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Gabriela Babnik – Slovenia

Sušna doba (2012)

Dry Season

Publishing House **Študentska Založba**

Biography

Gabriela Babnik was born in 1979 in Göppingen, Germany. After finishing her studies at Ljubljana University, she spent some time in Nigeria before working on a master's degree on the modern Nigerian novel. Since 2002, she has regularly contributed articles to all major daily and weekly publications in Slovenia. In 2005, Babnik graduated in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the University of Ljubljana.

Her first novel *Koža iz bombaža (Cotton Skin)* was published in 2007 and was awarded the Best Debut Novel by the Union of Slovenian Publishers at the Slovenian Book Fair. In 2009, her second novel *V visoki travi (In the Tall Grass)* was published, which was shortlisted for the Kresnik Award in 2010.

Babnik lives with her family in Ljubljana.

Synopsis

Gabriela Babnik's novel *Dry Season* is a record of an unusual love affair. Anna is a 62-year-old designer from Central Europe and Ismael is a 27-year-old African who was brought up on the street, where he was often the victim of abuse. What unites them is the loneliness of their bodies, a tragic childhood and the dry season or *Harmattan*, during which neither nature nor love is able to flourish. She soon realizes that the emptiness between them is not really caused by their skin colour and age difference, but predominantly by her belonging to the Western culture in which she has lost or abandoned all the preordained roles of daughter, wife and mother. Sex does not outstrip the loneliness and repressed secrets from the past surface into a world she sees as much crueller and, at the same time, more innocent than her own. Cleverly written as an alternating narrative of both sides in the relationship, the novel is interlaced with magic realism and accurately perceived fragments of African political reality.

Sušna doba

Gabriela Babnik

»Spiš?« je rekel in premaknil svoje božansko telo. Bil je iz zlate dobe, kjer se ljubimci niso držali za roke, še skozi lase so si komaj šli.

»Ne, ne morem.«

Hotela sem reči »ne znam spati kot ti«, vendar ni imelo smisla, ne bi razumel. Naključni tujec, s katerim sem v postelji preležala popoldne in eno noč, ne da bi se med nama karkoli zgodilo.

Med ponovnim odlaganjem torbe na tla, na tepih, po katerem se je sprehodilo že toliko stopal, večinoma bosih, od kod sicer tisti vonj po potu, po goloti, po zamolčanosti, me je spreletelo, da je ta navesek vse, kar mi je ostalo od prejšnjega življenja. Zunaj lije noč, na njo kapljajo zvezde in moj sin nekje v onstranstvu gleda še en nor film. Tokrat iz lastnega življenja.

Zazrla sem se v njegov molk in nato v njegove velike dlani z lepo oblikovanimi nohti, nekoliko nenavadno za fanta s ceste, ki je počel že toliko stvari, pa vendarle, zatlačene za kavbojke. To je tisto golo, kamnito področje, ki ga verjetno premorejo samo moški. Ali pa sem jaz iz kakšne stare šole.

»Zebe me,« je rekel in z brado pomignil nekam pod pas, kot da hoče prekiniti moj tok misli.

»In si greješ roke?«

»Ja, pa še navajen sem.« Vedno sem si predstavljala, da moške roke v hlačah pomenijo protekcijo in seveda preverjajo,

ali je stvar še tam. Moj sin tega ni počel, vsaj ne v moji prisotnosti. V tem je bilo verjetno tudi najino nesoglasje. Ko se je dogajalo njemu, je skrival, ko se je dogajalo meni, bi mu morala pokazati. Ga učiti. Vendar sem mislila, da bi ga vsega o flori in favni morala naučiti druga ženska. Druga, kot sem bila jaz druga za tega mladca pred menoj. »Veliko moških to počne,« je leno dodal in mi namenil nasmešek, pri čemer je razkril zgornji rob dlesni. »Nisi videla tega pri nogometu?«

