

European Union  
Prize for Literature  
Winning authors  
2020





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**Belgium**  
Nathalie  
Skowronek



**Bosnia and  
Herzegovina**  
Lana Bastašić



**Germany**  
Matthias Nawrat



**Estonia**  
Mudlum  
(Made Luiga)



**Norway**  
Maria Navarro  
Skaranger



**Croatia**  
Maša Kolanović



**Kosovo**  
Shpëtim Selmani



**Cyprus**  
Σταύρος  
Χριστοδούλου  
(Stavros  
Christodoulou)



**Luxembourg**  
Francis Kirps



**North Macedonia**  
Петар  
АНДОНОВСКИ  
(Petar Andonovski)



**Denmark**  
Asta Olivia  
Nordenhof



**Montenegro**  
Stefan Bošković



**Spain**  
Irene Solà

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# FOREWORD

**A**uthors and artists are indispensable companions in our lives in normal times. The COVID-19 crisis, with the isolation of confinement and the stress and anxiety caused by living through a pandemic, has made that even more evident. Books allow us to travel in time and space, meet new characters and feel different emotions. They help us to escape from our difficulties for a while.

The European Commission recognises that unique role of culture in our everyday lives and the importance of nurturing its diversity. The European Union Prize for Literature is a tribute to authors. It highlights the rich variety of contemporary literature available and stimulates the circulation of books, in particular those that would not otherwise make it on to bookshelves across Europe.

This anthology gives you a glimpse at the winning books of the 13 EU Prize for Literature laureates for 2020. It demonstrates how, through their stories, they bring us closer to other Europeans, especially important at times when we cannot travel as we have experienced this Spring. For me, what

makes this Prize so special is that it encourages us to discover new worlds, new words, new visions. I sincerely wish that it will help the 2020 laureates to have their works translated and read in many countries, in Europe and beyond.



The Prize is also a recognition of the essential role played by all professionals in the book industry - including publishers and booksellers - who help authors to find an audience. The Prize is part of the EU's Creative Europe programme that supports the cultural and creative sectors in 41 European countries. Every year the programme co-funds cooperation projects that bring together key organisations from the book sector to explore new practices and models. In parallel, we also support the translation and promotion of hundreds of books, including those awarded with the EU Prize for Literature, helping European authors to find new audiences.

I am grateful to the consortium organising the European Union Prize for Literature, consisting of the European Writers' Council, the Federation of European Publishers and the European and International Booksellers Federation. Their commitment to the Prize and their support to European Union policies on books and reading are vital.

Finally but most importantly, I warmly congratulate the 13 laureates. I wish each of them a wonderful literary career and hope that their books find large audiences, both at home and abroad. I wish readers, eager to discover new voices in different languages, a rewarding journey into the worlds created by our talented laureates.

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



# BELGIUM



**Nathalie Skowronek**  
**La carte des regrets**  
***The Map of Regrets***

Grasset, Paris, 2020  
Language: French  
ISBN: 978-2-2468-2151-9

## BIOGRAPHY

**N**athalie Skowronek was born in Brussels in 1973. After studying literature, she worked in publishing before going into women's fashion for 7 years. She returned to literature in 2004, when she created the editorial collection *La Plume et le Pinceau* for the publishing house Complexe. At the age of 37, she published her first novel, *Karen et moi* (Arléa, 2011), the first volume of a family trilogy which takes the reader from the Polish shtetls on the road to Auschwitz. Two novels, *Max, en apparence* (Arléa, 2013) and *Un monde sur mesure* (Grasset, 2017), followed. In 2015, she published an essay entitled *La Shoah de Monsieur Durand* (Gallimard, 2015), in which she shows that duty of remembrance ceases to operate after 70 years. Since 2016, she has been teaching in the Contemporary Writing Centre of La Cambre/École nationale supérieure



des arts visuels. She also facilitates a writing workshop for the Antonin Artaud Club, a day centre for adults with psychological disabilities.

## SYNOPSIS

Suicide, murder, accident? The circumstances of Véronique Verbruggen's death on a trail in the Cévennes would not have occupied more than a few lines in the press if the victim had not been a well-known publisher. Questioning and sharing the same grief are two men: Daniel Meyer, her ophthalmologist husband, and Titus Séguier, her lover and a filmmaker, forever doomed to wait for Véronique to finally leave her husband. To Daniel, nothing has ever disturbed the 20 years of living together with his wife, whom he loves unfliningly. The lovesick Titus hesitates between remaining silent or addressing a cinematographic love letter to Véronique by finishing the project they started together before she disappeared. Beyond varnished appearances lurks an upsetting portrait

of a woman who could not choose. Nathalie Skowronek explores with great subtlety the different facets of love and how, even if times are changing, the drawing and quartering of the heart remains.

## ♥ JURY REPORT

*The Map of Regrets* is a novel of beautiful mastery and powerful sobriety, written around a theme – that of choices in love and life – that too often contains misplaced or over-the-top displays of emotion. Here, the psychological dimension woven around the conflict between loyalty and freedom feeds on a female character rooted in its time, with its own blind spots and unthinkable things. With this book, Nathalie Skowronek demonstrates a writerly approach that goes beyond what might be expected, as well as a great cohesion in her overall work. From the search for the ability to forget what prevents us from living, to the quest for what fundamentally makes us who we are, her books never cease to tell stories of splits and breaks. Writing for her is like a thread stretched between places of fading memories and the necessity of constantly reinventing oneself in order to not forget.

# La carte des regrets

Nathalie Skowronek



*Suivant l'opinion ordinaire, veronica est formé  
de vera et de eikon : vraie image.*  
Dictionnaire Littré

À la fin de l'article on ne savait pas à quoi s'en tenir. Il était beaucoup question d'amour. Véronique Verbruggen était pleurée mais on ne comprenait pas. Qui aimait qui, qui était aimé de qui. L'article évoquait une invitation à rendre hommage à la disparue. Que ceux qui ont connu et aimé Véronique Verbruggen soient les bienvenus. Or, à ses propos, tout laissait à penser que Titus Séguier ne quitterait pas sa maison de Finiels, un petit village du mont Lozère, pour honorer sa mémoire. Il s'était pourtant juré de ne jamais décevoir cette femme, avait-il glissé au journaliste avant d'interrompre leur conversation.

De cette femme, directrice d'une petite maison d'édition, on savait un peu plus. Sa complice de longue date, la céramiste italienne Francesca Orsini, parlait d'une personnalité secrète dont le professionnalisme, la capacité d'écoute et l'engagement avaient permis de faire des éditions du Pont une maison au catalogue exigeant, défendant des artistes injustement oubliés. Véronique Verbruggen s'était spécialisée dans les monographies de petits maîtres de la peinture, dont le drame était d'avoir croisé les grands noms de

la discipline, éternellement condamnés à jouer les figurants dans les cours d'histoire de l'art. Si leurs toiles ressortent de temps en temps de l'oubli, c'est pour illustrer un événement ancien dans un magazine – on sollicitait souvent Véronique pour cette raison – mais sans qu'on les crédite d'une quelconque valeur artistique. Les proches de Véronique, un groupe restreint qui aimait gravir les cinq étages du vieil immeuble parisien de la rue Cassette, le siège de la maison, témoignaient de la ferveur de cette directrice de quarante-trois ans, longue liane qui peinait à dérouler son mètre quatre-vingt-deux, les épaules maladroitement repliées. Il fallait la voir batailler pour défendre les livres auxquels elle croyait. Par une indiscretion, on apprenait aussi que les fragiles éditions avaient plusieurs fois failli sombrer et qu'elles s'étaient chaque fois miraculeusement relevées.

L'article ne proposait qu'une illustration de mauvaise qualité, on y découvrait le sigle « VV » des couvertures de la maison, sobre, élégant, qui, ici, n'apportait aucune information utile. Pour se figurer Véronique, il suffisait d'introduire son nom sur n'importe quel moteur de recherche. Sous l'onglet « images » apparaissait un visage anguleux aux pommettes hautes, les yeux verts en forme d'amandes, les cheveux châtons coupés court. Aucun de ces portraits ne rendait justice à la beauté de l'éditrice, « une beauté lunaire » avait un jour lâché Francesca, ce qui ne voulait pas dire grand-chose, si ce n'est que Véronique dégageait une lumière singulière, un peu glacée, qui n'était pas sans évoquer les peintres flamands auxquels elle s'intéressait.

Que savons-nous de l'existence de ceux qui nous entourent ? Que nous montrent-ils d'eux-mêmes ? Que dissimulent-ils ? Mina, sa fille de vingt et un ans, qui sortait doucement de l'adolescence et venait de s'inscrire au conservatoire de musique en classe de piano, s'était exprimée avec prudence, dans un style probablement remanié par le journaliste : « Ma mère avait une façon bien à elle de travailler, d'aimer, de respecter les règles et de les transgresser.

Je veux rester fidèle à ce qu'elle était. » Mais que savait Mina de sa mère ?

Le corps sans vie de Véronique est découvert un après-midi de mai par un randonneur occasionnel. L'homme est parti d'un hôtel-restaurant de Villefort où, simple coïncidence, Véronique a l'habitude de déjeuner. Il est en train de franchir le col de Rabusat sur le GR70, appelé aussi « chemin de Stevenson », lorsqu'il s'arrête pour une première pause. Un panneau vient de lui préciser qu'il se trouve à 1 099 mètres, l'information le réjouit, si bien que l'homme photographie la plaque avec son téléphone portable. L'absence de réseau l'empêche d'envoyer l'image à sa compagne. L'homme respire profondément et regarde autour de lui.

Plus le randonneur grimpe, plus il a la sensation de faire corps avec le paysage. La ligne de crête est merveilleuse. À part de rares clarines, on n'entend plus les bruits de la civilisation. Le randonneur est bercé par le chant des oiseaux. Il se plaît à écouter le bruissement des feuilles, tente de les différencier d'un arbre à l'autre, suit des yeux les couples de papillons multicolores qui s'affolent à son arrivée, le vol d'un petit rapace. Ses oreilles bourdonnent. L'altitude ? il n'est pas impossible que ce soit un sentiment de plénitude. Au loin il voit des herbes hautes qui plient sous le vent, des chaos de pierres qu'il confond avec des troupeaux de moutons, des sommets brumeux et bleutés. Il ne se doute pas un instant que d'ici quelques heures il acceptera de livrer le récit de cette journée à un stagiaire du Midi Libre. Dans ce temps suspendu, il pense que cela fait des années qu'il ne s'est pas senti aussi léger.

Son rythme de marche est soutenu, les branchages craquent sous ses pas lorsqu'il décide de dévier de sa trajectoire pour ramener un bouquet d'arnicas. Des ailes lui poussent, le randonneur veille à bien poser les pieds sur le sol de plus en plus escarpé, il cherche ses appuis, se retient parfois à un buisson, à une touffe

de genêts, s'amuse de l'effort. Mais soudain l'homme s'arrête. Il voudrait n'être jamais venu ici, son corps se glace, il étouffe un cri. Il ne se tourne plus vers le ciel mais redescend vers la vallée. Il cherche une route, une vraie, avec des voitures et du bitume. Le jour devient affreux et triste. Affreux pour le randonneur, affreux pour ceux qui ont connu et aimé Véronique Verbruggen.



# The Map of Regret

Nathalie Skowronek

Translated from French by Jeffrey Zuckerman

*The name Veronica is supposed to have arisen  
by mistake and ignorance, being probably  
derived from vera icon... true image.*

The Imperial Dictionary

The article raised far more questions than it answered. It was, by all accounts, a matter of love. Véronique Verbruggen was being mourned, and yet the details of who loved who, of who was loved by who, didn't add up. The article mentioned a memorial for the dearly departed. Those who had known and loved Véronique Verbruggen were apparently welcome, and yet Titus Séguier seemed disinclined to leave his home in Finiels, a hamlet on the slopes of Mont Lozère, to pay his respects. Come hell or high water, he swore to the reporter before cutting the conversation short, he would never let this woman down.

This woman, the director of a small publishing house, was a matter of far less ambiguity. Her long-time confidante, the Italian ceramicist Francesca Orsini, alluded to her reserved personality, to the professionalism, receptiveness, and attentiveness that had been essential to the Éditions du Pont, a publishing house with an exacting list that elevated unfairly forgotten artists. Véronique Verbruggen specialised in monographs on minor masters of painting whose fate had been to cross paths with the medium's shining lights, and as a result to remain bit players on the grand stage of art history. The few times that their canvases did reemerge from obscurity, it was to add historical color

in a magazine — people often reached out to Véronique for that reason — but without any presumption of actual artistic value. Véronique's close acquaintances, a close-knit group that often made its way up to her top-floor office in an old building on Paris's rue Cassette, bore witness to this forty-three-year-old director's devotion; it was a struggle for her to stand up and straighten out the hunched-over curves of her willowy, nearly six-foot frame. It was really something to see her take to the bully pulpit for the books she most cared about. Only the occasional rumor hinted at just how precarious her business was, just how many times it had nearly gone under, just how miraculously she had kept it on a steady footing.

The article only had one rather poor photo. Barely visible was the sober and elegant VV that emblematised the publishing house but conveyed no useful information here. Picturing Véronique was simply a matter of entering her name into any search engine. Under the "images" tab was an angular face with high cheekbones, green and almond-shaped eyes, close-cropped chestnut hair. None of these portraits did justice to the publisher's beauty, "a lunar beauty," as Francesca had once put it, an adjective that was almost meaningless, unless it was how Véronique exuded a singular, almost icy radiance not unlike those Flemish painters in which she took such interest.

What can we know of the lives of those around us? What can they show us of themselves, and what can they hide? Mina, her twenty-one-year-old daughter, who had slipped deftly from adolescence into a prestigious piano program at a music conservatory, had chosen her words carefully, her lines likely rewritten by the reporter: "My mother had a particular way of working, loving, playing by the rules, breaking them. My hope is to uphold as faithfully as I can the example she set." But what could Mina know of her mother?

Véronique's lifeless body was found by a day hiker one May afternoon. The man had set out from a hotel in Villefort with a restaurant where Véronique, by sheer coincidence, often took her lunch. He was about to cross the Rabusat pass across the GR70, which was also called the Stevenson Path, when he stopped to catch his breath. A signpost showed that he was now 1099 meters up; the news so delighted him that he took a picture of the plaque with his cell phone. Because there was no network, the image hadn't gone through to his partner. The man's breath was halting as he looked all around.

The farther the hiker went, the more he felt like he was becoming one with the landscape. The profile the peak cut was a beautiful one. Apart from the tinkling of cowbells, there was no sound of civilisation to be heard. The birds' song lulled him. He reveled in listening to the leaves' rustle, in telling apart the various trees, in tracking the pair of iridescent butterflies that his arrival had sent fluttering, in watching a small bird of prey take wing. His ears buzzed. Was it the altitude? It was entirely possible this could have just been a sensation of fullness. In the distance he could make out tall grasses bending under the wind, heaps of rocks that looked rather like flocks of sheep, hazy and bluish summits. Not for a minute did he suspect that in just a few hours he would be recounting this entire day to a cub reporter at *Le Midi Libre*. In this liminal moment, he thought about how it had been years since he had felt so free, so light.

His pace was steady, branches snapped under his feet when he decided to go off-trail to gather some arnicas. Propelled by a renewed burst of energy, the hiker had to remember to look where he was putting his feet on the increasingly steep terrain. He kept checking his bearings, steadying himself here and there by a bush, a copse of broom. This exertion delighted him. And then the man stopped dead in his tracks. He stifled a shriek, an icy shiver ran down his body. He suddenly wished he'd never

ventured out in the first place. His sights were now set not skyward but down toward the valley. He was looking for a road, an actual one, with asphalt and cars. The day had turned ghastly and sad. Ghastly for the hiker, ghastly for those who had known and loved Véronique Verbruggen.

# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



**Lana Bastašić**  
**Uhvati zeca**  
***Catch the Rabbit***

Buybook, Sarajevo, 2019  
Language: Bosnian  
ISBN: 978-9-9583-0443-9

## BIOGRAPHY

**L**ana Bastašić was born in Zagreb in 1986. She majored in English and holds a master's degree in cultural studies. She has published two collections of short stories, one book of children's stories and one of poetry. *Catch the Rabbit*, her first novel, was published in Belgrade in 2018 and reprinted in Sarajevo in 2019. It was shortlisted for the

2019 NIN award and was translated into Catalan and Spanish in 2020. Her short stories have been included in regional anthologies and magazines throughout the former Yugoslavia. She has won Best Short Story at the Zija Dizdarević competition in Fojnica; the Jury Award at the 'Carver: Where I'm Calling From' festival in Podgorica; Best Short Story at the Ulaznica festival in Zrenjanin; Best Play by a Bosnian Playwright (*Kamerni teatar 55*) in Sarajevo and the Targa Unesco Prize for poetry in Trieste. In 2016, she co-founded Escola Bloom in Barcelona and she co-edits the school's literary magazine *Carn de cap*. She is one of the creators of the '3+3 sisters' project, which aims to promote women writers of the Balkans.

## SYNOPSIS

*Catch the Rabbit* is a story about two Bosnian women and their complicated friendship, structured as a Balkanic mirror of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Twelve years after they last saw each other, Sara receives a phone call from Lejla and decides to go on a road trip from Mostar to Vienna in order to find Armin, Lejla's long-lost brother. But the journey will prove to be much more than an innocuous reconnection

of old school friends: it is a road to a Balkanized 'heart of darkness', where Lejla's life was reshaped by strict identity politics and her sense of self was lost. Growing up in a Serbian family, Sara has had all the privileges denied to her best friend and has managed to repress her guilt together with her mother tongue. Now, years later, she has to go down the 'rabbit hole' of her language and bear the Coleridgean burden of telling the story over and over again.

## ♥ JURY REPORT

The novel *Catch the Rabbit* by Lana Bastašić could be regarded as a generational book, not only because it comes from an author whose generation is now mature in terms of literary years, but also because she is firmly committed to the verbal-ideological perspective of a theme in the literary community, articulating new voices. Inspired by the electric nature of the so-called Balkan issues and addressing the issues of war and post-war society, Lana Bastašić gives voice to those who grew up during that time (with a literary style close to south Slavic critical mimeticism). If in the past two decades we have read books by writers from disillusioned generations whose utopia has been betrayed, *Catch the Rabbit* introduces us to those who



not only grew up in a dystopian world, but who never had a utopia. This is just one of the reasons why the physical and emotional states associated with the sense of pleasure in this novel are represented darkly. The characters were not destined for joy. In addition, Lana Bastašić introduces a rare subject in the south Slavic literary field – female friendship. *Catch the Rabbit* also features an original approach to the issue of identity, and readers are warned that the heroines have been raised in a culture with a masculine literary canon, and thus they will get a new perspective on the construction of a literary character. We strongly believe that this novel will find new readers in new languages and can help to enlighten the dark heritage of the wars that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia.



# Uhvati zeca

Lana Bastašić



## 1

da počnemo ispočetka. Imaš nekoga i onda ga nemaš. I to je otprilike cijela priča. Samo što bi ti rekla da ne možeš *imati* drugu osobu. Ili da kažem *ona* ? Možda je tako bolje, to bi ti se svidjelo. Da budeš *ona* u nekoj knjizi. Dobro.

Ona bi rekla da ne možeš nekoga *imati*. Ali ne bi bila u pravu. Možeš posjedovati ljude za sramotno malo. Samo što ona voli sebe da posmatra kao nužno pravilo za funkcionisanje cijelog kosmosa. A istina je da *možeš* imati nekoga, samo ne nju. Ne možeš imati Lejlu. Osim ako je ne dokrajčiš, lijepo je uokviriš i okačiš na zid. Mada, da li smo to i dalje mi kad jednom stanemo? Jedno znam sigurno: zaustavljanje i Lejla nikada nisu išli zajedno. Zato i jeste tek razmazotina na sve i jednoj fotografiji. Nikada nije znala da se zaustavi.

Čak i sada, unutar ovog teksta, osjetim kako se koprca. Kada bi mogla, zavukla bi mi se između dvije rečenice kao moljac među dva rebra na venecijaneru, pa bi mi dokrajčila priču iznutra. Sebe bi preobukla u svjetlucave krpe kakve su joj se oduvijek svidale, produžila si noge, povećala grudi, dodala koji val u kosu. A mene bi iskasapila, ostavila tek poneki pramen da visi preko četvrtaste glave, dala mi govornu manu, prošepala lijevu nogu, izmislila urođeni deformitet tako da mi olovka zauvijek ispada. Možda bi otišla i korak dalje, sposobna je ona za takvu podlost – možda me

uopšte ne bi ni pomenula. Napravila bi od mene nedovršenu skicu. To bi ti učinila, zar ne? Pardon, *ona*. To bi *ona* učinila da je ovdje. Ali *ja* sam ta koja priča ovu priču. Mogu da joj uradim šta god želim. Ona mi ne može ništa. *Ona* je tri udarca u tastaturu. Mogla bih još večeras da bacim laptop u mukli Dunav, onda će i nje nestati, iscuriće joj krhki pikseli u ledenu vodu i isprazniti sve što je ikada bila u daleko Crno more. Prethodno će zaobići Bosnu kao grofica kakvog prosjaka na putu ka operi. Mogla bih da je završim ovom rečenicom tako da je više nema, da nestane, da se pretvori u blijedo lice na maturalnoj fotografiji, da se zaboravi u urbanoj legendi iz srednjoškolskih dana, da se tek nazire u maloj hrpi zemlje koju smo ostavile tamo iza njene kuće pored one trešnje. Mogla bih da je ubijem tačkom.

Biram da nastavim zato što mi se može. Ovdje sam makar sigurna, daleko od njenog suptilnog nasilja. Nakon cijele decenije vraćam se svom jeziku, njenom jeziku i svim ostalim jezicima koje sam svojevrijedno napustila, kao nasilnog muža, jednog popodneva u Dublinu. Poslije toliko godina, nisam sigurna koji bi tačno to jezik bio. A sve zbog čega? Zbog sasvim obične Lejle Begić, u izlizanim patikama na čičak i farmerkama sa, pobogu, cirkonima na dupetu. Šta se uopšte desilo između nas? Da li je to važno? Dobre priče ionako nikada nisu o onome što se dešava. Ostaju samo slike, poput crteža na trotoaru, godine padaju po njima kao kiša. Možda bi trebalo da napravim od nas slikovnicu. Nešto što niko sem nas dvije neće shvatiti. Ali i slikovnice treba nekako da počnu. Mada naš početak nije tek čutljivi sluga hronologije. Naš je početak bio i prošao nekoliko puta, vukao me je za rukav kao gladno kuće. *Hajde. Hajde da počnemo opet*. Mi smo neprestano počinjale i završavale, uvukla bi se u membranu moje svakodnevice kao virus. Ulazi Lejla, izlazi Lejla. Mogu početi bilo gdje. Na primjer u Parku Sv. Stefana u Dublinu. Telefon vibrira u džepu mantila. Nepoznati broj. Onda stisnem ono proketo dugme i kažem *da?* na jeziku koji nije moj.

„Halo, ti.”

Nakon dvanaest godina potpune tišine, ponovo čujem njen glas. Govori brzo, kao da smo se tek juče razišle, bez ikakve potrebe da se premoste rupe u znanju, prijateljstvu, hronologiji. Mogu da kažem samo jednu jedinu riječ: „Lejla.” Ona, po običaju, ne zatvara. Pominje restoran, posao u restoranu, nekog tipa čije ime prvi put čujem. Pominje Beč. Ja i dalje samo „Lejla”. Njeno je ime naizgled bilo bezazleno – sićušna stabljika usred mrtve zemlje. Išcupala sam ga iz svojih pluća misleći da je to ništa. Lej-la. Ali s tom je nedužnom grančicom izronilo iz kaljuge najduže i najdeblje korijenje, čitava šuma slova, riječi i rečenica. Čitav jezik sahranjen duboko u meni, jezik koji je strpljivo čekao tu malu riječ da protegne svoje okoštale ekstremitete i ustane kao da nikada nije ni spavao. Lejla.

„Odakle ti ovaj broj?” pitam je. Stojim nasred parka, zaustavila sam se tik ispred jednog hrasta i ne mičem se, kao da očekujem da se drvo pomakne u stranu i pusti me da prođem.

„Kakve to veze sad ima?” odgovara ona i nastavlja svoj monolog: „Slušaj, moraš da dođeš po mene... Je l' me čuješ? Slaba je veza.”

„Da dođem po tebe? Ne razumijem. Šta...”

„Da, da dođeš po mene. Ja sam u Mostaru i dalje.”

*I dalje.* Za sve godine našeg prijateljstva nije nijednom bila pomenula Mostar, niti smo ikada tamo otputovale, a sada je odjednom predstavljao neospornu, opštepoznatu činjenicu.

„U Mostaru? Šta ćeš u Mostaru?” pitam je. I dalje gledam u drvo i brojim u glavi godine. Četrdeset i osam godišnjih doba bez njenog glasa. Znam da sam negdje krenula, ima ta moja putanja veze sa Majklom, i zavjesama, i apotekom... Ali Lejla je rekla rez i sve je stalo. Drveće, tramvaji, ljudi. Kao umorni glumci.

„Slušaj, to je duga priča, Mostar... Ti i dalje voziš, je l' da?”

„Vozim, ali ne kontam šta... Je l' ti znaš da sam ja u Dublinu?” Riječi mi ispadaju iz usta i lijepe se po mom mantilu kao gomila čičaka. Kad sam posljednji put govorila *taj jezik*?

„Da, vrlo si važna”, kaže Lejla, već spremna da obezvrijedi sve što sam mogla da doživim u njenom odsustvu. „Živiš na ostrvu”, kaže, „i vjerovatno čitaš onu dosadnu knjižurinu po cijele dane i ideš na branč sa svojim pametnim prijateljima, je l' de? Super. Nego slušaj... Treba da dođeš po mene što prije. Moram do Beča, a oduzeli mi ovi majmuni ovdje vozačku i niko ne konta da moram...”

„Lejla”, pokušavam da je prekinem. Čak i nakon svih tih godina, savršeno mi je jasno šta se dešava. To je ona njena logika prema kojoj je gravitacija kriva ako te neko gurne niz stepenice, sve drveće je posađeno kako bi ona mogla da se popiša iza istoga, a svi putevi, koliko god krivudavi i daleki bili, imaju jednu zajedničku tačku, isti čvor – nju. Rim je šala.

„Slušaj me, nemam mnogo vremena. Stvarno nemam koga drugog da pitam, svi nešto seru da su zauzeti, istina nije baš ni da imam nešto mnogo prijatelja ovdje, a Dino ne može da vozi zbog koljena...”

„Ko je Dino?”

„...tako da kontam ako odletiš za Zagreb još ovaj vikend i sjedneš na autobus, mada bi Dubrovnik bio bolja opcija.”

„Lejla, ja sam u Dublinu. Ne mogu jednostavno da dođem po tebe u Mostar i vozim te do Beča. Jesi li ti normalna?”

Ona ćuti neko vrijeme, vazduh joj napušta nosnice i udara u telefon. Zvuči kao strpljiva majka koja se svim silama bori da ne lupi šamar djetetu. Nakon nekoliko trenutaka njenog teškog disanja i mog gledanja u tvrdoglavi hrast, kaže mi jednu riječ: „Moraš.”

# Catch the Rabbit

Lana Bastašić

Translated from Bosnian by the author

## 1

to start from the beginning. You have someone and then you don't. And that's the whole story. Except *you* would say you can't *have* a person. Or should I say *she*? Perhaps that's better, you'd like that. To be a *she* in a book. All right, then.

She would say you can't have a person. But she would be wrong. You *can* own people for embarrassingly little. Only, she likes to think of herself as the general rule for the workings of the whole cosmos. And the truth is you *can* have someone, just not her. You can't have Lejla. Unless you finish her off, put her in a nice frame and hang her on the wall. Although, is it really still us once we stop, once we freeze for the picture? One thing I know for sure: stopping and Lejla never went together well. That's why she is a blur in every single photograph. She could never stop.

Even now, within this text, I can almost feel her fidget. If she could, she would sneak between two sentences like a moth between two slats on a Venetian blind, and would finish my story off from the inside. She would change into the sparkly rags she always liked, lengthen her legs, enhance her breasts, add some waves to her hair. Me she would disfigure, leaving a single lock of hair on my square head; she would give me a speech impediment, make my left leg limp, think up an inherent deformity so I keep dropping the pencil. Perhaps she would take it one step further, she is capable of such villainy – she wouldn't even mention me at all. Turn me into an unfinished sketch. You would do that, wouldn't you? Sorry – *she*.

She would do that if she were here. But *I* am the one telling the story. I can do whatever I want with her. *She* can't do anything. *She* is three hits on the keyboard. I could throw the laptop into the mute Viennese Danube tonight and she would be gone, her fragile pixels would bleed into the cold water and empty everything she ever was out into the Black Sea, dodging Bosnia like a countess dodges a beggar on her way to the opera. I could end her with this sentence so that she no longer is, she would disappear, become a pale face in a prom photo, forgotten in an urban legend from high school, mentioned in some drunk moron's footnote where he boasts of all those he *had* before he *settled down*; she would be barely detectable in the little heap of earth we left there behind her house next to the cherry tree. I could kill her with a full stop.

