

EUROPEAN

PRIZES



EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

AUTHORS 2022

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Foreword

Dear reader,

This is your chance to discover 14 authors, 14 stories, 14 voices from 14 different countries – not only European Union Member States, but also Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, North Macedonia, Norway and Ukraine, who are all part of our common ‘creative Europe’ family.

I truly hope you enjoy this collection.

You will find a diversity of characters and genres that will transport you to completely different worlds and introduce you to new worldviews. This is what this anthology of the EU Prize for Literature for 2022 offers, and it is what the EU Prize for Literature has celebrated since 2009: the incredible creativity and diversity that can be found in Europe’s contemporary literature scene.

At the European Commission, we are proud to support a prize that continues to help emerging European fiction writers reach wider audiences, especially through the translation and promotion of their works. The 2021–2027 creative Europe programme also empowers publishers to work together, as we want to encourage the translation, the international promotion and, of course, the sale of books – especially those from languages that are read less often.

Before you dive into the stories by this year’s laureates, let me congratulate them warmly. I am confident that their books will find large audiences across Europe, and I wish each of them a wonderful literary career.

**Mariya Gabriel,
Commissioner for Innovation,
Research, Culture, Education
and Youth**



EUROPEAN JURY

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE MEMBERS

Koukla MacLehose

President of the European jury

Koukla MacLehose entered the publishing world in 1975 to manage the foreign-rights department of Flammarion. In February 1987, she set up her own scouting agency in London with four publishers. By 2009, the agency had publishers in 17 countries, and today it covers 22 countries. Koukla still works at the agency, and these days she focuses on French-speaking authors. The agency has readers in various languages and is in contact with agents and publishers all over the world. They also work with film and television production companies, and for the National Theatre.

Julia Angelin

Julia Angelin is a literary agent and the Chief Executive Officer of Salomonsson Agency, the leading literary agency in the Nordic countries. She represents authors in all genres, from literary to crime fiction.

Sonia Draga

Sonia Draga (born in 1967) is a Polish publisher, founder and President of the Sonia Draga Publishing Group. The publishing group includes Sonia Draga and Debit, along with the imprints Non Stop Comics (for comics), Post Factum (for non-fiction) and Mlody Book (for young adults). Sonia also owns several bookshops. She has been President of the Polish Chamber of Books since 2020, and was previously a member of the board. She has also been a member of the management board of Targi Książki Sp. z o.o., which organises the Warsaw Book Fair and the Silesian Book Fair.

Georgi Gospodinov

Georgi Gospodinov is a leading Bulgarian writer and the author of *Natural Novel*, *The Physics of Sorrow* and *Time Shelter*, among other works. He is the winner of many literary awards, including the Premio Strega Europeo in 2021, the Usedom Prize for European Literature in 2021, the Central European Angelus Award in 2019 and the Jan Michalski Prize in 2016. His books have been translated into more than 25 languages.

Vera Michalski

Vera Michalski-Hoffmann founded the Editions Noir sur Blanc publishing house in 1987, together with her husband Jan Michalski. Since its launch, the organisation has aimed to build bridges between the cultures and peoples of Europe. Later, various imprints and publishing houses merged together, with the Libella group now including a dozen publishing houses in France, the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland.

Kristīne Pikenena

Since starting her career in the book industry in 2012, Kristīne Pikenena has been actively promoting Latvian and international literature. Currently she works as the store manager of the flagship Jānis Roze Bookstore in the centre of Riga. She has been bringing together like-minded readers in the Total Cover (Totāls vāks) book club for more than 7 years, with monthly literary meetings on various themes.

Thomas Überhoff

Born in 1954, Thomas Überhoff studied English and German literature at the University of Göttingen. He began working in editorial services for Rowohlt Verlag in 1984, and headed its fiction department from 2000 to 2021. Since his official retirement, he has continued working for Rowohlt as an editor-at-large. He has also translated books by Denis Johnson, Nell Zink, Sheila Heti, Colum McCann and others.

VERDICT OF THE EUROPEAN JURY

We in the jury (which consisted of Georgi, Julia, Koukla, Kristine, Sonia, Thomas and Vera) met each of the 14 nominating organisations so that they had the chance to present their nominees. Having previously read all of the sample translations, this both gave us additional insight into the books and added some knowledge about the authors and their circumstances. This year's entries were consistently interesting, with outstanding literary quality, and if future nominating organisations keep in mind that this is a European prize, and that their entries should therefore have a European perspective of some sort, they should do fine.

The books we chose for the shortlist (*Trophy* by Gaea Schoeters from Belgium, *In the Ditch* by Slađana Nina Perković from Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Madame Lazare* by Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin from Ireland, *Perfect Days*

by Jacobo Bergareche from Spain and *Ask Miechka* by Eugenia Kuznetsova from Ukraine), as well as the EUPL winner, *A Garbage Chute* by Iva Pezuashvili from Georgia, were superbly written. They had original voices and powerful stories, were relevant to our time, kept us on our toes and made us want to know more about the story. They also made us want to recommend them to fellow translators and publishers in order to make these books travel through translations to each of their countries, both in Europe and worldwide.

In addition to noting the qualities listed above, which were present in each of the books, we made the following individual observations.

- Gaea Schoeters' writing is highly professional and refined. Her book is a compelling page-turner, despite its hard-to-digest subject – a billionaire hunter of big African beasts who is

cleverly persuaded by the owner of a lodge to add a human being to his trophies.

- Slađana Nina Perković has a very contemporary voice, and hers was one of the very few books that actually made us all laugh, even though its topic was civil war.
- Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin has written a sprawling European novel about language, family ties, identity and social questions. Add to that the themes of Jewish identity, World War Two and a mystery rooted in language and you will see the fullness and ripeness of his novel.
- Jacobo Bergareche has written a funny and refreshing book that felt somehow eminently different from other entries. His novel showed preoccupations that were very much part of our old Western world until that world was recently turned upside down, with scenes of seduction during seminars in America that have funny parallels with Faulkner, whose papers are housed in the city where the seminar takes place.
- Eugenia Kuznetsova's book, besides being very well written, felt

poignantly nostalgic and fairy-tale-like, considering the current situation in Ukraine. How many years will it take to be able to write again about a grandmother receiving her three granddaughters in her lovely country house for the summer, a house where they spent so many of their holidays as children and which may by now be destroyed?

- Iva Pezuashvili's book resonates with the images of war and its dire consequences that we are now being confronted with on a daily basis. At the same time, it is modern, deeply engaged and emphatic, and, last but not least, full of tongue-in-cheek humour and entertainment. Such literature creates empathy, and can also be used as a tool to better understand our world. Iva's is a powerful voice that needs to be heard far beyond the borders of his native Georgia.

Koukla MacLehose, for the jury

THE EUROPEAN UNION PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is an annual initiative, launched in 2009, that recognises emerging fiction writers in Europe (1). It is financed by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union, which aims to strengthen Europe's cultural and creative sectors.

The Prize is open to 42 countries currently involved in the Creative Europe programme.

Each year, national organisations in one third of the participating countries nominate a novel they trust has the potential to find an audience outside

of their national borders, with all participating countries and language areas being represented over a 3-year cycle.

This fifth cycle of the project marks a restructuring of the Prize, with a seven-member European jury now choosing one award winner for each edition of the EUPL, along with five special mentions.

All nominated authors will be promoted continuously on a European stage, aiming to reach a wider and international audience and to connect with readers beyond their national and linguistic borders.

SELECTION PROCESS

The 14 nominated novels were proposed by national entities that are familiar with the literary scene of their country, are used to promoting their own literature abroad and have expertise in literary quality and assessing the translatability potential of a book.

National selections are made on the basis of criteria stipulated by the EUPL Consortium in agreement with the European Commission, and fulfil the requirements listed below.

- The author of the proposed book must have the nationality of or be a permanent resident of the selected country.
- The author of the nominated book must have published between two and four fiction books in total.
- The nominated book must be the latest book published by the author.
- No book published by the author may have been translated into more than four languages.
- The nominated book must ideally have been published no more than 18 months before the date of announcement of the Prize winner.

All national organisations undertake to respect the selection rules.

Based on translated excerpts from the nominated books, the jury chooses one award winner and five special mentions. The jury's choice is made on the basis of a list of books nominated at the national level, one for each participating country.

THE EUROPEAN JURY

The European jury is composed of seven members, all of whom are literary experts with highly recognised professional reputations and are competent and influential in the field of literature and translation.

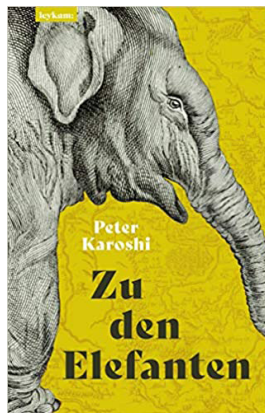
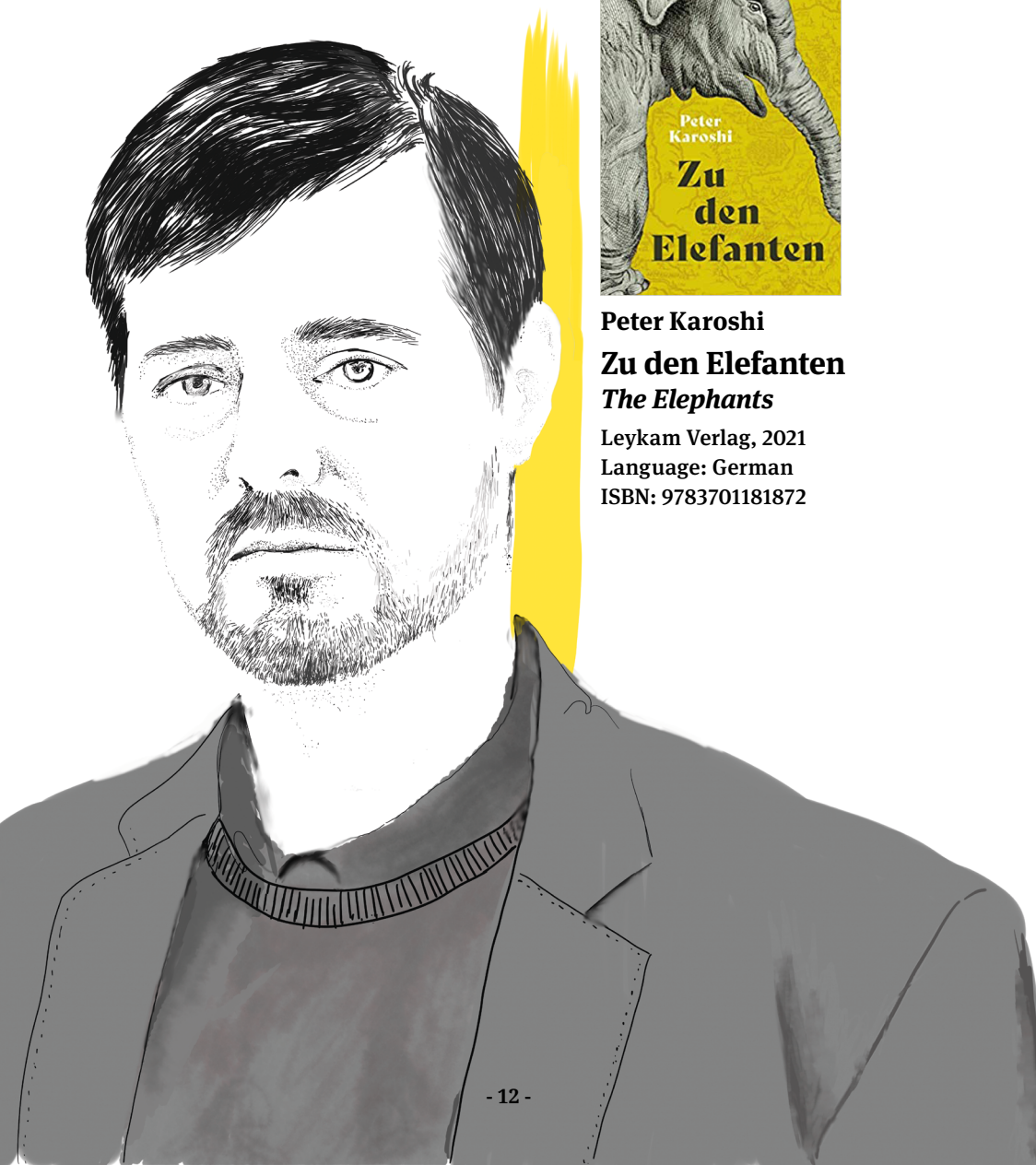
The members are appointed by the EUPL Consortium after consultation with experts in the sector. In each edition, experts are appointed to form the European jury. The members of the jury come from or represent countries not featured in the current edition of the Prize.

THE CONSORTIUM

The EUPL is organised by a consortium of associations comprising the Federation of European Publishers (FEP) and the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF), with the support of the European Commission. These two federations are jointly responsible for setting up the European jury, organising the jury's announcement and celebrating the authors' achievements through a yearly dedicated literary event. They support the authors in promoting their work across Europe and beyond – online, in bookshops and at book fair events. Both organisations represent part of the book chain at the European level and work closely together to highlight the priorities in the sector.

(1) Eligible countries are those participating in the Creative Europe programme. (https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/crea/guidance/list-3rd-country-participation_crea_en.pdf)

AUSTRIA



Peter Karoshi
Zu den Elefanten
The Elephants

Leykam Verlag, 2021
Language: German
ISBN: 9783701181872

BIOGRAPHY

Peter Karoshi, born in 1975 in Graz, studied history, English and American studies at the University of Graz. From 1999 to 2005, he worked in the transdisciplinary research area 'Modernity – Vienna and Central Europe around 1900' at the Department of Austrian History in Graz, where he studied heterogeneities, pluralities and cultures of memory in multi-ethnic states. In 2009, his first novel *Grünes, grünes Gras* (*Green, Green Grass*) was published by Milena Verlag. His novel *Zu den Elefanten* (*The Elephants*), published by Leykam Buchverlag, was nominated for the Deutschen Buchpreis in August 2021. Peter Karoshi currently lives in Vienna.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Theo, a cultural scientist, is stuck in a strange state of limbo when he resolves to change his relationship with his wife, Anna, and his son, Moritz. Together with Moritz, he undertakes a journey along the route from the Mediterranean to Vienna that the future Emperor Maximilian II took centuries ago with the elephant Soliman. This time, they travel in the opposite direction, from Austria via South Tyrol to Genoa. But the pair soon face major problems. Seemingly lost in himself and despairing of the present, Theo tells in diary form of a journey towards the realisation that it is the past, memories and memory that

shape the present. It is a journey that takes a dramatic turn, through which the narrator realises that life is a stream of attempts to explain and observe, and that people must first lose themselves to find each other.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

It is the question of time and its passing that is at the centre of Peter Karoshi's novella *The Elephants*. Linked to this is an examination of what role the individual can play in the passing of time, if any, and whether it is worth engaging with this time all. In this text, Peter Karoshi shows himself to be a confident, reserved narrator who knows about the truth of the poetic in relation to history. It is a person in the middle of his life who is being brought into focus here. This person is marked by a fundamental experience of loneliness and estrangement. He is experiencing a crisis, one that urges him to set out for himself, and this setting out ends in a historically charged landscape. With *The Elephants*, Peter Karoshi has presented a quiet but intense book that carries the multilayered, complex character of European history within it and shows that there is no escape from this history and these landscapes – whether we like it or not, they make us witnesses who can be held accountable for their lives, their actions and their omissions.

Zu den Elefanten

Peter Karoshi



Doch mich hatte eine große Sprachlosigkeit ergriffen. Ich hätte meinen Menschen, den wenigen, die mir noch geblieben waren, sagen sollen, wie sehr ich sie liebte. Stattdessen ging ich unruhig und getrieben von etwas, das ich nicht fassen konnte, durch die alte Landschaft.

Ich sah meinem Sohn beim Lesen zu, bewunderte ihn für seine Ruhe und Ausgeglichenheit, beides Eigenschaften, von denen ich doch auch wusste, dass sie innerhalb von einer Sekunde in eine nichts verzeihende Wut, auch sich selbst gegenüber, umschlagen konnten. Mit Neid bewunderte ich, wie wenig irritiert sich meine Frau von meiner Unruhe zeigte, wie ungerührt sie mit ihren Arbeiten weitermachte. Ich dagegen sprang vom Schreibtisch auf, sobald ich gerade einmal einige Dateien geöffnet, blind für ihren Inhalt gebannt auf den Bildschirm gestarrt hatte, um letztlich doch bewegungslos zu bleiben: Um mich herum schien alles in Bewegung, diese offensichtliche Entwicklungshaftigkeit von allem Vergangenen, die nicht zuletzt in allen diesen Artikeln in meinem Notebook nicht nur vorgefunden, sondern geradezu gefordert wurde, wünschte ich mir für meine Gegenwart auf einmal nicht mehr.

Am Abend des gleichen Tages hatte ich Anna und Moritz trotz andauernden Protests zu einem langen Spaziergang die Wiesen hinauf in Richtung des Berges gezwungen. »Erpresser«, hatte Moritz gezischt, dann hatten wir alle drei gelacht, weil es ja auch lustig geklungen hatte. Ohne es zu wollen, versäumte ich den richtigen Moment, ein Gespräch zu beginnen. Danach, das wusste ich aus Erfahrung, würde sich nun auch keines mehr ergeben. So stapf-

te ich missmutig wegen der nicht ergriffenen Chance, ansonsten aber fasziniert von der Umgebung vor den beiden bergauf. Ich sah verwirrt nach vorne und dann wieder nach hinten, trotz des hohen Grases glaubte ich, auf gepflegtem Grund zu spazieren, zu einem Garten hinter einem schmiedeeisernen Gitter, alt und gut verrostet, der ein vielleicht ehrwürdiges Haus umschloss (tatsächlich dachte ich an ein Spukschloss). Da erst fiel mir ein, dass ich genau das vor ein paar Tagen, noch in der Stadt, geträumt hatte. Dass ich mich nämlich in einem verwilderten Garten in einer Landschaft, die genau dieser dort ähnlich schien, verirrt hatte. Dass es geregnet hatte und ich durch wucherndes, knotiges Gras gehen musste, das genauso wild wie jenes draußen vor den Gittern gewesen war. Von wegen gepflegt, dachte ich missmutig, nichts passt mehr zusammen.

Wir gingen den Höhenweg weiter, bis wir an eine Weggabelung kamen. Ein gelbes Schild mit schwarzer Schrift auf einem Metallpfosten, der in einem Loch mit frischem Beton aufgefüllt steckte. Beim letzten Mal im Mai war hier noch kein Wegweiser gestanden. Der Beton war noch feucht. Wir befanden uns, las Moritz vor, auf dem *Weg des Buches*.

»Mit Unterstützung von Bund, Land und Europäischer Union«, las ich weiter und wir lachten. Zu gut um wahr zu sein.

Später am Abend im Bett las ich Anna vor, dass das Projekt des Bücherwegs eine Route nachstellte, auf der früher protestantische Bücher vom romkritischen Norden in den Süden geschmuggelt wurden. Und wie sich gerade in diesen schwer erreichbaren Tälern eine beinahe alles ergreifende Art des Protestantismus auch in Zeiten der Gegenreformation gehalten hatte. Ich war begeistert. Sie dagegen murmelte mit wenig Interesse und unter tiefen Atemzügen, dass ich das unbedingt Moritz erzählen müsste. Ich lag wach und dachte wie benommen über die Alpen nach, in deren Mitte wir, wie in all den Jahren zuvor schon, unseren Urlaub verbringen würden. Wie auf denselben Wegen und Straßen, die die römischen Legionen nach Norden benutzt hatten, so viele Jahr-

hunderte später Bücherschmuggler nach Süden gezogen waren, deren Weg sich mit jenem eines spanischen Elefanten und dessen Kaiser und Besitzer kreuzte, die in eine andere Himmelsrichtung zogen. Was absurd erschien, hatte ich dennoch mit Moritz im Frühjahr bei einer Führung entlang Wiens antiker Spuren erzählt bekommen. Mir persönlich war die Geschichte des Elefanten Soliman nicht bekannt gewesen, aber um mich herum hatten alle ganz informiert getan und über den triumphalen Einzug in Wien im Jahr 1552 geredet. Eine völlig verrückte Reise, auf der das Tier von Spanien ausgehend über das Mittelmeer bis Genua, und von dort durch die Alpen, angeblich immer in Begleitung seines neuen Herren, dem späteren Kaiser Maximilian II., wanderte. Ich erinnerte mich in diesem dunklen Moment in der Nacht in unserem Ferienhaus, dass ich die Führerin noch hatte fragen wollen, ob Maximilian tatsächlich die ganze Reise seines Elefanten von Spanien bis Genua und weiter durch die Alpen mitgemacht hatte (hatte er, was damals unvorstellbar für mich war). Aber sie war bereits von einigen Hobbyhistorikern belagert worden und so hatte ich mich dezent mit einem Handwinken von der sympathischen Frau mit dem Minirock und der guten Kurzhaarfrisur verabschiedet, was sie naturgemäß nicht bemerkte, und war mit Moritz in ein Kaffeehaus gegangen. Ich lag da und dachte über ihren letzten Satz nach, dass nicht zuletzt eine Reihe von Gasthäusern an der Reiseroute des Elefanten nach dem wundersamen Tier benannt worden war. Eine schöne Vorstellung, dass das außergewöhnliche Erlebnis in Erinnerungsstätten verewigt worden war. Was musste das für ein Gefühl gewesen sein, dem Elefanten gegenübergestanden zu sein und noch Jahre später davon erzählen zu können?

Seltsam erschien mir das alles, noch viel seltsamer als es den Menschen von damals vorgekommen sein musste. Dass so ein gewagtes Tier aus kühnen Träumen eine so starke Faszination ausübte, wunderte mich keineswegs, nein, das Irritierende war, fand ich, wie dieser Moment, der ja doch wie ein Blitz eingeschlagen sein musste, sich weiterentwickelte, über Generationen hinweg. Die nächsten Generationen sahen ja nicht mehr den Moment des Ereignisses, sondern nur mehr die Erinnerung in Form der Gaststät-

ten, ein Bild, das ich sympathisch fand. Ja, mehr noch, nur durch diese Stätten selbst konnte das mächtige Ereignis überhaupt weiterwirken. Die Herrscher, oder der Elefant selbst, sie interessierten mich nicht so sehr, wie ihre Träger und Bewahrer in den folgenden Jahrhunderten. Es waren meine, unsere, Gedächtnisstützen, die mir entscheidend für das Verständnis eines Ereignisses erschienen. Darüber dachte ich ganz nüchtern und logisch nach, weil es mir als das kraftvollere Bild als das der banalen Reisenden alleine erschien. Und als ich da so in den Schlaf spazierte, ergaben die Alpen ein noch viel bunteres Muster, wie in einem Webstück, das gar nicht so recht zu dem gesichtslosen Bild passen wollte, dass ich bis dahin von dieser Region gehabt hatte.

Sur la route des éléphants

Peter Karoshi

Traduit en français par Virginie Pironin

Mais j'avais été saisi par un profond mutisme. J'aurais dû dire à mes proches, les quelques-uns qu'il me restait, à quel point je les aimais. Au lieu de ça j'avancais, nerveux et porté par quelque chose que j'étais incapable d'appréhender, à travers ce paysage ancien.

Je regardai mon fils lire, admirai son calme et sa sérénité, deux qualités dont je savais qu'elles pouvaient laisser place en l'espace d'une seconde à une colère qui ne pardonnait rien, même envers lui-même. J'admirai et enviai le peu de trouble de ma femme face à mon agitation, l'impassibilité avec laquelle elle poursuivait ses tâches. Moi au contraire, je sautai de mon bureau aussitôt après avoir ouvert quelques fichiers et fixé l'écran sans voir leur contenu, pour finalement rester immobile: tout semblait se mouvoir autour de moi, soudain je ne voulais plus dans mon présent de cette évidente évolution inhérente à toutes les choses passées qui non seulement se trouvait, mais était carrément voulue, entre autres dans tous ces articles sur mon ordinateur portable.

Ce soir-là, je forçai Anna et Moritz, malgré leurs protestations répétées, à aller faire une longue promenade le long de la côte qui menait à la montagne, à travers les prés.

«Maître-chanteur», siffla Moritz, et nous avons ri tous les trois, parce que c'était drôle.

Sans le vouloir, je ratai le moment propice à une conversation. Ensuite, je le savais par expérience, il n'y en aurait pas d'autre. Je marchai ainsi devant eux, maussade à cause de la chance que je n'avais pas saisie, mais fasciné par les alentours. Confus, je regardai devant moi, puis de nouveau derrière. Malgré les hautes herbes,

j'avais l'impression d'avancer sur un terrain entretenu, vers un jardin derrière une vieille grille en fer forgé recouverte de rouille, entourant peut-être une respectable bâtisse (j'imaginai en réalité une maison hantée). Je me souvins alors avoir rêvé exactement de cette scène quelques jours auparavant, quand nous étions encore en ville. Que je m'étais égaré dans un jardin à l'abandon dans un paysage parfaitement similaire à celui-ci. Qu'il avait plu et que j'avais dû avancer à travers des herbes foisonnantes et noueuses tout aussi sauvages que celles qui poussaient devant cette grille. Entretenu tu parles, me dis-je morose, plus rien ne concorde.

Nous poursuivîmes notre chemin le long de la côte jusqu'à arriver à un croisement. Un panneau jaune à l'inscription noire sur un poteau métallique planté dans un trou fraîchement coulé de béton. La dernière fois, en mai, il n'y avait pas encore de panneau indicateur. Le béton était encore humide. Nous nous trouvions, lut Moritz, sur le *Weg des Buches*, le Chemin du livre.

«Avec le soutien de l'État fédéral, du Land et de l'Union européenne», poursuivis-je la lecture.

Cela nous fit rire. C'était trop beau pour être vrai.

Plus tard dans la soirée, dans notre lit, je lus à Anna que le projet du Chemin du livre retraçait la voie par laquelle les livres protestants avaient été autrefois acheminés illégalement du nord, où Rome était vue d'un œil critique, vers le sud. Et comment, justement dans ces vallées difficiles d'accès, une sorte de protestantisme presque poignant s'était maintenu durant la Contre-Réforme. Je trouvais ça passionnant. Elle, en revanche, marmonna sans grand intérêt, entre de profondes respirations, que je devais absolument raconter ça à Moritz. Incapable de m'endormir, je pensais confusément aux Alpes, au cœur desquelles nous allions passer nos vacances, comme toutes les années précédentes. À ces routes et ces chemins empruntés par les légions romaines vers le nord et, des siècles plus tard, par les passeurs de livres vers le sud, et dont la trajectoire croisait celle d'un éléphant espagnol et de son empereur et maître, dans une direction différente. Ce qui semblait

absurde, mais Moritz et moi l'avions pourtant entendu raconter, au printemps, lors d'une visite guidée sur les traces antiques de Vienne. Personnellement, je ne connaissais pas l'histoire de l'éléphant Soliman, mais autour de moi, tous avaient fait mine d'être bien informés et avaient discuté de son entrée triomphale dans Vienne en 1552. Un voyage complètement fou au cours duquel l'animal, parti d'Espagne, avait traversé la Méditerranée jusqu'à Gênes puis, de là, les Alpes, soi-disant toujours en compagnie de son nouveau maître, le futur empereur Maximilien II. Dans l'obscurité de la nuit dans notre maison de vacances, je me souvins avoir voulu demander à la guide si Maximilien II avait vraiment fait le voyage de l'Espagne jusqu'à Gênes et ensuite à travers les Alpes avec son éléphant (la réponse était oui, ce qui me paraissait inimaginable à l'époque). Comme elle était déjà assiégée par des passionnés d'histoire, j'avais pris congé de cette femme sympathique en mini-jupe et à la jolie coupe courte d'un mouvement de la main discret, ce qu'elle n'avait bien sûr pas remarqué, et j'étais allé dans un café avec Moritz. Allongé là, je repensais à sa dernière phrase, selon laquelle toute une série d'auberges sur la route de l'éléphant avaient été baptisées d'après l'étrange animal. C'était une belle idée de se dire que cet événement hors du commun avait été immortalisé dans des lieux commémoratifs. Quelle sensation cela avait dû être de se trouver face à face avec le pachyderme et de pouvoir le raconter encore des années plus tard...!

Tout ça me semblait étrange, encore plus étrange que ç'avait dû le paraître aux gens de l'époque. Qu'un animal aussi audacieux, sorti des rêves les plus fous, provoque une telle fascination ne me surprenait pas le moins du monde. Non, ce qui me perturbait était que ce moment, qui avait dû passer en un éclair, ait continué d'avoir un impact sur des générations. Les suivantes ne connurent plus le moment de l'évènement, seulement son souvenir sous la forme des auberges. Une image que je trouvais sympathique. Oui, plus encore, il n'y avait que grâce à ces lieux que cet incroyable évènement pouvait continuer de rayonner. Les souverains, ou même l'éléphant, ne m'intéressaient pas autant que les porteurs et les gardiens de leur histoire au fil des siècles suivants. Ils étaient

mes, nos aide-mémoires, ceux qui me paraissaient indispensables à la compréhension d'un évènement. J'y réfléchis avec grande lucidité et logique, car cette image me semblait plus puissante que celle des banals voyageurs à eux seuls. Et alors que je me baladais ainsi dans mon sommeil, les Alpes produisirent un motif encore plus haut en couleur, comme dans une pièce tissée qui refuserait de s'intégrer vraiment à l'image impersonnelle que j'avais jusque-là de la région.

SPECIAL
MENTION

BELGIUM

Gaea Schoeters

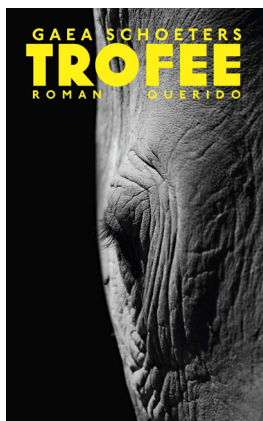
Trofee

Trophy

Querido, 2020

Language: Dutch

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BIOGRAPHY

Gaea Schoeters, born in 1976, is a writer, screenwriter, librettist and journalist. She made her debut with the travel book *Girls, Muslims and Motorcycles* (published by Querido) about a 7-month motorcycle trip through Iran, central Asia and the Arabian peninsula. This was followed by the novels *Diggers* (Manteau), *The Art of Falling* (De Bezige Bij) and *Untitled #1* (Querido), and the interview collection *The End* (Polis). Her latest novel, *Trophy* (Querido), was shortlisted for various prizes and won the Sabam Prize for literature. Together with illustrator Gerda Dendooven she produced *Nothing* (De Eenhoorn), a philosophical picture book for children, young, and old. With composer Annelies Van Parys she has written several award-winning operas and music theatre pieces; their

work has been performed at venues such as Biennale Venice, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Folkoperan Stockholm, Opera Ballet Vlaanderen, Deutsche Oper, Operadagen Rotterdam and Theater aan Zee. She also, in collaboration with Johanna Pas, translates the works of Kae Tempest. All of her work lies at the intersection of formal experimentation and social engagement. She is a much sought-after columnist and essayist for various newspapers and magazines, and the curator of the *Dead Ladies Show*, a *café chantant* that spotlights forgotten women.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Hunter White lives for the big game hunt. An immensely wealthy American share trader, he goes to Africa to shoot a rhinoceros, the last of the big five he has yet to bag. More than anything else, the hunt gives him the feeling of being alive. Moreover, he believes trophy hunting creates not just job opportunities but an income the local population needs to combat poaching. When he discovers, after a disappointing rhinoceros hunt, that there is something called the 'big six', his hunting expedition takes a sinister turn. In *Trophy*, Schoeters takes us into the twisted mind of a Western hunter. White is guided by a morally dubious compass as he weighs up the value

of a life, whether of a person or of an animal. In a stylistic tour de force, Schoeters builds the tension step by step and sets Hunter White, local tracker Dawid and young hunter INqate against each other in a gruesome and captivating psychological game of chess. Her rhythmical style underscores the almost physical sense of threat created by the plot.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

Trophy is an ode to wild nature and a sharp critique of how we relate to Africa. Without moralising, Schoeters raises crucial ethical questions about the mentality of Westerners. At the same time, she looks at the nuances of the complex subject of hunting, instead of presenting us with the usual fierce supporters and opponents. Above all, this disconcerting novel of ideas, with its painful and stark questions about contemporary colonialism and masculinity, holds a mirror up to the reader. *Trophy* won the Sabam for Culture prize, and was longlisted, as one of the few titles from Flanders, for the 2022 Boon prize. The interest in the title during the Frankfurt Book Fair 2021 makes us believe that the author is on the verge of an international breakthrough.

Trofee

Gaea Schoeters



Als een roofvogel duikt het vliegtuig uit de inktzwarte hemel naar beneden, om vervolgens af te remmen, even schijnbaar bewegingloos te blijven hangen en dan een wijde cirkelende beweging in te zetten, alsof het aarzelt tussen twee mogelijke prooien en nog niet besloten heeft op welke het zich zal storten. Beneden, in de diepte, tekenen zich linten van licht af die het duister in repen snijden en waarover andere, kleinere lichtjes als mieren naar elkaar toe bewegen, samentroepen, clusters vormen en weer uitwaaiëren. Het land buiten de lichtvlekken is donker, een gapend zwart gat, te donker zelfs om te zien of het vlak of golvend is. Pas later, als het vliegtuig zijn aarzeling opgeeft en verder daalt, tekenen zich leesbare patronen af: landruggen bollen op, dalen wijken terug, water scheidt zich af van land. Veel tijd om te kijken is er niet; nu de vogel zijn prooi heeft uitgekozen, duikt hij razendsnel neer. Even nog laten zich gebouwen onderscheiden, vrachtwagens, auto's, dan raakt het landingsgestel de grond.

Dawid herademt, maar voelt geen opluchting; integendeel, hij wordt meteen overvallen door een gevoel van zwaarte, alsof de aarde in dit nieuwe land harder aan hem trekt en de lucht zich moeilijker laat inademen. Jaren heeft hij hiernaar uitgekeken, dag na dag, en evenzoveel nachten heeft hij ervan gedroomd. Maar nu, nu hij hier werkelijk is, voelt hij geen vreugde, geen triomf, zelfs geen tevredenheid. Hoewel het vliegtuig wel degelijk op zijn bestemming is aangekomen – dat verzekert de metalige stem van de steward hem, voor het geval hij of een van de andere passagiers eraan zou-

den twijfelen: dat ze aangekomen zijn –, is wat hem overvalt niet de blijdschap van een aankomst, niet de verademing van een man die lange tijd heeft gereisd, na vele ontberingen zijn doel bereikt en viert dat hij het er levend van af heeft gebracht, maar de droefenis van een afscheid, alsof hij de hele weg die hij hiervoor heeft afgelegd met zich meedraagt en alle offers die hij tijdens zijn reis heeft gebracht zich met hun volle gewicht aan hem vastklampen.

