everything went on as usual.

A fragrance of evergreens, one window pagan, the other Christian

Nesting, when is it finished? They have their eyes on a retirement home in the west side of Reykjavík. Apply to lease an apartment with access to facilities, intending to settle down in the wonderland of old age, with all the hustle and bustle stilled and everything proceeding cautiously. But it's a short distance downtown, and they can have guests. They chose the west side after tough negotiations. She would have preferred to buy an apartment at the home on Lindargata, but Sverrir grew up on the west side and can't forget it.

A house full of old people is completely contrary to her aesthetic sense. It's a duller idea than women's and men's clubs, duller than day nurseries. Why have we agreed to such dullness? Blinded by a dream, until the distortion comes into full view. Always too late to catch the beauty that peeks out of every chink. It takes Sverrir a long time to convince her of

the reality implicit in this. In their position, helplessness can take over without warning. The reality is apparent; it's simply a matter of time.

Even cats slide on the ice

Her friend Simon is livid at the news of the retirement home. Calls repeatedly from Paris. Says that he saw this coming, ever since he first set eyes on Sverrir. He'd perceived that, deep down, the man had a fetish for being buried alive. It takes her a long time to calm Simon down, and she senses his defensive response to his own forsakenness.

This waiting room of death is bright and beautiful. On a tour of the retirement home, they chat with several residents. Simon had insisted that a faint smell of urine lingered over the place but, luckily, they're protected by the diminishment of the senses in old age. They like it and look forward to it. Music drifts from one apartment. There's no mistaking 'Return to Sender' by Elvis Presley. A new generation has settled in the retirement home. 'Bless You, My Countryside' is in a tight spot now. They arrange their future like teenagers in love. The colours on the walls, the curtains.

Sunny moments in February: two hours, she spends them at the Insurance Agency

The bragging is ubiquitous; it's common to the residents they chat with. What comes over people at this age? Is she like that now? She tries to beware of boasting, because she's certainly noticed it in old people. Even her father, who had good taste, fell into boasting towards the end. They brag about their good health, their stamina, and their achievements. "I would have dealt with this just like that back in the day." "How old do you think I am?" The men are worse; the downfall is more drastic for them. They remind her of the youngest children

she taught. When they start school, before they learn to hide. “Look at me,” “look at me,” sounds from every corner, and the teacher has her hands full answering: “I see you, you’re there in your full right. You exist.” I’m sure we shout this all our lives, look at me, look at me, look at me.

Of course she knows this. Castrated love that fertilizes nothing but itself has never been appropriate. We demand purpose in our deeds, we cling to a comprehensible plot. Fear anything that forms burls in it. The plot about us in context, which has long been a farce. Love between old people isn’t healthy-marriage love, whose aim is to fill the earth. Nor do people connect such love with the aesthetic or the celebration of physical pleasures; on the contrary, it’s considered unappetizing when see-through old age is involved. Imagination itself shies at the idea of crinkled and dry old people humping each other with the aid of lubricants. Sex is the only thing that comes to their minds, possessed as they are by that one idea concerning connections between people. Heirs become uneasy. Old-timers in love tend to spend money on luxuries and forget their primary obligation to the struggle to ensure the continuance of their genes.

Eider, purple sandpiper and oystercatcher, churning eroticism at the seashore on Eiðisgrandi

Kristín from the Couples’ Club, that benevolent woman, rises from her bedridden state to warn her. She has never before contacted her of her own accord. He’s probably the best of men and she’s sincerely happy for her. Personally, however, she has little interest in this sort of mingling in old age. She herself has rejected numerous suitors. Above all, she wants to maintain her independence. They’re transparent, Kristín’s passions. “I’m not that kind of person,” she says, exposing herself in her denial.

That's how people typically expose themselves. She has often discerned the same while listening to others in the hot tub at the Reykjavík Swimming Hall. They're usually the opposite of what they claim to be. There are very few who try to tell the truth about themselves; instead, they try to conceal the looming disgrace: their obvious flaws. Who admits to being envious? Not Kristín.

Displaying perfect carelessness, she puts on the red dress

It turns out that Sverrir is not a widower as she thought, but divorced. "It just ended," is all he would say about it. He says that his ex-wife is the best of persons, despite being a bit clingy and fragile; she always needed a lot of help.

"How so," she asks, "is she childish?"

"Maybe a little. I found her helplessness and beauty attractive back in the day."

"And where is she?"

"In America."

Sverrir moves in with her while they're waiting for the apartment. Their love is free of various defects; there's no trace of a power struggle. It would be possible to create one, but they lack the passion. Cooperation makes it possible for them to tell the story behind each task, and that requires at least two. When the radio informs them of falling stock prices in the world's financial markets, she doesn't simply talk to herself and the device, but to Sverrir. "Then it's good not to have too many of those," she says, "they tried quite hard to sell me those scraps of paper of theirs, wanting to get their hands on my retirement pay." They put in a lot of effort, practice rhythm and harmony. Which one loves the other more and the dominant position that this can create is more or less absurd in their competitive environment.

*The bells in the tower of Hallgrímskirkja church play a melody,
as out of tune as ever*

The director of the retirement home, a woman of around 50, informs them that they'll have to wait a year at most – they have such a quick turnover. They both smile indulgently at the director's phrasing, as if she seems to think that it conceals the facts of life. It's as if all of society is on the run from that uncomfortable word. We've even marked out a stall for death off the beaten track.



© Kristaps Kalns

Osvalds Zebris

Gaiļu kalna ēnā (2014)

In the Shadow of Rooster Hill

Publishing House **Dienas grāmata**

Biography

Osvalds Zebris, born in 1975, is a Latvian writer and journalist, holding a master's degree in economics. Zebris has worked in public relations and communications for Hill+Knowlton and McCann, and as an editor for various newspapers and magazines. He is also the author of three novels. Zebris' first book, a collection of short stories entitled *Brīvība tīklos* brought him instant popularity among readers and won him a Latvian Literature Award in 2010 for the best debut. *Gaiļu kalna ēnā* (*In the Shadow of Rooster Hill*, nominated for the Latvian Literature Award in 2015) was written and published for the historical novel series, *We. Latvia. The 20th Century*, focusing on the Latvian experience during 1905 in the Russian Empire. The novel *Koka nama ļaudis* tells the story of a strange wooden house in one of the oldest neighbourhoods of Riga. The wooden house is a breathing character in the story, influencing people living in it and initiating various mysteries. Zebris is a member of the Latvian Writers' Union.

Synopsis

It is 1905 in Riga – the Russian Tsar is slowly losing power over his vast empire, and the city is being rocked by worker riots, violence and pogroms. Revolution is in the air. Pitting brother against brother, the chaos forces people to choose a side. Among this upheaval, a former schoolteacher becomes involved in the revolution, but soon realizes that war will take much more than he is willing to give. The following year, a dramatic kidnapping of three children has Riga's police on edge. Who did it? What was their motive? The answer will shatter the lives of two families, as they struggle to understand who is guilty in a revolution where all sides are victims. Osvalds Zebris weaves a powerful tale of a country's desire to become free against the backdrop of the 1905 Revolution in Tsarist Russia, an event that gave birth to some of the most dramatic events in the 20th century.

Gaiļu kalna ēnā

Osvalds Zebris

Pirmā diena: pestīšana

Salīcis, drukns vecis platiem soļiem snāj no Dinaburgas sliežu ceļa¹ puses. Palielo galvu nošķiebis, smagi un nevienādi elsdams, viņš šķērso krāšņo jaunās stacijas laukumu, tad ielu – ciets, daudzu gājēju pieblīvēts sniegs čīkst zem brūno puszābaku zolēm. Vīrs apstājas, paceļ nogurušās un dziļi iekritušās acis uz pēcpusdienas krēslā mirdzošajiem *Bellevue* viesnīcas² logiem un, galvu nodūris, turpina steidzīgo gājieni pa Marijas ielu. Dažas spītīgas brūnu matu sprogas laužas ārā pie cepures maliņas, tās šūpojas gājēja satraukto soļu ritmā, biežās ūsas no ātrās elpas padegunē sasalušas. Uz Elizabetes un Suvorova ielas³ stūra pulciņos drūzmējas cilvēki, daži bezrūpīgi smejas, citi rimti izgriežas no Vērmaņa parka; vairāk dzird vīriešu balsis – dāmas salā ierāvušās kažokādās un mēteļu apkaklēs. Pirmsziemassvētku noskaņa ir jūtama Rīgā arī šogad, lai gan daudzos aizvien vēl mājo drūmas domas – rūgtums, ko nesis aizejošais 1906. gads, kā etiķi sagājis vīns ļaužu cerības apvēršis dziļā vilšanās sajūtā. Šodienas *Balss* raksta: “Tik daudz ienaida, posta un drūmu, draudošu mākoņu visā mūsu apkārtnē, ka negribas ticēt nekādai priecās vēstij. Un arī no nākotnes mums nespīd pretim nekāds cerības stars.”

1 1860. gadā, pēc Rīgas–Dinaburgas dzelzceļa izbūves, ierīkoja arī šā dzelzceļa galapunktu Rīgā. Toreizējā nelielā divstāvu mūra ēka ar diviem peroniem bija Rīgas Centrālās dzelzceļa stacijas priekštece.

2 Tagad Raiņa bulvāra un Marijas ielas stūris.

3 Tagad Krišjāņa Barona iela.

Šķērsojis Aleksandra bulvāri, iebraucējs apstājas pie pazemas sētiņas, kas apņēm pareizticīgo katedrāles varenos sānus, un vēro Ziemassvētku tirdziņa kņadu Esplanādes laukumā. Viņa apģērbs ir par plānu, uz vakaru sals kļūst aizvien bargāks, nācējs nodreb un pārlaiž uzmanīgu skatu ļaužu pulciņiem plašajā tirgus placī. Iegājis pa pavērtajiem vārtiņiem, viņš paraugās pa labi uz zvanu torni un, krustu nepārmetis, kā ēna aizslid gar katedrāles sienu. No spoži izgaismotās jarmarkas puses viņu neredz – vīrieša tumšais stāvs ir teju izzudis vienā no katedrāles sānu nišām. Vairāki pajūgi nupat jau atkal pietur, kungi pasniedz cimdotas rokas dāmām, izceļ no kamanām dažāda vecuma bērņeļus, tie skriešiem metas uz izrotātās egles un saldumu galdu pusi. Mazie spridzīgi smejas, spieto ap smaržīgajām vafelēm un ar spožām lentēm izrotātajām būdām, kur elektrisko spuldžu gaismā mirdz rotaļu lāču un leļļu melnās acis. Uzzibsnī arī ārpus gaismas loka stāvošā veča skatiens, tas cieši pavada atnācējus līdz pat nomaļākai pārdotavai, kur tie pie laimes akas sastopas vēl ar kādiem. Vērīgās acis pamana krietni apdilušu savulaik sarkanīgu koka zirgu un maza auguma karuseļa vīru, kurš, sagaidījis divus pēdējos pasažierus, sāk lēnu riņķa gājienu, tad pieliek soli, meitene skanīgi iesmejas, sīks cimdiņš māj, zirgi uzņem ātrumu, večuka velteņi pāriet vieglā skrējienā.

Vērotājs skaita minūtes, saliec un atliec pelēkajos dūraiņos sastingušos pirkstus, aptausta naudas aploksni iekškabatā un pamana vēl kādu bērnu. Puikam ir gadi seši septiņi, mazā roka uz karuseļa pusi velk garā, melnā mētelī tērptu kungu, kura apgārotajā, bālajā sejā jūtama atturīga nepatika pret skaļo kņadu cilvēku pārpilnajā placī. Ap viņa plānajām lūpām paceļas viegla elpas migliņa, veča lūpas atkārtoti elegantā kunga lūpu kustības: “Bet tikai īsu brīdi, Paulīt.”

Virš Rīgas turpina vilkties tumšzila krēsla, un pilsētai raksturīgie trokšņi decembra debesu klusumā izceļas tikpat asi, kā spoži izgaismotā Esplanāde gail aklajā nakts acs dobumā. “Bērni. Ziemassvētkos... tikai daži laimīgi mazie,” viņš čukst, dziļajā nišā ierāvies, vērotāju sakrata dobjš un sauss kāss, viņš nedaudz pieliecas un vēlreiz pārbauda iekškabatu – viss ir savā vietā. Nomierinājies tas atkal atgriežas pie gaismās mirguļojošā laukuma, piemiegtās acis atrod karuseli un eleganto kungu, kurš tobrīd ieinteresēti vēro trūcīgi, bet silti ģērbtu jaunkundzi ar pagalam nemierīgu zēnu pie rokas. Sieviete izliekas kungu nemanām, mazais izraujas no kalsnās rokas un droši diebj uz smieklu zvaniņu, izsaucienu un ņirbošu roku mājienu pusi. Puskrēslā stāvošais vīrietis ar prieku atskārš, ka šovakar ir pamatīgi vērīgs, nogurušās acis gluži vai ieguvušās spēju attēlu palielināt, līdz sīkām detaļām sasmalcināt. Viņš pārlaiž cimdu smaidā atplaukušajai mutei, tad augšup, garām paltajam degunam, acīm, pierai, paceļ jēreni augstāk un atspiežas pret baznīcas akmeņiem. Spējš atvieglotums, ilgi gaidītā pestīšana – vaina paliks tepat cietajā sniegā, taps iemīta līdz pat pavasarim, kad pēcpusdienas saulē tā izzudīs pavisam. Beidzot viss noskaidrots, ilgas šaubu mokas atkāpušās, viņš atkal ir drošs par sevi un nu ir gatavs tikties ar savu vajātāju. Piepeši smaidā iesilušās acis sastingst, tumšās skropstas tikko manāmi notrīs, viņš aiztur elpu, kļūst bālāks, platie arāju dzimtas pleci sakrītas.

– Mamm, tu? – vecis atraujas no sienas, pa sānu vārtniņiem iziet laukumā un, meiteni cieši vērodams, itin kā pret savu gribu tuvojas karuselīm.

– Eu, raugi, kur sprendzies, – kāds viņam uzsauc, platais cilvēks no pustumsas spraucas cauri kņadai, garām kļiņģeru apaļajiem sāniem, kūpošām glāzēm un resnai, spiedzīgi smejošai jaunuvei, kas rāda uz viņu ar salā pietūkušu, sarkanu

pirkstu. Kāds viegli parausta plecus, cits pasmaida sirmā bārdā, sak, cilvēks ir un paliek ērms, ķēms no zvēra, bet citam pat šāda sīka pagrūstīšanās ievēl dziļas rievās šaurajā pierē – kauns, plītnieki pašā Rīgas sirdī, tādā svētā laikā. Bet, kamēr pilsēta ievēl plaušās dzestro gaisu, pamet rotaļīgu skatienu augšup spožajās zvaigznēs, piemin izsmēķi vai noglāsta jauniegūtas draudzenes mēteļmuguru, vecis platiem soļiem tuvojas karuselim. Viņš apmet loku, iebrien nelielā kupenā smaidošo zirdziņu ēnas pusē un pastiepj spēcīgās rokas. Karuselis griežas lēni, un viņš saudzīgi noceļ bērnus vienu pēc otra. Vispirms mazais Paulītis, tad nadzīgais rezgalis un visbeidzot – viņa. Spēcīgās rokas nodreb, mammas siltās acis izbrīnā viņu uzlūko, bet lūpas nepaspēj izdvest ne skaņas. Spalgi iekliegties pagūst tikai vidējais puika, taču karuseļa otrā pusē spiedienu neviens nesadzird. Sieviete iespējami strupi rauga atcirst melnajā mētelī tērptajam švītīgajam kungam, kuram pēkšņi šis vakara izgājiens rādās noslēpumu pilns, īsti nesaprotami, acumirkļi neaptverami daudzsološs.

– Paulīti, mēs tūliņ iesim pie tētas, tūliņ es jums... – vecis aizelšas, viņš abus puikas paņēmis pie vienas rokas, pie otras meitene. Mudīgi rauj bērnus pāri Totlēbena bulvārim,⁴ pagriežas pa labi, un brīdī, kad no laukuma atskan vakara murdoņai neraksturīgi saucieni, savādā četrrotne jau nogriežas uz Nikolaja ielu,⁵ tad vēlreiz pa kreisi un pa Troņmantnieka bulvāri⁶ mēro labu gabalu pretējā virzienā – līdz pat novakares krēslā grimstošajam Bastejkalnam. Paulītis iešņukstas, otrs puika sparīgi rausta roku, meitene atgriež mazo galvu atpakaļ:

4 Tagad Kalpaka bulvāris.

5 Tagad Krišjāņa Valdemāra iela.

6 Tagad Raiņa bulvāris.

– Ū, uz šejieni, palīgā, – viņa sauc aizvilkdamās, taču smalkā balss izplēn pilsētas sirdspukstos, balsīs, važoņu izsaucienos, slāpētos smieklos. Pirms svētkiem ļaudis steidz noslēgt ilgi atliktus rēķinus un darījumus, satīties uz īsu sarunu, lai tad varētu mierīgu sirdi nodoties Ziemassvētku rosībai.

Savādais svešinieks nervozi iesmejas, velk mazos uz priekšu, vēlreiz pa kreisi, uz Aleksandra bulvāri, un tad jau viņi nonāk pie spoži izgaismotās *Imperiāla* viesnīcas⁷ sāniem. Pie augstajām divviru durvīm stāv šveicars tumši zilā tērpā, zeltītajās pogās atspīd dzeltenīga elektrisko spuldžu gaisma, ko greznais nams vēlīgi izlej no platajiem vestibila logiem. Meitenei – viņu sauc Laimdota – šķiet, ka durvju uzraugs tūliņ ņems nejauko veci aiz krāgas, sauks pēc gorodovoja un viņa būs glābta, taču šveicars steidzas pie nule piebraukušām kamanām, lai paņemtu brūnā papīrā iesaiņotas pakas un pasniegtu baltu cimdu lapsu astēs dziļi iegrimušai dāmai. Vecis raujas iekšā pa platajām divviru durvīm, viņi pieklūp pie viesnīcnieka galda; pa labi dzird biljarda bumbu paukšķus, uzvēdī cigāru un cepta ēdiena smarža – puspagrabā iekārtojies restorāns, viena no Rīgas greznākajām izklaides rotām. Vakaros te ņirb apaļi zelta desmitnieki un papīra divdesmitpiecnieki – šo vietu iecienījuši pirmie tikko pie rocības tikušie latvieši, kuriem gribas aizgūtnēm tērēt, rādīt zobus vāciešiem un krieviem.

7 Ēka Brīvības bulvārī 21.

In the Shadow of Rooster Hill

Osvalds Zebris

Translated from Latvian by Jayde Thomas Will

The First Day: Redemption

A stooping, thickset old man strode with wide steps from the side of the Dvinsk railway track. His somewhat large head bent downwards, panting heavily and irregularly, he crossed the splendid square of the new station, then the street – the hard snow, packed down by the many passers-by, crunched under the soles of his brown boots. The man stopped, raised his tired and sunken eyes toward the windows of the Bellevue Hotel glittering in the afternoon twilight and, with his head lowered, continued his hurried walk along Maria Street. A few spiteful locks of brown hair pushed out from under the edges of his hat, they rocked to the rhythm of his nervous step, his thick moustache frozen under his nose. People in groups thronged the area where Elizabeth Street and Suvarov Street met, some laughing in a carefree manner, while others were tranquilly leaving Vērmāne Park; one could hear more men's voices than those of the ladies, who were wrapped up in their furs with their coat collars pulled up against the cold. The mood before Christmas could be felt in Riga this year as well, even though gloomy thoughts still dwelt in many – a bitterness that was brought by the last days of 1906, like wine that has turned into vinegar, with peoples' hopes having turned into a deep feeling of disillusionment. Today's issue of the daily newspaper *The Voice* read: "So much hatred, misery and bleak, ominous clouds all around, that no one can ever

believe in good news. And we have no ray of hope shining upon us from the future.”

Crossing Alexander Boulevard, the old man stopped near a low-lying fence that encircled the impressive walls of the Orthodox cathedral and watched the bustle of the Christmas market on Esplanade Square. His clothing was too thin, and as evening approached the cold became ever more severe; he was shivering and quickly scanning the crowds of people in the broad market square. After going through the gates that were slightly open, he looked to the right to the bell tower and, without making the sign of the cross, slid along the cathedral wall like a shadow. He wasn't seen from the side of the brightly lit-up annual market – the man's dark figure had almost vanished in one of the cathedral's wall naves. Several carts had already stopped again, the gentlemen offered their gloved hands to the ladies, and lifted children of various ages from the sleigh. The children rushed off in the direction of the dolled-up Christmas tree and tables laden with candy. The little ones laughed cheerfully, and swarmed around the sweet-smelling waffles and huts decorated with shiny ribbons where the black eyes of teddy bears and dolls twinkled in the glow of the electric bulbs. The old man's stagnant eyes also lit up for a moment, they closely followed those who had come to the shop that was farthest away, where they met at the well of fortune to fish out prizes with a few others. His observant eyes discerned a shabby, faded red wooden horse and a man of short stature in charge of the carousel who began to walk slowly in a circle while waiting for the last two passengers. Afterwards, he walked faster, a small girl burst out laughing, a small glove beckoned, the horses gathered speed, and the old man's felt boots broke into a light trot.

The observer counted the minutes, clenched and flexed his fingers frozen numb in the grey mittens, felt an envelope with money in his inside pocket and then noticed another child. The boy was six or seven years of age, his small hand pulling a man dressed in a long black coat to the carousel. The man's enlightened, pale face showed a restrained dislike of being in a square filled with the loud din of people. The light fog of breath rose up around his thin lips, and the lips of the old man repeated the movement of the elegant gentleman's lips: "But just for a short moment, Pauls."

A dark blue twilight continued to drag itself above Riga, and the characteristic noise of the city in the silent clouds of December stood out so sharply, like the brightly-lit Esplanade glowing in the blind eye socket of the night. "Children. At Christmas... only a few happy little ones," he whispered to himself, shrinking into the deep nave. A deep, dry cough shook him as he bent over slightly and once again checked his inside pocket – everything was in its place. Having calmed himself, the old man once again focused on the square glimmering in the light, his squinting eyes finding the carousel and the elegant gentleman, who at that moment was observing with interest a young woman who was dressed poorly, but warmly, with a fidgety boy holding her hand. The woman pretended she did not notice the man, the boy broke away from her thin hand and bravely ran toward the laughter, bells, shouting, and flickering gestures of hands. The man standing in the twilight realized with pleasure that tonight he was very alert, his tired eyes almost gained the ability to zoom in, to reduce the scene to the finest details. He passed his hand slowly over his mouth, which had burst out in a smile, then up, past his long nose, the eyes, the brow, and raised his sheepskin cap higher and leaned against the stone wall of the

church. The sudden relief, the long-awaited redemption – the guilt would stay right in the hard snow, it would be pressed into it until spring came and then disappear completely in the afternoon sun. Finally everything was cleared up, the protracted torment of uncertainty had receded, and he was once again sure of himself and now was ready to meet his tormentor. Suddenly, his eyes that were warmed by a smile, froze. The dark eyelashes quivering ever so slightly, he held his breath, grew paler, and the broad shoulders of this country boy drooped.

“Mommy, is that you?” Observing a girl that had just come onto the square, the old man whispered and broke away from the wall. Emerging from the side gates, he approached the carousel as if moving against his own wishes.