I choose to continue because I can. At least here I feel safe from her subtle violence. After a whole decade, I go back to my language – her language, and all the other languages I voluntarily abandoned, like one would a violent husband – one afternoon in Dublin. After all these years, I'm not sure which language that is. And all that because of what? Because of the totally ordinary Lejla Begić, in her old sneakers with straps and jeans with, for god's sakes, diamanté on the butt. What happened between us? Does it matter? Good stories are never about what happens anyway. Pictures are all that's left, like pavement paintings, years fall over them like rain. But our beginning was never a simple, silent observer of chronology. Our beginning came and went several times, pulling on my sleeve like a hungry puppy. *Let's go. Let's start again.* We would constantly start and end, she would sneak into the fabric of the everyday like a virus. Enters Lejla, exits Lejla. I can start anywhere, really. Dublin, St. Stephen's Green, for instance. The cellphone vibrating in my coat pocket. Unknown number. Then I press the damn button and say *yes* in a language not my own.

'Hello, you.'



After twelve years of complete silence, I hear her voice again. She speaks quickly, as if we parted yesterday, without the need to bridge gaps in knowledge, friendship, and chronology. I can only utter one word, *Lejla*. As always, she won't shut up. She mentions a restaurant, a job in a restaurant, some guy whose name I've never heard before. She mentions Vienna. And I, still, just *Lejla*. Her name was seemingly harmless – a little shoot amidst dead earth. I plucked it out of my lungs thinking it meant nothing. *Lejla*. But along with the innocent stem, the longest and thickest roots came spilling out from the mud, an entire forest of letters, words and sentences. A whole language buried deep inside me, a language that had waited patiently for that little word to stretch its numb limbs and rise as if it had never slept at all. *Lejla*.

'Where did you get this number?' I ask. I'm standing in the middle of the park, stopped right in front of an oak, paralyzed, as if waiting for the tree to step aside and let me past.

'What does it matter?' she answers and goes on with her monologue, 'Listen, you gotta come pick me up... Can you hear me? The connection's bad.'

'Pick you up? I don't understand. What...'

'Yeah, pick me up. I'm still in Mostar.'

*Still*. During all those years of our friendship she had never once mentioned Mostar. We had never been there, either, and now it somehow represented an indisputable, common-knowledge fact.

'In Mostar? What are you doing in Mostar?'

I'm still looking at the tree, counting the years in my head. Forty-eight seasons without her voice. I know I'm going somewhere, my route has something to do with Michael, and the curtains, and the pharmacy, but all that has come to a standstill now. *Lejla* showed up, said cut, and everything froze. Trees, trams, people. Like tired actors.

'Listen, Mostar is a long story... You still drive, right?'

'I do, but I don't get what... Do you know I'm in Dublin?'

I keep looking around me afraid that someone would hear me. Words fall out of my mouth and stick to my coat like burrs. When was the last time I spoke *that language*?

'Yeah, you're very important,' *Lejla* says, ready to devalue the entirety of what I might have lived in her absence. 'Living on an island, probably reading that boring big-ass book all day long, having brunch with your brainy friends, right? Awesome. Anyway, listen... You gotta come get me as soon as you can. I gotta go to Vienna and these morons took my license and nobody gets that I have to...'

'*Lejla*,' I try to interrupt her. Even after all these years it is perfectly clear to me what's going on. It's that particular logic of hers that says gravity is to blame if someone pushes you down a flight of stairs, that all trees were planted so that she could take a piss behind them, and that all roads, no matter how meandering and long, have one connecting dot, the same knot – her. Rome is a joke.

'Listen, I don't have a lot of time. I really have no one else to ask, everyone's bullshitting me with how busy they are, not that I have a lot of friends here to be honest, and Dino can't drive 'cause of his knee...'

'Who's Dino?'

'... so I was thinking you could fly to Zagreb this weekend and get on a bus, though maybe Dubrovnik would be better.'

'*Lejla*, I'm in Dublin. I can't just pick you up in Mostar and drive you to Vienna. Are you insane?'

She's quiet for a while; the air leaves her nostrils and hits the receiver. She sounds like a patient mother doing her best not to slap a little kid. After some moments of her heavy breathing and my staring at the stubborn oak, she says, 'You have to.'

# CROATIA

**Maša Kolanović**

## **Poštovani kukci i druge jezive priče**

***Dear Insects and Other Scary Stories***

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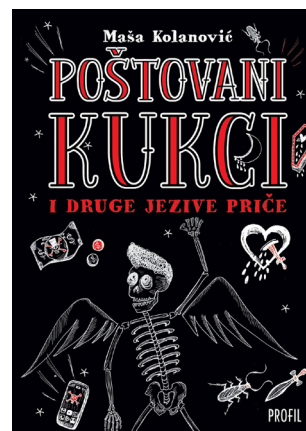
Naklada Ljevak, Zagreb, 2011), and has also edited *Komparativni postsocijalizam: slavenska iskustva* (*Comparative Postsocialism: Slavic Experiences*, Zagreb, Slavic School and FF Press, Zagreb, 2013) and *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia* (with D. Jelača and D. Lugarić, Palgrave Macmillan, New York and London, 2017).

### **BIOGRAPHY**

**M**aša Kolanović (born in Zagreb, 1979) works as an associate professor in the Department of Croatian Studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. She graduated from the same faculty with a degree in Croatian language and comparative literature and a PhD. So far, she has published a number of articles on literature and popular culture, as well as the following novels: *Sloboština Barbie* (V.B.Z., Zagreb, 2008; translated into German as *Underground Barbie*, Prospero Verlag, Berlin-Münster, 2012) and *Poštovani kukci i druge jezive priče* (*Dear Insects and Other Scary Stories*, Profil knjiga d.o.o., Zagreb, 2019). She has also published two poetry books, *Pijavice za usamljene* (*Leeches for the Lonely*, Student Center, Zagreb, 2001) and *Jamerika* (Algoritam, Zagreb, 2013), and one monograph, *Udamnik! Buntovnik? Potrošač...* (*Striker! Rebel? Consumer...*,

### **SYNOPSIS**

This book tells of the absurdity of existence, connected to ruthless capitalism, with protagonists who try to preserve their dignity while floundering like bugs and sometimes literally 'cracking up'. There are 12 stories with a range of compelling topics. An old aunt afraid of being buried alive decides to bring her cellphone to the grave, asking her family to call her the day after the funeral. A storyteller reads advertising slogans from IKEA's catalogue to her dying husband and the former director of a department store. A girl whose mother died of colon cancer opens her mum's wardrobe to find her 'spending diary' about how and what she bought through eBay, frantically spending money in order not to think about her diagnosis. An old father finds himself in the hands of a teleoperator with whom he signed an unfavourable contract, and begins to get huge bills because he can't handle technology. A child asks her



parents to get her exactly the sort of doll she happened to see in a documentary about Chernobyl. All 12 of them are stories in which life and death intertwine alongside laughter, some tears in the eyes and a lump in the throat.

### **♥ JURY REPORT**

*Dear Insects and Other Scary Stories* is a transitional Gothic and post-socialist Twilight Zone book, written in eerie yet realistic prose, and with an engaging and satirical narrative about the consequences of social change in a transitional society. The critical blade is specifically focused on the dehumanising characteristics of capitalist reality. Through skillful storytelling, the author creates a kind of Kafkaesque existential anxiety that goes beyond the description of a local community, hitting the sore points of globalised society. Consumption that replaces humanity, motherhood that it is not decent to talk about, banks as sinister pillars of our society, advertisements intensifying unhealthy cravings ... this is the world explored in this

masterfully written work of prose. With not only her narrative voice, but also her original drawings, Maša Kolanović portrays that difficult-to-express excess of the material side of human existence. The problems are universal, so the characters are easy to identify with, but the main value of this narrative is not just storytelling, but the author's compassion and humaneness. These are dark and absurd yet deeply intimate, powerful and socially sensitive stories. In short, a skillfully written, brave and strangely good book.



# Poštovani kukci i druge jezive priče

Maša Kolanović



## Kukci su gotovo kao ljudi

Ne mogu više. Želim se riješiti ove starudije čim prije. Samo me podsjeća na umiranje. Ispred zgrade je već groblje starog namještaja. Nakupine očerupanih sofa, iščupanih kutnih garnitura, rastavljenih dječjih polica s naljepnicama nogometaša i Štrumpfova, rasklimanih komoda i prevrnutih ladicica koje su počele gnjiliti. A gnjilit će još više na kiši koja je upravo počela sipiti. To su ljudi sami izbacili krupni otpad prije nekoliko tjedana. Valjda da se riješe stvari na kraju godine. Kao neko praznovjerje. Ne zna se koliko će trajati to čišćenje ni tko će to pokupiti. Sigurno će trunuti tu pred nama još mjesecima. Cigici se već dva dana motaju po kvartu oko tih hrpi. Prebiri što se da iskoristiti. Ja idem danas ravno u Ikeu. Naći ću neki namještaj, lagan i prozračan ko perce. I ja ću doprinijeti hrpi pa nek po njoj prebire ko hoće. Pobacat ću sva ova masivna drva i glomazni kauč na razvlačenje, za uvijek ću otpisati tamno smeđe vitrine i stolčice. Bit ću skandinavski siva, laka i moderna. Pitat ću onog malog s prvog kata da mi sav taj otpisani namještaj iznese van na tu hrpu, dat ću mu neku kintu, ionako je bez posla, živi valjda na gr-

bači roditelja, samo se muva tu okolo po cijele dane. Prvo se želim riješiti glomaznog zelenog kauča. Na njemu samo vidim Josu, kako se smanjuje, kako se pretvara u kukca, kako umire. Ponekad jastuci i deka u zgužvanoj kombinaciji oblikuju njegovu skvrčenu konturu na tom kauču, fetus-položaj u kojem je ležao pod zadnje dane. Onda ga stvarno vidim kao da je još uvijek živ i još uvijek tamo leži, ali umjesto ruku i nogu ima ticala kao tanke obrise nabora prekrivača koji se granaju oko izbočine središta od jastuka. Prošlo je već pola godine. Svu sam njegovu robu dala za izbjeglice u Porin. Bilo je i nekoliko finih odijela. Dok je još bio direktor. Direktor Name. Dok je žario i palio sredinom osamdesetih. Na kraju od svega toga nije ostalo ništa. Ručkovi, putovanja, ugovori, odbori, sastanci. Što mu je to vrijedilo u fetus-položaju. Prvo, mirovina po kratkom postupku ranih devedesetih. Nije bio podoban. Još i Srbin. Ajde mali plus, žena Hrvatica. Iako bi bolje bilo obratno. Nije se prešaltao dovoljno brzo. Tko ga je častio, taj mu je kasnije okretao leđa. Infarkt jedan, infarkt drugi, a onda rak. Ti rakovi, to se samo razmiljelo po nama od rata. Ko da smo pješčane plaže. Samo čekaš ko je idući. Sve sam prošla zajedno s njim. Od prvog do zadnjeg dana. Djeca? Što od njih možeš tražiti. Imaju oni svojih briga. Bore se za vlastiti život. Idem sad u Ikeu, pobacat ću svu ovu starudiju po kojoj se umiralo, po kojoj se plakalo, pisalo i sralo. Istrgat ću ovu drvenu lamperiju i stare tapete. Prebući ću sve u novi skandinavski dizajn, bit će ko u ovim modernim apotekama. Sravnit ću sa zemljom sav taj gnjili namještaj, kuhinjske elemente po kojima se cijede mosuri masti koje ne mogu ni svrdlom više sastrugati. Sve ću soriti i početi ispočetka. Možda tako pronađem i leglo žohara koji ko meci izlijeću noću i gube se u svom tom masivnom namještaju. O, dobro ću im nasuti leglo otrovom. Vidim ih. Svugdje ih vidim. Više ne znam jesu li stvarni ili nisu.

Spiskat ću i ono malo uštedevine jer ko zna koliko još imam do kraja. Naštedjeli smo se mi s kojekakvim štednjama u dinarima, devizama i kunama. Samo radimo, odričemo se i štedimo ko pče-



lice pa sve to onda propadne, pojede neka inflacija, popapa banka, država. A mi vječno odgađamo život. Štedimo za crne dane. Kao da nam ovaj naš život nije dovoljno crn. Evo, sad i ta moja sestra. Nešto su joj otkrili ispod pazuha. I sad čeka rezultate. Ne želim je zvati, ne želim znati rezultate. Barem ne danas. Dosta mi je polaganog umiranja. Pa ti onda štedi! Za koju mrtvu budućnost, ma za koju starost. Ta kad dođe sa svojim nevoljama niti jedna štednja je ne može podmititi. Kao što su htjeli podmititi ovog mog, da pogoduje, da rasproda pa kad nije htio, noga u guzicu i stiže nova garnitura. Još i Srbin. Poslije su ti isti pozavršavali po zatvorima. A mi smo se tad već ispisali iz javnog života. Nismo ni olakšanje osjetili. Dobro, ja sam bar zadržala posao u državnoj firmi koja nije propala i imala kakvu-takvu plaću do kraja radnog vijeka. Idem u Ikeu, sad mi je barem blizu. Kad se samo sjetim odlazaka u Graz i ustajanja u četiri ujutro. Vozi po mraku, do granice, pa kroz Sloveniju. Pred zoru stižemo u predgrađe Graza. Još je mrak. A ti ne znaš gdje bi prije, vrijeme curi, tijelom šiklja neki suludi adrenalin. Svi ti dućani na jednom mjestu, kupovao si koliko si mogao posakrivati u auto, uglavnom sitnice. Neki stolčić na jednostavno sklapanje, kakav prekrivač, set tanjura. Ništa veliko. Nešto veće ionako ne bi mogao prevesti u gepeku. Malo odjeće kakve nema kod nas. Moderne. Iz budućnosti. Nije ni previše skupa. A onaj moj bi uvijek nešto prigovarao. Direktor Name pa mrzi šoping. U panici da ga ne uhvate da nešto šverca. Da živi još sto godina, taj bi nosio valjda jedno te isto odijelo i košulju s masnom kragom, ležao poslije-podne s novinama na onom oronulom kauču s kojeg federi budu čovjeka oštro u rebra. Glavno da se posluje pošteno i po propisima. Eno mu ih na! Tad sam još i poželjela da bude malo korumpiran, to je bilo u modi tih godina kad se sve mijenjalo, kad je socijalizam umirao, a mi smo se nadali boljemu. Svi su tad malo otpustili remen. A onda je počelo žestoko. Poslije kuda koji mili moji. Sad nam je Ikea tu pred nosom. U poslovnoj zoni Zagreb istok. Nema prelazaka granice, sakrivanja stvarčica, otkidanja etiketa, kemijanja s računima. Švedskost ne poznaje granice. Idem. Cigo pušta

neke narodnjake na mobitelu dok prebire po staroj krami. Pita me imam li što. Bit će, bit će, dragi moj, uskoro. Posvuda prevrnuti borovi. Katolički Božić je gotov. Treba dati do znanja susjedima. Borovi kao mrtvac leže ispred kontejnera za smeće. Počinju velika sniženja. Vlaga se cijedi niz sive fasade.

Ova moja krtija nikako da upali. Tko još vozi staru Škodu Favorit. Bez klime. Mrtvi direktor Name. Posljednji Mohikanac tržišnog socijalizma. Ko da mi treba nešto drugo. Ionako nigdje ne idem. Što se ovo nagradilo posvuda? Nisam se micala iz kvarta mjesecima i više ne prepoznajem grad. Nagradilo se posvuda. Ima li uopće toliko ljudi koliko se nagradilo? Umire li itko po tim novogradnjama? Zagreb istok. Poslovna zona Istok. Blizu je Industrijska zona Žitnjak. E tamo su letjele kuće Srba u zrak i tjerali su ljude, a mi o tome nismo ništa znali i pravimo se da još uvijek ne znamo. Još smo mi i dobro prošli kako su neki. Sad su i tamo izgradili nove kuće. Kao da ništa nije bilo. Ma svugdje su izgradili. Ne smijem promašiti skretanje za Ikeu. Više i ne vidim dobro. Čorava sam. Vozim u sunce. Sad kiša, sad sunce, i vrijeme je poludjelo. Nema više ni zime ko nekad. Samo neka mokra južina i sunce ispod oblaka. Ali tamo je, vidim je, plavo-žutu građevinu. Iz daleka izgleda kao dječja igračka. Evo je! Pogodila sam put. Bubri preda mnom. Sve je veća i veća. Ponedjeljak ujutro, a pun parking. Ljudi i stvari. Ikea-ljudi na plakatu. *Napravi mjesta za život.*

# Dear Insects and Other Scary Stories

*Maša Kolanović*

Translated from Croatian by Vladislav Beronja

## **Pests Are Almost Like People**

I can't take it anymore. I want to get rid of all of these relics as soon as possible. They only remind me of death. There's already a graveyard of old furniture in front of the building. A pile-up of tattered sofas, ripped out corner accents, dismantled children's bookcases stickered with soccer players and Smurfs, wobbly chests and overturned drawers that have started to mold. And they'll mold even more in the rain, which had just started sprinkling. People from the building threw out all this bulk waste a few weeks ago. Probably to get rid of things at the end of the year. Like they're heeding some old superstition. Nobody knows how long the clean-up will last nor who'll pick it up. It'll probably be rotting right here in front of us for months. Gypsies have been roaming around this neighborhood and circling around the piles for two days already. They're picking through what's useful. I'm going straight to IKEA today. I'm going to buy some furniture that's light and airy as a feather. I'll also contribute to the pile so whoever wants to pick through it, let them. I'll throw out all this bulky lumber and the massive pull out couch, I'll part with the dark brown china closet and the nightstands forever. I'll be light and modern, in sleek Scandinavian gray. I'll ask that kid on the first floor to take out all this derelict furniture to the curb, I'll even give him some dough for it, since he's without a job and probably living off his parents — he just hangs around here all day anyway. First, I want to get rid of the massive green couch. I can't stop seeing Joso on it, getting smaller, turning into a pest, dying. Sometimes, the combination of the pillow with the crumpled blanket starts looking like his scrunched outline on that

couch, the fetus-position that he settled on in his final days. Then, I can really see him, as if he's still alive and lying right there in front of me, only instead of arms and legs he has grown antennae like the thin creases on the cover that branch around the middle bulge made by the pillow. It's already been six months. I gave away all his clothes to the refugees in Porin. There were some really nice suits in that pile. From his days as a director. A director of the State Department Store. When he was the head honcho in the mid-eighties. In the end, it all came down to nothing. Fancy lunches, business trips, contracts, committees, meetings. What good is all that when you're curled up in a fetus position. First, they forced him into early retirement in the early nineties. He had fallen out of favor. And he was a Serb on top of it. Okay, he had one thing going for him, a Croat wife. But it would've been better the other way around. He didn't manage to switch allegiances fast enough. Those who had been picking up his tab were later turning their backs on him. First one heart attack, then another, and then, bam, cancer. And these cancers, they've been spreading everywhere around us ever since the war. Like we're sandy beaches. At this point, you're just waiting to see who's next. I've been through it all with him. From beginning to end. And children? What can you expect of them? They have their own worries. They're just trying to make it in this world. I'm going to IKEA now and I'll throw out all this decrepit furniture that people have been dying on, crying on, pissing and shitting on for years. I'll rip out all these wooden lighting fixtures and old wallpaper. I'll outfit everything in a new Scandinavian design, it'll be like in those sleek, modern pharmacies. I'll flatten to the ground all this moldy furniture, the kitchen sets dripping with layers of grease, which I can't scrape off even with a drill bit. I'll toss everything away and start from scratch. That way maybe I'll even find the nest of cockroaches, which have been darting out like bullets at night and getting lost in all this massive woodwork. Oh, I'll sprinkle their nest nicely with poison. I see them. I see them everywhere. I don't even know if they're real or not anymore.

I'll even squander what little savings I have, because who knows how much longer I have left to live. We've saved up with all kinds

of nest eggs, in dinars, foreign currencies, and kunas. We just work, make sacrifices and save up like bees, and then everything collapses, some inflation, some bank, or the state gobbles it all up. And we just keep putting life on hold. Saving up for rainy days. As if this life of ours isn't rainy enough. Now it's my sister's turn, too. They found something on her armpit. She's waiting for the results as we speak. I don't want to call her, I don't want to know the results. At least not today. I've had enough of this slow death. But you just go right ahead and start saving! For what dead future, for what old age. When it comes with all its troubles, no amount of savings will be able to bribe it. Just like they tried to bribe that hubby of mine, to go along, to sell the state assets when he didn't want to — a kick in the ass and in comes the new cadre. And he was a Serb on top of it. Later, all these new honchos ended up in prison. By then, we had already left public life. We didn't even feel any relief. Fine, at least I kept my job in the state firm, which didn't go under and paid me a pittance until my retirement. I'm going to IKEA, at least it's now in the neighborhood. When I remember those trips to Graz, getting up at four in the morning. Driving in the dark, up to the border, and then through Slovenia. We'd arrive in the suburbs of Graz right before dawn. It'd still be dark out. You wouldn't know where to begin, the time is ticking, and your body's pumping with some crazed adrenaline. All these stores in one place, you'd buy as much as you could hide in your car, mostly trifles. Some tiny chair that's easy to fold up, some blankets, a set of plates. Nothing big. Something bigger wouldn't fit in the trunk anyway. Some clothes that you couldn't find around here. Modern. From the future. They weren't even that expensive. And that hubby of mine would always find something to complain about. A Director of the State Department Store, but he hates shopping. He'd worry about getting caught for smuggling. If he could live a hundred more years, he'd still wear that same exact suit and that same shirt with a greasy collar, and every afternoon he'd lie with the newspaper on that same sunken couch whose springs would jab further and further into his ribs. The important thing is to do business fairly and according to regulations. Well, he can have 'em! I even wanted him to be a little more corrupt back then, it was fashionable at that time, when everything

was changing, when socialism was dying, while we hoped for the better. Everyone loosened their grip a little back then. And then it started in earnest. Afterwards, it was each man for himself and god against all. Now IKEA is right here in front of our noses. In the Zagreb-East business district. No more border crossings, hiding of trifles, ripping of price tags, doctoring of receipts. Swedishness knows no borders. I'm going. A gypsy is playing turbo-folk on his cell phone while picking through scrap. He asks me whether I've got anything. Soon enough, my darling, soon enough. Christmas trees on the ground everywhere. The Catholic Christmas is over. Somebody should let the neighbors know. Christmas trees are lying in front of the dumpster like corpses. Great savings are about to start. Water drips down the gray façades.

This clunker of mine can barely start. Who else drives an old Škoda Favorit? With no air conditioning. The dead Director of the State Department Store, that's who. The Last Mohican of market socialism. Like I need something better. It's not like I go anywhere. What's all this construction everywhere? I haven't left my neighborhood in months and now I hardly recognize the city. Construction everywhere. Are there even enough people to fit into so much construction? Is there anyone dying in this new construction? Zagreb-East. Business district East. The industrial district Žitnjak is not too far off. They were blowing up Serb houses and chasing people out of their homes over there, and we didn't know anything about it and now we pretend that we still don't. We got through it alive at least, which is more than some others can say. Now there's new houses even there. Like nothing happened. What am I saying, they've built them everywhere. I can't miss the turn for IKEA. I can't even see well anymore. I'm blind as a bat. I'm driving straight into the sun. Now rain, now shine, even the weather's gone mad. Even the winters aren't what they used to be. Just a bunch of damp wind and the sun hiding behind the clouds. But there it is, I see it, the yellow-and-blue building. It looks like a toy from afar. Here it is! I got the directions right. It's swelling in front of me. Getting bigger and bigger. Monday morning and the parking lot's full. People and things. IKEA people on the billboard. Make room for life.

# CYPRUS

**Σταύρος Χριστοδούλου**  
(Stavros Christodoulou)  
**Τη μέρα που πάγωσε  
ο ποταμός**  
*The Day the River Froze*

Kastaniotis Publications,  
Athens, 2018  
Language: Greek  
ISBN: 978-9-6003-6365-4



## BIOGRAPHY

**S**tavros Christodoulou was born in 1963 in Nicosia, Cyprus. He studied law in Athens but has never practiced the legal profession since he had already dedicated himself to journalism at the end of the 1980s. He has worked as managing director of various magazines in Greece and Cyprus and currently works for the leading Cypriot newspaper *Phileleftheros* as a columnist. His first book *Hotel National*, published by Kalentis Publications in Athens in 2016, was shortlisted for the Cyprus State Literature Prize and for a competition run by the literary magazine *Hourglass*. His second book, *The Day the River Froze*, published by Kastaniotis Editions in Athens in 2018, received the Cyprus State Literature Prize.



## SYNOPSIS

Budapest, February 12, 1985. In the bitter cold, the river freezes over and a prophecy that sounds like a croak marks the birth of Janos: 'bad seed, bad tidings'. Twenty-seven years later, the man who the oracle confirmed as 'Janos the Hungarian' is arrested in Athens as the chief suspect in the murder of famous painter Miltos Andrianos. Could this be another crime typical of the sex intrigues of male prostitution rings? Journalist Stratos Papadopoulos begins to unravel the thread of history, delving into the lives of other people, whose paths sometimes lead to and cross in the margins of Athens' new reality. Amongst the key figures in this mystery: a 60-year-old widow involved in a love affair with the Hungarian man, his wife, with whom he has a son, the offspring of a powerful political family associated with the painter, a secretive police officer and a shady figure from the underworld. In Stavros

Christodoulou's novel, no one seems above suspicion, while the truth is hidden, as always, in the details.

As the mystery unfolds, the grey waters of the Danube carry away the stories of those whose only desire was to be loved.

## ♥ JURY REPORT

The murder of a famous painter in Athens serves as the deceptively simple starting point of this novel. As the story follows the main protagonist, the narrative focuses on a variety of geographical locations and human conditions. What results has an element of alluring cosmopolitanism that endows the novel with a distinct texture and gives breadth and depth to the plot. The writer possesses great ability in conveying with convincing accuracy the topography and cultural climate of cities as disparate as Athens and Budapest. The narrative is structured around continuous flashbacks and biographical accounts by the various characters. Low life and shady individuals, immigrants, privileged locals and aristocratic socialites are successfully portrayed in all their psychological complexity and emotional ambiguity. The author successfully depicts the atmosphere of the time and the location, chronotopes that gain in interest as the story moves towards the unveiling of the murderer and his motives. The jury considers Christodoulou's novel to be the most relevant for the prize since it possesses qualities that will appeal to European readers, translators and publishers.

# Τη μερα που παγωσε ο ποταμος

Σταυρος Χριστοδουλου



## 1. Τα παιδιά του «Skála»

*Βουδαπέστη, Φεβρουάριος 1985*

«ΝΑ ΦΟΡΕΣΣΕΤΕ σκουφιά. Θα πέσουν τ' αυτιά σας από το κρύο».

Τα λόγια της γυναίκας ήχησαν υπόκωφα. Οι λέξεις αναρριχούνταν σαν από κατακόρυφο γκρεμό κι έπειτα σωριάζονταν με έναν βαρύ γδούπο σ' εκείνο το δυάρι των πενήντα τετραγωνικών όπου είχε στριμώξει τη ζωή της. Καιρό τώρα δεν την ένοιαζε τι συνέβαινε έξω απ' την πόρτα της. Πόσα χρόνια, ούτε που θυμόταν. Μπορεί πέντε, μπορεί δεκαπέντε, μπορεί κι από πάντα.

«Μήπως απ' το αφαλοκόψιμό του;» αναρωτήθηκε ψιθυριστά. Αλλά έπνιξε τις λέξεις, σαν να ντράπηκε και που το σκέφτηκε ακόμα.

Από τότε που κατάπие τη χούφτα με τα χάπια ο χρόνος δεν είχε πλέον καμιά συνοχή. Ο γιος της ήταν εφτά χρόνων. Αυτό, ναι, το θυμόταν. Ένας μικρός διάλογος που ρούφαγε λαίμαργα τη δροσιά των νιάτων της. Επί εφτά χρόνια. Καθημερινά. Από τη στιγμή κιόλας που οι πόνοι της γέννας ξέσκισαν το κορμί

της. Όταν άκουσε για πρώτη φορά το κλάμα του, ένιωσε να την παρσέρνει η άμπωτη μακριά. Κόπιασε πολύ για να πατήσει πάλι στη στεριά. Για να σταθεί στα πόδια της. Για να τον ταΐσει, να τον πλύνει, να τον ξεσκατίσει. Όσπου να τον βάλει για ύπνο –κατάκοπη, αλλά ήσυχη επιτέλους–, για να χώσει ένα χαπάκι κάτω απ' τη γλώσσα της. Το κράταγε λίγο εκεί, όσο ν'αντλήσει δύναμη, κι έπειτα το άφηνε να κυλήσει στον οισοφάγο της αργά και παρηγορητικά, απελευθερώνοντας κύματα θερμότητας που επούλωναν τις αθέατες πληγές της.