Met een schok komt het vliegtuig tot stilstand. Om hem heen staan passagiers op, graaien naar hun bagage, verdringen zich in het gangpad. Dawid werpt nog een laatste blik door het venster. Nu pas valt het hem op dat de grond daarbuiten wit is. Het heeft gesneeuwd. Het beeld verrast hem, want hoewel hij het begrip sneeuw natuurlijk wel kent, net als het woord, heeft hij het fenomeen nooit eerder gezien. Hij kijkt ernaar als naar de geboorte van een kind: een doodnormale gebeurtenis die zich al eeuwenlang regelmatig voltrekt en zonder veel ophef aan de rest van de wereld voorbijgaat, maar die, wanneer ze zich voor het eerst in iemands eigen leven afspeelt, op hem overkomt als een wonder.

I. DE JAGER

Twee maanden eerder

De knal van het schot rijt de ochtendstilte uiteen. Hoewel hij zich flink schrap had gezet, brengt de terugslag van het zware jachtgeweer Hunter toch uit evenwicht; de kracht van het wapen tilt zijn linkervoet bijna een halve meter van de grond. Van Heeren, die naast hem staat, lacht.

‘Het verrast je altijd weer, hè? *Nasty fuckers*, die oude tweelopen. Maar wel een puik schot.’

Samen met Hunter loopt hij naar het andere eind van de schietbaan; tot zijn tevredenheid stelt Hunter vast dat hij inderdaad perfect doel heeft getroffen. Midden in de roos is een klein, rond inslaggat zichtbaar, nauwelijks dikker dan zijn pink, maar de impact van de kogel

heeft de achterliggende zandzak volledig opengescheurd; langs alle kanten sijpelen dunne stroompjes rood zand naar buiten. Voor die vuurkracht neemt hij de kneuzingen op zijn schouder er met plezier bij; dat kan straks het verschil maken tussen leven en dood. Van de jager, niet de prooi. Dat zoveel jagers tegenwoordig de voorkeur geven aan kleinere kalibers heeft hij nooit begrepen; hij zou zich met een lichter wapen niet veilig voelen in de bush. Lichtere munitie vereist een perfect geplaatst schot en op moeilijk terrein heeft een jager niet altijd de luxe zijn hoek te kiezen; als een wild dier onverwacht aanvalt, mag je al blij zijn dat je het raakt. Bovendien doodt een licht wapen de meeste prooien wel, maar stopt het ze niet meteen af, en Hunter wil niet verpletterd worden door een ‘dood’ dier dat nog een paar meter doorrent voor het neergaat. Daarom verkiest hij voor de jacht op groot wild zijn oude dubbelloops .577 Nitro Express, hetzelfde geweer waarmee Hemingway hier ooit een neushoorn en een stel leeuwen schoot, en niet een lichter, moderner model. Maar dat is niet wat hij vanochtend aan de luchthavenpolitie heeft verteld toen hij bij het uitklaren van zijn wapen een praatje maakte met de agenten; op hun vraag waarom hij met zo’n zwaar kaliber jaagt, heeft hij eenvoudigweg geantwoord dat het geweer van zijn grootvader is geweest, wat waar is, en daar nog iets aan toegevoegd over mannelijkheid, wat op een goedkeurend lachje werd onthaald. Slappende honden moet je niet wakker maken, zeker niet in een land als dit, waar het aantal schouderstrepen op een uniform de graad van corruptie aanduidt; hoe minder mensen op de hoogte zijn van zijn werkelijke reisdoel hoe beter. Liefdevol klapt hij de tweeloop open en hangt hem gebroken over zijn arm. Van Heeren geeft hem een vriendschappelijk klapje op zijn schouder.

‘Volgens mij heb je een aperitief verdiend.’

Samen lopen ze tussen de lage bungalows door in de richting van de lodge; overal om hen heen tsjirpen krekels. Hunter ademt een paar keer diep in; ondanks de nachtvlucht en de drukkende hitte voelt zijn lichaam fris en fit. Klaar voor de jacht. Zijn geest is ontspannen

en kalm, maar alerter dan thuis; zijn gehoor staat op scherp, hij registreert de onbekende geuren, proeft de vage smaak van ijzer in de lucht. Zouden ze onweer krijgen? Bij zijn bungalow blijft hij staan.

‘Ik kom zo. Eerst even deze jongen opbergen en een vers hemd aantrekken.’

Hunter duwt het schuifraam open, legt zijn wapen in de openstaande geweerkast op het bed, trekt zijn bezwete hemd uit en hangt het over de leuning van een stoel. Tegen beter weten in gaat hij op de rand van zijn bed zitten. Meteen slaat de jetlag genadeloos toe: zijn lichaam wil niets liever dan gaan liggen en de gemiste nacht inhalen. Gewoon even neerliggen, heel even maar, moet toch kunnen? Maar zodra hij zich op het bed uitstrekt, beseft hij dat hij een stomiteit begaat; als hij nu zijn ogen sluit, is hij verloren. Dan zal hij inslapen en straks midden in de nacht wakker worden en vervolgens urenlang slapeloos op de ochtend wachten. En zal dat patroon zich de komende dagen herhalen, tot hij volkomen uitgeput is. Terwijl het geheim er net in schuilt meteen het ritme van de nieuwe dag te volgen. Nog net op tijd dwingt hij zichzelf zijn ogen open te houden, en tast in zijn broekzak naar zijn gsm. Hij tikt een naam aan en wacht; boven hem, aan het plafond, draait de zware houten ventilator loom rondjes. Elfmaal gaat de telefoon over, voor iemand opneemt. De vrouwenstem aan de andere kant van de lijn klinkt warm en slaperig, maar toch klinkt er geen verwijt in door.

‘Hallo.’

‘Ik heb je wakker gemaakt.’

‘Verbaast dat je, op dit uur van de nacht?’

‘Waar ben je?’

Het geluid van stof die over stof glijdt. Een laken dat wordt weggeslagen. In gedachten ziet hij voor zich hoe ze rechtop gaat zitten, op de rand van het bed, nog niet helemaal wakker, haar gezicht zach-

ter dan het bij daglicht is. Hoewel hij voor haar scherpte is gevallen, is het haar nachtelijke zelf dat hem ontroert.

‘Mexico.’

‘Toe maar. Werk of plezier?’

‘Niet iedereen houdt die dingen zo strikt gescheiden als jij.’

Hunter lacht. In gedachten ziet hij zijn kantoor voor zich. De zee met computerschermen, de hemdruggen van de mannen die er werken even inwisselbaar als de displays waarnaar ze kijken; hij hoeft hun gezichten niet te zien om te weten wie winst maakt en wie verlies lijdt, de spanning in hun schouderbladen zegt genoeg. Buiten, achter het vensterglas, tientallen naar de hemel reikende torens. Een volledig verticale skyline. Een groter contrast met de weidsheid die hem nu omgeeft, is nauwelijks denkbaar; hier kan hij kilometers ver kijken zonder dat iets zijn blik afstopt. Hij komt half overeind en laat, steunend op zijn ellebogen, zijn ogen over het landschap glijden: nergens een spoor van menselijke aanwezigheid.

‘Ben je alleen?’

Zijn vrouw antwoordt niet meteen, wat hem doet vermoeden van niet. Waarom zou ze anders opstaan om met hem te bellen? Hij hoort stof ritselen, waarschijnlijk schuift ze het muskietennet open, daarna het geluid van haar blote voeten op een houten vloer. Dan opnieuw haar stem, minder gedempt nu.

‘Zou je jaloers zijn als het niet zo was?’

Nu is ze wakker. De zachtheid in haar gezicht is verdwenen, en over de halve wereld heen voelt hij hoe ze hem uitdagend aankijkt.

‘Nee.’

‘Nee?’

‘Jaloezie is een teken van zwakte. Het zou impliceren dat ik me bedreigd voel.’

Leeuwen vallen niet alle mannetjes in de troep aan. Alleen jonge dieren die hun plaats niet kennen, krijgen een tik. Een energiebesparende en efficiënte manier van samenleven.

Nu is het haar beurt om te lachen.

‘Mooi zo.’

Ze heeft een glas water gevuld, hij hoort haar drinken. Met grote teugen. Ziet haar vochtige lippen. Plots verlangt hij naar haar, met een hevigheid die hem verrast.

‘Kom je naar huis, voor onze huwelijksverjaardag?’ vraagt hij haar.

‘Welk huis?’

‘Hét huis. Ons huis.’

‘Kan jij niet hierheen komen? Het weer is hier beter.’

‘Moeilijk. Ik heb een cadeau voor je.’

‘En?’

‘Het is niet bepaald handbagage.’

Hij hoort haar inademen. Scherp. Gespannen.

‘Is het wat ik denk dat het is?’

Aan de snelheid waarmee ze haar volgende vraag stelt, weet hij dat ze geen antwoord verwacht had.

‘Hoelang ben je dit al aan het plannen?’

‘Twee jaar.’

De zachte ruis op de lijn eechoot haar waardering. Dan, als de betekenis van zijn woorden helemaal tot haar is doorgedrongen, voelt

hij haar rillen. Een korte huivering, blote huid tegen de zachte zijde van haar pyjama.

‘Wanneer vertrek je? Naar...’

‘Ik ben er al. Ik ben vanochtend aangekomen.’

Stilte.

‘Hunter?’

Ze aarzelt, want ze weet dat hij er een hekel aan heeft als ze het zegt, maar hij weet dat ze het toch zal zeggen.

‘Wees voorzichtig, wil je?’

Hunter strekt zijn hand uit naar zijn geweer dat in de openstaande wapenkist naast hem ligt, en laat zijn vingers even over het hout glijden. Een golf van opwinding trekt door zijn lichaam en vult hem met een tintelend verlangen naar de jacht van morgen.

‘Beloofd. Maar niet te. Ik zou niet willen dat je me saai gaat vinden.’

Hij haakt in, dwingt zichzelf op te staan, gooit een handvol water in zijn gezicht, kiest een vers hemd uit en kleedt zich aan voor de lunch. Dat zijn vrouw ongerust is, verbaast hem niet; dit is geen safari als alle andere. Niet zozeer omwille van de prooi, maar omwille van de ophef over de jachtvergunning: de vorige jager die er zo een-tje in de wacht gesleept had, was meermaals met de dood bedreigd. Maar haar bezorgdheid, hoe begrijpelijk ook, is volstrekt onnodig: hij heeft niet persoonlijk op de licentie geboden, maar via een van zijn vele bedrijfjes, speciaal opgericht om de sporen van controversiële aankopen van grote klanten mee toe te dekken. Vergeleken met de dubieuze overnamepraktijken en de semilegale monopolies die hij soms buiten het zicht van de financiële waakhonden moet weten te houden, is het verbergen van de aankoop van een jachtvergunning voor een Afrikaanse zwarte neushoorn voor een handvol fanatieke natuurbeschermers kinderspel.

Trophy

Gaea Schoeters

Translated into English by Michele Hutchison

The plane plunges from the pitch-black sky like a bird of prey, then slows – it seems to hang motionlessly for a moment before settling into a wide circling movement, as if hesitating between two possible victims, not yet having decided which it will swoop down upon. In the depths below, ribbons of light cut the darkness into strips and above them different, smaller lights move towards each other like ants, congregating, forming clusters and fanning out again. The land beyond the spots of light is dark, a gaping black hole, too dark even to tell if it is flat or undulating. Only later, when the plane gives up its hesitation and descends further, do legible patterns emerge: ridges bulge up, valleys sink away, water separates from land. There is not much time to look, now that the bird has chosen its prey, it dives at lightning speed. Buildings, trucks and cars become visible for a moment, then the landing gear hits the ground.

Dawid breathes again but feels no relief; on the contrary, he is immediately overcome by a feeling of heaviness, as if the earth in this new country is pulling down harder on him and the air is more difficult to breathe. He has been looking forward to this for years: day after day, and for as many nights, he has dreamed of it. But now, now he is actually here, he feels no joy, no triumph, not even contentment. Although the plane has arrived at its destination – as the tinny voice of the flight attendant assures him, just in case he or any of the other passengers should doubt that they have arrived – what overwhelms him is not the joy of arrival, not the relief of a man who has travelled from afar, reached his goal after many hardships and can celebrate that he made it there alive, but the sadness of a farewell, as though he is carrying the heaviness of his travels with

him, and all the sacrifices he made along the way are clinging to him with their full weight.

The plane reaches a standstill with a jolt. Passengers stand up around him, grab their luggage, throng in the aisle. Dawid takes one last look out of the window. Only now does he see that the ground outside is white. It has snowed. He is surprised by the sight, because although of course he is aware of the concept of snow and the word for it, he has never seen this phenomenon before. He looks upon it as if it were the birth of a child: a perfectly normal event that has been happening regularly for centuries and takes place in the rest of the world without much ado, but which, when it first happens in one's own life, appears to him like a miracle.

I. THE HUNTER

Two months earlier

The blast of the shot tears apart the morning's silence. Though he braced hard, the recoil of the heavy gun unbalances Hunter, the force of the weapon lifting his left foot fifteen inches from the ground. Van Heeren, standing next to him, smiles. "Always gets you, doesn't it? Nasty fuckers, these old double-barrelled rifles. But a fine shot."

He accompanies Hunter to the other end of the shooting range where Hunter is pleased to find a perfect hit. A small round hole is visible in the centre of the bullseye, barely thicker than his little finger, but the impact of the bullet has completely ripped open the sandbag behind it; thin streams of red sand trickle out.

He'll gladly accept the bruises on his shoulder for that firepower – it can mean the difference between life and death. The hunter's, not the prey's. He has never understood why so many hunters nowadays prefer smaller calibres, he wouldn't feel safe in the bush with

a lighter weapon. Lighter munition requires a perfectly placed shot and on difficult terrain a hunter doesn't always have the luxury of choosing his angle. If a wild animal attacks unexpectedly, any kind of hit will do. In addition, a light weapon will kill most prey, but it won't stop them immediately and Hunter doesn't want to be crushed by a "dead" animal charging a few feet further before it falls. That's why he prefers his old .577 Nitro Express for big game hunting – the same rifle Hemingway once used to shoot a rhino and a pair of lions here – rather than a lighter, more modern model. But that's not what he told the airport police this morning when chatting with the customs officers clearing his weapon. When asked why he hunted with such a high calibre, he simply replied that it was his grandfather's gun, which was true, and added something about masculinity, which was met with a chuckle of approval. Let sleeping dogs lie, especially in a country like this, where the number of shoulder stripes on a uniform indicated the degree of corruption. The fewer people who knew of his actual destination, the better.

He lovingly cracks open the rifle and hooks it over his arm. Van Heeren gives him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"I think you've earned yourself an aperitif."

They walk between the low bungalows towards the lodge together, crickets chirping all around them. Hunter takes a few deep breaths; despite the night flight and the oppressive heat, his body feels fresh and fit, ready for the hunt. His mind is relaxed and calm, but more alert than at home. His ears are pricked, he registers the unknown smells, tastes the faint tinge of iron in the air. Is a storm coming? He stops at his bungalow.

"I'll be right with you. First got to put this boy away and change into a fresh shirt."

Hunter pushes up the sash window, lays his weapon in the open gun box on the bed, pulls off his sweaty shirt and hangs it over the

back of a chair. Against his better judgement, he sits down on the edge of his bed. Immediately jetlag strikes: his body wants nothing more than to lie down and make up for the missed night. Just a little lie down, should be possible, right? But as soon as he stretches out on the bed, he realises he is doing something stupid – if he closes his eyes now, he will be lost. He'll fall asleep and wake up in the middle of the night and then spend hours waiting sleeplessly for the morning. And the pattern will repeat itself for the next few days, until he is completely exhausted. The secret lies in immediately picking up the rhythm of the new day. Just in time, he forces himself to keep his eyes open, and fumbles in his trouser pocket for his cell phone. He taps on a name and waits; above him, a heavy wooden ceiling fan spins lazily. The phone rings eleven times before anyone answers. The female voice on the other end of the line is warm and sleepy, but without reproach.

“Hi.”

“I woke you up.”

“Go figure, at this time of night.”

“Where are you?”

The sound of fabric gliding across fabric. Sheets being pushed aside. In his thoughts he pictures her sitting up on the edge of the bed, not yet fully awake, her face softer than it is by daylight. Although he fell for her sharpness, it is the night-time version that touches him.

“Mexico.”

“Wow. Work or pleasure?”

“Not everyone keeps things as neatly compartmentalised as you do.”

Hunter laughs. He pictures his office – the sea of computer screens, the shirted backs of the men who work there as interchangeable as the displays they look at. He doesn't have to see their faces to know who is making a profit and who a loss: the tension in their shoul-

der blades says it all. Outside, behind the windows, dozens of towers reaching for the heavens. A vertical skyline. A greater contrast with the vastness surrounding him now is hardly conceivable; here he can see for miles without anything blocking his view. He raises himself up and, resting on his elbows, allows his eyes to glide over the landscape: nowhere a trace of human presence to be seen.

“Are you alone?”

His wife doesn't answer immediately, which makes him suspect she isn't. Why else would she get up to take his call? He hears fabric rustling, she is probably sliding open the mosquito net, then the sound of her bare feet on the wooden floor. Then her voice again, less muffled now.

“Would you be jealous if I weren't?”

She's awake now. The softness has disappeared from her face, and right from the other side of the world he can feel her giving him a defiant look.

“No.”

“No?”

“Jealousy is a sign of weakness. It would imply I felt threatened.”

Lions don't attack all the young males in the pack. Only the young ones that don't yet know their place are given a swat. An energy-saving, efficient way of living together.

Now it's her turn to laugh.

“Good.”

She has filled a glass of water, he hears her drinking. Big gulps. Sees her moist lips. Suddenly he longs for her, with an intensity that surprises him.

“Are you coming home for our anniversary?” he asks her.

“Which home?”

“Our home. The house.”

“Can’t you come out here? The weather is better.”

“Tricky. I have a present for you.”

“So?”

“It’s not exactly hand luggage.”

He hears her inhale. Sharply. Tensely.

“Is it what I think it is?”

From the speed with which she asks her next question, he knows she wasn’t expecting an answer.

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Two years.”

The slight background buzz on the line echoes her appreciation. Then, when the meaning of his words has fully got through to her, he feels her shiver. A brief shiver, bare skin against the soft silk of her pyjamas.

“When will you leave? For—”

“I’m already there. I arrived this morning.”

Silence.

“Hunter?”

She hesitates because she knows he hates it when she says this, but he knows she’ll say it anyway.

“Be careful, won’t you?”

Hunter reaches for his rifle, which is in the open gun box next to him, and runs his fingers over the wood for a moment. A wave of excitement sweeps through his body, filling him with a tingling desire for tomorrow’s hunt.

“I will. But not too careful. I wouldn’t want you to start finding me boring.”

He hangs up, forces himself to get up, splashes water over his face, picks out a fresh shirt, and dresses for lunch. His wife’s concern is no surprise, this is not any old safari. Not so much because of the prey, but because of the fuss surrounding the hunting licence: the last hunter who managed to get one received several death threats. But her concern, understandable as it may be, is completely unnecessary: he had not bid for the licence personally, but through one of his many small businesses, set up specifically to conceal controversial purchases by major customers. Compared to the dubious take-over practices and the semi-legal monopolies he sometimes had to keep out of sight of the financial watchdogs, hiding the purchase of a hunting licence for an African black rhino from a handful of avid conservationists was child’s play.

SPECIAL
MENTION

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



Slađana Nina Perković

U jarku
In the Ditch

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BIOGRAPHY

Slađana Nina Perković, born in 1981, is a Franco-Bosnian journalist and fiction writer. After finishing her studies in political sciences at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, she mainly worked as a news correspondent for media outlets in the former Yugoslavia. Her work has also been featured in many European news outlets, such as *The Guardian*. Today, Slađana is mostly committed to her writing career. She has published the short-story collection *Kuhanje (Cooking)* and the novel *U jarku (In the Ditch)*. *In the Ditch* was listed for the 2021 NIN Award and the Meša Selimović Award. She lives, works and writes between Banja Luka and Paris.



SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

When the heroine's/narrator's mother runs into her room, interrupting the daughter watching her favourite crime series, readers begin to discover the almost insane and chaotic world of the story, made up of events such as the funeral of Aunt Stana, who chokes on a piece of chicken, thus shattering plans to sell the family home and land. The fictional world is filled with unusual visits to police stations and clinics, heroes who unsuccessfully attempt suicide and people who erect monuments for themselves before they have died, or experience a personal renaissance after deciding to enter the world of smuggling. With each new page, Slađana Nina Perković creates a unique novelistic world built on the display of everyday life – only that everyday life, expressed in extremely sharp language and with a dose of black humour, is moved almost to the limits of absurdity and the grotesque. A funeral and the sale of a family home and land – with the events almost automatically perceived as tragic or shocking – are transformed into the ridiculous, which does not ignore tragedy and reality, but instead helps us build a more complete picture of the world we inhabit.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

In an unstable relationship between fiction and reality, the novel *In the Ditch* by Slađana Nina Perković juggles two very important things. On the one hand, it accurately portrays the post-war and post-socialist misery, provincial delusions and patriarchal mindsets of Bosnia and Herzegovina that limit or even completely eliminate spaces of individual freedom. On the other, the novel opens with the following sentences: 'Everything in this book is fictional. If someone happens to recognise themselves, they should know that it is nothing but a reflection of their personal paranoia.' Thus, the novel also 'advocates' the need to challenge fictional identities and a fictional (mainly Balkan) mentality identified from within, or recognised from the outside as unequivocal truth. *In the Ditch* is therefore an ironic and often grotesque reflexive and critical questioning of past cultural politics relating to local–global and Balkan–European connections. Alongside this, the novel's sharp humour and its optimistic ending serve as an interesting narrative strategy used outside power positions (since, in the network of power, literature is yet unprivileged) to develop the still weak yet much-needed politics of hope.

U jarku

Slađana Nina Perković



Morala sam prepješačiti pola grada. Račune za stan, znate ono, struja, odvoz smeća, grijanje, kablovska i tome slično, inače, plaćamo u banci u našem naselju, ali njima je pao sistem ili tako nešto, pa su me uputili u njihovu centralu u drugom dijelu grada. I tako, otišla sam u drugi dio grada, ušla u banku, a tamo je bilo više ljudi nego na stadionu u toku finala Svjetskog fudbalskog prvenstva. Da muka bude još veća, od sedam šaltera, radila su tek tri, a ljudi su se toliko gurali da se više nije znalo gdje počinje, a gdje završava red. Pokvario im se aparat za izdavanje rednih brojeva, onaj na kojem počiva civilizacija, pa je nastao pravi krkljanac. Ljudi su jedni drugima disali za vratom i psovali tiho, ali sa puno mržnje. „Ja sam troje djece rodila, radila sam do zadnjeg dana sa stomakom do zuba, a ove današnje gospođe ne mogu ništa”, pištala je žena sa visoko natapiranim šiškama kada smo preko reda pustili trudnicu. A onda je druga potpuno sišla sa živaca kada je vidjela da preko rada puštaju čak i jednog čovjeka u invalidskim kolicima. „Pa on je u kolicima, sjedi, šta ga imate puštati! Gore je meni, imam proširene vene!” Ljudi su se uskomešali, umalo da izbije tuča, ali onda se pojavio ćelavi lik iz obezbjeđenja i nazivajući nas otvoreno i bez ustezanja „nekulturnom stokom”, razdijelio nas je u dva reda, jer je treći šalter u međuvremenu prestao raditi. Službenica je, pretpostavljam, otišla na zasluženu pauzu. Naravno, mene je dopalo da čekam u redu koji daleko sporije napreduje. U jednom trenutku sam se sjetila onog crtanog filma u kome Gustav radi za šalterom, a ispod stola drži čašu crnog vina, pa svaki put prvo umoči prst u vino, obliže ga i prevrne stranicu. Pomislila sam kako je velika vjerovatnoća da to isto rade i ove službenice i usta su mi se razvukla u blesavi osmijeh.

Međutim, osmijesi u redu za plaćanje računa su tako neprirodna i sumnjiva stvar da me lik iz obezbjeđenja, onaj isti ćelavi, pogledao ispod oka u fazonu „šta se ti, mala, koji klinac, smiješ”, te mi se u momentu izbrisao i najmanji trag osmijeha na licu. Nakon toga sam samo čekala i otpuhivala kao sav normalan narod. Kada je konačno došao moj red i službenica mi halapljivo istrgnula novac iz ruku, osjetila sam se srećno i zadovoljno. Tortura je završena. Slobodna sam, bar do sljedećeg mjeseca.

Napolju me je dočekala kiša. Nisam imala kišobran, mada mi nije bilo jasno kako sam ga mogla zaboraviti. Posljednja dva mjeseca kiša je uporno padala svaki ubogi dan. Kišobrani su nam postali produženi dio ruke. Uglavnom, kada sam konačno stigla kući, bila sam mokra od glave do pete. Čak su mi se i gležnjarice promočile. Okrenula sam lagano ključ u bravi i uvukla se u hodnik. Iz kuhinje je dopirao zvuk pretis lonca, mama je kuhala grah i nije me čula. Lagano sam izula gležnjarice, svukla sasvim mokre čarape i na prstima se ušunjala u svoju sobu. Stavila sam čarape na radijator da se suše, mada nije bilo grijanja, jer je, kao i obično, gradska kotlovnica bila u kvaru, uvukla se ispod jorgana i upalila TV. Moji su nedavno, u ogromnom tržnom centru koji je nikao na mjestu tatine bivše, da ne kažem pokojne, fabrike, kupili na 250 hiljada mjesečnih rata novi TV sa ekranom od 40 inča, a ja sam naslijedila njihov stari, koji uopšte nije tako loš. Da stvar bude još bolja, stigla sam na vrijeme. Taman je počinjala moja omiljena kriminalistička serija.

Ima sigurno tri godine kako nemam volje da radim bilo šta drugo nego da ležim u krevetu i gledam kriminalističke serije. Ne znam kako drugačije da opišem to stanje, osim da je moj organizam jednostavno utonuo u stanje opšte bezvoljnosti. Moj tip, a bili smo baš dugo zajedno, znate ono od drugog razreda srednje, dobio je garantno pismo od tetke iz Sidneja i odselio se kod nje. Ideja je bila da mi sredi papire, pa da i ja odem za njim, ali mama je skoro dobila napad epilepsije kada je to čula. „Znaš li ti gdje je Australija?!”, udarila joj je pjena na usta. Ja sam savršeno znala gdje je Australija. Od mame bi me razdvajale bar tri svjetlosne godine. Ali nemojte

da vas navedem na kriv zaključak. Nije uopšte mamina krivica to što nisam otputovala. Zapravo, taj moj tip mi je poslao jednu razglednicu kada je stigao u Australiju. Napisao je „ovo je zemlja velikih mogućnosti” i onda se izgubio u svim tim mogućnostima. Zaboravio mi se više javljati. Pratila sam pomno njegove objave na Fejsbuku. On kako drži krokodila za rep. On kako se sunča na plaži. On kako jogurtom kupljenim u nekoj bugarskoj prodavnici liječi opekotine. On kako jede smoki i liječi nostalgiju. On kako u nekom našem klubu pjevaljki gura novčanice u njedra. Onda mi je telefon jednog jutra, dok sam sjedila na wc šolji i grozničavo listala društvene mreže, ispao iz ruku ravno na pločice. Staklo na ekranu je puklo. Čovjek za pultom u servisu za opravku mobilnih telefona rekao je da bi popravka koštala više od novog telefona i pokazao u vitrini izložene kineske pametne telefone. „Nisu skupi, a dobri su”, rekao je i nastavio pričati da se ti telefoni prave u istim fabrikama, od istih dijelova, kao i iPhone. Pogledala sam čovjeka za pultom i rekla: „Ali ja ne želim novi telefon.” On je prevrnuo očima i rekao da ako baš insistiram, može naručiti novi ekran za moj telefon. Tad sam se potpuno slomila. „Ali ja ne želim nikakav telefon”, ponovila sam. I od tog trenutka nisam više ništa željela i tako sam utonula u to moje stanje koje sam vam već pomenula. Jedino sam još željela biti u svom krevetu i gledati kriminalističke serije. Samo me to još činilo srećnom.

Naravno, sreća nije dugo potrajala. Mama me je već namirisala. Tačno sekundu prije nego što će detektiv Frost razotkriti ubicu, utrčala je u sobu, potpuno zaklonivši ekran. Izgledala je prilično uzrujano. Nisam odmah razumjela šta se desilo, jer je nekontrolisano mlatila rukama i istovremeno pričala brzo. Kad je vidjela da je samo blijedo gledam, stala je, uhvatila dah i ponovila sve. Strina Stana se udavila komadićem piletine. Stric Radomir ju je našao na kuhinjskom podu, modru, iskolačenih očiju. Noktima je gotovo iščupala grkljan. Mama, u želji da što vjernije dočara scenu, uhvatila se objema rukama za grkljan. Plazila je jezik i prevrtala očima.

Nisam uspjela vidjeti ko je ubica. Kada se mama konačno odmakla od TV-a, na ekranu se već vrtjela odjavna špica.

– Strašno – nezadovoljno sam otpuhnula, misleći na tek završenu kriminalističku seriju. Sumnjala sam da je ubica ona baba koja uzgaja golubove, ali možda i nije. Nekada tako znaju zapetljati samu priču da do kraja ne možeš sa sigurnošću znati ko je ubica. Zato i obožavam britanske kriminalističke serije. One nove, američke, u kojoj se glavni inspektor, umjesto mozgom i intuicijom, služi skupim laboratorijskim testovima koji ga pomoću jednog zrna prašine mogu dovesti do ubice, čista su glupost. Mada, gledam i njih, ali samo kad na TV-u nema ništa drugo.

– Strašno. I više nego strašno! – ponovila je mama i dodala – Sahrana je sutra na seoskom groblju.

– Sutra – rekla sam odsutno, pokušavajući se sjetiti u koliko sati će se sutra emitovati repriza kriminalističke serije koja se upravo završila.

– Mora biti sutra. U selu nemaju mrtvačnicu, pa moraju iz istih stopa sahraniti pokojnike. Sreća u nesreći je što se udavila kad je zahladnjelo. Zamisli ljeti na plus četrdeset – mama se protresla od jeze zamišljajući pokojnike na plus četrdeset.

– Užas – i dalje sam nezainteresovano gledala prema TV-u, na kom se vrtjela reklama za pastu za zube.

– Šta ćeš obući? Daj da vidim imaš li šta pristojno u ormaru – mama je otvorila moj ormar i zagnjurila glavu u krpe od moje odjeće. Bilo je tu svega, od roze, flanel pidžamica koje sam nosila od svoje desete godine, nekih kariranih košulja, čistih promašaja kupljenih u onoj strašnoj i zbunjujućoj tinejdžerskoj fazi, pa do starih izlizanih majica i trenerki „za po kući”. Ozbiljne, nosive odjeće tu nije bilo. Ili je bar ja nikad nisam uspjela iskopati. Taj ormar je bio u takvom haosu da sam se čak plašila malo dublje gurnuti glavu u njega i uglavnom sam nosila samo dvije-tri majice koje su stajale na samom vrhu.

– Obući? – trepnula sam.

– Pa moraš imati nešto prikladno za sahranu. Nećeš valjda ići u farmerkama i ovoj crvenoj bluzi?! – mama je izvukla i brzo vratila u ormar svilenu, karmin-crvenu bluzu koju je nosila tokom osamdesetih godina. Te godine svog života je prilično mrzila i pokušala ih je izbrisati cijepajući sve slike na kojima je veselo pozirala, namazana po licu svim mogućim ratničkim bojama i s naramenicama dostojnim oficira Napoleonove vojske. Ta karmin-crvena bluza je jedina preživjela pakao inkvizicije. Vjerovatno jer je greškom dospjela među moje krpe.

– Zašto ja moram ići? Zar ne možeš sama? – skočila sam sa kreveta kao oparena. Ako sam išta mrzila, a to je bilo kada bi me tjerala da idem po sahranama. Te umro je kum babe Smilje, idemo na sahranu, te umro je rođak komšije sa prvog sprata. Ljudi su non-stop umirali od raka, ujeda pčela, tigrastih komaraca, krpelja, od rijetkih autoimunih bolesti, srčanih zastoja, moždanih udara, mišje groznice, alkoholizma, ali i u saobraćajnim nesrećama, ratovima, a dešavalo se nekada i od starosti. I mi bismo malo-malo išli na nečiju sahranu. Proporcionalno daleko više nego na svadbe, babine, slave i ostala veselja.

– Nemoj se ponašati kao razmaženo derište! – mama je prevrnula očima. – Uostalom, ja ne idem. Ideš samo ti.

In the Ditch

Sladana Nina Perković

Translated into English by Ellen Elias-Bursać

I had to go halfway across town. We usually pay the bills for our apartment—you know the ones, electric power, trash removal, heat, the cable connection and so forth—at a bank in our neighborhood, but their system crashed or whatever and they sent me to their main office in another part of town. So, off I went across town, walked into the bank, and there were more people there than at a soccer stadium during the World Cup finals. And to make matters worse, of the seven teller windows, only three were working, and so many people were cutting in that there was no telling where a line began and where it ended. The bank's number dispenser, the one upon which civilization relies, broke down, resulting in a real case of gridlock. People were breathing down each other's necks and swearing under their breath, bristling with hatred. "I gave birth to three children, worked till the last day with my belly up to my chin, but ladies these days seem so helpless", hissed a woman with highly teased bangs when we let a pregnant woman cut in front of us in line. And then another woman nearly had a nervous breakdown when she saw them letting in a man in a wheelchair. "But he's in a wheelchair. He's sitting. Why him? I'm so much worse off with my varicose veins!" People began to fidget, a fight nearly broke out, but then a bald security guy showed up, and, calling us "uncultured livestock", organized us into two lines, because, meanwhile, the third window had closed. The teller had gone off, no doubt, for her hard-earned break. It was, of course, my lot to wait in the line that moved much more slowly. At one point I remembered a cartoon in which Gustav is working as a bank teller and has a glass of red wine hidden under the counter. So first he dips his finger in the wine, then licks it and turns the page. I thought of the likelihood

that these tellers were doing the same and my lips spread in a silly grin. Smiles in the line for paying bills, however, were such an unnatural and suspicious thing that the security guy, that same baldy, shot me one of those sideways glances, like “what have you got to grin about, kid”, and in an instant all trace of the smile on my face was gone. After that I just waited, huffing and puffing like everyone else. When my turn finally came and the teller greedily snatched the money from my hand, I felt pleased and satisfied. The torture was over. I was free, at least until next month.