“Hey, watch where you’re going!” someone shouted at him. The old man could not care less and so carried on through the bustle, past the sides of large pretzels, steaming glasses and a rotund young woman with a high-pitched laugh who pointed a finger, red and swollen from the cold, at him. Someone lightly shrugged his shoulders, while another smiled in his grey beard; ah yes, a person is and remains a strange, freakish beast, but for another even that kind of jostling leaves deep wrinkles in their narrow forehead – the shame, revellers right in the heart of Riga, at such a holy time. But while the city drew the cool air into its lungs, threw a playful glance up to the glimmering stars, stamped out cigarette butts and caressed the back of a newly-acquired sweetheart, the old man approached the carousel with wide steps. He went around, waded into the small snowdrift towards the shadow of smiling horses and stretched out his strong arms. The carousel was turning slowly, and he carefully lifted the children off one by one. Starting with little Pauls, then the nimble troublemaker,

and finally her. The old man's strong arms were shaking – the mother's warm eyes glanced at him in astonishment, but not a sound emanated from her lips. It was only the middle boy that made a high-pitched scream, however no one heard the screaming on the other side of the carousel. The woman was giving snappy answers to the smartly-dressed man in the black overcoat, for whom this evening's walk suddenly appeared to be full of mystery, quite incomprehensible and immensely promising.

“Pauls, we'll go over to Daddy's now, now I'll...” the old man said, running out of breath. He held both boys with one hand, and the girl with the other. He hurriedly pulled the boys across Totleben Boulevard, turned to the right, and, at that moment when shouting, uncharacteristic of the evening groaning, rang from the square, this peculiar group of four was already turning off onto Nikolai Street, then once more turned to the left and went a good way along Crown Prince Boulevard in the opposite direction – all the way to Bastion Hill, which was sinking into the evening twilight. Little Pauls started whimpering, the other boy energetically trying to pull his arm away, while the girl kept turning her head back:

“Hey! Over here! Help!” she shouted ardently, however the thin voice died in the heartbeat of the city, in the voices, among the shouts of the cart drivers, in the muffled laughter. Before the holidays, people hurried to settle long-postponed scores and transactions, and meet for a brief chat so they could devote themselves to the bustle of Christmas with a certain peace of mind.

The odd stranger smiled nervously, dragged the little ones to the front, and once again to the left, onto Alexander Boulevard, and then they were already coming to the shiny, well-lit

facade of the Imperial Hotel. The doorman in a dark blue uniform stood next to the high double door, the gilded buttons of the uniform reflecting the light bulbs' yellow glow, which the luxurious building generously poured out through the broad windows of the lobby. To the little girl – whose name was Laimdota – it seemed that the door guard would take the bad old man by his collar at once, call for the police, and she would be rescued, but instead the doorman hurried to the sleighs that had just arrived in order to take packages wrapped in brown paper and offer a white glove to a lady submerged in her foxtail coat. The old man rushed inside through the wide double door and to the reception desk; to the right one could hear the pop of billiard balls, as the smell of cigars and hot food wafted in – there was a restaurant that was situated on the basement floor, one of Riga's most luxurious entertainment spots. In the evenings, it was the round gold 10 ruble coins that sparkled along with the 25 ruble notes. The first Latvians that had just gained the means favoured this place, those who wanted to eagerly spend and bare their teeth to the Germans and Russians.



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Walid Nabhan

L-Eżodu taċ-Ċikonji (2013)

Exodus of Storks

Publishing House **Midsea Books Ltd**

Biography

Walid Nabhan was born in Amman, Jordan, in 1966. His family fled Al-Qbeybeh, a small village in the outskirts of Hebron, Palestine, after the 1948 war that established the state of Israel and resulted in the first Palestinian Diaspora.

Nabhan studied at United Nations schools in Amman. He arrived in Malta in 1990, where he studied laboratory technology. In 1998, he graduated in Biomedical Sciences from Bristol University in England. In 2003, he gained a master's degree in Human Rights and Democratisation from the University of Malta. He has published two collections of short stories in Maltese (*Lura d-Dar u Ġrajjet Oħra li ma Ġrawx* in 2009 and *Leĥen tal-Fuħħar u Stejjer Oħra* in 2011) and one novel (*L-Eżodu taċ-Ċikonji* in 2013) which won the National Prize for Literature in 2014. He also published his first collection of poetry, *Fi Triqti Lejha*, in 2014. His poetry and articles have appeared in several papers and periodicals. He has also translated contemporary literary works from Maltese into Arabic.

Synopsis

The novel tells the story, in the first person, of a Palestinian man called Nabil who has lived all his life outside his homeland. His life is irrevocably intertwined with the fate of Palestine and of the whole Arab world, and in trying to understand himself he needs to find explanations for the way things have turned out in the Middle East, especially since the Six-Day War, an event which coincided with the birth of the narrator. The events in the novel take place mainly in Jordan, where Nabil was brought up and where his father continued to live until his death, and Malta, where the protagonist ended up later in life. It is a novel about identity, exile and displacement, but also about love and family in difficult times.

L-Eżodu taċ-Ċikonji

Walid Nabhan

Wara li spiċċat il-gwerra tas-67 u l-ġisem Gharbi nxtehet ferut mal-art, in-nies bkew sakemm kienu ha jaghmew. Ftit minnhom, wara li raw il-kobor tal-ġisem kollu ġrieħi u ċ-ċokon tal-avversarju li mlieh bid-daqqiet, għażlu li jieqfu jemmnu f'Alla. Oħrajn qalu li n-nuqqas t'Alla huwa li wassalna għal dan, u li l-Iżlam huwa l-unika kura biex tfejjaq. L-oħrajn saħqu li l-komuniżmu huwa l-mediċina fejjieqa, u n-Nazzjonalisti Gharab ma kinux jafu x'se jaqbd u jagħmlu minħabba li l-proġett romantiku tagħhom kien miżhūt mal-art u qiegħed jitlef haġna dmija, u milli jidher ma kienx hemm demm mit-tip tiegħu. Tilwim u għajjat, u mitt elf sikkina biex joperaw fuq il-ġisem stendut. Iktar haħsijiet u iktar arresti u sparar bejn l-avversarji politiċi u fuq iċ-ċittadini, filwaqt li l-ġisem midrub mimdud mal-art diehel f'koma dejjiema.

Fost dan kollu, fl-ewwel anniversarju tat-twelid tiegħi u t'oħti t-tewmija, ommi waqfet titkellem. Kienet ilha li naqqset mill-paroli imma issa waqfet għalkollox. Ikellmuha u ma twegibx lura, qisha truxa ma tisma' xejn. Għoxrin sena ilu waqfu jleqqu għajnejha u issa waqfu jitharrku xofftejha. Żammet il-kliem u n-niket u l-ħasra u r-rabja u l-konfużjoni kollha ġo fiha u sakkrithom wara bibien is-silenzju hoħnin. Missieri qatt ma insista li jehodha għall-kura xi mkien, donnu kien jaf li ma kienx hemm kura għaliha. Baqa' jiċċassa bħas-soltu, qisu ma ġralha xejn. Il-ftit ħin li kien iqatta' d-dar kien iqattgħu jħares fil-mhux magħruf tiegħu. Kultant kien iħares naqra lejha u malajr ineħħi haħstu mikduda minn fuqha, donnu kien jaf x'kien qed jistennieha wara l-intrata tas-skiet.

Fl-14 ta' Lulju 1969, sentejn wara d-9 ta' Ġunju u s-silenzju ta' omni, eżatt fis-sagħtejn ta' filgħodu, omni mietet fl-età ta' 44 sena. Il-mara li qalu li xi darba kienet gustuża, u li hadd ma jiftakar meta kienet l-aħħar darba li rawha titbissem, qabdet u mietet imlefilfa fi skietha. Jiena u n-Nakseh konna għadna kif ninfatmu minn sidirha.

Għall-bidu, it-tobba tal-UNRWA, l-aġenzija tal-Ġnus taparsi Magħquda mwaqqfa għall-għajnuna tar-Refuġjati Palestinjani fix-xerq Qrib, ikkonkludew mit-testijiet li għamlu fuq omni li filwaqt li jiena kont nerda' mill-ftit ħalib fqir li baqgħalha fi driegħha, oħti t-tewmija kienet qed tinjettalha xi velenu rari li jagħmel ħsara kbira fis-sider.

L-attenzjoni tat-tobba Skandinavi tal-UNRWA bdiet tikber malajr meta bdew jinnotaw li qegħdin imutu ħafna nies fil-kampijiet tar-refuġjati mingħajr ma kien hemm fuqhom sinjali ta' mard kroniku, u l-maġġoranza tagħhom qed jieqfu jtkellmu f'salt wara li jibbiesu xofftejh. It-tobba Skandinavi u Belġjani tathom rashom u kienu ħa jiggennu, għax meta ttestjaw lin-nies ħajjin u mejtin sabulhom traċci mill-istess velenu t'oħti t-tewmija. It-tobba baġtu għall-iktar apparat avvanzat iżda għalxejn. Ħafna bijopsiji u ħafna strumenti u kampjuni u mikroskopji u professuri ġejjin u sejrini u hadd ma rnexxielu jstabbilixxi r-rabta bejn il-velenu t'oħti t-tewmija u l-ħemda ta' xofftejn ir-refuġjati Palestinjani li nfixxu mal-erbat irkejjen tas-Sirja u l-Libanu u l-Ġordan. Intefqu flus kbar iżda l-misteru baqa' għaddej ġmielu, sakemm ġew żewġ studenti Norveġiżi li kienu qed jagħmlu xi studju fl-antropoloġija u wara ftit stħarriġ u ftit żjarat fid-djar taż-żingu, ikkonkludew li dawn in-nies li qed taqbadhom is-sikta u jmutu wara sena jew sentejn, tlieta l-iżjed, kellhom xi ħaġa kumuni bejniethom, xi ħaġa li l-ebda professur, l-ebda pillola, l-ebda magna, l-ebda strument, l-ebda apparat ma jista' jfejjaqha.

Wara r-rabta sentimentali, issa nqatgħet ir-rabta metabolika ma' omni. Omni telqet fl-iktar mumentu li kelli bżonnha, u biex tkompli titnejjek bija d-dinja, għoxrin sena wara, wara li blajt nofs il-pjaneta, ħarġuli ħafna nisa li riedu jagħmluha ta' omni. Kif tista' tifhem mara? Jitla' ormon u jagħmilha skjawa tiegħu. Jitla' ormon u jtella' miegħu elf haġa li trid tieġu ħsieb elf haġa. Anke jekk din il-ħaġa tkun sfigurata u tobrox u tniggeż u ġabet magħha saħta kbira fid-dinja. Jitla' ormon u jġib miegħu proċess ta' trasformazzjoni misterjuża. Il-pali tal-idejn isiru għodda tat-tmellis, is-saqajn imħaded u s-sider fliexken ta' ħalib diefi sustanzjuż, u n-nippa gażaża ratba tassorbi l-uġiġħ u l-ġuħ u d-dwejjaq u l-biki.

Fl-14 ta' Lulju 1969 tlift lil omni li qatt ma kelli. Tlift lil omni li kien ilha mejta mill-1948. Iz-zija Safija, oħtha, saħqet li mhux veru omni kienet ilha mejta mill-1948 għax skont hi, omni baqgħet tittama sal-1967. "Min jittama ma jkunx mejjet ħanini," qalet iz-zija. Id-differenza bejn bniedem ħaj u iehor mejjet, skont iz-zija Safija, hi li wieħed jittama u l-iehor le, voldieri omni mietet mal-wasla t'oħti t-tewmija. Għalhekk abbli missieri mindu twelidt qatt ma ġie jittawwali biex jara x'forma għandu wiċċi li 'l quddiem nett ħa jsir kopja perfetta tiegħu. Bilfors beda jassoċjani mat-telfa tal-Palestina li wasslet għat-telfa tal-mara tiegħu li raha tmūt quddiem għajnejh mingħajr ma seta' jagħmlilha xejn, baqa' jsegwiha fis-skiet sakemm ippakkjat u telqet mid-dinja bi kwietha.

Ommi ndifnet xi tmintax-il metru 'l bogħod minn oħtha Sarah li kienet mietet tlettax-il ġurnata qabilha. Bejniethom, fl-istess ringiela, kien hemm seba' oqbra ġodda, tlieta mir-residenti tagħhom jiġu minni u aktarx il-kawża tal-mewt tagħhom kellha x'taqsam mal-qerda li ġibt miegħi fid-dinja. Mhux ta' b'xejn bqajt għal żmien twil inhossni responsabbli għal dawk il-ħofor li dejjem jespandu.

Omm il-Ħiran, iċ-ċimiterju iżolat fix-Xlokk t'Amman, fl-1967 kien għadu żgħir u kważi vojta. Sal-1970 gie ddikjarat mimli u ma jiflaħx kadavru mgiddem ieħor, u l-gvern Ħaximita mhux elett kellu jalloka post ieħor biex jibda jservi bhala ċimiterju ġdid għar-residenti t'Amman. Ir-residenti gergru kemm felħu minħabba li l-post il-ġdid li alloka l-gvern mhux elett kien 'il barra sew minn Amman u li ħa jibda jkollhom ġibda sakemm jaslu s'hemm biex jidfnu l-mejtin tagħhom jew iżuru 'l qrabathom. Barra minn hekk, il-mejtin Ġordanizi proprji tal-post ma tantx ħadu gost bil-preżenza tar-refuġjati mixħutin ħdejhom b'saqajhom jintnu pesta. Min jaf meta kienu nhaslu l-aħħar? Iktar u iktar jekk inhaslu b'dak is-sapun tal-Ġnus taparsi Magħquda magħmul miż-żejt tal-qali użati.

L-ewwel ħadniehom l-ispazju ta' fuq l-art u issa qegħdin indejquhom anke fil-ġuf tagħha. Il-gvern mhux elett intebaħ li jekk jilqa' t-talba tagħhom ħa jkollu jagħmel żewġ ċimiterji, wiehed għan-nies Ġordanizi safja u ieħor għar-refuġjati mnittnin. Wara li ħasibha sew intebaħ li dan kien ser johloq firda b'konsegwenzi koroh li ma kellux moħħhom dak iż-żmien. Il-mejtin ma kinux idejquh. Aktar il-militanti ħajjin li bdew joperaw fil-Punent tal-pajiz u jisparaw fuq l-Iżrael minn diversi postijiet. Il-gvern mhux elett Ġordaniz beda jgħid li d-dar tiegħu magħmula mill-ħġieg u li ma jistax ikun li toqgħod tissotta n-nies bil-ġebel meta d-dar tiegħek magħmula mill-ħġieg. Aħseb u ara joqgħod jispara xi ħadd barrani mingħandek. Il-gvern mhux elett Ġordaniz qatagħha li ma jistax ikun li l-Palestinjani, wara li bieghu arthom lil-Lhud u qabdu prezzha fil-but, joqogħdu jisparaw minn ġor-renju fragli, erhilu li x-Xatt tal-Punent li jinkludi lil Ġerusalem tal-Lvant sa dak iż-żmien kien għadu taħt il-kuruna Ħaximita. Ix-Xatt tal-Punent jgħidulu hekk għax ix-Xatt tal-Lvant huwa l-Ġordan stess u ż-żewġt ixtut kienu

meqjusin bħala ż-żewġ pulmuni tal-Ġordan li r-re tiegħu skopra f'daqqa li b'pulmun wieħed aktar jaqbillu. Ir-re Hussein kien professur fl-arti tas-sopravivenza ġewwa dik il-foresta ta' azzarini.

Minkejja t-tgergir tan-nies Ġordaniżi indigeni, il-gvern mhux elett Ġordaniż xorta alloka roqgħa art kbira għaċ-ċimiterju ġdid fl-Ilbiċ ta' Amman f'post jgħidulu Saḥāb, fit-tarf tad-deżert li qed jaggregdixxi lil Amman min-Nofsinhar, fejn ḥamsa u tletin sena wara mort infittex il-qabar ta' missieri u għamilt is-siġhat indur u nagħqad mitluf, ġewwa ċimiterju li għal ftit hin stħajjiltu ikbar mill-pajjiż innifsu. Dak iċ-ċimiterju rnexxielu jwaqqaf il-passi fermi tad-deżert selvaġġ mifruq mill-Ḥiġāz u Tabūk fis-Sawdita Għarbija, minn fejn ḥareġ il-profeta Gharbi, u ḥarġu šhabu warajh, u bl-ilbiesi strambi tagħhom irrenjaw nofs id-dinja antika. Forsi rrenjaw meta kellhom ras waħda, mhux għexieren ta' rjus bla għamla jew fasla ċara, għax daqqa tarahom bi rjus ta' lpup u daqqa tarahom ta' ngħaġ, u dan l-aḥḥar qed narahom bi rjus ta' rettili mdaḥḥlin fiż-żmien. Uḥud minnhom jixbhu lil dawk il-kreaturi strambi li jidhru f'Jurassic Park.

Il-gvern qal li d-dar tiegħu magħmula mill-ḥġieġ, u li min ikollu daru tal-ḥġieġ, ma jridx jissotta lill-oḥrajn bil-ġebel għax jissottawh lura u jkissrulu kollox. U apparti l-isparar, il-gvern mhux elett kompli jgħid li l-Palestinjani bdew iqazżu 'l Alla fil-Ġordan, u li bdew jabbużaw wisq mill-ospitalità ġeneruża, u aktarx qegħdin iḥawdu t-tjubija mad-dgħufija. "Il-Palestinjani," kompli jgħid u kellu mitt elf raġun, "qegħdin isiru awtorità ġol-awtorità. Qegħdin iwaqqfu u jinterrogaw u jarrestaw lil min iridu, u anke japplikaw l-liġi mgħawġa tagħhom. Ma jistax ikun. Irridu niftakru li ḥafna minnhom mażuni u kumunisti minn dawk li jorqdu ma' ḥuthom, u b'hekk mhux talli qegħdin jirrabjaw 'l Alla biss,

izda qegħdin jirrabjaw lill-Amerikani li huma terġa' ħafna aqwa minn Alla.”

Taħt pressjoni qawwija ma tinfelaħx mill-Istati Uniti u bosta pajjiżi oħra li kien qed idejjaqhom il-mod kif kienu qegħdin iġibu ruħhom il-Palestinjani fil-Ġordan u l-mod kif qegħdin jinbxu lill-Iżrael u ma jhalluhx fi kwietu, il-gvern mhux elett Ġordaniż kellu kontra qalbu, fis-17 ta' Settembru tal-1970, jithan lir-reżistenza Palestinjana. L-armata Haqimita, li ma setgħetx tispara tir wiehed fid-direzzjoni t-tajba biex tiddifendi lil Ġerusalem fl-1967, f'daqqa waħda nbidlet fi l-juni fferoċjati ma jibzġu minn xejn. U f'inqas minn ħmistax-il gurnata, qatlet għadd kbir ta' Palestinjani. Il-figuri finali baqgħu bħas-soltu misturin. Filwaqt li l-Palestinjani qalu li nqatlulhom 'il fuq minn ħamest elef, l-uffiċjali Ġordaniżi saħqu li n-numru ma jaqbiżx it-tliet mija. Id-differenza, bħalma qegħdin naraw, hija ċucata. Għax l-4700 ruħ xorta ħa jintesew. Il-figura eżatta, bħalma huwa magħruf, dejjem tibqa' taħt it-trab.

Id-diżgrazzja tal-1970 issemmiet Settembru l-Iswed. Għandna kollox la għandu isem deskrittiv u retoriku. Ta' tliet snin, kont diġà mgħobbi bi tliet gwerer magġuri. In-Nakbeh u n-Nakseh u Settembru l-Iswed. u l-kbir kien għadu ma wasalx. Tliet snin bi tliet diżgrazzji kbar u l-aħħar tnejn kif qed taraw ġibthom miegħi. Mhux ta' b'xejn li ommi għazlet li żżarma mid-dinja kmieni qabel tara lill-aħwa jbiċċru lill-aħwa u l-qraba jqattgħu fil-qraba, u l-mejtin imutu b'mistoqsijiet strambi f'għajnejhom, mistoqsijiet aktarx bla tweġiba. Li joqtluk il-għadu forsi tifhimha, izda meta joqtluk ħuk, kif tista' tifhimha?

Exodus of Storks

Walid Nabhan

Translated from Maltese by Rose Marie Caruana

When the 1967 war ended and the Arab body lay wounded on the ground, people wailed to such an extent that they almost became blind. Some people chose to stop believing in God when they gazed upon that large body full of wounds, succumbing before the feet of the small adversary that had inflicted all those injuries. Others insisted that it was disbelief in God that had landed us in this precarious situation, and that Islam was the only cure. Some retorted that communism was the answer. The Arab Nationalists had no clue what to do since their 'romantic' project had ended in a heap, bleeding to death on the ground. Shouts and quarrels broke out, while a hundred, thousand knives lashed out to operate on that supine body. Arrests and shooting as well as exchange of fire between political adversaries took place. The prisoners and 'disappeared' piled up, while the wounded body which inexorably stretched in pain was about to enter into a lasting coma.

During all these events, on the first anniversary of my birth and that of my twin sister, my mother suddenly stopped talking. She had been conversing less and less for a while but now she turned completely soundless. She didn't answer when addressed, as if she was deaf and couldn't hear anything. Twenty years ago her eyes stopped glittering with joy and now her lips became fossilised. She held all the words and grief and pity and anger and confusion within her and locked them away behind thick walls of silence. My father never insisted we take her somewhere to be cured, as if he knew that

there was no cure. He remained gazing at his nothingness, as if nothing had happened to his beloved wife. In the little time he spent at home, he kept staring into the unknown. Occasionally he would glance at her and quickly turn away frowning, as if he knew what lay in store for her and all of us, behind those silent symptoms.

At precisely two o'clock in the morning, on 14 July 1969, two years after that fateful defeat of June when my mother was engulfed in silence forever, she passed away at the age of 44. She had been described as a beautiful woman, but no one could remember the last time she had smiled after losing her Palestine. Now all of a sudden, she was gone, wrapped in eternal silence. Nakseh and I had just been weaned off her breast.

At first, after performing initial tests on my mother, the doctors at the UNRWA, the so-called 'United' Nations agency set up to aid the Palestinian refugees in the Near East, concluded that while I was suckling what was left in her dry breast, my twin sister was injecting her breast with some rare poison that caused malignancy.

The attention of the Scandinavian doctors of the UNRWA was quickly drawn to the fact that a lot of people were dying in the refugee camps without showing any outward symptoms of chronic illness, and that a large majority of people stopped talking after their lips grew stiff. The Scandinavian and Belgian doctors were at their wits' end because when they tested both the dead and the living, they found traces of that same poison which my twin sister had formulated. The doctors sent for more advanced apparatus, but it was all in vain. After performing numerous biopsies and importing numerous instruments, robots and microscopes, the

professors couldn't establish the true link between my twin sister's poison and the silence that embarked on the lips of the Palestinian refugees that had spread to all four corners of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. A large quantity of money was squandered but the mystery was never resolved until two Norwegian anthropologists conducted research that involved visiting those corrugated iron sheds. They immediately concluded that there was an organic link between going mute and passing away after a year or two, three at most. There was an essential ingredient which eluded all professors and doctors, and ridiculed their injections and recipes, and that anomaly was the love for Palestine.