Zmedlo me je, zmedlo njegovo nenadno tikanje. Bo zdaj še enkrat ponovil tiste vulgarne besede, razkleni se, daj, da te pofukam, čeprav, čeprav jih ni nikoli izrekel. Veliko žensk, to sem videla v tistih reklamah za mila in detergente ali pa celo prebrala v detektivskih romanih ter raznobarvnih časopisnih dodatkih, ima to željo, kaj željo, obsesijo po posiljevalcu. Groza, da bi si nekdo na silo vzел njihovo telo, da bi v zatemnjeni hotelski sobi prodril vanje, sploh če je moški lep in mlad in temnopolt in one stare in ovene in svetlopolte, se lahko spremeni v mantranje, v priklicevanje. O bog, če bo res storil kaj od tega, bo z menoj konec. Razprla bom usta kot ona z vlažnim, svetlikajočim v sebi, medtem ko ji je otrok padal med snežinke. In je stol ob oknu ostal prazen.

»Sem. In?«

»Tam spodaj smo najbolj občutljivi.« Spet sem pogledala proti torbi na tleh. Vse prijateljice, ki so poznale mojega sina, so me po tem, ko so opazile njegovo nekoliko uvelo, zaprepadeno pojavo, začele gledati sumničavo. Zanje sem postala nekdo drug, ne Ana, ki so jo poznale. Še vedno Ana v visokih usnjenih škornjih pozimi in kačjih balerinkah poleti, Ana, ki izdeluje mehke blazine z botaničnimi vzorci in tapete v ognjenih barvah, vse to, ker ni znala ukrotiti svojega skrivnostnega in nepredvidljivega vrta, pa vseeno drugačna Ana.

Ana izdajalka. Ana izumiteljica svojega sina, ki je bila videti tako močna, ko ga je rodila. Ana, ki po rojstvu ni bila nič drugačna od onih div, ki na odru bosih nog srkajo viski ter kljubujejo celemu svetu. Toda potem se je tej isti Ani otrok sfižil. »Nisi vedela, da hijene žrtev najprej zgrabijo za moda?«

In ker nisem hotela, da bi samo sebe ter svoje celotno življenje opazovala iz neke nove perspektive, sem mu na hitro odgovorila: »Če ulovijo samca; kaj pa, če ulovijo samico?«

»Vas ne zaboli šok tam spodaj?« je rekel in zdaj se ni več smehljajal, ni več kazal dlesni. Nagnil se je nekam proti moji polovici postelje in zdelo se mi je, da se vendarle hoče dotakniti tistega skrivnostnega področja.

»Ne vem, še nikoli se mi ni zgodilo. Čeprav je po mojem vagina bolj za nežno odprtje in dotik.«

Jezik, ki sva ga govorila, ni bil njegov jezik. Dajal je vtis nonšalantnega razbojnika, ki se ima povsem v oblasti, vendar je bil tam pri srčnem prekatu še ranljivejši od mojega sina. »Ja, to je res, bolj zaprta je.«

Zdaj sem bila jaz na vrsti, da se zasmejim, da pokažem dlesni. »Ali veš, kaj se pogovarjava?« In ker ni kazalo, da bi vedel, da bi v tistem hipu sploh karkoli vedel, sem rekla, nekoliko predrzno sicer, za tisto hotelsko sobo in za svoja leta: »Ali veš, da sva se ravno zdajle ljubila?«

Vsi moji akvareli skupaj niso premogli pol toliko nežnosti kot njegovo vprašanje. »Misliš z jezikom?«

Zaželela sem si, da bi mi šel skozi gozd las in da bi doživela tisti čudoviti, sanjski trenutek zblížanja moškega in ženske ali pa da bi vsaj razgrnil zavese, težke žametne zavese, ki so naredile noč še bolj temno, vendar je storil nekaj čisto drugega.