Outside I was greeted by rain. I had no umbrella, though I couldn't believe I'd forgotten it. For the last two months rain had been falling every godforsaken day. My umbrella had become an extension of my arm. Whatever. When I finally got home, I was soaked through and through. Even my ankle boots were drenched. I turned the key quietly in the lock and slipped into the front hall. The pressure cooker sound came from the kitchen. Mama was cooking beans and didn't hear me. I slowly peeled off my ankle boots and my soaking wet socks and tiptoed into my room. I put my socks on the radiator to dry, though there was no heat, because, as usual, the city heating system was on the blink, slipped in under my coverlet and turned on the television. For two hundred and fifty thousand monthly payments my folks recently bought a television set with a 40-inch screen at the huge shopping center that sprouted up on the site of Dad's former, not to call it “late great”, factory, and I inherited their old one, which wasn't at all bad. And, better yet, I was there in the nick of time. My favorite detective show was just starting.

It has been like three years that I haven't been up to much but lying around in bed and watching detective shows. I don't know how else to describe the mood I'm in, except that my organism sank into a state of general lethargy. My boyfriend—and we were together for absolutely ever, you know what I mean, like since tenth grade—was sent a letter of guarantee by his aunt in Sydney and off he went. The idea was that he'd take care of my paperwork and I'd join him, but

Mama almost had a seizure when she heard. “Do you even know where Australia is?” she foamed at the mouth. I know perfectly well where Australia is. There'd be at least three light years between me and Mama. But don't get me wrong. It's not Mama's fault that I didn't go. What happened is that my boyfriend sent me a postcard when he got to Australia. He wrote, “This is a country with great possibilities”, and then he vanished along with all the possibilities. He neglected to write any more. I kept a close eye on his Facebook posts. Him holding a crocodile by the tail. Him sunbathing on a beach. Him slathering on yogurt he'd bought at a Bulgarian market to treat his sunburn. Him eating Yugo-Smoki peanut puffs to ease his nostalgia. Him tucking a bill between the breasts of a singer at a nightclub. And then one morning, when I was sitting on the john and frantically scrolling through social media, my phone fell out of my hand, straight onto the floor tiles. The screen cracked. The man behind the counter at the mobile phone repair service said the repair would cost more than a new phone and he gestured to a glass case where Chinese smart phones were on display. “They don't cost much and they work just fine”, he said and went on talking about how they make these phones at the same factories, using the same parts as the iPhone. I looked at the man behind the counter and said, “But I don't want a new phone”. He rolled his eyes and said that if I insisted, he could order a new screen for my phone. Then I broke down completely. “But I don't want any sort of phone at all”. And from that moment, on, I didn't want anything and that's how I sank into the state I already mentioned. The only thing I still wanted was to be in my bed, watching detective shows. That was the only thing that made me happy.

Of course my happiness didn't last long. Mama had already sniffed me out. Exactly one second before Detective Frost would uncover the murderer, she charged into the room, completely blocking my view of the screen. She looked pretty upset. I didn't catch on right away to what was going on, because her arms were flailing and she was

talking really fast. When she saw that all I could do was stare at her, she stopped, took a breath, and repeated everything. Aunt Stana had choked on a mouthful of chicken. Uncle Radomir found her on the kitchen floor, all blue, her eyes bugging out. With her fingernails she'd nearly clawed away her whole throat. In her desire to convey the scene as faithfully as possible, Mama grabbed herself by the throat with both hands. She stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes.

I had no chance to catch who the murderer was. When Mama finally stepped away from the television screen, the credits were already rolling by.

"Awful", I huffed, grumpy, thinking of the detective show that had just finished. I suspected the murderer was the little old lady who'd been raising pigeons, but maybe not. Sometimes they tangle the story up so much that right to the end you can't say with certainty who the murderer is. That is why I love the British detective shows. The newer American ones, where the main detective uses expensive laboratory tests that can take them from a mote of dust to the killer instead of relying on brains and intuition, are sheer idiocy. Though I watch them, too, but only when there's nothing else on.

"Awful. And awfuller than awful!" Mama repeated and added, "The funeral is tomorrow at the village graveyard."

"Tomorrow", I said absentmindedly, while trying to recall the schedule for when the episode would be rerun tomorrow.

"It has to be tomorrow. They have no mortuary in the village so they have to bury the dead right away. What a blessing in disguise that she choked to death now that the cold weather is here. Imagine this in the middle of a summer heatwave". Mama shuddered at the very thought of the deceased, mid heatwave.

"Awful", I continued staring, disinterested, at the television screen at a toothpaste ad.

"What have you got to wear? Let me see if there's anything halfway decent in here", Mama opened my closet and thrust her head in among the clothes. There were all sorts of things from pink flannel pajamas that I have worn since I was ten, to plaid shirts, a total disaster, bought in my appalling and confusing teen phase, and all the way to the old washed-out t-shirts and sweatpants for "around the house". There wasn't a stitch of serious, halfway decent clothing. Or at least I'd never been able to dig up something like that. The closet was in such disarray that I was even a little alarmed to push my head in so I generally wore the two or three shirts that were right on top.

"To wear?" I blinked.

"Well you must have something suitable for a funeral. I hope you're not planning to go in jeans and this red blouse!" Mama wriggled out of the closet and quickly put back a lipstick-red silk blouse she'd worn back in the 1980s. She generally hated those years of her life and tried to erase them by ripping up all the pictures on which she struck cheery poses, with all sorts of war paint smeared over her face and shoulder padding worthy of one of Napoleon's officers. The lipstick-red blouse was the sole item to survive the hell of the inquisition. Probably because it ended up, by mistake, among my stuff.

"Why've I got to go? Can't you go by yourself?" I jumped off the bed as if scalded. If there was anything I hated, it was her making me go to funerals. Old lady Smilja's maid-of-honor died and we're going to the funeral, our first-floor neighbor's cousin died. People were non-stop dying of cancer, bee stings, tiger mosquitoes, ticks, rare auto-immune disorders, cardiac arrest, strokes, mouse fever, alcoholism, but also traffic accidents, wars, and sometimes even old age. So we were forever going to somebody's funeral. Proportionately far more than to weddings, showers, saints' days and other festivities.

"Don't be a spoiled brat!" Mama rolled her eyes. "And besides, I'm not going. You're going alone."



GEORGIA

Iva Pezuashvili
ბუნკერი
A Garbage Chute

ინტელექტი/Intelekti, 2020
Language: Georgian
ISBN: 9789941312458

BIOGRAPHY

Iva Pezuashvili is a contemporary Georgian writer and screenwriter. Born in 1990, Iva's writing career kicked off in 2014, when his debut book of short stories *I Tried* was published by Intelekti. His short story *Tsa* was one of 10 short stories by Georgian writers published in 2018 by British publisher Comma Press in the collection *The Book of Tbilisi*, and one of seven short stories in the collection *Georgien - Eine literarische Einladung (Literature Invitation to Georgia)* by German publisher Klaus Wagenbach. In 2018 he won a scholarship for the international writing program at the University of Iowa, United States, followed by a residency at Residencia Literaria 1863 in La Coruña, Spain. In 2018 his first novel, *Gospel of the Underground*, was published by Intelekti, and it was shortlisted for every one of the country's major literature awards. With his last novel, *A Garbage Chute*, Iva won the EUPL 2022, as well as other literary awards, including the Tsinandali Award for best prose, and in 2021 he won the Special Jury Prize of the SABA award.



A graduate of the Feature Film Department of Shota Rustaveli Cinema and Theatre University, Iva is also the author of several TV series and films in Georgia. In 2011, Iva won the Autumn Legend, the student literature competition, with his short story *Alchu (Lucky Toss)*. Based on this short story, he shot his first movie, *Babazi*. Among others, he also worked as a screenwriter and director for one of Georgia's most popular film series, *Tiflis*, between 2014 and 2016.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Milla, who has lost hope for her husband Genna, is planning her future without him. Their daughter, Zemmas, who is working in the police system, decides that revenge is the only purpose she will ever serve. Lazare, the youngest member of the family, who follows left-wing ideals, is suddenly forced to give up on his principles.

The new novel from Iva Pezuashvili is a saga about a Simonian family that flees from the war in Karabakh to Tbilisi, a city of corruption, violence and dirty politics. The story develops in the space of 24 hours, with all the conflicts, drama and challenges pouring down on the family at the same time. On the top of this, demons and people from the past start to awaken once again, reminding Genna that if something rotten is buried deep below, there is no chance of a bright future.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

The stylistically masterful novel *A Garbage Chute* is the third book published by the young Georgian writer Iva Pezuashvili. *A Garbage Chute* tells the story of an



Armenian family of Simonians, forced to take refuge in Tbilisi after the escalation of the Karabakh conflict. The plot of the novel stretches over 24 hours, but with an omnipresent narrator we get a deeper look into the past and into the background stories of the characters. The story revolves around the four key figures, and unwinds in the prism of myriad social and political issues tracing back to the 1990s. While living as ethnic minorities in former Soviet Tbilisi, the members of a Simonian family face different struggles: Genna finds himself redundant and sinks into nihilistic male stagnation; Milla falls into an invisible category, predestined by her social role as a wife, her ethnical background and even her profession, as we see her attempt to awaken and rediscover herself; children Zemmas and Lazare are trying to find their places and roles in an unjust social climate, representing somewhat opposing ideologies. The writer builds an engaging flow of narration, painting a vivid picture of the urban and social tissue of contemporary Tbilisi. The plot is interwoven in a juxtaposition of verbal and literary styles, including Wu-Tang-inspired Georgian slang, bringing story and form together. The metaphor of the 'bunker' stench ('bunker' being the literal translation of the Georgian title of the novel: ბუნკერი) embodies the rotting remains of the post-Soviet mentality, and also represents poetic 'revenge' in compensation for the invisibility of the protagonists. With this exposing story and original storytelling, *A Garbage Chute* is a cutting-edge novel that puts human beings at the centre of the readers' focus.

ბუნკერი

ივა ფეხუაშვილი



შუქი გამთენიისას, სადღაც ექვს საათზე ჩართეს. მილამ დენის გამათბობლები აამუშავა, სახლი შეძლებისდაგვარად გააღულუნა და საცოდავი ზემა საწოლიდან წამოაფრინა, რომ ორი კვირის დაუბანელი თავი ჯერ სარეცხი საპნით შემდეგ კი „კრია-კრიათი“ დაემუშავებინა. დაბანის, გაშრობის, თმის დაწვნის და მარილში ამოწობილი, გახუხული თონის პურით საუზმის შემდეგ სკოლაში გაუშვა და ლაზარესთვის – რომელსაც მაშინ ჯერ კიდევ არ ერქვა ლაზარე, აბაზანის გავსებას შეუდგა, რაც, თავის მხრივ, ძალიან ჭკვიანური ნაბიჯი იყო, ჯერ ერთი, ბიჭს ძალიან უყვარდა ჭყუმპალაობა და მეორეც – წყლის შეწყვეტის შემთხვევაში სავსე აბაზანა უნიტაზის ჩასარეცხად გამოდგებოდა და წყლის გათიშვა კი ელექტროენერჯის და გაზის გათიშვის შემდეგ საქართველოს დემოკრატიული მთავრობის ყველაზე საყვარელი საქმიანობა იყო და ამიტომ საკუთარი გამჭრიახობით კმაყოფილმა მილამ ნახევრადმძინარე ლაზარე „კიპიწელნიკით“ გაცხელებულ წყალში ჩასვა, თავიდან ფეხებამდე გაქაფა, გახეხა, დაბანა, რამდენჯერმე გაავლო, აბაზანა სათამაშოებით აუვსო და თვითონ კი სამზარეულოს მიაშურა, რომ სასმელი წყალიც მოემარაგებინა და რომ აავსო მილამ პირველი ოცლიტრიანი და ორი ხუთლიტრიანი ბოცა, ზუსტად ამ დროს შემოვიდა სახლში გენა და კაცი, რომელიც სულმუდამ ნაცრისფერი, უემოციო და გულისრევამდე დაღლილი იყო, ისეთი ანთებული თვალებით და მაჯებში იმხელა ენერჯით დაბრუნდა, რომ ჯერ აიტაცა და შემდეგ კი სამზარეულოს მაგიდაზე დააწვინა და რომ გახადა სვიტერი, არ დაიზარა და მაისურიც ზედ მიაყოლა და შეუხსნა ბიუსტკალტერიც და არც სპორტული შარვალი

და უსქელესი – სამ-ოთხ ადგილას თვალწასული ჩულქები დაივიწყა და თან კოცნიდა და კოცნიდა ზუსტად ისე, როგორც წლების წინ, ზუსტად ისე, როგორც ბაქოდან გაქცევამდე, როგორც ერევნიდან გაქცევამდე, როგორც საკუთარი თავისგან გაქცევამდე, როგორც სამველას სიკვდილამდე, კოცნიდა ყველგან და კოცნიდა ბევრს და კოცნიდა ვნებით და ვნებითვე ეფერებოდა და ეჩურჩულებდა ყურში, რომ უყვარდა და რომ უყვარს და რომ ეყვარება, როგორც ადრე, ისე დღეს და სულ და ყოველთვის და თხოვდა პატიებას, რომ ხანდახან ვერ და უმეტეს შემთხვევაში კი არ ამჟღავნებდა იმას, რასაც გრძნობდა და გრძნობდა, რომ ყველაფერი შეიცვლებოდა, რომ ძალა დაუბრუნდებოდა, რომ მნიშვნელოვანი გახდებოდა, რომ ჯოჯოხეთი ისაა, რაც რუტინად იქცევა და რომ არსებობს რუტინული ჯოჯოხეთებიც და ერთ-ერთს საქართველო ჰქვია და რომ საქართველოსნაირ ჯოჯოხეთშიც კი ხდება გამონათებები და რომ მისი მზეც გაანათებს, რომ წინა ღამეს – არც მეტი არც ნაკლები, ქვეყნის პრეზიდენტი გადაარჩინა სიკვდილს, რომ შინაგან საქმეთა მინისტრის გვერდით გაათენა, რომ მმართველი პარტიის ყველა მაღალჩინოსანი და მინისტრთა კაბინეტის ყველა მინისტრი მაღლობას ეუბნებოდა და ყველანი ერთად თუ ყველანი ცალ-ცალკე, საგმირო საქმის გამო, ჰპირდებოდნენ ბროლის სასახლეებს და ისეთ დროებას, რომელ დროებაშიც მილას ყველაფერს, საერთოდ ყველაფერს შეუსრულებდა, ყველაფერს მისცემდა, რასაც იმსახურებდა და მოდიოდა ის დროება, როდესაც გენა საკუთარ თავს მიიღებდა და შესაბამისად, მიიღებდნენ სხვებიც და გენა მიაღწევდა ბევრ წარმატებას და მილა იქნებოდა ბედნიერი, როგორც აქ და ახლა, ისე სულ და მუდამ და აქ და ახლა კი მილა მხოლოდ უღიმოდა და მხოლოდ ვნების კვნესით პასუხობდა და ამ კვნესას კი სააბაზანოდან გამოსული ლაზარეს ტიტინი მისდევდა ფონად და კვნესა რომ აჩქარებულ გულისცემაში და ნეტარების ოხვრაში გადაიზარდა, გენამ დაიწყო სიამოვნების ყმული და ყმუოდა გენა – დიდებას ზეცით კურთხეულს და დიდებას ქვეყნად სამოთხეს, ტურფას ივერსა და ყმუოდა გენა – დიდებას ძმობის, ერთობის! დიდებას თავისუფლების! დიდებას სამარადისოს, დიდებას ჩვენი სამშობლოს –

სამშობლოს, რომელიც დაკარგა, რომელიც აღარ აქვს და მიიღებს საქართველოს სამშობლოდ და გააფეტიშებს და თუ საქართველო ფეტიშია და ფეტიში ჭემმარიტების დაკარგვა და ჭემმარიტების გარეშე დარჩენილი დროება რუტინა და რუტინა ჯოჯოხეთი და ჯოჯოხეთი კი ყველაფერი, რაც რუტინად იქცევა – გენა მინც იყმუვლებს – დიდებას ჩვენი სიცოცხლის მიზანს დიადს! „ვაშა!“ ტრფობას, სიყვარულს, „ვაშა!“ შვებას, სიხარულს, „სალამი!“ ჭემმარიტების, შუქ-განთიადს და დაიცლება გენა დიდებისგან და სიტყვებისგან და ყმუილისგან და სამზარეულოში დარჩება მხოლოდ გამაღებელი გულისძგერის ხმა და ბედნიერებისგან ღონემიხდილ ცოლ-ქმარს აღარ მოესმებათ ლაზარეს ტიტინი და დუმილი სააბაზანოში რომ გაგრძელდება საეჭვოდ და აუტანლად დიდხანს, გენა შარვალჩახდილი წამოხტება და გიჟივით შევარდება შვილის სანახავად და იპოვნის თითქმის გალურჯებულს და სიკვდილის პირას მყოფს და ფილტვებში წყლით და ორი და სამი და ოთხი წუთი ეცდება მის მოსულიერებას და, ალბათ, მართლა რაღაც სასწაულის ძალით რომ გადაარჩენს და რომ ამოისუნთქავს ბიჭი, ხარბად და დიდი ამოისუნთქვით და რომ დაუბრუნდება სიცოცხლეს, გენა დაუბრუნდება ჩვეულებზე უფრო მეტ სინაცრისფრეს და ჩაჯდება სახლში და ჩაიკეტება საკუთარ თავში და იტყვის, რომ

– სამველ იმია პრაკლიატოე, ი ნადა ივო პამენიაცო

და დაარქმევს შვილს ლაზარეს...

ეს ყველაფერი მილას ახსოვს და მილამ ზუსტად იცის – რომ არა ლაზარეს ამბავი, გენა მართლაც მთებს გადადგამდა და გენა მართლაც შეიცვლევ ბოდა და გენა მართლაც შეუძლებელს შეძლებდა და გენა ყველაფერს მიაღწევდა – იმ ერთხელ მაინც რომ გამართლებოდა ცხოვრებაში. მაგრამ...

მაგრამ მოხდა ის, რაც მოხდა და გენა ისეთია, როგორც არის.

A Garbage Chute

Iva Pezuashvili

Translated into English by Tamar Japaridze

The power was back early in the morning, at about six am. Milla turned on the heaters, and when the apartment became more or less warm, she pulled poor Zemba out of bed to wash the two-week greasy dirt from her head, first with washing soap and then with Кря-кря¹ shampoo. When the girl had washed her hair, dried it, braided it, and breakfasted on toast soaked in salt water, Milla sent her off to school and set about filling the tub for her son, who wasn't yet called Lazare. It was a very smart move – firstly, because the boy loved to splash in the water, and secondly, because in the event of a water outage, which seemed to be one of the favourite pastimes of the democratic government of Georgia after blackouts and gas outages, she would have a supply of water to flush the toilet. Satisfied with her perspicacity, she heated the water with a spiral tube heater, put her half-asleep son into the tub, soaped him well, rinsed the foam down with clean water, filled the tub with toys and went to the kitchen to fill the twenty-liter and five-liter tanks with drinking water. Just at that moment, Genna, who was always pale, unemotional and tired to the bone, came home. His eyes were sparkling strangely, and he was so full of energy that he instantly took his wife into his arms, rushed her to the kitchen, laid her on the table, took off her sweater and T-shirt, tore off her bra, sweatpants and ripped stockings, and began to kiss her with oblivion, just like years ago, just like before fleeing Baku, before fleeing Yerevan, before fleeing himself, and before Samuel's death. He kissed her a lot, and everywhere, and passionately; he caressed her and whispered in

1 (Russ.) Kid shampoo 'Quack-Quack'

her ear how he had always loved her and always would, and asked her forgiveness for being unable or unwilling to express his feelings at times. Now he felt that everything had changed, that his strength had returned to him, and he would become significant. He said that every routine was hell, but there were hellish routines and one of them was Georgia... But even in Georgian hell his sun would rise, as the night before he had saved the President from death! He said that he and the Minister of Interior Affairs hadn't slept a wink, and that all the high officials of the ruling party and the entire cabinet of ministers thanked him, and all of them, together and individually, promised him the stars and the moon for his heroism, and that soon the time would come when he would be able to fulfil Milla's every wish, when he would give her everything she deserved; that the time would come when he would start to appreciate himself again, and so would others; that he would achieve a lot, and that he would make his wife happy, and that eternal happiness awaited her. And Milla smiled at him and answered him with groans of lust, and her groans were accompanied by the babble of Lazare, who had left the bathroom. When the moans grew into rapid heartbeats, Genna began to howl, praising God, earthly Paradise, beautiful Iveria², Brotherhood, Unity, Freedom; he praised the homeland that he had lost and which would not accept him back, so now he would take Georgia for his homeland and it would be his fetish. And if Georgia became a fetish, if it was a fetish to lose the truth, and if to live without truth was routine, and routine was hell – then everything that turned into routine was already hell! But Genna still howled, praising the great goals in life! Long Live Love! Long Live Relief and Joy! Welcome Dawn!... And finally, he ejaculated, a release from words, praises and howling... Now only the rapid heartbeats of the happy couple were heard in the kitchen, but the child's babble was no longer audible... When the silence from the bathroom seemed

2 Iveria – the old name of Georgia

too long and unbearable, Genna jumped to his feet and rushed to the bathroom. He found his son half-dead and blue in face, with lungs full of water, and tried desperately for three or four minutes to bring him back to life... And when by some miracle he saved him, when the child eagerly inhaled the air and returned to life, Genna returned to his usual inertness, locked himself up at home, and announced:

“Самвел имя проклятое и надо его поменять.”³

So, he re-named his son Lazare...

Milla remembers all this. She knows that if not that unfortunate incident with the child, Genna would move mountains, he would definitely change, he would do everything possible and impossible and achieve success if he had been lucky that once, but...

Well, what's happened, happened, and Genna is what he is.

3 Самвел имя проклятое и надо его поменять (Russ.) - Samuel is a cursed name and we need to change it.

GREECE

Takis Kamylyis

Γενικά Συμπτώματα *General Symptoms*

Καστανιώτη/Kastaniotis, 2021

Language: Greek

ISBN: 9789600369144



BIOGRAPHY

Takis Kamylyis was born in Nafplion. He started his career as a journalist at *Nea* in 1986 as a reporter, and later became editor-in-chief. He worked as managing editor at *Eleftheros Typos* in 2006, and then at *Kathimerini* from 2007 to 2010 as a contributor and columnist. From 2010 to 2014 he was general manager of the Athens municipal radio station, Athens 9.84. He has published two novels: *Giants and Beans* and, more recently, *General Symptoms*.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Five characters, one story: the unknown Greek volunteer for vaccine experiments, the angry son of the bankrupt merchant, the bedridden

mother, the clumsy coffee maker and the unemployed, ambitious journalist. Their footsteps seem ordinary, everyday – like the general symptoms of a virus, which we evolved with as we emerged together from caves to savannahs, fields and cities. All five heroes, in the midst of the pandemic, get caught up in a ‘good guy’ civil war that breaks out in a neighbourhood in Athens, with all the aftermath: the amortisation of people, motivation and other assets. All five become protagonists of the same murder. A novel of monologues, where everything – even crime and self-sacrifice – is done in the most conventional way: without the will of the perpetrator or with the wrong victim...

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

In his novel *General Symptoms*, Takis Kamylyis presents a densely woven net of five alternating monologues to elicit from his narrators five different truths about the society that surrounds them. An anonymous volunteer participates in secret experiments on the vaccine, in a semi-conscious attempt to atone for the decisions he made as a high-ranking bank executive that have ruined his one-time benefactor, a merchant who runs a hardware store in the old centre of Athens. The bankrupt merchant’s angry son tries to endure his father’s downfall, which ends in murder, while his dementia-stricken mother loses the world beneath her feet. A journalist struggles to decipher the codes of ethics in a long-discredited and devastated profession. Finally, the lack of trust in everyone and everything will be expressed by a loquacious coffee drinker. Five narratives, each from a different point of view and point of observation, set against an urban background that has been transformed from a mural of Athens into a series of instants of poetic breath. In *General Symptoms* the pandemic and all its side effects (from the panic of death and the multifaceted discomfort

over direct and indirect precautions, to the hope for the vaccine and the denial of the danger of the virus) are transformed, together with the callousness of banking towards the weak and the neglected, into a means of demonstrating not only the social and psychological interconnection of the successive financial and health crises, but also the impasses that arise because of this interconnection at the level of everyday existence and moral survival.



Γενικά Συμπτώματα

Τάκης Καμπύλης



Η αλήθεια είναι ότι δεν έχω μελετήσει το σώμα μου όσο τη γερμανική οικονομία του Μεσοπολέμου. Ίσως γι' αυτό όλα μού φαίνονται πιθανά και την ίδια στιγμή όλα ακυρώνονται από το φόβο μιας άγνωστης συνωμοσίας μέσα μου. Γιατί έβαλα αυτό το πράγμα στο σώμα μου; Όχι, δεν θέλω να με ξεγελάσω. Σκέφτομαι πάλι τον κυρ Σπύρο και τον καθηγητή Δημητρίου. Τους άφησα έξω από τη ζωή μου. Όμως, τους σκεπτόμουν συχνά – μην αυτομαστιγώνομαι. Ωστόσο, το τηλέφωνο δεν το σήκωσα παρά τα πρώτα δύο τρία χρόνια στις ονομαστικές τους εορτές.

Είχα χρόνο; Όχι βέβαια! Έφθανα στην Τράπεζα πρώτος κι έφευγα τελευταίος. Δεν άφηνα εκκρεμότητες – είχα κηρύξει πόλεμο στην ακινησία των εκατομμυρίων που περνούσαν από τα χέρια μου. Ούτε για λίγες στιγμές δεν θα επέτρεπα να μην απέδιδαν τα μέγιστα για την Τράπεζα.

Οι έπαινοι και στη συνέχεια τα μπόνους έδειχναν πως έκανα τη δουλειά μου καλά και υπεύθυνα. Και οι προαγωγές τι άλλο ήταν παρά ένα γενικότερο μήνυμα στους χιλιάδες συναδέλφους; Ήμουν –είμαι– το θετικό παράδειγμα, η πορεία μου μπορεί να κάνει καλό και σε άλλους, αν την ακολουθήσουν. Να, λοιπόν: Το καλό! Εντάξει, δεν είμαι κυρ Σπύρος, ούτε καθηγητής Δημητρίου, αλλά, παρ' όλα αυτά, είμαι κάποιος που πρόσφερε ένα θετικό παράδειγμα. Αυτό δεν αποδεικνύει ότι έκανα κι εγώ κάποιο καλό στους γύρω μου, στους συναδέλφους μου; Και μάλιστα, ανυστερόβουλα; Διεκδικούσα το παραμικρό από ό,τι τούς προσέφερα; Όχι!

Πολλές φορές πάλι, σκέπτομαι αν το καλό που γίνεται κατά τύχη, χωρίς να το επιδιώξεις, αξίζει το ίδιο με το καλό που γίνεται στο-

χευμένα. Μου αρκεί ότι το κακό που γίνεται αθέλητα δεν βαραίνει το ίδιο με το κακό που γίνεται ηθελημένα. Ας ξεκινήσω από κει: από το κακό που έκανα κλείνοντας τη στρόφιγγα σε όσους είχαν ανάγκη. Τους γνώριζα; Επιδίωξα να τους βλάψω προσωπικά; Χάρηκα με τη χρεωκοπία τους; Φυσικά όχι! Δεν έβλαψα σκόπιμα, προσωπικά, επί τούτου, κανέναν!

Ανοίγω πάλι το φάκελο Νο. 3848: Τα νούμερα χιμάνε σαν όρνια που τρέφονται από το συκώτι μου. Συσχετίζω πάλι με την αιμορραγία – ήρθε λίγο μετά το «Απορρίπτεται»!

23:10. Βράδιασε για τα καλά. Ακόμα και οι Ερινύες θα κοιμηθούν σε λίγο – ή μήπως μένουν να κεφαλαιοποιήσουν ό,τι ανεξόφλητο κρύβει η ψυχή των θυμάτων τους;

Γιατί έβαλα αυτό το πράγμα μέσα μου;

«Θετικό παράδειγμα», «τεράστιο καλό στους συνανθρώπους σας», αυτά ήταν τα θερμά λόγια στο μείλ της Εταιρείας. Μα και στη γερμανική πόλη οι άνθρωποι της Εταιρείας συμπεριφέρθηκαν σαν να ήμουν ξεχωριστός, ένας πιονέρος της δημόσιας υγείας. Μου άρεσε αυτό, από την πρώτη στιγμή η απόδοση σε εμένα υψηλών κινήτρων οπωσδήποτε με διευκόλυνε να προχωρήσω. Αλλά πώς ξεκίνησε; Αυτό ψάχνω, σπάω το κεφάλι μου. Η πρώτη στιγμή, η πρώτη σκέψη, η πρώτη αντίδραση πότε ήταν; Γιατί δεν θυμάμαι; Απλωθούμε κι ευχάριστες στιγμές; Όχι, δεν ήταν ευχάριστη.

Πάντως, μου είναι σαφές ότι όλα ξεκίνησαν την περίοδο που στιγματίστηκε από ένα συγκεκριμένο φάκελο, τον Νο. 3250. Η «Καρυπίδης ΑΕ». Θυμάμαι ότι τότε ήταν που αναζήτησα την πιθανότητα να πάρω μέρος στις δοκιμές οποιουδήποτε νέου φαρμάκου για οποιαδήποτε ασθένεια – δεν ήταν ακόμα γνωστές οι δοκιμές για το Εμβόλιο: Όταν είχε φθάσει με την εσωτερική αλληλογραφία εκείνο το ιταμών χαρακτηρισμών υπηρεσιακό σημείωμα για μένα –κοινοποιήθηκε προς όλα τα ανώτερα στελέχη της Τράπεζας– από τη Διεύθυνση Δημοσίων Σχέσεων. Αιτία ήταν η προ ημερών απορριπτική γνωμοδότησή μου στον φάκελο Νο. 3250. Αναφερόταν σ' ένα εμβληματικό ακίνητο στο κέντρο της Αθήνας, που υπο-

λειτουργούσε για χρόνια ως επιχείρηση ένδυσης και υπόδησης. Το μειονέκτημά της ήταν ότι εμπορευόταν αποκλειστικά ρούχα και παπούτσια δικής της κατασκευής, τα οποία οι καταναλωτές ουδόλως εκτιμούσαν, όπως έδειχναν οι πωλήσεις. Το δάνειο που αδυνατούσε να εξοφλήσει η επιχείρηση προς την Τράπεζα τα τελευταία δέκα χρόνια ήταν ασήμαντο σε σχέση με την αυτοτελή αξία του ακινήτου. Απόδειξη ότι η Τράπεζα το πούλησε ταχύτατα, έναντι ποσού πολλαπλάσιου του δανείου. Όμως, μια τέτοια εξέλιξη στο κέντρο της πόλης προκάλεσε το ενδιαφέρον των εφημερίδων. Φρόντισαν από τις Δημόσιες Σχέσεις να παραθέσουν άφθονα δημοσιεύματα που μιλούσαν για «απαράδεκτη κερδοσκοπία από πλευράς της Τράπεζας» και για «κοινωνική αναληγσία», φιλοξενώντας φωτογραφίες και απόψεις μερικών εκ των περίπου πενήντα απολυμένων της επιχείρησης.

«Το προφίλ της Τράπεζας δέχθηκε μεγάλο πλήγμα» κατέληγαν οι Δημόσιες Σχέσεις και ζητούσαν «να συνυπολογίζονται όλες οι παράμετροι μιας αίτησης και δη οι κοινωνικές, ιδίως σε εποχές κρίσης και γενικευμένου φόβου των καταθετών».

Λίγες μέρες μετά, ο υπέργηρος ιδιοκτήτης της χρεωκοπημένης «Καρυπίδης ΑΕ» δολοφόνησε την κατάκοιτη γυναίκα του και αυτοκτόνησε.

Τι περίεργο! Το αίμα εμφανίστηκε πάλι τώρα που σκέφτομαι αυτά, τα παλιά, το νιώθω στα χείλη, να γλιστράει στο σαγόني.

Τότε ήταν! Το απόγευμα εκείνης της μέρας, εδώ, σ' αυτό το δωμάτιο, έκανα την πρώτη σκέψη να γίνω πειραματόζωο. Μ' αυτή τη λέξη το σκέφτηκα: πειραματόζωο. Νωρίτερα εκείνη τη μέρα, ήδη από το πρωί, στην Τράπεζα είχα αγνοήσει τα κύματα αποδοκμασίας, που μου έρχονταν. Το ίδιο και το μεσημέρι. Δεν είχα καταλάβει το λόγο – δεν διάβαζα παρά οικονομικά έντυπα και ηλεκτρονικά περιοδικά. Μετά είδα την ανακοίνωση της Τράπεζας: «με λύπη της», μπλα, μπλα, μπλα, «περισσότερη ενσυναίσθηση», μπλα, μπλα, μπλα, «όλες τις προσπάθειες ώστε στο μέλλον», μπλα, μπλα, μπλα. Μόνο που δεν με έφτυσαν καταπρόσωπο!

Δεν εξοργίστηκα, δεν είχα χρόνο. Τις επόμενες μέρες ξετίναξα κάθε λεπτομέρεια από το φάκελο Νο. 3250. Αναλυτικά, μέχρι σεντ... Πέρασα τις εκτιμήσεις στον αλγόριθμο και προέκυψαν πάλι οι ίδιες επιλογές. Κοίταξα αν υπήρχαν παράμετροι που είχα αγνοήσει ή δεν είχα συμπληρώσει. Δεν υπήρχαν. Ούτε είχαν προστεθεί ούτε προστέθηκαν αργότερα. Επομένως, η Τράπεζα μου έκλεινε το μάτι: «Συνεχίζουμε, μεγάλε παίκτη!» Αυτή ήταν η αγαπημένη φράση του CEO. Αυτό σαν να μου επαναλάμβανε και τώρα, έστω στα κρυφά· διαφορετικά, θα είχαν τροποποιήσει τον αλγόριθμο. Ωστόσο, ένα απόγευμα αποχώρησα ηττημένος στα μάτια των συναδέλφων μου. Το έβλεπα όλες τις προηγούμενες μέρες. Δεν χρειαζόταν καν να το αναζητήσω, μου το φώναζαν χωρίς να μου μιλάνε, ούτε καν με κοιτούσαν. Σαν να ήμουν κάτι σαν το φωτοτυπικό στον προθάλαμο ή σαν τον αλγόριθμο. Σαν τόσα χρόνια απλώς να με υπέφεραν.

Δεν ενημέρωσα την Τράπεζα για τη συμμετοχή μου στο Εμβόλιο. Ζήτησα υπηρεσιακά το υπόλοιπο αδείας, το υπέγραψα, μετά φρόντισα τις εκκρεμότητες, πλήρωσα το λογαριασμό στο κυλικείο κι έκλεισα την πόρτα του γραφείου μου.