After the sentimental bond with my mother had been broken, the metabolic bond was immediately severed. My mother had left when I needed her most. To add salt to the bleeding wound, the world made fun of me 20 years later by providing me with loads of 'mothers'. How could you possibly understand a woman? A hormone pops up and she promptly becomes enslaved. Another hormone appears, searching for 1,000 things that need to be cared for from a woman's biological perspective. Even if this thing is disfigured and prickly and has caused a dreadful curse upon the whole world. Then another hormone enters the bloodstream and sends her into a mysterious transformation. Hands abruptly become tools to caress. Legs transform into pillows. Breasts into nozzles of nourishing protein withstanding tears and pain while providing its unconditional comfort and softness.

On 14 July 1969, I lost the mother I never had. The mother who had been dead since 1948. Her sister, my aunt Safiyyah, insisted that it wasn't true that my mother had died in 1948 because, according to her, my mother kept up her hopes until 1967. "Who hopes isn't dead, my dear," my aunt said. According to her, the

difference between a dead person and a living one, is that one hopes or not. This meant that my mother died when my twin sister was born. Perhaps that's why my father never bothered to look at me from the day I was born, was never interested to look at my face which one day would be a perfect copy of his. No doubt he associated me with the loss of Palestine, which in turn caused my mother's death. He watched her slipping away before his very eyes, wrapped up in his own silence, but was unable to do anything. He helplessly observed her packing her suitcases to leave this earth without fuss.

My mother was buried about 18 metres away from her sister Sarah who had died 13 days before. In the same row, there were seven new tombs between them. Three of their residents were my relatives. Most probably, their demise was due to the destruction I had brought with me into the world. It's no wonder I spent many long years feeling guilty and responsible for those holes in the ground that continuously multiplied.

Omm il-Hiran, the isolated cemetery in the south east of Amman, was a small and nearly empty cemetery in 1967. By 1970 it was declared full to bursting point, unable to accommodate another blasted grave. The non-elected Hashemite government had to allocate another place to serve as the new cemetery for Amman's inhabitants. The Jordanians grumbled vociferously since the new cemetery was far away and would require an inconveniently long journey to bury one's dead or to visit their graves. Besides this, the native Jordanian cadavers weren't too pleased to reside beside the dead refugees. Goodness knows the last time they washed themselves before dying! It would have been even worse if they had washed themselves with that soap made out of used frying oil which the so-called United Nations provided!

First we occupied their space above the ground and now we're bothering them in their tombs too. The non-elected government of Jordan quickly realised that if it were to give in to the native residents' demands, it would have to set up two cemeteries, one for the native Jordanians and another for the stinky refugees. But after thinking it through, the non-elected government concluded that a decision like that would create a rift with unimaginably terrifying consequences. After all, from the non-elected government's perspective, the dead wouldn't give a shit! It was more concerned about the living militants who began to operate in the western part of the country, firing at Israel from various angles. The non-elected Jordanian cabinet said that their house was made of glass and therefore they couldn't afford to throw stones at the houses of others, because the others would throw stones back and destroy theirs. So the non-elected Jordanian government banned the Palestinians, who had *sold* their homeland to the Jews, from attacking Israel from their fragile kingdom of Jordan. Never mind that the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was under the Hashemite Crown. The West Bank is called the West Bank, because the East Bank is in fact, Jordan. The two banks were considered to be the two lungs of Jordan. Though all of a sudden the Hashemite King realised that it was better off with one lung. King Hussein was a true professor of the art of survival amongst that forest of rifles.

In spite of the indigenous Jordanians' complaints, the government went ahead with allocating a large patch of ground to serve as a new cemetery in the south west of Amman, at a place called *Sahab*, which lies at the edge of the desert that stabs Amman from the south. Thirty-five years later, I returned to look for my father's grave and spent hours there, completely lost and unable to find my bearings in a cemetery

that appeared larger than the country itself. That cemetery halted the march of the wild desert; a desert spreading from Hejaz and Tabuk in Saudi Arabia, where the Arab prophet and his strange companions emerged from, to rule half of the ancient world.

Moreover, the non-elected government also stated that the Palestinians were badly behaved in Jordan, abusing their hosts' hospitality and, in all probability, confusing kindness for weakness. The Palestinians were establishing an authority within the authority. They stopped, interrogated and arrested whoever they pleased and brought them in front of their own distorted justice. We must remember that many of these Palestinians are Freemasons and communists who sleep with their sisters, and therefore are not only displeasing God but are also angering the Americans who are even more powerful than God.

Under this unbearable pressure, mainly from the United States and other countries that disliked the way Palestinians were behaving in Jordan, the non-elected Jordanian government had no choice but to crush the Palestinian resistance on 17 September 1970. The Hashemite army, which couldn't fire a single shot in the right direction to defend Jerusalem in 1967, suddenly transformed into a ferocious lion, fearing nothing. In less than 48 hours, this army was able to massacre a respectable number of Palestinian refugees. As usual, the exact number of casualties was kept under wraps. While the Palestinians recorded over 5,000 casualties, the Jordanian officials insisted that the death toll didn't exceed 300. Evidently, there is a ridiculous gap because those 4,700 corpses must have been fabricated! The exact figure will always remain buried under the dust.

The 1970 disaster was named the Black September, a descriptive and rhetorical name. By the age of three, I was already burdened with three major wars. Nakbeh, Nakseh and Black September, and the worst was yet to come. Three years burdened by three major disasters of which the latter two, as we have noted, were brought on by me. To no surprise, my mother chose to leave this world early on, before she saw brothers killing brothers, neighbours butchering neighbours and people dying with strange questions in their eyes, questions with heavy answers. You could possibly understand an enemy killing you, but how could you come to terms with your brother killing you?



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Aleksandar Bečanović

Arcueil (2015)

Arcueil

Publishing House **Levo krilo**

Biography

Aleksandar Bečanović, born in 1971, is a Montenegrin writer, film critic and screenwriter. He is the author of five poetry books, *Ulysses' Distance* (1994), *Being* (1996), *The Pantry* (1998), *Places in the Letter* (2001) and *Preludes and Fugues* (2007); two short story collections, *I am Waiting, What Will Happen Next* (2005) and *Obsession* (2009); and a novel, *Arcueil* (2015). He has also published two books of film criticism, *Genre in the Contemporary Cinema* (2005) and the 900-page long *Lexicon of Film Directors* (2015). He received the Risto Ratković Award for the best book of poetry in Montenegro in 2002. He writes film reviews and essays for Montenegrin daily *Vijesti*, and is one of the contributors to the books *501 Movie Directors* (2007), *501 Movie Stars* (2007), *101 Horror Movies You Must See Before You Die* (2009) and *101 Sci-Fi Movies You Must See Before You Die* (2009).

Synopsis

On Easter Sunday, April 3, 1768, Marquis de Sade promised an écu to a beggar by the name of Rose Keller if she would follow him to Arcueil. Only a few hours later, after Keller managed to escape from the Marquis' country house, this little 'adventure' in the Paris suburbs would become the notorious 'Arcueil affair', a scandal that caught the public imagination in France and beyond.

Different testimonies and rumours were spreading, conflicting interpretations were heard, but what really happened in the Marquis' room? Where lies the truth about the scandal? Was Arcueil the scene of horrible sadistic sexual violence and some kind of perverse theatrical production, or was the victim not so innocent after all? *Arcueil* is a complex, multi-perspective retelling of the 'Arcueil affair', which emphasizes the doubts and ambivalences of any historical or – for that matter – media event.

Marquis je izašao u osam sati.

Stojao je maloprije uokviren u velikom ogledalu, prikladno odjeven, sa izrazom lica koje je nestrpljivo iščekivalo što će se dalje desiti. Njegove oči su dobile dubinu neophodnu da bi strasti prešle u imperativ. Kosa je bila namještena, štap u ruci, nož za opasačem. Za religiozne svetkovine treba se dotjerati sa ukusom i otići sa neobaveznim šarmom, bez obzira da li zaista vjerujete u njih.

Ogledao se još nekoliko trenutaka, taman dovoljno da lik utone u njegove misli. Pripreme zahtijevaju, misli on, anđeosku pažnju, punu usredsređenost, predostrožnosti koje će predvidjeti svaku situaciju što bi mogla iskrsnuti. Stvari moraju imati čvrstu osnovu da bi se kasnije razbuktale. To je bio njegov nauk: užitak valja do u tančina izgraditi, on uvijek počiva na jasnom planu, na anticipiranju epizoda koje će uslijediti. Ovdje ne smije biti improvizacije: spontanost je za amatere. Sloboda zadovoljstva zapravo izrasta iz strogog rituala koji se ponavlja onoliko koliko je potrebno da se dođe do vrhunca. Užitak dolazi iz početnog razmišljanja i posljedičnog djelovanja da se zamišljeni nacrt dovede do kraja.

Pa opet, čak i kada se sve sprovede gvozdenom rukom, kada se detalji uvedu u traženi poredak objekata, ljudi i događaja, postoji mogućnost da će slučaj umiješati svoje prste. Ali, to bi trebalo razumjeti kao dodatno uzbuđenje, dodatni napor za postignuti cilj. Scena je već dotjerana, kulise su stavljene u funkciju, protagonisti upućeni u svoje uloge, a onda možda

dolazi neočekivana varijacija, malo pomjeranje u dizajnu. Jedva čekam da vidim kakav će biti rezultat, misli on, ponovo se vraćajući u fokus.

Plan za ovaj dan, čiju svetost valja iskušati, razrađen je sa sitničavošću starih egzegeta. Sada, kada se stvari pokrenu, ostaje da se vidi kakvi će biti efekti priče koja je formirana u časovima dokolice, snatrenja i hladno budne racionalnosti. Da li će u njoj biti materijala za dalje prepričavanje, za nova pripovjedanja, za drugačija ponavljanja.

Marquise je ostala u krevetu, gore na spratu, u inerciji koja ju je držala i u snu i na javi. Otkako je nedavno postala majka, neprestano je umorna, štoviše, rekao bi Marquis, i razdražljiva, ali ipak to ne pokazuje ispod svojih skorojevičkih manira. Kada se probudi i vidi da je njen suprug već uveliko izašao i da ne može računati s njegovim prisustvom na ovako važan dan gdje svaka porodica, naročito one najuglednije – a sada je pripadala takvoj –, traže jedinstvo i razoružavajuću bliskost, sa istim osjećajem dužnosti će uraditi, ma koliko bilo oskudno njeno razumijevanje, sve preporučene vjerske rituale. I iskreno će se žalostiti što familija neće ni ovaj put biti na okupu, jer Marquis uvijek ima nekih prećih stvari, neki neodložni posao koji zahtijeva njegovo potpuno angažovanje. Barem joj tako kasnije tumači svoje odlaske, dok ona sve više sumnja da tu nisu čista posla, i da njen suprug posjeduje pretjerano avanturistički duh eda bi svoj dom smatrao privilegovanim mjestom.

Makar ju je njena *maman* znalački tješila: Jednom kada postaneš majka, u njemu će se razviti načelo odgovornosti, njegova bjekstva će se okončati, ludorije sa teatroom prestati da ga opčinjavaju. Najgore su, dalje joj je pričala zabrinuta mater pored razigrane vatre u kaminu – dok je te razgovore

Marquis volio sebi pojačano da dočarava u njihovoj nategnutoj konvencionalnosti –, teatarske opsije, besramno skupe a tako nepotrebne, čisto bacanje para, i od najmanjeg računa me zaboli glava, u toj naknadnoj Marquisovoj interpretaciji tvrdi *maman*, koja se odmah hvata za glavu, svima se žali na nepodnošljivu migrenu i odlazi u svoju sobu sa stavom istinske mučenice. Svi mi imamo naše male golgote, kaže *maman* svojoj kćerki, učeći je najdubljim mudrostima i najsvetijim tajnama bračnog života. Ali, sigurna sam, kaže ona a Marquis u sebi sve potvrđuje, da će ga mali Louis-Marie promijeniti iz korjena, neki nagovještaji su prisutni, postoje razlozi da se nadamo.

Marquise spava gore, u glomaznom bračnom krevetu, tvrdo poput pravednice. Kao i svi prostodušni ljudi, misli on, najsretnija je kad ne mora da razbija glavu oko svakodnevnih problema. Nju nikad nisu brinule okolnosti njihovog ugovorenog braka, nikad se nije zanimala kako je taj potpuni stranac – o kojem nije ni znala da ga prati određena reputacija iz falsifikovanih policijskih dosijea i zluradih glasina – završio u njenoj postelji odmah tražeći sve pripadajuće bračne prinadležnosti, a možda i neke van obaveznog popisa. Da se interesovala, zasigurno je prvo odgovore trebala da potraži kod njene gospođe majke, baš pored istog onog kamina gdje sada dobija naknadne i neučinkovite bračne poduke i savjete. Samo prostodušni ljudi, misli on, mogu da budu duboko u sebi nezadovoljni sudbinom, a da se ne bune protiv nje.

Marquise krasi kvalitet da očekuje rasplet događaja sa krotkom ravnodušnoću. Da je kakva filozofesa, tu bi osobinu nazvao božanskom apatijom. Nedostižni ideal koji se zamjenjuje pojačanom dramaturgijom što laž ustoličuje ne kao opsjenu, ne kao iluziju, već kao neophodni dodatak ili začim onome što zaista mislimo o životu. Sjetio se sa smiješkom – ogledalo je automatski naglasilo promjenu u licu – jednog proljeća u château

d'Évry kada su svi morali da prihvate nove uloge, da iskoče na kratko iz svog zatvorenog bića i prepuste se njegovoj režiserskoj ruci koja nije samo postavljala ljude u malom proscenijumu, nego je i ispravljala i dopisivala uvažene komade.

Čak se i Marquise bila opustila, prihvativši svoje role u začudno dobro raspoloženju, valjda zato što je pokušavala da uvidi sličnosti između teatra i života, lažno sigurna da se drugi element mora povinovati prvom, da su pisani zakoni jači od haosa stvarnosti. Ušla bi u svoj lik bez oklijevanja, uvjerena da će čuti baš ono što je željela, moralni nauk i izjavu ljubavi, od strane muškarca koga je, onda kada je u njemu prihvatila vlastiti usud, voljela i sa strašću i sa dužnošću. Pjevala je poboljšane i preokrenute stihove koji su obećavali harmoniju i sretni kraj, iako joj slabašni glas nije dozvoljavao da pogodi pravu intonaciju. Bilo je u svemu tome više šarma nego nezgrapnosti, prisjećao se on, naročito u njenim pozama kada je glumila samouvjerenost, iznutra potrešena mogućnošću da nešto neočekivano dobija, iako *maman* nije prestajala da se buni oko troškova izgrađene otvorene pozornice, izvezenih kostima i ponekog profesionalnog glumca, unajmljenog za ove svečanosti.

Ali, glavni udar ironije nalazio se u činjenici da je i *maman* – još bijesna zbog pozamašnog deficita – tog proljeća završila na pozornici, moglo bi se reći, misli on, u maloj Marquisovoj drami. Tačnije, farsi, jer na repertoaru su, u skladu sa najnovijom aristokratskom modom da se u činjenicama vidi tek odblesak nedostižnog ciničnog ideala, bile samo trivijalne komedije, laki komadi koji su trebali da prevare i one unutar i one izvan pozornice, da ponude priprostu zabavu koja je, međutim, čuvala u sebi mračne namjere. Jer, svijet je najlakše prevariti uz pomoć sretnog kraja, konvencije u koju žurimo da povjerujemo, taman kao da nam lična radost zavisi od njega.

Dovedena na pozorišne daske, otrgnuta na trenutak iz svoje praktične svakodnevice, Mme de Montreuil je bila osuđena na očaravajuće zadovoljstvo i plodonosnu taštinu, koje čak ni uvijek prisutno gundavo škrtarenje nije moglo da umanjiti.

Maman je polako izlazila na scenu, misli on, dok podiže obrvu iznad desnog oka kao da zaista posmatra taj spektakularni ulaz, prvo iskreno zbunjena, ljuta na sebe što je prihvatila da kao šiparica nepromišljeno upadne u pripremljenu zamku, nervozna jer se dala nagovoriti bez da je pružila dostojanstveni otpor. Treba joj neko vrijeme da se navikne na okruženje, da prihvati snagu fikcije. Onda se prepušta, obrazi su joj rumeni od pristiglog zadovoljstva, uživlja se u svoju ulogu i spremna je da zaboravi na sitničave zamjerke.

Maman na sceni, to je prizor koji valja pohraniti u sjećanju, da bi kasnije mogao biti iskorišten za blagodeti ironije. U povećem kostimu koji njeno tijelo čini okruglim, ona zamišlja da je gospodarica priče koja je, međutim, već davno određena a dijalozi su unaprijed spriječili autonomnost radnje. Volio je da tokom predstave, čekajući da dođe red na njega, posmatra majku i kćerku, kako iz suprotstavljenih razloga prihvataju da se ponašaju u skladu sa zakonima otrcane farse: jedna je mislila da pozorište oplemenjuje, da će biti katarza u bračnom životu u čiju je svrhu već počela da sumnja, iako su zloslutne informacije bile pažljivo sklanjane od nje, druga je bila ubjeđena da, uz malo laskanja, može sve da kontroliše s obje strane zavjese i da joj ništa neće promaći. To je najniži i prezrenja dostojan efekt pozorišta: da natjerate ljude da povjeruju u iluziju, da obezbjedite prostor u koji će moći da nadoknade ono što im manjka i da izbace ono što ih tišti. Prostodušni ljudi su najbolja, ali i najneznavenija publika, posebno kad u svojim umovima igraju drugima dodijeljene uloge ili oponašaju tuđe akcije.

Teatar je nešto drugo, misli on, potpuno drugačija instanca: on ne proizvodi ni laž ni istinu, ne vraća ništa i ne obezbjeđuje ništa. Nema ničega na što bi se moglo ugledati, ničega na čemu bi se valjalo zadržati. Nema pročišćenja i pokajanja, smijeh nikada nije srdačan, suze nikad nisu potresne. Teatar je ispad iz logike morala, i zato sredstvo da se njime bičuje hipokrizija i konvencija, ali ne da bi se svijet poboljšao, ne da bi bila poslata poruka, ovo je loše, ovo je nemoralno, nemojte da radite poročna djela. Ne, pozorište je mjesto gdje upravljate ljudima i riječima, pravite najoprije kalkulacije, raspoređujete ispod proscenijuma stvari i junake, kombinujete tijela u pozama, položajima, shemama, činite vještačkom svaku vezu, svaki govor, cijelu prirodu.

Najviše je volio pripreme, iščekivanje pred spektakl, zadržku prije nego će priča biti postavljena. Onda bi izašao na pozornicu da je dobro osmotri, prošetao bi nekoliko puta uzduž i poprijeko da osjeti koliko prostora može da dobije ako iskoristi dubinu pozadine. Zatim bi razmišljao o tome kako postaviti svjetlo i usmjeriti pogled gledaoca, jer pozornica nema svrhu ako u njoj nema mjesta za sjenke koje svemu daju nijansu, i lažnoj bezbrižnosti farse i nategnutoj moralnosti tragedije. Fikcija je velika ne zato što sve može, već zato što ništa ne mora.

Arcueil

Aleksandar Bečanović

Translated from Montenegrin by Will Firth

The Marquis left the house at eight in the morning.

Just before that he had stood framed in a large mirror, suitably dressed, with an expression on his face that showed he eagerly awaited what was to come. His eyes took on the depth needed for passions to cross over to the imperative. His hair was neatly combed, his walking stick in hand, and his knife under his belt. You have to dress with taste and go out with easygoing charm on church holidays, whether you believe in them or not.

He looked at himself closely for a few moments more, just enough for his countenance to sink into his thoughts. The preparations, he thought, demanded angelic attention, full concentration and foresight to allow him to predict every situation that could arise. Things had to have a firm base so that they might blaze up later. That was his maxim: enjoyment has to be worked out down to the finest detail; it always rests on a clear plan and anticipation of the episodes to follow. There must not be any improvisation here: spontaneity is for amateurs. Rather, the freedom of pleasure grows out of a strict ritual repeated as often as necessary for the apex to be reached. Enjoyment comes from initial reflection and subsequent activity to see a conceived project through to its end.

And yet even when everything is implemented with an iron hand, when the desired sequence of objects, characters and events is fleshed out in detail, there is still a possibility of

chance taking a hand. But that should be seen as an added thrill, an extra effort required to attain the goal. The stage is decorated, the scenery set up, the protagonists are conversant with their roles, and then an unexpected variation can come, a small shift in design. *I can hardly wait to see what the result will be*, he thought, and returned to his focus again.

The plan for this day, whose sanctity was to be tested, had been elaborated with the meticulousness of old exegetes. Now, when things were getting under way, it remained to be seen what the effects would be of this story formed in hours of leisure, in daydreaming and cool-headed rationalism. Would it provide material for further paraphrasing, new narrations and different iterations?

The Marquise remained in bed upstairs, in the inertia that held her both when asleep and awake. Since giving birth recently, she had been constantly tired, and moreover tetchy, the Marquis would say, but still she didn't show it beneath her parvenue manners. When she woke up and saw that her husband was well and truly gone and that she could not count on his presence on this important day, where every family, especially the most respectable ones – she now belonged to those circles – demanded unity and an ingratiating closeness, she would perform all the recommended religious rituals with the same sense of duty, however limited her understanding was. And she would be sincerely sad that the family wasn't together again because the Marquis always had some pressing things to attend to, urgent business that demanded his complete commitment. That, at any rate, is how he later explained his absences to her, while she increasingly suspected that something fishy was going on and that her husband possessed too adventurous a spirit to consider his home a privileged place.

At least her *maman* consoled her with all her expertise: “When you become the mother of his child, the Marquis will acquire a degree of responsibility, and the escapades with the theatre will cease to fascinate him. Theatrical obsessions are the worst –,” her anxious mother continued beside the dancing flames in the fireplace (the Marquis loved to evoke those conversations for himself and play them through in their stiff conventionality) “because they are shamelessly expensive and so unnecessary, a pure waste of money, and the smallest invoice gives me a headache,” *maman* claimed in the Marquis’ retrospective interpretation. She immediately grasped her head in her hands, complained of an unbearable migraine and went off to her room with the pose of a true martyr. “We all have our little ‘Calvaries,’” *maman* confided to her daughter, teaching her the deepest wisdoms and holiest secrets of married life. “But I’m sure, and the Marquis confirms it himself, that Louis-Marie will change him radically – there are already some signs – so there is cause for hope,” she said.

The Marquise slept upstairs in a bulky, king-size bed, soundly, like the sleep of the just. As with all simple-minded people, he thought, she was happiest when she didn’t have to worry about everyday problems. She never cared about the circumstances of their arranged marriage and was never interested in how that complete stranger – she didn’t even know he was followed by a certain reputation from forged police dossiers and malicious rumours – ended up in her bed and immediately demanded the fulfilment of all her conjugal duties, and perhaps also some that were not on the list. If she had asked herself these questions, she certainly should first have sought answers from her esteemed mother, beside the very same fireplace where she was now being given belated, futile marital instruction and advice. Only simple-minded people,

he thought, could be so dissatisfied deep inside with their fate, and yet not rebel against it.