«Σύνελθε, αλλιώς θα φύγω», τη φοβέριζε ο άντρας της, καθώς την έβλεπε να χάνεται στα ύπουλα σκοτάδια του μυαλού της. Και την κάρφωνε μ' εκείνο το τραχύ βλέμμα που κάποτε ξάνοιγε τα φυλλοκάρδια της. Κάποτε, όμως. Τώρα πια στεκότανε μπροστά της κι αυτή δεν τον θωρούσε. Απλώς τον υπέμενε. Στωικά. Όμοια και τ' αγγίγματά του. «Λόγια! Μόνο για ψόφια λόγια είσαι ικανός, σαν τα σαπιοκρέατα που πουλάς στην αγορά, καημένες», του αντιγύριζε περιφρονητικά.

Η αλήθεια είναι πως ποτέ δεν πίστεψε ότι θα τους εγκατέλειπε. Δεν τον είχε ικανό για κάτι τέτοιο. Αλλά νά που δεν τον ήξερε, τελικά, τόσο καλά όσο νόμιζε. 18 Ιουνίου του 1967, Κυριακή πρωί, την επομένη των γενεθλίων του παιδιού, έφυγε. Η ανάμνηση εκείνης της μέρας σώζεται ολοζώντανη μέσα της, κι ας φύτεψε σε στέρφα, από κάθε συναίσθημα, γη. Είχε έναν ελαφρύ πονοκέφαλο όταν ξύπνησε. Έσυρε τα πόδια της μέχρι την κουζίνα, έφτιαξε καφέ και πρόσθεσε μια γεμάτη κουταλιά αφρόγαλα για να τον γλυκάνει. Ήπие μια γουλιά και χαμογέλασε βλέποντας το είδωλό της στον μικρό καθρέφτη πάνω από τον πάγκο της κουζίνας. Μια λεπτή λευκή γραμμή σκέπαζε το πάνω χείλος της.

«Αστεία που είσαι...» της είπε εκείνος.

Δεν είχε αντιληφθεί την παρουσία του. Πόση ώρα στεκόταν πίσω της άραγε; Η φωνή του ήχησε αχνά, με ανεπαίσθητη τρυφερότητα, προκαλώντας της μια ελαφριά ανατριχίλα.



«Φεύγω», της είπε στεγνά. Και της το επανέλαβε, για να βεβαιωθεί πως τον άκουσε.

Δεν πρόλαβε ν' αντιδράσει. Τον έβλεπε να σηκώνει τη βαλίτσα του και ν' αγγίζει το χερούλι της πόρτας με μια βραδύτητα σαν να κινούνταν σε κενό αέρος. Όταν η πόρτα έκλεισε πίσω του, ένιωσε τα άκρα της να παραλύουν. Κατάφερε μόνο να πεταρίσει τα μάτια της. «Έφυγε...» σκέφτηκε. Με μια λέξη. Τελεσίδικη, καταπώς φαινόταν. Κοιτούσε τον άδειο διάδρομο αποσβολωμένη. Μετά, κατάφερε να σύρει τα πόδια της ως το καθιστικό. Το παιδί κοιμόταν ήσυχα στο ράντζο. Πέρασε ξυστά

από δίπλα του ακροπατώντας. Πήρε τη γυάλινη καράφα και πρόσθεσε δυο δάχτυλα κονιάκ στο φλιτζάνι της. Το αλκοόλ, αναμειγμένο με καφέ και γάλα, της ανακάτεψε το στομάχι. Αλλά συνέχισε να πίνει. Σε στάση προσοχής. «Να μην ξυπνήσει ο μικρός διάολος...» σκεφτόταν.

Τι να του εξηγήσει; Από πού να πιαστεί για να μην πέσουν, μανά και γιος, στο χαντάκι που άνοιξε το απρόσμενο φευγιό του; Έπινε για να μη σκέφτεται. Και να μην πονάει. Κυρίως αυτό. Το αλκοόλ την αναβάπτιζε σε θερμά ιαματικά νερά γαληνεύοντάς την. Εκλεινε τα μάτια κι ανακαλούσε την ευφρόσυνη εικόνα της εφηβείας της, όταν, για μια και μοναδική φορά, ευτύχησε να βουτήξει στα αστραφτερά λουτρά του Γκέλιρτ. Έπινε και βουτούσε όλο και πιο βαθιά, μέχρι ν' αγγίξουν οι παλάμες της τον μαρμάρινο πυθμένα. Εκεί όπου κανένας και τίποτα δεν μπορούσε να την πληγώσει.

Πόσος καιρός πέρασε από τότε; Η μνήμη της δεν την βοηθούσε να υπολογίσει. Αλλά δεν την έκοφτε κιόλας. Της αρκούσε που το ασθενικό σκαρί της άντεχε ακόμα, ώστε να βλέπει τον γιο της να μεγαλώνει. Ν' ανδρώνεται. Να μοιάζει στον πατέρα του. Κι ως την φοβόταν ενδόμυχα τούτη την ομοιότητα.

Ακούμπησε την κούπα στα χείλη της και κατάπιε δυο γουλιές για να διώξει τις δυσοίωνες σκέψεις. Έπειτα άπλωσε τα χέρια της προς

το καλοριφέρ. Η θέρμη του την κάλμαρε τόσο, που θα μπορούσε να μείνει ακούνητη εκεί όλη μέρα.

Ο γιος της γύρισε και της έριξε μια τελευταία ματιά προτού ανοίξει την εξώπορτα. Έτσι ζαρωμένη όπως ήταν, έμοιαζε να τα έχει τελείως χαμένα. «Στοιχημα πως είναι πάλι πιωμένη», σκέφτηκε, αλλά δεν της είπε τίποτα. Έπρεπε να βιαστεί.

«Να φορέσετε σκουφιά...» άκουσε ξανά την αδύναμη φωνή της από το μέσα δωμάτιο.

«Δεν υπάρχει άλλος, ρε μανά», δυσφόρησε εκείνος, αλλά, προτού ακόμα τελειώσει τη φράση του, το μετάνιωσε. Κάθε φορά που του μιλούσε σαν να 'ταν κι άλλος στο σπίτι φούντωνε. Και κάθε φορά κάκιζε τον εαυτό του γι' αυτό.

«Ναι, δεν υπάρχει...» του απάντησε αφηρημένα. Κι έσκυψε το κεφάλι, ακουμπώντας το σχεδόν στο στήθος της.

Ίσως να έφταιγε η λεκιασμένη ρόμπα της, το θολό της βλέμμα ή το ξεθωριασμένο κίτρινο χρώμα των μαλλιών της. Μπορεί όμως να ήταν απλώς γιατί στα δικά του μάτια φάνταζε γριά. Το βέβαιο ήταν πως η εικόνα αυτής της παραιτημένης γυναίκας τού προκαλούσε ναυτία. «Πόσων χρόνων να είναι τώρα;» αναρωτήθηκε. Όταν τον γέννησε, δεν είχε κλείσει ακόμα τα δεκαεφτά. Ένα παιδί που γέννησε παιδί... «Δεν μετανιώνω που με γκάστρωσε, αλλά που σε κράτησα», του είχε πει κάποτε μέσα στο μεθύσι της. Τι κι αν έκλαιγε μετά και του ζητάγε συγγνώμη; Το ποτό την τράβαγε με ορμή στον πάτο.

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Εκείνο το πρωινό, στις 12 Φεβρουαρίου 1985, το κρύο στη Βουδαπέστη περόνιαζε τα κόκαλα και ο δυνατός αέρας πέτρωνε τα πρόσωπα. Η γειτονιά τέτοια ώρα έμοιαζε έρημη και τα παράθυρα στις πολυκατοικίες, πίσω από τον σιδηροδρομικό σταθμό Κέλετι, ήσαν ερμητικά κλειστά.

«Να δεις που είχε δίκιο η μάνα μου για τον σκούφο...» μουρμούρισε και τάχυνε τα βήμα του για να φτάσει το γρηγορότερο στο Μετρό. Η φοβισμένη φωνή της Άντρεα, λίγο πριν στο τηλέφωνο, του τριβέλιζε το μυαλό, σπρώχνοντας με δύναμη τα βήματά του στη νοτισμένη ασφαλτο. «Ένας πόνος, σαν σουβλιά, με πεθαίνει», την άκουσε να ψιθυρίζει στην άλλη άκρη της γραμμής. «Ο Λάζλο;» ήταν το μόνο που κατάφερε να πει μέσα στη σαστισμάρα του. «Αν ήταν εδώ ο αδερφός μου νομίζεις θα σ' έπαιρνα;» ξέσπασε εκείνη. «Πονάω, σου λέω. Βιάσου!»

Μπήκε ασθμαίνοντας στον σταθμό, έδειξε την κάρτα του στον νυσταγμένο υπάλληλο και χώθηκε σ' ένα από τα βαγόνια της κόκκινης γραμμής. Στην Ντέακ Φέρεντς άλλαξε βιαστικά τρένο και στριμώχτηκε ανάμεσα σ' έναν τύπο που τα χνότα του μύριζαν μπίρα και μια μεσόκοπη γυναίκα που διάβαζε τη Népszabadság. Έκανε συχνά αυτήν τη διαδρομή τον τελευταίο χρόνο, αλλά τούτη τη φορά τού φάνηκε ατελείωτη. Όταν άνοιξαν οι πόρτες στην όγδοη στάση, ανέβηκε τρέχοντας τις σκάλες και βγήκε επιτέλους στην οδό Πούτιους.

Η κίνηση στον δρόμο ήτανε λιγοστή. Δυο εργάτες καθάριζαν νωχελικά το πεζοδρόμιο και μια γριά, τυλιγμένη μ' ένα βαρύ μάλινο σάλι, πούλαγε ματσάκια με λουλούδια. Τα είχε στριμώξει σ' έναν βρόμικο πλαστικό κουβά που ακουμπούσε ανάμεσα στις χοντρές γαλότσες της. Πήγε να την προσπεράσει, αλλά ένα χέρι τον τράβηξε απότομα και, προτού προλάβει να καταλάβει τι συνέβαινε, είδε τη γυναίκα να του φράζει τον δρόμο.

«Πάρ' της φρέσκα λουλούδια. Θα της αρέσουν...» του είπε παρακλητικά, ενώ του έσφιγγε το μπράτσο με δύναμη.

«Παράτα με!» αντέδρασε εκείνος. Κάτι στα μάτια της τον αλάφιαζε.

«Φιορίνια! Δώσε μου λίγα φιορίνια κι εγώ θα σ' τα πω όλα».

«Παράτα με, τρελόγρια, σου λέω».

«Κακός σπόρος, κακά μαντάτα» ακούστηκε σαν κρώξιμο η φωνή της πίσω του, όμως οι λέξεις σκόρπισαν από τη δύναμη του ανέμου.

Άνοιξε το βήμα του και απομακρύνθηκε σχεδόν τρέχοντας. Πέρασε μπροστά από μια βεραμάν πολυκατοικία-βεραμάν, αυτήν την αλλόκοτη λέξη χρησιμοποιούσε η Άντρεα-και στο επόμενο μπλοκ, με το ζωηρό κεραμιδί χρώμα, χτύπησε το κουδούνι των Κόβατς. Έσπρωξε τη σιδερένια πόρτα κι ανέβηκε δυο δυο τα σκαλιά μέχρι τον δεύτερο όροφο.

Εκείνη τον περίμενε στην είσοδο, κρατώντας την τεράστια κοιλιά της με κόπο. Αν και δεν είχαν μεσολαβήσει ούτε τρεις μέρες από την τελευταία φορά που συναντήθηκαν, ξαφνιάστηκε από το πόσο όμορφη έδειχνε μέσα στο γαλάζιο της φουστάνι. Έμοιαζε με φουσκωμένο γυαλιστερό μπαλόνι που πάνω του ισορροπούσε ένα πανέμορφο μουτράκι από πορσελάνη.

«Μη με κοιτάς σαν χαζός!» τον αποπήρε και σωριάστηκε στην πολυθρόνα, ανήμπορη να σταθεί άλλο στα πόδια της.

# The Day the River Froze

*Stavros Christodoulou*

Translated from Greek by Susan Papas

## 1. The kids from “Skala”

*Budapest, February 1985*

“PUT your hats on. The cold will make your ears drop off.”

The woman’s words had a hollow sound. They rose steeply as if from the foot of a cliff and then collapsed with a dull thud in that two-roomed apartment of fifty square metres into which she had squeezed her life. For a long time now, she had not cared what happened outside her door. For how many years, she could not remember. Perhaps five, perhaps fifteen, perhaps for ever.

“Perhaps from when his umbilical cord was cut?” she wondered in a whisper. But she stifled the words, as if ashamed of even thinking them.

Since the day when she had swallowed the fistful of pills, time no longer had the slightest consistency. Her son had been seven years old. Yes, that she remembered. A little devil who had greedily sucked up all the freshness of her youth. For seven years. Daily. From the moment, in fact, when the labour pains had ripped through her body. When she heard his crying for the first time, she had felt the tide going out, dragging her with it, far away. She had made a great effort to stand once more on dry land. To find her feet. To feed him, wash him, clean up his shit. Until she could put him to bed,

feeling exhausted but alone at last, then slip a tablet under her tongue. She would hold it there a while, drawing strength from it, and then let it slide down her oesophagus slowly and comfortingly, releasing waves of warmth to heal her invisible wounds.

“Pull yourself together, or I’ll leave,” her husband threatened, when he saw her receding into the treacherous darkness of her mind. And he would star at her with that harsh look which once had melted her heart. That was then. Now he stood before her and she didn’t even look at him. She simply endured him. Stoically. The same as when he touched her. “Words! That’s all you’re good for, words as dead as the rotten meat you sell in the market, poor sap,” she returned scornfully.

The truth is she had never believed he would desert them. She didn’t think he had it in him. But as it turned out, she didn’t know him as well as she thought she did. On 18 June 1967, Sunday morning, the day after the boy’s birthday, he left. The memory of that day, although rooted in earth that was barren of every emotion, lived vividly inside her. She had had a slight headache on waking. She had dragged herself to the kitchen, made coffee and floated a spoonful of cream on top, to sweeten it. She took a sip and then smiled, seeing her reflection in the small mirror above the kitchen worktop. A fine white line covered her top lip.

“You look funny...” he said.

She had not realised he was there. How long had he been standing behind her? His voice was soft, with a hint of tenderness, provoking in her a slight shiver.

“I’m leaving,” he said matter-of-factly, and repeated it, to make sure she had heard him.

She had no time to react. She watched him pick up his suitcase and touch the handle of the door slowly, as though moving through a vacuum. When the door closed behind him, her limbs

felt paralysed. She could only blink her eyes. “*He’s gone...*” she thought. Just like that. Final, so it seemed. She looked at the empty passageway in bewilderment. Afterwards, she had managed to drag herself to the sitting room. The child was sleeping peacefully in the camp bed.

She squeezed past it on tiptoe. Then picked up the glass decanter and added two fingers of cognac to her cup. The alcohol, mixed with coffee and cream, upset her stomach. But she went on drinking. Staying alert. Thinking, “*Don’t let the little devil wake up...*”

What would she tell him? What would she lean on, so that they did not fall, mother and son, into the gulf which his unexpected departure had opened up? She drank so as not to think. And not to feel pain. Mainly that. The alcohol rebaptized her in warm spa waters, soothing her. She closed her eyes and summoned the joyful picture from her adolescence, when, for once only, she had had the opportunity to dive into the glittering waters of the Gellért spa. She drank and she dived all the more deeply, until the palms of her hands could touch the marble bottom. Down there, no one and nothing could hurt her.

How much time had passed since then? Her memory did not help her to calculate it. Not that she cared. It was enough that her feeble frame still held out, enough to see her son grow up. To become a man. To resemble his father. Though deep down this resemblance terrified her.

She had put the cup to her lips and taken two swallows, to chase away the ominous thoughts. Then she had stretched out her hands towards the radiator. The warmth of it calmed her, she could have remained there unmoving all day long.

Her son turned and gave her a final glance before opening the front door. Crumpled as she was, she looked completely befuddled.

“*I bet she’s drunk again,*” he thought, but said nothing. He had to hurry.

“Wear your hats...” again he heard her weak voice from the inner room.

“There’s no one else here, mother,” he said resentfully, but even before he had finished the phrase he regretted it. Each time she spoke to him as though someone else was in the house, he flared up. And each time rebuked himself for it.

“Yes, there’s no one...” she answered vaguely, and bent her head until it almost touched her chest.

Perhaps it was her stained dressing gown, her blurred gaze, or the faded yellow of her hair. Or perhaps it was simply that to his eyes she looked old. What was certain was that this picture of the long-suffering woman made him feel sick. “*How old must she be now?*” he wondered. When she gave birth to him, she was only seventeen. A child giving birth to a child... “I don’t regret that he got me pregnant, but that I kept you,” she had said to him once, when she was drunk. What difference did it make that she had cried afterwards and asked his forgiveness? Drink dragged her inexorably to the bottom.

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That morning, 12 February 1985, the cold in Budapest pierced to the bone and the strong wind froze his face. At that hour the neighborhood looked deserted and the windows of the apartment buildings, behind the Keleti railway station, were tightly shut.

“See, she was right about the hat...” he murmured and quickened his pace towards the Metro. Andrea’s scared voice, a little while before on the telephone, beat in his brain, accelerating his steps across the damp asphalt. “A pain, a piercing pain, it’s killing me,” he heard her whisper on the other end of the line. “Lász-

l6?’ was all he managed to say in his confusion. “If my brother was here do you think I would have called you?” she burst out. “It hurts, I tell you. Hurry!”

Breathless, he entered the station, showed his card to the drowsy employee and buried himself in one of the Red Line carriages. At Deák Ferenc he hurriedly changed trains and squeezed in beside a guy whose breath smelled of beer and a middle-aged woman who was reading the Népszabadság. He had made this journey often in the last year, but this time it seemed to him unending.

When the doors opened at the eighth stop, he ran up the stairs and came out at last in Pöttyös street.

There was little movement on the road. Two workmen were languidly cleaning the pavement and an old woman, wrapped in a heavy woollen shawl, was selling bunches of flowers. She had squeezed them into a filthy plastic bucket which rested between her thick rubber boots. He was about to pass her, when a hand tugged at him suddenly and, before he had time to realise what was happening, he saw the woman blocking his way.

“Take her some fresh flowers. She’ll like them...” she begged, at the same time gripping his arm tightly.

“Let go!” he reacted. Something in her eyes repelled him.

“Forints! Give me a few forints and I’ll tell you everything.”

“Let go of me I tell you, crazy old woman.”

“Bad seed, bad tidings,” her voice screeched behind him, but the words were scattered by the strong wind.

He quickened his step and moved away almost at a run. He passed in front of a veraman apartment block - veraman, that strange word Andrea used - and at the next block, with its bright

terra-cotta color, he rang the Kovács’ bell. He pushed open the metal door and took the stairs two at a time to the second floor.

She was waiting for him at the entrance, clutching her enormous belly. Although it was only three days since the last time they had met, he was startled by how beautiful she was in her blue dress. She resembled a big shiny balloon with a lovely little face made of porcelain balanced on top of it.

“Don’t stand there looking at me like an idiot!” she snapped, and crumpled into an armchair, unable to remain on her feet a moment longer.



# DENMARK

**Asta Olivia Nordenhof**

## **Penge på lommen**

***Money in Your Pocket***

Basilisk, Copenhagen, 2020

Language: Danish

ISBN: 978-8-7930-7771-3

### **BIOGRAPHY**

**A**sta Olivia Nordenhof (born 1988) is an award-winning Danish poet and author and a graduate of the Danish Academy of Creative Writing, where she now teaches. Her debut novel *Et ansigt til Emily* (*A Face for Emily*, Basilisk, Copenhagen, 2011) won the Munch-Christensen Debutant Prize. In 2013, she won, among other awards, the Montana Literary Award for her critically acclaimed poetry collection *Det nemme og det ensomme* (*The Easiness and the Loneliness*, Basilisk, Copenhagen, 2013), which sold over 10 000 copies in Denmark and was translated into English and other languages. *Penge på lommen* (*Money to Burn*), published in 2020, is Nordenhof's most recent work and the first novel in a planned septology entitled *Scandinavian Star*.



### **SYNOPSIS**

*Money in Your Pocket* is the first volume of a novel sequence which has the fire on board the *Scandinavian Star* ferry as its central theme. The tragedy that took place on 6 April 1990 led to the death of 159 people. It was followed by an official investigation that blamed the fire on a convicted arsonist who died during the incident. If the focal point is an actual event, the characters in the story are fictitious. In this volume, we meet Kurt and Maggie. They live on a farm just outside Nyborg. Kurt's bus company has yielded a nice profit for several years in a row and he dreams of investing the money in something big. Meanwhile, Maggie tries to understand what love is and why she let it swallow her whole life. We also meet the narrator. She's somewhere on the Danish

island of Funen when she experiences a fright that leads her into the lives of Kurt and Maggie.

### **♥ JURY REPORT**

Asta Olivia Nordenhof has written a novel about the many consequences that a disaster such as the *Scandinavian Star* fire can have for a society like Denmark. It is a political work about capitalism in the 21st century. We explore through the narrator the connection between economics and human life, and the book appears almost as a battle-ready manifesto. The language is beautiful, narrative and very figurative. The novel is also about Maggie and Kurt, who live together near Nyborg. It's about their lives, about their relationship with violence and humiliation (Kurt spits on Maggie, calls her a whore), about their child, Sofie, about their different kinds of work. Maybe it's about Maggie in particular, about her past that contains rape, prostitution and homelessness. It is hard and heart-breaking. But despite this harshness there is also tenderness and, in the end, humour. For this is where the stories merge – the big and the small, the one about capitalism and the *Scandinavian Star* and the one about Kurt and Maggie – because they are really not two different stories, but only

one. This is what makes *Money in Your Pocket* so utterly compelling – and the only reason it gets five stars and not six is because there are six more volumes to come, which leaves you eagerly anticipating the next one. An incredibly beautiful and astonishing novel.



# Penge på lommen

Asta Olivia Nordenhof



Maggie var fjorten, da hun første gang blev voldtaget. Men voldtægt er mit ord, ikke hendes. Mange år senere sad hun overfor en kvinde i Dannerhuset, hun var taget derhen for at spørge, om hun huskede rigtigt, når hun huskede, at Kurt havde været voldelig, men blev bange og spurgte i stedet, om hun havde været udsat for en voldtægt dengang, og kvinden på den anden side af bordet lyttede og svarede, at ja, det var en voldtægt. Maggie gik derfra og følte sig som en bedrager, fordi hun ikke havde nævnt det, der for hende var det egentligt uudholdelige spørgsmål, at hun blev våd, at hun åbnede sig for ham.

Hun var som sagt fjorten, var blevet smidt ud hjemmefra. Hun havde haft en fyr med hjemme en aften hun troede hendes mor ville komme sent hjem fra arbejde, de havde drukket sig fulde i kirsebærvin, det var nogle vamlige kys, og pludselig stod hendes mor i døråbningen og bad hende forsvinde. Gaden føltes meget åben, da hun den følgende morgen stod dernede med sin rygsæk. Det eneste, hun kunne forestille sig, var at finde en mand, der ville have hende boende, men hun vidste ikke, hvor hun skulle starte. Hun gik ad Vesterbrogade, da hun så plakaten. Teltlejr i Jylland, alle var velkomne.

Hun sad og kæderøg på togets toilet indtil anklagerne fra den anden side af døren blev alvorlige, så stod hun af i Odense og ventede en time på det næste tog, hvor hun, klog af skade, skiftede toilet hver gang toget holdt. Der var bare en lille vind-blæst stationsbygning der, hvor hun skulle stå af, omkring stationen græssende køer, so-

len stod højt, asfalten på perronen var varm mod lårene, da hun satte sig og spredte sminke-taskens indhold ud foran sig, fandt lommespejlet frem og gik i gang med at male.

Lejren lå smukt mellem bakker og bag dem var havet. Telt-pladsen vrimlede med børn, kvinderne havde løse, lange kjoler på, og Maggie blev nervøs, hun følte sig udstillet og grotesk i sit stramme kostume og ville være taget hjem igen, hvis ikke det var for sent nu. Hun tænkte på sin mor, og det stak hende i hjertet, at hun havde kaldt hende en latterlig gammel kælling, inden hun smækkede døren efter sig.

Ud på aftenen samledes folk om bålet. Maggie som havde gået for sig selv hele eftermiddagen, kiggede rundt efter en mand. Hun startede adspredt, strøede lidt af sig selv alle vegne, men besluttede sig så for en ung fyr med rodet hår og et lidt ånds-svagt men også charmerende ansigt, satte sig tæt op af ham og fortalte, at hun var blevet forældreløs og ledte efter et telt, hvor hun kunne overnatte. Han delte et stort telt med noget familie, hun skulle være velkommen.

Senere lagde hun sig derind, mens han endnu sad ved bålet, og ventede at han ville følge hende, men i stedet var det hans onkel, der fulgte efter og lagde sig hos hende. Han lagde hånden på hendes kind, og hun løftede den væk.

Der må være sket en misforståelse, det var det hun, som om hun var ansat i sin egen krops reception, med et beklagende smil forsøgte at signalere. Han mumlede noget, det lød som en grød, vristede sin hånd ud af hendes greb og førte den tilbage på hendes krop, løftede blusen og fandt hendes bryst med munden. Hun var fortsat høflig og fuld af beklagelser, gode argumenter, hun følte, at det var hendes opgave at argumentere, nu hun havde anbragt sig i teltet og givet det indtryk, og argumentet var, at hun var for ung, og han var for gammel, at det ikke ville se kønt ud, heller ikke for ham. Så lagde hun kræfter i, forsøgte at løfte hans ansigt op fra sin mave, sagde nej og vær sød, men han sendte hende et grødet smil, sagde noget, der

føltes varmt og klistret, ulækkert, ind i hendes øre og greb hendes håndled med én hånd, mens han med den anden hånd trak hendes trusser til side og førte to fingre op. Det kom i en forfærdelig bølge nedefra, hun lå stille og mærkede, at hendes krop forrådte hende, hun blev våd, hans pik gled ubesværet op. Hun har ikke nogen ord for det, der foregik, indtil han kom oppe i hende og tumlede til siden og snart efter snorkede. Had, skam, angst og liderlighed flettede hvor hun kunne overnatte. Han delte et stort telt med noget familie, hun skulle være velkommen.

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fik dem til at tro, at hun var blevet holdt fast, formentlig havde gjort modstand. De kunne også fastslå, at hun havde haft sex. Hun nikkede, hun hørte efter med en påtaget opmærksom mine, det føltes som at være til eksamen. Helst ville hun ud og ryge og gå i gang med at glemme det, hun allerede havde glemt, men hun forstod, at det ville virke forkert, mistænke-ligt, hvis hun frabad sig at vide, hvad hun selv havde oplevet. Så slap de hende endelig fri, og hun gik hjem.

Det meste af tiden lykkedes det ikke at tænke på det. Samme eftermiddag var hun i parken med en ven, og slog sit ophov-nede ansigt hen med en latter. Jaja, hun var fuld i går, man får nogle knubs. Men det kom i jag. Han kunne være alle-vegne. Hun ville ikke nødvendigvis kunne genkende hans ansigt, men han ville kunne genkende hendes. Han kunne sidde lige i nærheden og eje det øjeblik, hun tror, er hendes eget.

Et par år efter havde hun haft sex med så mange, at hun snarere måtte antage, at hun ofte passerede mænd på gaden uvidende om, at de genkendte hende. Et mandeansigt var et hul man kunne trække penge op af, når hun åbnede de små skuffer i kommoden derhjemme, var der altid sedler at finde. Strøgbutikkerne lukkede sig op for hende, hun købte, købte, købte, stjal også stadig, selv om hun nu havde råd. En kort kjole holdt fast under armhulen og skjult under jakken, og tre kjoler på disken. Et par sko også, i sølv.

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Hun tager en taxa og fylder kabinen ud med en tung duft af ravgul parfume. Fremme i lejligheden giver manden, hun mødte et par dage forinden, sig til at fremvise sin nye støv-suger. Han tænder for kontakten og holder røret frem mod hende, se, hvor den suger, og for at gøre det endnu mere klart sætter han røret mod sin egen arm og suger sin hud et stykke med ud. Maggie ved ikke, hvad hun skal forstå ved det optrin, hun drikker af rødvinen, som sikkert er dyr, og bag hendes arrogante grimasse, er det som om, bunden går ud af en spand, som om hofterne næsten ikke kan holde på vandet,

latteren. Det er hendes plan at få lov til at være her mindst en uge, det skal udfylde et hul, der er opstået mellem andre muligheder.