Τις επόμενες βδομάδες η αλληλογραφία με την Εταιρεία και οι πρώτες εξετάσεις σε ιδιωτικό κέντρο επιλογής της με βοήθησαν να προχωρήσω, να παραμερίσω στη μνήμη μου τις κραυγές των τηλεοράσεων και τους ξύλινους τίτλους των εφημερίδων για την υπόθεση του φακέλου Νο. 3250.

Ίσως ένιωθα ότι με το Εμβόλιο έδινα απάντηση – χωρίς λόγια, ποτέ δεν ήμουν καλός στα προφορικά. Η επικείμενη δοκιμή με είχε συνεπάρει, ήταν σαν να έβγαινα από το χαράκωμά μου και να ορθωνόμουν απέναντι στο κίτρινο σύννεφο του «αέριου της μουστάρδας», που πλησίαζε από τα γερμανικά ορύγματα – δείχνοντας σε όλους πόσο λάθος είχαν για μένα. Ναι, εγώ αναλάμβανα ευθύνες· αυτό πράττω σ' όλη μου τη ζωή. Αναλάμβανα ευθύνες που μου ανέθεταν. Ε, τώρα προχώρησα παραπέρα. Ακόμα και στην Εταιρεία το είπαν: «Αναλαμβάνετε μια ευθύνη χωρίς να σας ζητηθεί» – το έχω στα μέιλ μου.

00:05. Καλύτερα να ξαπλώσω, η αναδρομή δεν με βοηθάει, δεν αλλάζει το «τώρα» ούτε καν το εξηγεί. Εννοώ, ε, μιλάω σε εσένα μέσα μου, πώς να ήξερες ότι θα μ' έφερνες σήμερα εδώ; Αν μη τι άλλο, οφείλω να σε συγχωρήσω. Πώς να γνώριζες;

Ναι! Ίσως αυτό να είναι το Εμβόλιο: μια πράξη συγγνώμης.

00:35. Δεν έχω κουράγιο να αλλάξω ρούχα, ο ιδρώτας παγώνει πάνω μου, καλό σημάδι, θα υποχωρεί ο πυρετός – ή όχι;

Σε λιγότερο από επτά ώρες θα μάθω, η Φωνή θα είναι συνεπής στο πρόγραμμά μας.

Ίσως πρόκειται για τυπική διαδικασία απόσβεσης παγίων του οργανισμού, εξυγίανσής μου...

Symptômes généraux

Takis Kampylis

Traduit en français par Aude Fondard

Le sang s'est arrêté, peut-être que la toux a fait sauter un petit vaisseau sanguin. C'est probable, non ?

La vérité, c'est que j'ai mieux étudié l'économie allemande de l'entre-deux-guerres que mon propre corps. C'est sûrement la raison pour laquelle tout me semble probable alors qu'en même temps tout est aboli par la peur d'une conspiration inconnue s'ourdissant en moi. Pourquoi j'ai mis ce truc dans mon corps ? Non, je ne veux pas me ridiculiser. Je repense à m'sieur Spyros et au professeur que j'ai exclu de ma vie. Tout de même, j'ai souvent pensé à eux — pas d'autoflagellation. Enfin, après deux ou trois ans, j'ai cessé de décrocher le combiné pour leur souhaiter une bonne fête.

Avais-je le temps ? Bien sûr que non ! J'étais le premier arrivé à la banque et j'en repartais le dernier. Je ne laissais rien en suspens. J'avais déclaré la guerre à l'inertie des millions qui passaient entre mes mains. Je ne pouvais pas permettre que les maxima ne rapportent rien à la banque, même pour un bref moment.

Les éloges et les bonus obtenus en continu montraient que j'effectuais mon travail comme il se doit et de façon responsable. Et les promotions, qu'était-ce d'autre sinon un message général à ces milliers de collaborateurs ? J'étais — je suis — le bon exemple, ma trajectoire peut même être bénéfique aux autres, s'ils la suivent. Alors, tout va bien ! Certes, je ne suis pas monsieur Dimitris ou m'sieur Spyros, mais je suis malgré tout une personne qui a donné le bon exemple. N'est-ce pas la preuve que j'ai, moi aussi, semé le bien autour de moi et auprès de mes collègues ? En toute sincérité en plus ? Ai-je revendiqué quoi que ce soit de ce que je leur ai apporté ? Non !

Encore une question récurrente: est-ce que le bien arrivé par hasard, qui ne répond pas à un objectif, vaut autant que le bien qui se produit de façon ciblée ? Il me suffit de penser que le mal effectué involontairement ne pèse pas autant que le mal qui se produit de façon délibérée. Et si je commençais par là: par le mal que j'ai fait en coupant le robinet à tous ceux qui étaient dans le besoin. Est-ce que je les connaissais ? Avais-je pour objectif de les blesser personnellement ? Me suis-je réjoui de leur banqueroute ? Bien sûr que non ! Je n'ai nui à personne expressément par intérêt ou intention, personne.

J'ouvre de nouveau le dossier n°3848. Les chiffres pullulent comme des vautours-griffons se régaland sur mon foie. Je fais de nouveau le lien avec mon hémorragie. Elle s'est produite peu après mon «refus».

23h10. Heureusement qu'il fait nuit. Même les Érinyes s'assoupiront sous peu – à moins qu'elles ne restent éveillées pour capitaliser ce que cache l'âme créditrice de leurs victimes.

Mais pourquoi j'ai mis ce truc dans mon corps ?

«Donner le bon exemple», «contribuer considérablement au bien-être de vos compatriotes», ah les belles paroles de la firme, par courriel. Dans la ville allemande, les employés se sont comportés comme si j'étais un être exceptionnel, un pionnier de la santé publique. Ça me plaisait bien. L'attribution directe de grands desseins à ma personne m'a définitivement permis de progresser. Mais comment cela a-t-il commencé ? Telle est la question qui me taraude. Quand donc a eu lieu le premier instant, la première pensée, la première réaction ? Pourquoi je ne me souviens pas ? Est-ce que je refoule des moments heureux ? Non il n'y en a pas eu.

Quoi qu'il en soit, il me semble évident que tout a commencé à une période marquée par un dossier en particulier, le n°3250 sur la SA Karypidis. Je me souviens que c'est à ce moment-là que j'ai envisa-

gé la possibilité de participer à des essais pharmaceutiques pour un médicament quelconque sur une maladie quelconque (les essais sur le vaccin n'étaient alors pas connus), au moment où la direction des ressources humaines nous a adressé à tous les cadres supérieurs de la banque un courrier interne portant ce vil qualificatif de mémorandum. Son motif concernait mon opinion défavorable sur le dossier n°3250 donnée quelques jours plus tôt. Il faisait référence à un bien emblématique au cœur d'Athènes qui tournait au ralenti depuis des années comme entreprise de prêt-à-porter. Son seul inconvénient, c'est qu'elle vendait uniquement des vêtements et chaussures de sa propre fabrication, que les consommateurs n'appréciaient pas vraiment, le chiffre d'affaires l'attestait. Le prêt que l'entreprise n'avait pas pu rembourser auprès de la banque sur les dix dernières années était insignifiant par rapport à la valeur du bien. Gage que la banque le vendrait en moins de deux, contre plusieurs fois le montant du prêt. Un tel événement en lien avec le centre-ville attirait toutefois l'attention des journaux. Les relations publiques prirent soin de mentionner un tas d'articles qui parlaient de «spéculation inacceptable de la part de la banque» et «d'indifférence à l'égard du social». L'ensemble était étayé de photographies et témoignages de la cinquantaine de personnes environ licenciées par l'entreprise.

Les relations publiques en ont conclu que «l'image de la banque s'était fortement ternie» et exigeaient dorénavant «de prendre en compte, dans le cadre d'une demande, tous les paramètres, et notamment les facteurs sociaux, plus particulièrement en période de crise et de peur généralisée des déposants».

Quelques jours plus tard, le propriétaire très âgé de la société anonyme en faillite a tué sa femme grabataire avant de se suicider.

Comme c'est étrange ! Le sang se manifeste de nouveau tandis que je repense à tout ça, au passé. Je le sens sur mes lèvres, il coule sur mon menton.

C'était donc à ce moment-là ! Précisément cet après-midi, dans cette chambre même que j'ai songé pour la première fois à devenir rat de laboratoire. Je l'ai pensé en ces termes: rat de laboratoire. Plus tôt ce jour-là, dès le matin, à la banque, j'avais ignoré une salve de reproches. Le midi, rebelote. Je n'en avais pas compris la cause — je ne lisais rien d'autre que les revues économiques et les journaux électroniques. Ensuite j'ai lu le communiqué de la banque : «exprime son grand regret», blablabla, «plus d'empathie», blablabla, «plus d'efforts à l'avenir», blablabla. Sauf qu'ils ne me l'ont pas craché au visage.

Je ne suis pas sorti de mes gonds, je n'en avais pas le temps. Les jours suivants j'ai passé au crible tous les détails du dossier n°3250. De façon systématique et exhaustive... J'ai transmis les évaluations à l'algorithme et les mêmes options sont ressorties. J'ai regardé si j'avais ignoré des paramètres ou des éléments que je n'avais pas remplis. Il n'y en avait pas. Il n'y avait rien de plus et rien ne serait ajouté par la suite. Après coup, la Banque a passé l'éponge : «On continue, grand joueur !» C'était l'expression préférée du PDG. Comme pour me le rappeler encore et toujours, même en secret, sinon ils auraient modifié l'algorithme. Un après-midi cependant, je me suis éloigné aux yeux de mes collègues, vaincu. Je l'ai senti venir les jours qui ont précédé. Ils n'ont pas eu besoin que je cherche quoi que ce soit, ils me l'ont hurlé sans me le dire, sans même me regarder. Je me suis senti pareil au photocopieur dans l'entrée ou à l'algorithme. Comme s'ils n'avaient fait que me supporter durant toutes ces années.

Je n'ai pas informé la banque de ma participation aux tests vaccinaux. J'ai demandé le solde de mes congés au service du personnel, j'ai signé les documents et me suis chargé des dossiers en cours. J'ai réglé la note à la cafétéria et fermé la porte de mon bureau.

Les semaines suivantes, la correspondance avec la firme et les premiers examens dans la clinique privée choisie par ses soins m'ont

aidé à bien avancer, à écarter de ma mémoire les cris d'orfraie à la télévision et les titres mensongers des journaux sur l'affaire concernant le dossier n°3250.

Peut-être ai-je pensé donner le change avec le vaccin — sans verbaliser, je n'ai jamais été bon à l'oral. J'étais passionné par les essais en cours, je croyais être sorti de mon trou et me dresser devant le nuage jaune de «gaz moutarde» en provenance des tranchées allemandes. J'allais prouver combien tout le monde se trompait à mon sujet. Oui, j'ai assumé des responsabilités — toute ma vie durant. J'ai assumé les responsabilités qui m'incombaient.

Alors là, je progresse à grandes enjambées. C'est justement ce qui circulait au sein de la Firme: «Assumez vos responsabilités sans vous poser de question», je l'ai dans ma boîte mail.

ooh05. Je ferais mieux de m'allonger, passer en revue tous ces faits ne m'aidera pas, cela ne changera rien au maintenant et ne l'expliquera pas non plus. Je pense, euh, je te parle à toi qui es en moi, comment savais-tu que tu me conduirais ici aujourd'hui ? Je n'ai pas d'autre choix que de te pardonner. Mais comment savais-tu ?

Oui ! C'est peut-être ça le vaccin: une pratique du pardon.

ooh35. Je n'ai pas le courage de changer mes vêtements, la transpiration colle à ma peau, c'est bon signe, non, ça va faire chuter la fièvre ?

Dans moins de sept heures, je saurai, la Voix sera fidèle à notre rendez-vous.

Peut-être s'agit-il d'une procédure normale d'amortissement des immobilisations de mon organisme, une sorte de purge.

SPECIAL
MENTION

IRELAND

Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin

Madame Lazare

Madame Lazare

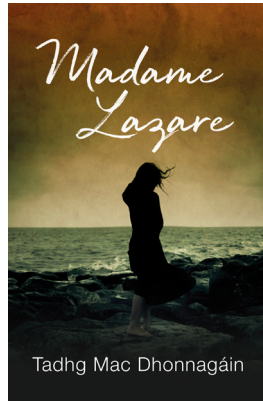
Barzaz, 2021

Language: Irish

ISBN: 9781910945964

BIOGRAPHY

Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin writes books, screenplays, songs and works predominantly in Irish (sometimes called Gaelic), the indigenous language of Ireland. His creative-fiction-style biography of the 19th-century poet and songwriter Antoine Ó Raiftearaí, *Mise Raiftearaí an Fiodóir Focal (I Am Raifterai, the Word-Weaver)*, was awarded the premier Irish-language Book of the Year Award, Gradam Uí Shúilleabháin, in 2015. His season song book/CD *Bliain na nAmhrán (The Year of Song)* won a Children's Books Ireland Book of the Year Award, was included in the *White Ravens Annual Catalogue* of excellent children's publications from around the world by the International Youth Library in Munich, Germany, and won the Irish-language Book of the Year, Gradam Réics Carló, for 2017. His screenwriting credits include the TV drama *Aifric* (Telegael, 2006–2008, for TG4), which he co-created with director Paul Mercier and Telegael. The series won three consecutive Irish Film and Television



Awards for best youth programme (2007, 2008 and 2009) and the Celtic Media Festival Bronze Torc Award for best young people's production. The show has been broadcast in Europe, Latin America and Asia. His novel *Madame Lazare* was awarded an An Post Irish Book Award in 2021.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Levana has always been proud of her Jewish heritage and the generations of Jewish women who came before her. One of those women is her grandmother, Hana Lazare, who raised Levana in a traditional Jewish community in Paris. Hana's story is one of struggle: as a child, she fled the Nazi invasion of her northern European homeland, the only member of her family that survived the Shoah. She has never spoken a word about that other life to Levana.

But as Hana succumbs to old age and her mind becomes increasingly confused, fragments of memory emerge that surprise and puzzle Levana. As the old woman unknowingly reveals more of her past, Levana finds herself questioning everything her grandmother has ever told her. The trail leads from Paris to Brussels to the Atlantic coast of Ireland, leading Levana ever closer to discovering the terrible event that has defined the secretive life of Madame Lazare.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

The jury selected this book because this stunning novel is quintessentially a European one, not just in setting but also in its subject matter. It is a major and important addition to a limited contemporary canon in the Irish language. The wide, epic sweep of the work – from a remote island off the west coast of Ireland to Estonia, and from Paris and Brussels – and the focus on the deliberate concealment of the past by an elderly woman make the book an intriguing fiction that invites the reader to reflect on identity, oppression and

culture at both a personal and a European level. *Madame Lazare's* partial historic setting draws attention to the Second World War, to the Shoah and to the pan-European repercussions of that tragic time in European history. From a literary perspective, the book is well structured and cleverly paced, bringing its various elements to a satisfactory and fulfilling conclusion. The jury also found the treatment of memory loss and dementia to be sensitively handled, while at the same time being deftly used as a plot device. The book's treatment of multilingualism, language and the role of translation in fostering comprehension is also elegantly done, as are the descriptions of a modern European lifestyle. As the story unfolds, just enough information is revealed to sustain the reader's attention, while leaving enough untold to ensure the reader's full engagement. Subjects as

diverse as Jewish customs, Irish folklore and nature are all effortlessly integrated into the plot. With its focus on themes of identity, place and language and its strong European setting, this book is a perfect and topical candidate for the 2022 European Prize for Literature.



Madame Lazare

Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin



Muraed, Árainn, 1937

Sagart áirid a bhí ann. Sin a deireadh na daoine fásta faoi Father Folan, ach shíl Muraed go raibh sé go hálainn. Dá mbuailfeadh sé bleid chainte ort is tú ag siúl abhaile ón scoil, nó dá gcuirfeadh sé ceist ort sa seomra ranga agus é tagtha isteach ar cuairt, níor airigh tú go raibh sé ag iarraidh a fháil amach an raibh tú dána nó leisciúil nó sleamchúiseach. ‘Sén chaoi go mbíodh suim aige sa rud a déarfá leis, amhail is go raibh níos mó ná freagra ceart amháin ar cheist ar bith.

Níor thuig Muraed cén fáth go mbíodh na daoine fásta a rá go raibh bealach aisteach leis. Cén dochar má bhí sé de nós aige fanacht go maidin ag tórramh, é féin ag scéalaíocht, ag gáirí leis an gcomhlúadar agus ag rá corrstéibh d’amhrán?

Bhí sé beagáinín áirid, ceart go leor, an chaoi a mbíodh sé ag dul thart leath den am agus seaicéad bréidín air, amhail seanascaire. Dúirt Eoin Éamonn go raibh a chloigeann curtha ó mhaith ag na blianta a bhí caite amuigh san Afraic aige. Bhí a intinn bruite ag an teas amuigh ann, a dúirt sé, é ag iarraidh foghlaim Dé a chur ar dhaoine fiáine in áiteacha nach dtitfeadh braon báistí ó cheann ceann na bliana.

Ach in ainneoin na rudaí a deireadh na daoine fásta faoi, bhí cúis mhaith amháin ag Muraed a cheapadh gur sagart fíordheas a bhí ann. Mar b’é Father Folan an t-aon duine riamh a tháinig ag an teach go speisialta le castáil ar Pháraic.

Cén chaoi a raibh a fhios aige go raibh Páraic ann beag ná mór? Ní thugtaí amach ag an Aifreann riamh é. Is dócha go raibh a fhios ag muintir na háite go raibh sé ann. D’fheicfidís ar maidin é agus Muraed á thabhairt chomh fada le teach Neil Chóil Jimí, le go dtabharfadh sise aire dó nuair a bhí sí féin agus Bid ar scoil. Ach maidir leis na daoine a thagadh san oíche ag an teach le bheith ag scéalaíocht le Deaide nó ag casadh amhrán, ní leagfaidís sin súil riamh air. Dhéanfadh Deaide cinnte go mbeadh Páraic curtha a luí i gcónaí sula dtiocfaidís.

Níor thaitnigh sé le Muraed an chaoi a dtugadh Bid ‘simpleoir’ air. Ní raibh tada simplí faoi Pháraic. Agus ní ‘gnúsachtach’ a bhíodh aige, ach focla. Focla a bhí cumtha aige féin. Cé mhéad duine cliste a bhí in ann a rá gurbh iad féin a chum na focla a bhí acu, chuile cheann beo? Ach b’shin mar a bhí ag Páraic. ‘Nuc’ a bhí aige ar bhainne. ‘Unna’ a bhí aige ar ronnach. ‘Há’ ar an bpréachán. Agus ‘Aidhl’ a bhí aige ar an bhfaoileán bán. Bhí dosaen eile focla ar a laghad aige.

Agus ní le focla amháin a chuireadh sé féin in iúl. Bhí bealach aige lena dhá shúil a chasadh ina chloigeann a thabharfadh brí bhreise don mhéid a bhí sé ag iarraidh a rá. Dá gcasadh sé deiseal na súile agus iad a stopadh le stánadh suas ar fhraitheacha an tí, chiallódh sé sin go raibh sé sásta, nó gur mhaith leis go mbainfeadh Muraed dinglis as. Agus dá gcasadh sé na súile tuathal agus iad a stopadh le stánadh ar leacracha an urláir, chiallódh sé sin go raibh sé cráite ann féin. Dá mba néal uaignis a bhí tite air, chúbfadh sé isteach aige féin agus ní bheadh bíog as ar feadh an tráthnóna.

Ach dá mba stoirm chantail a bhailigh ina thimpeall, scéal eile a bheadh ann. Bheadh lasracha sna súile an uair sin aige agus dá ligfí leis, tharraingeodh sé trioblóid éicint. Formhór laethanta, dá dtabharfadh Muraed faoi deara in am é, bheadh sí in ann é a mhealladh agus a bhréagadh sula mbeadh buicéad uisce leagtha aige nó cic buailte aige ar chois an bhoird.

Ach formhór mór an ama, ní bhíodh mórán deacracht ar bith ag baint leis. Má bhí sé suite ar a chompord i gcúinne na cistine, é ag spraoi leis na clocha míne a fuair Muraed thíos ar an gcladach dó,

ba chuma leis faoi rud ar bith eile. Ní fios cén sásamh a bhaineadh sé as na clocha míne céanna, é á bpiocadh suas is á leagan uaidh, é ag déanamh líne díobh, á gcarnadh ar mhullach a chéile go dtí go dtitidís anuas ina thimpeall ar leacracha an urláir.

Uair amháin, nuair a thit carn a bhí déanta aige, tháinig ceann mór amháin anuas go trom ar a chois. Ar ndóigh, lig Páraic béic as a chloisfí amuigh i gConamara. Dhúisigh Deaide de gheit.

“Tusa a thug na clocha damanta sin isteach sa teach seo, nach tú?” a deir sé.

Chlaon Muraed a ceann.

“Bhuel, faigh réidh anois leo,” a deir sé. “Is ná feicim arís iad. Tá a dhóthain gleo aige siúd mar atá.”

Bhí a fhios ag Muraed gur drochphlean a bhí ansin. Agus bhí an ceart aici. Bhí Páraic croíbhriste faoi na clocha a bheith caite amach. Choinnigh sé air go ceann cúpla lá ag olagón agus ag éagaoin nó gur dhúirt Deaide le Muraed iad a thabhairt ar ais isteach.

Bhí siad ann ó shin i gcúinne na cistine agus Páraic ina lár go sásta formhór mór tráthnóntaí.

Bhuel, oíche Dhomhnaigh amháin, thart ar mhí nó mar sin th’éis do Father Folan a theacht go hÁrainn le bheith ina shagart paróiste nua, bhuaíl sé isteach ag an teach gan choinne. Bhí Páraic ina shuí sa gcúinne, Muraed agus Bid ag an mbord ag scríobh a gcuid aistí, Deaide ina chnap chodlata cois tine.

Nuair a chonaic Muraed an sagart i mbéal an dorais, sheas sí suas go díreach, mar a dhéanadh sí nuair a shiúladh duine tábhachtach dá chineál isteach sa seomra ranga ar scoil. Bhreathnaigh Bid suas óna cóipleabhar.

“Cén tseafóid atá ortsa?” a deir sí.

“Fáilte isteach, a Athair,” arsa Muraed. Nuair a bhreathnaigh Bid i dtreo an dorais, tháinig dath geal ar a héadan.

“Dia anseo isteach,” a deir Father Folan.

Dhúisigh Deaide de gheit.

“A Athair,” a deir sé, an dá shúil ag leathadh ina cheann.

“Ní le drochscéala atá mé tagtha, a Thaidhg,” arsa an sagart, gáirí muinteartha ar a bhéal.

Bhreathnaigh Deaide go géar anall ar Mhuraed, agus thuig sí ón dearcadh sin uaidh go gcaithfeadh sí Páraic a thabhairt isteach sa seomra ó thuaidh ar an bpointe boise.

Ach bhí a fhios aici chomh maith go mbeadh jab aici é a tharraingt amach as an gcúinne agus a chluiche a fhágáil ina dhiaidh.

“Tá súil agam nach bhfuil mé ag cur as daoibh,” arsa Father Folan. “Níl ann ach go bhfuil mé ag iarraidh beannacht bheag a chur ar an teach agus a bhfuil ina gcónaí ann.”

Bhreathnaigh Deaide ar an sagart agus meangadh fáilteach aige, ach d’airigh Muraed go raibh faitíos de chineál éicint air.

Chaith Deaide súil ghéar eile anall ar Mhuraed. Chas sí i dtreo Pháraic agus chrom síos aige, í ag labhairt leis sa nglór sin a d’úsáideadh sí lena bhréagadh.

“Seo leat, a Pháraic,” a deir sí. “Tá sé in an am dul a luí.”

Choinnigh Páraic air gan aird ar bith a thabhairt uirthi, é ag leagan na gcloch ina líne mar a bheadh nathair nimhe chnapánach ann.

“A Pháraic,” a deir Muraed arís de chogar géar.

Bhreathnaigh sé uirthi, an dearcadh ceandána sin a raibh oiread cleachtaidh aici air.

Chas Muraed timpeall. Ní fhéadfaí Páraic a chorraí, ach dá seasfadh sí os a chomhair, b’fhéidir nach dtabharfadh Father Folan faoi deara mórán é.

Bhí stiall fhada éadaigh bainte amach as póca a sheaicéid faoin tráth seo ag an sagart. Déanta as éadach bán de chineál éicint a bhí sé agus croiseanna ar dhath an óir fuáilte ann. Ba mhór an áilleacht é, cibé cén t-ainm a bheadh air. Leath Father Folan an stiall éadaigh amach uilig agus phóg é sular chuir sé thart ar a mhuineál é. Sheas sé i lár an urláir agus bheannaigh sé an teach, agus ní Laidin a bhí aige ach píosa mór fada de phaidir Ghaeilge. Ansin, anonn leis chomh fada le Deaide. Leag sé a ordóg ar a bhaithis siúd agus ghearr fíor na croise ann ar an gcaoi chéanna is a ghearradh Deaide fíor na croise ar dhroim na bó th'éis dó í a bhleán. Níor bhreathnaigh Deaide ar an sagart, ach síos ar leacracha an urláir.

Chas Father Folan agus anonn leis chomh fada le Bid, le beannacht a chur uirthi siúd chomh maith céanna. Nuair a chas sé i dtreo Mhuraed, chonaic sí an straois a bhí ar éadan a deirféar. Bhain sí dá pluic arís í breá sciobtha nuair a chonaic sí Deaide ag stánadh anall uirthi.

Leag Father Folan a ordóg ar bhaithis Mhuraed agus chuir beannacht uirthi, é ag monabhar leis faoi Bhríd agus Colm Cille agus Éanna. Ansin, dhírigh sé ar Pháraic.

“Á, ná bac leis siúd, a Athair,” arsa Deaide, agus cineál de chreathán ina ghlór. “Níl aon chiall aige.”

“Duine de chlann Dé atá ann, a Thaidhg, ach an oiread leatsa agus liomsa,” arsa Father Folan.

Chuaigh sé síos ar a dhá ghlúin os comhair Pháraic agus labhair leis i nglór íseal. Bhreathnaigh Páraic air go ceisteach, ach bhí an t-amharc ceandána imithe óna shúile.

“Nach le castáil ortsa a tháinig mé, a Pháraic?” a bhí Father Folan a rá leis. “Nach é do leithéidí a bhronnann grásta Dé ar na daoine atá ag tabhairt aire duit?”

Bhreathnaigh Muraed anonn ar Dheaide, féachaint an raibh a fhios aige siúd an méid sin cheana. Ach bhí an chuma neirbhíseach chéanna ar a éadan i gcónaí.

Madame Lazare

Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin

Translated into English by Tadhg Mac Dhonnagáin

Muraed, Aran, 1937

He was an odd priest. That's what the grown-ups said about Father Folan, but Muraed thought he was lovely. If he spoke to you and you walking home from school or if he asked you a question in class when he dropped in for a visit, you never felt he was trying to catch you out or find out if you were lazy or careless with your work. You felt he was interested in what you'd have to say. It was like he believed there was more than one right answer to a question.

Muraed couldn't understand why the grown-ups had such a set on him. What harm if he wouldn't leave a wake when he'd have the rosary said? What harm if he'd stay 'til morning, telling stories and laughing and singing the odd verse of a song? Fair enough, it was a bit out of the ordinary the way he'd go around like a fisherman and an old rough tweed jacket on him. Eoin Eamon reckoned his head was destroyed from the years he had spent out in Africa. His mind was melted from the heat, said Eoin Eamon, the poor man trying to put God's learning on wild people in places that never saw a drop of rain from one end of the year to the other.

But besides all the things the grown-ups had to say about him, Muraed had one very strong reason for thinking that he was a good priest. Father Folan was the only one ever to come to the house especially to meet Páraic.

How did he know about Páraic to begin with? He was never brought out to Mass on Sunday. The neighbours knew about him – they'd see Muraed bringing him to Nell Cole Jimmy's in the morning, before she followed Bid down the road to school. But as for Dada's friends who

visited at night to sit around the fire and tell stories and sing songs, some of them had hardly ever laid an eye on him. Dada would make full sure that Páraic was in bed before any of them arrived.

Muraed hated the way Bid used to say that Páraic was ‘simple’. There was nothing simple about him. And those sounds he made to tell you something – they weren’t ‘grunts’, they were words. Words Páraic had made up himself, without anyone’s help. How many clever people were able to boast that they had made up themselves every single word that they could say? And that those words they had invented were completely different from the names that everyone else had for things?

Well, that’s the way it was with Páraic. ‘Nuc’ was the word he had for milk. ‘Unna’ was a mackerel. ‘Haw’ was a crow. And ‘iyle’ was what he called a seagull. He had a dozen words made up at the very least. And not only that, he had other ways of telling you what he meant, ways that ordinary people would never have thought of. He had a special way of turning the two eyes in his head to show you what he meant to say. If he leaned his head to the left and turned his eyes to the right to look up at the rafters, he was telling you that he was happy, or he wanted you to give him a bit of a tickle. And if he turned his eyes to the left and stared down at the flagstones of the kitchen floor, that meant that he was upset about something.

If it was a lonesome feeling that had come down on him, he’d gather himself into a bundle and sit in the corner all evening without a peep out of him. But if it was a cranky humour that was troubling him, that was another story. You’d see stormy flashes in his eyes and if you didn’t watch out, you’d know all about it. If Muraed noticed him in time, she’d be able to sit down beside him and whisper in his ear and, if she was lucky, she’d stop him from spilling the bucket of well water or from giving an almighty kick to the leg of the table. But beside those cloudy humours, most of the time, Páraic was no trouble at all. If he was settled in his corner of the kitchen facing the door, playing away with the smooth stones that Muraed

had found on the strand for him, he wouldn’t bother anyone. He loved those same smooth stones. He’d make a line of them on the floor that looked like some class of a lumpy sea serpent. Now and again, he’d have a go at standing them up, one on top of one another, until they’d come crashing down around him. Once, when one of these constructions he was working on collapsed, Páraic let a screech out of him that’d be heard out in Connemara. Dada jumped awake in his chair by the fire.

“Na clocha sin arís!”

He turned to Muraed. “Those accursed stones! It was you that brought them into the house. Wasn’t it?” She nodded, moving to stand between him and Páraic. “Well bring them out again, now. And let me not see them under this roof again. Your brother has enough noise out of him without adding to it.”

Muraed knew that Dada’s plan wasn’t going to work. And she was right. Páraic was broken-hearted without the stones to play with. He groaned and groused for three long days until Dada finally told Muraed to bring the stones back in. They were there since in the corner, Páraic in the middle of them, content once more.

It was a Sunday evening, about a month after Father Folan arrived on the island to be the new parish priest, that he called into the house, without warning. Páraic was in his spot in the corner, Dada was a sleepy heap in his chair and Muraed and Bid were at the table writing their compositions. When Muraed spotted the priest standing in the mouth of the door, she stood up erect, as she had learned to do at school, whenever someone important appeared. Bid, her back to the door, looked up from her copybook, a puzzled look on her. “Fáilte romhat, a Athair,” said Muraed, in greeting. When Bid glanced over her shoulder, she jumped. “Dia anseo isteach,” said Father Folan.

The strange voice, bidding God to be with all in the house, wakened Dada.

“A Athair,” he said, the two eyes in his head widening.

“I haven’t come with bad news, Timín,” said the priest, a friendly smile on him.

Dada gave Muraed a sharp look that meant she was to get Páraic into the back room as quick as she could. She got up to move him, knowing well she’d have a job to take him out of the corner and leave his stones behind him.

“I hope I’m not disturbing ye,” said Father Folan. “It’s just that I wanted to give a little blessing to the house and all that’s in it.”

Dada was looking at the priest, trying his best to smile himself. But even so, there was something about the way that he was shifting his weight from one leg to the other that made Muraed think that he was feeling afraid for some reason. He turned to throw her another sharp stare. She offered Páraic her two hands and put on the voice she used when she was trying to persuade her brother to do something.

“Here we go, Páraic,” she said. “It’s time for bed.”

Páraic kept playing at his game, not paying one bit of attention to her, laying out one smooth stone after the other in a crooked line in front of him.

“Páraic,” said Muraed again, her voice a sharp whisper now.

He looked up, wearing that stubborn expression she knew so well. It was hopeless. She tried another tack, turning towards the priest, standing directly in front of her brother. If she stayed where she was, maybe the visitor wouldn’t notice him so much. Father Folan had taken a long strip of cloth from his pocket now. It was made out of some sort of lovely white material and there were two golden crosses stitched into it at either end. It was a beautiful thing, whatever name he had on it. He raised one end of the cloth to his lips,

kissed the golden cross and arranged the thing on his shoulders like a class of a long, thin shawl. He stood in the middle of the floor and blessed the house, and it wasn’t Latin he mumbled but a big, long prayer in Connemara Irish that any ordinary person would understand. Then, over he marches to Dada. The priest placed his thumb on Dada’s forehead, made the sign of the cross, in the same way that you’d bless the cow’s back after milking her. Dada stood straight as a sea stack, not looking once at the priest but directing his eyes down at the flagstones. Father Folan turned around to Bid, leaving the sign of the cross on her forehead as well, mumbling away in Irish all the time. When he turned to bless Muraed, she could see Bid smirking behind the priest. But when Bid spotted Dada’s angry stare from the other side of the kitchen, she wasn’t long getting the smile off her face. Father Folan’s thumb landed on Muraed’s forehead, and she could hear clearly now his prayer, a lovely one she hadn’t heard before that mentioned Saint Bridget and Saint Colmille and the island’s own Saint Éanna. Finally, the priest turned to Páraic, still on the floor, still lost in his game of the smooth stones.

“Ah don’t bother with him, Father,” said Dada, a nervous kind of a shake in his voice now.

“He has no sense.”

“He’s one of God’s family, Timín,” said Father Folan, “no less important than you or me or any of us walking this earth.”

Down with him on his two knees on the bare flagstone in front of Páraic and spoke to him in a soft voice. Páraic threw a glance at him, but that stubborn look was nowhere to be seen now.

“Isn’t it to meet yourself that I came, Páraic?” Father Folan was saying. “Isn’t it the likes of you that gives the people who care for you a special grace from God?” Muraed looked over towards Dada, to see if this piece of important information was news to him. If it was, Dada still had that same nervous look about him.