The Marquise was graced by the quality of awaiting the outcome of events with meek equanimity. Had she been a philosopher of any kind, he would have termed this characteristic divine apathy. An unreachable ideal that is substituted by intensified dramaturgy that enthrones the lie not as a sleight of hand, not as an illusion, but as an essential dash of spice to what we really think about life. He recalled with a smile – the mirror automatically accentuated the change on his face – one spring at Château d'Évry when everyone had to accept new roles, briefly step out of their closed selves and trust his director's hand, which not only placed people in the small proscenium but also reworked and rounded off the celebrated pieces.

Even the Marquise relaxed and accepted her roles in a remarkably good mood, probably because she was trying to see similarities between theatre and life, falsely confident that the latter must submit to the former, and that written laws were stronger than the chaos of reality. She would take on her character without hesitation, convinced that she was going to hear just what she wanted: moral edification and a declaration of love from the man whom, once she accepted he was her destiny, she loved both passionately and dutifully. She sang improved verses with changed meanings that promised harmony and a happy end, although her feeble voice prevented her from getting the intonation right. There was more charm than clumsiness in all that, he recollected, particularly in her poses when she played self-confidence, all shook-up inside by the possibility of gaining something unexpectedly, although *maman* never stopped complaining about the cost of the fully constructed open stage, the embroidered costumes and the handful of professional actors hired for the festivities.

But irony's main blow, so to speak, lay in the fact that *maman* herself – still furious about the sizeable deficit – ended up on the stage that spring in one of his small dramas, the Marquis thought. It was a farce, to be exact, because, in line with the latest aristocratic fashion of seeing facts as just a reflection of an unattainable, cynical ideal, the repertoire consisted purely of trivial comedies, light pieces that were supposed to trick those both on and off the stage into thinking that they offered plain amusement, when they actually harboured dark intentions. People are easiest to cheat with the help of a happy ending, a convention we are quick to believe, as if our personal happiness depended on it. Led onto the boards of the theatre, torn away from her everyday concerns for a moment, Mme de Montreuil was condemned to enthralling pleasure and creative vanity, which even her perpetual grouchy avarice was unable to impair.

Maman stepped out onto the stage slowly, he thought and raised his right eyebrow as if he was actually scrutinising that spectacular entry. At first she was sincerely bewildered, angry at herself for having been so simple as to unthinkingly walk straight into a trap like a greenhorn, and nervous because she had let herself be persuaded without offering a dignified show of resistance. She needed some time to get used to the surroundings and accept the power of fiction. Then she let go, her cheeks went red from a surge of pleasure, she identified with her role and was prepared to forget her petty-minded quibbles.

Maman on stage – that was a sight worth remembering so it could later be used for the benefit of irony. In a rather large costume that made her body seem rotund, she fancied herself the mistress of the story, but things had long been laid down and the dialogues hindered the autonomy of the acting in advance. As he waited for his own parts in the performance,

the Marquis enjoyed watching mother and daughter acquiesce to go along with the laws of the trite farce for opposite reasons. The one thought that theatre ennobled, that it would be a catharsis for her marriage, whose purpose she had already begun to doubt, although ominous information was always painstakingly hidden from her; the other was convinced that, with a little flattery, she would be able to gain full control on both sides of the curtain, and nothing would escape her attention. That is the lowliest and most shameful effect of theatre: you make people believe in an illusion, you provide a space where they can compensate for what they lack and cast off what vexes them. Simple-minded people are the best, but also the most ignorant audience, especially when their minds play the roles assigned to others or imitate the actions of others.

Theatre is something else, he thought – a completely different agency. It produces neither lies nor truth, it neither returns nor promises anything. There is nothing for you to emulate and nothing you should cling to. There is no cleansing and penitence, the laughter is never heartfelt, and the tears are never touching. Theatre is a suspension of the logic of morals and therefore can be used to scourge hypocrisy and convention, but not in order to make the world a better place or to send a message: this is bad, this is immoral, steer clear of sin. No, theatre is a place where you govern people and words, make ruthless calculations, dispose of things and heroes beneath the proscenium arch, combine bodies in poses, positions and schemes, and cast every bond, all speech and the whole of nature in an artificial mould.

Most of all he liked the preparations, the anticipation before a show and the delay before the story was put on. Then he would go out onto the stage to have a good look around; he would walk the length and breadth of it several times to get a

sense of how much space he could gain if he exploited the full depth at the rear. Later he would think about how to place the light and direct the gaze of viewers, because the stage has no purpose if there is no place for the shades that give all things their hue, including the false nonchalance of the farce and the strained morality of the tragedy. Fiction is great not because everything is possible, but because nothing is prescribed.



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Jamal Ouariachi

Een Honger (2015)

A Hunger

Publishing House **Querido**

Biography

Jamal Ouariachi, born in 1978, is the son of a Dutch mother and a Moroccan father. Jamal studied psychology at the University of Amsterdam and spent years working as an online therapist. He made his literary debut in 2010 with the novel *De vernietiging van Prosper Morèl (The Destruction of Prosper Morèl)*. Since then he has written controversial stories, articles and columns for a range of leading publications including *nrc.next*, *HP/De Tijd*, *de Volkskrant*, *Knack Focus* and *Vogue*. His second novel *Tenderness* earned him nominations for the BNG Literatuurprijs and the Gouden Uil. He followed it up with *25*, one third of a Dutch literary trilogy written in response to *Fifty Shades of Grey* together with Daan Heerma van Voss and David Pefko.

Synopsis

Aurélie is the loving and dedicated mother of a three-year-old daughter, a role she combines with a successful career in television. Her life is turned upside down when she receives a phone call out of the blue from an ex-lover: Alexander Laszlo, formerly an iconic figure in the world of Dutch development aid and once better known as ‘Holland’s answer to Bob Geldof.’ Ten years previously, the passionate relationship between Aurélie, then a young student, and the flamboyant Alexander came to an abrupt end when Laszlo was convicted of sexually abusing one of his Ethiopian foster children. The boy had been brought to Amsterdam together with a dozen other children to be raised as part of Laszlo’s megalomaniac Future Leaders of Europe initiative. The aim was to give these children the best possible education so that they would return to their homeland armed with the knowledge to make a difference to society.

Een Honger
Jamal Ouariachi

Busje (1)

Sneller dan veilig was stoof de minibus voort door de grijze blubber, liefdesbaby van sneeuw en strooizout, bij een buitentemperatuur van -9°C , terwijl binnen een ouderwetse autokachel goedbedoelde maar misselijkmakende hete lucht rondspoot die, in combinatie met de vochtige koolstofdioxide uit de monden van de twaalf inzittenden, zorgde voor de klamme atmosfeer van een tropisch zwemparadijs. Behalve de voorruit waren alle ramen beslagen.

Er klonken slechts twee stemmen, man en vrouw, beide afkomstig van een Radio 1-programma waarin voor een vroege zaterdagochtend wel erg wakker over politiek werd gepraat.

Drempels, bochten, remmen, optrekken: in de maag van Aurélie Lindeboom klotsten twee happen boterham heen en weer in een poeltje koffie. Primatour vergeten in te nemen, wagenziekte streed zij aan zij met de kater van haar afscheidsfeestje, dat pas was geëindigd toen er nauwelijks nog tijd over was om te slapen.

Ze legde haar zware hoofd op de schouder van Yohannes, die rechts van haar zat. Een vlaag vanille en de kokosgeur van zijn kroeshaar activeerden haar speekselklieren en ondanks haar samengeknepen maag kreeg ze trek in iets zoets. Tas, met daarin onder meer een pak Oreó's, niet binnen handbereik. Ter compensatie knauwde ze wat op het middelste kootje van haar wijsvinger.

‘Zit je nou op je duim te zuigen?’ vroeg Yohannes.

Beschaamd trok ze de vinger uit haar mond en wierp een blik op de man links van haar, de man die ze tot voor kort alleen van tv en uit de krant kende. Hij leek het niet te hebben gehoord, veegde met de mouw van zijn jas wat condens van het raampje naast hem. Buiten ontwaakte de stad, de luie winterzon kwam op, of preciezer: het daglicht zwol aan. Van de zon was op deze zwaarbewolkte winterochtend niets te zien. 196 Om tien voor acht had ze voor de laatste maal de inhoud van haar fluorescerend groene koffer geïnspecteerd, checklist in de hand. Maar was de checklist wel compleet? De afgelopen weken was ze soms midden in de nacht wakker geschrokken met in haar hoofd iets waar ze hoe-konze-het-vergeten nog geen seconde aan had gedacht. De paniek werd op zulke momenten versterkt door de mogelijkheid van al die andere dingen waar ze overdag bij volle helderheid niet aan gedacht had, en die haar misschien wel nooit in haar slaap zouden komen verrassen. Pas als ze goed en wel in Ethiopië was, zou ze zich ten volle realiseren wat ze allemaal had verzuimd mee te nemen en dan was het te laat, want ze hadden daar natuurlijk niks.

De Emergency-kit met daarin een draagbare operatiekamer bestaande uit eerstewereldfrivoliteiten als steriele injectie-naalden en scalpels en latex handschoenen en verbandgaasjes, en verder volgestouwd met diarree remmers, tientallen zakjes ors, malariapillen, breedspectrum-antibiotica en het speciale gele vaccinatiepaspoortje waarin haar inenting tegen dtp, hepatitis a en gele koorts vermeld stonden. In een winkel voor reisbenodigdheden had ze zich verder nog allerhande middelen tegen insecten laten aansmeren, alsook zeep waar je geen water voor nodig had, waterzuiveringspoeder, een tekenpincet, vlooienpoeder en de krachtigste deet-spray (50%) die ze kon vinden.

Check.

De nacht: pyjama, hoofdlantaarn, hygiënisch slaapzakje, boeken over Ethiopië waarin ze nog steeds niet begonnen was.

Check.

Kleding: spijkerbroeken, opdrukloze T-shirts, veel koloniaal linnen – in wat voor bui van overdreven serieuze had ze die selectie gemaakt? Had ze dan toch iets geërfd van dat kleurloze idealisme waar de Bejaarden zich vroeger met zoveel vreugdeloze passie aan hadden overgegeven?

Snel propte ze twee vrolijke jurkjes in de koffer, en in haar toilettaas wat make-up.

Handbagage: eten voor onderweg, tandenborstel, notitieboekje, fototoestel, memorecorder. Laptop in waterdichte hoes = draagbaar laboratorium. Laatste wijziging: Globalization and Its Discontents van Stiglitz eruit (waarom zat dat erin? Alsof ze dat in het vliegtuig ging lezen!), Hemingways A Farewell to Arms erin: een afscheidscadeautje van Alice, die ‘nog 197 nooit zo’n mooi liefdesverhaal’ had gelezen, al had ze dat een jaar eerder ook beweerd over dat overschatte lichtheidsboek van Kundera, en een jaar dáárvoor was het weer iets anders geweest, wat? , The English Patient? , ja, Alice had een groot hart.

Alles aan boord.

Twee over acht: de bel. Yohannes.

‘Yo, Yoyo!’

Ze omhelsden elkaar.

‘Laat geworden?’ Hij liet haar los, bestudeerde haar gezicht.

‘Nogal, ja. Bij jullie ook, zo te zien?’

Zijn hinniklachje, schor: ‘Mensonterend laat.’

Heldhaftig tilde hij haar overvolle prinsessenkoffer op en samen stommelden ze de trappen af. Ze stapten in de vrieskist van de donkere ochtend, waar het geklingel, geknal en geroffel klonk van metaal op metaal, en hout op metaal: de kraamzeters waren bezig de markt op te bouwen onder het oranje licht van de straatlantaarns. Tranen in haar ogen van de kou, maar ze stond zichzelf geen klacht toe: ze zou deze kou nog gaan missen de komende weken.

Bij de incheckbalie op Schiphol werd het gezelschap (minus chauffeurKoter Tewolde, die weer met het busje huiswaarts was gekeerd) opgewacht door Machteld, de vrouw van het donateursblad Tesfa, en Harm, de enige professionele journalist die interesse had kunnen opbrengen voor deze expeditie. Of nu ja, interesse... Aurélie had hem enkele weken eerder ontmoet, tijdens de kennismakingsborrel op de Keizersgracht, en toen al kreeg ze het sterke vermoeden dat hij veel liever naar Afghanistan of Irak was uitgezonden. Dat waren de landen waar je op dit moment moest zijn, want iederéén was daar, maar Oneindig Laagland, het opinieblad waar hij voor werkte, had anders besloten.

‘En jij, waar schrijf jij voor?’ had hij bij die gelegenheid aan Aurélie gevraagd, en met de nodige schroom had ze geantwoord: ‘O, gewoon, voor het faculteitsblaadje van school. Ik ga eigenlijk mee vanwege mijn afstudeeronderzoek, maar het lijkt me gewoon wel leuk om ook een soort reisreportage te schrijven of zo.’

Harm had geknikt en was vervolgens een nieuw drankje gaan halen, terwijl Aurélie zichzelf vervloekte vanwege 2 x ‘gewoon’, 1 x ‘eigenlijk’ en tot overmaat van ramp ook nog

1 x ‘of zo’. Naar haar afstudeeronderzoek had hij die avond verder niet gevraagd.

Nu stond hij te gapen in spijkerjack en camouflagebroek. Machteld was de opgewektheid zelve en begroette iedereen met uitbundige zoenen, ook Aurélie, die nu blijkbaar een beetje bij de familie hoorde. Ze vond Machteld wel schattig, zo’n heerlijke mollige vrouw met een praktisch kapsel, bij wie alles erop duidde dat ze haar zorgzame karakter, na het volwassen worden van haar kinderen, ten dienste van de behoeftige medemens had gesteld, een vrouw die zich nooit door cynisme uit het veld zou laten slaan – een uitstervend ras.

Het gezelschap bestond nu uit dertien leden en hoewel Aurélie niet bijgelovig was, gaf dat getal haar toch een onaangenaam gevoel, dat zich gezellig aansloot bij het reeds aanwezige ensemble van vermoeidheid, verbolgen lever, getergde maag en zenuwpezende darmen. Pas voorbij de douane, toen er eindelijk gelegenheid was om te zitten en iets te eten, kwam ze een beetje tot zichzelf. De grote raampartij bij de gate toonde ijzigblauwe klm-toestellen op berijpt tarmac, gehuld in dikke slierten mist. Ze at een van huis meegebrachte appel, dronk daarna een half flesje water leeg.

Veel Ethiopiërs in de wachtruimte. Dat mocht niet verbazen en toch verbaasde het haar. Hoe ze eruitzagen. Zakenlieden, keurig in pak. Gezellige gezinnen, zichtbaar welvarend. Wat had ze dan verwacht? Ja, blanken natuurlijk, met T-shirts van unicef of Save the Children of Oxfam Novib of hoe al die clubs ook mochten heten. Maar blijkbaar gingen er ook mensen voor zaken of voor hun plezier naar Ethiopië. En met dat inzicht kwam haar deelname aan deze reis haar ineens voor als een totale charade. Aurélie Lindeboom gaat in ontwikkelingshulp – zij! Zij, bij wie de betrokkenheid met de

derde wereld zich een jeugd lang had beperkt tot luisteren naar platen van Kinderen voor Kinderen. Voor kiiiin-du-run van dáááááár – nee hoor, gewoon omdat ze die rotdeuntjes niet uit haar kop kreeg. Ze kon zich maar één gelegenheid herinneren waarbij ze – in een kortstondige fase van adolescent idealisme – haar ouders had gevraagd, nee, bevolen om een substantieel bedrag (50 gulden) over te maken op Giro 555. Ergens halverwege de jaren negentig was dat, toen tv-beelden vanuit Rwanda slachtoffers met afgehakte lichaamsdelen toonden, gefragmenteerde lijken in modder, de eindeloze stromen vluchtelingen te voet op weg naar de grens met Congo. Er kwam een Nationale Inzamelingsactie met bijbehorend tv-spektakel en 199 Aurélie wilde deelgenoot worden van de collectieve filantropie die het land in haar greep hield. ‘Dat geld komt toch nooit aan bij de mensen die het nodig hebben,’ stribbelden de Bejaarden tegen. Vond zij toen cynisch, en na lang doorzeuren kwam dan toch het boekje met overschrijfformulieren op tafel. Een warm gevoel doorgolfde haar toen het bedrag werd ingevuld, de ouderlijke handtekening gezet. Die geelgekleurde aflaat stond voor háár bijdrage aan de eensgezinde poging van het ene volk een ander volk te redden. Bijna-tranen van trots.

De Bejaarden hadden helaas gelijk gehad met hun scepsis, zo bleek een jaar of wat later, toen Aurélie een reportage zag over wat er uiteindelijk met het hulpgeld gebeurd was. Dat er in dat vluchtelingenkamp in Congo vooral Hutu’s waren terechtgekomen: de genocideplegers. Niet de slachtoffers, de Tutsi’s, zoals de landelijke tv-actie had doen voorkomen.

Namens haar dertienjarige ik voelde ze zich alsnog bekocht. Maar wat had haar ook bezielde? Waar was die plotse aanval van weldoenerij vandaan gekomen?

School waarschijnlijk. Groepsdruk. Bijna religieus, hoe Nederlandse kindertjes werden opgevoed met een schuldgevoel over hun welstand. Kinderpostzegels: daar begon het al mee. Zelden had Aurélie het Goede Doel en de Derde Wereld intenser gehaat dan tijdens de regenachtige najaarsdag waarop ze de deuren van onwillige vreemden langs moest om te leuren met velletjes filatelie.

(Afgelopen herfst had ze in de krant zo'n opgewekt berichtje aangetroffen – '... mogen honderdduizenden basisschoolleerlingen weer de straat op...': die middeleeuwse martelmethode om kinderen de Hollandsche charitasgeest bij te brengen (helpen is lijden) bestond dus nog steeds!)

Toch zat ze nu hier, te wachten tot ze aan boord mocht van de grote Airbus die haar naar Ethiopië zou brengen, waar voor de zoveelste maal in de geschiedenis een hongersnood het leven van honderdduizenden, misschien wel miljoenen mensen bedreigde. Haar afstudeeronderzoek zou daar geen verandering in brengen, maar de reportage die ze wilde schrijven voor het faculteitsbladje – waarvan ze stiekem hoopte dat een serieuze krant of misschien een tijdschrift als *Oneindig Laagland* die zou willen doorplaatsen – kon misschien een klein, een piepklein verschil 200 maken. Bewustwording, daar ging het om. Voor een herhaling van de Rwanda-verwarring hoefde niemand bang te zijn. Het weinige dat ze tot nu toe over Ethiopië had geleerd, was dat er geen oorlog gaande was en ook geen genocide, er stond zelfs geen krankzinnige dictator aan het roer, het was gewoon een land waar het zó lang niet geregend had, dat er niets meer te eten was. Simpele waarheden – ze bestonden nog. Toch nog. En zij kon helpen door de aandacht op die ellende te vestigen – de aandacht van de wereld, die momenteel volledig gefixeerd was op de oorlog tegen het terrorisme.

A Hunger

Jamal Ouariachi

Translated from Dutch by Michele Hutchison

Minibus (1)

Faster than was safe, the minibus raced through the grey slush, spawn of snow and road salt; the outside temperature was minus 9°C, while inside an old-fashioned car heater shot out well-intentioned but nauseating hot air which, in combination with the moist carbon dioxide from the mouths of 12 passengers, recreated the clammy atmosphere of an indoor tropical water park. Aside from the windscreen, all of the windows had steamed up.

Only two voices could be heard, one male, one female, both originating from a Radio 1 programme in which a very lively conversation about politics was being held for so early on a Saturday morning.

Speed bumps, bends, brakes, acceleration: the two bites of sandwich in Aurélie Lindeboom's stomach sloshed back and forth in a puddle of coffee. She'd forgotten to take her pills, car sickness had joined forces with the hangover from her leaving party that had only ended when there was barely enough time left for sleep.

She rested her heavy head on the shoulder of Yohannes who was sitting to her right. A waft of vanilla and the coconut smell of his frizzy hair activated her salivary glands and, despite her clenched stomach, she hankered after something sweet. Bag, containing a packet of Oreos amongst other stuff, out of

reach. To compensate, she chewed on the middle section of her index finger.

‘Are you sucking your thumb?’ Yohannes asked.

She pulled her finger from her mouth, ashamed, and glanced at the man to her left, the man she’d only known from TV and the papers until very recently. He didn’t seem to have heard and used the arm of his jacket to wipe condensation from the window next to him. Outside, the city was waking up, the lazy winter sun rose, or to be more precise: daylight swelled. There was nothing to see of the sun on this overcast winter morning. At ten to eight, she’d inspected the contents of her fluorescent green suitcase one last time, checklist in hand. But was everything on the checklist? Over the past weeks, she’d sometimes jerked awake in the middle of the night with something – how could she have forgotten? – that hadn’t even crossed her mind yet. At moments like that, the panic was reinforced by the possibility of all the other things she hadn’t thought about during the day when her mind was clear, things that might come and surprise her in her sleep. It wasn’t until she was actually in Ethiopia that she would fully comprehend just how much stuff she had failed to take with her and then it would be too late, because they didn’t have a thing there, of course.

The Emergency Kit contained a portable operating theatre consisting of First World frivolities such as sterile hypodermic needles and scalpels and latex gloves and bandage gauzes. It was also crammed with diarrhea inhibitors, dozens of sachets of ORS, malaria pills, broad-spectrum antibiotics and the special yellow vaccination passport listing her inoculations against DTP, hepatitis A and yellow fever. In a shop that sold travel equipment, she’d allowed them to ply her with all kinds

of insect repellents, plus soap you didn't need water for, water purification powder, a tick tweezer, flea powder and the most powerful DEET spray (50%) she could find.

Check.

For the nighttime: pyjamas, head torch, anti-transpiration sleeping bag, books about Ethiopia she hadn't got around to reading yet.

Check.

Clothes: jeans, plain t-shirts, a lot of colonial linen – what kind of ridiculously austere mood had she been in when she'd made that selection? Had she managed to inherit some of the drab idealism the Olds had surrendered to with so much joyless passion?

She quickly chucked two cheerful dresses into the case and some make-up into her toiletry bag.

Hand luggage: food for the journey, toothbrush, notebook, camera, dictaphone. Laptop in a waterproof cover = portable laboratory. Last change: out with Stiglitz's *Globalization and Its Discontents* (what was that doing there? As if she was going to read that on a plane!), in with Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*: a leaving gift from Alice who had 'never read such a nice love story,' even though she'd said the same thing a year previously about that overrated lightness book by Kundera, and the year before that it had been something else again, what? *The English Patient*? Sure, Alice had a big heart.

Packed and ready to go.

Two minutes past eight: the bell. Yohannes.

'Yo, Yoyo!'

They hugged.

‘Late night?’ He released her and studied her face.

‘You could say that. You too, by the looks of it?’

His whinnying laugh, hoarse voice: ‘Inhumanly late.’

He courageously lifted up her overstuffed princess’ suitcase and they staggered down the stairs together. They stepped out into the bitter cold of the dark morning to the clanging, banging, drumming sound of metal on metal, and wood on metal: the stall builders were busy setting up the market beneath the orange light of the street lamps. Tears in her eyes from the cold, but she didn’t allow herself to complain: she’d miss this cold in the weeks to come.