Hun er prisgivet, det er klart, alle disse mænd med deres støv-sugere og ludende hundeansigter, men hvad skulle hun ellers gøre, tage arbejde på en fabrik, stemple ind klokken fem? Det ville aldrig kunne lade sig gøre, det regulære arbejdsmarked har ikke noget rum for et menneske som hende, som ind imellem skal bruge en hel dag på at græde eller ligge på en plæne og overrisles af angst, og aldrig, aldrig ville kunne møde til tiden eller rigtig høre efter en besked. Der findes ingen arbejdsgiver, der kan bruge hende til noget, og desuden, hvis hun skal bruges, og sådan er loven, vil hun gerne bilde sig ind, at hun selv bestemmer hvordan. I det mindste er der ikke rigtig nogen, der kan fyre hende. Hun er blevet fyret tre gange, to gange som barnepige og én gang som ekspeditrice, efter kun et par dages arbejde. Hun anstrengte sig under fyringssamtalerne, holdt på ansigtet og tårerne indtil hun var ude, hvor tårerne gik løs. Ydmygelsen ved at blive fyret er, hvad den er, hun har for længst opgivet at have en ære, men penge. Penge, et rum der udvider sig langt hinsides smerte-grænsen.

Den følgende morgen tager han på arbejde. Han er arkitekt åbenbart, viste hende nogle stregtegninger i aftes. Hun er lidt beklemmt, glad for at han er væk, for han viste sig at pibe som, ja, som en lille museunge i sengen, og da han sov, stod hun op og fik kuldegysninger, når hun tænkte på lyden, sad i hans køkken og følte ikke den eufori, hun ellers kan føle den første nat i et fremmed hjem.

Nede i parken står roserne i blomst, de dufter heftigt, hun sætter sig på en bænk og iagttager et egern pile op og ned ad en stamme, bliver så rørt over den lille rødglinsende ven. Ja, selvfølgelig, svarer hun en kvinde, der spørger efter en cigaret, og kigger efter hende helt indtil hun forsvinder ud gennem lågen. Så svømmer hun tømmer-mændsagtigt let hen i en billedløs nostalgi.

## Money in Your Pocket

*Asta Olivia Nordenhof*

Translated from Danish by Sherilyn Hellberg

Maggie was fourteen the first time she was raped. But rape is my word, not hers. Years later, she was seated across from an employee of the women's shelter, where she had gone to ask whether she was remembering correctly, when she remembered Kurt being violent, but she got scared and instead asked if she had been raped back then, and the woman on the other side of the table listened and said yes, that was rape. Maggie left and felt like a traitor because she hadn't mentioned the part that was unbearable to her, that she got wet, that she opened herself to him.

She was, as I said, fourteen, had been kicked out of the house. She had brought a guy home with her one night when she thought her mother would be home late from work. They were drunk on cherry wine, there were a few slimy kisses, and suddenly her mother was standing in the doorway, telling her to get out. The street felt very open the next morning as she stood there with her backpack. Her first thought was to find a man who would have her, but she didn't know where to start. She walked down Vesterbrogade and saw the flyer: Community Campsite in Jutland. All welcome.

She chain-smoked in the bathroom on the train until the complaints on the other side of the door started getting serious enough for her to get off in Odense and wait an hour for the next train, where she, now the wiser, switched restrooms every time the train stopped. Where she was supposed to get off, there was only a small windswept station building. Cows grazed around the station, the sun was high in the sky, and the asphalt on the platform warm against her thighs when she sat down and spread

out the contents of her make-up bag, opened her compact mirror and started painting.

The campground was slipped between two hills and the sea behind them. The campsites were teeming with kids. The women were clad in long, flowy dresses and Maggie felt nervous, exposed and grotesque in her tight outfit and would have turned around to go home if it wasn't already too late. She thought about her mother and felt a stab in her heart when she remembered calling her a stupid old bitch before she slammed the door behind her.

Later that night, people gathered around the bonfire. Maggie, who had spent the afternoon walking around on her own, looked around for a man. She started absently, sprinkling a bit of herself all over the place, but eventually settled on a young guy with messy hair and a slightly foolish but charming face, sat close to him and told him that both her parents had died, she was looking for a spot to sleep. He was sharing a big tent with a few of his family members, she was welcome to stay with them.

Later, she lay down to sleep while he was still out by the fire, had waited for him to follow her, but instead his uncle followed her and lay down next to her. He placed a hand on her cheek, and she moved it away.

There must have been misunderstanding. That was what she tried to signal with an apologetic smile, like her own body's receptionist. He mumbled something, an oatmealish sound, twisted his hand out of her grasp and it was on her body again, lifted her shirt and found her breast with his mouth. She was still trying to be polite and full of excuses, good arguments. She felt that it was her responsibility to argue; after all she had put herself in this tent and given off some impression, and she argued that she was too young and he was too old, that it wouldn't look good, not for him either. Then she started to resist, tried to lift his face away from her stomach, said no and please, but he sent her an oatmealish smile, whis-

pered something that felt warm and sticky, repulsive, in her ear and grabbed her wrist with one hand, while he used the other to push her panties aside and shove two fingers in. She felt a terrible wave wash over her from below. She lay still and felt her body betray her. She got wet. His dick slid easily into her. She doesn't have any words to describe what happened before he came inside her and rolled over and started snoring. Hatred, shame, dread, and lust wove together, tightened into a lifelong dream inside her. She learned that sex and violence are one and the same, and to believe that the confusion between the two stemmed from a place deep inside her and not the outside world. She lay there with her groin throbbing and her heart beating out of control, dizzy and then, with one brief, hard thought, she closed herself: you are alone and the only thing that you have is the will to keep moving forward.

Her first priority was to leave the campground unseen. It was only when she reached the highway that she stopped, sat on the side of the road, and lit a cigarette. She felt she should cry, but she couldn't. She thought vaguely, almost abstractly, about where to sleep. It was more a question that coerced her body forward than a question with an end. She got up and stuck out her thumb. From the passenger seat, she watched Jutland go by with its slow, surreal inevitability, its blackness stretching out from the car in all directions, tightly woven and sea-soaked.

She was nineteen the second time she was raped. Though actually, she doesn't know what happened. She had gone to Andy's Bar by herself. A man in cowboy boots was sitting at the bar, looking like a fool, an easy target. She told him one of her stories. Maybe that she was the daughter of a Russian aristocrat living in exile, had a massive fortune at her disposal, but it was useless here, where there wasn't so much going on. She woke up on the sidewalk of Sølvgade. The sun was coming up and she was freezing. It took a moment for her to realize that the blood on the ground was hers. At the hospital, they said that she had been beaten up, that the



bruises on her arms and her chest suggested she had been held down, had probably resisted. They had also deduced that she had had sex. She nodded, pretending to listen. It felt like she was back in school. More than anything, she wanted to leave and smoke a cigarette and to start to forget what she had already forgotten, but she knew that it would seem off, suspicious, if she didn't want to know what had happened to her. Finally, they let her go, and she walked home.

Most of the time, she was able to avoid thinking about it. Later that afternoon, she was at the park with a friend, and shrugged off her swollen face with a laugh. Yeah, she got a little too drunk last night, sometimes you get knocked around. But it came back to her in flashes. He could be anywhere. She probably wouldn't be able to recognize his face, but he would recognize hers. He might be sitting nearby, stealing the moment she thinks is her own.

A few years later, she had been with so many men that she might as well assume that she often passed men on the street, unaware that they recognized her. A man's face was a hole you could pull money out of. When she opened the small drawers of the dressers at home, there was always money. Shops opened their doors to her, and she bought, bought, bought, still shoplifted too, even though she had the money now. A short dress tucked under one arm, covered by her coat, and three dresses on the counter. A pair of shoes too, silver.

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She takes a cab and fills the car with the hefty smell of amber perfume. Inside the apartment, a man she met a few days ago shows off his new vacuum. He turns it on and holds it out to her, look how powerful it is, and to make his point he holds the end to his arm and sucks up his skin. Maggie doesn't know how to interpret his performance. She takes a sip of her red wine, which is probably expensive, and behind her arrogant grimace, it's like the bottom

falls out of a bucket, like her hips almost can't hold back the water, her laughter. Her plan is to stay here for at least a week, to fill a gap that's opened between other options.

She's at the mercy, that much is clear, of these men with their vacuum-cleaners and drooping dog-faces, but what is she supposed to do, get a job at a factory, punch in at five o'clock? It would never work. The labor market can't accommodate someone like her, who sometimes spends a whole day crying or lying on a lawn letting her anxiety wash over her, who would never show up on time or pay attention to a message. There aren't any employers who can use her for something, and besides, if she's going to be used, as the law demands, she wants to be able to delude herself into thinking that it's her choice how. At least there's nobody to fire her now. She's been fired three times, twice as a nanny and once as a cashier, after only a few days of work. She struggled through the conversations, holding onto her face and back her tears until she was outside, and she burst into tears. The humiliation of getting fired be what it may—she's long since given up her honor—but the money. Money, that space that continues far beyond the boundary of pain.

The next morning, he leaves for work. He's an architect apparently, showed her some of his sketches last night. She feels a little uneasy, happy that he's gone because it turned out that he whimpers like, yeah, like a little mouse in bed, and while he was still asleep, she got up and shuddered at the thought of the sound, sat in his kitchen and didn't feel the euphoria that she usually feels the first night in a new home.

In the park below, the roses are blooming, their scent pungent. She sits on a bench and watches a squirrel dart up and down a tree, touched by her little shiny, reddish friend. Yes, of course, she says to a woman asking for a cigarette, and watches her disappear through the gate. In a hungover daze, she swims effortlessly around an imageless nostalgia.

# ESTONIA

**Mudlum (Made Luiga)**

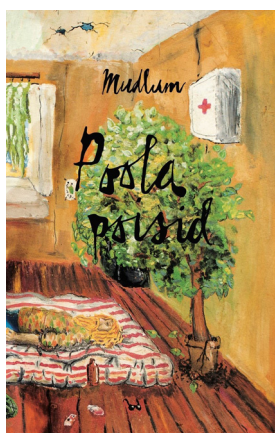
**Poola poisid**

**Polish Boys**

Strata, Tallinn, 2019

Language: Estonian

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## BIOGRAPHY

**M**udlum (Made Luiga), born on 31 July 1966, is an Estonian prose writer and a literary reviewer. She studied philosophy at the Estonian Humanitarian Institute (Eesti Humanitaarinstituut) and graduated from the Estonian Academy of Arts (Eesti Kunstiakadeemia), which provides higher education in art, design, architecture, media, art history and conservation/restoration. In addition to *Polish Boys*, she has written two collections of short stories and a novel: *Tõsine inimene* (A Serious Person, ZA/UM, Tallinn, 2014); *Ilus Elviira: burleskne jutustus*

(*Beautiful Elviira: A Burlesque Story*, Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, Tallinn, 2015); and *Linnu silmad* (Bird Eyes, Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, Tallinn, 2016). The Estonian Head Read Literary Festival says of Mudlum: 'Her first short stories published in the media took no time to attract attention; her debut, the collection of stories *Tõsine inimene* ... was nominated for the prose award of the Estonian Cultural Endowment. Mudlum has said that instead of seeing the world as a story, she considers it a journey. This is the peculiarity of her work, her focus on past, almost dream-like musings where mundane moods and details stand out, as well as her preference for states of mind over plotlines. This is how a unique world is created, described by Ilona Martson as a "chaos with a clear composition". Mudlum is a well-known literary critic; her reviews and essays have been anthologised as *Ümberjutustaja* (The Narrator, Elusamus, 2017). She has also contributed to the increasing popularity of Estonian short stories, being one of the four editors of the collection *Eesti novell 2018* (Estonian Short Stories). In 2017, she won the leading award for Estonian short stories, the Friedebert Tuglas Award, for her short story *Ilma alguse, ilma lõputa* (Without a Beginning, Without an End), which was first published in her third book *Linnu silmad*. In 2020, *Polish Boys* won Mudlum the annual award of the Estonian Cultural Endowment.



and not least by the convenient choices offered by the establishment. The same choices are present in their private lives: the unpredictability of free love or the security of a family. *Polish Boys* is a bildungsroman for the whole generation inspired by the cultural group ZA/UM in Estonia. The author, who was a member of the group, writes from her personal experience with warmth and compassion, which makes the novel's tone both universal and human.

## ♥ JURY REPORT

### SYNOPSIS

*Polish Boys* is a story of young bohemian intellectuals who have settled in old dilapidated buildings and who follow their ideals. The novel is set in socialist Poland, but space and time are irrelevant and can be seen as an allegory. *Polish Boys* is about the confidence of youth and about aspirations for beauty and truth, how high expectations meet reality, how some people bend and deviate and some don't. Adam, Sulisław, Teofilis and Jerzy grow up together and become influential figures in Warsaw's art and literary circles. They set up the radical cultural newspaper *Płazzcze* and try to transform the society surrounding them. Their radicalism is challenged

The novel was chosen for its concept and leitmotif (ideals meet reality), which is universal in any contemporary society. The second reason was the author's command of style and language, which is unique in Estonian literature. The novel is not bounded by regional or national particularities and is in this respect truly European. The role of gender equality played its part, the three previous Estonian winners of the European Union Prize for Literature all being male. *Polish Boys* would be a worthy example of Estonian literature in the European book market and this would encourage the author, who is a freelancer and lives by her pen, to continue her writing career.

# Poola poisid

Mudlum



Tulevastele sündmustele annavad tõuke mingid asjad, mis juhtuvad nüüd või on ehk juba ära juhtunud. Varajasel kevadkuul saabus Adami perre teade, et üks Mackiewiczite ulatusliku suguvõsa puruvana liige on otsad andnud. Inimelu kustumine on küll kurb, kuid reeglina ei avalda see elavatele suuremat mõju. Sugulasest jäi järele majaront, mida keegi ei tahtnud, sest see oli nii kaugel linna servas, nii halvas korras, õieti täitsa kõdu, täis hiigelsuuri ämblikke ja hallitust; onnis polnud ei moodsa aja vältimatut mugavust, elektrit, ega ka kraanivett, sest viimased eluaastad oli vanake virelenud mööda haiglaid ja keegi ei olnud märganud maksta makse, nõnda olid kõik mugavused vaikselt välja lülitatud, ja kui lõpuks taibati, et kuskil seisab tühi hurtsik, siis pidid pärijad ukse maha murdma: pilt, mis neile avanes, ei olnud meeliülendav. Raske öelda, millisele vääritle kontingendile see majake kunagi oli ehitatud, võib-olla raudteetöölisele, igatahes ei olnud ehitis suurem kui teise mehe kuur, ja kindlasti oli ta halvemini kokku klopsitud. Ainus materjal, mida töömeestel püstitamise ajal laialt käes paistis olevat, olid ukse, sest toasuurusesse elamisse oli tekitatud kõige hämmastavamast sorti pime esik, kust läks suisa kuus ust teistesse ruumidesse, mis olid pisikesed nagu tikukarp. Maja paraadnast sai astuda nii ahtasse eeskotta, et laiemate õlgadega mees võis sinna kinni jääda, mingi nipiga oli välisesikusse topitud ka pööningutrepp. Kui olid eeskoja ukse selja taga kinni löönud, seisdki pilkases pime-

duses. Käsikaudu kobades selgus, et paremale viis kaks ust, üks neist niinimetatud suurde tuppa, kus asus pöörane tervet seina kattev peegelustega riidekapp ja vastasseinas pehkinud saepurplaadist looka vajunud platedega raamaturiil, täis kopitanud ja krussi tõmbunud kõiteid, teine aga kohta, mida võiks tinglikult nimetada kabinetiks, too oli samuti maast laeni raamatuid täis, isegi toa keskel oli riiul nagu raamatukogus, kõigi nende virnade vahele oli litsutud kööbakas kirjutuslaud, selle kõmmeldunud sahtlid ei liikunud ja ukse olid kiivas hingedel ripakil. Ka laua taga olev tool lonkas kõiki jalgu, teda oli isegi tohterdatud põikpulkade ümber mässitud riideribadega, et tapid veel kuidagimoodi koos püsiksid. Toa ainus aken oli tillukeste ruutudega, räämas, suunaga põhja, maja ümber kasvasid suured puud. Kokkuvõttes oli see pool majast pime nagu koobas. Koridori otsauks viis nurga peale väikesesse tuppa, kus oli pireke valgema, paari naelaga oli akna ette löödud kardinakalts, mis oli kunagi kollane olnud, nüüd pleekinud liivaväljade kahkjat tooni. Akna all nurgas kõssitas rõske voodi ja selle kõrval korratu kuhi ikka neidsamu niiskusest rikutud raamatuid, virna otsas seisis tass, millest keegi oli kunagi joonud, sees kivistunud suhkrumuistis. Vasemale viis pimedast soolikast koridorist samuti kaks ust – üks pesuruumi, kus elasid kakandid ja hiigelämblikud, suured nagu rusikas, mustad ja karvased, jalad nii jämedad kui ankrukois. Vetsu loputuskasti paak oli katki. Viimane ruum ühendas endas köögi ja katlamaja, sisaldas imelikku plekist pliiti ja ühte kummutit, mille peal seisis laiskliisu, kummuti sahtlites olid pruukimata nõud, kõik kenasti hiiresitaga koos. Nurgas seisis ainuke ajastutruu ese – külmkapp, kohe külmkapi kõrval oli pehkinud keldriluuk, kui seda rõngast sikutasid, siis jäid ka mõned lauad pihku. Ei taha teadagi, mis seal keldris oli.

Sugulased vangutasid päid, panid uksele uue luku ette, võtmed jagati laiali ja maja unustati. Ühel malbel sügispäeval, kui Sulisław järjekordselt mingist veidrast elupaigast välja nügiti ja ta täiesti

nõutult Varssavi uulitsal seisis, teadmata, mida järgmiseks ette võtta, meenus sõber Adamile järsku *maja*. Lõppude lõpuks on *maja* siiski katus ja seinad, kuigi seal mitte midagi muud ei ole, taeva kingitusena oli *majaga* koos säilinud pisike varu puid, ümberkaudu majades oli puuriitu nagu muda, vaikselt saab mõne halu ikka ära nahistada, küte pole küsimus. Teine lugu oli see, et isegi Adam ei oleks kuigi meelsasti tahtnud elada nii totaalselt väljaspool ühiskonda ja selle traditsioonilisi mugavusnorme, ehtsas tiisikusekoldes, kuigi elu Lilita juures hakkas juba hapuks minema. Sellises õrnas eas mehed, aga ka palju vanemad, täiesti kogenud mehekolakad kasutavad sel puhul üht väga viletsat taktikat. Et neil ei ole julgust suhteid lõpetada inimese moodi, rääkides või läbi rääkides või lihtsalt jeebet tõmmates, hakkavad nad otsima kaudseid mooduseid, kuidas oma teinepool niimoodi välja vihastada, et too ise taipaks asjade lõplikku lõrriminekut. Sellised mehed hakkavad jooma ja laaberdama, käituvad nagu kaabakad, või mis käituvad, nad ongi kaabakad, krantsid, närukaelad, nende teod on koledad ja andestamatud, neil lasub selline süü, mida ei lunasta ükski märtrisurm. Nad ei aimagi, et on naisi, keda lihtsalt ei õnnestu maha raputada kasvõi kakskümmend aastat järjest juues.

Igatahes lonkis Adam peale Sulisławiga kohtumist vanematekoju ja tuhlas seal läbi kõik sahtlid, kergitas riiulitel asuvaid nipsasju, avas ning sulges kappide uksi nii metoodilise aeglusega, et ema Ewal katkes kannatus.

‘Mida imet sa õieti otsid?’ küsis ta nagu alati. Pani oli kandnud köögilauale suure hunniku toitu ja ootas pikisilmi, et end harva näole andev poeg kõhu korralikult täis sööks. Toitmisinstinkt ei olnud temas vaibunud, iga kord kui võsuke kodu väisas, tühjendas ta oma kapid tangainetest ja lihakraamist, pakkides pojale kaasa korraliku kompsu nassvärki. ‘Nälga ei pea küll keegi nägema,’ ütles ta ikka, ja ‘süüa ei keela me kellelegi’, või ‘tule söö nüüd kõht korralikult täis’, nõndaviisi tundus talle, et miski ei saa liiga vabalt olla.

‘Maja võtit otsin,’ vastas Adam, legendaarne asjadeotsija. Ta otsis alati midagi, kas mõnda oma sokki, püksirihma, mõnda raamatut, oma võtmeid, oma mütsi, oma ükskõik mida ja sageli ta ei otsinudki midagi. ‘Ma ainult vaatan, mis siin on,’ ütles ta siis. Niisiis ei imestanud pani Mackiewicz hetkekski otsitava objekti üle, ega hakanud pärima, miks Adamil võtit vaja läheb, vaid vastas automaatselt:

‘Esikus peeglikapi peal on see puujuurikast tops, vaata sinna põhja.’ Tema oli jälle tuntud selle poolest, et teadis alati täpselt, kus mingi, ükskõik kui imelik või harva kasutatav asi on. Ja kui tema ei teadnud, kus asi on, siis võis selle asja kadunuks lugeda.

Võti näpus, läks Adam kööki sööma ja sõi tõepoolest korralikult kõhu täis. Tal oligi natuke näljas peetud hurdakoera nägu peas.

Oktoobrikuu esimesel päeval kolis Sulisław Zawisza ihuüksinda hüljatud majja. Vett tõi ta pangea naabrite juurest ja püüdis siis kangelaslikult üdini rõsket, vammid ja lagu täis maja üles kütta. Ehitise pentsik küttesüsteem oli vist kunagi eesrindlik olnud, pea-aegu nagu keskküte, pliiti küttes soojenes veevärk, kuumenenud vett oleks radikates pidanud ringi ajama mingi elektriga käivituv pump. Et aga elektrit ei olnud, siis võis peale tundidepikkust kütmist täheldada, kuidas radiaatori üks nurk kergelt leigeks muutub, nii teise-kolmanda ribini, siis aga soojus taandus ja Zawisza näole ilmus kurblik ilme. Ta kükitas pliidisuu ees ja luges kuni valguse kadumiseni kopitanud raamatuid. Voodi oli nagu soo, kui palju ta ka ei katsunud tekke ja patju üles soojendada, neid tihevalt vastu pliidikülgi toppides ja igapidi keerates, ikka oli tunne, nagu oleks end mässinud surilinalesse, kõigel püsis märja, klimpunud mulla lõhn.

Kuid huvitaval kombel tõi *maja* endaga kaasa ka täiesti positiivseid muudatusi Sulisławi seltskondlikus elus. Kui enne oli tüdrukutega kehvasti, siis nüüd selgus, et tüdrukud tahavad vägagi külla tulla, ja just sellised halvad, halbade kavatsustega tüdrukud, nad

tahtsid tema juures viina juua, istuda küünlavalgel kesk apokallüpsist, tunda, kui elus, kui muretud, kui hoolimatud on nad keset seda vana kola, mis oli ju kokkuvõttes ikkagi romantiline, istuda turritavate vedrudega roosipuust diivanil, no võib-olla mitte just roosipuust, aga igal juhul roose kuhjaga täis nikerdatud; kõikjale oli asetatud raskeid pronksist küünlajalgu, märg ja külm tõmbusid koomale noorte soojade kehade ja igale poole valguva küünlavaha eest. Mõnus oli ette kujutada, et neid koletislikke raamatulasusid valvab mõni Goethe vaim ja vaatab vesise suuga noori näitsikuid, silmad punnis peas.

Lõplikult sättis Sulisław ennast sisse nukapealsesse kollase kardinalkaltsuga tuppa. Seal oli ka kollakas tapeet ja aknast viiliti sisse paistev madal sügispäike muutis armetu toa õndsaks kuldseks nurgakeseks. Tüdrukud oli sinna ukse peale kirjutanud sildi 'Külm ja kole tuba, keegi ei taha olla', aga just selle külma ja kole-da, pliidist kõige kaugemal asuva ruumi asustas Sulisław iseen-daga. Sest kõik teised toad olid veel rohkem perse keeratud, siin oli vähem asju, vähem hallitanud kõiteid, ja need, mis olid, ladus ta ilusasti sirgetesse ridadesse väikesele improviseeritud riulile, loopis ülejäänud kola toast välja ja jättis sinna miinimumi — ühe klapplaua, kõige vähem logiseva tooli, voodi ja oligi kogu lugu.

## Polish Boys

*Mudlum*

Translated from Estonian by Adam Cullen

Certain later events evolve from developments which are currently underway or have perhaps already occurred. In early spring, Adam's family received word that an ancient member of the extensive Mackiewicz bloodline had given up the ghost. The expiring of a human life is indeed unfortunate, but generally has no greater impact on the living. This relative left behind a ramshackle cottage which no one wanted because it was so far on the fringes of the city and in such poor condition — rotting to the very foundations, in fact, and stocked with dry rot and giant spiders. The hovel lacked the most essential modern-day convenience, electricity, as well as running water, because the old man's final ailing years were spent bouncing from hospital to hospital and no one had ever thought to pay the bills, resulting in the utilities being shut off one after another. When someone did finally realize there was a dilapidated cottage standing vacant somewhere, the heirs had to break down the door to gain access — what they found was not uplifting. It was hard to say for what rude contingent the dwelling had once been constructed, perhaps railway workers, but some men certainly owned larger sheds hammered together more competently than it. Doors were apparently the only material the builders had had in abundance: the space, large enough for a single room, had been given a most astonishing lightless vestibule from which an inexplicable six doors opened into rooms as miniature as matchboxes. The front door opened into an entryway so cramped that a broad-shouldered man could get wedged tight, and yet a staircase leading up to the loft had also been crammed into it by some miracle. Once the front door was shut, you found yourself in total darkness. Groping around blindly helped to determine that two doors led to the right. One opened into



a “living room” furnished with a puzzling cupboard with mirrored doors which covered the entire wall, across from which was a sagging plywood bookshelf groaning under the weight of musty volumes with crimped pages. The second door opened into what could conditionally be called a study and was likewise piled with books from floor to ceiling; there was even a bookshelf standing in the center of the room like in a library. A decrepit desk was jammed between the heaps, its warped drawers stuck fast and its cabinet doors hanging askew from their hinges. Even the desk chair wobbled on each leg; strips of fabric were wound around the stretchers in an attempt to hold the tenons in place somehow. The single grimy window was divided into tiny grilled panes and faced north, though mighty trees hemming in the house obscured the view anyway. In short, that face of the building was as dark as a cave. The door at the end of the corridor opened into a compact corner room which was a smidgen lighter. A tattered curtain, once yellow but now sun-bleached to the chalky tone of dunes, hung before the window on two nails. Crouching in the feeble light that filtered through the glass was a bed paired with another disorderly stack of books ruined by the dank air. An unwashed mug balanced on the top-most volume, fossilized sugar encrusted at its base. Two doors also opened from the left of the inky intestinal corridor — on into a lavatory occupied by pill-bugs and gigantic spiders which were black and hairy, as big as one’s fist, with legs as thick as anchor cables. The toilet tank was cracked. Consolidated behind the final door was the kitchen and boiler room, which also contained an unusual tin stove and a dish-drying rack set upon a chest of drawers. The drawers were packed with unused bowls, plates, and saucers, all nicely peppered with mice scat. Standing in one corner was the only item true to the times in that cottage: a refrigerator. Next to the appliance was a worn cellar trapdoor, though tugging at its rusted ring only left you holding a few rotting floorboards. No one wanted to know what was inside.

The relatives all shook their heads, changed the lock, handed out the spare keys, and forgot about the cottage.

One mild autumn day, after Sulisław had been expelled from his latest unorthodox accommodation and stood on a Warsaw street corner at a total loss for what to do next, his friend Adam suddenly remembered: the cottage. All else aside, the cottage did have walls and a roof, no matter that that was all it had. And as an additional heavenly blessing, the cottage had retained a modest stack of firewood. The neighboring houses all had generous supplies as well — one could always filch a log or two from here or there, so heating wasn’t an issue. Not even Adam would have been willing to relocate so totally outside of society and its traditional standards of convenience to live in that genuine hotbed of tuberculosis, even though life with Lilita had already begun to go sour. Males at that delicate age, not to mention much older, burly, seasoned men, commonly employ a vile tactic in such a situation. Lacking the courage to end the relationship like civilized human beings by discussing or negotiating or simply fucking off, they pursue circuitous ways to infuriate their partner to such a degree that she herself ultimately realizes their romance is utterly kaput. Men like that start to drink and brawl, behaving like hooligans. Or what behavior is it, really — they are hooligans, scoundrels, bastards. Their actions are terrible and unforgivable; they bring upon themselves a guilt no martyr’s death could redeem. They haven’t the slightest clue that there exist women who simply cannot be shaken off by even twenty years of constant boozing.