ITALY

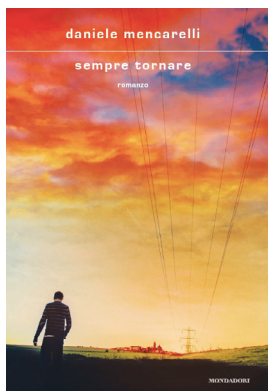
Daniele Mencarelli

Sempre tornare
Always Return

Mondadori, 2021

Language: Italian

ISBN: 9788804741848



BIOGRAPHY

Daniele Mencarelli, born in Rome in 1974, is a poet and novelist. His latest collection, published in 2019, is *Tempo Circolare* (collected poems 2019–1997). His first novel, *La casa degli sguardi* (winner of the Volponi prize, the Severino Cesari first work prize and the John Fante first work prize), was published by Mondadori in 2018. *Tutto chiede salvezza*, his second novel, was released in 2020 and won the Strega Giovani Award. *Sempre tornare* is the final part of an ideal autobiographical trilogy that began with *La casa degli sguardi*. He collaborates with newspapers and magazines, writing about culture and society.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

It is the summer of 1991. Daniele is 17 and this is his first vacation alone with friends. Two weeks away from home, to be enjoyed to the fullest among beaches, discos, alcohol and girls. But there is something he hasn't come to terms with: himself. A small inconvenience on the night of 15 August is enough for Daniele to decide to leave the group and continue the journey on foot, alone, from the Riviera Romagnola towards Rome.

He will have all sorts of encounters: people who are worn out by loneliness but still capable of leaps of humanity, others who look over an abyss of madness, people defeated by life, or

incurable bullies. And he will meet love, in Emma's blue eyes. But above all, Daniele will meet himself, in an intense inner dialogue. He unceasingly interprets and questions everything that happens to him, with the urgency to devour the world typical of a 17-year-old, craving to be able to understand everything – above all, himself.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

Despite being the last part of a trilogy, *Sempre tornare* by Daniele Mencarelli is a completely autonomous story. In a way, it is two different kinds of travel journal: one is through Italy; the other is an exploration of insight. Daniele, the hero, leaves the Adriatic Riviera and heads to Rome because he wants to be alone. Nevertheless, during his trip he meets a large number of people, experiencing many different sensations and landscapes. Mencarelli finds a perfect balance between the outer and inner worlds of the hero, with a very refined style that ranges from highly colloquial, even slangish, to a poetic perspective. And so the reader finds themselves identifying with a 17-year-old boy in search of himself and involved in an engaging travel through time (summer 1991), space (a lazy summerish Italy made of sun, sea and countryside) and a rich, wide range of all sorts of people and voices.



Sempre tornare

Daniele Mencarelli



Una Kadett gialla.

Di taxisti me ne sono capitati parecchi. Ce n'è uno che è una mia presenza fissa, un signore che parte dai Castelli per andare a lavorare a Roma. Non è per cattiveria, ma quando vedo la sua macchina in avvicinamento smetto di fare l'autostop, alcune volte mi levo proprio dalla strada. Lui però si ferma lo stesso. Per carità, è una persona per bene, simpatica, solo che ha un problema serio, e io non so davvero come dirglielo. Alle medie avevo una professoressa con lo stesso difetto. L'alito. A livelli che non dovrebbero esistere sulla faccia della terra.

«Devo arrivare a Casa del Diavolo.»

«Io arrivo là vicino.»

Il taxista fuma le stesse sigarette dei miei. Emmesse dure.

«Vado al Red Zone, la discoteca.»

«Ogni tanto ci porto qualcuno.»

«Sta andando lì?»

Magari mi faccio lasciare di fronte all'ingresso, non ho i soldi per entrare, però farei un arrivo in grande stile.

«No, ho una chiamata da una via che sta dall'altra parte della frazione, ti devi fare una bella passeggiata per arrivarci.»

«Io mio chiamo Daniele, lei?»

«Armando.»

Io non so se questo fatto del nome offerto e richiesto abbia veramente a che fare con la buona educazione. A pensarci, credo nasconda la paura che mi prende tutte le volte che monto su una macchina guidata da uno sconosciuto, per giunta di notte, per giunta lontano da casa, senza che nessuno sappia minimamente dove mi trovi. Perché un po' di paura c'è sempre.

Sapere il nome del mio benefattore di turno mi illude di conoscere, seppur di poco, la sua identità, e le sue intenzioni. Ma dentro di me c'è sempre una parte in allerta. Armando potrebbe fermare la macchina, tirare fuori dal portaoggetti del suo sportello un cacciavite e piantarmelo in gola, così, senza problemi, per poi sotterrarmi in mezzo a uno dei tanti boschi della zona.

«Lei, Armando, di dov'è?»

«Perugia.»

«È sposato?»

«Separato.»

Intanto, la Kadett passa accanto al cartello che riporta a lettere nere su sfondo bianco il mio punto d'arrivo: CASA DEL DIAVOLO.

«Ti lascio all'imbocco della prossima via.»

«Grazie.»

Scendo e la respirazione torna a essere regolare. Mi ero impaurito, mi succede spesso, basta tenere la mente a briglia sciolta e il risultato è assicurato.

Stupido che sono. E se anche avesse avuto brutte intenzioni mi sarei difeso, invece era uno per bene, come tutti quelli che mi sono capitati sino a oggi.

E poi fumava le Emmesse dure.

Non poteva essere cattivo.

Inseguo una cassa dritta, martellante.

Nell'aria c'è solo il battito del Red Zone, cerco di andare nella direzione della musica, ma non ha una provenienza precisa, anzi, si sposta attorno a me in continuazione. Il mio traguardo si trova in via Fratelli Cervi. Facile a dirsi.

Non vedo luci, nemmeno in lontananza, le case, i capannoni, sono sprofondata nel buio, come le strade. Questo posto sembra disabitato.

Soltanto i fari delle macchine illuminano quello che ho attorno, mi sfrecciano accanto spostando l'aria, come li vedo provo a chiedere un passaggio, ma è davvero troppo buio. Dalla valigia tiro fuori il maglione che preferisco, è di cotone, blu, l'aria inizia a essere fresca, arriva a sbuffi leggeri dal prato che ho di fianco.

Proprio lì, nell'erba, a non più di un paio di metri di distanza, vedo qualcosa. Come una luce. Più che paura mi gela il terrore. Guardo al meglio che posso. La luce riappare, poi un'altra vicina. Gli occhi lentamente mettono a fuoco, un tappeto si accende a perdita d'occhio, fino agli alberi lontani.

Il terrore diventa meraviglia, stupore, incanto.

Ne avevo solo sentito parlare, al massimo viste nei cartoni animati.

Un popolo di lucciole balla ai miei piedi.

Come stelle danzanti precipitate sulla terra.

Uno spettacolo che mi toglie le parole.

Luce nel buio.

La bellezza va vissuta, qualsiasi racconto, per quanto preciso, sapiente, non può dire la gioia di fronte a certe visioni, né la gratitudine che arriva a colmare gli occhi di lacrime.

Fari in lontananza. La luce artificiale nasconde quella microscopica della natura.

Scatto con il pollice, subito dopo accendo il sorriso.

Un pezzo techno rallenta.

Si ferma una Renault 5.

«Andate al Red Zone?»

«Ma che vieni a balla' co' 'a valigia?»

La macchinata esplode in una risata a più bocche. Il dialetto è il mio. Sono romani.

«Me potete da' un passaggio?»

Il ragazzo con cui sto parlando ha i capelli lunghi e gli occhi allucinati. Ha le pupille dilatate, quindi o cocaina o pasticche, ormai so riconoscere abbastanza bene le sostanze, a partire proprio dagli effetti che hanno sugli occhi. Dei passeggeri sul sedile posteriore vedo le tre teste, ma non c'è abbastanza luce per cogliere appieno i visi.

«E 'ndo te mettemo? Semo in cinque. Se vò te piamo 'a valigia.»

Altra risata stronza.

«Oppure aggrappate ar tettino.»

La Renault 5 riparte sgommando.

Li seguo per qualche decina di metri, poi torno a cercare le lucciole, mi ci vorrà del tempo per riabituarli gli occhi, per farli tornare alla loro dimensione.

Un motore viaggia ringhiando nell'aria, si avvicina, lo sento perfettamente, ma attorno a me non vedo comparire nulla, nessuna luce, da nessuna parte.

Il ringhio si trasforma in frenata.

Non capisco a che cosa.

Un boato.

Serva correre così.
Uno schianto spaventoso è esploso nell'aria.
Poi rumore di cristalli che cadono, plastica spaccata.
Mi ritrovo piegato sulle ginocchia.
È comparsa una luce, punta il cielo notturno.
Sarà almeno a cinquecento metri da me.
Inizio a correre in quella direzione, la valigia mi sbatte sulla gamba, arrivo a un incrocio, giro a destra, subito dopo imbocco una via a sinistra.
In lontananza delle luci confuse, il fiatone inizia a rallentarmi.
Quello che vedo mi inchioda i piedi all'asfalto.
Al centro della strada due macchine, distrutte. Pezzi sparsi ovunque. La luce che puntava verso l'alto è un faro.
Non arriva voce. Lamento.
Mi strappo un passo alla volta.
Si sono presi frontalmente. Della macchina che ho davanti riconosco lo sportellone posteriore, è una 205 Rallye. Del muso dell'altra non è rimasto nulla.
Sono a una ventina di metri.
Dietro di me sento fermarsi qualcuno.
Sportelli che si aprono.
Mi ritrovo a fianco due ragazzi.
Ci guardiamo.
Uno dei due, quello più grande, ci sfila accanto, prosegue verso l'incidente, noi gli andiamo dietro.

Le lamiere delle due macchine sembrano cauterizzate, bruciate.
Io dovrei fermarmi.
Non voglio vedere.
Ma non ci riesco.
Non può esistere.
Dio mio levami dagli occhi quello che vedo.
Il ragazzo della 205.
Il sangue deve stare nel corpo.
Un manichino senza grazia. Svuotato d'anima.
«Vojo torna' a casa.»
Una palazzina poco distante si accende, un uomo in canottiera e calzoncini, a fianco una vecchia in vestaglia.
«ABBIAMO CHIAMATO I CARABINIERI E L'AMBULANZA! MALEDETTI VENGONO A FARE I PAZZI!»
Il ragazzo che ho di fianco sembra preso da un conto matematico, da un'equazione difficilissima. Non si capacita.
«Vojo torna' a casa.»
Io non ero pronto.
A questa cosa sfigurata.
Non sono pronto.

Always Return

Daniele Mencarelli

Translated into English by Antony Shugaar

A yellow Opel Kadett.

I've taken rides from plenty of taxi drivers. There's one who's something of a regular presence, a gentleman who leaves the Castelli Romani to go to work in Rome. I'm not trying to be mean, but when I see his car coming, I stop hitchhiking; sometimes I actually walk away from the side of the road. But he still stops all the same. Oh, don't get me wrong, he's a perfectly nice person, likeable enough and all. But he has one serious problem, and I really don't know how to tell him. In middle school, I had a teacher who had the exact same issue. It was her breath. And I'm talking about levels of halitosis that truly shouldn't exist on the face of this earth.

"I'm heading to Casa del Diavolo."

"I'm going right near there."

The taxi driver smokes the same brand of cigarettes as my parents. MS, hard pack.

"I'm going to the Red Zone, the disco."

"Every so often, I take a passenger there."

"Are you going there now?"

Maybe I can get him to drop me off right at the front door. I might not have enough money to get in, but at least I'd arrive in grand style.

"No, I have a call from a street that's on the far side of that little village. You'll have a good long walk ahead of you from where I'll drop you off."

"My name is Daniele. How about you, sir?"

"I'm Armando."

I can't say whether this exchange of names — one offered and the other requested — really has anything to do with good manners. Come to think of it, I think it's a way of concealing the fear that washes over me every time I get into a car driven by a complete stranger, and to make it worse, at night, and worse yet, far from home, plus absolutely no one has the slightest idea of where I even am. Because there's always a bit of fear, at the very least.

Possessing the name of my latest benefactor at least gives me the illusion of knowing, at least to some small extent, their identity and their intentions. Nonetheless, deep inside there's always a part of me that's quivering in alarm. Armando could pull over, reach into the driver's side accessory pocket, extract a screwdriver, and plant it in my throat, just like that, without blinking an eye, and then bury me in any of the surrounding woods.

"So, tell me, Armando, where are you from?"

"Perugia."

"Are you married?"

"Divorced."

Meanwhile, the Kadett rolls past a sign that announces in black letters on a white background my destination: CASA DEL DIAVOLO.

"I'll drop you off at the start of the next street."

"Thanks."

I get out and my breathing slows down to a normal rate. I'd been frightened, which happens to me all the time. All I have to do is loosen the reins on my mind, and things are sure to turn out well.

What a fool I am. Even if he'd had the worst intentions, I'd have fought him off. In fact, though, he was a perfectly nice person, like everyone else I've taken rides from so far.

Plus, he smoked MS, hard pack.

How bad could he be?

I walk toward the sound of a pounding, four-on-the-floor beat.

The air is filled with the Red Zone beat, so I do my best to head in the general direction of the music, but it doesn't seem to be coming from anywhere specific. In fact the sound seems to shift around me incessantly. My destination is located on Via Fratelli Cervi. Easier said than done.

I see no lights, not even in the distance. The houses and the industrial sheds are all immersed in utter darkness, as are the roads. This place seems uninhabited.

Only the headlights of passing cars light up my surroundings; they zip by, with a whoosh of air. As I see them coming, I do my best to beseech a ride, but it's seriously too dark. I open my suitcase and pull out the sweater I like best: navy blue, cotton. The night is getting chilly, the coolth reaches me in faint gusts from the meadow alongside me.

Right there, in the grass, at no more than a few yards' distance, I glimpse something. It seems like a light. More than by fear, I'm frozen to the spot by terror. I squint my eyes, peering to see what's there. The light reappears, followed by another light nearby. My eyes slowly grow accustomed, and a carpet of light spreads out, as far as my eyes can see, all the way to the distant trees.

My terror turns into wonder, astonishment, and enchantment.

I'd only ever even heard of this, if seen strictly in the cartoons.

A populace of fireflies dances at my feet.

Like pirouetting stars that have fallen to earth.

A spectacle that leaves me speechless.

Light in the darkness.

Beauty must be experienced in real life. Any account of beauty, no matter how accurate, how skillfully woven, is insufficient to convey the joy one feels in the presence of certain visions, much less the gratitude that fills one's eyes with tears.

Headlights in the distance. Artificial light conceals the microscopic glow of nature.

I stick out my thumb, and a split-second later I switch on my smile. A techno beat slows to a halt.

A Renault 5 pulls up.

"Are you going to the Red Zone?"

"Wassup, son, goin' dancin' with your suitcase?"

The carful bursts into a loud laugh issuing from multiple mouths. Their dialect is the same as mine. These are Romans.

"Any chance of a ride, bro?"

The young man I'm talking to has long hair and haunted, staring eyes. His pupils are dilated, which means either cocaine or some other pills or tablets — by now I'm a dab hand at recognizing narcotics, starting with the distinctive effects they have on the eyes. I can see the three heads of the passengers in the back seat, but there's not enough light to get a good look at their faces.

"Yo, where would we even put you? There's five of us. But if you want, we can take your suitcase."

Another blare of assholish laughter.

"Or else you can ride on the roof. But you'd better hold on tight!" The Renault 5 takes off again, tires screeching.

I watch them peel out for fifty feet or so, and then I go back to looking for fireflies. It's going to take some time for my eyes to re-habituate to the darkness, to let them return to the fireflies' dimension.

An engine comes sailing through the night air, snarling its way on a hurtling trajectory, drawing closer, and though I can hear it clearly nothing appears around me, no light, neither here nor anywhere.

The snarl turns into the screech of brakes.

I can't figure out from where, though.

The roar of impact.

That's what you get for going so fast.

A terrifying crash has just detonated into the air.

Then the noise of glass falling, crunching plastic.

I find myself bent over on my knees.

A light has appeared, pointing straight up into the night sky.

It must be five hundred yards away.

I start running in that direction, the suitcase slamming against my leg. I reach an intersection and turn right; a short distance later, I turn down a road on the left.

In the distance, a tangle of lights. My gasping breath starts to slow me down.

What I see now nails my feet to the asphalt.

In the middle of the road are two cars, utterly destroyed. Pieces of them scattered in all directions. The light pointing straight up is a headlight.

Not a voice to be heard. Not a moan.

I tear free one step after another.

The two cars must have crashed head-on. Of the car right in front what I can recognize is the rear hatchback. It's a Peugeot 205 Rallye. There is nothing left of the other car's front.

The two wrecks are about twenty yards away.

Behind me, I can hear someone braking to a halt.

Car doors opening.

Now there are two young men standing beside me.

We exchange glances.

One of them, the elder of the two, walks past us and continues toward the wreck. We follow behind.

The twisted sheet metal of the two cars seems to have been scorched, cauterized.

I ought to stop.

I don't want to see it.

But I can't help it.

This can't be real.

Oh my God, cleanse my eyes of what I'm seeing right now.

The young man in the Peugeot 205.

Blood is supposed to stay inside your body.

A clumsy mannequin. Stripped of its soul.

"I wanna go home."

An apartment house not far away lights up, a man in boxer shorts and undershirt, beside him an old woman in a dressing gown.

"WE'VE CALLED THE CARABINIERI¹ AND AN AMBULANCE! DAMNED IDIOTS COME OUT HERE, DRIVING LIKE LUNATICS!"

The young man standing next to me seems to be struggling with some sort of mathematical reckoning, a terribly challenging equation. He can't make himself *see*.

"I wanna go home."

I wasn't ready for this.

For this disfigured... *thing*. I'm not ready.

¹ Italian police

LITHUANIA

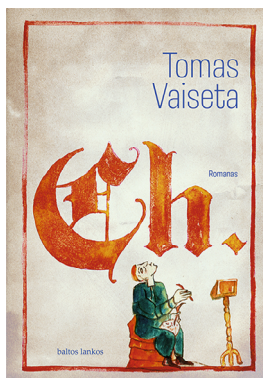
Tomas Vaiseta

Ch.
Ch.

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BIOGRAPHY

Tomas Vaiseta, born in 1984, is a writer, historian and associate professor at the Faculty of History of Vilnius University. His debut collection of short stories, *Paukščių miegas* (*The Sleep of Birds*, 2014), was included as one of the top five books for adults in the Book of the Year selection and the top 12 most creative books selected by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. His novel *Orfėjas, kelionė pirmyn ir atgal* (*Orpheus: A Journey There and Back*, 2016) also made it into the top five books for adults in the Book of the Year selection. His latest novel, *Ch.*, was awarded the Jurga Ivanauskaitė Literary Prize 2022 and was included in the list of the top 12 most creative books of 2021 in Lithuania. Vaiseta has also written two historical monographs: *Nuobodulio visuomenė* (*The Society of Boredom*, 2014) and *Vasamamis* (*Summerhouse*, 2018). He is a recipient of the Kazimieras Barėnas



Literary Prize and the Jurgis Kunčinas Literary Prize. In 2018, Vaiseta attended the International Literary Translation and Creative Writing Summer School in Norwich, United Kingdom, as a guest fiction author.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

In the words of stagehand Charles, the main character and narrator of his latest book, *Ch.* is a novel about the first real theatre, because in it the performance lasts until the end – until death. Such theatres are said to appear during the darkest years of tribulation to atone for the sins of mankind. Upon entering the stage of the novel, the actors re-enact the story of the torture of Saint Denis, the bishop of Paris, as it was depicted historically accurately in medieval performances: they are being burned,

whipped, fed to wild beasts. This story can be read as an elegy of a father mourning his murdered daughter; as an allegory of purgatory, abundant in references to the Bible, Carolingian culture and fiction; as an imposter prophet's warning about the end of European culture; or as an ode to cats who were sent to fight the Devil.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

According to the Lithuanian jury, the novel of ideas *Ch.* (suggested pronunciation 'ha') meets the European Union Prize for Literature's criteria perfectly: it is a masterful work of literature, faithful to the tradition of high modernism, yet at the same time it demonstrates the uniqueness of this young writer's prose as he contemplates the challenges faced by Western civilisation, creates a universal narrative world and dedicates special attention to the literary language. Vaiseta's *Ch.* pulls the reader into the intricate narrative delivered by a theatre worker, Charles. No one other than this 'little man' has been entrusted with the important task of taking care of bodies after the end of performances that last until death. Written with the ingenuity that is the signature of this cultural historian, this

multilayered novel is like an allegory of purgatory, which, alongside Charles and through his irony, and at times grotesque depiction, invites the reader to think about the culture of death and its meaning, about the sense of duty, about the purpose of art and the foundations of the value system of Western culture, and about the constant struggle between the divine and the demonic. The values pondered in the novel are relevant to every European, while the virtuously written text offers readers a challenge and an intellectual delight.



Ch.

Tomas Vaiseta



O kur nubloškė mane, Šarlij? Žinote, štai jums dar vienas skirtumas: praktinis skausmas įkalina žmogų viename taške, mylimai, iškamuotai Adelei tas taškas sutapo su juostančiu žemės lopinėliu, į kurį buvo įbestas nedidelis kryželis ir prie jo prikalta skardinė lentelė su mūsų dukrelės vardu, Viešpatie, ir gimimo bei mirties datomis, o abstraktus skausmas medžioja žmogų vaizduotės tyrilaukiuose, todėl man žūt būt reikėjo atrasti slaptavietę. Jokių intymių vietelių anapus mūsų namų aš neturėjau. Turėjau tik biblioteką. Tuomet dar turėjau. Namu grįždavau vien kelias valandas numigti, kitą laiką tūnodavau tenai, niekieno nekliudomas, lyg sirgčiau užkrečiama liga. Ar valgydavau? Ar prausdavausi? Neatsimenu. Buvau medžiojamas, buvau taikinys, kurį nuolat pakerta kulkos. Tačiau pamenu, kaip kartą grįžau namo po vidurnakčio, įkišau raktą į spyną ir jis nepasisuko, tarytum būtų įšalęs užrakte. Tada tyliai ir švelniai kaip katino atodūsis prasivėrė durys ir įsisupusi į kambario šilumą laukan žengė Adelė. Supraskite, trisdešimt dveji metai bibliotekoje, bet keturiasdešimt treji – su šia moterimi, tą akimirksnį vėstančia ir temstančia, kai laukujės durys užsidarė ir mus įtraukė šaltos nakties giedras dangus. Ir kaip ji, Adelė, neiškeikvojo savo švelnumo atsargų? Kaip jų galėjo būti likę po to, po dukrelės mirties? Žinoma, ką ji ištarė, buvo žiaurus jos praktinio skausmo padarinys, bet ištarė ji dar švelniau nei įprastai: arba visiems laikams grįžti namo, arba visiems laikams iš jų išeini. Koks jos balso aiškumas! Koks nakties aiškumas! Pro žvaigždžių kiaurymes, pro juodo dangaus kiaurasamtį ant mūsų galvų sijojosi

mirties nuoplavos, o jos nuodingi vaisiai liko blizgėti ten, aukštai, deja, nepasiekiami. Gali būti, kad per keturiasdešimt trejus metus mes pirmą kartą patyrėme tokią kraupią, bet, kaip sakoma, romantišką akimirką, lyg būtume ne skyręsi, o ką tik susipažinę. Ar Adelė neatleido man, kad nepadėjau jai pastatyti antkapio, ar ji suprato tai, ko aš bent tada, stypsodamas ant namų slenksčio, dar nebuvau įsisąmoninęs – kad savąjį antkapį pastačiau ir jame apsigyvenau? Kad biblioteka tapo ir slaptaviete, ir tuo nelemtu dukrelės paminklu?

Po to vaidinimo visi sumišę ir nuščiuvę skirstėsi po kambarius. Ponas Režisierius tradicinį maldos susirinkimą nukėlė į kitą dieną, sausai sumurmėdamas „rytoj“. Žinoma, aš turiu savų spėjimų dėl pono Režisieriaus sprendimo, bet kas iš to? Priežasčių galėję būti šimtai, o aš jums pateikčiau vos vieną iš jų, ir ta nebūtinai pati svariausia. Užtat atkuto katinai. Spingsėdami jonvabalių akutėmis jie tapinėjo skubriais žingsneliais, lyg tvarkytų neatidėliotinus reikalus reikaliukus, o pamatę žmogystą, tai yra vieną iš mūsų, tuoj pasišiaušdavo ir nuliuksėdavo tolyn. Jų piktas, bent mano akimis, džiaugsmas negalėjo negelti širdies. Tarytum iki tol su jais būtų elgtasi nederamai ir tik dabar jie pajutę tikrą katiniško gyvenimo skonį. Tvyrant šitam liūdnam trupę apėmusiam sukrėtimui. Kas galėjo pagalvoti? Ir kaip greitai pasiduodi bendrai nuotaikai! Rodos, kas man darbo? Atleiskite, kad šitaip stačiokiškai, na, bet iš tiesų – kuo aš dėtas? Visas tas sumanymas – grynčiausia pono Režisieriaus avantiūra, dėl kurios niekas kitas neturėtų jaustis atsakingas. Ir vis dėlto sutvarkęs sceną, nukurnėjau juodais koridoriais iki savo kambarėlio, mielosios Ch, prislėgtas ar kaltės, ar nepasitenkinimo. Paniuręs nusijuosiau diržą su įrankiais ir atsisečiau marškinių sagas, tuomet išgirdau kažką krebždant aplink duris.

Po galais, na, ir pasiuto tie katinai! (Leiskite prisipažinti: dabar truputį gėda, kad tada vos ne garsiai ėmiau keikti mielus pady-

kusius padarėlius, visai nekaltus dėl mūsų, žmonių, juokingų tragedijų, taip, sutinku, reikėtų sakyti – nejuokingų komedijų.) Kai suklibėjo durų rankena, supratau, kad čia ne katinai (o, ne jūs vieni esate girdėję apie katinus, gebančius atsidaryti duris, tačiau ne gamykloje, net ir šią katinų Valpurgijos naktį). Durys atsivėrė ir pamačiau stypsantį kaulėtą siluetą. Tamsa veržėsi taip įžūliai, kad ir prie jos pratusios akys negalėjo iškart atpažinti, kas ten stovi. Lyg kokia ragana būtų atėjusi tuoktis su velniu! Na, koks iš manęs, Šarlio, velnias? Vieni juokai, nors tada juokas neėmė. Siluetas žingtelėjo į kambarį ir – kaipgi, žinoma, – atpažinau ją, Julitą. Ji stovėjo išsitiesusi, įsitempusi, o paprastai į kuodą rišamos garbanos (išskyrus vieną kitą išdrykusių sruogą, beje, nepriartčiau spėjimui, kad ištraukdavo ją tyčia, – ne jos būdui buvo koketuoti, net nekaltai) laisvai krito ant pečių. Todėl jos ir neatpažinau. Na, ir dar ta, kaip čia pasakius, delikati aplinkybė, kurios, dovanokite, negaliu išvengti nepaminėjęs, kad ji stypsojo vienais naktiniais, ačiū Dievui, pusilgėmis rankovėmis, bet apnuogintais keliais ir šiek tiek šlaunimis (ir kaip neapgalvotai šiais laikais siuvami tokie subtilūs drabužėliai). „Prašau“, – ištarė ji, palikdama, matyt, man nuspręsti, kurį jos prašymą įvykdyti. „Prašau nebijoti“, – patikslino ji, nes tikslumą mėgo. O man patiko, kad Julita net į mane, Šarlių, kreipėsi mandagiai, daugiskaitos antruoju asmeniu, be to perdėto familiarumo, kuris apsėdęs mūsų pasaulį ir galbūt dėl to sukvailėjusį. Kaip tai susiję? Žinote, mandagumas nėra vien kreipiniai, jis lemia mąstymą, gyvenimo būdą ar trajektoriją, kuri mus gelbėja nuo horizontalios plokštumos. Na, matau, ilgai užtrukčiau aiškinti, o ir nesu tikras, kad pavyktų išdėstyti savo mintį. Prašau pamiršti. Julitos mandagumas nebuvo šios nakties pokštas. O tai, sutikite, dar nuostabiau, atsižvelgiant į jos darbą, varginamą įtampą, išprotėjusius skambintojus su reikalu ir be reikalo. Kas čia keista, kad jos amato žmonėms būdingas šiurkštumas, nepatiklumas ir neatlaidumas, kitaip ir neįmanoma, jų sunki, dygliuota ir šalta kaip tanko vikšrai kalba yra profesijos liga,

kita vertus, ar liga gali būti tai, kas padeda išgyventi? O staiga girdžiu: „Jūs, Šarli...“ Būčiau padaręs bet ką, garbės žodis, bet ką.

Tačiau šito nelaukiau! Julita ištiesė ranką ir kažką atkišo. Įsižiūrėjęs atpažinau plaukų kuokštą. Nepatikėjau, kol ji ištarė: „Jo ir mano plaukai.“ Jos plaukai, šitą suprantu, o kaip jai pavyko gauti jo, žinote, Igno, plaukų, man galva neišnešė. Pats tą, kaip čia pavadinus, Igno kūno palikimą sušlaviau ir sukroviau į maišą. Sunku ten buvo ką atskirti, o plaukų ir visai nemačiau. Paėmiau kuokštą į rankas – jos garbana, iš tiesų, viena akimi dėbtelėjau į Julitą, buvo galima įžiūrėti, kad kairėje pusėje, ties ausimi, jos juodų plaukų girliandos retesnės, o šalia – kiti plaukai, kur kas trumpesni, plonesni ir tamsoje beveik bespalviai. Jie galėjo būti Igno, nors iš kur galėjau žinoti? Julitos balsas nuskambėjo tvirtai: „Ar galėtumėte, Šarli, mūsų plaukus supinti kartu?“ „Supinti“ nėra tikslus žodis, Julita, toji precizikos mėgėja, galėjo rasti tinkamesnį žodį, bet nesiėmiau ginčytis, nes ginčytis reikėjo dėl rimtesnių klausimų. Malonėkite suprasti, tai buvo ne mano pareiga, o kažkas anapus jos, ir neketinu toliau leisti į kalbas apie tas, na, gerai, plaukų skulptūreles. Aš ne tik neprivalėjau, kaip prašė Julita, supinti Igno ir jos plaukų kartu, aš apskritai neprivalėjau nieko daryti! Tas avantiūriškas vaidinimas, tie pasiutę katinai, net Julita, šnaranti medvilniniais naktiniais, niekas negalėjo man, Šarliui, primesti prievolės ką nors daryti su plaukų kuokštais, gulinčiais ant mano delno kaip nešvariai uždirbti nedidelės vertės banknotai. Aš nesutikdamas papurčiau galvą, ir Julita atatupsta atsitraukė per keletą žingsnių durų link. Vyliausi, kad tuoj išeis. Bet ne. Ji vos sulenkė kojas per kelius, kilstelėjo naktinių kraštą ir ėmė lėtai siūbuoti dubenį. Julita šoko, teisingiau būtų sakyti, negrabiai judėjo pagal kadaise išmoktas taisykles, ji akivaizdžiai stengėsi būti tiksli, deja, tokiam šokiui reikėjo kitokio tikslumo, įgimto, neapskaičiuojamo. Padėjau plaukų kuokštą ant stalo, nusivilkau marškinius ir įsmukau į lovą po antklode. Nusigręžęs nuo Julitos į sieną, girdėjau, kaip medvilnė glosto jos kaulėtą tarsi

girgždančios sūpynės judantį kūną, o gilus, nervingas kvėpavimas taikosi su vienkartinio pralaimėjimu. Už durų, koridoriaus gerklėje, atbangavo šaižus katinų kniaukimas. Stojo tylą. Julita atsėlino prie mano sulankstomos sofos, lengvai kaip knygos puslapį atvertė antklodę ir atsigulusi prigludo iš nugaros. Virpėjo. Atsargiai apkabino ranka, ir beregint abu nusiraminome sapne.

Ch.

Tomas Vaiseta

Translated into English by Laima Vince,
edited by Saulina Kochanskaite

And where was I, Charlie, cast away. You know, here's one more difference for you: practical pain imprisons a person in one point. For my beloved suffering Adele, that point became rooted in that plot of blackened ground that was our daughter's grave. That plot of land where there is a little cross stuck into the ground and a tin board nailed to it with our daughter's name. Lord, her name, and also the dates of her birth and her death. Oh, but abstract pain haunts a man in his wilderness of imagination. That is why I desperately needed to find a place to hide. I didn't have any intimate place apart from our house. I only had the library. Then, I still had the library. I only returned home for a few hours to sleep. All the rest of the time I lurked in the library, not bothered by anyone, as though I were carrying a highly infectious disease. Did I eat? Did I bathe? I don't remember. I was hunted, I was a target that was continually riddled with bullets. Although, I do remember that one time I returned home after midnight, stuck my key into the lock, and it did not open, as though it had frozen to the lock. Then, quietly, and gentle as a cat's breath, the door opened, and Adele stepped outside, wrapped in the warmth of the house. Please, try to understand: I spent thirty-two years in the library, but I've lived forty-three years with this woman, who in that very moment was growing colder and darker, when finally the outer doors shut and we were pulled in by the cold, clear sky of the night. How did she, Adele, not use up all the gentleness she had in her? How could anything of that gentle nature be left after our daughter's death? Of course, the words she uttered that night were the result of her terrible practical suffering. But she uttered them more gently than she ever had before. She said

to me: Either come home for all times or leave home for all times. What a clarity of the voice! What a clarity of the night! Ashes of death were being sifted onto our heads through the colander of the black sky, through the tiny cracks in-between the stars; and its poisonous fruit remained shining up above, right there, up high, where unfortunately no one could reach it. It could be that after forty-three years together for the first time we experienced such a horrific, but, at the same time, as they say, romantic, moment together. It was as though we were not breaking up but meeting each other for the very first time. Did Adele not forgive me for not helping her put up our daughter's gravestone? Did she understand what I, shifting my weight from leg to leg, standing on the threshold of our home, did not yet comprehend – that I had built my own grave and that I was living in it? That the library had become my hiding place, as well as a damned gravestone of my daughter?

After that performance, everyone, confused and hushed, quickly retreated to their respective rooms. Mr. Director postponed the traditional prayer circle to another day, dryly muttering, “Tomorrow.” Of course, I have my own guesses about Mr. Director's decision, but what of it? There could have been hundreds of excuses, and I would be able to present just one to you, and not necessarily the most important one. But the cats came back to life. With their little eyes lit up like fireflies, they scattered around on their padded feet, as though they were taking care of all sorts of urgent cat business, but when they saw a human, that is one of us, they arched their backs and dashed away. Even though their joy seemed malevolent, I couldn't help but feel heartbroken for them. It was as though they hadn't been treated right up until now and they finally tasted the life of a real cat. In this sad shock that engulfed the troupe. Who would have thought? How quickly one caves into the general mood! But what difference was it to me? Excuse me for being so blunt, well, but really, how is this my fault? That entire idea was the venture of Mr. Director. Nobody other than him ought to feel responsible for

it. Still, after I'd cleaned up the stage, I scurried down the dark corridors to my little room, my dear Ch, burdened with whether guilt or dissatisfaction. Glum, I took off my tool belt and unbuttoned my shirt. That's when I heard something scratching and scraping around my door.