Ne vem, koliko časa sva z Malikom preživela v Cotonouju, teden, dva, mesec, leto, tisti čas je zame kakor izbrisan. Med čakanjem na konec šole sva živela pri neki Francozinji, ki ji je bilo ime Julie Amado. Lahko bi bila mimobežna ženska iz Črne ulice z visoko spetimi lasmi, vitkim hrbtom, ki se ji je v notranjost telesa odpiral v obliki črke s, in počasno hojo, prepočasno celo za njeno starost, izdajala jo je ta hoja, govorila o njeni nejasni preteklosti ali pa vsaj o pretirani nagnjenosti k melanholiji, vendar sem se po daljšem premisleku odločil, da ne gre za isto osebo. Malik ni mogel imeti stvari pod tolikšnim nadzorom in tudi Julie sama po sebi se je zdela napol nora. Ponoči na primer *ni spala, saj so njeno velikansko posteljo zasedale mačke; sama je sedla na stol in položila noge na posteljo, vse tiste mačke, moralo jih je biti več kot dvajset, pa so spale ob njenih nogah in med krožniki napol gnilih rib.*

Malika nisem spraševal, kje je spoznal Julie niti kaj počneva pri njej. Vse, kar sem razumel, je bilo, da čakava. Malik me je Julie sicer predstavil kot prijatelja, ki zna delati stavke in zato piše roman. Zanj si je celo izmislil naslov, *Spet morje* ali nekaj podobnega, in Julie je bila navdušena. Ponudila mi je pisalni stroj, veliko, črno, predpotopno žival, ki je ob tipkanju oddajala grozeč zvok ali pa požirala papir, na desetine dreves je šlo v njeno podolžno grlo, v takšnih napetih trenutkih sem skočil izza mize ter začel z rokami vleči papir, sprva previdno, potem pa vse bolj razjarjeno, raztrgani kosi so leteli po zraku kakor snežinke, *smo kot sneg, ki vedno poneha*, sem si mrmral stavek, za katerega še zdaj ne vem, kje sem ga pobral, ampak po nekaj dneh je stroj odnehal, tropski gozdovi so bili rešeni, pokrajina odmrznjena, medtem ko se je zame vse šele začelo. Julie mi je po kotih hiše začela pripovedovati svoje spomine. Menda so bili do tolikšne mere zanimivi, da naj bi iz

njih sklofal knjigo. Odklonil sem, češ, v resnici sploh ne znam delati stavkov, Malik je tisto rekel kar tako, vendar je še naprej prislanjala hrbet na steno, grizla v luknjast sir in v bageto ter pripovedovala. Tako sem izvedel, da je v Cotonou pred leti prišla kot učiteljica prostovoljka. Toda ker se stvari niso izšle, rekla je čisto tako, natančno se spominjam, je službo pustila.

»Ne razumi me narobe, po srcu sem še vedno humanitarka, otrokom pomagam, kolikor lahko, olajšam jim pot, brez mene bi še bolj trpeli, toda če misliš, da iz tega posla lahko izstopiš, ko si enkrat v njem, se motiš.«

Več ko je govorila, manj sem razumel. Otroci od osem do šestnajst let, zvezane roke, treba jih je pospremiti. Uradna razlaga: transport mladoletnikov, ki jih hočejo posvojiti belci (moje razmišljanje: morda jih bodo prodali v suženjstvo, morda za prostitucijo, kajti lepo vas prosim, kateri beli par bi pa hotel posvojiti malega črnuha?). In kdo je še vpleten v posel? Ljudje na položajih, polkovniki, birokrati, ministri.