Anyhow, after meeting with Sulisław, Adam shuffled off to his parents’ apartment, where he rummaged through all the drawers, peeked under knickknacks on the shelves, and opened and closed cupboard doors with such methodical sluggishness that his mother Ewa finally lost her nerve.

“What wonder are you looking for now?” she asked as she always did. Pani Mackiewicz had served a feast on the kitchen table and was impatiently waiting for her son, who made very infrequent appearances, to tuck into a proper meal. Her motherly instincts had not faded and every time their boy paid a visit, she emptied their cupboards of meat and grains to pack him a sizeable care package. She’d say, “Nobody needs to go hungry,” and, “We’re not going to stop you from eating,” or “Sit right down and have a proper meal.” In this way, she believed that nothing could ever be too amiss.

“I’m looking for the cottage key,” the legendary looker-for-things replied. Adam was always ferreting around for something, be it a sock, a belt, a book, his keys, his hat, or his whatever-else, and oftentimes he wasn’t really looking for anything. “I’m just seeing what’s here,” he’d say. Consequently, Pani Mackiewicz was in no way nonplussed by the sought-after object, and neither did she inquire of the purpose for Adam needing it. Instead, she automatically answered: “There’s a wooden bowl on top of the entryway closet. Check around the bottom.” She, in turn, was famous for always knowing exactly where things were, no matter how strange or little used they were. If she didn’t know where something was, then it was as good as lost.

Key in hand, Adam entered the kitchen to eat, and did polish off a proper meal. He bore a striking resemblance to a starved greyhound.

Sulisław Zawisza moved into the abandoned cottage alone on the first of October. He fetched a pail of water from the neighbors and doughtily set about heating the dank space teeming with rot and must. The peculiar heating system had probably been state-of-the-art at one time and was almost like central heating. A fire in the stove heated the plumbing system and hot water should have circulated through the radiators with the help of an electric pump. Yet since there was no electricity, Zawisza could feel one corner of a radiator turn lukewarm after hours of stoking the flames, perhaps even extending to a second or a third rib, before the warmth dwindle

dled and a dour expression washed over his face. He would crouch before the mouth of the stove and read musty books until the light faded. The bed was like a mire — no matter how much he tried to warm the pillows and blankets by pressing them against the sides of the stove and rotating them every which way, he still felt as if he was wrapping himself in burial sheets as he lay down to sleep. Pervading every inch of the space was the smell of damp clotted soil.

Interestingly, however, the cottage still ushered in entirely positive changes in Sulisław’s social life. Whereas his situation with girls had been spotty before at best, it now turned out that girls were very much willing to come visit, and specifically the bad girls with bad intentions. They wanted to sip vodka, to lounge in an apocalypse by candlelight, to feel how alive, how carefree, how careless they were among the heaps of old junk, which taken as a whole was romantic nevertheless; to recline upon a rosewood sofa with the springs poking through —nwell, maybe not rosewood exactly, but embellished with rose carvings in any case. Heavy bronze candlesticks were scattered everywhere; the cold and damp withdrew from the young, warm bodies and the wax spilling in every direction. It was amusing to imagine that those monstrous heaps of books were guarded by a Goethean spirit, gazing upon the young sprites with bulging eyes and salivating lips.

Ultimately, Sulisław settled into the yellowish-curtained corner room. The wallpaper was also yellow and the autumn sunlight which filtered through the window at a low angle turned the dingy room into a golden nook. A girl had scrawled “cold and nasty room, no place to be” on the door, but it was precisely that cold and nasty space farthest from the stove where Sulisław made himself the most comfortable. For while all the other rooms were lost causes to an even greater extent, there were fewer objects in this one, fewer musty volumes, and the ones that Sulisław found he stacked into neat, even rows on a small improvised shelf, tossing the rest of the junk out the door and leaving only the bare minimum: a collapsible table, the least-rickety chair, the bed, and nothing more.

# GERMANY

**Matthias Nawrat**

## **Der traurige Gast** ***The Sad Guest***

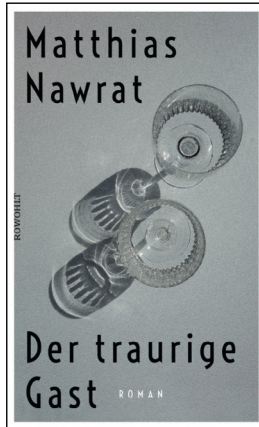
Rowohlt, Berlin, 2019

Language: German

ISBN: 978-3-4980-4704-7

### BIOGRAPHY

**M**atthias Nawrat was born in 1979 in Opole, Poland, and moved to Germany with his family at the age of 10. His first novel *Wir zwei allein* (*The Two of Us Alone*), published in 2012, was awarded the Literaturpreis of the Kanton of Bern 2012 and the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Förderpreis 2013. For an excerpt from his dystopian novel *Unternehmer* (*Entrepreneurs*), Nawrat was awarded the KELAG Prize at the Klagenfurt Days of German-Language Literature in 2012 and the Bayern2-Wortspiele-Preis 2014. In his subsequent novel *Die vielen Tode unseres Opa Jurek* (*The Many Deaths of our Grandpa Jurek*), which was awarded the Förderpreis of the Bremer Literaturpreis 2016 and the Alfred-Döblin-Medaille 2016, Nawrat countered the historical horror of his family history with the cheerfulness of a picaresque novel. Nawrat's new novel, *Der traurige Gast* (*The Sad Guest*), was published in 2019 and is a quiet, melancholy book that



traces the most diverse biographies in contemporary Berlin. Nawrat has also published essays, short stories and a journal about a journey to Siberia: *Nowosibirsk: Tagebuch* (2017). He lives in Berlin.

### SYNOPSIS

The first-person narrator who roams through contemporary Berlin in *The Sad Guest* is a flickering, elusive being. The narrator is a writer, has already published three books and comes from Poland. But this novel is not autobiographical. The main character in the first of the three parts of the novel is Dorota, a Polish architect whom the first-person narrator meets through a newspaper ad. The first-person narrator visits Dorota several times. Her monologues charged with

existential philosophy are not always pleasant for her listener, but they do bring him into harmony with the fragility of his own existence. The narrator's precarious feeling of home and security is shaken by the attack on the Christmas market on Breitscheidplatz. The last significant encounter of the first-person narrator is with Dariusz, a former doctor who was stripped of his licence to practice medicine because of his alcohol problems, and who is struggling through life, while the burden of memories is almost crushing him. Dariusz's recollections of his arrival in Germany decades earlier illuminate precisely that space of possibility between loss of homeland, euphoria of departure and longing in which all the characters in the novel are located.



### ♥ JURY REPORT

Matthias Nawrat's novel *The Sad Guest* reflects on the logic and linearity of history and its supposed causality. Little by little, he condenses the main themes of migration and, as a countermovement, exploration of homeland, and reflects on them through different characters. From the initially somewhat haphazard and confusing network of paths and encounters, Nawrat skilfully spins a loose web of urban experiences of the most diverse kinds. He then narrows this down to almost flaneur-like, fumbling encounters. Over the full length of the work, this heterogeneous, at first glance almost brittle, novel acquires a lasting effect. On the surface, the narrator's aimless mode of operation reflects the existential forms of the people he meets. Subtly, Nawrat takes concepts such as life planning or continuity ad absurdum – unobtrusively, but always against the background of historical experiences and injuries. *The Sad Guest* is a quiet but urgent novel, written in a language rich in associations, which also leaves room for a comforting spark of residual hope.

# Der traurige Gast

Matthias Nawrat



## Diaspora

Am dritten Sonntag im Januar fuhr ich von unserem Viertel aus mit der U-Bahn zur Hasenheide am Südstern, auf die andere Seite der Stadt. Dort gab es eine Kirche, in der sich die polnische Gemeinde traf. Ich war nur einmal im Inneren der Kirche gewesen, und auch nicht zur Messe, sondern um mir die farbigen Fensterbilder der Heiligen anzuschauen. Genau gegenüber der Kirche befand sich das Lokal Mały Książę, *Der kleine Prinz*, und wenn man zur richtigen Zeit eintraf, dann bekam man noch einen Tisch, bevor das Restaurant, an das ein Laden mit Lebensmitteln angeschlossen war, sich mit Familien und älteren Herren und Damen füllte, die aus der Sonntagsmesse kamen. In dem Restaurant wurde Polnisch gesprochen, aber jeder Gast sprach auch Deutsch, und die zwei jungen Bedienungen sprachen beides ohne Akzent, sie waren, so glaubte ich, die Töchter des Lokalbesitzerehepaars, die an Sonntagen aushalfen.

Als ich den Raum betrat, waren alle Tische noch frei, aber kurz nach elf begann der Raum sich zu füllen. Es setzte sich, weil die Leute bald zwischen den Essenden standen und ihnen, um abzuschätzen, wann ein Platz für sie frei werden würde, auf die Teller schauten, ein älterer Herr zu mir. Er war in einen grauen Anzug mit weißem Hemd und goldgelber Krawatte gekleidet und trug am kleinen Finger einen goldenen Siegelring, dessen Wappen einen Schild und zwei gekreuzte Degen zeigte. Wir mussten beide nah an den Tisch rücken und uns vorbeugen, hinter uns drückten

die Leute gegen unsere Rücken, im Raum dröhnte es wie in einer Abflughalle.

Er fragte mich, ob ich die Pierogi, die ich gerade zu essen begonnen hatte, empfehlen könne, und ich sagte, dass es zwar nicht die besten seien, die ich je in meinem Leben und vielleicht auch nicht die besten, die ich je in dieser Stadt gegessen hätte, aber dass sie trotzdem gut seien. Und so bestellte er bei einer der zwei jungen Frauen, die sich durch die Menge zu uns vorgearbeitet hatte, eine Portion Pierogi.

Wir sprachen Polnisch miteinander. Es stellte sich heraus, dass er aus Südpolen stammte, aus einer Stadt in der Nähe der Stadt Opole, aus der meine Familie kam und in der ich geboren worden war und die ersten zehn Jahre meiner Kindheit verbracht hatte.

Dann waren Sie gerade auch in der Kirche?, fragte er.

Nein, ich war nicht in der Kirche, sagte ich.

Ist denn etwas passiert?

Nein, ich gehe einfach nur nicht in die Kirche, sagte ich.

Er warf mir einen besorgten Blick zu. Für einen Augenblick fühlte ich mich wie ein Betrüger, der hierhergekommen war, um von der gereinigten Stimmung und der Erhabenheit der Kirchgänger um uns herum zu profitieren.

Er fragte mich, was ich beruflich machte, und ich sagte, dass ich Schriftsteller sei.

In welcher Sprache schreiben Sie?

Auf Deutsch.

Und worüber?

Ich schreibe Erzählungen über verschiedene Dinge, zuletzt über meine Familie und Leute, die ich kenne, sagte ich. Ich habe drei Erzählbände veröffentlicht.

Ach so, sagte er.

Er sagte, dass er Handwerker sei und schon seit über fünfzig Jahren in der Stadt lebe. Er sei in den 60er Jahren zur Zeit der Proteste geflohen und habe hier seine Frau kennengelernt, die aus Lublin gewesen und vor sieben Jahren verstorben sei. Nun lebe er allein, ein paar Straßen weiter.

Was für eine Art Handwerker sind Sie?, fragte ich.

Klavierstimmer, sagte er. Er höre aber inzwischen schlecht, andernfalls könnte er sich noch heute, mit 81 Jahren, etwas dazuverdienen, da in den reicheren Stadtteilen Berlins viele ein Klavier zu Hause stehen hätten. Er habe auch ein Haus in seinem Heimatort, aber er kenne dort niemanden mehr. Sein Sohn und seine Tochter machten dort manchmal Urlaub mit ihren Familien.

Seine Pierogi waren gekommen, und er war eine Weile mit dem Essen beschäftigt. Ich fragte ihn, wie sie ihm schmeckten, und er sagte, dass er schon mal bessere gegessen habe, aber auch schon mal schlechtere.

Ach, schauen Sie, sagte er dann, Richtung Theke deutend, an der die Leute vor der Kasse in der Schlange standen, um die Lebensmittel aus dem Laden zu bezahlen. Da ist Frau Halina.

Vom Eingangsbereich des Restaurants winkte ihm eine Dame in einem roten Mantel zu, mit goldenen Ohrklipsen und gepudertem Gesicht und rot geschminkten Lippen. Sie kam in kleinen Schritten und sich umsichtig an den Stuhllehnen festhaltend zwischen den Rücken der Väter, Mütter und Kinder auf uns zu.

Guten Tag, Herr Rosowski, rief sie, lauter, als nötig gewesen wäre, direkt in sein Ohr. Sie lächelte mir freundlich zu, aber auch misstrauisch, als könnte ich ein Enkel ihres Bekannten sein, von dessen Existenz bisher keiner gewusst hatte. Die zwei anderen Stühle an unserem Tisch waren besetzt, es saß dort ein junges Paar, das sich,

die Köpfe zusammensteckend, leise unterhielt. Ich stand auf und bot Frau Halina meinen Stuhl an, was sie aber ausschlug.

Bitte, sagte ich.

Ich war mit meinem Essen längst fertig, und die Geräuschkulisse im Lokal und die Leute, die noch immer standen und auf freie Plätze warteten, hatten mich erschöpft. Ich verabschiedete mich von Herrn Rosowski, der mich aber schon gar nicht mehr beachtete. Er war aufgestanden, half Frau Halina, sich zu setzen, und hängte ihren Mantel über meine Stuhllehne.

Ich habe mir eine Portion Pierogi bestellt, rief er ihr ins Ohr, während ich noch neben ihnen stand.

Ach schön, rief sie zurück und rückte den Stuhl näher an den Tisch heran.

Ich zahlte vorne an der Kasse, bei derjenigen der zwei jungen Frauen, von der ich glaubte, dass sie Małgorzata hieß, und trat in die kühle Winterluft hinaus, für einen Moment geblendet von dem grellen Himmel, der sich über die Kirche und den Friedhof auf der anderen Straßenseite und über die ganze Stadt spannte. Ich brauchte einen Moment, bis ich wieder wusste, wo ich war, und ging dann los, Richtung U-Bahn-Station.

Um mich waren spazierende Familien unterwegs. An der Kreuzung hielt ein Mann auf einem Fahrrad, hinter ihm zwei Kinder mit Helmen auf kleineren Fahrrädern. Die ganze Stadt schien unterwegs zu sein, obwohl die Luft schneidend kalt war. Ich ging an der U-Bahn-Station vorbei und an den Geschäften der Urbanstraße entlang zum Kanal, ich ließ mich von der Stimmung der Leute treiben. Ich hatte wirklich das Gefühl, dass ich in der Kirche gewesen war, wie als Kind in der Familiensiedlung am Stadtrand von Opole, als ich die Geschichten über die Wunder, über die Hochzeit zu Kana, über die Königreiche der Engel und der Teufel noch geglaubt hatte.

# The Sad Guest

*Matthias Nawrat*

Translated from German by Katy Derbyshire

## Diaspora

On the third Sunday in January, I took the U-Bahn from our neighbourhood to the Hasenheide area at Südstern station, on the other side of Berlin. There was a church there where the Polish community met up. I had only been inside the church once, not for Mass but to look at the stained-glass saints. Directly opposite the church was the restaurant Mały Książę, The Little Prince, and if you arrived at the right time you could get a table before the place filled up with families and elderly ladies and gentlemen leaving Sunday Mass. The language in the restaurant, which had its own grocery shop next door, was Polish, but every guest also spoke German and the two young waitresses spoke without accents; they were the daughters of the restaurant owners, I believe, and helped out on Sundays.

All the tables were free when I arrived, but it began to fill up shortly after eleven. People were soon standing between the diners, staring down at their plates to judge when they'd be vacating their places, so an elderly gentleman joined me at my table. He was dressed in a grey suit with a white shirt and a golden-yellow tie and wore a golden signet ring on his little finger, its crest a shield and two crossed swords. Both of us had to pull our seats up close to the table and lean in, the people behind us pressing against our backs, the room reverberating like a departure lounge.

He asked me whether I would recommend the pierogi I had just begun eating, and I said they weren't the best I'd ever eaten in my life and perhaps not the best I'd ever eaten in the city either, but they were still good. And so, once one of the two young waitresses had worked her way through the crowd to us, he ordered a portion of pierogi.

We spoke Polish to one another. It turned out he originated from southern Poland, from a town near Opole, the city my family came from, where I had been born and spent the first ten years of my childhood.

You've just come from church then, too? he asked.

No, I wasn't at church, I said.

Has something happened?

No, I just don't go to church, I said.

He cast me a concerned glance. For a moment, I felt like a con-man who had come here to profit from the church-goers' feelings of purification and transcendence.

He asked me what I did for a living, and I said I was a writer.

What language do you write in?

German.

And what about?

I write stories about various things, most recently about my family and people I know, I said. I've published three short-story collections.

I see, he said.

He told me he was a tradesman and had been living in the city for more than fifty years. He had escaped during the protests in



the 60s and had met his wife here, who was from Lublin and had died seven years ago. Now he lived alone, a few streets away.

What kind of tradesman are you? I asked.

A piano tuner, he said. But his hearing was bad now, he told me, otherwise he might still be making a little on the side, at the age of 81, since many people in the richer parts of Berlin had a piano at home. He had a house in his hometown as well but he didn't know anyone there these days. His son and daughter took their families there on holiday.

His pierogi had arrived and he was occupied with eating for a while. I asked him how he liked them, and he said he'd had better but he'd had worse as well.

Oh look, he said then, pointing towards the counter where people were queuing up to pay for food from the shop. There's Mrs Halina.

From the restaurant's entrance area, a lady in a red coat waved at him, with golden ear clips, a powdered face and red-painted lips. She came over to us, taking tiny steps and holding on to the backs of the chairs between the fathers, mothers and children.

Hello, Mr Rosowski, she crowed directly into his ear, louder than necessary. She gave me a smile that was friendly but also distrustful, as though I might be a grandson no one had previously been aware of. The two other seats at our table were taken by a young couple talking quietly, their heads pulled in close. I stood up and offered Mrs Halina my chair, but she declined.

Please, go ahead, I said.

I had long since finished my meal and was exhausted by the volume in the restaurant and the people still standing around waiting for tables. I said goodbye to Mr Rosowski but he took no more

notice of me. He had got to his feet to help Mrs Halina sit down and was draping her coat over the back of my chair.

I ordered a portion of pierogi, he yelled in her ear as I was still standing alongside them.

Lovely, she shouted back, and pulled her chair in closer to the table.

I paid at the cash desk at the front, thanked the young waitress I believed was called Małgorzata, and stepped out into the chilly winter air, dazzled for a moment by the bright sky arching above the church and cemetery on the other side of the street and above the whole of the city. It took me an instant to remember where I was, and then I set off back towards the station.

Families were out strolling around me. At the crossroads, a man on a bicycle stopped, behind him two children with helmets on smaller bikes. The whole of the city seemed to be out and about, though the air was bitterly cold. I walked past the underground station and along the shops on Urbanstrasse to the canal, letting the atmosphere drive me on. I really did feel like I'd been to church, like as a child on my family's housing estate on the edge of Opole, back when I'd still believed the stories about the miracles, the marriage at Cana, the kingdoms of angels and devils.

# KOSOVO<sup>1</sup>

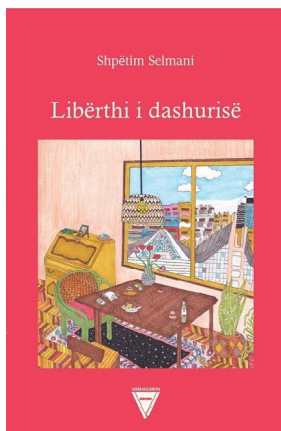
<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

## Shpëtim Selmani **Libërthi i dashurisë** *The Booklet of Love*

Armagedoni, Prishtina, 2019  
Language: Albanian  
ISBN: 978-9-9517-8011-7

### BIOGRAPHY

**S**hpëtim Selmani was born on 16 May 1986. He received a master's degree from the Academy of Arts at the University of Prishtina. He acts in theatre performances in the country and internationally, and has received awards for his acting. He is a regular contributor to the alternative blog *S'bunker*. He was part of the 'Crocodile' literary residence in Belgrade in 2014, and 3 years later took part in the 'Poeteka, Tirana in Between' literary residence in Tirana. He participated in the Leipzig book fair in 2017. Shpëtim Selmani writes prose and poetry. He published the book *Shënimet e një Grindaveci (Hot-tempered Notes)* in 2015 and a poetry collection *Selected Poems 2010-2017 – Poetry in Time of Blood and Despair* (Multimedia, Prishtina) in 2017. His most recent novel *Libërthi i dashurisë (Booklet of Love)* was published in 2019 by Armagedoni in Prishtina and will be published in



Bulgarian in 2021. Its publication was supported by the Kosovo Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

### SYNOPSIS

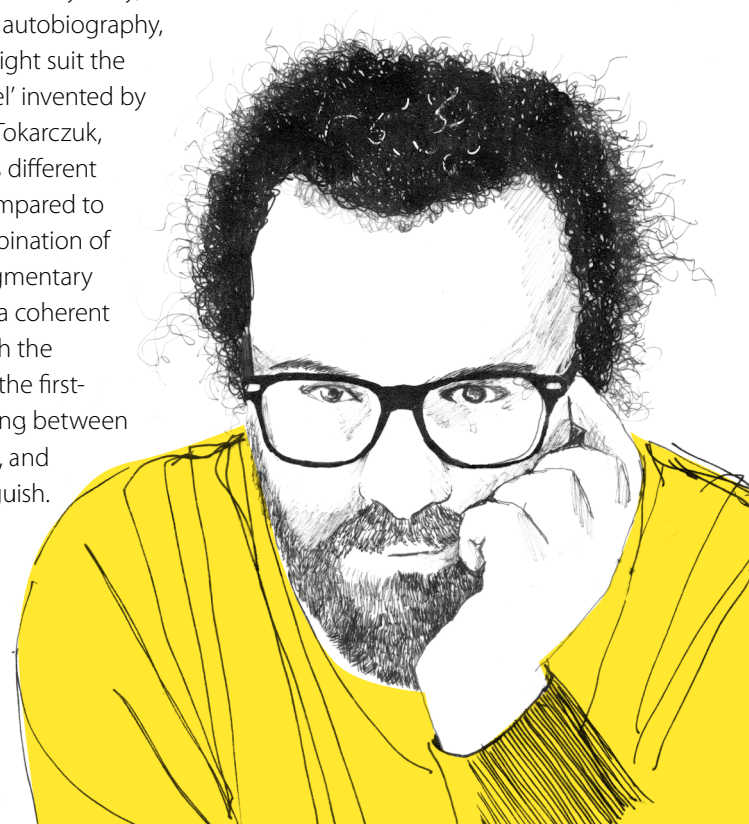
The narrative begins with the narrator reflecting on his everyday routine and continues with him thinking about a variety of topics, from the mundane to the worldly and the spiritual, touching on fragments from the past and present, and on issues of local and global consequence. Later on, the narrator blends his interior monologues with a focus on his beloved partner and her pregnancy, as he demonstrates his own transformation while preparing to become a parent. He reflects on his own relationship with his father, and on his relationship with literature and

with nationalism, consumerism and other-isms. The feeling of giving birth to a new creature makes the narrator consider his preoccupations from a new and different angle. The narrative closes with the act of naming his newborn son, alluding to the power of reference of language.

### ♥ JURY REPORT

Shpëtim Selmani's book is something new in prose in the Albanian language. His novel is a hybrid composition of different genres such as literary diary, poetic prose, essay and autobiography, a blend of styles that might suit the term 'constellation novel' invented by the Polish author Olga Tokarczuk, which for her combines different versions of reality as compared to linear writing. This combination of genres might seem fragmentary on first sight, but it has a coherent structure and ideas, with the contemplative voice of the first-person narrator oscillating between sincerity and ambiguity, and between hope and anguish. This voice meditates, protests, loves, hates, mocks and self-ironises, covering a wide range of dimensions from

the personal to the political. Shpëtim Selmani's main thematic focus is existential, and the pessimistic tone prevails, fused with a strong feeling of altruism. The imagery and figurativeness are skillfully used to transmit irony and sarcasm, often directed to the narrator himself. He uses the frivolous to reflect on perennial topics such as the cruel and painful encounter of the individual with the collective, thus opening up questions that sound tangible in the global context of the post-pandemic world.



# Libërthi i dashurisë

Shpëtim Selmani



## PJESA E PARË

*Zota ju qofsha falë, për librin që ma dhatë!*  
Tomaž Šalamun

### 1. Strip Depo

Me vite përpiqem të zgjahem herët, të ulem si mbret në njëren prej karrigeve të Strip Depo-së. Të shumtën e herëve ia dal të zgjahem herët. I jetoj mëngjeset sikur të ishin të njëjta. Mbase që të gjitha dhe janë të njëjta. Po kush ia qin nënën! Kur ulem marr një xhemper ose një pallto, mbuloj gjunjët e mi të dashur. Gjunjët e mi të dhier apokaliptikë. Rregulli numër një: Gjithmonë përpiqu të dhurosh ngrohtësi për veten, pastaj të tjerët do të strehohen te ti. Bota është një frigorifer i prishur. Kjo është fara e parë e dijes. Lufta qëndron e patrazuar në hyrjen e secilit libër që na kanë falur zotat.

### 2. Lola

Gjatë kohës sa punoja në Qendrën për Dekontaminim Kulturor në Beograd kam njohur një grua fantastike. Quhej Lola. Gjithnjë më thoshte se jam foshnja e saj. Ta themi hapur, ka lindur shumë herët para meje. Kam lindur shumë vonë pas

saj. Që ta dini, e gjithë mjeshtëria jonë është që të lindim në kohë të duhur. Ama për këtë gjë duhet pasur koqet deri te gjunjët. Vuaj që nuk kam lindur në një kohë tjetër. Qaj në heshtje, ia fus vetes grusht para pasqyrës. Dua ta shkatërroj veten shkaku i paaftësisë për të lindur në kohën e duhur. E gjithë historia njerëzore është dëshmi e nënshtrimit, dëshmi e kësaj filozofie idiote. Lola mban balluke të hatashme. Gjatë kohës sa isha atje ajo kujdesej nëse isha ushqyer mirë, nëse kisha birra në duar, nëse kisha kokëdhembje, nëse më pëlqente të vallëzoja, nëse kisha uri për suxhukun e hedhur në mes fasules. Lola më ka puthur dy herë, por sikur ta puthte foshnjën e vet. Beogradi pa të nuk ka kuptim. Duket i vdekur pa Lolën. Duket mjeran, një lypës i përdalë që pshurr nën urën e ashpër të shekujve. E gjithë ç'desha të them është se më ka marrë malli për të. Do të doja ta dëgjoja edhe një herë rrëfimin mbi dashnorin mesdhetar që mërdhihej para Hotel Slavija. T'ia dëshmoj atë që gjithmonë e thotë. Jam një foshnje e madhe, që në një formë i përket asaj. Fund e krye, vetëm asaj.

### 3. Izabela

Tiranë. Jam në shtëpinë e Izabelës. Pasi bëjmë dashuri me loçkën hyjnore, nuk bëj zë. Futem lakuriq në dhomën e madhe të vetmitarëve depresivë. E pyes veten për esencën e kotësisë. Ajo më kafshon në gjoks. Më thotë diçka të shenjtë:

- Jam e lumtur.

Hamendësohem në lidhje me të. Çfarë dreqin mund të jetë lumturia që nxjerr shpirtra në lëndinën e madhe të jetës. Mbase një shërbëtorë e përbetuar e djallit. Një iluzion metafizik që ngadhënjën shpresën. Natyrisht kënaqem që e thotë këtë. Dua ta shoh gjithmonë të lumtur. Atë tërësi të saj përballë meje, gjithmonë. Por pëllumbesha ime nuk e ka në mend të ndalet me kaq. Përsëri thotë diçka që është e lakmueshme për botën:

- Jam në paqe.

Kësaj here nuk rri dot para tundimit të pyetjes. Doja të isha pronari i paqes. Zot i paqes. Në mënyrë që ta shtrij në tërë fushën e inatit, urrejtjes, kudo në botë. Dhe kudo jashtë saj. I lë shenjat e pashlyeshme të buzëve të mia në ballin e saj:

- Me veten tënde apo me mua...?

Më pas rri në ballkon. Lexoj. Ajo në anën tjetër kryen punët e veta të përditshme. Zogjtë cicërojnë, e dinë se përse e bëjnë këtë. Njëherë e mirë u japin fund dilemave letrare. Koha është e bukur. Një kohë për të gjithë. Britmat e kalamajve jehojnë si kambana qiellore. Një zë nga altoparlanti lajmëron se e gjithë bota do të qeveriset nga Bruce Springsteen. Vasha ime më sjellë dredhëza, banane të prera. Të prera me saktësi. Në pasdite e lëpij diellin që bie mbi fytyrën e saj si një qen i lazdruar. E ha zemrën e lumturisë. E pështyj. E shoh se si përplasat poshtë në rrugë.