At the check-in at Schiphol airport, the group (minus driver Koter Tewolde, who’d headed home with the bus) was met by Machteld, the lady from the charity magazine *Tesfa*, and Harm, the only professional journalist who’d been able to summon up interest in the expedition. Or should that be ‘interest’... Aurélie had met him a few weeks earlier, during the meet and greet at the Keizersgracht, and even then she’d got the strong impression he’d rather have been sent to Afghanistan or Iraq. Those were the places to be now because simply everyone was there, but *Infinite Lowlands*, the magazine he worked for had had other ideas.

‘And you, who do you write for?’ he’d asked Aurélie, and she replied, with some hesitation, ‘Oh, you know, just the faculty’s paper at uni. I’m actually going for my graduation project, but I sort of liked the idea of sort of writing a travelogue.’

Harm had nodded and then gone to fetch another drink, while Aurélie cursed herself for her ‘you know’ and ‘actually’ and ‘sort of’: twice. He hadn’t asked about her graduation project that evening.

Now he stood before her, yawning in a denim jacket and combat trousers. Machteld was the very picture of cheerfulness and greeted everyone with a protracted series of kisses, even Aurélie, who was now clearly a member of the family. She found Machteld quite adorable, such a delicious plump woman with a practical haircut, everything suggested she had redirected her caring nature to the service of her needy fellow men after her children had flown the nest; a woman who'd never be put off by cynicism, a member of a dying breed.

The group now contained 13 members and although Aurélie wasn't superstitious, the number gave her an uneasy feeling, which merrily joined in with the already present ensemble of tiredness, angry liver, tormented stomach and nervous intestines. It wasn't until after customs, when there was finally an opportunity to sit down and eat something, that she came to a little. The large windows at the gate revealed ice-blue KLM planes on frosted tarmac, shrouded in thick trails of mist. She ate an apple she'd brought from home and drunk half a bottle of water.

Lots of Ethiopians in the waiting room. It shouldn't be a surprise and yet it was. The way they looked. Businessmen in neat suits. Happy families, visibly affluent. What had she expected then? White people of course, wearing UNICEF t-shirts or Save the Children or Oxfam or whatever those charities were called. But clearly people also went to Ethiopia for business or pleasure. And with that insight, her participation in the trip suddenly seemed a complete charade. Aurélie Lindeboom joining the VSO – her! Aurélie, whose commitment to the Third World had consisted of watching an old video of Band Aid. Feed the world, but only because you couldn't get the song out of your head. She could only remember one instance – in a brief phase of adolescent idealism – in

which she'd asked her parents, no, ordered her parents to transfer quite a large sum (50 guilders) to the national fundraising campaign Giro 555. Somewhere halfway through the nineties that was, when they'd shown Rwandan victims with chopped off limbs on TV, body parts in the mud, the endless streams of refugees on their way to the Congolese border on foot. There was a countrywide fundraising drive with an accompanying TV show and Aurélie wanted to be part of the collective philanthropy that held her country in its grip. 'The money never reaches the people who need it,' the Olds countered. She thought that cynical and, after a lot of whining, the cheque book finally appeared on the table. A warm feeling flooded through her when the sum was filled out, parental signature added. That yellow-tinted indulgence stood for her contribution to the concerted efforts of one people trying to save another. She almost shed tears of pride.

A year or so later, it transpired that the Olds had been right in their scepticism, alas: Aurélie saw a report about what had actually happened to the money raised. The refugee camps in Congo were mainly filled with Hutus: the perpetrators of the genocide. Not the victims, the Tutsis, as the national TV campaign had suggested.

She still felt cheated on behalf of her 13-year-old self. But what had possessed her? Where had the sudden attack of do-goodish behavior come from?

School, probably. Peer pressure. It was almost religious, the way Dutch children were raised to feel guilty about their easy lives. Children's stamps: that was where it started. Aurélie had rarely hated charity and the Third World more intensely than during the rainy autumnal day when she'd had to knock on the doors of hostile strangers peddling philatelic sheets.

(The previous autumn she'd come across another of those breezy items in the newspaper – 'a hundred thousand primary school pupils hit the streets once again...' that medieval torture method to instill the Dutch charitable spirit in children (helping is suffering) still existed!)

Yet here she sat now, waiting to board the large Airbus that would take her to Ethiopia, where for the nth time in human history a famine threatened the lives of hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of people. Her graduation project would broker no change, but the article she wanted to write for her faculty's paper – which she secretly hoped a serious paper or maybe even a magazine like *Infinite Lowlands* would want to republish – might possibly make a small, a tiny difference. Raising awareness, that was the point. No one needed to be afraid of a repeat of the Rwanda confusion. The little she had learned about Ethiopia up to now was that there was no war and no genocide; there wasn't even a crazy dictator at the helm. It was simply a country where it hadn't rained for so long that there was nothing to eat. Simple truths still existed. They still did. And she could help by drawing the world's attention to the misery – attention that was currently focused on the war against terrorism and nothing else.



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Darko Tuševljaković

Jaz (2016)

The Chasm

Publishing House **Arhipelag**

Biography

Darko Tuševljaković was born in Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1978. Since 2002, his fiction has been published in literary magazines and anthologies in Serbia and elsewhere in the Balkans. In 2004, he was awarded the Lazar Komarcic Award for short fiction. Tuševljaković is the author of two novels and a collection of short stories. His books have been shortlisted for some of the most important Serbian national awards for fiction. In 2016, his novel *Jaz (The Chasm)*, the Serbian winner of the European Union Prize for Literature) was shortlisted for the NIN Award for the best novel of the year, the most prestigious literary award in Serbia. He lives and works in Belgrade.

Synopsis

At its core, *Jaz (The Chasm)* is a story about the disintegration of a family. In the first of the two parts of the novel, an estranged husband suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of his war experience, strives to re-establish the relationship with his estranged wife during a holiday in Greece, succeeding only in deepening the discord between the two of them. The second part takes place in Serbia and focuses upon the main reason for the marital discord of the couple from the first part – the plight of their son, a student who tries to find his place in society, as well as his identity, through a series of dramatic events with a surprising and powerful twist at the end.

1.

I posle toliko godina, Bogdana je budio prasak. Ovog puta su mu eksplodirale zenice i, kada je došao sebi, prešao je prstima preko kapaka da se uveri da ispod njih ipak ima nečega. Bio je prilično zadovoljan zaključkom: nalazio se u sve tri dimenzije, a i četvrta mu se postepeno vraćala dok se prevrtao po neudobnom, nepoznatom krevetu. Star čovek zna da je živ po tome što ga sve živo boli, palo mu je na pamet. I na isti način ume da razdvoji san od jave. U snu, ma koliko košmaran bio, bol ne postoji. On nastupi posle, na ovoj strani zida, ovde su mu izvori i ušća. Bol prožima dužine, širine i visine, i proteže se sekundama i godinama. Ta pomisao je trebalo da bude utešna jer je značila da su sve sanjane strahote bezopasne, ali Bogdana to ipak nije uspeo da oraspoloži. Protrljavši dlanom nos koji ga je svrbeo od hrkanja, podigao je kapke i na trenutak ostao slep. Radica je već rastvorila žaluzine i parče plavog neba zapretilo je da mu zaista iskopa očne jabučice. Osećao je osušen znoj na sebi, peckala su ga mesta natekla posle ujeda komaraca. Bilo je teško odabrati dimenziju pogodnu za bežanje.

„Navuci bar zavesu“, promumlao je.

Apartmanska soba u kojoj su s mukom pregurali noć mirisala je na tečnost koja ih je ošamućivala i koju su morali da kupe čim su se raspakovali prethodne večeri, pošto usluga nije podrazumevala odbranu od krvopija. Ostrvo na koje su došli ne zaprašuje se, tobože da bi se zaštitili maslinjaci, ali niko nije postavio mreže preko prozora i vrata. Zato je

u svakoj prodavnici u koju su ušli, pegavi poput tifusara, postojao zaseban raf sa sredstvima protiv komaraca od kojih su najjeftinija koštala petnaest evra. Pederi grčki.

Radica je grejala vodu na pocrnелom rešou. Miris kafe se mešao sa mirisom tečnog insekticida i Bogdan je strgnuo čaršav sa sebe i pravo iz kreveta izjurio na terasu.

U apartmanu ništa nije valjalo, tu se fizički bol spajao sa duševnim. Damir mu je nedavno objasnio kako funkcionišu kompjuterski programi za ulepšavanje stvarnosti i pokazao mu šta mogu da urade sa, recimo, njegovom starom fotografijom iz vojske, ali kada su Radica i Bogdan u agenciji birali smeštaj, njemu nije palo na pamet da ništa od luksuza prikazanog na nacifranim prezentacijama neće zateći na licu mesta. Trošno, to je bila prava reč. Sve je bilo trošno. Kreveti su škripali i suviše lako klizili preko pločica postavljenih čak i u spavaćoj sobi, kao da je to klanica, a ne apartman. Kuhinja je bila toliko skućena da se frižider jedva otvarao, a među posuđem nije bilo šerpe. Šta su oni zamišljali, šta čovek da jede? Nije bilo šerpe, ali je zato u visećem elementu iznad sudopere stajao sekač za kuvana jaja. (Bogdan nije znao kako se to tačno zove, pa ga je zvao sekač. Ono malo sranje sa žičicama koje pritisneš na jaja kako bi ih isekao na šnite. Šnicle. Kako god... Kome to treba?) I čajnik. Obezbedili su kojekakve specijalizovane naprave, a izostavili onu opšte namene – šerpu u kojoj možeš i skuvati čaj i obariti jaje. Čim su došli, Radica mu je rekla zašto je tako, ali Bogdan nije bio zadovoljan objašnjenjem. Otkud ona zna? A ni to da je ceo Krf, pa i Dasija, u kojoj su odseli, prevashodno namenjen turistima iz Zapadne Evrope, ponajviše iz Engleske i Holandije, nije mu se činilo realnim. „Gde su, onda, ti Englezi?“, pitao je, pokazavši rukom na kompleks apartmana koje su, sve do jednog, popunili Srbi. Kada su se iskricali iz autobusa, nekoliko saputnika se bacilo u

bazen, a domaćin, sredovečan pogrbljen Grk u čijim je očima Bogdan video samo pare, pare, pare, razgalamio se i isterao ih iz vode. Zbunjeni putnici su u pustoj restoranskoj prostoriji sačekali da im se podele ključevi, kako bi, poput zatvorenika, u koloni pošli ka sobama. „Gde su ti Englezi?“, ponovio je tada, naslonivši se na zidani roštilj u toj zatvorenoj menzi, dok je Radica uspravljala preturene kofere. Prešao je prstom preko rešetke grila i pokazao joj savršeno čistu jagodicu. „Ovo niko nije palio mesecima. Godinama.“ Radica je slegla ramenima. „To je zato što im više ne dolaze Englezi. Vidiš da ni kuhinja ne radi. Neće da raspaljuju vatru za nas.“ Podigla je manji kofer i očima mu pokazala da preuzme veći. „Verovatno zato ne smemo ni u bazen“, dodala je i pošla ispred njega ka apartmanu. Pederi engleski, pomislio je.

Na terasi ga je zapahnuo topao vetar koji je dobijao zalet spuštajući se niz planinu ka moru. Mirisalo je na... hlor iz bazena. Bogdan odmahnu glavom i skrsti ruke na grudima. Zašto su uopšte došli? Zašto je pristao na ovo letovanje usred sezone, u terminu koji je uvek izbegavao, čak i dok je službovao – a tada je bilo mnogo teže otići na odmor baš kad tebi odgovara. Pretpostavljeni su mu, doduše, uglavnom izlazili u susret. *Kapetan Bogomdan*, govorili bi i upisivali u kalendar dane koje bi on odabrao. *Kapetan Bogomdan može da ide na odmor kad god poželi*. Ono što ne može jeste da dobije čin majora, ali Bogdan je o tome prestao da razmišlja davno pre nego što je otišao u penziju. Nikad se nije mnogo opterećivao činovima. Napredovanje u službi bilo je Radičin fah, ali ona je prokleta i Bogdan je to znao. Evo i sad – ta kafa preti da mu pokvari dan. Kafa, sredstvo protiv komaraca, hlor, sekač za jaja, čajnik, nepostojeći Englezi, gramzivi Grci, celo ostrvo, previše blizu Albanije.

Bila je to njena ideja. Rekla mu je da treba da se sklone iz Beograda, makar na nedelju dana. I on je poverovao u ponuđeno rešenje, onako kako je poverovao Damiru da *Fotošop* menja izgled ljudi. Samo što to nije istina: ljudi se sami menjaju, sami od sebe prave nakaze. Ne treba im kompjuterski program za to. *Kad je on mogao da ode, možemo i mi*, pomislio je tada i pustio Radicu da odabere odredište. Naravno da je odabrala more. *Krf*, rekla je, *gde cveta limun žut*. S vremenom je shvatio koliko su poseban soj ti ljudi potekli iz krša. Ni sa čim se ne da uporediti razmišljanje onoga ko je celo detinjstvo proveo okružen sivilom. Kamen sa golih brda preti da se preseli u čoveka, ispuni ga kao onog vuka u basni sa jarićima i povuče ga ka dnu. Bogdan nije smatrao da je Radica dotakla dno, zato što nije znao gde bi to dno trebalo da se nalazi. Veći strah u njemu je izazivala pomisao da dna uopšte nema. Tada se pitao da li je sve što njih dvoje rade, te davno iscrtane šeme po kojima su se primicali i udaljavali jedno od drugog, samo bauljanje u snu lišenom dimenzija i smisla.

Sredstvo protiv komaraca mirisalo je na limun. Sada je i kafa imala tu aromu. Toliko o slavnom *Krfu*. Danas je sve lažno. Ljudi su lažni, mirisi su lažni, ostrva su lažna, ma koliko visoku grbu nosila na leđima. Grbu koja zaklanja sunce. Pantokrator. Ko uopšte dade jednom brdu takvo ime? Kao neka poljska mašina. *Idem, Radice, da preorem njivu pantokratorom*.

Bogdan se zagledao u more, udaljeno oko pola kilometra od kompleksa s bazenom. Tamo dalje, ka Albaniji, svetlucalo je na suncu kao da je presvučeno celofanom, ali plićak Dasije bio je u senci. Bogdanu se nije ulazilo u zaliv čiju je vodu mreškao vetar; delovala je hladno, a pesak koji se beleo na dnu mogao je biti i živ, spreman da proguta celog čoveka. Ako se moglo verovati Radici, ovde ga niko ne bi izvukao na suvo, jer ga

meštani, uprkos tradicionalnom grčko-srpskom prijateljstvu, ne bi razumeli. Vikao bi „Upomoć!“, a ne „Help!“ niti „Hilfe!“. Kad konačno bude provirilo iznad Pantokratora, sunce će upeći i Bogdan će joj predložiti da se danas ne spuštaju do plaže. Ionako su suviše umorni od puta. Uveče bi mogli da prošetaju mestom, ali ništa više od toga. On nije bio čovek iz kamena. Rođen je u njivi, izašao je iz plodnog tla Šumadije, što ga, doduše, najčešće nije činilo ni pametnijim, ni mekšim. Kada su se tek upoznali, šalili su se da će razlike između njih doprineti vezi, da će se pomoću njih još čvršće spojiti u onome što dele. Možda je to nekad bila istina, ali Bogdana je, kao i kada su posredi bile granice zajedničkog sna, više mučila pomisao na to da sličnosti i poklapanja uopšte nema.

„Za pola sata treba da budemo u zajedničkoj prostoriji“, dobacila je Radica iz sobe, srknuvši kafu. „Doći će turistička predstavica, da nas upozna sa aranžmanom. Ima nekih izleta, videla sam na oglasnoj tabli. Paksos, Antipaksos. Ide se i na Vido. Možda...“

„Možda bismo mogli da preskočimo tu govoranciju“, rekao je Bogdan, okrenuvši leđa moru. Dočekao ga je pogled na padinu i vetar mu je udario pravo u lice. Opet je osetio pritisak u očima, pretnju da će nešto u njemu buknuti. Znao je da uzalud negoduje. Ušao je u sobu, zadržavši dah kako bi izbegao neprijatne mirise. Zatvorio se u kupatilo i presvukao u pristojnu odeću. Kada je Radica ispila kafu, sišli su u prizemlje. Tamo se nekoliko gostiju već beše okupilo oko roštilja i nepostavljenih stolova za ručavanje, i Radica je među njima prepoznala par koji je tokom puta od Beograda do Krfa sedeo sa druge strane prolaza u autobusu. Na pauzi kod Predejana je prozborila reč-dve s njima, dok je Bogdan olakšavao bešiku

u motelu. Kada je autobus napustio parkiralište, prenela mu je da su to Tanja i Zoran Simović i da i oni idu u Dasiju. Gospodin je čak bio vojno lice u penziji, poput Bogdana. „Divno“, rekao je, zatvorivši oči da izbegne mučninu. Sada, dok je stajao među pospanim turistima i čekao turističku predstavnicu, shvatio je da je to bio prvi znak: upozorenje da je trebalo ostati kod kuće. Ali nije ga prepoznao na vreme i sad je bilo kasno. Radica je već ćaskala sa tim Zoranom i njegovom znatno mlađom gospođom, mašući Bogdanu tašnom da priđe, na šta je on odmahnuo rukom i zauzeo sto nasred prostorije, na bezbednoj udaljenosti od njih. Radica mu se ubrzo pridružila s kartom Krfa koju su joj poklonili novi poznanici.

„Kakav si...“, zamahnula je tašnom kao da će ga klepiti po glavi. „Odseli su u apartmanu do našeg. Gledaćemo ih nedelju dana. Što se ne bi, za promenu, oraspoložio? Valjda smo zato došli.“

„Nismo zato došli“, rekao je Bogdan, jer je znao da će je to učutkati. Doduše, oprezno je pogledao u tašnu, koja mu je oduvek ličila na ružnog i loše dresiranog psa, uvek spremnog da zalaje. Imala je prgavu njušku i, kad god bi Radica otkopčala njene metalne čeljusti, Bogdan se plašio da će ka njemu pokuljati žuč koju je gazdarica nataložila u mraku kožne utrobe. Sada mu se, na sreću, činilo da nema bojazni od sličnih izliva nežnosti. Tajne koje je tašna krila bile su bezbedne iza te podsmešljive grimase.

The Chasm

Darko Tuševljaković

Translated from Serbian by Randall A. Major and Ema Pandrc

1.

Even after all those years, Bogdan was awakened by a bang. This time his pupils exploded and, when he came to his senses, he felt his eyelids with the tips of his fingers to make sure that there was still something lying under them. He was fairly satisfied with his conclusion: he was occupying all three dimensions, and the fourth was gradually coming back to him as he tossed and turned in an uncomfortable bed he had never slept in before. An old man knows he's alive when every inch of him hurts, it occurred to him. And in the same way, he's able to separate the dream world from the waking one. In his dreams, no matter how nightmarish, pain doesn't exist. It only comes later, on this side of the wall, it starts and ends here. Pain pervades length, width, and height, and lasts for seconds and ages. That thought was supposed to be a consolation because it meant that all the horrors one dreams are harmless, but it didn't make Bogdan feel any better. With his palm he rubbed his nose, which was itchy from his snoring, then raised his eyelids and for a moment was blinded. Radica had already opened the jalousies and a glimpse of the blue sky threatened to actually dig out his eyeballs. He felt dried sweat on his skin, the swollen mosquito bites were burning. It was difficult to choose a dimension suitable for escaping.

“At least close the curtains,” he mumbled.

The suite in which they had spent the tortuous night smelled of a lotion that dizzied them; they had been forced to buy it as soon as they unpacked the previous evening, because the services didn't include safety from the little bloodsuckers. The island they were visiting was not sprayed, ostensibly to protect the olive orchards, but no one put screens on the doors and windows. That is why every shop they entered, spotty like typhus victims, had a special rack with anti-mosquito products, the cheapest of which cost 15 euros. Greek bastards.

Radica was heating water on an old greasy hot plate. The smell of coffee mingled with the smell of the insecticide lotion, and Bogdan threw the sheet back and rushed straight from the bed onto the terrace.

Nothing about the suite was good, it was where physical and spiritual pain connected. Damir had recently explained to him how reality enhancement computer programs work and showed him what they can do, for example, with an old photograph from his army days; but when Radica and Bogdan were in the agency choosing their lodgings it never even crossed his mind that none of the luxuries in the fancy presentations would actually be there when they arrived. Squalid, that was the right word for it. Everything was squalid. The beds were creaky and slid too easily across the tiles laid even in the bedroom, as if it were a slaughterhouse, and not a hotel suite. The kitchen was so cramped that you could hardly open the refrigerator, and there were no pots among the dishes. What were they thinking, how was one supposed to eat? There were no pots, but there was an egg cutter in the cabinet above the sink. (Bogdan didn't know exactly what the thingy was called, so he called it a cutter. That little piece of crap with wires that you push down over an egg to cut into slices. Into wedges. Whatever... Who needs *that*?) And a teapot. They

had supplied all sorts of special utensils, but they had forgotten the general-purpose stuff – like a pot in which you could make tea and boil an egg. As soon as they arrived, Radica had told him why it was so, but Bogdan was not satisfied with the explanation. How could she know? It also did not seem real to him that all of Corfu, including Dassia where they were staying, was primarily visited by tourists from Western Europe, mostly from England and Holland. “So, where are all the Brits?” he asked, pointing at the surrounding suites which were occupied to the last by Serbs. The second they got off the bus, several passengers had jumped straight into the pool and their host, a middle-aged slouching Greek in whose eyes Bogdan saw only money, money, money, began shouting at them and made them get out of the water. The confused travelers milled around the deserted restaurant waiting for their room keys, only to be marched to their rooms single file, like prisoners. “So where are all the Brits?” he had said then as well, leaning on the built-in barbecue in the closed-up dining hall, while Radica was straightening up the pile of luggage. He ran his finger over the grill and showed her that it was perfectly clean. “Nobody has used this for months. Years even.” Radica just shrugged. “That’s because the Brits don’t come here anymore. See, the kitchen isn’t even open. They won’t light the fire for people like us.” She picked up the smaller suitcase and instructed him with a look to take the bigger one. “That’s probably why we’re also not allowed in the pool,” she added, heading off in front of him to the suite. English bastards, he thought.

On the terrace, he was swept by a warm wind that gained speed as it came down the mountainside towards the sea. It smelled of... chlorine from the pool. Bogdan shook his head

and crossed his arms. Why did they decide to come in the first place? Why had he agreed to a summer vacation in the high season, in the period he had always avoided even while he was in the service – and it had been a lot harder back then to go on vacation exactly when you preferred to. His superiors, truth be told, had usually yielded to his choices. *Captain Bogdan, a.k.a. the God-Given*, they would say and write the dates he had picked into the calendar. *Captain God-Given can go on vacation whenever he desires*. What he could not do was to be promoted to the rank of major, but Bogdan had stopped thinking about that long before he retired. He had never really been obsessed with ranks. Promotions in the workplace were Radica's thing, but she was cursed and Bogdan knew that. Even now – coffee was threatening to ruin his day. The coffee, the mosquito lotion, the chlorine, the egg cutter, the teapot, the non-existent Brits, the greedy Greeks, the whole island way too close to Albania.