For God's sake, those cats had gone mad! (Allow me to admit, I am a little embarrassed of how I almost cursed those naughty, sweet furballs out loud that night; they were not at all responsible for our ridiculous human tragedies, or rather – yes, I agree – our boring human comedies) When my doorknob rattled, I knew it was not the cats. (Oh, not only you have heard of those cats who learn how to turn doorknobs, but not in this factory, not even in this Walpurgis night of cats) The door swung open, and I saw before me a bony silhouette. The darkness invaded with such impertinence that even with my well-practiced eyes I could not make out who it was standing before me. It was as though some witch had come to be married off to the devil! Well, what sort of a devil am I? It was all a joke, but I was in no mood to laugh then. The silhouette stepped inside the room – and of course, of course – I recognized her. It was Julita. She stood tall, strained, and her curly hair, which was normally tied up in a knot on the top of her head, fell onto her shoulders (her hair was always tied up, except for a few curly strands that always came loose, and, by the way, I would disagree with a guess that she did this on purpose – it was not her manner to be coquettish, even if innocently). That was why I did not recognize her. Well, and there was also, how shall we say, the delicate circumstances, which, pardon me, I'm obliged to chronicle. She stood upright before me only in her nightgown. Thank God her sleeves were long, but her knees and some of her thighs were exposed. (Oh, how thoughtlessly those subtle articles of clothing are sewn these days) “Please,” she said, leaving it probably up to me to decide which of her requests I'd honor. “Please don't be afraid,” she said more accurately because she liked to be accurate. And I liked that Julita addressed even me, Charlie,

politely, by using the formal pronoun, with none of that exaggerated familiarity which possesses our world and makes it dim-witted. How is this related? You see, being polite is not only about choosing to address one by the formal pronoun, it also influences one's thinking, one's lifestyle, one's trajectory, which saves us from horizontal flatness. Yes, I see, it would take a long time for me to explain, and I am not at all certain that I would possibly manage to enunciate my thought. Please forget it. Julita's good manners were not just a trick of this night. And that, you have to agree, was even more remarkable when one considered her work, its tiring tension, and all the mad people who would call her both for a reason, and for no reason at all. It's no surprise that people working in her field tend to be rough, untrusting, and slow to forgive; they can't be any other way, not with their language – heavy, thorny, and cold as a tank's caterpillars – an occupational disease. Then again, can something that allows one to survive be a disease? And then suddenly I heard her say: "You, Charlie." I swear, I would have done anything, and I mean anything.

But this I did not expect! Julita shoved out her hand and there was something in it. I gazed at what she was showing me and discerned that it was a lock of hair. I could not believe it until she said, "That is his hair, and my hair." I understood that it was her hair, but how had she gotten his, you know, Ignas's hair, I had no idea. I cleaned up his remains myself after the play and had shoved it into the bag. It was hard to see what was what, and I especially did not take note of his hair. I took the locks out of her hands: her curl, I glanced at Julita with one eye, and, really, you could see that on the left side of her head, above her ear, her black curls were less dense. Beside her curl now lying in my palm, the rest of the hair was not hers, it was much shorter, thinner and seemed almost colorless in the dark. It could have been Ignas's hair, but how could I tell. Julita said in a firm voice: "Could you, Charlie, braid our hair together?" Braid is not a very accurate verb. Julita, who so favored precision in lan-

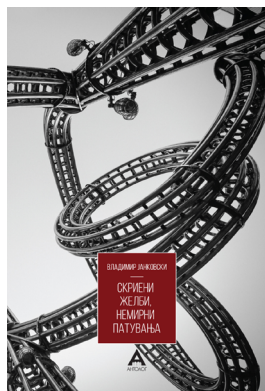
guage, could have found a better suited word. But I did not argue with her. That's because one only argued over more serious matters. Please try to understand. That was not my responsibility, but something beyond it, and I don't intend to get any more into talking about those, well, ahem, those hair sculptures. Not only did I not have to, as Julita asked, braid Ignas's and her hair together, I had no obligation to do anything at all! That venturesome performance, those raving cats, even Julita in her rustling cotton nightdress, nobody could push me, Charlie, to do something with those locks of hair lying on my palm, as though they were ill-gotten money. I shook my head, no, and Julita took a few steps backwards towards the door. I hoped that she would soon leave. But no. She bent her knees a little, yanked up the edge of her nightdress, and began to slowly gyrate her hips. Julita danced, although it would be more accurate to say that she clumsily moved according to some rules she'd once learned. She obviously tried to be precise in her dance, only, that sort of a dance required a different sort of precision, an inborn, incalculable precision. I placed the lock of hair on my desk, pulled off my shirt and sunk into my bed under the blanket. I turned my back away from Julita and listened how the cotton of her nightdress rustled against her bony, gyrating like a squeaking swing body, how her deep, nervous breathing reconciled with a one-time defeat. Beyond the door, a sharp mewing of the cats rippled from the throat of the corridor. Suddenly, everything went quiet. Julita crept up to my sofa bed. In a single light movement, as though she were turning the page of a book, she pulled up the blanket and lay down beside me, pressing her body against my back. Trembling. She hugged me carefully with one arm and, in the blink of an eye, we both found comfort in a dream.

NORTH MACEDONIA



Vladimir Jankovski
Скриени желби,
немирни патувања
Hidden Desires, Restless Travels

Антолог/Antolog, 2020
Language: Macedonian
ISBN: 9786082434179



BIOGRAPHY

Vladimir Jankovski, born in 1977, graduated in general and comparative literature from the 'Blaze Koneski' Faculty of Philology in Skopje. He worked as an editor in several publishing houses, and has published three novels: *Hidden Desires, Restless Travels* (2020), *Invisible Loves* (2015) and *Eternal Present Time* (2010). He received the Novel of the Year award for *Hidden Desires, Restless Travels*, and for *Invisible Loves* he was given the Racinovo Priznanie award for the best prose book. These two novels were the North Macedonian representatives for the international Balkanika award. He is active in the field of literary translation. For his translation of the novella *The Penelopiad*, by Margaret Atwood, he was awarded the Zlatno pero award by

the Association of Literary Translators of North Macedonia.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Hidden Desires, Restless Travels is a mosaic novel in which the stories of 50 people from different geographical meridians intersect with the stories of the four characters based in Skopje, North Macedonia. The book is a mixture of interwoven, detailed stories with a specific atmosphere. This is a novel about the interaction between the personal and the external, about the way the atmosphere and situations shape our inner landscapes, about the need to tell stories and find the glow and the lie in them. The combination of an unbiased camera view and personally coloured storytelling creates an unusual tone, which causes the reader to be left in front of the open door of interpretation. Thematically, the book deals with some of the dominant themes in modern society: the relationship between the real and the virtual; the question of professional success and success in the art world; and the relationship between external achievement and the search for oneself that has one form on the outside and another on the inside.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

The novel *Hidden Desires, Restless Travels* by Vladimir Jankovski is one of the best Macedonian and European novels of the last decade. With its mosaic structure, which combines the possibilities of short prose and extensive storytelling, this novel contains abundant innovative storytelling strategies through which it sinks into the most hidden intimacy of the characters: their hidden desires. Moving through this great novel we have the feeling that we are travelling all over our planet. One gets the feeling that something most elusive is captured – the simultaneity and parallel flow of the stories and human destinies, as all the stories run parallel to each other (like human lives). This novel received the prestigious Novel of the Year award for 2020 (awarded by the newspaper *Utrinski vesnik*). The commission's explanation states that 'This novel is an impressive work, an original innovation in Macedonian literature. With an extremely interesting collage structure, based on life persuasiveness and multifacetedness, this prose pulsates with a new rethinking of human relations, perceiving the world as a single network of concepts and destinies that develop in perspectives and in mutual correlation.' This is why we are deeply convinced that this work by Jankovski deserves the attention of an international readership thanks to the European Union Prize for Literature.

Скриени желби, немирни патувања

Владимир Јанковски



Бистра и Мартин, 1

Мартин ги подзатвора очите за уште посилно да го почувствува мирисот на жената што стои во лифтот пред него.

Лифтот треба да одработи уште четири ката.

Силно го вдишува мирисот што телото го создава.

Во следниот момент вратата на лифтот се отвора, жената динамично зачекорува надвор.

Таа засекогаш ќе исчезне во градот, претворена во сеќавање за едно можно вкрстување.

Мартин никогаш нема да дознае како се вика, која е нејзината професија, какви се нејзините опсесии.

Таа се вика Анастасија Димеска, 43-годишна фармацевтка. Не ја сака премногу својата работа. Помлада сестра во семејство на лекари. Како тинејџерка таинствено била опседната со најодвратните деца од населбата. Три години живее со Алекс, агент за недвижности и фанатик за италијански фудбал. Анастасија ништо не сака на фанатичен начин. Себеси се смета за некоја што умее добро да го одреди обемот на нештата. Тоа е точно. Често во мислите одговара на замислени интервјуа. Жали за: тоа што не може да живее неколку различни животи истовремено. Желба: наутро да го избира својот живот како

што луѓето ја избираат облеката што ќе ја носат. Кога е пред огледало: ужива во лицето што ја гледа.

Павел, 1

Павел седи на металните седишта и на екранот ги набљудува имињата на градовите. На седиштето спроти него една Азијка втренчено, речиси без никаква дистанца меѓу очите и екранот, скроча по таблетот. До неа, нејзината пријателка или само сопатничка, внимателно ги набљудува лицата на луѓето што од безбедносната контрола се пробиваат до чекалицата. Сосредоточена е на нивните лица, движења, ги набљудува како во нив да ќе најде одговор на прашање што одамна си го поставила.

Изобилие на мигот. Така Павел би можел да ја опише оваа ситуација во која мноштво луѓе поминуваат низ топлото грло на аеродромот.

Павел продолжува немарно да разгледува, тој не е некој чиј поглед долго време може да се задржи на едно место. Ги набљудувал луѓето што седат и најголемиот број од нив втренчено гледаат во своите телефони приклучени на најпопуларната социјална мрежа. Зјапаат во баналноста на туѓите животи.

Аеродромот е мелница на илјадници човекови егзистенции, кои во следниве неколку часа ќе се доближат, ќе поминат низ заедничката цедилка, а потоа процедени од другата страна ќе се распрснат насекаде. Ќе биде вистинско чудо доколку некои од тие приказни, допрени со посредство на ова неместо со стандардизирани елементи, повторно се вкрстат. Тоа неврстување за Павел отсекогаш било ослободувачко.

Одеднаш, девојката што седеше до таблет-девојката станува, изодува бавен круг околу чекалицата, активност типична за ваквите ситуации, и застанува пред него. Тоа е првата нетипичност досега.

– Извинете, дали може да ве прашам нешто – изговара на добро извезбан англиски јазик.

– Да, секако – неговиот англиски е за нијанса полежерен.

– Можете ли да ми кажете која е вашата приказна?

– Молам?

– Вашата приказна. Во неколку реченици. Не повеќе од десет.

Погледот на Павел кажува дека му е потребно дополнително објаснување. Непознатата го разбира значењето на тој поглед. Изгледа како личност добро тренирана за да ги разбира потребите на другите луѓе. Затоа од внатрешниот џеб на палтото вади мобилен што ќе послужи како снимач на звук. Секое нејзино движење е во хармонија со соопштението што следува.

– Најчесто луѓето ме прашуваат да им дадам објаснување. Им кажувам дека секогаш кога имам можност за тоа, одам на патување надвор од мојата татковина, родена сум во Шведска. На тие патувања снимам случајно избрани луѓе. Секако, ако се согласат со тоа. Ги снимам како рас- кажуваат некоја своја приказна. За нив, за некој близок, за нешто што ги интригира. Претходно, само треба да ги соопштат името, презимето и градот од кој доаѓаат, некои ги прашувам и за годините... но тоа не е задолжително. Тоа правам – ги собирам нивните приказни за самите себеси. Ви пречи ли ако и вие ми ја кажете? Ќе ви пречи ли ако ве снимам?

Ја гледа азиската Швеѓанка.

Сакај го мигот, биди добар кон него, препушти му се без да очекуваш ништо за возврат.

– Не, ама имам еден услов...

– Секако!

– Ќе го направам тоа што го барате од мене, ама на мојот јазик, на македонски јазик. Јас сум Павел Фирфов од Скопје,

Македонија. Една земја во Европа, поточно во Југоисточна Европа, не знам дали некогаш сте слушнале или биле...

– Да. Сакам географија. Македонија – Охридско Езеро...

– Да, така...

Тогаш гласот од звучниците го најавува качувањето на авионот за Истанбул, летот на Павел.

– И вие одите за Истанбул?

– Не, Рим.

– Значи, имам малку повеќе од две минути за да ви го раскажам она што го барате од мене?

Девојката го подава мобилниот кон Павел.

Давид, 1

Давид лежи на креветот во својата соба и го набљудува плафонот на кој мајка му уште пред тој да се роди насликала небо кон кое полетуваат девојки облечени во широки фустани, а наместо раце имаат перки од риби. Со години го гледа овој плафон без да му стане досаден или да добие желба да го пребојадиса.

До него на портокаловиот кревет е поставен инструментот. Левата рака благо го допира лакираното тело.

Има 22 години и утре е еден од најважните денови во неговиот живот – концертот кој ќе значи што понатаму ќе се случува со него и со неговиот инструмент.

Бистра и Мартин, 2

На улицата градот нервозно ги камшикува лицата на своите жители. Го прави тоа со звуците што ги произведува, со глетките што ги создава, со воздухот што луѓето се принудени да го дишат.

Мартин застанува пред деловниот центар примајќи ги жестоките удари. Добро ги познава и, уште повеќе, ги сака. Во последно време тој и може да му биде издржлив единствено на тој начин – преку неговата суровост.

Иако во овој момент трајна врз лицето на Мартин е само трагата од мирисот на жената во лифтот.

Уршка Ловренц од Ново Место, Словенија; биографија во една реченица, во второ лице

Ти си онаа што мисли дека секој човек во себе носи по еден мал чудак, а животот се претвора во тага кога дозволуваме тој чудак во нас пречесто да спие.

Бистра и Мартин, 3

Бистра го праќа прегледот во ексел што го работеше цело утро, па погледнува кон големиот канцелариски прозорец.

Нокниот дожд во соработка со правот на стаклото исцртал фигура: жена со пет глави.

Станува од столот, канцеларијата е празна, колегите се на пауза. Го залепува лицето врз студеното стакло. Нејзината е шестата глава. Или таа станува жена со шест глави.

Градот долу е тивок и каприциозен, разгален љубовник без јасна претстава како сака да ја заврши нокта.

Бистра со показалецот исцртува една реченица врз студеното тело на стаклото.

Никој никогаш нема да ја прочита оваа реченица.

Тоа не ѝ пречи – таа не е некоја што сака да остава траги, да биде запаметена, спомнувана.

Hidden Desires, Restless Travels

Vladimir Jankovski

Translated into English by Christina Kramer

Bistra and Martin, 1

Martin half closes his eyes to catch the scent of the woman standing in front of him in the elevator more intensely.

The elevator has another four floors to descend.

He breathes in deeply the scent emanating from her body.

The next moment the elevator door opens, the woman steps out briskly.

She will disappear into the city forever, turned into a memory of a possible intersection.

Martin will never know her name, her profession, or her obsessions.

Her name is Anastasija Dimeska, a 43-year-old pharmacist. She doesn't much like her work. A younger sister in a family of doctors. As a teenager she was secretly obsessed with the most repulsive children in their neighborhood. She's been living for three years with Alex, a real-estate agent and an Italian football fanatic. Anastasija doesn't like anything in a fanatical way. She thinks of herself as someone who knows how to give the right weight to things. The true one. In her imagination she answers questions to made-up interviews. She is sad about: the fact that she can't live various lives simultaneously. Her desire: to choose a life in the morning the way people choose what clothes to wear. When she's in front of a mirror: she takes pleasure in the face looking back at her.

Pavel, 1

Pavel sits on one of the metal chairs and studies the names of the cities on the screen. In the chair opposite him an Asian woman is scrolling on her tablet, staring with almost no distance between her eyes and the screen. Next to her, her friend, or merely a traveling companion, is attentively studying the faces of the people who come into the waiting area from airport security. She is focused on their faces, their movements; she studies them as if she'll find in them an answer to a question she asked a long time ago.

An abundance of the moment. That is how Pavel would describe this situation where so many people are funneling through the warm gorge of the airport.

Pavel continues to look around absently, he's not someone whose gaze can be held for long in one place. He studies the people sitting there and the majority of them stare fixedly at their telephones logged on to the most popular social media. They stare at the banality of other people's lives.

The airport is a mill of thousands of people's lives, which, over the course of the next several hours, will draw closer, will pass through a collective sieve, and then, once sifted to the other side, will disperse in all directions. It would be a true miracle if some of those stories, unfolding through the mediation of this non-place with its standardized features, were to intersect again. For Pavel, this non-intersection has always been liberating.

Suddenly, the girl sitting next to tablet-girl stands up, makes a slow circle around the waiting area, an activity typical for this situation, and stops in front of him. That is the first atypical thing thus far.

"Excuse me, may I ask you something," she says in well-rehearsed English.

"Yeah, sure," his English more casual in tone.

"Can you tell me your story?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your story. In several sentences. Not more than ten."

The look on Pavel's face says that he needs more of an explanation. The unknown woman understands the meaning of that look. She seems like a person quite well rehearsed in understanding the needs of other people. So from an inside coat pocket, she takes out a cell phone which will serve as an audio recorder. Each of her movements is in harmony with the information that follows.

"People usually ask me to give them an explanation. I tell them that whenever I can, I take a trip outside of my native country, I was born in Sweden. On these trips I record randomly selected people. That is, of course, if they agree. I record them telling one of their stories. About themselves, about someone close to them, about something that intrigues them. First, they just provide their first and last names, and the city they come from, I ask some of them their age... but that isn't necessary. That's what I do – I collect their stories about themselves. Would it bother you if you told me yours? Would it bother you if I record you?"

He looks at the Asian Swede.

Love the moment, be good to it, indulge in it, and expect nothing in return.

"No, it wouldn't, but on one condition..."

"Of course!"

"I'll do what you're asking, but in my language, in Macedonian. I am Pavel Firfov from Skopje, Macedonia. A country in Europe, or more precisely in Southeastern Europe, I don't know if you've ever heard of it or been..."

"Yes. I love geography. Macedonia – Lake Ohrid..."

"Yes, that's right..."

The voice over the loudspeakers announces the boarding of the flight to Istanbul, Pavel's flight.

"Are you also going to Istanbul?"

"No, Rome."

"So that means I have less than two minutes to tell you what you're asking?"

The girl moves the cell phone towards Pavel.

David, 1

David is lying on the bed in his room observing the ceiling on which, before he was born, his mother painted a sky with girls in wide dresses flying towards it, but instead of arms they have fish fins. He has been looking at this ceiling for years without it becoming boring or wishing to repaint it.

Beside him, there's an instrument lying on the orange bed. His left hand is gently touching its varnished body.

He is twenty-two years old and tomorrow is one of the most important days of his life; the concert which will determine what will happen to him and to his instrument.

Bistra and Martin, 2

On the street the city angrily lashes the faces of its residents. It does this with the sounds it produces, the views it creates, the air the people are forced to breathe.

Martin stops in front of the business center taking the city's harsh blows. He's well acquainted with them, and what's more, he likes them. Lately, this is the only way he can endure the city – through its cruelty.

At this moment, however, what is enduring on Martin's face is the trace scent of the woman in the elevator.

Urška Lovrenc from Novo Mesto, Slovenia: biography in one sentence, in the second person

You're the one who thinks that we each carry inside ourselves a little weirdo, and life turns to grief when we allow that weirdo inside us to sleep too often.

Bistra and Martin, 3

Bistra sends the overview in an Excel file which she worked on all morning and looks at the large office window.

The night rain, in collaboration with the dust on the glass, has drawn an image: a woman with five heads.

She gets up from her chair, the office is empty; her colleagues are on break. She glues her head to the cold glass. Hers is the sixth head. Or she has become a woman with six heads.

The city below is quiet and capricious, a spoiled lover with no clear idea how he wants the night to end.

With her index finger, Bistra traces a sentence on the cold body of the glass.

No one will ever read this sentence.

That doesn't bother her, she isn't someone who wants to leave traces, to be remembered, to be thought about.

NORWAY

Kjersti Anfinnsen

Øyeblikk for evigheten

Moments for Eternity

Kolon forlag, 2021

Language: Norwegian

ISBN: 9788205559394



BIOGRAPHY

Kjersti Anfinnsen born in 1975, lives in Oslo, where she works as a dentist. She studied creative writing at the Tromsø Academy of Contemporary Art and at the Writing Academy in Bergen. In 2012, she made her debut with the novel *Det var grønt* (*It Was Green*). Her follow-up novel *De siste kjærtegn* (*The Last Signs of Love*) was published in 2019, and has been translated into Danish and Russian. Anfinnsen has received several awards and author grants. Published in 2021, her third novel *Øyeblikk for evigheten* (*Moments for Eternity*) is an independent sequel to *The Last Signs of Love*.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Birgitte Solheim is a cardiologist who has turned 90 years old – so old that most of her friends are dead. Lonely and frail, she spends most of her time in her apartment in Paris. Behind her she has a long career in a male-dominated environment, and she never prioritised having a family of her own. Now she is trying to reconcile with life, while observing people and the world. With wisdom, experience, drive and humour, she does not give up her dream of love. *Moments for Eternity* is a

tender, bitter and surprisingly funny novel about loneliness, love and death. Who are you when you're old? Are you just a representative of a certain age?

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

90-year-old Birgitte has found love, but love has not become less complicated over the years. Even if the body decays, emotions are as strong as ever. As the outside world becomes increasingly distant, Birgitte looks back on her life. She reflects on love, loss, grief, loneliness and death. With wisdom, humour and laughter, this book is a unique tribute to life. This is a reflected, gripping, brave and sorrowful novel about health, ageing love and life. Over the course of 109 pages, we get to know this intelligent and brave cardiologist, who is now an old woman. The nuances in her sentences are preserved, right up to the last full stop. This is a text you let sink in and reflect upon. The novel is painful, yet wonderful. The author creates an emotional and mental bond between generations, and lets us reflect on who we are throughout life. Marvellous!

Øyeblikk for evigheten

Kjersti Anfinnsen



GRAND HOTEL

Vi klamrer oss til hver vår stol slik vi klamrer oss til selve livet. Feilaktig har jeg takket ja til en invitasjon fra Rikshospitalet i Oslo for å motta en utmerkelse. Jeg skylder litt på Javiér, som overtalte meg på sitt sjarmerende vis. Han mente jeg fortjente oppmerksomheten. Våre fabuleringer fikk oss til å glemme hvor skrøpelige vi er, så vi reiste slik vi lovet hverandre, og ble deretter overrasket over at alderen har fått slik tak på oss.

Nå våger vi ikke å forlate hotellrommet. Kan hende finner vi ikke tilbake. Det er livstruende glatt utenfor. Dessuten er det kaldt. Så vi sitter i hver vår stol med dyne og ser ut av hvert vårt vindu mens vi venter på å bli hentet. Skjønt, Javiér har sovnet, og jeg ser nærmest ingenting.

ARVEN

Min søster sendte meg de fineste plaggene sine, strøket og brettet ned i en av postens pappesker. Hun brukte det siste året på å rydde, sortere og lagre, men aldri kaste. Elisabeth kastet ingenting. Jeg ser henne for meg der hun romsterer i skap og skuffer. Hektisk i bevegelsene, som om hun har det travelt.

Fremdeles er hun plagsom.

Men det er vel meg det er noe galt med, jeg mener: Hun er død, og jeg er irritert.

Øverst i forsendelsen ligger kåpen. Jeg løfter den opp etter kragen og trekker inn lukten av min søster. Ja, det er min eneste lillesøster.

«Slik lukter du,» sier jeg.

«Chanel og karbonadesmørbrød,» sier hun.

Jeg tar på meg kåpen. Ruvende henger den rundt meg, jeg blir svimmel, og alt omkring meg forsvinner et lite øyeblikk.

NEDERLAG

Michel M er syk. Det er visst noe som går. Jeg lager middag selv. For å lese oppskriften trenger jeg lupen med størst forstørrelse og lys. Vanligvis ligger den i midtskuffen på skatollet i stuen. Nå er den vekk. Jeg husker ikke når jeg brukte den sist. Sikkert i går. Det er nær sagt livsnødvendig å legge ting på faste plasser. Glemselen er som et hardt slag mot ansiktet, store utsnitt av hukommelsen har rast ut, og man husker ikke annet enn at man har blitt fryktelig gammel. Jeg kan ha glemt hele somre, og sikkert noen av de andre årstidene. En lang høst, en kort vår, hva vet vel jeg lenger annet enn at tiden oppløses og forsvinner. En årstid blir borte på et øyeblikk. Særlig har somrene en lei tendens til å fordufte.

Jeg bestemmer meg for å lete i et kvarter. Ikke lenger. Da blir jeg sur og sliten. Mens man leter, kommer man i fare for å rydde, minner jeg meg selv på.

«Det må jeg ikke gjøre,» sier jeg høyt.

Dersom jeg rydder, blir det heller mer rot, knuste glass og håpløse røkeringer, og jeg finner ingenting siden. Det er bortkastet.

Etter en rolig leteaksjon bestiller jeg mat levert på døren.

Brioche og crème au chocolat.

FLYT

Jeg har aldri riktig vært i vinden. Da jeg var barn, var ikke barn viktige. Da jeg studerte og arbeidet, var det en klar fordel å være mann. Og nå, når jeg er virkelig gammel, skal man visst være ung i denne verden.

MODELLEN

Jeg setter meg ned overfor Javiér ved tegnebordet og spør om han er sulten. Han reagerer ikke, fortsetter rolig å file på en trebit han holder mellom hendene.

«Hva tenker du om vinduer?» sier han.

«De er nødvendige,» sier jeg. «Hva liker du med vinduer?»

«Lyset som siver inn gjennom dem,» sier han. «Måten strålene du- ses ut og kysser veggene på.»

«Jeg synes de tar seg best ut når de er buet,» sier jeg.

Så snur han modellen og plukker ut kirkens vinduer på den ene siden.

«Er det egentlig så viktig?» sier jeg.

Han klør seg på haken. En sur eim siver mot meg. Jeg forsøker å komme på når han dusjet sist. Jeg husker ikke.

Moments for Eternity

Kjersti Anfinnsen

Translated into English by Kari Dickson

GRAND HOTEL

We cling to our chairs in much the same way that we cling on to life. I, rather stupidly, have accepted an invitation from Oslo University Hospital to receive an award. I blame Javiér in part, he was so charmingly persuasive. He felt I deserved the attention. In our enthusiasm, we forgot how decrepit we are, and off we went, as we promised each other we would, only to discover, to our surprise, that age has a firm hold on us.

And now we don't dare leave the hotel room. We might not find our way back. It's fatally slippery outside. And very cold. So we stay lodged in our chairs, wrapped in a duvet, and look out of the window while we wait to be collected. Well, that's to say, Javiér has fallen asleep and I see practically nothing.

INHERITANCE

My sister has sent me her best pieces of clothing, neatly ironed and folded in a post office box. She spent the last year of her life tidying, sorting and storing, but didn't throw anything away. Elisabeth never binned anything. I can just picture her rummaging through her cupboards and drawers. Bustling movements, as though she were busy.

She still manages to plague me.

But it's probably me there's something wrong with, I mean: she's dead, and I'm still annoyed.

Uppermost in the box is a coat. I lift it up by the collar and draw in the smell of my sister. Oh yes, that's my little sister.

"That's how you smell," I say.

"Chanel and fried onions," she says.

I put the coat on. And vanish in its capacious folds.

DEFEAT

Michel M is ill. Seems there's a bug going around. I have to make my own dinner. To read the recipe, I need a good light and my strongest magnifying glass. I normally keep it in the middle drawer of the bureau in the sitting room. But it's not there now. I can't remember when I last used it. Yesterday, no doubt. Goodness, it's vitally important to put things back in the right place. Forgetfulness is like a slap on the face, huge parts of the memory collapse, and you can't remember anything except that you are terribly old. I may have forgotten entire summers, and possibly some other seasons as well. A long autumn, a short spring, what do I know, other than that time is dissolving and slipping away. A whole season vanishes in the blink of an eye. Summers in particular have an unfortunate tendency to evaporate.

I decide to look for quarter of an hour. No more. By then I'll be tired and fractious. I remind myself there is always a danger that once you start looking, you start tidying as well.

"I mustn't do that," I tell myself out loud.

If I start tidying, it will only result in more mess, broken glass and silly changes and I won't be able to find anything. It's a waste of time.

Following a controlled search, I order food to be delivered to my door.

Brioche and crème au chocolat.

FLOW

I've never really had a favourable wind. When I was a child, children were not important. When I studied and worked, it was more advantageous to be a man. And now that I'm old, youth is what's vaunted in this world.

THE MODEL

I sit down opposite Javiér at his drawing board and ask him if he's hungry. He doesn't react, just carries on filing a piece of wood he's holding in his hand.

"What are your thoughts on windows?" he says.

"They're necessary," I reply. "Why do you like windows?"

"The light that filters through them," he says. "The way the beams are softened and kiss the walls."

"I think arched windows are the nicest," I say.

Then he turns the model around and takes out the windows from one side.

"Is it really that important?" I ask.

He scratches his chin. A slightly sour smell wafts over towards me. I try to remember when he last had a shower. I can't.

ROMANIA



Raluca Nagy

Teo de la 16 la 18

Teo from 16 to 18

Nemira, 2021

Language: Romanian

ISBN: 9786064310903

BIOGRAPHY

Raluca Nagy, born in Cluj-Napoca in 1979, is an anthropologist and writer. She studied economics, anthropology and sociology in Bucharest, Rabat and Brussels. In addition to her academic publications, since 2005, Raluca has been publishing texts for wider audiences, along with fiction, in various, mostly Romanian, cultural magazines. After publishing a short piece in the collection *Scrisori din Cipangu – Povestiri japoneze de autori români* (*Letters from Cipangu – Japanese Stories by Romanian Authors*; Trei Publishing House, 2016), she continued writing fiction for various collected volumes. Her first novel, *Un cal într-o mare de lebede* (*A Horse in a Sea of Swans*; Nemira Publishing House, 2018), won the Sofia Nădejde and Observator Cultural debut prizes in Romania and was shortlisted for the Festival du Premier Roman de Chambéry in France. Her second novel, *Teo de la 16 la 18* (*Teo from 16 to 18*; Nemira Publishing House, 2021), was shortlisted for the Sofia Nădejde prize.



SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

After a difficult childhood, with several medical problems, Teo begins to understand that she is different. She goes to university in the capital city of her country, then studies abroad in two locations, one of them decided by the 'Bologna fairy'. During her master she starts working for an agency, and never stops travelling to other cities to which she assigns her own names, giving the reader a constant feeling of a recreated contemporary Babel. With each experience, things accelerate and get out of hand, personally and professionally: love, abuse, marriage, surviving a near-death experience, reinventing herself afterwards. The first theme of the book is reflected directly in the title – a homage to Agnes Varda's film *Cléo de 5 à 7* – with a cancer diagnosis that changes everything. From this perspective, the book reveals the complete experience of a young woman surviving an aggressive form of cervical cancer. The reader discovers that 16 and 18 are references to HPV, the virus that causes this disease, which is still so invisible in many countries, killing hundreds of thousands every year. A second theme, in close relation to the medical one, is spiritual: the novel is a feminist reinterpretation of the *Bible*, as Teo's and Jesus' lives are very similar. All the apostles appear in the book, as characters, with their real names in various languages, depending on the circumstances in which Teo meets them. A third theme of this book could be the language

itself, as the author throws in many different fonts, languages and styles (including a parody of an academic text), along with wordplay and humour, challenging the conventional form of a novel and making the text feel highly contemporary. All in all, a bold, complex, intense and visionary novel.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

Raluca Nagy's novel *Teo from 16 to 18* is an impressive tour de force from at least two perspectives. First, it impresses the reader thematically, narrating a young woman's struggle with her cancer; relentlessly lucid and anti-sentimental, the narration is ultimate proof that literature is salvation, in the most literal and non-metaphorical sense. Second, Nagy's novel documents this struggle with an enormous stylistic playfulness, mixing styles and languages and even alphabets, traversing Western and (Far) Eastern cultural geographies, putting to work a massive amount of knowledge, both intra- and extra-literary. The electric arc of the book is generated by the tension between these two poles – namely the possible tragedy unfolding before our eyes and the stylistic playfulness with which it is narrated. Literature is playful, but it can save us: this is the essential lesson about which Nagy's novel reminds us. Such books are hugely necessary.

Teo de la 16 la 18

Raluca Nagy



Așa a început lungul chin al îngurgitării; orice îmi dădeau de mâncare, mă înfrângea după o înghițitură, singura chestie cât de cât suportabilă erau niște prune acre pe care mi le aducea mama, nu știu de unde le lua. Balerina îmi zicea că-mi trebuie neapărat proteine și-a încercat cu niște *shake*-uri cu gust îngrozitor, pe deasupra, mai erau și foarte dulci, iar corpul meu părea să considere deodată că dulcele e dușmanul. Balerina mi-a retezat-o că n-aveam timp de fițe „*healthy*“, important deocamdată era să bag super-calorii, să mă pun pe picioare. A încercat cu un *shake* sărat, adică nu sărat, ne-dulce, și nici așa n-am putut.

Atunci a intrat Dr. Simon în salon, nici nu mai știam dacă e pe bune sau doar în vis, sau de când nu ne văzuserăm. Arăta pur și simplu impecabil și-am vrut să mă fac mică, mică sub pelicula mea permanentă de transpirație rece, știam că eu arăt că moartea-n vacanță la un nivel la care nu mă văzuse niciodată, și-abia atunci mi s-a părut că ratasem, într-adevăr, omisiune foarte importantă. Dar ea s-a așezat lângă mine și mi-a zâmbit, mi-a spus că trebuie să mănânc, am vrut să-i zic Dr. Simon, vă rog eu mult, fără *body cognition* sau rodii, dar circumstanțele erau puțin altele decât cele de la începutul relației noastre bazate pe sex (în sensul de gen).

A continuat ea, ok, atunci trebuie să-ți facem o transfuzie, ca să poți duce tratamentul. Am aplecat privirea, i-am zis *you promised* și mi-a răspuns, calm, te rog, măcar pentru cât de greu am găsit acest tratament. Mi-a explicat cum inițial crezuseră că era metastazat la plămâni cancerul, ca la Jeanne, dar pe PET scan nu se vedea absolut nimic la plămâni, în schimb s-a văzut pe artera iliacă, unde nici dracu' n-ar fi căutat, ceva ca o mandarină; la biopsie a ie-

șit că e carcinom cu urme de P16 și P18 și cu multe, foarte multe alte milioane de celule, toate diferite între ele. Au comparat carcinomul cu cilindrul pe care îl găsiseră pe gresia bicoloră de la mine din baie, transportat de oamenii de pe salvare într-o pungă de plastic, crezând că făcusem un avort spontan. Și-atunci Dr. Simon s-a uitat în pământ și-am văzut cum o spală și pe ea pe spate cu dușul fierbinte, o freacă încetișor, ea sânge- rează, am văzut cum iese cu greu din casă și se plimbă prin parcuri ore în șir, ținându-se de cel mai plat abdomen din lume și tristețea, tristețea aia imensă când vede femei însărcinate, parcă toate femeile de pe Pământ erau însărcinate.