V tem trenutku sem se nehote zarezal: »Julie, z vsem spoštovanjem, kje se nahajam jaz v tej bordelski verigi?«

V naročje je vzela eno izmed mačk, ki so se nama pletle med nogami, in jo začela božati. »Še vedno ti ni jasno, kaj? Morda pa res nisi pravi pisatelj.«

V bližnji trafiki sem si kupila zavojček cigaret in telefonsko kartico za klice v tujino ter tako opremljena splezala na streho družinske hiše. Zdaj vem: od tu je Ismael strmel v ogenj, ki ga razširjajo kmetje v času harmatana, od tu je gledal bežeče živali, goreče ptice, ki letijo kakor feniksi, preden jih pogoltnejo plameni. Tu je bil prostor njegovega počitka in

sanj, čeprav je mene na vrhu spreletaval prej občutek, da sem se prišla posloviti. Želela sem prekoračiti namišljeno ljubkovanje mladega moškega telesa, pa mi je spodletelo. Želela sem preseči bridko žalost, stopnjujočo se osamljenost, pa očitno investicija ni bila prava. Zato je bil čas, da odidem. Poleg tega ni imelo smisla obremenjevati Ismaelove tete. Za ljudi, ki so prihajali na dvorišče, si je v mojem imenu izmišljevala zgodbe, ki jim je le malokdo verjel; nekoč me je neka starejša ženska celo zgrabila za trebuh in mi v obraz izkričala grobe, najbolj grobe besede mojega življenja. Teta me je tolažila, naj se ne zmenim zanjo, same neumnosti je rekla, vendar sem vseeno vedela; tega, kar sem občutila, ne bi smela preseči z Ismaelom, Ismael je bil namenjen za druge stvari.

Vtipkala sem številko telefonske kartice v mobilni telefon in nato očetovo telefonsko številko. Preden bi se odločila za karkoli, preden bi splezala s strehe in pustila goreče fenikse viseti v zraku, sem morala preveriti, kako je z očetom. Se me je odrekel, odkar sem mu priznala, da sem se tu z nekom zblížala, z nekom, ki je nekaj desetletij mlajši od mene, se me je odrekel, ker se kljub njegovim tožbam o prizadeti polovici možganov še vedno nisem odločila vrniti, ali pa je še vse po starem? Če je še vse po starem, potem je to zame pravzaprav dobro, če pa bo prijazen, pomeni, da so mu zamenjali srce. In v tem primeru se ne bom imela več kam vrniti.

Telefon je ponovno zazvonil. Zvonjenje sem slišala v glavi, v telesu, morda še intenzivneje, ker so vsi zunaj na dvorišču zadrževali dih. Noč, koze, celo kmetje, ki so zažigali travo, so za trenutek potihnili. Med dvigovanjem slušalke in še po tem, ko sem namesto tistega praznega halo izrekla Ismaelovo ime,

sem se zavedala, da je najina ljubezen trajala čas ene sušne dobe. Posejala sva seme v zemljo, in ker ni bilo klitja, ker ga nikoli ni moglo biti, se mi dozdeva, da je vse zgolj naključje, da sem sama bitje, oropano smisla.

Dry Season

Gabriela Babnik

Translated from the Slovenian by Olivia Hellewell

“Are you sleeping?” he said, moving his divine body. He was from a golden age, where lovers didn’t hold hands; they barely ran their fingers through each others’ hair.

“No, I can’t.”

I wanted to say “I don’t know how to sleep like you”, but there was no point; he wouldn’t understand. The chance for-
eigner, with whom I had been lying in bed all afternoon and one night, without anything happening between us.

Whilst yet again placing the bag on the floor, onto the carpet over which so many steps had walked, mostly bare, from where that smell of sweat, nakedness and concealment came, it occurred to me that this bag was all that was left of my former life. Outside the night pours, stars splash into it, and somewhere beyond, my son watches another crazy film. This time from his own life.

I stared into his silence and then, despite them being tucked into his jeans, at his large palms with beautifully formed nails, somewhat unusual for a street boy who had done so much. This is that bare, stony terrain, which probably only men can possess. Either that, or I’m from some sort of old school.

“I’m cold,” he said with his chin beckoned somewhere below his waist, as if he wanted to interrupt my stream of thought.

“And you’re warming your hands up?”