It was her idea. She told him that they should get out of Belgrade, at least for a week. And he believed the given solution would work, just like he believed Damir that Photoshop can change people's appearances. Only that's not true: people change themselves, they make freaks of themselves. They don't need a computer program for that. *If he could leave, so can we*, he thought at the time and let Radica choose the destination. She chose the seaside, of course. *Corfu*, she said, *where the yellow lemon blossoms*. With the passing of time, he had come to understand what a peculiar kind of people are those who come from the karst regions. Nothing can be compared with the thinking of someone who spent their whole childhood surrounded by greyness. The stones from the bare mountains threaten to move into a man, filling him like the wolf in the fable of the seven little goats, and dragging him

to the bottom. Bogdan didn't think that Radica had reached the bottom, because he didn't know where that bottom was supposed to be. He was even more frightened by the thought that there was no bottom at all. He began to wonder whether everything the two of them did, those long-since established patterns in which they moved closer to or further away from each other, was mere groping in a dream devoid of dimension and meaning.

The anti-mosquito lotion smelled like lemons. Now even the coffee smelled like that, too. So much for the famous Corfu. Everything is fake nowadays. People are fake, smells are fake, islands are fake, no matter how big the humps on their backs. Humps that block the sun. Pantokrator. Who gives a mountain a name like that? Sounds like farm machinery. *Radica, I'm gonna go plow the field with the pantokrator.*

Bogdan stared out at the sea, about half a kilometre away from the complex and swimming pool. In the distance, towards Albania, it sparkled in the sunshine as if covered in cellophane, but the shallows of Dassia were in the shade. Bogdan didn't feel like swimming in the cove where the wind rippled the water; it seemed cold, and the sand shining white at the bottom could have been quicksand, waiting to swallow a man whole. If Radica was to be trusted, nobody would drag him out, because the locals would not understand him, despite their traditional Greek-Serbian friendship. He'd cry out: "Upomoć!" and not "Help!" or "Hilfe!" When it finally did peek out from behind Pantokrator, the sun would be broiling hot and Bogdan would suggest not to go down to the beach today. They were too tired from travelling anyway. In the evening, they could take a walk around town, but nothing more than that. He was not a man of stone. He was born in the fields, he came from the fertile land of Šumadija which, in

all honesty, most often made him neither smarter nor gentler. When they'd first met, they joked that the differences between them would improve their relationship, that those things would bring them even closer together in what they shared. Perhaps it was true sometimes but, like when the boundaries of their common dreams were in question, Bogdan was more often disturbed by the thought that there were no similarities or agreements.

“We should be in the common room in half an hour,” Radica called out from the room, sipping her coffee. “The tour operator is coming to tell us about the arrangements. There are some outings, I saw them on the bulletin board. Paxos, Antipaxos. There's one to Vido as well. Maybe...”

“Maybe we could just skip all that prattle,” Bogdan said, turning his back to the sea. He was met by a view of the slopes and a wind which drove straight into his face. Again he felt pressure in his eyes, a sign that something within him was about to burst. He knew that he was being defiant in vain. He went into the room, holding his breath so that he could avoid the unpleasant smells. He shut himself up in the bathroom and changed into decent clothes. When Radica had finished her coffee, they went downstairs. There, several guests had already gathered around the barbecue and the unset dining tables, and Radica recognized a couple who had been sitting across the aisle from them on the bus from Belgrade to Corfu. During the rest stop near Predejane, she had exchanged a few words with them, while Bogdan relieved his bladder at the motel. When the bus had left the parking lot, she told him their names were Tanja and Zoran Simović, and that they too were headed for Dassia. The gentleman was even retired

from the military, like Bogdan. “How nice,” he said, closing his eyes to avoid getting nauseous. Now, as he was standing among the sleepy tourists, waiting for the tour operator, he realized that that had been the first sign: a warning that they should have stayed at home. But he hadn’t recognized it at the time and now it was too late. Radica was already chatting with that Zoran fellow and his significantly younger spouse, waving Bogdan over with her purse, to which he gave a wave of his hand and sat at the table right in the middle of the room at a safe distance from them. Radica soon joined him with a map of Corfu which her new acquaintances had given her.

“I mean, really...” she swung her purse as if she were about to box his ears with it. “They’re staying in the suite next to ours. We’ll be running into them all week. Why don’t you relax for a change? That’s why we’re here, right?”

“No, that’s not why we’re here,” Bogdan replied, knowing that would shut her up. Still, he was examining the inside of her purse, which always reminded him of an ugly and ill-trained dog, ever ready to start barking. It had a surly snout and, whenever Radica unsnapped its metal jaws, Bogdan was afraid that a deluge of bile would come at him which its owner had stored in the darkness of its leather bowels. Fortunately, now it seemed to him that there was no reason to dread such niceties. The secrets in that purse were kept safe, hidden behind her mocking facial expression.



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Sine Ergün

Baştankara (2016)

Chickadee

Publishing House **Yayınları**

Biography

Born in 1982 in Biga, Turkey, Sine Ergün graduated from Cağaloğlu Anadolu High School and Bilkent University, where she studied creative drama. She started writing poetry while she was still in high school. For three years, Ergün worked as an editor for a literary magazine, before publishing her short stories and poems in publications including *Notos*, *Özgür Edebiyat* and *Sözcükler*. She is currently working as a researcher at Bilgi University in Istanbul. She has published three books so far and her 2012 collection of short stories, *Bazen Hayat*, won the Sait Faik Short Story Award the following year.

Synopsis

The book's 23 stories in 80 pages are succinct: the shortest story is just one page long, the longest six pages, plainly written with depth and variety. Each story is an independent being, inviting the reader to start a new challenge.

Her *Statutory Decree (Kanun Hükmünde Kararname)* is a political satire on a highly abstract level: it is realistic, though also dreamlike. That story in itself could be considered sufficiently enlightening with regards to the situation in Turkey.

The concluding piece illustrates the overall atmosphere succinctly: a truck driver, after many years of solitary driving, is unable to leave his truck any more and sits nailed to the steering wheel. This indeed is an unnerving parable of the human condition.

In her stories, the themes she deals with are: alienation to oneself and to others; facing mediocrity; coming to terms with the past, the present and the future; revolt to inner and outer pressures; challenging your reality; seeing your city, your environment and your surroundings with different eyes; making choices; and looking deeper and deeper into one's soul.

Baştankara
Sine Ergün

UZUN YOL

“Ve ben hiç değer vermiyorum yalnızlığa.
Kendime değer vermiyorum yalnız olduğum zaman.”
Peter Handke, *Solak Kadın*

Uzun bir yolculukta ona eşlik etmesi için ne kadın adamı ne de adam kadını seçerdi. Gitmeleri gerektiğinde bir birbirlerine bir etrafa bakmış, başka seçenekleri olmadığı için beraber yola çıkmışlardı.

Kentten çıkana dek bilindik yolları izlediler. Kentin sınırına geldiklerinde etrafının gümüş topraklarla çevrili olduğunu gördüler. Önlerinde ince bir patika vardı. Adam hızlı ama duraksayıp etrafı izleyerek, kadın hızını değiştirmeden, tekdüze bir ilgiyle ilerliyordu.

Yol ne daraldı ne de genişledi. İki yan yana yürüdüğüne birbirlerine degecek denli dardı ilk günden beri, bunu hiç tercih etmediler. Güneş çıktığında toprak öyle bir parlıyordu ki tek bir patika bile zar zor seçiliyordu. Geceleri ise bir yıldızlar bir toprak yanıp sönüyor, birbirlerine karışıyordu. Böylece bilinmez zaman geçti. Neden sonra adam, Herkes gitmiş, dedi, ayak seslerini dinleyerek daha ilerlediler, Çoktan, dedi kadın. Biz niçin arkada kaldık? Ben kiminle gideceğimi seçemedim, dedi kadın, Ben gittiklerini fark etmedim, kimse söylemedi. Kadın duraksadı, Bugün yürüdüğümüz yetmez mi, dedi, Hayır, belki onlara yetişiriz.

Önce patika, sonra bütün toprak hiç görülmemiş bir kırmızıya döndü. Tek bir ize rastlamadan yürümeye devam ettiler. Sayılmaz günün sonunda, Suskunluğun sinirimi bozuyor, dedi adam, Sen de suskunsun, dedi kadın, konuşsan dinlerim. Yine günlerce yürüdüler.

Su kenarına vardıklarında susamamışlardı, içtiler. Yola çıktıklarından beri ilk kez oturdular. Kırmızı toprağa ilk kez dokundular. Çocukken bir kuş öldürdüm, dedi adam, ben öldürmedim, arkadaşım öldürdü, arkadaşım da değildi, o gün beraberdik işte. Yiyelim, dedi, tüylerini yolduk, yine de ısırınca ağzıma geliyordu tüyleri. Niçin uydum ki ona. Kalktı, suya uzandı, içti, öfkeyle döndü, Bizi niçin almadılar? Ben, dedi kadın, kiminle gideceğimi seçemedim, Kendini üstün görüyorsun, nedeni bu, dedi adam, yalnızlığının nedeni bu, yürürken hep izliyorum seni, bastığın topraktan bile üstün görüyorsun kendini. Suskunluğun sinirimi bozuyor. Tek başıma olsam daha iyi, bilirim tek başıma olduğumu, böyle. Uykum var, dedi kadın, sanırım düş göreceğim.

Kadın düşünde suyun derinliklerinde ilerliyordu. Nereye gideceğine dair iz yoktu. Biliyordu.

Adam düşünde bir yamacın ucundaydı. Uçabileceğini biliyordu. Bir tek.

Uyandıklarında kadın konuşkan adam suskundu. Bütün sevdiğim kitapları başkasına verdim, dedi kadın, Sevdiğim hiçbir şeyi başkasına vermedim, dedi adam.

Kadın, Buradan sonra patika yok olacak, dedi, nereye gideceğimizi seçmek zorunda kalacağız. Sen başka yöne ben başka yöne gitmek isteyecek. Nereye gittiğimizin önemi olmayacak, önemli olan ayrılmamız. Patika kaybolacak, dedi adam, ben başka yöne sen başka yöne gitmek isteyecek. Yollarımız ayrılırsa ayrılacak. Önemli olan nereye gittiğimiz.

Kırmızı toprak, onulmaz bir siyaha döndü, gökyüzü ise göz alıcı beyaz. Gece olduğunda tek yıldız çıkmadı, ay da. Patika vardıysa da önlerinde, gözden kaybolmuştu. Adam, yapış yapış siyahın içinden kadının elini buldu, çekti, Buradan, dedi, kadın kararsızdı, uydu, ilerlediler.

Yıldızlar hiç boşluksuz karanlığın içinde yavaş yavaş belir-meye başladığında adam sevinçten çılgınlığını tutamadı. Elle-rini bırakıp bir gökyüzüne bir birbirlerine baktılar. Kadın, adama bir zamanlar yıldızların hep bir arada, geniş bir aile olduğundan söz etti, sonra kimsenin anmak istemediği bir kavga sonucu ayrılmışlar, birbirlerini daha kırmamak için birbirlerine belli bir mesafeden daha fazla yaklaşmayacakları konusunda sözleşip gökyüzüne yayılmışlardı. Adam hikâyeyi dalgın, dinledi, Gidelim, dedi.

Toprak rengini bulduğunda, rengini unutacakları denli zaman geçmişti. Düz yol, bir tepeyle eğildi. Yürüdüler. Tepenin öteki yamacında ufak bir kulübe gördüler. Girdi-ler. Kadının eviydi. Adamın eviydi. Ne ki bunu ansımadılar. Oturdular. Elleri damarlanacak denli zaman geçti.

Ses. Tekdüze vuruş. Önce uzaktan sonra kendilerinden geliyormuş gibi. Adam kalktı, odanın içinde döndü. Odayı, kendini dinledi. Buzdolabının kapısına yöneldiğinde içinde tortop olmuş bir adam bulacağını biliyordu. Ne kadar da uzun sürdü, dedi buzdolabından-çıkan-adam serzenişle, can havliyle çıkmaya çalışırken, donacaktım. Adam gerisin-geri oturdu, buzdolabından-çıkan-adam da aralarına ilişti. Soğukluğu önce odayı sonra bedenlerini sardı.

KANUN HÜKMÜNDE KARARNAME

Bir Kanun Hükmünde Kararname ile Sokağa Basma Yasağı yürürlüğe girdiği ilk günlerde, gündelik hayat sekteye uğramış olsa da zamanla her şey normale dönmüştü.

Otoparktan otoparka yolculuk edenler için ilk günden beri bir şey değişmemiş, yaya trafiğinin ortadan kalkmasını sevinçle karşılamışlardı. Ötekiler ise apartmanların aralarına gerilen iplerle işlerine gidiyor, eskisinden daha zaman alsa da, gündelik hayatlarının gereksinimlerini bir biçimde yerine getiriyorlardı.

Tabii yasak kolay kabul edilmemişti. Birçok köşe yazarı Kent Konseyi'nin kararını sert bir dille eleştirmiş, sokakların kent kültürünün önemli bir parçası olduğundan söz etmiş, kararı protesto için halkı sokağa çağırmişti. Ne ki, yine yasak ve Kent Konseyi'nin yasağı çiğneyenlere karşı aldığı önlemlerin sertliği bu çağrının gerçekleşmesini mümkün kılmamıştı. Yasağa en çok direnenler için bile işe gitme gereksinimi ağır basmış, insanlar sokağa basmadan yaşamanın çözümlerini bulmuştu.

Sokağa basmanın yasak olduğu unutulacak denli gün geçmişti aradan. Zamanla, sokağa basmak, dedelerin torunlarına anlattığı masallardaki gerçeküstü olaylardan biri haline gelmişti.

Kentin en yüksek gökdeleninin en üst katında çalışan Selim de ötekiler gibi sokağa hiç basmamıştı. İplerin sıcağın gevşediği bir gün yerin yaklaşık on metre yakınına inmişti, hepsi bu.

Bir gün, gökdelenin çatısında sigara içerken bir kuş gördü. Gündelik hayatında insanlardan çok gördüğü kuşlara alışık, ne ki gördüğü bu kuş hiçbirine benzemiyordu. Kanatları

onu bu yüksekliğe çıkarması mucize sayılacak denli ufaktı. Başının üstünde siyah bir leke vardı. Kıpırtısız Selim'e bakıyordu. Sonra, yukarıda bir noktaya uçmaya başladı ve bir anda gözden kayboldu. İlerleyen günlerde aynı olay sayısız kez gerçekleşti.

O gün Selim işe yanında ucunda kanca olan uzunca bir halatla geldi. Çatıya çıktığında kuş yine gözlerini dikmiş onu bekliyordu. Bir süre birbirlerine baktılar ve kuş yine aynı yöne kanat çırpıp gözden kayboldu. Selim, halatı boşluğa salladı. Ve. Kanca tiz bir ses çıkararak bir yere takıldı. Aşağıdan bakıldığında halat boşlukta asılı görünüyordu ama kanca takıldığına göre bir yere gidiyor olmalıydı. Tırmanmaya başladı. Gözden yitti.

Ertesi gün Selim'in işe gelmediğini kimse fark etmedi. İlerleyen günlerde iş arkadaşlarından biri çatıdaki boşluğa asılı halatı fark edip tırmandı ve o da ortadan kayboldu. Zamanla kentte gökyüzüne halat fırlatıp ortadan kaybolanların sayısı arttı.

Bir Kanun Hükmünde Kararname ile gökyüzüne tırmanmak yasaklandığında kentte pek az kişi kalmıştı.

SİZİN GİBİLER

Kente vardığında sabahtı. Pek az şey anımsıyordu. Otobüse binmişti ve uyumuştı.

Otobüsten indi. Gar binasına girdi. Camlarla çevrili yapının ortasında, demir sandalyelerde tek tük insan oturuyordu. Kimse kimseyle konuşmuyordu. Ne ki uğultu vardı. Çıktı. Yürüdü. Adımlarını ancak görebildiği bir sisin içinde uzun süre yürüdü. Binaları zar zor seçebiliyordu. Hepsini uzun, gri-sarı ve balkonsuzdu.

Işığı seçti, Otel, içeri girdi, Bir gece, dedi, adam tek söz etmeden anahtarı verdi, parayı ödedi, odaya çıktı. Gri-sarı duvarlar, yatak, üstünde battaniye, masa, ayna. Kapıyı kilitledi, anahtarı üstünde bıraktı. Uykuya daldı.

Telefon sesine uyandı. Odadan çıkmanızı rica edeceğim, dedi ses. Niçin, diye sordu. Buraya biriyle buluşmaya mı geliniz, buluşmak bu otelde yasaktır. Biriyle buluşmaya gelip gelmediğini anımsamıyordu. Niçin, dedi yine. Bilmiyorum, dedi ses, siz buraya gelecek birine benzemiyorsunuz. Neye benziyordu, sormadı. Aynaya baktı, önce gözlerini, burnunu seçti. Sonra dudağı, geniş alnı, kaşları, yanakları. Baktıkça yüzü değişiyor, yansımadaki gözleri ona bakmak yerine tedirginlikle odayı tarıyordu. Burnu belirsizleşmeye, yanakları içine çökmeye başladı, gözleri deliklerinin içinde kayboldu. Boşa çaba, diye geçirdi içinden. Uykuya daldığında sis odaya çökmüştü.

Telefon sesine uyandı yine. Odadan çıkmanız gerek, dedi ses. Hayır, dedi, Bu bir rica değil, odadan çıkın. Çıkmayacaktı, çıkamazdı da bir yandan. Aynaya baktı, sisin ardından yüzünü seçmeye çalıştı, hiçbir şey yoktu. Ne kadar

olmuştu, önceden neye benziyordu, anımsamıyordu. Yine de kimse, birine benzemiyor diye onu odadan atamazdı. Uykuya daldı.

Kapı sesine uyandı. Çıkın, dedi ses kapının ardından. Nereden geldiğinizi sormayacağım, paranızı da ödeyeceğim, isterseniz fazlasını, yeter ki çıkın. Hayır, dedi ama sesini duyamadı. Çıkmazsanız kilidi kıracağım, öyle ya da böyle, çıkacaksınız. Sizin iyiliğiniz için söylüyorum, sizin gibiler buraya gelmemeli. Bekledi. Ayak sesinin uzaklaştığını duydu. Uykuya daldı.

Konuşmalara uyandı. Size pahalıya patlar, dedi bir ses, güçlü bir kilit bu, Önemli değil, dedi ses, siz kırın yeter. Battaniyenin altında kilidin kırılmasını bekledi. Bir süre sonra odanın içinde ayak seslerini duydu. Pencereden çıkmış olmalı, dedi ses. Öteki, Nasıl, diye sordu. Bilmiyorum, dedi, önemli olan çıkmış olması.

Chickadee

Sine Ergün

Translated from Turkish by Ümit Hussein

THE LONG JOURNEY

“And I do not value solitude at all.
I do not value myself when I’m alone.”
Peter Handke, *The Left-Handed Woman*

The woman did not choose the man, nor the man the woman to accompany him on a long journey. When it was time for them to leave they looked first at each other, then all around them, and having no other option, set out together.

Until they left the city, they followed the roads they knew. When they arrived at the city’s edge they saw it was surrounded by silver soil. There was a narrow path before them. The man advanced quickly, but paused to survey the area, while the woman walked without altering her pace, with a dull curiosity.

The road neither narrowed nor widened. From the first day, it was narrow enough for them to touch one another when they walked side by side, an option they strongly rejected. When the sun came out, the soil shone so brightly it was a job to make out even a single path. At night, first the stars, then the soil, would light up and go out, the two blurring into one another. No one knows how much time passed in that way. After a long while the man said, Everyone’s left; they went on, listening to their footsteps, A long time ago, said the woman.

Why did they leave us behind? I wasn't able to choose who I went with, said the woman, I didn't notice them leaving, no one told me. The woman paused. Haven't we walked enough for today, she said, No, we might be able to catch up with them.

First the path, then all the soil turned into a shade of red never seen before. They continued walking without coming across a single footprint. After countless days the man said, Your silence is getting on my nerves, You're silent too, said the woman, if you spoke I'd listen. Again they walked for days.

When they reached the waterfront they weren't thirsty, but they drank. They sat down for the first time since setting out. They touched the red soil for the first time. When I was a child I killed a bird, said the man, I didn't kill it, my friend killed it, he wasn't even my friend, we just happened to be together that day. He said let's eat it, we plucked its feathers, but still, when I bit into it I kept getting feathers in my mouth. Why did I go along with him? He stood up, reached out towards the water, drank, and turned, in anger, Why didn't they take us? I, said the woman, wasn't able to choose who I went with, You think you're superior, that's why, said the man, that's the reason why you're lonely, I watch you all the time while you're walking, you think you're even more superior than the soil you tread on. Your silence is getting on my nerves, I'd be better off by myself, at least then I'd know I was alone. I'm sleepy, said the woman, I think I'm going to have a dream.

In her dream the woman was moving through the depths of the water. There was no sign indicating where she was headed. She knew.

In his dream the man was at the tip of a slope. He knew he could fly. That was all.

When they awoke the woman was talkative, the man silent. I gave away all the books I loved, said the woman, I never gave away anything I loved, said the man.

The woman said, After this the path will disappear, we'll have to choose where we go. You're going to want to go in one direction and I in another. It won't matter where we go, what will matter is that we stay together. The path will vanish, said the man, I'm going to want to go in one direction and you in another. If we go our separate ways then so be it. What will matter is where we're going.

The red soil turned irremediably black, while the sky turned spectacularly white. When night fell, not a single star came out, nor did the moon. And if there were a path before them, it had disappeared from view. The man found the woman's hand within the cloying blackness and pulled it, This way, he said, the woman was undecided, she acquiesced, they continued.

When the stars slowly began to appear within the relentless darkness, the man could not contain his cry of joy. Releasing their hands, they looked first at the sky, then at each other. The woman told the man that the stars had once been a large family all living together, but had separated after a quarrel that no one wanted to talk about and that, to avoid causing each other any more hurt, they had promised not to go within more than a certain distance of each other and spread themselves out in the sky. The man listened to the story, distracted, Let's go, he said.

By the time the soil regained its colour, enough time had passed for them to forget what shade it had been. The straight road curved up a hill. They walked. They saw a tiny hut on the other side of the hill. They went in. It was the woman's

house. It was the man's house too. Only they didn't remember that. They sat down. Enough time passed for blue veins to sprout on their hands.

A noise. Dull shooting. At first it seemed to be coming from far away, then from themselves. The man stood up, he paced around the room. He listened to the room, to himself. When he headed for the fridge door he knew he would find a man curled up into a ball inside. It took so long, said the man-who-came-out-of-the-fridge reproachfully, I was about to freeze as I fought for all I was worth to get out of there. The man sat down again, the man-who-came-out-of-the-fridge stuck with them. His coldness shrouded first the room, then their bodies.

STATUTORY DECREE

Although everyday life was disrupted during the first few days when the Ban on Stepping on the Street came into force by Statutory Decree, over time everything returned to normal.

Right from the first day, nothing changed for the people whose journeys consisted of going from one car park to another, and they were delighted to see the back of the pedestrian traffic. As for everyone else, they travelled to work by means of ropes suspended between apartment buildings. Although it took longer than it used to, somehow they still managed to fulfill their daily obligations.