A ridicat capul și-a continuat, nu semăna deloc biopsia cu cilindrul, care, de altfel, nu știm ce e.

Dar mă operase cel mai bun chirurg, Papadopoulos.

Hahahaaaaaaa, *you cannot invent this shit* am vrut să zic, dar m-am abținut.

Papadopoulos îmi scosese cât putuse din mandarina carcinom, cca. două sfinte treimi, nu putuse mai mult, deși știa că nu e frumos să lași în farfurie, dar nu era cazul să se apropie mai tare de o arteră iliacă și nici de uretră, pe care carcinomul oricum o blocase, apropo, vezi că ai un *memokath* la rinichi, un ce?, haha, poate mă va ajuta să memorez, dar nici asta n-am zis cu voce tare, e un fel de stent, mi-a explicat Dr. Simon.

Au trimis din bucata extirpată de Papadopoulos la mai multe clinici de specialitate și nimeni nu știa ce e, așa că, într-un final, au tăiat feliuțe foarte subțiri, milimetrice, și au aplicat pe ele tot ce le-a trecut prin cap, până una dintre feliuțe s-a micșorat.

Am început să râd în hohote, pe bune, voi, ăștia cu cutiuțele dar, deși n-am zis-o cu voce tare, Dr. Simon a tăcut, iar când am reușit în sfârșit să vorbesc și în realitate, i-am repetat doar *you promised*, și atunci s-a dus toată camaraderia feminină, s-a uitat la mine atât de fix, rece, tăios, cum n-o mai făcuse niciodată, și mi-a zis știu foarte bine că asta este cu totul altceva, n-ai decât să te alinți cât

vrei, toată lumea îți vrea doar binele, dar n-am cum să te oblig. Dacă nu accepți tratamentul, e vorba de zile, maximum săptămâni. Am întrebat de cât e vorba dacă îl accept. S-a ridicat și-a ieșit din salon.

Așa că am strâns din dinți și-am înșfăcat o pungă din sângele altcuiva, după care m-am simțit *only lover left alive*, mi-au făcut prima tură de tratament, adică balerina a adus un vin cu totul diferit la cină, nici alb, nici roșu – nici paracetamol cu glucoză, nici sângele altcuiva – o pungă de perfuzie care nu arăta ca celelalte, nu era transparentă, ci din folie metalică. „*Shall I warm you?*“ m-a întrebat balerina și m-am gândit ce bine ar fi fost dacă m-ar fi în- trebat asta toți stăpânii speculelor, inclusiv Mariza, dar balerina mea părea cea mai în măsură să încălzească orice, numai că ea mi-a băgat mâna într-o găleată din plastic galben cu apă fierbinte, de-am crezut că-mi cade pielea și, brusc, toate venele s-au arătat. Mi-a zis că învățase șmecheria de la o colegă, la urgențe, și-a înfipt acul hulpav într-una dintre liniile mele mov și grăsuțe; atunci am văzut-o ca pe generăleasa armatei de ace care era, deși se ascundea sub o rochiță de balerină, plecase la război, sângele a țâșnit de pomană și-a început să picure în găleata galbenă, până s-a făcut portocalie și-i pierise balerinei-general absolut tot sângele de pe fața frumoasă; i-a revenit doar când a reușit să mă lege la mufa pungii metalice; un lichid rece ca gheața mi-a luat-o nebun prin corp, de parcă un pompier stropea cine știe ce incendiu din plămâni cu un potop.

M-am trezit în beznă de la o durere absurdă de picioare, începând cu oasele de la genunchi și până în mijlocul tălpii, încât durerile din copilărie îmi păreau acum gădilături. Am văzut că trece pe lângă patul meu o asistentă și-am strigat-o, dar s-a dus mai departe. Am revăzut-o după vreo juma' de oră și-am țipat, tot nimic, așa că am început să-mi agit mâinile în aer și abia atunci s-a apropiat, mi-a zis să nu-i vorbesc din vârful buzelor, că e surdă și e întuneric în salon, i-am explicat că mă doare în- grozitor și-a zis să stau cât pot de liniștită, că o să mă ajute.

S-a întors și mi-a injectat ceva în perfuzie, s-a așezat lângă mine pe marginea patului și mi-a explicat că, din cauza inundațiilor, majoritatea personalului nu reușise să ajungă la spital, de-asta apelaseră la ea, era rezervă, de obicei. Din cauza penei de curent, se trecuse pe generator, de-asta era beznă, curentul mergea doar la lucrurile esențiale. După ce s-a terminat perfuzia îmbunătățită, ca să nu zic *spiked*, mi-a scos acul și, pentru prima dată de nici nu mai țineam minte când, am simțit nu doar că nu mai aveam niciun corp străin în corpul din mine, ci nicio durere, niciun disconfort, niciun artificiu, și m-am ridicat încet deasupra patului. Pluteam în apa aia de unde se trag visele când facem homeostază „și în sfârșit picioarele se articulau și începeai să mergi pe ele prin lume, pe foame și pe frică“, am mers sute de mii de kilometri, prin toată lumea am mers, prin toate beculțele rețelei de metrou, până a trecut potopul și s-a aprins lumina în salon și balerina mi-a adus o farfurie cu două ouă fierte și o roșie coaptă care se împrăștiase peste ele.

A zis te rog eu mult să mănânci, iar eu m-am bucurat atât de mult să o revăd, că am mâncat absolut tot, am lins farfuria, ea zâmbea de acoperise cu totul neonele din salon, și abia atunci am simțit iubirea, toată iubirea aia, atât de multă, că nu știam unde s-o mai pun, ca învățătoarele florile din prima zi de școală, pâlcuri-pâlcuri, valuri-valuri, ca un tsunami. Nu doar balerina, și mama, și Dr. Simon, fiecare OM voia să mă fac bine. După ce am terminat de mâncat, parcă dădusem cel mai tare concert, numai n-au aplaudat, radia pur și simplu toată armata aia de oameni în verde care avea grijă de mine. Până și tipa cu părul scurt care urlase la mine din cauză că pe mama ei n-o lăsau înăuntru era acum foarte prietenoasă, mi-a spus că are o nepoată cam de vârsta mea, tocmai terminase facultatea, și urma să vină la ea în vizită. I-am zis că atunci e mult mai mică decât mine, și m-a întrebat câți ani am, a făcut o pauză lungă înainte să adauge că nu-i arăt. Atunci am rugat-o pe balerină să mă ajute să fac duș; a făcut o piruetă de bucurie, mi-a scos cateterul și mi-a adus un cadru dintr-alea care au bătrânii care nu mai pot să meargă singuri.

Când am încercat să fiu pe picioarele mele, le-am simțit ca pe niște picioare, mi-a luat juma' de viață să le trag după mine până la baie. Balerina stătea cu un pas în spate și mă sprijinea ușor. Am rugat-o să mă lase singură înăuntru și-a fost de acord, dar cu ușa întredeschisă, asta după ce i-am promis că nu mă desprind de tot de cadru în niciun moment al acțiunii.

M-am pus în față chiuvetei și m-am apropiat încet de oglindă. Eram tot eu, dar cu douăzeci de ani în urmă. Mi-am văzut claviculele ieșind prin cămașa de spital, nu mai rămăsese nimic din mine. De sub mâneca scurtă se vedea un braț atât de subțire, cum nici nu țineam minte să-l fi avut vreodată, poate copil. Am încercat să ridic cealaltă mână de pe cadru, ca să mi-l pipăi, și m-am rostogolit pe podea. Balerina a intrat val-vârtej, m-a ajutat să mă ridic, să mă spăl, între timp a venit o altă asistentă cu un scaun cu rotile, m-au dus în pat și m-au învelit. Au făcut totul ca la un meci de dublu, o echipă perfectă, care funcționa la milimetru.

A început urcatul muntelui, cu fiecare pas, o bucată de stâncă se fărâma și toți oamenii din armata verde, care constituiau acest munte, rămâneau mai subțiri, mai ciobiți. Trăiam acum pe credit de la ei, trăisem pe credit de la atâția oameni, de atâția ani, că nu mai știam cum e să nu.

A doua tură de lichid din punga metalică a intrat ușor, pentru că în mâna cealaltă îmi intra concomitent o licoare magică, ce făcea ca oasele să nu mai doară. Când s-au terminat licorile, m-am ridicat iar deasupra patului și-am plutit, mi-am simțit capul fără greutate și-am adormit.

De colo-încolo, lucrurile au mers ca jocul echipei de dublu, punct cu punct. Realizările erau de tipul am mai mâncat un prânz, am mai urcat o treaptă. Făceam în fiecare zi exerciții de mers cu un kinetoterapeut care îmi promisese că mă întorc acasă atunci când reușesc să urc singură două etaje, fără niciun fel de ajutor și fără să mă țin de balustradă. Niciun antrenament nu mi se păruse vreodată atât de greu.

Teo from 16 to 18

Raluca Nagy

Translated into English by Monica Cure

That's how the long travail of ingurgitation began; whatever they gave me to eat would defeat me after a single bite, the only things [...] were more or less bearable were some sour plums that my mother would bring, I don't know where she'd get them. The ballerina kept telling me I absolutely had to have protein and she tried giving me some *shakes* that tasted foul and, on top of that, were also very sweet, right at the time my body suddenly seemed to think that sweetness was the enemy. The ballerina was short with me, I didn't have time for "healthy" whims, what mattered right now was taking in tons of calories, to get me back on my feet. I tried a savory *shake*, not savory actually, just non-sweet, and I couldn't get that down either.

Then Dr. Simon came into the room, I didn't even know if it was for real or only in my dream, or how long it had been since we'd seen each other. She looked simply impeccable and I wanted to shrivel up under my permanent film of cold sweat, I knew I looked like the living dead to a degree which she had never seen me look before, and only then did I feel I had truly failed a very important omission. But she sat down next to me and smiled, she told me I had to eat, I wanted to say Dr. Simon, please please, no *body cognition* or pomegranates, but circumstances were a bit different from those at the beginning of our relationship based on sex (in the sense of gender).

She continued, okay, then we have to give you a transfusion, so you can handle the treatment. I lowered my gaze and said you *promi-shhh-ed* and she answered, please stay calm, at least considering how hard it was for me to find this treatment. She explained that initially they had believed that the lung cancer had metastasized, like in Jeanne's case, but absolutely nothing showed up in my lungs on the PET scan, instead, visible along the iliac artery, where the devil himself wouldn't have been lucky enough to find it, was something

the size of a tangerine; the results of the biopsy revealed it was a carcinoma with traces of HPV16 and HPV18 and many, many other cells, millions, all of them different from each other. They compared the carcinoma to the cylinder they found on the two-tone tiles in my bathroom, brought over in a plastic bag by the ambulance workers who thought that I had had a spontaneous abortion. And then Dr. Simon lowered her gaze and I saw them wash her back as well under the hot shower, they gently scrub her, she bleeds, I saw her struggle to leave the house, and stroll through parks for hours on end, holding onto the flattest belly in the world, and sadness, that immense sadness when she sees pregnant women, it seems as if every woman on the Planet were pregnant.

She lifted her head and continued, the biopsy doesn't look anything like the cylinder, which, by the way, we don't know the origins of.

But the best surgeon, Papadopulous, had operated on me.

Hahahaaaaaaa, *you can't make this shit up* I wanted to say, but I restrained myself.

Papadopulous had taken out as much as possible of the tangerine carcinoma, approx. two of the holy three in one and couldn't remove more, despite knowing it isn't polite to leave things on your plate, but it wasn't a good idea to get any closer to the iliac artery or the urethra, which, in any case, the carcinoma had blocked, that reminds me, you have a memokath attached to your kidneys, a what? haha, maybe it will improve my memory, but I didn't say that out loud either, a kind of stent, Dr. Simon explained.

They sent some of what Papadopulous had cut out to several specialized clinics and no one knew what it was, so, in the end, they sliced it very thin, millimeters thin, and applied everything they could think of to the slices, until one of them shrunk.

I began roaring with laughter, are you kidding, all of you, with your little metal boxes, but, even though I didn't say it out loud, Dr. Simon remained silent, and when I finally was able to talk in reality too, I only said you *promi-shhh-ed* again to her, and that put an end to our

feminine camaraderie, she gave me a colder, more withering, stare than she ever had before, and said to me you know very well that this is an entirely different matter, you can whine all you want, everyone only wants what's best for you but I have no way of forcing you. If you won't agree to the treatment, we're talking days, at most weeks. I asked how much we were talking if I agreed to it. She got up and left the room.

So I sucked it up and snagged a bag of someone else's blood, after which I felt very *only lover left alive*, they gave me the first round of treatment, meaning the ballerina served a completely different wine for dinner, neither white nor red – neither paracetamol and glucose, nor someone else's blood – an IV bag that looked different from the others, it wasn't see-through, but made of metallic foil. “*Shall I warm you up?*” the ballerina asked me and I thought how nice it would've been if all the lords of the specula would've asked me that, Mariza included, but my ballerina seemed to be the best person for warming up anything, except that she stuck my hand into a yellow plastic bucket of water so hot that I thought all my skin would fall off and, suddenly, all my veins became visible. She told me she had learned this trick from a co-worker, in the ER, and she stuck the greedy needle into one of my fat, purple lines; that's when I saw her for the commandress of a needle army that she was, though she had disguised herself in a short ballerina dress, she had gone to war, blood squirted gratuitously and began dripping into the yellow bucket until it became orange and absolutely all the blood drained from the ballerina-commander's pretty face; it came back only after she had managed to hook me up to the port of the metallic bag; a liquid as cold as ice ran like crazy through my body, as if a firefighter were extinguishing who knows what fire in my lungs with a deluge.

I woke up in utter darkness from an absurd pain in my legs which started from my kneecaps and went down to the arches of my feet, by comparison my childhood pains felt like tickles now. I saw a nurse pass by my bed and I called after her, but she kept going. I saw her again after half an hour and I yelled, still nothing, so I began to wave my hands in the air and only then did she come over, she told me not to mince my words, because she's deaf and it's dark in the room, I

explained that I was in terrible pain and she said for me to stay as still as possible because she was going to help me.

She turned around and injected something into my drip, she sat down on the edge of my bed and explained that, because of the flooding, most of the staff hadn't made it to the hospital, that's why they called her in, she was a substitute, usually. Because the power had gone out, they were on a generator, that's why it was completely dark, electricity was going only to what was essential. After the enhanced, not to call it *spiked*, perfusion was done, she took out my needle and, for the first time since I couldn't even remember when, not only did I no longer feel I had a foreign object in the body inside me, but I felt no pain at all, no discomfort, not one firework, and I slowly rose above my bed. I was floating in that water where dreams come from when we're in homeostasis "and finally your stilt-like legs became articulated and you started walking on them through the world, hungry and afraid," I walked hundreds of thousands of kilometers, walked through the whole world, through all the little lightbulbs on the metro map, until the flood was over and the light came on in the room and the ballerina brought me a plate of food, two hardboiled eggs and a ripe tomato that had spurting onto them.

Please, please eat, she said, and I was so happy to see her again that I ate every last bite, I licked the plate, her smile completely eclipsed the room's neon lights, and only then did I feel the love, all that love, so much that I didn't know where else to put it, like the flowers elementary teachers receive on the first day of school, cluster after cluster, wave after wave, like a tsunami. Not just the ballerina, my mother too, and Dr. Simon, every PERSON there wanted me to get better. After I finished eating, it was as if I had performed the most amazing concert, she all but clapped, that entire army of caretakers in green were simply beaming. Even the lady with short hair who had yelled at me because her mother hadn't been allowed inside was now very friendly, she said she had a granddaughter about my age who had just finished college and was about to come visit her. I told her then her granddaughter's much younger than me, and she asked me how old I was, she took a long pause before adding that I didn't look it. Then I asked the ballerina to help me take a shower; she pirouetted

for joy, she removed my catheter and brought me a walker, the kind for old people who can't get around by themselves anymore.

When I tried to stand on my own two feet, my legs felt like stilts, it took forever and a day to drag them behind me to the bathroom. The ballerina stayed one step away and gently supported me. I asked her to let me be by myself inside and she agreed, but with the door ajar, after I promised I wouldn't completely let go of the walker at any point during the activity.

I positioned myself in front of the sink and got closer to the mirror. I was still me, but from twenty years ago. I saw my clavicles poking through the hospital gown, I had wasted away to nothing. Coming out from the short sleeve, I saw an arm thinner than I could remember mine ever being, maybe as a child. I tried to lift my other hand off the walker so that I could feel my arm and I tumbled onto the floor. The ballerina whirled in, she helped me get up and wash myself, meanwhile another nurse came over with a wheelchair, they placed me onto the bed and put the covers over me. They did everything like in a doubles match, a perfect team, with split second timing.

The climb up the mountain began, a piece of the rock would crumble with each step, and all the people in the green army who made up this mountain became thinner, more chipped. I now lived on credit from them, I had lived on credit from so many people, for so many years, that I no longer knew how not to.

The second round of liquid from the metallic bag went easier because a magic potion was going into my other hand at the same time, making it so my bones stopped hurting. When the potions were done, I rose above my bed again and floated, my head felt weightless and I fell asleep.

Back and forth, as if playing in a doubles match, point by point. Accomplishments were things like I ate lunch again, I walked up another step. Every day I did walking exercises with a physical therapist who promised me that I could go home once I managed to climb up two flights of stairs by myself, without any kind of help and without holding onto the handrail. No workout had ever seemed as hard to me.

SLOVAKIA

Richard Pupala

Ženy aj muži, zvieratá

Women as Well as Men, Animals

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BIOGRAPHY

Richard Pupala studied journalism at Comenius University and scriptwriting at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. To provide for his family while studying, he worked as barman, on the staff of several weeklies and, for two years, as a copywriter with the Monarch agency. Currently he freelances as a scriptwriter and dramaturge with various production and TV companies. He and his wife live in the Petržalka district of Bratislava. In 2007, he won the Poviedka short story competition, and he published his first book, *Návštevy* (*Visits*), in 2014. His collection of spooky short stories, *Čierny zošit* (*The Black Notebook*), appeared in 2017, followed in 2020 by *Ženy aj muži, zvieratá* (*Women as Well as Men, Animals*), a collection

of thirteen short stories. All three books were nominated for Slovakia's most prestigious literary prize, the Anasoft Litera, with *The black Notebook* shortlisted for the René Anasoft Litera (chosen by secondary school students) and his latest collection making it onto the 2021 Anasoft Litera shortlist.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Richard Pupala's latest book manages to subtly link seemingly unconnected short stories together to make a greater, carefully composed whole in a way that is hard to define. At the same time, it provides fresh proof of the author's ability to evoke a powerful drama in a realistic and yet very modern way within a very short space. With this book, Pupala continues his sophisticated and finely drawn yet distinctive reflections

on important social themes. His focus is mostly on people on the margins of society, outsiders or children from broken families, and the subjective way they come to terms with objectively difficult circumstances. The men, but more often the women and the children, for whom the author has quite astoundingly profound empathy and on whose behalf he is able to speak, are people who are often disadvantaged, under threat or deprived of opportunities for getting ahead in life in the way they would like to. In his latest book, Pupala eschews

any literary crutches. Instead, he offers a profound and – in the best sense of the word – realistic and consistently direct Hemingwayesque perspective on the dramatic circumstances of ordinary lives.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

Richard Pupala has established himself as probably the most distinctive short-story author in Slovakia today. In terms of Slovak literature, this genre has proved to be more productive and better suited than the novel to represent our fragmented, shattered social reality and the way it affects the individual. This has helped Pupala's books garner much public and critical acclaim, along with nominations for prestigious literary prizes. His writing is frequently allusive, setting in motion situations full of lively dialogue, which he observes without drowning the reader in the exchanges. He presents carefully chosen fragments or images that add up to a mosaic, evoking intense mental and emotional states. The author's focus on social themes and his writing, brimming with powerful emotions yet devoid of cheap sentimentality, were reasons why it was quite easy for our jury to choose this book as a nominee for the European Union Prize for Literature.



Ženy aj muži, zvieratá

Richard Pupalá



Súkromná hodina matematiky

„Však on je normálny psychopat!“

Otec ziapal a mama ho tíšila, snažila sa ma brániť, ale tým svojím kunkavým tónom, na facku.

Ako keď som ju prichytil nad umývadlom. Vrátil som sa od kanála a šiel hneď do kúpeľne, aby otec nezbadal, aký som zablatený.

„Jéj, už si doma?“ vyskočila.

„Čo sa stalo?“

„Nič, bobáčik,“ hlúpo sa zasmiala. „Čo by sa malo stať?“ A z nosa sa jej pustila krv.

Mama ľudí znervózňovala. Tiež som bojoval s nutkaním ublížiť jej alebo ju aspoň šetrne, no rázne odsunúť z cesty. Jej náklonnosť som považoval za prekážku medzi mnou a otcom.

Prestaň – kurva – kunkať!

Bolo to jeho slovo, inde než doma som ho nepočul. K maminmu hlasu priliehalo tak, že mi ani nenapadlo pátrať, kde ho otec vzal a čo znamená.

Dozvedel som sa to náhodou, asi z nejakého dokumentu v telke. Muselo to byť na jar, možno v apríli, ešte pred hodinou matematiky u profesorky Badinkovej. Bol som ôsmak a celé dni som sa ponevierať vonku. Prekvapilo ma, že kunka, konkrétne kunka žltobruchá, je malá nevzhľadná žaba. A potom som ich aj počul

naživo, kunky, a neznelo to ako bežné žabie kvákanie, bol to skôr spev. Namiesto tréningov a doučovania som chodil ku kanálu pri čističke. Párkrát som zmizol aj z vyučovania, z dvojhodinovky technických prác. Vôbec ma netrápilo, že to praskne. Mal som viac obľúbených miest. Opustenú stavbu s miestnosťou čiernou od ohňa alebo úsek pri trati, kde rýchlik zabil štyroch Afgancov. Hľadal som úlomky kostí alebo aspoň stopy krvi.

Najradšej som však chodil ku kanálu. Čupel som bez pohnutia v kríkoch a sledoval ľudí prechádzajúcich po chodníku. Bol som od nich sotva na dva metre a zdalo sa mi úžasné, že ma nevidia. Bol som neviditeľný a tajomný. Počúval som, o čom sa zhovárajú. Hľadel im do tváří.

Občas ma zacítilli psy, ale cez močarinu, presakujúcu z kanála, sa neodvážili. Otec mal možno pravdu a ja som sa tak trochu zbláznil. Chlapcom sa to stáva, zvlášť v tomto období života. Dnes viem, že to nie je nič výnimočné.

Jednu kunku som vylovil z vody a dobol do nej palicou. Spravila niečo nečakané. Horeznačky, s vytočenými kĺbmi, sa energicky prehla – akoby ma chcela odstrašiť tým, že praskne, predvádzajúc žiarivožlté flaky na bruchu. Netušila, aké má šťastie. Dostal som chuť pichnúť do nej ešte raz a silno zatlačiť, a taká chuť je vzrušujúca, no ovládol som sa – tajomný a ušlachtilý – a zase znehybnel, spomalil dych, to mi šlo na jednotku. Keď sa kunka zdalo, že nebezpečenstvo pominulo, ot njene oči la sa na brucho, zase sivozeľená, a odsákala do bezpečia pod hladinu močariny.

Spev kuniek sa mi zdal krásny. Nevieam, či ho otec niekedy počul. Bol v ňom smútok. Rád som kvôli tomu spevu počkal pri kanáli do tmy. Detský psychiater, doktor Malnoczký, muž s maličkým noštekcom, sa ma pýtal, či masturbujem. Otcovi potom vysvetlil, že som len mierne zaostal vo vývoji, ale všetko doženiem.

Netušil som, že predtým zašiel otec do školy. Spýtal sa, či mu nechcem niečo povedať, napríklad o mojich známkach. Nechcel som mu povedať nič. Videl som, ako zovrel päšť a zhlboka, prerývane

sa nadýchol. Neudrel ma do tváre, len do ramena – až mi cvakli zuby. Bolo to prvý a posledný raz, čo sa ma takto dotkol. Dozvedel sa, že som si katastrofálne zhoršil prospech, žiacku som preventívne do školy prestal nosiť. Z matematiky som prepadal. Preto mi vybavil doučovanie. Profesorka Badinková učila na gymnáziu. A predtým prednášala na ekonomickej univerzite.

Otec ma odviezol pred osemposchodový nezateplený panelák a čakal v aute, kým vojdem. „Už ti nikdy nebudem môcť veriť,“ povedal mi po údere pästou do ramena. Zvonil som v bráne, nikto neotváral a otec na mňa hľadel z auta. Dnu ma vpustil telnatý chlap v šľapkách so smetným košom.

„Ku komu ideš?“

„K profesorky Badinkovej.“

Významne prikývol a stlačil gombík.

„Rodina?“

„Synovec.“

Rád som klamal a hľadel pri tom ľuďom do očí. Smetný kôš smrdel po rybách.

Zase som zvonil. Zdalo sa mi, že to trvá večnosť. Otec by mi neveril, že nebola doma. A keď sa dvere konečne pootvorili, akurát na hlavičku s veľkými slnečnými okuliarmi, v prvom momente som si myslel, že stojím oproti dieťaťu. Predstavil som sa a pripomenul doučovanie. Profesorka bola menšia ako ja. Pozrela na hodinky, ktoré nemala na ruke, a vpustila ma dnu.

Asi som ju zobudil. Bola útla, vo vyfahanom svetri, bez veku. Mala krátke vlasy. Do očí som jej pre tmavé sklá nevidel, v prítomí bytu sa musela pohybovať po pamäti. Usadila ma v obývačke so zatiahnutými závesmi. Zažala lampu v rohu a zapálila si cigaretu. Izba nebola pekná a mne sa to páčilo. Chvíľu si ma mlčky prezerala a potom vyhlásila, že dúfa, že nie som príliš hlúpy.

Prezrela si učebnicu matematiky, ktorú som priniesol so sebou. Listovala v nej čoraz prudšie, s cigaretou medzi prstami, až sa zdalo, že posledné stránky vytrhne, hundrajúc popod nos: „Lineárne nerovnice... kružnicový oblúk... výsek... kombinatorika...“ A všimol som si, že okrem svetra má na sebe len hrubé pančuchy s dierami na kolenách.

Učebnicu odhodila na gauč vedľa mňa. „Dnes na teba nemám veľa času,“ povedala. „Budeme sa chvíľu rozprávať, nezáväzne...“ Vstala a odišla do kuchyne. Počul som, ako otvorila chladničku. Vrátila sa s fľašou Martini rosé. Načiahla sa do police po krištáľový pohár a naplnila ho ružovým vermútom.

„Nemáš rád matematiku alebo ju nechápeš?“

Zamyslel som sa:

„Kým sa skončí hodina, zdá sa mi, že umriem.“

Napila sa. „Chcelo by to ľad,“ zamrmlala a upriamila na mňa tmavé sklá. „Asi netušíš, aká je matematika krásna.“

Rozhovorila sa. Fajčila jednu od druhej a medzi vetami chlipkala vermút po dúškoch ako múdry vtáčik. Kládla mi otázky. Určite som už počul, že matematika má veľa spoločného s hudbou. Nie s Elánom, pochopiteľne. A školské osnovy jej krásu zabíjajú. Ne-pamätám si presne, čo všetko mi povedala. Možno spomenula, že matematika je o vzťahoch. A viac o dôležitých otázkach než odpovediach. Žiaden dospelý sa so mnou takto nerozprával. Určite nie v škole. Matematiku začneš mať rád, hovorila, alebo to dnes hovorím ja, ak pochopíš, že je plná záhad, ktoré čakajú len na to, kým ich rozlúskneš.

„Je to dobré?“ spýtal som sa a ukázal na fľašu. Výrazne zdobené vinety vermútov priťahovali moju pozornosť.

„Je to sladké a horké,“ povedala, dopila a zaklonila hlávku.

Keď odišla na záchod, napil som sa z fľaše. Mala pravdu. Najskôr som na jazyku zacítil omamnú sladkosť, cez ktorú sa vzápätí

predrala horká, dospelá chuť. Kým sa ozval splachovač, odpil som si ešte niekoľkokrát a po tele sa mi rozlievali vlny tepla.

Chcela vedieť aj niečo o mne. Povedal som jej o rodičoch. O tom, že otec neznáša mamu a už ani mňa. Pripadalo mi normálne, že to hovorím, v obývačke plnej dymu. Jednu cigaretu tipla v polovici a druhú si hneď zapálila.

„Matematika je vo všetkom,“ vyhlásila.

Hľadel som na kolená.

„Vo mne?“ spýtal som sa.

„Aj v tebe, ty trkvas,“ povedali diery na pančuchách.

Hodinu zrazu uťala. Zahasila cigaretu a zavelila, aby som šiel domov.

„Nabudúce si porozprávame niečo o pravdepodobnosti.“

Otec zacítil dym z cigariet. A potom alkohol z môjho dychu. Plietol sa mi jazyk, skôr zo strachu než z vermútu. Mamu silno uštipol do líca a držal, kým sa nerozplakala. A hneď ráno zašiel do gymnázia.

Profesorku Badinkovú prepustili. Mala už jedno napomenutie a v kabinete jej našli fľašu. Otec napadol mamu ešte raz a potom od nás odišiel. Podal žiadosť o rozvod a založil si novú rodinu. Mama bola dlho nešťastná. Chcela poznať odpoveď a hľadala ju v sebe. Chvíľu trvalo, kým si zvykla, že je spokojnejšia ako predtým. Istý čas tomu pocitu nedôverovala, asi preto, že ho dovtedy nezažila.

Otec s nami prestal udržiavať kontakty. Jedného dňa cez letné prázdniny som ho zbadal na pumpe kdesi za Kremnicou, už ako vysokoškolák. Mal so sebou malého syna. Z kufra zaparkovaného auta vytiahol mikinu a protestujúceho chlapčeka do nej navliekol. Zdvihol ho do náruče a poriadne mu zo žartu prdol pod bradu. Malý sa dusil od smiechu. Otec si ma všimol, keď ho ukladal do sedačky. Istý čas som si nahováral, že ma nevidel, ale pohľady sa nám určite stretli, to pamäť nevymyslí. Nastúpil do auta a odfrčali. Nezazlievam mu to. Mohol som mu mávnuť, keby som chcel.

S druhou rodinou mu to vyšlo lepšie. Výživné platil načas, až kým som nedoštudoval.

Mama sa nezmenila. Ani moja manželka ju nemá v láske. Ľudí stále znervózňuje, tak ako mňa. Naše deti rozmaznáva a ony ju majú rady takým tým banálnym spôsobom. Je len otázkou času, kedy pred ňou začnú utekať.

„Jéj, ty zase kunkáš!“

Baví ma to; myslím, že aj ju.

„Ozaj?“

„Už s tým prestaň.“

Na jar sa chodím poprechádzať ku kanálu. Vzal som tam aj rodinu, ale smutný spev neviditeľných žabiek so žltými bruchami na moju ženu ani deti nijako zvlášť nezapôsobil.

Women as Well as Men, Animals

Richard Pupala

Translated into English by Julia Sherwood

A private maths lesson

“The kid is a regular psycho!”

My dad was shouting as my mum tried to calm him down and protect me, except that she did it in that annoying, yelly-aching voice of hers.

Like the time I caught her leaning over the washbasin. I'd been to the canal and when I got home, I headed straight for the bathroom, before Dad noticed that I was covered in mud.

“Oh, you're back already!” she said, startled.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing, sweetie pie,” she said with a silly laugh. “Why should there be anything wrong?” And she got a nosebleed.

Mum often rubbed people up the wrong way. I, too, had to resist the temptation to hurt her, or at least to push her aside gently but firmly. I saw her affections as standing between myself and Dad.

“Stop that bloody yelly-aching!”

This was his word, I never heard it anywhere except at home. And it fitted Mum's voice so well that it never even occurred to me to try to find out where Dad got it from and what it meant.

I discovered what the word meant by chance, probably from some TV documentary. It must have been spring, April perhaps, just before my maths lesson with Miss Badinková. I was in eighth grade

and used to spend whole days roaming the streets. I was surprised to learn that the yellow-bellied toad was an ugly little frog. And then I got to hear them live, the yellow-bellied toads: it didn't sound like ordinary croaking, more like singing. Instead of sports practice and the tutors, I used to go to the canal by the sewage works. Sometimes I'd also sneak out of school during the two-hour technology workshop. I didn't care if I was found out. I had several favourite places. A room in a deserted building site blackened by fire, and an area close to the railway tracks where an express train had killed four Afghans. I used to look for bone fragments or at least some traces of blood.

But the canal was my all-time favourite. I would crouch motionless hidden in the bushes and watch people walk past. I was less than two metres away and thought it was amazing that they couldn't see me. I felt invisible and mysterious. I would listen to them talking. Look into their faces. Sometimes a dog would catch my scent but didn't dare to approach across the swampy area around the canal. Dad might have had a point, I might really have gone a bit crazy. It does happen to boys, especially at that age. Now I know that it's nothing out of the ordinary.

Once I fished out a yellow-bellied toad from the water and poked it with a stick. It did something unexpected. With its belly up and joints twisted, it arched vigorously, as if it wanted to deter me by bursting, and showed off bright yellow spots on its belly. It didn't know how lucky it was. I felt like poking it again and pressing down hard, an exhilarating sort of desire, but I controlled myself – mysterious and noble as I was – and froze again, slowing down my breathing, something I was brilliant at. Once the toad sensed that the danger was over, it flipped back onto its belly and bounced off, grey-green again, back to safety below the surface of the swamp.

I thought the singing of the yellow-bellied toads was beautiful. I don't know if Dad had ever heard it. There was a sadness to it. I was happy to sit by the canal until it got dark, just to hear it. The child

psychiatrist, Dr Malnoczký, a man with a tiny nose, asked me if I masturbated. Then he told Dad that I was only slightly delayed in my development but that I would catch up.

I had no idea that Dad had been to my school. He asked me if I had anything to tell him, about my grades for example. I had nothing to tell. I saw him clench his fist and draw a deep breath. He didn't hit me in the face but instead punched my shoulder so hard that my teeth clicked. This was the first and last time he touched me like that. He'd found out that my grades had worsened catastrophically. I had stopped bringing my pupil's record book home a long time ago, to be on the safe side. I was headed for a fail in maths. That was why he found me a tutor. Miss Badinková was a teacher at a grammar school and before that she had taught at the university's department of economics.