#### 4. Miller

Jam i vetmi që kam një libër në dorë. Dukem qesharak. Një mbeturinë e hatashme klasike. Nuk më han palla për asgjë. Jam kryengritës bosh. Luftoj ndaj diçkaje bosh. Nuk besoj në heronj, as në fat e as në dritaren e hapur. Njerëzit në çdo çast mund ta tradhtojnë veten ngaqë e kanë të pamundur të ikin nga tragjizmi epik që i mbështjellë. Djajtë kanë strofullin e vet legjendar në zemrat joshëse që marshojnë drejt gjakut. Jam si një hije duke besuar me çdo kusht, se kjo është epoka jonë më e lavdishme. Kujt i duhet e vërteta. Ajo bishë e frikshme që përtyp mishin e njeriut. Lexoj e kulloj në ujin e qetë të gotës së xhamtë. Jam i dalë boje, i trishtuar nga gara e këmbëve të mprehta, artist fund e krye, aspak mendjemadh. Si një Henry Miller me afat të skaduar. I vdekur shpirtërisht, i gjallë fizikisht. Moralisht i lirë.

#### 5. Vetëvrasja

Sot përsëri më shkoi mendja të bëj vetëvrasje, t'ia fus vetes thikën në sy, ta pi helmin e minjve laboratorik, ta fus kokën në rrethin e një litari të pistë, të dal papritur para një veture në autostradë, të hidhem nga ndonjë kodër. Është e habitshme se sa shumë mënyra ekzistojnë për t'ia qirë vetes nënën. Edhe më e habitshme se kaq është një tjetër gjë: toleranca dhe Zoti liberal ndaj qenies së tij vigane. Sa shumë mundësi na ka lënë në duar. Desha ta shkruaja një letër: Qijuni të gjithë! Më keni ardhur në majë të hundës! Natyrisht, nuk e bëra. Jam në prag të të tridhjetave, e kur shoh fytyrat e njerëzve që i kam njohur gjithmonë, shpirti im i ndyrë qan si kafsha në ferr. I shoh se si po vjetrohen. Bash i dalloj. Qenie që po shkojnë poshtë. E kuptoj se diçka jokorrekte po ndodh me ne. Si një mazohist i keq kënaqem, e marr si të natyrshme tërë këtë situatë që shkërdhen nënën e absurdit. Dhe të gjithë absurdistëve të dobët e të marrë. Dielli na ka poshtëruar që nga mëngjesi. Diç duhet të bëjmë, por ende nuk jemi të aftë. Po të isha Zot, Zot na ruaj! Do t'ua falja njerëzve vetëm një gjë, veten e tyre, pastaj do t'i braktisja përgjithmonë.

#### 6. Lufta

Viti 1999. Në mes të prillit të atij viti dhe prillit të vitit 2016 jam zgjatur si një çamçakëz. I zjarhtë, traumatik deri në fund të të gjitha epokave që ma shurdhojnë bythën.

#### 7. Terri

Kam hapur dritaret. Dëgjohet zhurma e lumit. Zogjtë dhe gumëzhima e veturave të largëta. Kundërmon era e mutit të lopëve. Terri futet në mua. Katër drita shtëpish herë ndriçojnë, herë humbasin pushtetin e tyre. Jam vetmitar. Flutur e lumtur që përvëlohet në dritë. Apolitik. Atomik. Modern. Hëna është e vdekur, idiotët si

puna ime fusin gishtërinjtë e gjatë në sytë e natës. Pastaj qetë bëjmë atë që kemi bërë gjithmonë. Fund e krye të lumtur. Hamë thonjtë tanë. Duke parë nga dritarja se si flatrojnë qeniet njerëzore, që presin të vijnë në këtë botë.

## 8. Dielli

Po kthehesha nga Prishtina. Dielli po përplasej mbi xhamin e përparmë të Opelit. Ndjeva diçka të pazakontë. E gjithë bota po rrotullohej brenda meje. Bëra grimasa të çuditshme me fytyrë. Gjoksi më digjej ngaqë pas tridhjetë vjetësh ende nuk e dija arsyen e ekzistencës sime dhe të gjithçkajes rreth meje. Isha një hut. Besnik ndaj rrjedhave të pandryshueshme. Bëra grimasa me fytyrë në përpjekje për ta gjetur një përgjigje por, thjesht, nuk po ia dilja. Isha i paaftë mendërisht. Dikush ma bëri me dorë. Përpara meje koka tullace e një traktoristi, po më verbonte me shkëlqim. Një këlysh me zorrët e shkapërderdhura në vijën e bardhë të asfaltit, një mori tërmetesh në kokë. Jetoja vetëm për Izabelën dhe familjen time. Gjithçka tjetër jashtë nesh ishte e çuditshme. E lëkundshme. E rrezikuar nga kafsha e realitetit. Dikush ma bëri përsëri me dorë. Oh, udhëtarë të qëruar nga thika e shqetësimit, trupi im është pemë që lulëzon në dimër. Lumturia është shërbëtore e përdhosur nga Zoti. Ne jemi të radhitur njëri pas tjetrit, duke e shitur veten, duke parë tymin nga luftërat e shekujve. Gjithsesi dielli po e bënte ditën më të bukur. Vazhdoja të isha jashtë asaj që isha në të vërtetë. Jashtë asaj që po e thosha kudo në prani të secilës fytyrë. Isha bërë një matrapaz brenda stilit të mendjeve që rregullonin botën. Lëshova një këngë nga Gillespie\*. U ndjeva Motherfucker. Sha, la, la, la, la. Sha, la, la, la, la. (\*Gillespie - Indie Band nga Prishtina.)

## PJESA E DYTË

*E di çfarë ha dhe e di çfarë tretë por,  
se çfarë po krijoj, nuk e di.*  
Salvador Dalí

## 9. Easy

Po rrija në ulëset e Easy Jet si një gjigant. Pija verë të kuqe franceze dhe shkrija mend në qiell. Nuk kisha më frikë nga fluturimi mbase për shkak të verës së fortë dhe mendimeve në ajër e serisë së re të mendimeve në jetën time. E rëndësishme ishte që frika ia kishte mbathur. Gjithmonë është mirë kur e heqim qafe çdo lloj frike. Kur ia fusim shqelm në fytyrë dhe i themi: Baje bythën nga këtu! Izabela po rrinte në rendin e parë. Kishim ndërruar ulëset. Ajo është me barrë. Do të bëhem baba. Kur ma tha këtë gjë sapo kisha mbaruar një provë në teatër. E hapa derën me nxitim. Më akuzoi se po hiqja këpucët pa e puthur dhe tha se do të më tregonte diçka të rëndësishme. Ma mori dorën e më uli në ulësen e dhomës së ditës. U ul mbi mua. Më tregoi një letër ku i shihej barku. Diçka në bark. Foshnja jonë që po formësohej. U dridha. Nuk po besoja. Ndjenja të llojllojshme hapën dyert, u futën në mua. Nuk kisha asnjë përshkrim të saktë të çastit. Do të bëhesha baba. Nuk fjeta tërë natën. Qaja në heshtje, ndërsa Izabela po flinte. Çfarë do të ndodhte? A do të isha një babë i mirë? Ku dreqin po e sillja? Në cilën botë? E gjithë ajo çfarë ishte e vërtetë kishte të bënte me njëfarë lloj misticizmi të frikshëm. Kur isha njëzetekatërvjeçar kisha probleme të mëdha me babanë. Doja t'i ndërprisja studimet e të ikja në Danimarkë, me një grua që ishte trembëdhjetë vjet më e vjetër se unë. Babai më kishte shkruar një e-mail ngaqë, sipas tij, ishte e pamundshme të diskutonim qetë. Natyrisht ishte kundër. Më kishte thënë që, mbase, vetëm në moshën tridhjetëvjeçare do ta kuptoja se çfarë ishte në të vërtetë jeta. Mendonte se unë po jetoja huha huha. Vetëm ai kishte një shpjegim për këtë gjë. Për këtë koncept fantom që më rrinte si një kurorë

mbi kokë. Dhe ja, në këtë moshë ai më la. Ai më la dhe kuptova se do të bëhesha baba. Dikush po rregullonte rendin e gjërave, ciklin e hershëm të zhvillimit njerëzor. Të gjithë ne ishim trashëgimtarë të vuajtjes, përulësisht po i shërbenim asaj. Edhe kur nuk donim, ishim duke ia puthur këmbët. Kjo ishte e vërteta e vetme mes të vërtetash të liga. Njeriu i vjetër ia lëshon rendin njeriut të ri. Vuajtja kërkon trupa të freskët. Zoti kërkon ta freskojë fushën e lojës apo, thjesht, të mos mërzitet nga monotonia që ia falin robërit e tij.

## 10. Berlioni

Udhëtimi i parë i foshnjës sonë ishte për në Berlin. Nuk kam qenë asnjëherë në Berlin. Gjithmonë kam dashur të jem këtu por, me gjasë, udhëtimet nuk janë më si dikur, kur pija gjatë tërë kohës. Tani isha përgjegjës për Izabelën dhe atë se çfarë ka në bark. Ajo han shumë. Dëshiron të flejë gjatë tërë kohës. Madje ndonjëherë shpërthen në pellgun e nervozës dhe provon të ma këpusë kokën. Ja, ta themi një gjë të bukur, në mes të 'bukurive' të tjera: gjithmonë kam qenë dembel. Kureshtja për qytetet e mëdha kurrë nuk më ka bërë të gjallë. Adhuroj shtretërit e hoteleve. Për mua qëndrojnë shumë më lart se çdo muze, se çdo shesh, se çdo statujë, se çdo teatër. Shtrati qëndron në hierarkinë më të lartë të gjërave që janë ofruar para qenies njerëzore. Izabela kishte rezervuar një hotel që mirëmbahet nga dy ruse. Njëra që fliste në telefon gjatë tërë kohës, tjetra që kur i kërkonim një hekurosëse, na sillte letra tualeti. Ta themi pa u qarë. Zona ishte e qetë. Dukej zonë e pleqve dhe e automekanikëve. Kjo ishte përshtypja e parë. Sapo u futëm në dhomë Izabela lëshoi një pordhë të bukur. Një të tillë e kishte lëshuar edhe Margarita, ish e dashura ime kur kisha vizituar shtëpinë e saj në Lund të Suedisë. Ishte pak a shumë kështu. Pasi e mbylli me shumë vështirësi çantën e fryrë të rrobave të mia, tha: Amazing dhe e skuqur në fytyrë lëshoi një pordhë të gjatë. Ajo e Izabelës ishte fare e shpejtë, e lezetshme si një mace që futet nën tavolinë. Nuk kisha besuar se

pas pordhës së Margaritës do të dëgjoja një më të mirë që ta kënaqte zemrën. Sikurse ajo e Izabelës. Epo jeta është plot befasi, me të mira të pandalshme. Thjesht, jepu kohë gjërave. Lejoje veten të zhytesh në bukuritë që dalin nga njeriu. Do ta shohësh.



# The Booklet of Love

*Shpëtim Selmani*

Translated from Albanian by Elsa Lici

## PART ONE

*Gods be blessed, for the book you gave me!*

Tomaž Šalamun

### 1. Strip Depo

For years I have tried to wake up early and sit like a king on one of the chairs at the Strip Depo. More often than not, I do manage to wake up early. I live my mornings as if they were the same. Perhaps they are all the same. But who gives a fuck! When I sit down, I take a jumper or a coat and throw it over my poor knees. My fucked-up apocalyptic knees. Rule number one: always try to give warmth to yourself, then the others will find shelter in you. The world is a broken fridge. This is the first seed of knowledge. War looms large in the beginning of each book that the gods have given us.

### 2. Lola

When I was working for the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade, I got to know a fantastic woman. Her name was Lola. She would call me her baby. Let me be frank about it, she was born long before I was. I was born long after she was. Just for you to know, our whole triumph is to be born at the right time. But to achieve this, one must really have big balls. I suffer because I was

not born at a different time. I weep in silence and punch myself in front of the mirror. I want to destroy myself because of my inability to be born at the right time. All human history is the testimony of submission, of this stupid philosophy. Lola had amazing bangs. While I was working for the Centre, she would take care of me, making sure I was well fed, I had beer at hand, I had no headache, I liked dancing, I hungered for *suxhuk*<sup>1</sup> in my beans. Lola kissed me twice, as she would kiss her baby. Belgrade is meaningless without her. The city seems dead without Lola. It seems miserable, like a beggar who pees under the bleak bridge of centuries. All I want to say is that I really miss her. I just want to listen once again to her story of the Mediterranean lover getting cold in front of the Hotel Slavija. I want to prove to her what she always used to say, that I am a big baby who, in a way, belongs to her. Only to her, heart and soul.

### 3. Izabela

Tirana. I am in Izabela's house. After making love to the divine darling, I keep quiet. Naked, I enter the big room of the depressive loners. I wonder about the essence of vanity. She bites me in the chest. She tells me something holy.

"I am happy."

I deliberate about that. What on Earth is this happiness that brings souls into the vast meadow of life? Perhaps it is an avowed servant of the devil. An optic illusion that conquers hope. Of course, I feel happy that she says that. I want to see her always happy. The whole creature in front of me, always happy. But my little dove does not stop at that. She says something else that the whole world would love.

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<sup>1</sup> Local type of sausage.

“I am at peace.”

Now, I cannot resist the temptation of asking a question. I want to be the owner of peace, the Lord of peace, so that I can spread it out over the field of anger, of hatred all over the world. And beyond that. I imprint the indelible marks of my lips on her forehead:

“With yourself or with me...?”

I get out on the balcony to read. She does her daily chores. The birds twitter and they know why they are doing it. They put an end to all the literary dilemmas. The weather is lovely. Everyone loves this weather. The children's cries echo like celestial bells. A voice coming from a loudspeaker announces that the world will be governed by Bruce Springsteen. My girl brings me strawberries, and finely chopped banana. So precisely chopped! In the afternoon, I lick the sun on her face like a spoiled dog. I chew the heart of happiness. I spit it out and see how it crashes on the street below.

#### 4. Miller

I am the only one with a book in my hand. I look ludicrous. An amazing classical remnant. I don't give a damn about anything. I am an empty insurgent. I fight against an empty thing. I don't believe in heroes, neither do I believe in fate, nor in the open window. People can betray themselves at any time because they find it impossible to escape their epic tragedy that envelops them. Demons have their legendary lairs in the tempted hearts that march towards blood. I am a shadow who strongly believes that this is our most glorious epoch. Who needs the truth? That frightening beast that munches on human flesh. I read and drink up the still water from the glass. I am faded and sad from the contest of

my fast feet, an artist body and soul, not selfish at all. Like a Henry Miller with an expiry date. Spiritually dead, physically alive. Morally free.

#### 5. Suicide

It crossed my mind again today to commit suicide, to stab myself into the eye, to take the poison of lab rats, to jump in front of a moving car on the highway, to stick my neck in the noose of a dirty rope, to jump from a high hill. It is surprising how many ways there are to fuck yourself. Even more surprising than that is another thing: the tolerance and the liberal God towards his colossal creation. How many options He has left in our hands! I wanted to write a letter: Fuck you all! I have had enough of you! Of course, I did not do it. I am at the threshold of my thirties, and when I look at the faces of people I have always known, my dirty soul weeps like an animal in hell. I can see them growing old. I can see them. Human beings sliding down the slippery slope of age. I realize that something unusual is happening to us. As a wicked masochist, I rejoice, and I regard as natural this whole situation that smashes the womb of the absurd, and all the weak and crazy absurdist individuals. The sun humiliates us from the early morning. We must do something, but we are not capable of that. If I were a God, God help us! I would offer a gift to all the people, one gift only: their own selves, and then I would abandon them for good.

#### 6. War

Year 1999. From mid-April of that year to April 2016, I feel stretched out like a chewing gum. Fiery and traumatic to the very end of all the epochs that have deafened my butt.

## 7. Darkness

I have opened the windows. The sound of the gurgling river flows in, along with the birds' songs and the drone of distant cars. It reeks of cow dung. Darkness slips into me. The lights of four houses twinkle, and then lose their shining power. I am lonely. A happy butterfly getting burned in the light. Apolitical. Atomic. Modern. The moon is dead, and idiots like me stick their long fingers into the eyes of the night. Then, in silence we do what we have always done. We are happy, body and soul. We bite our nails, watching from the window how human beings use their wings while waiting to come into this world.

## 8. The Sun

I was coming back from Pristina. The sun was hammering upon the windshield of my Opel. I felt something unusual. The whole world was revolving around me. I made some weird grimaces. I felt a burning sensation in my chest because, even after thirty, I did not know the reason of my existence, and of everything around me. I was a vulture, loyal to the unchangeable flows. I made grimaces in an attempt to get an answer, but I simply could not succeed. I was mentally incapable to solve that. Someone waved at me. The bald head of a tractor driver in front of me was blurring my sight with its glaring shine. A puppet with its intestines sprawled on the white line on the asphalt caused tremors in my head. I was living only for Izabela and my family. Everything outside us was weird, shaky, threatened by the beast of reality. Someone waved at me again. O travelers tempered by the fire of concern; my body is a tree that flourishes in winter. Happiness is God's defiled servant. We stand in line, one after the other, to sell ourselves as we watch the smoke of centuries-long wars. But the day was lovely due to the sun. I still could not grasp what I really was. I still could not grasp what I was articulating everywhere in the presence of other faces.

I had become a huckster following the style of the minds that run the world. I turned on the radio and a song from *Gillespie*<sup>2</sup> burst out. I felt like a Motherfucker. Sha, la, la, la, la. Sha, la, la, la, la.

## PART TWO

I know what I eat, and I know what I digest,  
but I do not know what I create.  
Salvador Dalí

## 9. Easy

I was sitting on one of the Easy Jet seats like a giant. I was drinking red French wine and beating my brains in the sky. I was not afraid of flying any more, perhaps because of the strong wine, my thoughts up in the air and the new streak of thoughts in my life. The important thing was that my fear was gone. It is always good when we get rid of whatever form of fear. When we kick fear in the face and say: Move your ass from here! Izabela was sitting in the first row. We had changed our seats. She is pregnant. I will become a father. When she broke the news to me, I had just come back from a rehearsal in the theatre. I dashed into the house. She accused me of taking off my shoes without kissing her first. She told me that she would share with something important. She took my hand and led me to one of the armchairs in the living room. She sat on my lap and showed me a small piece of paper with her womb printed on it. Something in her womb. Our baby was growing. I shivered. I could not believe that. What innumerable feelings broke loose within me! I could not describe that moment accurately. I would

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<sup>2</sup> Indie band from Pristina.

become a father. I could not sleep all night. I was weeping in silence as Izabela was sleeping. What was going on? Would I be a good father? In what world was I bringing this child? All the truth about it was related to a certain frightening mysticism. When I was twenty-four, I had serious problems with my father. I wanted to quit my studies and elope to Denmark with a woman who was thirteen years older than I was. My father had sent me an email, because he believed that it was impossible for us to discuss the matter quietly. Of course, he was against the idea. He had told me that only when I reached thirty, I might understand what life really was. He believed that I was living a devil-may-care type of life. However, he had an explanation for that, for that phantom concept that had set on my head like a crown. And here I am, at this age that crown has fallen, that concept is gone as I am about to become a father. Someone was fixing the order of things, that ancient cycle of the human development. We are all the heirs of suffering, and we humbly serve the suffering. Even when we do not want to, we kiss the feet of suffering. This was the only truth among wicked truths. The old leaves their place to the young. Suffering demands fresh flesh. God wants to refresh the game field, or He just wants to escape the boredom that His creatures give Him.

## 10. Berlin

Our baby's first flight was to Berlin. I had never been to Berlin. I have always wanted to visit the city, but journeys are unlikely to be as they used to, when I was drinking all the time. I was responsible for Izabela and what she was carrying in her belly. She eats a lot and wants to sleep all the time. At times, she unleashes her flow of nervousness and wants to bite my head off. Ok then, let me share something lovely among other lovely things: I have always been lazy. The curiosity for big cities has never gotten the better of me. I love hotel beds. To me, they are better than any museum, any

square, any statue, any theatre. The bed stands at the top of the hierarchy of things that have been offered to human beings. Izabela had booked us into a hotel that was run by two Russian women. One was continuously talking over the phone, the other one would bring us toilet paper when we had asked for a steam iron. But I do not want to complain. The area was quiet. It seemed like an area for old people and auto mechanics. That was my first impression. We had just entered our room when Izabela let out a beautiful fart. Margarita, my ex-girlfriend, had let out a similar fart when I had visited her at her place in Lund, Sweden. More or less, it happened like this. After having closed my bulging bag of clothes with some difficulty, she said: "Amazing" and while becoming red in the face, she let out a lingering fart. Izabela's fart was simple, lovely, like a cat running under the table. I did not believe that I would hear a better fart than Margarita's. Like Izabela's, that makes your heart rejoice. But life is full of surprises and never-ending good things. You only need to give time to things. Plunge yourself into the beautiful things that people make and you will see.

# LUXEMBOURG

**Francis Kirps**

**Die Mutationen:  
7 Geschichten  
und ein Gedicht**

***The Mutations:  
7 Stories and a Poem***

Hydre Editions, Luxembourg, 2019

Language: German and  
Luxembourgish

ISBN: 978-2-9199-5413-1



## BIOGRAPHY

**F**rancis Kirps lives and works in Lintgen (Luxembourg). He has a degree in psychology from the University of Strasbourg. He first started publishing in student magazines in the early 1990s and in the cultural journal *Cahiers luxembourgeois* in 1998. Since then, he has published two short story collections (*Planet Luxembourg*, 2012; *Die Mutationen: 7 Geschichten und ein Gedicht* (*The Mutations: 7 Stories and a Poem*), 2019) and one novel (*Die Klasse von 77*, 2016), and has made numerous contributions to anthologies and contemporary short story collections. He has twice won the second prize in the 'Concours littéraire national',

in 2000 and 2001. Since 2003, he has regularly hosted and appeared at public readings and poetry slam sessions in German-speaking countries. He is the co-organiser of public readings in Luxembourg (Lesebühne) and Germany, and co-editor of the German literary magazine *EXOT*. Since 2014, he has contributed to a satirical column in the German newspaper *taz*.

## SYNOPSIS

*The Mutations: 7 Stories and a Poem* is a collection of seven short stories and one poem written in German, with one story featuring passages written in Luxembourgish. The title-giving 'mutations' are programmatic in two major regards: thematically, as the stories cast moments and instances of transformation of the characters as central to the plot, and conceptually, as each story is in fact a rewriting of a pre-existing text from European literature. While this intertextual homage lends depth to the stories, it is only ever the starting point for Kirps' masterful recasting and reimagining of plots and characters. Their hitherto untold stories are skillfully unfolded and turned into powerful narratives that in turn mutate into new, independent stories carried

entirely by Kirps' carefully crafted authorial voice and imaginative power.

## ♥ JURY REPORT

Under the precise and often humorous pen of Francis Kirps, texts by Virginia Woolf, Kurt Tucholsky, Franz Kafka, Prosper Mérimée, Heinrich von Kleist, Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach and Ingeborg Bachmann, as well as the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, are revisited. The jury was particularly impressed by the skillful intertextual weavings, the transplantation of plots and characters and their recasting in new and unprecedented ways. While an awareness of the pretexts undoubtedly heightens the pleasure of reading, Kirps' stories manage to stand on their own as they are entirely carried by a carefully crafted and powerful authorial voice and by the exceptional strength of Kirps' imaginative power.



# Die Mutationen: 7 Geschichten und ein Gedicht

Francis Kirps



## Die Schnecke an der Wand

*Vorlage „The Mark on the Wall“ von Virginia Woolf*

Die drei Chrysanthemen in der Vase auf dem Kaminsims sind fast verblüht, aber ihr Gift ist bestimmt noch wirksam. Ich darf sie nicht essen, egal wie groß mein Hunger ist. Ich sitze an einer weißen Wand, fünf bis sechs Schneckenlängen über dem Sims. Trotz des noch warmen Herbsttages brennt im Kamin ein Feuer, als wären wir mitten im Winter. Ich fühle, wie die Hitze von unten ausstrahlt, sehe den gelb und rötlich flackernden Schein. Wenn ich zu lange hier verharre, werde ich austrocknen und nicht mehr von der Stelle fortkommen. Durch die Krone des Baumes vor dem Fenster scheint die Sonne herein. Es ist heller Tag. Ich muss sehr lange und sehr tief geschlafen haben.

Wie bin ich überhaupt hierhergekommen? Wenn ich je wieder hinausfinden will, dann ist es unbedingt nötig, mich daran zu erinnern, auf welchem Weg ich in dieses Zimmer gelangt bin ...

Und jetzt entsinne ich mich: Etwas ist gestern passiert, etwas, das ich am liebsten für immer vergessen möchte. Am frühen Abend ist im Salatbeet eine Bierfalle erschienen, das heimtückischste und gefährlichste Tier von allen. Ich habe von meinen Vorfahren gelernt und diese wiederum von ihren Vorfahren undsoweiter, dass wir uns vor Bierfallen in Acht nehmen müssen wie vor sonst nichts.

Wenn wir Bier auch nur von weitem wittern, werden wir Schnecken schwachsinnig, dann gehört unser Gehirn nicht mehr uns, so als ob eine fremde Macht uns steuert, mitten hinein ins flüssige Verderben.

„Widerstehet den trügerischen Verlockungen des Todespfeils“, so lernten wir Schneckenkinder es in jenem sorglosen ersten Sommer unseres Lebens in der Schule der Sprüche, und ich und all meine Mit-Schnecken sagten den Spruch so lange auf, bis wir ihn auswendig konnten.

Hierzu möchte ich allerdings anmerken: Mir persönlich ist das ein wenig zu unklar formuliert. Vielleicht sollte man das Böse einfach beim Namen nennen, kurz und prägnant: „Kinder! Hütet euch vor der Bierfalle!“ Das käme auch bei einfacher gestrickten Schnecken an. Aber gut. Wo war ich stehengeblieben? Gestern Abend, genau: Von nah und fern kamen sie, die Nacktschnecken aus dem Nachbargarten, die Weinbergschnecken von gegenüber, die Bänderschnecken aus dem Park, allesamt wie von Sinnen. Ich sah meine Cousins Steinchen und Birne, beide kaum ein Jahr alt, ihre Gehäuse noch jung und durchscheinend, auf die Bierfalle zukriechen. Ich hörte wie sie diskutierten: ob mit dem Todespfeil wirklich die Bierfalle gemeint sei und nicht vielmehr der Ententeich, da sei durchaus Interpretationsspielraum.

„Ich bin eine freie Schnecke“, rief meine alte Schulfreundin Wolke, „und lasse mir von niemanden nichts vorschreiben, jawohl“, bevor sie über den Rand kippte und für immer aus meinem Leben verschwand. Ich sah enthemmte Schnecken, die von der fahlen Brühe sofften, während bereits ein Dutzend Artgenossen tot darin zum Grund sanken. Schon begann der Geruch auch an meinen Sinnen zu zerren, er war stark, bitter, süß. Wenn ich die Nacht überstehen wollte, dann musste ich aus diesem Garten verschwinden, irgendwohin, wo der Dämon mich nicht fand. Ich hatte den heißesten Teil des Nachmittags unter welken Blättern an der Hausmauer verschlafen und war erst aufgewacht, als der Tumult bereits in vol-



lem Gang war. Das war vermutlich meine Rettung. Mit einer schier unmenschlichen Willensanstrengung kehrte ich dem Garten den Rücken und wandte mich einer nahen Türöffnung zu. Hinter den Mauern dieses Hauses würde ich Sicherheit finden. Ich dachte an alles Mögliche, um mich von den Bierdämpfen abzulenken. In Winde-seile war ich durch die Tür und in einem angenehm kühlen Keller. Doch immer noch streckten die Alkoholdünste ihre mörderischen Griffel nach mir aus. Schnell wie ein Pfeil kroch ich vorwärts, über den Rahmen eines rostigen Fahrrads, zwischen den Zinken eines Rechens quetschte ich mich durch, erklomm die Klinge einer Sense und rutschte auf der anderen Seite wieder runter, dann durch einen Türspalt und eine endlose Treppe hinauf, die in einen langgestreckten Raum führte. Geschwind glitt ich über glattpolierte Dielen und schließlich nach rechts, (oder war es links?), in diesen Raum hinein, robbte die Mauer hoch, und dann, ja dann muss ich, halbtot vor Erschöpfung, eingeschlafen sein.

Meine Schleimspur, eine silbrig schimmernde Kruste, längst eingetrocknet, verläuft horizontal zu meiner Rechten, dann schräg an der Wand hinunter und verliert sich unten auf dem Boden.

Aber halt, was ist das? Plötzlich habe ich das Gefühl beobachtet zu werden. Ich recke meine Stielaugen und tatsächlich: Ich bin nicht allein in diesem Zimmer. Im Sessel vor dem Kamin sitzt ein Mensch, sitzt da, raucht und starrt mich mit großen Augen über den Glutpunkt des Glimmstengels hinweg an, während blaugraue Schwaden sich um sein Gesicht kringeln.