“Yes, I’m used to it still.” I always imagined that male hands in trousers meant protection, and that they were of course checking that the thing was still there. My son didn’t do it, at least not in my presence. There was probably something of our misunderstanding in that too. When he did it, he concealed it, when I did it, I would have to show him. To teach him. But I thought that another woman should teach him all about flora and fauna. Another, just like I, was another to this young man in front of me. “Lots of men do it,” he added lazily, giving me a smile which revealed an upper rim of gum. “You haven’t seen that in football?”

It threw me, his unexpected informal address. Will he now repeat those vulgar words again? Open yourself up, go on, so I can screw you, although, although he never uttered them. Many women – I’d seen it in those adverts for soap and detergent or even read it in detective novels and multi-coloured newspaper supplements – want that, that desire, they obsess over somebody ravishing them. The horror, that someone would take their body by force, take them down in a darkened hotel room, if the man is at all handsome and young and dark-skinned, and they old and withered and light-skinned, that horror can turn into a mantra, a summoning. Oh god, if he were to do anything like that, it would be the end of me. I will widen my mouth like her, moist, opalescent inside her, whilst the child was falling amongst the snowflakes. And the chair by the window remained empty.

“I have. And?”

“It’s where we’re most sensitive, down there.” Again I looked towards the bag on the floor. All my female friends who knew my son began to look at me suspiciously when they noticed his

somewhat withered, startled character. To them I had become someone else; not the Ana that they knew. Still Ana in leather high heels in winter and snakeskin ballerina pumps in summer; Ana, who makes cushions with botanical designs and wall hangings in fiery colours, all this, because she didn't know how to tame her secret and unpredictable garden, yet still a completely different Ana. Ana the traitor. Ana, inventor of her son, who had seemed so strong when she gave birth to him. Ana, who after the birth was no different from those divas who would get up on stage bare-legged, would sip whiskey and defy the whole world. But then, the child of that very same Ana got spoiled. "Didn't you know that hyena's prey go for the testicles first?"

And because I didn't wish to observe myself and my entire life from some new perspective, I answered him quickly: "If they catch buck; what about if they catch a doe?"

"Well doesn't it give you a painful shock down there?" he said, no longer laughing and no longer showing his gums. He leant somewhere towards my side of the bed and it seemed as if he still wanted to touch this secret region.

"I don't know, it's never happened to me. But I'd say the vagina is more for softer opening and touch."

The language which we were speaking wasn't his language. He gave the impression of a nonchalant bandit, who has himself under complete control, although there, in those ventricles of the heart, he was more vulnerable than my son. "Yes, true, it's more closed."

Now it was my turn to burst out laughing, showing my gums. "Do you know what we're talking about?" And as he didn't look as if he did know, or as if he knew anything at that moment, I said, somewhat boldly, for that hotel room and for his age: "Do you know that we just made love?"

All of my watercolours combined could not have contained half the softness of his question. “Do you mean with words?”

I wished he would go through my forest of hair and that I could experience that wonderful, dream-like moment of man and woman coming closer or that he would at least draw the curtains, the heavy, velvet curtains which made the night even darker, yet he did something completely different.

I don't know how much time I spent with Malik in Cotonou; a week, two, a month, a year – this time was somehow deleted for me. Whilst waiting for school to end the two of us lived with some French lady called Julie Amado. She could have been the fleeting woman from Black Street with hair tied-up high, a slender back which at the inner of her body opened out into the shape of a letter ‘s’, and a slow gait, too slow even for her age. It betrayed her, that gait; it spoke of her vague past or at least of her excessive proclivity to melancholia. But after much thought I decided that it couldn't have been the same person. Malik couldn't have things under such supervision and also Julie herself seemed completely crazy. For instance *she didn't sleep at night, with her huge bed being overrun by cats; she sat alone in the chair with her feet on the bed, whilst all the cats – there must have been more than twenty of them – slept on her lap and in amongst plates of rotting fish.*