Dad drove me to an old-style eight-story prefab block and waited in the car until I was inside. "I'll never be able to trust you again," he said after punching me in the shoulder with his fist. I rang the bell at the entrance with Dad watching from the car. There was no answer. A portly man in flipflops carrying a rubbish bin let me in.

"Who have you come to see?"

"Miss Badinková."

He nodded and pressed the button.

"A relative?"

"Nephew."

I enjoyed lying to people while looking them in the eye. The rubbish bin stank of fish.

I rang the bell again. An eternity seemed to pass. Dad wouldn't have believed that she wasn't home. When the door finally opened a crack, just enough for a little head with big sunglasses to poke through, my first thought was that I was looking at a child. I introduced myself and said I'd come about the tutoring. The teacher was shorter than I was. She glanced at a non-existent wristwatch and let me in.

Apparently, I'd woken her up. She wore a shapeless jumper. She was slender and ageless, with short hair. I couldn't see her eyes through the dark lenses. She seemed to navigate the semidarkness of her flat by memory. She showed me to a seat in the living room with heavy curtains that were kept drawn. She switched on a lamp in the corner and lit a cigarette. It was not a nice room, and that appealed to me. She watched me for a while in silence and then said she hoped I wasn't too thick.

She took a look at the maths textbook I'd brought along. She flipped through it with mounting fury, cigarette between her fingers, nearly ripping out the last pages and muttering under her breath: "Linear inequations... circular arc... sector... combinatorics..." I noticed that the only thing she was wearing apart from the jumper were thick tights with holes at the knees.

She flung the textbook down on the sofa next to me. "I don't have a lot of time for you today," she said. "Let's just have a bit of a chat." She stood up and went to the kitchen. I heard her open the fridge. She returned with a bottle of Martini rosé. She reached for a crystal wine glass on a shelf and filled it with pink vermouth.

"You don't like maths, or you just don't get it?"

I thought about it.

"I feel like I'm going to die by the time the lesson's over."

She took a sip. "It needs some ice," she mumbled and fixed her dark glasses on me. "You probably have no idea how beautiful maths is."

She started to talk. Chain-smoking and sipping vermouth between sentences like some wise little bird. She asked me a few questions. I must have heard that maths had a lot in common with music. Not as in the band Elan, of course. But school curricula were killing its beauty. I don't remember everything she told me. She may have mentioned that maths was about relations. And more about important questions than answers. No adult had ever talked to me like that. Certainly not at school. You'll get to like maths, she said – or

maybe it's me saying it today – if you realise that it's full of mysteries that are just waiting to be cracked open.

“Is it nice?” I asked, pointing at the bottle. I was fascinated by the strikingly ornate vermouth label.

“It's both sweet and bitter,” she said, finished her drink and tilted her head back.

When she went to the toilet, I took a swig from the bottle. She was right. First an intoxicating sweetness spread across my palate, followed immediately by a bitter, grown-up taste. Before I heard her flush, I took a few more sips. Waves of warmth surged through my body.

She then wanted to learn something about me. I told her about my parents. That Dad couldn't stand Mum and that lately he couldn't stand me either. It felt quite normal to be saying these things in the smoke-filled living room. She put one cigarette out halfway through, then immediately lit another.

“Maths is in everything,” she declared.

I stared at her knees.

“In me?”

“In you too, you dimwit,” said the holes in the tights.

Suddenly she cut the lesson short. She stubbed out the cigarette and ordered me to go home.

“Next time we'll have a chat about probability.”

Dad smelled the cigarette smoke. And then the alcohol on my breath. I was slurring my speech, though more from fear than the vermouth. Dad gave Mum a painful pinch in the cheek and kept pinching until she started to cry. The next morning he went round to the grammar school.

Miss Badinková was fired. She'd been reprimanded once before, and they also found a bottle in her office. Dad assaulted Mum one more time and then he left us. He sued for divorce and started a new family. For a long time, Mum was unhappy. She kept looking for an explanation and tried to find it in herself. It took her a while to get used to being happier than before. And she needed time to trust this feeling, probably because she had not known it before.

Dad broke off all contact with us. One day, in the summer holidays, a university student by then, I spotted him at a petrol station somewhere near Kremnica. He was with a young boy. Taking a sweatshirt from the boot of a parked car he pulled it over the little boy's head. He picked him up and gave him a playful but mighty punch on the chin. The kid was choking with laughter. Dad noticed me as he strapped the boy into the child seat. For a while I tried to convince myself that he hadn't seen me, but our eyes did meet, I'm sure of that, and memory doesn't lie about that sort of thing. He got into the car and zoomed off. I'm not cross with him. I could have waved to him if I'd wanted to.

He was luckier with his second family. And he paid alimony until my graduation.

Mum hasn't changed. My wife doesn't like her either. She still rubs people up the wrong way, myself included. She spoils our children and they love her in that banal sort of way. It's just a question of time before they start running away from her.

“Mum, you're yelly-aching again!”

I enjoy this and I think she does too.

“Am I?”

“Stop it.”

In springtime I go for walks by the canal. Once I took my family along but my wife and children weren't particularly impressed with the mournful singing of the invisible little toads with their yellow bellies.

SPECIAL
MENTION

SPAIN



Jacobo Bergareche
Los días perfectos
Perfect Days

Libros del Asteroide, 2021
Language: Spanish
ISBN: 9788417977627

BIOGRAPHY

Jacobo Bergareche, born in London in 1976, abandoned his fine arts studies in Madrid to study literature and writing at Emerson College in Boston, United States. He combines writing with his work as a television producer and scriptwriter. He is the author of a poem collection, *Playas* (2004), the play *Coma* (2015), the children's book series *Aventuras en Bodytown* (2017), an autobiographical novel about his brother's murder,

Estaciones de regreso (2019), and the novel *Los días perfectos* (*Perfect Days*; Libros del Asteroide, 2021). He lived in Austin, Texas, for four years, and was able to conduct research into the private correspondence of various writers at the Harry Ransom Center. *Perfect Days* is one of the fruits of that research. He lives in Madrid with his wife and three daughters.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Luis, a journalist who's tired of his job and his marriage, is planning to attend a conference in Austin, Texas. The trip is merely an alibi to cover his meeting with Camila, who has become the only thing that motivates him in his life. But just as he is about to leave, he receives a message from her: 'It's over but we'll always have our memories.' Heartbroken and at a loose end in Austin, he takes refuge in a university archive, where he happens upon the letters William Faulkner wrote to his lover Meta Carpenter. Reading the correspondence helps him to reconstruct his memories of his own love affair and to reflect on his tedious marriage, but also to



REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

wonder how one should live to make every day count. With much truth and humour, and enormous narrative skill, Jacobo Bergareche will draw readers in with this unique and captivating novel that explores the universal nature of both the ardour of falling in love and the inevitable routine of long-term relationships. This is a book of exceptional solidity and originality that proves Bergareche is an author who has come into his own.

Perfect Days is an extraordinary literary artifact, which combines the virtues of the short-story genre with the solid structure of a novel. An epistolary novel about love and disaffection composed of two letters and no replies, which depicts the road that begins with infatuation and, almost inevitably, ends up in routine. The main character reflects on love and its weaknesses with wonderful narrative skill and humour, while navigating the literary memoirs of William Faulkner.

Los días perfectos

Jacobó Bergareche



He reinado ya más de cincuenta años en la victoria o en la paz, amado por mis súbditos, temido por mis enemigos y respetado por mis aliados. Riquezas y honores, poder y placer, estaban a mi disposición, ninguna bendición terrenal parecía estar fuera del alcance de mis deseos. En este predicamento, conté diligentemente los días de pura y genuina felicidad que me tocaron: ascienden a catorce.

Abderramán III

Austin

Junio 2019

Querida Camila:

Me doy cuenta ahora de que durante el último año los momentos de felicidad más recurrentes y reales de mi vida han sido lo que Carmen, mi hija pequeña, llama guerra. Es un breve ritual de pelea simulada que Carmen me exige muchas noches, antes de ir a la cama. Ella me mira con furia y me lanza sus piernas y brazos con movimientos amenazantes inspirados en algún arte marcial que ha debido de ver en el patio del colegio, yo debo cazar alguno de sus miembros al vuelo, inmovilizarla, hacerla girar sobre mis brazos en una voltereta y arrojarla al colchón de la cama, después ella intenta levantarse y yo debo impedírselo con cierta violencia, empujando su frente hacia atrás mientras se incorpora, ella se estrella en la almohada y trata de levantarse de nuevo, y yo la tiro hacia atrás otra vez. Después le agarro de los tobillos, y de una sacudida la volteo y la dejo boca abajo, y una vez boca abajo, le hago cosquillas hasta que dice basta. Ella aguanta todo lo que puede

antes de rendirse, entre carcajadas y alaridos. A veces algo sale mal, y ella me golpea en la nariz y me hace daño, o yo le clavo las uñas y le dejo una marca, o ella se estrella contra la pared y termina llorando. Pero la mayoría de las noches me pide más, exige que repitamos la voltereta, y el volteo por los tobillos, y las cosquillas en los pies, y me chantajea diciéndome que si no prolongamos la guerra no me dará un beso de buenas noches, sabe que mi día no termina bien sin su beso de despedida antes del sueño.

Hay días en que no estoy en casa a la hora en que Carmen se va a dormir, y hay otros en que estoy tan cansado que no puedo emplearme en lanzarla prudentemente por los aires, con la seguridad de que no le romperé el cuello o que no se me escurrirán sus tobillos. Esos días, a menudo me torturo pensando que quizás no haya más guerras, que sin haberlo sabido he perdido la última oportunidad de una guerra con Carmen, que al día siguiente ella no querrá, ni al otro, y de repente se habrá hecho mayor y ya no le apetezca ser zarandeada de esa manera, ni le apetezcan los ataques de risa que provocan las cosquillas, que ya no quiera vender tan caro su beso de buenas noches, sino que lo regale sin más para librarse de mí. Porque igual que un día, hace aproximadamente un año, empezó a exigir una guerra antes de ir a dormir, habrá un día en que dejará de pedirla, y por mucho que yo procure acudir puntualmente a cada guerra, sé que es inevitable la llegada de esa última guerra, y que no sabré reconocerla como la última (a menos que el final sea producto de una desgracia, como que se golpee fatalmente la nuca contra el pico de una mesa, cosa que he pensado alguna vez que podría llegar a pasar, porque lamentablemente todo lo que puede pasar le termina pasando a alguien alguna vez) hasta que noche tras noche fallemos a nuestra cita, porque yo esté de viaje, o ella en un campamento de verano, y el tiempo se eche sobre nuestras guerras, y ella se haga más grande y yo más viejo, y nuestras guerras pasen a ser un recuerdo feliz de la infancia, y por fin se hayan concretado en un número exacto y cerrado, el número de guerras que tuvimos, una primera, muchas otras, y una final. Un número que ignoraremos siempre, porque no llevamos una cuenta de nuestras guerras, pero no por eso soy

capaz de olvidar que el número es exacto, y que hubo un primer ritual y que, más pronto que tarde, llegará otro que sea el último.

No solo me pasa con las guerras de Carmen, me pasa a menudo con todo aquello que amo repetir, cuántas veces me he despedido de una comida dominical con mi madre pensando que puede ser la última, cuántas veces me he ido de viaje y he besado a mis tres hijos, y al perderlos de vista he pensado que quizás fuera ese el último beso, porque quizás se estrelle el avión, o quizás mueran en un incendio absurdo causado por el humidificador con el que mi mujer cree prevenir las toses de los niños y al que yo no doy más crédito que a un remedio de herbolario. Y me pasa también contigo, sí, me pasa desde la primera vez que te besé, y que me fui a la cama deseando que ese primer beso tan improbable, tan inesperado, no hubiera sido el último, y al día siguiente, cuando me diste el segundo beso empecé a llevar la cuenta de cada uno que nos dimos los tres días que duró nuestro primer encuentro. Hasta que nos vimos de nuevo, pasé tantas noches peleando con el fantasma del último beso, resistiéndome a la idea de que ese beso ya te lo había dado sin darme cuenta de que era el último, y de que todo se había acabado, el telón había caído, la gente se había ido a su casa y yo seguía sentado en la platea esperando a la siguiente escena. Cuando después de un año volvimos al escenario del crimen y me diste ese beso en el aeropuerto antes de que pudiera decirte lo que durante todo el vuelo planeé que te diría al verte otra vez, me quedé tranquilo y dejé por fin de contar, perdí el miedo a la finitud, me convencí de que esto se repetiría cada año, el último beso no parecía estar a la vista ya, se perdía en un futuro lejano.

Cuánto tiempo habré malgastado provocándome angustias que oscurecen mi mente como una neblina pasajera cada vez que algo me hace recordar que todo aquello que no quiero perder ha tenido un principio y tendrá un día su final. Trato de escapar rápidamente de ese pensamiento estéril, antes de que en la neblina de mi conciencia tome forma la visión concreta de una última vez, y yo me quede absorto contemplándola, y no pueda ya proteger a mi ánimo del influjo que esa visión tendrá sobre él.

Por eso, ahora que casualmente tengo en mis manos una carpeta con la correspondencia de un famoso escritor a su amante —ambos muertos hace mucho— no puedo dejar de angustiarme: puedo ver la primera carta de una historia de amor asomar al principio de esta carpeta, y a la vez puedo ver la última carta al final, y no puedo evitar hacer el cálculo a ojo de todas las hojas que hay entre ambas cartas, la primera y la última, y medir en cada punto las cartas que le restan a esa relación para extinguirse. Se puede decir que el conjunto de pruebas que quedan en el mundo de ese romance apenas miden medio centímetro de grosor, y caben en un espacio de treintaicinco por veinticinco centímetros, que es más o menos lo que miden las carpetas de color hueso en que están clasificadas las cartas del contenedor 11 del archivo de William Faulkner en el Harry Ransom Center con las que estoy matando el tiempo esta mañana, y con las que sospecho que perderé el día entero, y los días venideros, hasta olvidarme por completo del propósito de mi visita que ya ha perdido todo interés para mí. Eran unos papeles demasiados tentadores, llego a ellos, como te dije, casualmente, y en ellos descubro una posibilidad de hallar respuestas, los leo con una fruición parecida a la de los adolescentes que leen el consultorio amoroso de las revistas juveniles. Y sin embargo, nada más ver la carpeta me asaltan nuevas preguntas. ¿Qué medidas tuvo lo nuestro (dejémoslo en lo nuestro, a falta de un nombre mejor)? ¿Qué huella ha dejado, qué residuo, qué cenizas? No hay memoria. Yo lo he borrado todo, absolutamente todo, y me consta que tú también. Solo sé que el año pasado te vi cuatro días en estas mismas fechas, en esta misma ciudad, y que el año anterior te vi otros tres días, en las mismas fechas y la misma ciudad. Verte se queda corto. Te tuve, me tuviste. Nos tuvimos.

Perfect Days

Jacobó Bergareche

Translated into English by Andrea Rosenberg

I have now reigned above fifty years in victory or peace; beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure, have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting to my felicity. In this situation, I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot: they amount to fourteen.

Abd al-Rahman III

**Austin
June 2019**

Dear Camila,

I'm realizing now that over the past year, the most real and recurrent moments of happiness in my life have been what Carmen, my youngest, calls war. She often demands this brief ritual of simulated combat before bed. She'll glare and fling her legs and arms at me, her menacing movements inspired by some martial art she probably saw during recess at school; I'm supposed to catch one of her flailing limbs in midair, pin her, flip her in a somersault in my arms, and toss her onto her bed. Then she tries to get up and I'm supposed to prevent her, aggressively, pushing her forehead back as she struggles to sit; she collapses onto the pillow and tries to get up again, and I thrust her down once more. Then I grab her by the ankles, roughly turn her over onto her belly, and once she's face-down, I tickle her until she tells me to stop. She holds out as long as she can before finally giving in, howling and laughing. Sometimes something goes wrong and she smacks me in the nose hard enough

to hurt, or I scratch her with my fingernails and leave a mark, or she crashes into the wall and ends up in tears. But on most nights she wants more, demanding that we repeat the somersault, the ankle flip, and the tickles on the soles of her feet, and she haggles with me, telling me that if we don't drag the war out longer, she won't give me a kiss goodnight; she knows my days don't end right without her parting kiss before sleep.

Some days I'm not home when Carmen goes to bed, and on others I'm so tired that I'm not confident I won't end up breaking her neck or losing my grip on her ankles as I carefully toss her through the air. Often on those days, I torture myself with the possibility that there will be no more wars, that without knowing it I've missed my last chance for a war with Carmen, and tomorrow she won't want one, nor the day after, and suddenly she'll be all grown up and won't be into roughhousing or tickle-induced fits of laughter, and will no longer be interested in selling her goodnight kiss at astronomical prices, and instead will give it away just to be rid of me. Because just as, one day about a year ago, she started asking for a war before bed, there will come a day when she stops asking for it, and though I try hard to show up for every war, I know that inevitably the last one will arrive, and that I won't recognize it as such (unless the end is brought about by some calamity, like if she dies from hitting her head on the corner of a table, a turn of events that I've sometimes imagined, since, sadly, everything that can conceivably happen does end up happening to somebody at some point), until night after night we miss our standing appointment, because I'm traveling, or she's at summer camp, and time piles up on our wars, and she grows up and I grow old, and our wars become just a happy childhood memory and finally harden into an exact, unchanging number, the number of wars we had: a first one, many more, and then a last one. The number will always be unknown to us, because we don't keep track of our wars, but that doesn't mean I'm able to

forget that the number is exact—that there was a first ritual and, sooner rather than later, another will arrive that will be the last.

This doesn't just happen with Carmen's wars; it happens often, with everything I love doing again and again. Many times, saying good-bye after a Sunday lunch with my mother, it has occurred to me that it might be the last; many times I have left on a trip and kissed my three children, and once they're out of sight I've wondered whether that was the last kiss, because the plane might crash, or they might die in a bizarre fire sparked by the humidifier my wife believes prevents children's coughs and in which I put no more stock than in a herbal remedy. And it also happens with you—yes, it's been happening since the first time I kissed you, since I went to bed wanting that first improbable, unexpected kiss not to be the last, and the next day, when you gave me the second kiss, I began keeping track of every kiss we exchanged during the three days of our first encounter. In the period before we saw each other again, I spent many nights doing battle with the ghost of the last kiss, resisting the idea that the kiss I'd inattentively given you had been the last one, and now everything was over, the curtain had fallen, the audience had gone home, and I was still in my seat, waiting for the intermission to end. When, a year later, we returned to the scene of the crime and you gave me that kiss in the airport before I could even tell you I'd spent the entire flight planning what I'd say when I saw you again, I relaxed and finally stopped counting; I lost my fear of finitude, I convinced myself that this would be repeated each year, the last kiss seemed to be nowhere in sight, it faded into a distant future.

I've wasted far too much time tormenting myself with anxieties that darken my mind like a swirling mist every time something reminds me that all the things I do not wish to lose had a beginning and will one day have their end. I try to evade that barren thought before a detailed picture of a final instance can take shape in the fog of my consciousness, and before I then get caught up in contemplating it and can no longer shield my spirit from its impact.

And so, now that I happen to be holding a folder containing the correspondence of a famous writer to his lover—both of them long dead—I feel an awful pang: I can see the first letter of a love story peeking out at the beginning of this folder and, at the same time, the final letter at the end, and I can't help trying to estimate how many pages lie between the two, the first letter and the last, and tallying at each point how many letters are left in the relationship before it fizzles out. The extant accumulated evidence of the romance is less than a quarter-inch thick, and fits in a space some ten by fifteen inches, the approximate size of the ivory-colored folders into which the letters from container 11 of the Harry Ransom Center's William Faulkner collection are filed, and with which I am killing time this morning, and with which I suspect I will fritter away the entire day, and the days to come, until I forget the reason for my visit—now no longer of any interest to me—altogether. The papers are tantalizing. I happen upon them, as I said, by chance, and in them I discover a possibility of finding answers; I read them eagerly, like a teenager reading a magazine advice column. Yet, seeing the folder provokes a barrage of new questions. What were its dimensions; how long and how wide did our thing (let's just call it our thing, for lack of a better term) stretch? What mark has it left, what residue, what ashes? There is no memory of it. I deleted everything, absolutely everything, and I know you did too. All I know is that last year I saw you for four days on these same dates, in this same city, and that the previous year I saw you another three days, on the same dates and in the same city. Saw you doesn't really capture it. I had you; you had me. We had each other.

SPECIAL
MENTION

UKRAINE

Eugenia Kuznetsova

Спитайте Мієчку

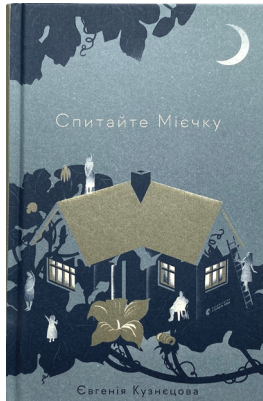
Ask Miechka

Видавництво Старого Лева / Old

Lion Publishing House, 2021

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BIOGRAPHY

Eugenia Kuznetsova is a Ukrainian author, translator and researcher. She was born and spent her childhood in the village of Khomutyntsi in central Ukraine. After graduating from Kyiv National University, she received her PhD in literary analysis in Spain. Nowadays, Eugenia works in media research, focusing on conflict-sensitive reporting and countering disinformation, and translates fiction and non-fiction. So far, Eugenia has published two books: her first, *Cook in Sorrow*, was published in 2020; her second, *Ask Miechka* was shortlisted for BBC News Ukraine Book of the Year in 2021. She is currently working on a monograph on Soviet linguistic and identity policies, along with another novel. Both books are to be published in 2022.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

The story of *Ask Miechka* features four generations of women seen over one summer. Two sisters, Mia and Lilia, come to their 'shelter' – an old house belonging to their grandmother, where they spent their childhood – in an attempt to put on hold their upcoming life-changing decisions: deciding whether to emigrate or stay; choosing between a reliable man or wild love. Their grandmother, Thea, is nearing the end of her life, and her daughter, the sisters' mother, is fearful of taking the place of the oldest woman in the family. The old house, overgrown with weeds, shrubs and sprawling trees, seems to be frozen in time, lost in oblivion. Yet the sisters bring it back to life: new people

come, new cats wander in, pumpkins are grown and the porch is renovated. The house changes, along with the lives of the women who inhabit it as the summer nears its end. In her novel, Eugenia Kuznetsova tells a deeply intimate story about the relations between sisters, mothers and daughters. Vivid dialogues, in which the most sensitive things remain unspoken, but somehow felt, define the atmosphere of the story and highlight the unique ties existing between the generations of women in the family.

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION

Selecting a nominee from the shortlist of 10 strong candidates was a challenging task. Yet we were aware that the text should have great potential to represent Ukrainian culture in the European context. Therefore, we are excited to present Eugenia Kuznetsova's novel, *Ask Miechka*. Kuznetsova is a bright personality, researcher, analyst and translator. This background is visible in her fiction, which has many layers and important messages woven into the exciting and sensitive text. Her light and sparkling writing provides a great analysis of how gender roles changed in Ukraine during the last century, how women evolved in their emancipation and how social and political changes shaped the country and its people. It also highlights that the sentimental paradise that could so easily have been found by the characters in the book is actually very fragile in the current geopolitical situation, and is at risk of being lost. No wonder this brilliantly written novel became a bestseller in Ukraine and received many warm reviews. We believe this book deserves to be translated worldwide to help everyone who reads it to understand contemporary Ukraine better.



Спитайте Мієчку

Евгенія Кузнецова



Приїхали

— Кожна жива істота має право на притулок, — казала Мієчка за кермом.

— На зарослий кущами шелтер, — відказувала її сестра Лілічка.

Поки вони мовчали, були абсолютно різні: в однієї — хвилясте волосся, в іншої — пряме, як у китайки. Мієчкині щоки завжди мали ледь персиковий відтінок, а Лілічка була бліда, наче все життя провела у бетонній коробці, куди ніколи не потрапляє сонце. Але коли сестри починали говорити, якимось чином ставали схожі. З кожним словом їхні очі, губи, вуха, рухи все більше зливались, аж поки співрозмовник не заплющував очей, не тряс головою і не казав: «Хто з вас говорить?». Вони тоді переглядались, якусь мить мовчали і знову ставали різними — як день і ніч.

У зарослий кущами притулок для лузерів вони приїздили завжди, коли без цього вже було не можна. Для цього не треба було трагедій — просто іноді видавалося, наче все в тумані і дороги далі не видно. Тоді наставав час для шелтеру. Притулок являв собою будинок із величезними непропорційними вікнами, витертою підлогою і згнилою терасою, весь зарослий кущами, малиною, ожиною, хмелем, високими тополями, березами, здичавілими сливами, яблуками й грушами. У тих кущах вони й вирости, програли битву заростям і хащам, звідти й поїхали. Він стояв, як докір минулому

про те, що ніколи там не буде так, як раніше. Ніколи вже не спати- муть усі по троє, ніколи чоловіки не казатимуть «я ляжу надворі» і не лягатимуть на дерев'яних настилах попід деревами, струшуючи з себе усю ніч випадкових кажанів, котів і комах із безкінечною кількістю ніг. Усі ці люди давно розбіглися, вмерли, загубились, і про них нагадував тільки різноманітний мотлох, названий їхніми іменами. «Подай-но мені гончаровську вазу», — казала бабуся. Ніхто в домі того Гончарова й не знав, і не пам'ятав, але ваза була його імені.

На місці будинку колись була хата, а потім невмолимий час її перемолов, лишивши провалену стріху, хлів по груди в землі і зворушливу драбину коло віконця для птиці. Більше жодній птиці не судилося сидіти на тій драбині, окрім випадкових жовтих вивільг. Колись на це місце бабуся привіз чоловік, знявши її з п'ятого поверху в центрі міста, забравши її від батьківських фікусів, бібліотеки і розшитої золотом скатерки.

— Це той рай, про який ти мені казав? — спитала тоді юна ще Теодора, дивлячись на старий хлів і на залишки розваленної хати, яку наче розбило судомами.

— Це він, — чула вона у відповідь і розуміла, що любила цей голос так, що ніякі фікуси їй не були потрібні.

Минули десятки років, поки сліди старої хати зникли, а на її місці виріс будинок і зістарився разом із Теодорою. Тут виростили діти, звідси вони поїхали, виростили онуки, тут бавилися правнуки. Тепер Теодора, підбираючись до своїх ста літ, сиділа на зігнилій терасі, пробравшись через стежку, що вся заросла ожиною, і чекала на своїх біженок, які прямували до неї в кущі.

Спершу у притулок тікали через екзистенційні переживання про померлих папуг і черепах. Потім через кар'єрні кризи, любові, дітей. Лілічка у притулку колисала синів тоді, коли у звичайних умовах вони її доводили до божевілля. В

шелтері для лузерів діти раптом ставали спокійні і просто повзали заростями ожини, дряпаючи свої ніжні, м'які животи. Мієчка тут вирішувала, куди рухатись далі. У шелтері ідеї не приходили до голови, зате приходило усвідомлення, що колись таки прийдуть. Тут навіть можна було змиритись із відсутністю ідей, рубаючи ті непролазні хащі.

— Страшно уявити, що роблять люди, в яких немає будинку в дикій малині, — казала Лілічка.

Вона привезла ледь рожеві туфлі з відкритими пальцями, щоб Мієчка їх одразу взула — туфлі лежали на горищі років сорок; бабуся купила їх колись у Вільнюсі, але розмір був не її, тому так ніколи їх і не взула, і зараз не знала, що час їхній настав. Лілічка їх знайшла, поки прибирала на горищі в нервовому припадку. Хто ж знав, що сорок років тому бабуся купила туфлі точно такого розміру, якого будуть чотири ноги її двох майбутніх онучок.

— Ти зараз вийдеш з машини, і бабуся упаде, — казала Лілічка, роздивляючись сестрине плаття. Вона була офіційно красивою. Носила темні окуляри, майку без нічого під нею і джинси з дірками.

— А тобі скаже, — відповідала Мієчка, — чого ти не можеш вдягатись, як сестра?

— Вона ж не знає, що весь інший час ти носиш оте своє плаття кольору і фасону мішка під картоплю, — казала Лілічка, блискаючи окулярами у заднє дзеркало.

— Зате коротке.

— Тим більше коротке.

Потім вони стали на заправці. Світило перше спекотне червене сонце, деь там під яблунами дозрівали суніці їхнього дитинства, а Мієчка витягла з багажника свою валізу і звідти дістала небесно-голубий сарафан у білі квіточки.

— О! — сказала Лілічка.

— Вдягай! — усміхнулась Мієчка.

Лілічка відчинила задні двері машини, швидко скинула свою майку, і сарафан легкою хвилею скотився з плечей за коліна.

— Бабуся точно упаде, — сказала Лілічка.

Вперше за вісім років ситуація була така, що реабілітація була потрібна на все літо.

Вони розіслали листи чоловікам, бойфрендам, колишнім чоловікам і всім причетним. І склали графік для Лілічких дітей.

— Пам'ятаєш, — сказала Мієчка, однією рукою шукаючи радіостанцію, а другою поправляючи собі рукав плаття, — раніше літо було безкінечне, правда?

Лілічка просто кивнула, однією рукою тримаючи кермо замість Мієчки. Іншою рукою вона терла яблуко об власне коліно, на якому легкою синьою хвилею лежав щойно подарований сарафан. Вони так робили завжди — коли одна бралася поправляти бретельки, то інша автоматично брала кермо в свої руки.

Приїхали вже під вечір.

Ask Miechka

Eugenia Kuznetsova

Translated into English by Reilly Costigan-Humes & Isaac Wheeler

We're Here

“Every living being has the right to shelter,” said Miechka, who was driving.

“To a shelter overrun by bushes,” replied her sister Lilichka.

Before they started talking, they were absolutely different. One’s hair was wavy, the other’s hair so straight it almost made her look Chinese. Miechka’s cheeks had a peachy shade to them, while Lilichka was pale, like she’d spent her whole life in a concrete bunker that never got any sunlight. Yet, as soon as the two sisters began speaking, a certain similarity emerged. With every word, their eyes, lips, ears, and movements blended together more and more up until whoever was conversing with them could close their eyes, shake their head, and say, “Who’s even talking?” Then they’d exchange a glance, fall silent for a moment, and then, once again, they’d become as different as night and day.

They came to the overgrown shelter for losers whenever they had no other choice. That didn’t require a tragedy of anything – at times, it just seemed like everything was foggy and the road ahead was obscured. That’s when it came time for the shelter. It was a structure with large, disproportionate windows, a faded floor, and a rotten deck overrun by bushes, raspberries, blackberries, barley, tall poplars, birches, wild plums, apples, and pears. They grew up amid those bushes, lost the battle to the thickets and overgrowth, and then left.

The shelter stood, reproaching the past for the fact that things there would never be like they used to be. Never again would all of us sleep in groups of three, never again would the men say “I’m going to sleep outside,” lie down on planks under the trees, and spend all night shaking off stray bats, cats, and insects with innumerable legs. All of those people scattered, died, or disappeared long ago, and the assorted junk bearing their names is the sole reminder of them. “Hand me Honcharov’s vase,” Grandma said. Nobody in the house had any idea who Honcharov was, but the vase was named after him.

Before the shelter, there used to be a house here. Then implacable time mashed it up, leaving behind the collapsed remains of a thatched roof, a barn full of chest-high piles of dirt, and a heart-warming ladder by a window for birds to perch on, yet no more birds, except for an occasional yellow oriole, were destined to sit there. Back in the day, Grandma’s husband brought her to this place, once he’d plucked her out of that fifth-floor apartment downtown and taken her away from her parents’ fig trees, library, and gold-embroidered tablecloth.

“Is this the paradise you were telling me about?” a young Theodora asked as she looked at the old barn and the remnants of a dilapidated house that had been obliterated by convulsions.

“This is it,” came the response, and she realized that she loved this voice so much that she didn’t need any fig trees whatsoever. Decades passed before every trace of the old house vanished and a new one matured and grew old with Theodora. Her children grew up here and then left; her grandchildren grew up here; her great-grandchildren played here. Now, Theodora, sneaking up on a hundred, sat on the rotten deck after she had fought her way down a path overrun by blueberries and waited for her refugee granddaughters who were heading toward her through the bushes. At first, they fled to the shelter due to existential anxieties over dead parrots and tur-

ties. Then over professional crises, relationships, children. Here, Lilichka lulled her sons to sleep when, under regular circumstances, they drove her to the brink of insanity. At the shelter for losers, her children calmed down suddenly and simply crawled through thick patches of blueberries, scratching their tender bellies. Miechka would decide where to head next. At the shelter, ideas wouldn't come to her, yet the realization that they eventually would did come. Here, you could come to terms with your lack of ideas as you sliced through impassable thickets.

"I shudder to think what people who don't have a house overgrown with wild raspberries do," Lilichka said once. She brought a pair of barely pink open-toed heels for Miechka to put on right away. Those heels had been up in the attic for about forty years; their grandma bought them way back when in Vilnius, but they didn't quite fit her, so she never wore them, and she wasn't aware that their time had come. Lilichka found them when she was cleaning the attic in a nervous fit. Who could have guessed that, forty years ago, her grandma bought heels that were the exact size of her two future granddaughters' four feet?

"Granny'll fall over when you step out of the car," Lilichka said, eyeing her sister's dress. Lilichka was certifiably beautiful. She was wearing dark glasses, a T-shirt with nothing underneath, and jeans with holes in them.

"And she'll ask you why you can't dress like your sister." Miechka replied.

"She has no clue you wear that sack-of-potatoes dress most of the time," Lilichka said, her glasses flashing in the rearview mirror.

"At least it's short."

"Yeah, and it's short to boot!"

After that, they stopped at a gas station. The first sweltering sun of that June shone bright; the strawberries of their childhood were ripening under the apple trees. Miechka took her suitcase out of the truck and produced a sky blue sarafan with white flowers on it.

"Oh!" Lilichka said.

"Put it on!" Miechka said, smiling. Lilichka opened one of the back doors of the car, swiftly slipped out of her T-shirt, and the sarafan slid softly as a wave from her shoulders down over her knees.

"Granny'll fall over, that's for sure," Lilichka said.

For the first time in eight years, things were such that they would need the whole summer to rehabilitate fully. They emailed all their husbands, boyfriends, ex-husbands, and all other interested parties and set a schedule for Lilichka's kids.

"Remember how," Miechka said, searching for a radio station with one hand and adjusting her dress sleeve with the other, "summer used to go on forever. Didn't it?"

Lilichka simply nodded, holding the wheel with one hand for Miechka. With her other hand, she rubbed an apple on her knee, on the airy, blue wave of the sarafan that she'd just been gifted. That's what they always did – whenever one of them had to adjust their straps, the other would take the wheel automatically.

They arrived in the early evening.

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