Naturally, the population hadn't taken the ban lying down. Many a columnist had used strong language to criticise the City Council's decision, on the grounds that the streets were an important part of city culture and summoned the people to take to the streets in protest. However, the ban itself and the severity of the measures the City Council took against anyone who flouted it made it impossible for the summons to bear any fruit. The need to get to work weighed heavily on even the ban's most vehement opponents, and people found ways of carrying on with their lives without stepping on the street.

Enough time passed for people to forget that stepping on the street was banned. With time, stepping on the street took on the status of one of the surreal events in the stories that grandfathers tell their grandchildren.

Like everyone else, Selim, who worked on the top floor of the city's tallest skyscraper, had never stepped on the street. The closest he had come was when he had descended to a

distance of some ten metres from the ground on a day when the ropes had grown slack in the heat.

One day, as he was smoking on the skyscraper's roof terrace, he saw a bird. Given that he saw more birds than people in his day-to-day life he was used to them, but this bird was unlike any of the others that he saw. Its wings were so small, it was a miracle they had managed to carry it up that high. There was a black mark on its head. It eyed Selim without moving. Then it started flying somewhere above him and was out of sight in an instant. In the days that followed, the same incident recurred countless times.

That day Selim went to work with a rope with a longish hook attached to the end. When he went up to the roof terrace the bird was there again, staring, waiting. They gazed at each other for a while, then once again the bird flapped its wings towards the same destination and vanished out of sight. Selim swung the rope in the air. And with a sharp clang it hooked onto something. Anyone looking up from below would think the rope was hanging in mid-air, but as the hook had hooked onto something, it clearly led somewhere. He started climbing. He disappeared out of sight.

The next day no one noticed that Selim wasn't at work. In the days that followed, one of his colleagues noticed the rope on the roof terrace hanging in mid-air, climbed up and he too disappeared out of sight. With time the number of people in the city tossing ropes up into the sky and disappearing increased.

When a ban on climbing up into the sky was issued by Statutory Decree there was hardly anyone left in the city.

PEOPLE LIKE YOU

It was morning when she reached the city. She could barely remember a thing. She had got on the bus and gone to sleep.

She got off the bus. She entered the station. There were lone individuals sitting on metal seats in the centre of the glass-enclosed building. No one spoke to anyone. Yet she could hear murmuring. She went out. She walked. She walked for a long time, in fog so thick she could barely see her footsteps. It was an effort to make out the buildings. They were all tall, greyish yellow, without balconies.

She made out the light, Hotel, she entered, One night she said, the man handed over the key without a word, she paid and went up to the room. Greyish yellow walls, a bed with a blanket, a table, a mirror. She locked the door and left the key in the lock. She drifted off to sleep.

She awoke to the sound of the telephone. I'm going to ask you to vacate the room, said the voice. Why, she asked. Did you come here for a rendezvous, we don't allow rendezvous in this hotel. She didn't remember if she had gone there for a rendezvous. Why, she repeated. I don't know, said the voice, you don't look like the kind of person who would come here. What kind of person did she look like, she didn't ask. She looked in the mirror, first she made out her eyes, her nose. Then her lips, her wide forehead, her eyebrows, her cheeks. As she looked her face changed, instead of looking at her, the eyes reflected in the mirror searched the room uneasily. Her nose began to grow indistinct, her eyes disappeared into their sockets. All that wasted effort, she thought. When she drifted off to sleep, the fog had shrouded the room.

Once again she awoke to the sound of the telephone. You need to vacate the room, said the voice. No, she replied. I'm not asking you, vacate the room. She would not, besides, she couldn't. She looked in the mirror, she tried to make out her face through the fog, there was nothing there. How long had it been, what had she looked like before, she couldn't remember. But still, no one could evict her from the room for not looking like anyone. She drifted off to sleep.

She awoke to the sound of knocking at the door. Vacate the room, said the voice on the other side. I'm not going to ask where you came from, I'll give you your money back, I'll pay you extra if you like, as long as you leave. No, she said, but she couldn't hear her voice. If you don't leave I'll smash the lock, you're leaving no matter what. I'm telling you for your own good, people like you shouldn't come here. She waited. She heard the footsteps growing faint. She drifted off to sleep.

She awoke to the sound of talking. It'll cost you, said a voice, this is a sturdy lock, I don't care, said the voice, just as long as you smash it. Under the blanket she waited for them to smash the lock. Some time later, she heard the sound of footsteps in the room. She must have climbed out of the window, said the voice. How, asked the other voice. I don't know, said the voice, the only thing that matters is that she's left.

The United Kingdom



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Sunjeev Sahota

The Year of the Runaways (2015)

L'année de tous les départs

Publishing House **Picador**

Biography

Sunjeev Sahota was born in 1981 in Derbyshire. His debut novel, *Ours are the Streets*, was called 'nothing short of extraordinary' by the *Observer*, and 'a moral work of real intelligence and power' by the *Times*. His second novel, *The Year of the Runaways*, won the South Bank Sky Arts Award for Literature, and the Encore Award. It was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2015. In 2013, Sahota was named as one of *Granta* magazine's Best of Young British Novelists.

Synopsis

The Year of the Runaways tells of the bold dreams and daily struggles of an unlikely family thrown together by circumstance. Thirteen young men live in a house in Sheffield, each in flight from India and in desperate search of a new life. Tarlochan, a former rickshaw driver, will say nothing about his past in Bihar; and Avtar has a secret that binds him to protect the chaotic Randeep. Randeep, in turn, has a visa-wife in a flat on the other side of town: a clever, devout woman whose cupboards are full of her husband's clothes, in case the immigration men surprise her with a call. Sweeping between India and England, and between childhood and the present day, Sunjeev Sahota's generous, unforgettable novel is – as with Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* – a story of dignity in the face of adversity and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit.

The Year of the Runaways

Sunjeev Sahota

1. ARRIVALS

Randeep Sanghera stood in front of the green-and-blue map tacked to the wall. The map had come with the flat, and though it was big and wrinkled, and cigarette butts had once stubbed black islands into the mid Atlantic, he'd kept it, a reminder of the world outside. He was less sure about the flowers, guilty-looking things he'd spent too long choosing at the petrol station. Get rid of them, he decided, but then heard someone was parking up outside and the thought flew out of his head.

He went down the narrow staircase, step by nervous step, straightening his cuffs, swallowing hard. He could see a shape through the mottled glass. When he opened the door Narinder Kaur stood before him, brightly etched against the night, coat unbuttoned despite the cold. So, even in England she wore a kesri. A domed deep-green one that matched her salwaar kameez. A flank of hair had come loose from under it and curled about her ear. He'd forgotten how large, how clever, her eyes were. Behind her, the taxi made a U-turn and retreated down the hill. Narinder brought her hands together underneath her chin – 'Sat sri akal' – and Randeep nodded and took her suitcase and asked if she might follow him up the stairs.

He set her luggage in the middle of the room and, straightening right back up, knocked his head against the bald light bulb, the wire flexing like a snake disturbed from its tree.

She was standing at the window clutching her handbag with both hands.

‘It’s very quiet,’ Randeep said.

‘It’s very nice. Thank you.’

‘You have been to Sheffield before?’

‘My first time. What’s the area called again?’

‘Brightside,’ he said.

She smiled, a little, and gazed around the room. She gestured towards the cooker.

‘We used to have one like that. Years ago.’

Randeep looked too: a white stand-alone thing with an overhanging grill pan. The stains on the hob hadn’t shifted no matter how hard he’d scrubbed. ‘There is a microwave, too,’ he said, pointing to the microwave. ‘And washing machine. And toaster also, and kettle and sofa-set... carpet...’ He trailed off, ridiculous to himself. ‘The heater works fine. It’s included in the rent. I’m sorry there’s no TV.’

‘I’m used to it.’ She looked to the wall. ‘Nice map.’

‘Oh. Thank you. I thought...’ What did he think? ‘I want to visit every continent of the world.’ She smiled politely, as if he’d said he wanted to visit the moons of Jupiter. ‘It’s one of my dreams.’

There were only two other rooms. The bathroom was tiny, and the pipes buffalo-groaned when he forced the taps. In the centre of the greenish tub the hand-held shower lay in a perfect coil of chrome, like an alien turd.

‘And this is your private room,’ he said, opening the second door.

She didn't step inside. There wasn't much to see: a double bed, a rail for her clothes, a few wire coat hangers. Some globs of Blu-Tack on damp, loose wallpaper. There was a long, hinged mirror straight ahead which they found themselves staring into, him standing behind her. She didn't even reach his shoulders. It was cold and he noticed her nipples showing through her tunic. Frowning, she pulled her coat shut and he averted his eyes.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'It's too small. And dirty. I'll look for something else tomorrow.'

'It's fine. Honestly. Thank you for finding it for me.'

'Truly?' He exhaled relief. 'There is a bus from the bottom of the hill that can take you into town.'

'And that hill will keep me in shape.'

'And this isn't an area with lots of apneh.' Her lips parted, but she didn't speak. 'Like you asked,' he reminded her. 'And the gurdwara's only a few stops away. In Burngreave. I can show you? If you like?'

'We'll see,' she said. 'It's late. Can I call you tomorrow?'

'Of course. But you should know that the flat downstairs is empty. So no disturbances.' He smiled, pleased with himself. 'Yes, this flat was a special find. Especially at this time of year, it is not easy. We were lucky.' That 'we' was problematic and knocked him off balance. 'But I should go,' he said hastily. He took up his red tracksuit top and zipped it to his chin, pushing the short sleeves up to his elbows.

She walked him to the stairs, saying, 'You should probably bring a few of your things and leave them here.'

He nearly blurted out that his suitcase was just outside, in the gennel. 'I will bring some. But I will telephone you first.' He wouldn't be one of those boys who turned up at a girl's house unannounced and unexpected. Then he remembered about the meter tokens. 'The light.' He pointed down the stairs. 'There is a meter underneath. It takes the pink electric tokens. Not the white ones. The pink ones. There is a shop around the corner. The aunty there sells them.'

She looked confused. 'Do I have to collect these tokens? Like vouchers?'

'Collect them from the shop, yes. Only be careful you put the cards in straight. Would you like me to show you? The meter?'

She'd never heard of electricity being pink, or white for that matter, but she was tired from the journey and said she really did just want to sleep. 'But thanks for everything, Randeep.'

She used his name, without 'ji' and to his face, which hurt him a little. But this was England. 'No problem. And do not worry. You won't need any for a while yet. I put lots in before you came.'

She thanked him again, then – perhaps out of nerves, needing her fingers occupied – retightened her chunni over her turban and under her chin. It made her eyes look bigger, somehow.

Randeep opened his wallet and held out some notes to her.

'Next month's.' He was looking away. He hated doing it like this. At least when she lived in London it had gone by post. She too seemed embarrassed to take it.

He said goodbye. Halfway down the stairs he stopped, looked round. 'I hope you don't mind, but is everything all right? You are not in any trouble?'

'Oh, I just need to rest. I'll be fine tomorrow. Can I call you?'

'Of course you may. Of course.' He smiled, then went down the remaining steps and opened the door. He nodded a final goodbye. She leaned forward out of the doorway, arms folded. She looked uncertain.

Randeep held his suitcase across his lap on the bus ride home. Of course she wasn't going to ask him to stay. It was stupid of him to have thought she might. If anything, he wondered now if she'd seemed eager for him to leave her alone. He spat coarsely into his hankie and worked out a bit of dirt on the brown leather of his case, which still gleamed, in spite of the coach to Delhi, the flight to London, and now three months spent wedged on the roof of that disgusting wardrobe.

He got off right outside the house and saw the grey-blue light of the TV flickering behind the closed curtains. He'd hoped they'd be asleep by now. He went the long way round the block, stopping off at the Londis for some of those fizzy cola-bottle sweets.

'You are leaving?' the singh asked. The suitcase.

'I was helping a friend move only.'

The TV was still on when he got back. Randeep turned the key gradually, wincing at the loud final snap of the metal tongue, and went straight up to his room on the second floor. He sat there polishing his workboots with toilet roll and after that he changed the blanket on his mattress, taking care

with the corner-folds. Then he lay down, the darkness roomy around him, and with no real enthusiasm reached for the toilet roll once more.

It was near midnight when the clanging of the gate woke him up. He hadn't meant to fall asleep afterwards and the scrunch of sticky toilet paper was still in his hand.

Downstairs, he went through the beaded curtain and found Avtar gulping straight from the tap. The back of his uniform read Crunchy Fried Chicken. Randeep stood in the doorway, weaving

one of the long strings in and out of his fingers. There was a calendar of tropically naked blonde women on the wall by the fridge. Someone would have to get a new one soon.

Avtar turned off the tap, though it continued to drip. 'Where is everyone?'

'Asleep.'

'Did someone do the milk run?'

'Don't think so.'

Avtar groaned. 'I can't do everything, yaar. Who's on the roti shift?'

Randeep shrugged. 'Not me.'

'I bet it's that new guy. Watch, they'll be bhanchod burnt again.'

Randeep nodded, sighed. Outside the window, the moon was full. There were no stars though, just an even pit of black, and if he altered the focus of his eyes, he saw his vague reflection. He wondered what his father would be doing.

‘Do you think Gurpreet’s right? About what he said this morning?’

‘What did he say this morning?’

‘You were there.’

‘I was asleep.’

‘He said it’s not work that makes us leave home and come here. It’s love. Love for our families.’ Randeep turned to Avtar. ‘Do you think that’s true?’

‘I think he’s a sentimental creep. We come here for the same reason our people do anything. Duty. We’re doing our duty. And it’s shit.’

Randeep turned back to the window. ‘Maybe.’

‘And I asked bhaji, by the way, but there’s nothing right now.’

The job, Randeep remembered. He was relieved. He’d only mentioned it during a low moment, needing solidarity. One job was enough. He didn’t know how Avtar managed two.

‘How’d the thing with the girl go?’

‘Nothing special,’ Randeep said.

‘Told you,’ and Avtar picked up his satchel from where it rested against the flour barrel. He took out his manila college folder and wriggled up onto the worktop.

Randeep had learned by now that when Avtar didn’t want to be disturbed he just ignored you until you went away. He let the beads fall through his hands and was turning to go when Avtar asked if it was true that Gurpreet hit him this morning in the bathroom queue.

‘It was nothing,’ Randeep said.

‘He’s just jealous, you know.’

Randeep waited – for sympathy? for support? – but Avtar curled back down to his book, trying out the words under his breath, eyes glinting at the end of each line. Avtar’s posture reminded Randeep of the trips he used to make between college and home, his own textbook open on his lap.

In his room, he changed into his tracksuit bottoms, annoyed he’d forgotten to warm them against the oven, then slid inside the blanket. He knew he should try to sleep. Five hours and he’d have to be up again. But he felt restless, suddenly and inexplicably optimistic for the first time in months. Years? He got up and moved to the window and laid his forehead against the cool pane. She was somewhere on the other side of the city. Somewhere in that dark corner beyond the lights, beyond that pinkish blur he knew to be a nightclub called the Leadmill. He wondered if she’d noticed how he’d spent each evening after work scrubbing the doors and descaling the tiles and washing the carpet. Maybe she was thinking about all he’d done right now as she unpacked her clothes and hung them on the rail. Or maybe she’d decided to have a bath instead and was now watching TV, thick blue towels wrapped around her head and body the way British girls do. His forehead pressed harder against the glass. He was being ridiculous again. There was no TV, for one thing. But he couldn’t lose the sense that this was a turning point in his life, that she’d been delivered to him for a reason. She’d called him in her hour of need, hadn’t she? He wondered whether she’d found his note yet, the rose-scented card leaning inside the cupboard above the sink. He cringed and hoped she hadn’t. At the time, in the petrol station, he’d convinced himself it was the sophisticated thing to do. Now, he exhaled a low groan and closed his eyes and forced himself to remember each carefully written word.

Dear Narinderji, I sincerely hope you are well and are enjoying your new home. A beautiful flat for a beautiful person. And a new start for us both maybe. If I may be of any assistance please do not hesitate to make contact. I am at your service day and night. In the interim, may I be the first to wish you, in your new home, a very Happy New Year (2003).

Respectfully yours, Randeep Sanghera.

L'année de tous les départs

Sunjeev Sahota

Traduit de l'anglais par Dominique LeMeur

1. ARRIVÉES

Randeep Sanghera se tenait devant la carte verte et bleue scotchée au mur. Cette carte faisait déjà partie du décor de l'appartement avant qu'il ne le loue. Elle était grande, froissée et des mégots de cigarettes écrasés avaient laissé des traces d'îlots noirs au milieu de l'océan Atlantique. Malgré cela, il avait décidé de la garder, souvenir du monde extérieur. Il était moins sûr pour le bouquet. Des fleurs à la mine coupable qu'il avait passé trop de temps à choisir à la station-service. Bonnes à jeter, se dit-il. Puis il entendit une voiture se garer dehors et ne pensa plus aux fleurs.

Il descendit l'escalier étroit marche par marche, le pas nerveux, en lissant l'extrémité de ses manches, la gorge serrée. Il aperçut une silhouette à travers la vitre au verre marbré. Il ouvrit la porte. Devant lui, Narinder Kaur lui apparut clairement dans la nuit. Elle n'avait pas pris soin de boutonner son manteau malgré le froid. Tiens, même en Angleterre, elle portait le sari. Un modèle ample, de couleur vert foncé en harmonie avec son *salwaar kameez*. Une mèche de cheveux s'était échappée pour tomber en boucle sur son oreille. Il avait oublié combien ses yeux étaient profonds, son regard pénétrant. Derrière, le taxi fit demi-tour et disparut au bas de la rue. Narinder joignit ses mains sous le menton pour le saluer.

– *Sat sri akal.*

Randeep acquiesça, prit sa valise et l'invita à monter à l'étage.

Il déposa les bagages au milieu de la pièce. En se relevant de manière un peu brusque, il se cogna la tête contre une ampoule nue. Le fil se tordit comme un serpent qu'on aurait dérangé sur son arbre. Elle se tenait debout près de la fenêtre, les deux mains cramponnées à son sac.

– C'est très calme, dit Randeep.

– C'est très joli. Merci.

– Vous étiez déjà venue à Sheffield ?

– Non, c'est la première fois. Comment s'appelle ce quartier, encore ?

– Brightside, répondit-il.

Elle esquissa un sourire et regarda autour d'elle. Montrant la cuisinière du doigt.

– Nous aussi, nous en avons une. Il y a bien longtemps

Randeep regarda à son tour ce gros cube de couleur blanche. Une poêle pendait juste au-dessus. Les taches sur les plaques de cuisson n'avaient pas disparu. Elles avaient toujours résisté au plus vigoureux des nettoyages.

– Il y a aussi un micro-onde, dit-il en indiquant l'endroit où se trouvait le four. Et une machine à laver, un grille-pain, une bouilloire, un canapé... un tapis...

Il finit par s'interrompre, se trouvant ridicule.

– Le chauffage fonctionne bien. Il est inclus dans le prix de la location. Par contre, il n'y a pas de télé. Désolé.

– Pas de problème.

Elle se tourna vers le mur.

– Jolie carte.

– Oh merci. J’ai pensé...

Qu’avait-il pensé ?

– J’ai l’intention de visiter chacun des cinq continents.

Elle lui adressa un sourire poli, comme s’il venait de lui annoncer qu’il voulait visiter toutes les lunes de Jupiter.

– C’est l’un de mes rêves.

Il n’y avait que deux autres pièces. La salle de bains était minuscule. Les tuyaux poussèrent des grognements dignes d’un buffle quand il entreprit de tourner les robinets. Au centre de la baignoire verdâtre, la douche à main posée dans une parfaite spirale de chrome, sorte d’étron extraterrestre.

– Voilà votre chambre, dit-il en ouvrant la seconde porte.

Elle resta sur le seuil. Pas grand-chose à voir : un lit double, une barre pour ses vêtements, quelques cintres. Des globes de Blu-Tack sur du papier-peint humide et décollé par endroits. Face à eux, un long miroir rabattable. Tous deux le fixaient. Lui derrière elle. Elle ne lui arrivait même pas à l’épaule. Il faisait froid. Randeep ne put s’empêcher de remarquer le bout de ses seins pointant à travers sa tunique. L’œil sévère, elle ferma son manteau. Il évita son regard.

– Je suis désolé, dit-il. C’est trop petit. Et sale. Je me mets dès demain à la recherche de quelque chose d’autre.

– C’est parfait. Vraiment. Merci de m’avoir trouvé ce logement.

– Vous êtes sûre ? fit-il soulagé. Un bus en bas de la rue va jusqu’à la ville.

– Descendre cette rue à pied me maintiendra en forme.

– Et ici, c'est un quartier où il y a peu de gens de chez nous.

Elle ouvrit la bouche mais ne prononça aucun mot.

– Comme vous l'avez demandé. Le *gurdwara* n'est éloigné que de quelques arrêts. A Burngreave. Je peux vous montrer si vous voulez.

– On verra, répondit-elle. Il se fait tard. Je peux vous appeler demain ?

– Bien sûr. Je dois aussi vous dire que l'appartement du dessous est vide. Vous ne serez pas dérangé.

Il sourit, content de lui.

– Oui, quelle aubaine de trouver ce logement. Surtout à cette époque de l'année, ce n'est pas facile. Oui, nous avons eu de la chance.

L'utilisation du 'nous' posait un problème qui le désarçonna.

– Bon, je vous laisse, dit-il à la hâte.

Il prit sa veste de survêtement rouge, remonta la fermeture éclair jusqu'au menton et releva ses manches au niveau du coude. Elle l'accompagna jusqu'à l'escalier.

– Si vous voulez, vous pourriez apporter quelques-unes de vos affaires et les laisser ici.

Il faillit aussitôt répondre que sa valise était dehors dans la ruelle.

– C'est d'accord. Mais je vous téléphonerai avant.

Lui n'était pas le genre de garçon à arriver comme ça chez une jeune femme, sans prévenir et de façon inopinée. Les jetons pour le compteur électrique lui revinrent d'un coup à l'esprit.

– La lumière, dit-il en faisant un geste vers le bas des escaliers. Le compteur est en-dessous. Il faut utiliser les jetons roses. Pas les blancs. Il y a un magasin au coin de la rue. La dame en vend.

Elle eut l'air étonnée.

– Et il faut que j'aille chercher ces jetons? Comme des bons d'achats?

– Oui. Vous les prenez au magasin. Seulement, veuillez bien à insérer les cartes bien droit. Vous voulez que je vous montre? Je veux dire, le compteur.

Elle n'avait jamais entendu parler d'électricité rose ou même blanche. Fatiguée du voyage, elle lui répondit qu'elle voulait juste aller dormir.

– En tout cas, merci pour tout Randeep.

Elle avait utilisé son nom sans y ajouter *ji*, marque de respect, et en le regardant dans les yeux. Il se sentit un peu offensé. Bon, c'est vrai qu'on était en Angleterre.

– Pas de problème. Et ne vous inquiétez pas. Vous en avez suffisamment pour l'instant. J'ai fait le plein avant votre arrivée.

Elle le remercia encore. Puis -peut-être par nervosité, ou pour occuper ses doigts- elle resserra son *chunni* autour de son turban et sous le menton. Ses yeux n'en furent que plus grands, d'une certaine façon.

Randeep ouvrit son portefeuille et lui tendit quelques billets.

– Pour le mois prochain.

Il regarda ailleurs. Horreur de faire ça de cette façon. Au moins, quand elle habitait à Londres, ça arrivait par la poste. Elle aussi semblait embarrassée de les prendre.