I didn't ask Malik where he met Julie, nor what the two of us were doing at her place. As far as I understood, we were waiting. Malik had otherwise introduced Julie to me as a friend, who knew how to form sentences and who was therefore writing a novel. He had even thought up a title for her, *Once Again, the Sea*, or something like that, and Julie was

thrilled. She offered me a typewriter, a large, black, antiquated animal, which upon typing gave out a menacing sound and it consumed paper, with the trees going into its oblong mouth in tens. At such tense moments I leapt from behind the table and began to pull the paper, at first carefully, but then more and more furiously, with the torn up pieces flying through the air like snowflakes, *we are the like snow which eventually ceases to fall*, I murmured a sentence to myself which I still don't know where I picked up, but after a few days the machine gave way, the tropical rainforests were saved, the landscape unfrozen whilst for me everything had only just begun. Julie began to tell me her stories all over every corner of the house. Maybe to some degree they were interesting enough for me to churn out a book about them. But I declined, seeing as in reality I had no idea how to construct sentences, Malik had just made that up, but she carried on leaning her back against the wall, biting into a baguette and some holey cheese, and recounted. It was how I learnt of how she came to Cotonou as a volunteer teacher a year earlier. But because things didn't work out – she said it just like that, I remember exactly – she had left her job.

“Don't get me wrong, I'm still a humanitarian at heart, I help children however I can, I make their paths easier and without me they'd suffer even more, but if you think that you can get out of that business once you're inside it, you're mistaken.”

The more she spoke, the less I understood. Children from eight to sixteen years old, hands tied, needed to be accompanied. The official explanation: the trafficking of children, which white people wanted to adopt (my thinking: maybe they were going to sell them into slavery, maybe into prostitution,

because I ask you, which white couple is going to want to adopt a little black kid). And who is still involved in business? People in positions: colonelships, bureaucrats, ministers.

At that moment I involuntarily became angry: “Julie, with the greatest of respect, where do I fit into this licentious chain?”

Into her lap she placed one of the cats which had been winding between our legs and started to stroke her. “Do you still not get it, or what? Maybe you’re really not a true writer.”

At the nearby newsstand I bought a pack of cigarettes and an international phone card and, so-equipped, climbed to the roof of the family house. Now I know: it was from here that Ismael stared at the fire which the farmers spread in the time of Harmattan, it was from here that he watched the escaping animals, burning birds which fly like phoenixes before being swallowed by flames. Here was his place of rest and dreams, although here at the top I got more a feeling that I had come to say goodbye. I had wanted to get over the imaginary caresses of the young male body but I failed. I wanted to overcome the bitter sadness, the increasing loneliness, but this investment obviously wasn’t the right one. That is why it was time to leave. Besides that there was no sense in troubling Ismael’s aunt. For people coming to the courtyard, she had been making up stories which nobody would believe; once an older woman had even grabbed my stomach and yelled rudely, the rudest words of my life, to my face. The aunt had comforted me, told me not to mind about her, it’s all nonsense she’d said, but still I’d known; Ismael couldn’t help me overcome what I was feeling, Ismael was meant for other things.

I typed the phone card's number into the mobile phone, followed by my father's telephone number. Before I decided on anything, before I climbed from the roof and left the burning phoenixes to hang in the air, I had to find out how things were with my father. He had renounced me ever since I confessed to him that I'd become close to somebody here, somebody who was a good few decades younger than me, he renounced me because despite his complaints about the affected parts of his brain I still hadn't decided to return, or was everything still as usual? If everything was still as usual, then it was actually good for me, but if he was going to be nice that meant that they'd changed his heart. And if that was the case I wasn't going to have anywhere to return to.

The telephone rang again. I heard the ringing in my head, in my body, maybe even more intensely because everyone outside in the courtyard held their breath. The night, the goats, even the farmers who had been burning the grass, all fell silent for a moment. Between answering the phone and then afterwards, when instead of that empty hello I said Ismael's name, I realised that our love had lasted an entire dry season. We sowed seeds in the ground, and because they didn't germinate, because they never could have germinated, it seemed to me that everything was mere coincidence, that I am just a being, devoid of meaning.



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