Es handelt sich um eine Sie, das kann ich deutlich erkennen: langes Haar, in kunstvollen Knäueln um den Kopf gewickelt, keine Haare im Gesicht, dazu ein hellbrauner Rock, der fast bis zum Boden reicht.

Menschen sind ja in zwei Kasten geteilt: die Sie und die Er. Die Er haben in der Regel kurze Haare auf dem Kopf, meistens Wolle im Gesicht und tragen zwei-beinige Röcke, sogenannte Hosen. Sie rauchen Pfeife, während die Sie Zigaretten zu bevorzugen scheinen. Soweit wir Schnecken das von unserer Warte aus beurteilen können, sind die Er die dominante Kaste. Warum das so ist, weiß

niemand. Vielleicht gab es in der Urzeit einen gewaltigen Krieg zwischen Sie und Er und die Er haben gewonnen und die Sie für immer unterworfen. Was für ein Glück dagegen, als Schnecke in eine kastenlose Zwittergemeinschaft hineingeboren zu werden, wo niemand niemanden dominiert.

Sie rührt sich nicht, raucht nur und sitzt da und starrt in meine Richtung. Ich habe keine Ahnung, ob sie meine Anwesenheit registriert hat. Es ist, als würde sie durch mich hindurchsehen, den Blick irgendwo hinter mich gerichtet. Aber da ist nur diese weiße Wand.

Ich darf jetzt keine hastige Bewegung machen. Menschen sind nicht ungefährlich. Für ihre Größe bewegen sie sich erstaunlich flink. Vor allem aber sind sie unberechenbar. Wir alle kennen die Geschichten. Es könnte ebenso gut sein, dass sie mich zärtlich von der Wand pflückt und im Garten freisetzt, wie dass sie mich tötet und auf den Abfallhaufen wirft. Ich kann nur abwarten und das Beste hoffen: dass sie mich nicht bemerkt und irgendwann diesen Raum verlässt, sodass ich mich auf den Weg nach draußen machen kann. Ich muss einfach Geduld mit ihr haben. Wenn ich nur nicht einen solchen Hunger hätte.

Wie lange mag sie wohl schon da sitzen und gucken? Immerhin ist es kein Er. Die Er sind für ihr aggressives Wesen bekannt. Sie führen Kriege gegeneinander wie Ameisen. Weit weg von hier soll im Moment ein großer Krieg toben, wo tausende von Ers aufeinander losgehen. Die Würmer vom Friedhof erzählen, wie Tote in Kisten zurückgebracht und im Boden vergraben werden. Manchmal werden auch leere Kisten vergraben, sagen sie. Friedhofswürmern ist zwar nicht zu trauen, aber ich bezweifle, dass sie genug Fantasie haben, um sich so etwas auszudenken. Es kommen auch Überlebende zurück, mit fehlenden Gliedmaßen und anderen schrecklichen Verletzungen. Im Nachbargarten sitzt jeden Tag ein junger Er auf einem Liegestuhl unter Karodecken. Er ist aschfahl und zittert die ganze Zeit. Die Küchenschaben von drüben sagen, er litte an einem „Kriegstrauma“. Küchenschaben sind solche Klugscheißer.

In unserer Gegend kämpfen die Er auch gegeneinander, aber es scheint sich um ritualisierte Kämpfe zu handeln; niemand stirbt dabei. Manchmal wenn wir im Park spazieren kriechen, kommen sie in Gruppen und wir sehen ihnen dabei zu, wie sie Krieg spielen. Sie werfen mit Bällen aus Leder oder Holz herum und laufen und springen, offenbar irgendwelche kryptischen Regeln befolgend. Die Er in Weiß gegen die Er in Schwarz. Die Er in Rot gegen die Er in Grün. Manche Schnecken glauben, wenn man es schaffen würde, die Muster ihrer Spiele zu entziffern, könne man daraus das Wetter vorhersagen, aber das halte ich für Aberglauben.

Jetzt haben ihre Augen so einen glasigen Ausdruck bekommen. Ab und zu bewegen sich ihre Mundwinkel, als habe sie gerade etwas besonders Interessantes oder Belustigendes gesehen. Aber hier gibt es nichts zu sehen. Nichts als diese weiße Wand und mich. Wenn sie nur irgendwas tun würde. Ich fühle, wie das Kaminfeuer da unten mich austrocknet. Kann es denn sein, dass sie mich immer noch nicht gesehen hat, obwohl sie die ganze Zeit zu mir hinschaut? Ich muss mich ablenken, an etwas anderes denken, damit die Zeit rumgeht, bis sie aufsteht. Gute Idee, ich weiß, was ich mache: Ich visualisiere meinen Rückweg in den Garten. Meiner Schleimspur zurück zum Boden folgen und vorbei an ihrem Sessel, der hoffentlich bald leer sein wird, dann zur Tür. Rechts oder links? Wenn ich von rechts kam, dann muss ich nach links, und wenn ich von links kam, dann muss ich nach rechts. Muss die Treppe finden. Auf der zweiten Stufe von unten, also der vorletzten von oben, habe ich eine Gießkanne gesehen, die wird mir helfen, mich zu orientieren und nicht die falsche Treppe hinunter zu kriechen. Rein in den Keller, wo die vielen Gegenstände herumliegen. Sense. Rechen. Fahrrad. Zur Linken drei blassblaue Container, mehrere eiserne Reifen, mit denen sie im Sommer im Garten spielen und Vogelkäfige. Zur Rechten zwei Paar Schlittschuhe, ein Queen-Anne-Kohleeimer, ein Tisch mit bunten Zeichen darauf und ein kaputter Leierkasten. So viele Zeugen vergangenen Lebens und Treibens, von der Zeit vergessen und abgelegt im dunklen Keller.

## The Mutations: 7 Stories and a Poem

*Francis Kirps*

Translation from German by Gerald Chapple

### **The Snail on the Wall**

*After "The Mark on the Wall" by Virginia Woolf*

The three chrysanthemums in the vase on the mantelpiece are almost dead, but their poison is definitely still effective. I mustn't eat them no matter how hungry I am. I'm stuck to a white wall, about five or six snail-lengths above the mantelpiece. There's a fire in the hearth despite the warm autumn day, as if we were in the middle of winter. I feel the heat spreading from below and see the yellow and reddish flickering glow. If I stay here too long I'll dry up and never get away from this place. The sun comes in through the crown of the tree outside the window. It's broad daylight. I must have had a long and very deep sleep.

How did I get here anyway? If I'm ever going to find my way out then it's absolutely necessary to recall the way into this room.

And now I remember: Something happened yesterday that I'd like to forget forever. A beer trap appeared in the lettuce bed early last evening — the most insidious and dangerous animal of all. I learned from my ancestors, as they learned from theirs and so on, that we have to watch out for beer traps above all else. Even if we smell beer from some distance away, we snails go soft in the head; our brain is no longer part of us, as if an alien power were guiding us straight to our liquid doom.

“Resist the treacherous enticement of the puddle of death” is what we snails learned as children in that first carefree summer of our life, from the *School of Proverbs*; I and all my fellow snails recited that proverb so often until we knew it by heart.

But I should like to observe in this regard: I personally feel that statement is a little too unclear. Maybe evil should be called for what it is, concisely and to the point: “Children! Beware of beer traps!” That would hit home with dim-witted snails, too. Oh, well. Where was I? Last night, exactly. They came from near and far: slugs from the neighbour’s garden; vineyard snails from across the road; banded snails from the park — all of them out of their mind. I saw my cousins, Pebble and Pear, barely a year old, their shells still young and translucent, creeping toward the beer trap. I heard them debating whether the puddle of death really meant the beer trap rather than the duck pond — lots of room for interpretation there.

“I’m a free snail,” Blossom, my old school friend, shouted, “and nobody’s going to tell me what to do — right!” before she tipped over the edge and vanished out of my life forever. I saw uninhibited snails swilling down the pale brew while a dozen of their ilk sank to the bottom, dead already. Now the aroma began to tug at my senses, too; it was strong, bitter, sweet. If I were going to survive the night, then I’d have to get out of this garden, go someplace where the demon wouldn’t find me. I’d slept through the hottest part of the afternoon under some withered leaves beside the wall of the house and only awakened when the uproar was in high gear. I suppose that saved my life. With an almost inhuman effort of will I turned my back on the garden and headed for a nearby doorway. I’d surely be safe within the walls of that house. I thought of everything possible to distract me from the beer vapours. I was through the door in no time and into a pleasantly cool cellar. But the alcohol fumes were still reaching their murderous tentacles after me. Quick as an arrow, I crept ahead over a rusty bi-

cycle frame, squeezed between the tines of a rake, climbed up the blade of a scythe and slid down the other side, then out through a crack in the door and up an endless stairway leading into a long room. I swiftly slipped over the smooth, polished floor and finally turned right (or was it left?) into the room, worked my way up the wall and then — it must have been then — is when, half dead from exhaustion, I fell asleep.

My slimy trail, a silvery shimmering encrustation, long dried up, runs horizontally to my right, then angles down the wall and peters out on the floor.

But hold on! What’s that? I suddenly have the feeling I’m being watched. I raise my stalk-eyes and indeed: I’m not alone in the room. A human is sitting in an armchair by the hearth, sitting, smoking and staring at me, bug-eyed, over the glowing end of a fag while blue-grey clouds curl around her face.

I am dealing with a She — I realize that clearly: long hair, wound in artistic knots around her head, no facial hair, and a light-brown, floor-length skirt as well.

Humans are of course divided into two castes: the Shes and the Hes. The Hes, as a rule, have short hair on their head, usually wool on their face, and wear two-legged skirts, so-called trousers. They smoke pipes, whereas the Shes seem to prefer cigarettes. As far as we snails can judge from our perspective, the Hes are the dominant caste. Why this is so, nobody knows. Maybe in times primeval there was a mighty war between Shes and Hes, and the Hes won and subjugated the Shes forever. What luck, by contrast, to have been born a snail into a casteless, hybrid community where nobody dominates anyone.

She’s not moving, just sits there smoking and staring in my direction. I haven’t a clue whether she’s registered my presence. It’s as if she could look right through me and see somewhere behind me. But there’s only this white wall.

I mustn't make any rash move now. Humans are not harmless. Their movements are astonishingly nimble for their size. But above all they're unpredictable. We all have tales to tell. She could just as well pluck me gently off the wall and release me in the garden as kill me and toss me on a rubbish heap. I can only wait and hope for the best: that she takes no notice of me and leaves the room at some point so that I can make my way outside. I simply must be patient with her. If only I weren't so damn hungry.

How long might she have been sitting there watching? At least it's not a He. The Hes are famous for their aggressive behaviour. They fight wars with one another like ants. There's said to be a Great War going on at the moment, far away, where thousands of Hes attack one another. The worms from the cemetery tell how the dead are brought back in boxes and buried in the ground. Sometimes even empty boxes are buried, they say. To be sure, you can't trust cemetery worms, but I doubt they have the imagination to dream up things like that. And some survivors return with missing limbs and other horrifying injuries. A young He sits in the neighbour's garden every day in a deck chair under some checked blankets. He's ashen-faced and shakes all the time. The cockroaches over there say he's suffering from "post-war trauma." Cockroaches are some kind of know-it-all.

The Hes fight around here, too, but it seems these are ritualised fights; nobody gets killed. Now and then when we take a crawl in the park they arrive in groups, and we watch them playing at war. They throw leather or wooden balls around and run and jump, obviously following some kind of cryptic rules. The Hes in white against the Hes in black. The Hes in red against the Hes in green. Many snails believe that if you could manage to decipher the pattern of their games you could predict the weather — but I regard that as a superstition.

Now her eyes have taken on a sort of glassy expression. Every now and then the corners of her mouth move as if she'd just seen something particularly interesting or amusing. But there's nothing to see here. Nothing but this white wall and me. If only she'd do something. I feel the fire down in the hearth drying me out. Can it really be that she still hasn't seen me although she's been looking up at me all this time? I've got to divert myself, to think of something else to kill time until she gets up. Good idea: I know what I'll do. I'll visualise my way back into the garden. Return by my slime trail down to the floor and past her armchair, which hopefully will soon be vacant, then to the door. Right or left? If I came from the right, then I'll have to turn left, and if I came from the left, then I'll have to go right. Got to find the stairs. I saw a watering can on the second last step — as seen from above — that will help me get oriented and not crawl down the wrong way. Made it into the cellar where so many things are lying around. Scythe, rake, bicycle. Three pale blue canisters on the left, a number of iron hoops they play with in the garden in summer, and bird-cages. On the right two pairs of ice skates, a Queen Anne coal-scuttle, a bagatelle board, and a broken hand organ. So much stuff from the goings-on of past life, forgotten by time and consigned to the dark cellar.

# MONTENEGRO

**Stefan Bošković**

**Ministar**

*Minister*

Nova knjiga, Podgorica, 2019

Language: Montenegrin

ISBN: 978-8-6747-0813-2

## BIOGRAPHY

**S**tefan Bošković was born in 1983 in Podgorica. His books include the short story collection *Transparentne životinje* (*Transparent Animals*, 2018) and the novel *Šamaranje* (*Slap in the Face*, 2014), awarded the 2014 prize for the best manuscript novel in Montenegro. In 2016, he won second prize at the Festival of European Short Stories for *Fashion and Friends*. Bošković has written scripts for a feature-length film, several short films, a sitcom series and a number of documentaries. Several of his short plays have been staged.

## SYNOPSIS

The novel *Minister* follows the life of Valentin Kovacevic, Minister for Culture of Montenegro, during nine turbulent days in which he struggles with the difficulties of business pressures, cultural customs, administration, the inevitable bottom line of family history ... and



with himself. Bošković writes in a fast and filmic way which is, however, consciously literary, with elements of political thriller, noir, psychedelia and the melancholy of human beings and society in transition growing organically and unpredictably from each other, so that every now and then the reader will ask who is crazy here: the minister, society or the reader themselves. There are no easy answers to such difficult questions, and as mesmerising as this book may be, its effect is dissecting and sobering: both human beings and society reveal themselves in all their misery and opulence, in disharmony and striving to attain the coveted normalcy and peace.



## ♥ JURY REPORT

How successful are the so-called transitional iterations of young ex-Yugoslav democracies? Literature that tries to thematise the schizophrenic image of societies polluted by corruption, organised crime and the grey economy is highly successful. Ergo, only a few literary works have managed to penetrate to the core of the circus of political elites who do not hesitate to flirt with the Brussels administration on the way to joining the EU, and criminogenic structures comfortably located in zones of parapolitical power. The very title of Bošković's novel clearly marks the starting point. His minister is not a metaphor for anything or the key to embodying any of Montenegro's current Balkan politicians. Simply put, Boskovic's

minister is like a spider lost in an irresistibly attractive game involving the consequences of egomania, personal frustrations and political power. It is difficult to imagine what cannot fit in, by those parameters, this fenced pandemonium. And Bošković's novel not only does not betray expectations, but also peeks behind the scenes of the system's simulation, touching on places to which the literature of South Slavic languages has so far not yet travelled.

# Ministar

Stefan Bošković



*Savremen je onaj koji upire pogled u svoje vrijeme, ne zato da bi opazio svjetla, nego mrak. Biti savremen je, ponajprije, pitanje hrabrosti.*

Đorđo Agamben

## PRVI DAN

Jesam li kriv? Progonilo me je to tokom cijelog jutra. Lud, licemjeran, ležeran, lascivan, lomljiv, la, lu, lo – *Landscape* Džona Kejdža odzvanja u hodniku, između kupatila i spavaće sobe. Sve je u obliku slova L. Položaj ruke na koju naslanjam tijelo u kosom planku. Limun u čaši tople vode, lejzi beg i mejlovi. Sto trideset devet na koje moram da odgovorim. Bruno Kortone je prvi po važnosti. Lavež labradora se pojavljuje prije žutih zraka. Od mirisa lavande ježi mi se koža na dupetu. Lijepo je. Vježbam progon misli dok mi vrela voda peče ramena. Jesam li kriv? Kroz paru jedva nazirem nos i dio usana. Crni su. Kao krv iz njenih usta. Malo kasnije glancam cipele i naslućujem svoj odraz u srebrnom kljunu. Savjetnici su mi sugerisali da ostanem kod kuće ili otputujem na seminar u Poljskoj. Roditelje nisam udostojio njihova prijedloga. Ja sam morao da donesem odluku. Ja odlučujem. Ja sam ministar.

\*\*\*

Jutro je bilo mokro, sjajno i trajalo je duže nego obično. Dok je provjeravao pritisak u gumama, Saša je gazio po svjetlucavim kapima i gušio svjetlost. Mirovao sam na zadnjem sjedištu sklopljenih očiju. Saša je protrljao ruke i dunuo u njih, zatim je pokrenuo motor, mrmljajući. Probijali smo se kroz gusti splet ulica Stare Varoši, koja treba da bude prečica. Proguta sam dva dijazepama, no uzbuđenje nije opadalo. Treskanje i naglo kočenje računali su tenziju na elemente koji su se rastvorili po tkivu i kapilarima. Kad sam otvorio oči, napetost je nestala, a utroba je poskakivala prazna, od čega mi je došlo muka.

– Smanji brzinu i probaj da izbjegneš rupe na putu.

Saša je moj vozač punih osam godina. Prije nego što sam postao ministar bio sam dekan Fakulteta dramskih umjetnosti. Saša mi je tada dodijeljen za šofera. Kad sam napredovao u funkciji, i Saša je napredovao. Dobio je zeleni mercedes A klasu, zavolio ga je kao sopstveno dijete. Dok je gužvao lice smišljajući šta da kaže, klizio sam po kožnom sjedištu nadajući se da neće progovoriti. U retrovizoru je osmotrio moje oznojeno čelo.

– I ja sam napet – rekao je Saša.

– Ja nisam – odgovorio sam.

– Klima nije u redu danima.

Podizao je i spuštao ekvilajzere da bi prigušio neprijatnost. Obojica smo znali da je klima sasvim u redu. Saša je bio lojalan, prilično nesiguran i vaspitan stvor. Kao i ostali vozači, poznavao je ljude. Kad nisam želio da razgovaram, gledao bi me u retrovizoru, učestalo, ali nedovoljno dugo da bi me uvrijedio. Tokom tih trenutaka upijao bi pogledom sve što nismo izustili.

Kada izađem iz ministarskog zdanja, navike malih ljudi postaju i ministarske navike. Tako nalažu pravila premijera. Biće mno-



go ljudi, telefona i upaljenih kamera. Njena kapela je treća po redu. Imaće vremena da me prepoznaju i smisle šta da dobace. Lud, licemjieran, ležeran, lascivan, la, lu, lo, napuštam male navike i probijam put prema trećoj kapeli. Prepoznali su me i uzvrpoljili se, stotine aveti šušte krilima, u plućima mi tutnja oluja, čašice ispadaju iz koljena. Podignutih ramena vrludam kao Pinokio u *nil baret* odijelu, poražen i naivan, spreman da se sručim pred vratima, kleknem pred ruljom i prošapćem: „Ja sam kralj na koljenima. Proburazite me sad, rogovima i objektivima, stisnite se u red za komentar i išćupajte mi kičmeni stub, tucite pleća i užarenu glavu. Ne zaboravite da objavite i cijenu odijela.“

U kapeli je tiho i hladno. Tmurne figure na uglačanoj površini mijenjaju raspoloženje i raspored. Kad sam zakoračio, utihnuli su jecaji. U koloni je bilo sedam žena, brisale su suze i zurile u mene. Stao sam ispred otvorenog sanduka i gledao u nju. Lice joj je bilo hrapavo, koža siva, malo krvi na mrtvim usnama. Posmatram taj komad mesa, koji ne daje nijedan impuls, nijedan podsjetnik na nemirne oči, gipkost ruku i zvuke koje je nekad proizvodio golemi ljudski mehanizam. Dišem otežano i glasno, dok se iza mene stvara gužva. Ne usuđujem se da napravim korak dok se suze ne počnu slivati niz moj naročito tužan lik. Izvadio sam maramicu, elegantno natapkao jagodice, duboko se naklonio i zakoračio prema vješticama. Žene kojima sam izjavljivao saučešće bile su u procesu zamrzavanja. Vjerovao sam da će ih suze iznenaditi. I jesu. Na kraju kolone čekala je njena visoka majka. Dostojanstveno i lijepo stvorenje u šezdesetim. Zastao sam i prvi put podigao glavu. Nazirali smo jedno drugom žute žice u očima. Tiho i razgovjetno sam rekao, da mi je mnogo žao. Vrlo kratko me je zagrlila i, prije nego što je postala svjesna svoje nepromišljene reakcije, bio sam vani, među muškarcima. Rukovanje je bilo na cijeni. Trudio sam se da ih presretnem jačinom stiska. Muškarci vole snagu drugih muškaraca. Čak i dok primaju saučešće od čovjeka koji je sudjelovao u ubistvu njihove ćerke. Sestre. Unuke.

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U automobilu je bilo toplo, misli su mi uzurpirali mirisi koje sam ponio iz kapele. Klima nije uspjela da ih sastruže s kože, te sam otvorio prozor i dopustio vjetru da silovito jurne u njih. Treći put sam pažljivo čitao poruke Bruna Kortonea nasložene u in-boksu *Votsapa*. Bruno je čuo za incident i izrazio je zabrinutost za moj mandat. Brže-bolje mi je postavio sva neophodna pitanja u vezi sa saradnjom koju smo njegovali u tajnosti. Nisam spremio odgovor. Morao sam da promislim o situaciji i okolnostima, ali ko je znao ishod mogućih posljedica, ukoliko bi ih uopšte i bilo? Samo premijer, do kojeg nisam mogao da dođem prije negoli me pozove. Prepušten sam čekanju – i dok čekam, gledam u mlado drveće koje ostaje za nama. Saša me je vozio prema Cetinju, gradu koji su mještani uobraženo nazivali Dolinom bogova, premda je bio zelen, mirišljiv i otisnut među kršima. Kod Cetinjana je postojala neobjašnjiva ideja o velikom sebi, pa su se u jednom trenutaku i poistovjetili s božanstvom. Volio sam Cetinje zbog intenzivnog mirisa lipe i debele hladovine, no proljeća su sporo stizala, te sam u nekoliko navrata predlagao da se Ministarstvo kulture preseli u glavni grad. Cetinje je bilo suviše izolovano, s mnogo kiše i mnogo priče ni o čemu. Zgrada Ministarstva je štrčala na kraju ulice. Plemićka rezidencija, prostrana i tiha. Čim bih zakoračio unutra, pomislio bih da pripadam kraljevstvu, ne crnogorskom, već nekom znatno većem, neupitno starijem, možda polunebeskom. Onda bih dobio poziv od oca i vratio se u trnje. Zvao me je svakog dana tačno u jedanaest časova i obavljao dnevnu rutinu. Prve rečenice su pripadale majci i njenom zdravlju, zatim bi i mene upitao kako sam, bole li me pluća i da li pijem čajeve koje mi je poslao. „Nezainteresovano“ bi postavio niz kratkih pitanja o pojedinim ljudima iz partije, na šta sam ga više puta upozorio, o takvim stvarima ne razgovaramo telefonom. Uvrijeđen, završio bi blagom opaskom o novinskom članku koji se bavio mnome, na koji je, kao, slučajno naišao i ovlaš ga pročitao. Tada bih obično spustio slušalicu

uz štur izgovor da je neko upravo ušao u kabinet. U dvanaestoj godini sam prekinuo verbalne izlive ljubavi prema roditeljima. U tridesetoj sam prestao da ih volim. Sad su mi četrdeset dvije. Život mi je bio pažljivo posložen i sve je funkcionisalo... sem njene smrti. Opsjedala me je ideja o krivici, iako je situacija bila naočigled čista i razriješena. Iskreno, mnogo više me je izjedala sumnja da će njena smrt uticati na moj ministarski mandat. Postojala su još dva čovjeka koje je zabrinula mogućnost smjene. Zovu se Bruno Kortone i Ranko Prediš.

#memoari #pisac #literatura

Ja sam Valentino Kovačević, ministar kulture Crne Gore. Dvije godine i šest mjeseci uspješno obavljam ministarsku funkciju. Odnos prema kulturi mi je častan, s obzirom na to da moja profesija dolazi iz umjetničke oblasti, za razliku od nekolicine prethodnika. Diplomirani sam dramaturg i magistar komparativne književnosti. Diploma koja asocira na bijedan život, zar ne? Moj život nije bijedan. Primijenjena dramaturgija mi je obezbijedila i više nego lagodan život, poziciju i ugled. Ali oduvijek sam sanjao da postanem pisac. Oštar, bezvremen i temeljit pisac, poput Vitolda Gombroviča, Danila Kiša, Bruna Šulca... Saznanje da nisam mogao da postanem ni piskaralo osrednjeg značaja paralisalo me je i svelo na hvatanje bilješki, pisanja nacрта i skica koje su mi rezale produženu moždinu. Poslanička karijera mi je uzletjela na kondorskim krilima, a iz oblaka su se ispilili nasmijani poznanici. Bili su uviđavni, lizali su mi peruške i sugerisali isto: „Napiši memoare!“ Vrlo rano sam osjetio da moja priroda godi ljudima, najčešće kad ne progovaram, a uglavnom ćutim. Od premijera sam naučio da slušam, mada se nerijetko isključim i odlutam, jer ljudi koje srećem uglavnom barataju ispraznom retorikom, oglodanim frazama i floskulama, koje na kraju uokvire projektom i zakucaju na moja ministarska vrata. Nekad im dodijelim sredstva, nekad ne. Memoare ću objaviti onog dana kad napustim ministarsku stolicu, da bih se spasio od zaborava. Sada ih držim u tajnosti, u

procesu sam otkrivanja društvenih mreža i sajber jezika, i malo je reći da mi se najava memoara kroz haštagove nadasve dopada.

Telefon me je trgao iz misli. Poziv od Dragutina, bivšeg ministra kulture.

- Halo?
- Kako je prošlo na sahrani?
- Dobro.
- Je li bilo kakvih reakcija?
- Nije. Ne znam šta se desilo nakon mog odlaska.
- Sjedim s premijerom.
- Dobro je prošlo... reci mu.
- Kako si ti?
- Reci mu da je prošlo dobro.
- Reći ću mu kad prekinem vezu. Pitao sam kako si.
- Ne znam... valjda dobro.
- Za vikend igramo. Jesi li u sastavu?
- Naravno. Potrebno mi je da se istrčim, znaš... više zbog psihe.
- Javi se kasnije. Ostavio sam sto u *Juti* za večeras.
- Važi. Čujemo se.

# Minister

Stefan Bošković

Translated from Montenegrin by Will Firth

*The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure.*

Giorgio Agamben

## DAY ONE

Am I to blame? That question dogged me all morning. Loony, lip-serving, laid-back, lascivious, languid, la-lo-lu – John Cage's *Landscape* resounded in the hall between the bathroom and the bedroom. Everything was shaped like the letter L: the position of my arm on which I leaned my body in a diagonal plane; the slice of lemon in the cup of hot water; the beanbag and the emails. There were 139 I needed to answer. Bruno Cortone was the first and most important. The barking of the labrador came before the first yellow rays. The smell of lavender raised goosebumps on my rear. It was lovely. I practiced dispelling thoughts while the scalding water burned my shoulders. Am I to blame? Through the steam I could hardly see my nose and the shape of my lips. They looked black. Like the blood from her mouth. A little later I polished my shoes and saw a hint of my reflection on their silvery points. My advisers suggested I stay at home or go away to a seminar in Poland. I didn't consider what my parents proposed. I had to make a decision. I am the one who decides. I am minister.

\*\*\*

The morning was wet, bright and lasted longer than usual. As he checked the pressure of the tyres, Saša trod on the glistening drops and crushed the light. I rested on the back seat with my eyes closed. Saša rubbed his hands and blew into them, then he started the motor with a mutter. We made our way through the thick tangle of streets in Podgorica's Old Town, which was supposed to be a shortcut. I took two Valiums, but the agitation didn't subside. The bouncing and sudden braking sent the tension off into elements that dissolved in my tissues and capillaries. When I opened my eyes again, the tension was gone, but my empty insides jumped and brought on a bout of nausea.

"Slow down and try to avoid the potholes."

Saša has been my driver for eight full years. Before I became minister, I was Dean of the Faculty of Drama. Saša was then assigned to be my chauffeur. When I was promoted, Saša was too. He got a green Mercedes A-Class and fell in love with it like it was his own child. As he wrinkled his face and tried to think what to say, I slid about on the leather seat and hoped he wouldn't say anything. He examined my sweat-beaded brow in the rear-view mirror.

"I'm tense too," Saša said.

"I'm not," I replied.

"The air conditioning's been playing up for days."