Il la salua. Arrivé au milieu de l'escalier il s'arrêta et regarda autour de lui.

– Excusez-moi, mais vous êtes sûre que tout va bien ? Pas d'ennuis au moins ?

– Oh, j'ai seulement besoin de repos. Ça ira mieux demain. Je peux vous appeler ?

– Bien sûr que oui. N'hésitez pas.

Il sourit, descendit le reste des marches et ouvrit la porte. Un léger mouvement de tête en guise de dernier au revoir. Elle se pencha en avant, les bras croisés. Mine hésitante.

Durant le trajet en bus qui le ramenait chez lui, Randeep garda sa valise posée sur les genoux. Comment avait-il pu imaginer qu'elle lui demande de rester ? C'était idiot de sa part d'avoir pensé à cela. Entre autre chose, il se demandait maintenant si elle avait été pressée de le voir partir. Il cracha grossièrement dans son mouchoir et gratta une petite saleté collée à sa valise toujours luisante malgré le voyage en car vers Dehli, le vol pour Londres et à présent trois mois passés en haut d'une armoire crasseuse.

Il descendit juste devant sa maison et vit la lueur gris-bleu de la télé qui tremblotait derrière les rideaux tirés. Il avait espéré qu'à cette heure, ils dormiraient. Il fit le tour du pâté de maisons et s'arrêta à la boutique Londis pour acheter des gelées en forme de bouteille de coca au goût pétillant.

– Vous partez ? demanda le Cingalais. La valise, là.

– Non. Juste aidé un ami à déménager.

La télé était toujours allumée quand il rentra. Randeep tourna lentement la clé. Il fit une grimace au moment où se

produisit l'ultime claquement sur la langue de métal. Il monta directement à sa chambre au second étage. Il s'assit et nettoya ses bottes avec des feuilles de papier toilette. Ensuite, il changea la couverture sur le matelas en prenant soin de plier les coins. Il s'allongea, au milieu de ce sombre espace autour de lui, puis sans enthousiasme particulier, se saisit une nouvelle fois du rouleau de papier toilette.

Il était près de minuit quand il fut tiré de son sommeil par le bruit métallique de la grille. Il s'était endormi sans le vouloir et il avait encore à la main le papier toilette froissé.

Il descendit et passa à travers le rideau de perles. Avtar était en train de boire à même le robinet. Au dos de son uniforme était inscrit *Crunchy Fried Chicken*. Randeep, debout dans l'encadrement de la porte, jouait avec une des lanières en la faisant coulisser le long de ses doigts. Au mur, à côté du réfrigérateur, un calendrier de femmes blondes nues sous les tropiques. Il faudrait que quelqu'un s'en débarrasse un de ces jours.

Avtar ferma le robinet qui continua malgré tout de couler.

- Où sont les autres ?
- Ils dorment.
- Quelqu'un est allé acheter le lait ?
- Je pense pas.

Avtar maugréa.

– Je peux pas tout faire, mon pote. Et c'était à qui de faire cuire les *roti* ?

Randeep haussa les épaules.

- Pas à moi.

– J'te parie que c'est au tour du nouveau. Tu verras, putain. Il va encore nous brûler les pains.

Randeep secoua la tête en soupirant. Dehors, c'était nuit de pleine lune. Aucune étoile cependant. Seulement un puits d'obscurité. Sans aspérités. En changeant son angle de vue, Randeep pouvait distinguer son propre reflet, contours vagues. Il se demanda ce que son père faisait à cet instant.

– Tu penses que Gurpreet a raison ? Ce qu'il a dit ce matin ?

– Qu'est-ce qu'il a dit ce matin ?

– Tu étais là.

– J'étais pas réveillé.

– Il a dit que ce n'est pas à cause du travail qu'on quitte le pays pour venir ici. C'est par amour. Amour de nos familles.

Randeep se tourna vers Avtar.

– Tu penses que c'est vrai ?

– Je pense que c'est un con bourré de bons sentiments. On vient ici pour les mêmes raisons que celles qui animent notre peuple dans tout ce qu'il fait. Le devoir. On fait notre devoir et c'est pas drôle.

Randeep retourna vers la fenêtre.

– Peut-être.

– Au fait, j'ai demandé à Bhaji, mais il n'y a rien pour le moment.

Ha oui, le boulot, se souvint Randeep. Il était soulagé. Il en avait juste fait mention dans un moment de déprime. A la recherche d'un sentiment de solidarité. Un seul boulot était suffisant. Comment Avtar pouvait s'en sortir avec deux lui était un mystère.

- Comment ça s'est passé avec la fille ?
- Rien de particulier, dit Randeep
- J'te l'avais dit.

Avtar ramassa sa sacoche qui traînait contre le tonneau de farine. Il sortit son classeur cartonné de l'université et se percha sur le plan de travail en gigotant.

Depuis le temps, Randeep savait parfaitement que, quand Avtar ne voulait pas être dérangé, il vous ignorait jusqu'à ce que vous fichiez le camp. Il laissa les perles glisser le long de ses mains. Il s'apprêtait à partir quand Avtar lui demanda si Gurpreet l'avait vraiment frappé ce matin alors qu'ils faisaient la queue pour aller à la salle de bains.

- C'était rien, dit Randeep.
- Il est juste jaloux, tu sais.

Randeep attendit – un peu de compassion, de soutien ? – mais Avtar se replongea dans son livre, prononçant les mots dans un souffle, les yeux brillants à la fin de chaque ligne. La façon dont était assis Avtar lui fit penser au temps où il faisait le trajet entre l'université et la maison, lui aussi un livre ouvert sur les genoux.

Dans sa chambre il enfila son pantalon de survêtement, énervé parce qu'il avait oublié de le réchauffer sur le poêle. Il se glissa sous la couverture. Il savait qu'il devrait essayer de dormir. Plus que cinq heures avant de commencer une nouvelle journée. Mais il se sentait agité, d'un optimisme soudain et inexplicable. Des mois que cela ne lui était pas arrivé. Des années ? Il se leva et se dirigea vers la fenêtre. Il appuya son front contre la vitre froide. Elle était là quelque part de l'autre côté de la ville. Quelque part dans ce coin sombre au-delà des lumières, au-delà de ce rose indistinct qui venait du

Leadmill, le nightclub. Il se demanda si elle avait remarqué que chaque soir après le travail, il passait son temps à briquer les portes, enlever le tartre des carrelages, laver le tapis. Elle était peut-être en train de penser à tout ce qu'il avait fait, alors qu'elle déplaçait ses vêtements pour les accrocher dans l'armoire. Ou peut-être avait-elle décidé de prendre un bain et regardait la télé, une large serviette bleue autour de la tête et du corps, à la manière des filles d'ici. Il appuya son front encore plus fort contre la vitre. Voilà qu'il était encore ridicule. Il n'y avait pas de télé. Et d'une. Pourtant il ne pouvait se défaire du sentiment qu'il était à un tournant de sa vie. Il devait bien y avoir une raison pour qu'elle se soit adressée à lui. C'est bien elle qui l'avait appelé quand elle s'était trouvée dans le besoin, non ? Avait-elle déjà trouvé son billet ? Cette carte aux senteurs de roses qu'il avait laissée dans le placard au-dessus de l'évier. Il fit une grimace et espéra qu'elle ne l'avait pas vue. Un moment, quand il était à la station-service, il s'était mis en tête que cela donnerait une note sophistiquée à son arrivée. Il laissa alors échapper un grognement sourd et ferma les yeux. Il fallait à présent qu'il se rappelle parfaitement de chaque mot écrit.

Chère Narindjeri, j'espère sincèrement que vous allez bien et que l'appartement vous plaît. Un superbe appartement pour une personne superbe. Un nouveau départ pour nous deux, qui sait. Si je peux vous aider en quoi que ce soit, n'hésitez pas à m'appeler. Je suis à votre service, de jour comme de nuit. En attendant, permettez-moi d'être le premier à vous souhaiter, dans votre nouvelle demeure, une très bonne année 2003.

Avec mes respectueuses salutations.

Randeep Sanghera.

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President: **Arno Jundze** – Chairman of the Latvian Writers' Union, writer, journalist and literary scientist

Members

Ieva Kolmane – member of the Latvian Writers' Union Board, literary critic & translator

Inga Žolude – prose writer, columnist, critic, teacher of creative writing, EUPL winner 2011

Renate Punka – President of the Latvian Publishers' Association; Director of Janis Roze Publishers, translator.

Bārbala Simsons – literary scientist, Head of Department for Latvian Language and Literature at the publishing house Zvaigzne ABC Publishers.

Malta

Coordinator: Maltese Language Academy

President: Dr Marco Galea

Members

Prof. Stella Borg Barthet

Dr. Adrian Grima

Dr. Norbert Ellul Vincenti

Dr. Stephen Bonanno

Montenegro

Coordinator: Montenegrin Association of Independent Writers

President: Andrej Nikolaidis – writer of novels, essayist, EUPL Winner 2011

Members

Ognjen Spahić – writer of novels and short stories, EUPL Winner 2014

Dragana Tripković – poetess and dramatist

Vasko Raičević – dramatist, Assistant Professor at the Academy of Drama Arts in Montenegro

Ethem Mandić – writer of novels, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Montenegrin Language and Literature

The Netherlands

Coordinator: Vereniging van Letterkundigen

President: **Bob Kappen** – bookseller at Cultuurcafé in Noordwijk

Members

Menno Hartman – publisher, Van Oorschot

Maria Vlaar – writer, journalist, Chairwoman of VSenV

Serbia

Coordinator: Serbian PEN Centre

President: **Zoran Paunovic** – writer, translator and literary critic, Vice-President of the Serbian PEN Centre

Members

Jelena Lengold – writer, EUPL winner 2011

Uglješa Šajtinac – writer, EUPL winner 2014

Srdjan Tesin – writer and literary critic, member of the Serbian PEN Centre

Nenad Saponja – representative of the Serbian Publishers Association

Turkey

Coordinator: Turkish PEN Centre

President: **Zeynep Oral** – PEN Turkey President

Members

Metin Celal – President of the Turkish Publishers Association

Çiler İlhan – EUPL Winner 2011

Suat Karantay – professor

Tarık Günersel – PEN Turkey

United Kingdom

Coordinator: The Society of Authors

President: **Cathy Rentzenbrink** – writer, journalist & contributing editor to *The Bookseller*

Members

Martin Neild – former publisher, University professor and CEO of his own coaching company in the publishing industry

Adam Foulds – writer, EUPL winner 2011

Nic Bottomley – independent bookseller, Vice-President of the Booksellers Association of the UK & Ireland

Arifa Akbar – journalist, critic and columnist

EUPL 2017 Jury Reports

Albania

The events of the novel *Epika e yjeve të mëngjesit* (*The Epic of the Morning Stars*) take place mainly in the artistic surroundings of Tirana, the capital city of Albania, in the 1970s. The plot focuses on the story of a young painter who falls victim to the machinations of state security bodies and government policies. During a time of celebration, the heavy rain washes away the letters on some propaganda placards, along with portraits of communist leaders. This causes great concern in party and state authorities. The whole mechanism of police and Communist Party organs are put in search of the “enemies” that caused the sabotage. In fact, the error was technical: an imported paint of bad quality. The state seeks to find the culprits, or to create them. In the machinations and police traps which follow, falls the talented painter. The novel depicts the very interesting atmosphere – realistic, but also absurd – of Tirana in the 1970s. It also shows the level of control that the communist system had on personal lives through the use of psychological violence and instilling fear in ordinary people. This particularly affected artists, who were considered blind instruments of state policy. The characters of the novel: from painters, workers, company executives and officers of the Ministry of the Interior, right up to the highest dome of the Communist Party, are convincing and beautifully drawn.

Bulgaria

Ina Vultchanova's *Осрпов Крпак* (*The Crack-Up Island*) was a notable event in the Bulgarian literary scene in 2016. The novel stands out through its subtle fusing of two storylines and two female characters in search of their identities, creating a combined existential symbol. The vigorous narrative knits together a trip through physical space with a psychological journey, and bridges islands of the sea with islands of the souls. Through penetrating into the attitudes of the characters, the author's fearless eye goes deep into the turmoil of changing circumstances and the mindset in present-day Eastern European countries, achieving an impressive psychological insight into the age. The novel displays remarkable skill in building up emotionally consistent characters, containing superbly rich, yet lightly flowing, dialogues as well as compelling and masterly storytelling, all of which led the Bulgarian jury to nominate *The Crack-Up Island* for the prestigious EUPL. Without doubt, the novel represents highly-readable prose writing and will attract the interest of reading audiences far beyond the Bulgarian cultural environment.

Czech Republic

Jezero (The Lake) is a book about a journey to the past which leads through the rough 'present' of the totalitarian regime. The journey, however, must be done in order to bring about the possibility of the future. The book is dystopian by genre, but is disrupted by the story's ending in a way that, despite everything, brings hope. The story takes place without reference to a particular place or time, which becomes a necessary part of the symbolism of this *Bildungsroman*. The world Bianca Bellová creates is cruel and heartless, but only this type of world could preserve these characters; although the story also shows that no totalitarian regime, and no regime built on the dehumanization of man, will last forever. However, at the same time, Bellová builds the conflict in a way that makes it obvious that the totalitarian regime lies not outside of man, but is rooted in his mind. The language used corresponds to the rawness of this world and the book's short sentences reminds one of chisel cutting into hardwood. Consequently, the form is linked with the content. The result is a strong testimony that cannot be read without the reader being absorbed by it.

Greece

The novel *Δενδρίτες (Dendrites)* by Kallia Papadaki delivers on the promise of her first book, *The Back-Lot Sound*, a collection of short stories published in 2009 that attracted critical attention and was followed by a poetry collection. An award-winning professional screenwriter, the author seamlessly weaves flashbacks to previous generations in a story of adolescents and adults, including second-generation Greek immigrants, set in crisis-ridden Camden, New Jersey in the 1980s.

This is a story about wanting to belong; a tale of expectations against the odds and of failures on a personal or social level. It is a story of the kind of common dreams Americans, Europeans and all people share. There is despair and hope, cruelty and compassion. Engaging and unique, the characters in the novel come together or drift away before they melt on dry ground like snowflakes (or dendrites, a word used to describe a form of snowflake.)

One of the achievements of this Greek novel is how it tucks the complexity of human emotions up the sleeve of its story. A context of crisis makes the text very current. There is continuous engagement with the borders of physical and emotional migration, by a US-educated author who was born less than 40 years ago in a Greek border town.

Kallia Papadaki distinctively represents the figure of an emerging European author during these critical times for Europe and the world.

Iceland

Tvöfalt gler (Double Glazing) is a stunning ‘coming-of-age’ novella that gives an unfiltered voice to the inner life of a 78-year-old woman. The subject is rare in Icelandic literature, and by making the story revolve around the love life of the elderly, the author captures a blind spot in our world view: when are we too old for new romance?

The imagery is beautifully interwoven with emotive language that fits the theme of the story, but also carries with it a counterpoint of sharp wit that perfectly balances the narration. The author excels in describing big emotions with a poetic precision, choosing every word carefully for its shape and meaning. Written in an innovative way, where the ever-churning inner voice of the protagonist evolves from the mundane to an intense confession, the jury found the story both direct and well structured.

Double Glazing is a large story in short form about existence and purpose, full of clear feminine wisdom and sharp insights into life and death. It is a refreshing take on a rejuvenating but infertile new love that forces the reader to face this ultimate taboo subject. The jury was moved by the theme and execution of the novella, and by the author’s insightful treatment of a delicate and neglected subject.

Latvia

Osvalds Zebris’ novel *Gaiļu kalna ēnā (In the Shadow of Rooster Hill)* turns a new page in the story about the 1905 Revolution in Latvia – a series of crucial events for the whole Russian Empire, in the course of which the European movement of social democracy became acquainted with the notion of Latvian terrorists and their deeds. The novel is marked by astonishing documentary scenes of the epoch, which have been created from extensive historical research. These passages uncover the huge tragedy of revolutionary times. The historical notions, people and documentation featured in the novel provide the background for solving serious moral and ethical issues. The reader is invited to measure the price which an individual pays engaging in a revolution, stepping from naive idealism to a crime. These questions are of equal importance both to the Riga of 1906 overtaken by terror acts and bloody events, as well as to the Europe of our days.

Malta

L-Eżodu taċ-Ċikonji is a rare book in Maltese literature in that it is written by an author whose first language is not Maltese. The author learnt Maltese as an adult and in spite, or even because of this, his literary language is impressive in its sharpness, bluntness and metaphorical quality. The novel is a feat of storytelling, weaving together the narratives of a multitude of characters living in different moments in history and in different countries, but who in some way or other impinge on the narrator's own life as a displaced Palestinian, refugee, exile and maladjusted inhabitant of Malta. The novel is a harsh indictment of the political systems that brought about the plight of Palestinians in the 20th century and those that perpetuate it today, but is also a call for all involved to rethink their positions, even as victims of history or destiny. Read from a European perspective, the book is a fascinating discourse with a narrator who is both in and out, who lives in Europe and with Europeans and yet stands out like a sore thumb, as he carries his homeland with him like a suitcase, in spite of his statements to the contrary and his quoting Darwish for comfort. The novel is also a self-conscious exploration of the responsibilities, as well as the futilities, of committed writing.

Montenegro

Although Aleksandar Bečanović is mostly known as a poet, his book *Arcueil* provides a very interesting (and triumphant) take on the historical novel genre. By telling us a story about de Sade, Bečanović is addressing very important contemporary issues, such as the misuse of social status, social injustice and the power of the media. By telling us a story about “de Sade, our contemporary”, Bečanović develops a lucid and relevant critique of our society and the unpleasant truth behind its “dark secrets”. The language in *Arcueil* is rich but precise and the narration is smooth but sharp. From the very first sentence of his novel (which is based on the one Paul Valéry quoted as the reason why he refused to write a novel: “The Marquise went out at five o'clock”), Bečanović builds a complex web of literary and philosophical references, which are hidden in the beautiful, lyrical intonations used for sharpening the contrast of the main character's transgressions. With the exception of Borislav Pekić's *How to Quiet a Vampire*, a Montenegrin (and Yugoslav) novel has never been so uncompromisingly cosmopolitan and European – in the sense that the destiny of Europe is also the destiny of the Balkans. There is no doubt that *Arcueil* is one of the best Montenegrin novels written in this millennium.

The Netherlands

We as a jury are happy to announce that the Dutch winner of the EUPL 2017 is *Een Honger* (*A Hunger*) by Jamal Ouariachi. Jamal is a gifted and ambitious stylist. We could say that the novel is the most courageous one in Dutch literature in decades. He takes readers on a journey of more than 500 pages, through seven continents, several decades and makes us think about major social issues like paedophilia, sexism, gender issues, queerness, feminism, race, etc. He makes us think about the world, and life and death, in a magnificent way. We see Jamal as a young and very talented writer, and a rising star of Dutch literature. He immerses himself into his characters in a way we don't see a lot of in modern literature. Writers that Jamal Ouariachi is related to include names like: Woolf, Nabokov, Joyce, Easton Ellis and, in some respects, Tolstoy and Flaubert.

He bases this masterly novel of ideas on the life of Nobel Prize-winner Daniel Carleton Gajdusek, a physician and medical researcher convicted of child abuse. Besides exploring the nature of love and examining the wisdom and folly of development aid, *A Hunger* delivers a fierce polemic against rigid sexual mores and is above all an exhilarating tour de force. Without being judgmental, without forcing us to think in the same way he thinks, he makes us want to consider these issues, which are very important and current issues in the world we live in.

Serbia

Darko Tuševljaković's novel *Jaz* (*The Chasm*, 2016) is a powerful and intimate story, but also a story about Serbia during the 1990s and 2000s. Its main protagonists are, in many respects, typical representatives of Serbian society at that time: they belong either to the young generation, torn between a wish to leave the decaying country and a strong urge to stay there in spite of it all, or to the older one, overwhelmed by nostalgia and unable to resist the adverse circumstances of the changed times. Depicting the life of young people in a turbulent era through combining the elements of a social novel with those of dark fantasy, Tuševljaković creates a broad picture, replete with striking characters who suffer their personal problems and try to live their lives amidst huge political and historical disturbances, and in a largely disintegrated society.

Turkey

Sine Ergün seems to be open to all kinds of human experience. The depth and imagination of her work is accompanied by the scientific, analytical enthusiasm of a scholar. Her intellectual formation is a fruitful combination of a philosophical approach with a literary efficiency that flourishes thanks to not only talent, but also to her meticulous labour.

Distinguishing her among the many young talents in contemporary Turkish literature who use language in an innovative and creative manner, is Ergün's unique style where form and content are indissolubly intertwined. Her slim volume is a collection of vignettes which are amazingly compact and poignant. Reminiscent of Raymond Carver's short fiction, Ergün writes in the post-modernist vein, delving into the subconscious and bordering on Kafkaesque parable.

Ergün masters the language, plays with it, and broadens the meaning of the words. With her poetic language and with the choices she makes in structuring her stories, the area that she covers becomes the whole world. In a few lines she embraces philosophical themes and introduces us to an imaginary world which feels more real than reality itself!

The refinement and depth in each story underlines her understanding of life, and she puts this into words with elegance and candour. She combines words in an unexpected way to create an original style of storytelling, somewhere in between absurdity and uncertainty, and one which offers the pleasure of literature to the reader.

We trust that the stories in her book have the potential to draw attention internationally, contributing to mutual understanding in Europe and the world. With this book, she also offers much promise for her future writing.

The United Kingdom

'At its best, this novel calls to mind what Isaac Babel said about Tolstoy: "If life could write itself, it would write like Tolstoy". Rich, humane, moving, dramatic and engrossing, searing about the cruelty of the caste system and the desperately precarious lives led by many migrants, superb on the nature of religious faith and doubt, and with dialogue that always rings true, *The Year Of The Runaways* brings to light a whole world of experience that many of us live alongside without ever knowing.'

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 rotating 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 12 countries participating in the 2017 award.

The nomination of candidates and the final selection of one winner in each country took place between October 2016 and February 2017.

The new emerging talents were selected on the basis of criteria stipulated by the European Commission and fulfil in particular the following requirements:

- The author must be a citizen of the 12 selected countries.
- The author should have published between **2 and 4 contemporary fiction books**.
- The winning book must not exceed the maximum number of 4 translations.
- The winning books must be the latest work of the author, must have been published in the last 18 months and must still be commercially available.

Juries

Jury members are appointed by national members of EIBF, EWC and FEP. National juries are composed by a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 members.

The jury reports were delivered in order to justify the jury's choice and provide 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 and International 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

Twelve winning authors



Rudi Erebara • *Epika e yjeve të mëngjesit*

Ina Vultchanova • *Осрнов Крaх*

Bianca Bellová • *Jezero*

Kallia Papadaki • *Δενδρίτες*

Halldóra K. Thoroddsen • *Tvöfalt gler*

Osvalds Zebris • *Gaiļu kalna ēnā*

Walid Nabhan • *L-Ežodu tač-Čikonji*

Aleksandar Bečanović • *Arcueil*

Jamal Ouariachi • *Een Honger*

Darko Tuševljaković • *Jaz*

Sine Ergün • *Baştankara*

Sunjeev Sahota • *The Year of the Runaways*