He raised and lowered the equalizers to muffle the unpleasantness. We both knew the air conditioning was perfectly OK. Saša was a loyal, rather insecure, well brought up creature. Like other drivers too, he knew people. When I didn't want to talk, he'd look at me in the rear-view mirror, repeatedly, but not for so long as to offend me. In those quiet moments his eyes would take in everything we didn't say.

When I leave the minister's building, the habits of the small people become mine. That's what the prime minister's rules prescribe. There would be a lot of people, with phones and cameras poised. Her chapel was the third in the row. They'd have time to recognize and heckle me. Loony, lip-serving, laid-back, lascivious, la-lo-lu, I abandoned small habits and made my way to the third chapel. They recognized me and squirmed, hundreds of ghosts rustled their wings, a storm raged in my lungs, my kneecaps fell out. I traipsed with raised shoulders like Pinocchio in a Neil Barrett suit, smitten and naive, ready to plump down at the gate, kneel before the mob and whisper: "I am a king on his knees. Stab me now with horns and camera lenses, queue for a commentary and wrench out my spine, thrash my shoulders and incandescent head. Don't forget to report the price of my suit."

It was quiet and cold in the chapel. Gloomy figures on the smooth-worn surface changed their mood and order. When I stepped forwards, the sobbing died down. Seven women in a column wiped away their tears and stared at me. I stopped in front of the open coffin and looked at her. Her face was rough, her skin grey, with a little blood on her dead lips. I observed that piece of meat, which had no spark of life – there was no reminder of her restless eyes, supple hands and the sounds that the large human mechanism once produced. My breathing was laboured and loud, and a crowd formed behind me. I didn't dare to move until the tears began running down my especially sorrowful face. I took out my handkerchief, elegantly dabbed my cheekbones, bowed low and took a step towards the witches. The women, to whom I expressed my condolences, froze, one more icily than the other. I thought my tears would surprise them. And they did. Her tall mother was waiting at the end of the column. A dignified and beautiful person in her sixties. I stopped and raised my head for the first time. We discerned the yellow streaks in each other's eyes. I said softly and distinctly that I was so sorry. She embraced me very briefly, and before she became aware of her ill-considered reaction, I was outside among the men. Shaking hands was the done thing. I tried to meet them with the

force of my handshake. Men like the strength of other men. Even when they accept condolences from the one involved in killing their daughter. Sister. Granddaughter.

\*\*\*

It was warm in the car, and my thoughts were usurped by the odours I had brought with me from the chapel. The air conditioning couldn't erase them from my skin, so I opened the window and let the wind blast into them. I carefully read all of Bruno Cortone's messages filed in my WhatsApp inbox for a third time. Bruno had heard of the incident and expressed concern about my ministership. He jotted out all the essential questions regarding the collaboration we cultivated in secret. I hadn't prepared a reply yet. I needed to think over the situation and the circumstances. But who knew the upshot and the possible consequences, if there would be any at all? Only the prime minister did, whom I couldn't reach before he rang me. I had no choice but to wait – and as I waited, I watched the young trees flitting past. Saša was driving me to Cetinje, a town that the locals pretentiously used to call the Valley of the Gods, although it was green, fragrant and tucked away among limestone outcrops. The people of Cetinje had the inexplicable idea of their own grandeur, and at one point they even equated themselves with a deity. I liked Cetinje for its intensive linden aroma and deep shade, but spring was always slow in coming, and on several occasions I proposed that the Ministry of Culture move to the capital. Cetinje was too isolated, with a lot of rain and a lot of talk about nothing. The building of the Ministry stood out at the end of the street. A former patrician residence, spacious and quiet. The moment I stepped inside I'd feel I belonged to a kingdom, not of Montenegro, but one considerably greater, unquestionably older, perhaps semi-celestial. Then I'd get a call from my father that brought me back to earth with a crash. He called me every day at 11am sharp and reeled off his daily routine. The first few sentences were always about my mother and her health; then he'd enquire how I was, if my lungs hurt and if I drank the teas he sent me. After that, he'd ask a series of short, "disinter-

ested” questions about particular people in the party, which led me to warn him several times that we shouldn’t talk about things like that on the phone. Snubbed, he’d finish off with a gentle remark about a newspaper article dealing with me, which he claimed to have just stumbled across and read perfunctorily. Then I’d usually hang up with the flimsy excuse that someone had come into the office. I ended all verbal outpourings of love for my parents when I was twelve. I stopped loving them when I was thirty. Now I’m forty-two. My life had been carefully arranged and everything went according to plan... except for her death. I was obsessed by the idea of guilt, although the situation was obviously clear and resolved. Honestly, I was much more consumed by worry that her death could impinge on my ministerial career. Two other people were also concerned about the possibility of me being replaced: Bruno Cortone and Ranko Prediš.

#memoirs #writer #literature

I am Valentino Kovačević, Minister of Culture of Montenegro. I have been discharging my ministerial function successfully for two and a half years. My attitude towards culture is honourable if you consider I have a training and background in the arts, unlike several of my predecessors. I received a Master’s in dramaturgy and comparative literature – a degree generally associated with a life of poverty. My life is far from that. Applied dramaturgy has ensured me a comfortable life, a position and prestige. But I always dreamed of becoming a writer. A sharp, timeless wordsmith like Witold Gombrowicz, Danilo Kiš or Bruno Schulz. The realization that I couldn’t become even a middling hack paralyzed me and relegated me to making notes, writing drafts and sketches, which carved into my medulla. Yet a ministerial career took to the air on condor’s wings, and smiling acquaintances emerged from the clouds like birds of a feather. They were considerate, licked my plumes and all suggested the same: “Why don’t you write your memoirs?” I noticed at an early age that my nature flatters people, particularly when I don’t speak, and I’m silent most of the time. I learned from the prime minister

to listen, although I often switch off and wander because the people I meet mainly toss around empty rhetoric, trite phrases and platitudes, which they ultimately use to frame a project and knock at my door with. As minister, I sometimes allocate them funds, sometimes not. I’ll publish my memoirs the day I leave the helm so as to save myself from oblivion. I’m keeping them secret for now. I’m in the process of discovering social media and cyber language, and to say that announcing my memoirs through hashtags appeals to me greatly would be an understatement.

My phone jarred me out of my thoughts. It was Dragutin, the former minister of culture.

“Hello?”

“How did it go at the funeral?”

“Good.”

“Were there any reactions?”

“None. But I don’t know what happened after I left.”

“I’m sitting here with the prime minister.”

“It went well... tell him that.”

“How are you?”

“Tell him it went well.”

“I’ll tell him when we’ve finished. I asked how you are.”

“I don’t know... Good, I suppose.”

“We’re playing on the weekend. Are you on board?”

“Of course. I need the exercise. You know... it keeps me on an even keel.”

“Call me again later. I’ve reserved a table at the *Juta* for this evening”.

“OK. Talk to you soon.”

# NORTH MACEDONIA



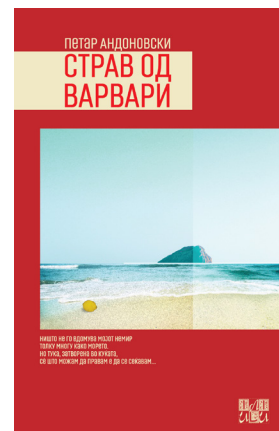
**Петар Андоновски**  
**(Petar Andonovski)**  
**Страв од варвари**  
***Fear of Barbarians***  
Ili-ili, Skopje, 2018  
Language: Macedonian  
ISBN: 978-6-0847-7093-0

## BIOGRAPHY

**P**etar Andonovski (born 1987, Kumanovo) is mainly a prose writer. He has a degree in general and comparative literature from the Faculty of Philology in Skopje and has been a writer in residence in Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro. Currently, he works for the Polica publishing house. His novel *Телото во кое треба да се живее* (*The Body One Must Live In*) received the 2015 National Novel of the Year Award. His other previous work includes *Ментален простор* (*Mental Space*, poetry collection, 2008) and *Очи со боја на чевли* (*Shoe-colored Eyes*, novel, 2013).

## SYNOPSIS

Several days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, three foreigners (two men and a woman) arrive at the small southernmost Greek island of Gavdos, where an isolated community of villagers seems to be frozen in time and to have been forgotten by the world. The voices of two female narrators, the foreigner Oksana and the local Penelope, tell the story of this novel. Their interchanging narratives are emotional accounts of their lives and their experiences on the island. The newcomer Oksana speaks about her escape from the Chernobyl disaster and Ukraine, the death of her partner Evgeni on the island, and her lurking fears about her uncertain future. Fears about the future are shared by the young local



woman Penelope, raised and educated in a monastery and then isolated and trapped in an unhappy marriage on the island. Otherness and alienation are the underlying themes of the novel, which questions the notions of construction and reality until its very end.

## ♥ JURY REPORT

*Fear of Barbarians* is a short novel written as a braid of two interchanging stories, told by two female voices: the Ukrainian Oksana and the Greek Penelope. Apart from the personal stories, each of the two narratives contains many additional, intertwined stories. It is this multiplication of stories and the diversity of ways in which they are told (directly quoted by the narrators, retold

to them by other people or questioned by third, often absent parties) that makes this book exciting, readable and dynamic. The story also revolves around the basic issue of seeming versus reality, as this multitude of voices often presents truths that are blurred, questionable and conflicting. The rather surreal effect of the story is achieved by constant telling and retelling of what is told and retold, but also by addressing collocutors who remain absent from the book. This narrative remains coherent until the very end, skilfully rounding the circle by questioning the very existence of everything and everybody, including the narrators themselves. The novel very skilfully connects two quite distant worlds: the one of post-Chernobyl Ukraine/Soviet Union and the one of an isolated Greek island community. By quoting Konstantinos Kavafis' poetry and invoking J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, it can also be read in the light of issues stemming from the recent refugee crisis, such as perception of otherness and the positioning of European borders. It is therefore a contribution to literary explorations of the notions of 'foreign' and 'barbaric' as juxtaposed with 'indigenous' and 'civilised', questioning their actual existence by presenting the process of their construction.



# Страв од варвари

Петар Андоновски



*Не го исуши ли морето, водите и големата бездна  
не ги претвори ли морските длабочини во пат,  
за да поминат искупените*  
Исаија (51, 10)

## Разгледница: Оксана

Не знам колку време помина од нашето последно видување. Од денешна дистанца ми се чини дека тоа беше во некој друг живот. Откако замина, мислев дека никогаш нема да ја напуштам Украина, дека цел живот ќе останам во Доњецк и ќе те чекам да се вратиш. Но јас одамна го напуштив Доњецк, а од неодамна и Украина. Замисли, сега живеам на остров, каде и да погледнам, го гледам морето, но засега го гледам само од прозорците на куќата. Големи се и може убаво да се види, во која соба и да отидам, јас пред мене го гледам морето. Големо! – токму онака како што го замислувавме. А и куќата е како онаа куќа од разгледницата што ти ја донесе татко ти, бела, на два ката, рамките на прозорците се сини, и жалужините се сини, а пред вратата има лимоново дрво. Се сеќаваш ли кога бев болна и дојде да ме посетиш, надвор паѓаше снег, многу снег, а ти ми донесе два лимона, ти реков дека ми студи, а ти ме погали по челото и ми рече да не се грижам, дека еден ден ќе заминеме на некој остров во Грција

и таму секогаш ќе ни е топло, и ќе имаме не два лимона, туку цела плантажа со лимони, дека ќе живееме во куќа како онаа од разгледницата што ти ја донесе татко ти. После толку години јас навистина се преселив на остров, живеам во куќа како од разгледницата што ти ја донесе татко ти, имам и лимоново дрво, но живеам со Евгениј и со Игор, не со тебе. Ти и не ни знаеш кој е Евгениј.

Беше попладне кога со Евгениј се запознавме во предавалната на факултетот. Беше попладне кога двајцата штотуку дипломирани нè викнаа во деканатот и ни кажаа дека како најдобри студенти, ќе бидеме вработени во Нуклеарната централа во Чернобил. Беше попладне кога дознавме дека дошло до хаварија на четвртиот реактор на нуклеарната електрана „Ленин“.

Беше попладне и кога рибарот го фрли јажето кон насобраните луѓе, а ние за првпат стапнавме на островот.

Последните неколку години со Евгениј живеевме во Киев. Сè што имавме ни остана во Припјат. Едно утро Евгениј случајно налета на Игор, наш колега од електраната, за кого мислевме дека загинал во експлозијата. На Евгениј му кажал дека по несреќата заминал на Крит, дека живее во некое село во близина на Псилорити. Во селото освен неколкуте старци и мачки, не живее никој. Преживува така што им помага на старците и на овчарите од околните села, а за возврат добива храна и понекоја драхма. Таму успеал да се излекува од радијацијата. Евгениј за сите овие години постојано е болен, постојано е на разни испитувања. На заминување, Игор му кажал дека се вратил поради татко му кој е во болница, но за неколку недели повторно ќе замине, овој пат на еден остров во близина на Крит. На Гавдос.

### Чамец на стравот: Пинелопи

Да не побегнеше онаа ноќ од манастирот, сега сигурно ќе бевме некаде во Шпанија или во Португалија. Она попладне кога рибарот го врза јажето на пристаништето, знаев дека засекогаш ќе останам тука. Дента кога стапнав на Гавдос, си ветив дека никогаш повеќе нема да помислам на тебе. И не помислив цели десет години, до денес, кога Михали се врати вознемирен дома. Првпат видов страв на неговото лице. Уште рано утрово се собрале во таверната за да го пречекаат докторот. Додека пиеле ракија, попот го прашал што има ново од другата страна, покажувајќи со раката преку морето. Докторот им рекол дека паднал Берлинскиот ѕид, дека цела Европа е во исчекување. Сите молчеле. Никому не му било јасно какво значење би имал еден ѕид за Европа.

Тука луѓето со години живеат заборавени, историјата упорно ги одминува, ги одминале и лепрата и гладот, и таман кога помислиле дека и овој пат ќе ги одмине, во таверната влетал Спиро и на сиот глас почнал да вика: „Тие дојдоа! Ене ги, се приближуваат кон пристаништето!“ И без да прашаат кои се тие, сите се упатиле кон пристаништето во Караве. И тогаш, од среде мирното море, во облик на чамец, до нив сè повеќе се приближувал стравот.

Од чамецот излегле тројца луѓе, двајца мажи и една жена. Жената била со кратко потстрижана коса, повеќе личела на маж отколку на жена. Рибарот што ги донел им рекол дека се дојдени да се лекуваат на островот. Им рекол дека се Руси.

И тогаш, крвта ми смрзна. Не од страв! – туку од помислата на тебе! Те видов како стоиш, на лицето ја имаш насмевката за која сестра Теоктисти велеше дека е ѓаволска. Иронично им се смееш додека го гледаш стравот во нивните очи. Ти, која велеше дека не се плашиш од ништо, дури ни од смртта.

Се секаваш ли кога во манастирот дојдоа оние двајца Американци, рекоа дека се новинари и дека сакаат да ги фотографираат девојчињата што живеат во него, а сестра Еротеј нервозно потскокнуваше на едната нога и постојано повторуваше дека главната сестра Теоктисти не е тука, дека е во посета на манастирот во Аркади, притоа погледнувајќи во прозорците од нејзината работна соба. И по долги преговори со Американците, ти ме повлече за ракавот и им рече дека ние ќе позираме. Стоевме и позиравме. Јас цело време од срам гледав во моите извалкани чевли од прав, а ти бесрамно се клештеше кон апаратот. Сестра Еротеј стоеше настрана и ти се закануваше цело време дека ќе те каже на сестра Теоктисти, а мене само ми рече дека треба да се срамам што одам по твојот памет, ти си полутуѓинка, тебе ти доликува такво однесување, а мене не. Но никогаш не ти кажав дека и јас се плашев по малку од нив, истовремено и се плашев да не те разочарам зашто ти цело време повторуваше дека сум различна, дека не сум како другите девојки.

# Fear of Barbarians

*Petar Andonovski*

Translated from Macedonian by Kalina Maleska

*Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep,  
who made a road in the depths of the sea  
so that the redeemed might cross over  
(Isaiah 51:10)*

## Postcard: Oksana

I do not know how long it has been since we last saw each other. Today, when I look back on it, it seems as though it had been in another life. Since you left, I thought I would never leave Ukraine, that I would remain in Donetsk all my life, waiting for you to come back. Yet I abandoned Donetsk a long time ago, and recently Ukraine as well. Imagine, I live on an island now, wherever I turn I see the sea, although for now I only see it from the windows of my house. They are large, and it can easily be seen, whichever room I walk into, I see the sea in front of me. Large! – just as we imagined it. And the house too is just like the house from the postcard that your father brought, white, on two floors, the frames of the windows are blue, and the blinds are also blue, and in front of the door there is a lemon tree. Do you remember when I was ill and you came to visit me, it was snowing outside, snowing hard, and you brought to me two lemons, I told you I was cold, and you caressed my forehead, and told me not to worry, that one day we shall go to an island in Greece and always be warm there, and we shall have not only two lemons, but a whole plantation of lemons, that we shall live in a house just like the one from the postcard that your father brought. So many years later I did move to an island, I live in a house just

like the one from the postcard that your father brought, and have a lemon tree as well, but I live with Evgeniy and Igor, not with you. You do not even know who Evgeniy is.

It was afternoon when Evgeniy and I met in the faculty classroom. It was afternoon when we were summoned, after just having graduated, to the Dean's Office to be told that, being top students in our class, we would be employed in the Nuclear Power Plant in Chernobyl. It was afternoon when we found out that there was a disaster at the number four reactor at the Lenin Nuclear Power Plant.

It was also afternoon when the fisherman threw the rope towards the people who were gathered, and we stepped onto the island for the first time.

For the last few years, Evgeniy and I lived in Kiev. Everything we had remained in Pripyat. One morning, Evgeniy accidentally encountered Igor, a colleague from the power plant, who we presumed had died in the explosion. He told Evgeniy that after the disaster he had gone to Crete, that he lived in a village near Psiloritis. No one lives in the village, except for the few old people and cats. He survives by helping the old people and the shepherds from the nearby villages, and in return he receives food and an occasional drachma. There, he managed to convalesce from the radiation. In all these years, Evgeniy has constantly been sick, he has constantly been going to medical examinations. Before they parted, Igor told him that he had returned to see his father, who was in the hospital, but he would leave again in a few weeks, this time going to an island near Crete. To Gavdos.

## A Boat of Fear: Penelope

If you had not escaped that night from the monastery, now we would certainly have been somewhere in Spain or in Portugal. That afternoon, when the fisherman tied the rope to the port, I

knew I would stay there forever. The day I stepped on Gavdos, I promised myself I would never think of you again. And I did not think of you for ten whole years, until today, when Mihali came back home upset. For the first time, I saw fear on his face. They gathered early this morning in the tavern in order to wait for the doctor. While they were drinking rakia, the priest asked him what was new on the other side, pointing with his hand across the sea. The doctor told them that the Berlin Wall had fallen, that all of Europe was in a state of anticipation. They were all silent. Nobody understood what significance a wall in Europe could have.

Here, people live forgotten for years, history persistently avoids them, leprosy and famine have also avoided them, and just when they thought it would avoid them this time as well, Spiro rushed into the tavern, and started shouting loudly: "They came! There they are, they are approaching the port!" And without asking who they are, everyone set off toward the port in Karave. And then, from amid the tranquil sea, in the shape of a boat, fear was increasingly approaching them.

Three people came out of the boat, two men and a woman. The woman had short hair, and looked more like a man than a woman. The fisherman that brought them said they had come to the island for healing purposes. He told them they were Russians.

And then my blood froze. Not because of fear! – but because of the thought of you! I saw you standing, with the smile on your face which sister Teoktisti called devilish. You are laughing at them ironically while you see the fear in their eyes. You, who said you were not afraid of anything, not even of death.

Do you remember when those two Americans came to the monastery, said that they were journalists and that they wanted to photograph the girls who lived there, and sister Erotey nervously hopped on one foot, constantly reiterating that the mother superior Teoktisti was not here, that she was visiting the Arkadi Mon-

astery, all the while looking at the windows of her study room. And after long discussions with the Americans, you pulled my sleeve and told them we would pose. We stood and we posed. Out of shame, I was looking down at my dusty shoes, while you shamelessly laughed in front of the camera. Sister Erotey was standing aside and threatened all the time that she would tell you off to sister Teoktisti, and to me she only said that I should be ashamed of following your ideas, you were half-foreigner, such behavior suited you, and not me. But I never told you that I was a little afraid of them, and at the same time I was afraid of disappointing you since you constantly repeated that I was different, that I was not like the other girls.

# NORWAY

**Maria Navarro Skaranger**

**Bok om sorg  
(Fortellingen om Nils  
i skogen)**

***Book of Grief (The Story of  
Nils in the Woods)***

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## BIOGRAPHY

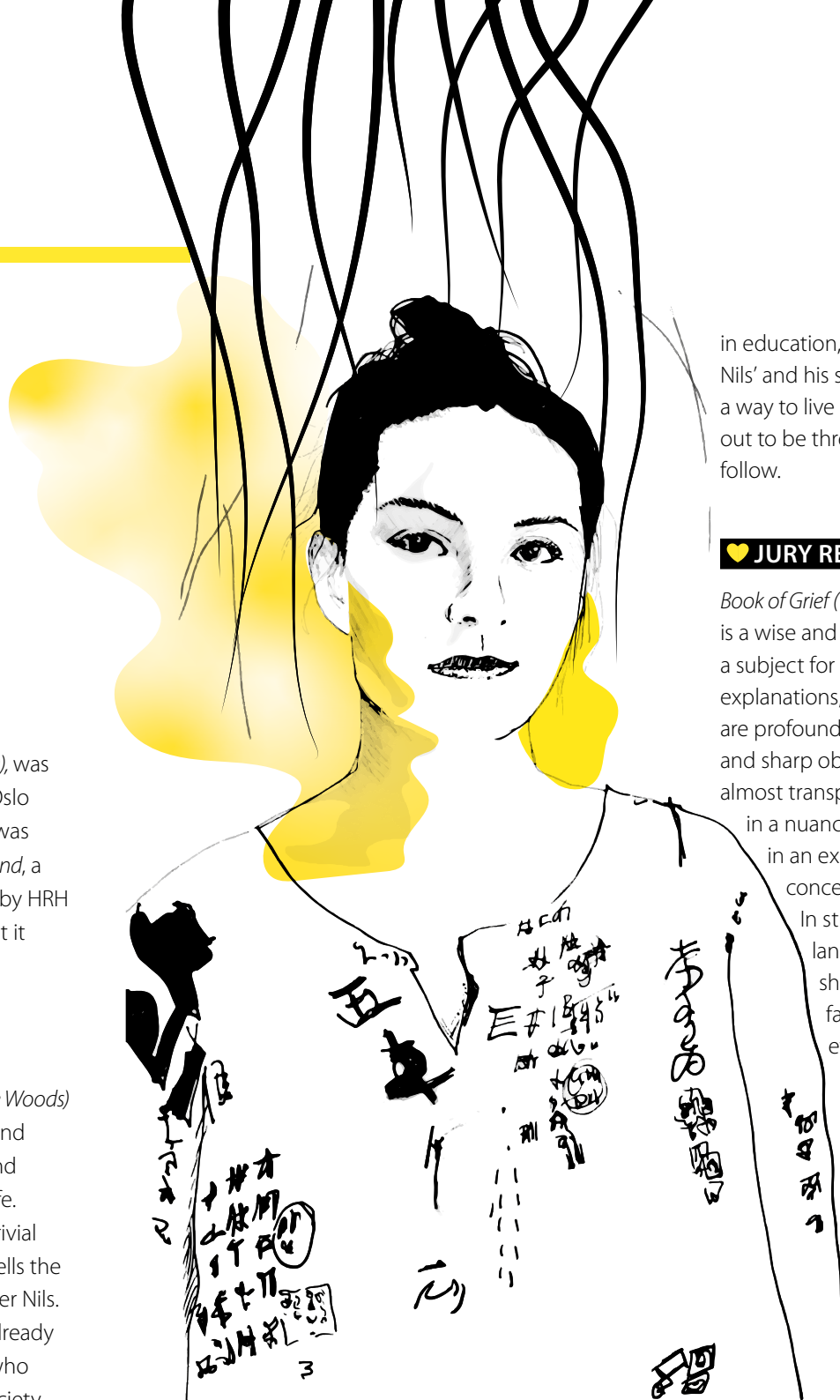
**M**aria Navarro Skaranger (1994) was born and lives in Oslo. She has studied writing at the Academy of Creative Writing in Hordaland and comparative literature at the University of Oslo. As the author of just two books, Skaranger displays an impressive preciseness in the way she brings up relevant themes with great originality.

Her debut novel *All the Foreigners Have Closed Curtains* (2015) is the first Norwegian book written in a consistent multi-ethnolect from a diverse Oslo suburb, her language absorbing expressions from different countries and backgrounds. The novel received much attention and was awarded the First Novel Prize. The film version of the novel was launched in Norwegian cinemas in March 2020. Her second novel, *Bok om sorg* (*Fortellingen om Nils i skogen*) (*Book of*

*Grief (The Story of Nils in the Woods)*), was published in 2018 and won the Oslo Prize the same year. In 2019, she was one of 12 contributors to *Homeland*, a prestigious anthology co-edited by HRH Mette-Marit, which explores what it means to be Norwegian.

## SYNOPSIS

*Book of Grief (The Story of Nils in the Woods)* is Maria Navarro Skaranger's second novel. Nils, a young man of around 30 years old, has taken his own life. Through anecdotes, seemingly trivial events and memories, his sister tells the story of the family before and after Nils. It is the story of a boy who was already a loner as a child, a young man who never really found his place in society,



in education, at work or among friends. Nils' and his siblings are trying to find a way to live on after Nils, and it turns out to be three very different tracks to follow.

## ♥ JURY REPORT

*Book of Grief (The Story of Nils in the Woods)* is a wise and easily accessible novel on a subject for which there are no simple explanations, and where the resonances are profound and rich. Simple sentences and sharp observations create an almost transparent story. Life unfolds in a nuanced and broad spectrum in an extremely effective and concentrated way of telling. In straight, direct and sober language, and through 240 short passages, a dramatic family history gradually evolves.

# Bok om sorg (Fortellingen om Nils i skogen)

Maria Navarro Skaranger



## RYDDE UT (ULYKKEN)

1. Jeg liker best de bildene der Nils tuller. De bildene der han drikker en øl, geiper, lager grimaser. Det ser så ekte ut.

Det finnes en del bilder der vi er barn, der han er barn, oppfører seg som barn, løper på en eng, klatrer i trær, bilder fra fisketurer. Det finnes de der han er syk. I albumene er disse bildene ofte klippet litt i, han kan være klippet bort, eller være halv, enten fordi han ser så tynn ut eller fordi det bare er sånt man gjør.

2. Mammas øyne var umulige å tyde, hun sa nesten ingenting heller.

Det første broren min Mik sa: Det var jo dette vi var redde for, vi visste jo at dette kunne skje. Han sa det veldig enkelt og greit, ikke overraska, mer bekreftende, faren min nikket han også, faren min var enig, Mik sa noe han kjente seg igjen i, alle var liksom enige, som om vi alle på en eller annen måte hadde forberedt oss eller tenkt det før, tanken hadde allerede streifet oss, og da hadde

den vel også streifet Nils selv. Mest sannsynlig for lenge siden. Da han bodde i skogen eller kanskje de første gangene han ble lagt inn.

Vi hadde kanskje tenkt allerede da, at denne gutten, han kommer aldri til å bli gammel, han kommer aldri til å få barn, gifte seg, kjøpe hus og bil.

3. Først var stemmen til faren min i telefonen bare veldig tørr, mutt, virka nesten sur. Mamma sa alltid før at dette mutte var en typisk nordnorsk greie. Man sier noe til han, så bruker han veldig lang tid på å svare, kanskje ti sekunder.

Etterpå hadde han et ansiktsuttrykk som var umulig å bestemme, øynene vidåpne og helt blanke og glassaktige, kanskje han var skremt, redd, begge deler.

Han tok hunden på løpetur og var borte i mange timer. Da de kom inn igjen, la hunden seg rett ned på gulvet og sovna, lå helt stille og med tunga ut, akkurat som den var død, den òg. Faren min tok seg i håret hele tida, klødde seg bak ørene, pirket, strøk håret bakover med fingrene, kikket på fingrene sine etterpå. Han tok et stort glass med cola som han drakk og drakk av helt til det var tomt. Jeg tenkte på hvordan kullsyra måtte ha gitt han frysninger. Etterpå fylte han glasset med vann, så helte han vann i hendene som han skvettet opp i ansiktet sitt flere ganger.

4. De første nettene hos mamma var jeg våken, jeg prøvde å legge meg ned, holde øynene igjen og bli liggende, bli i senga, jeg lå på siden, på ryggen, jeg stod opp igjen, gikk stille inn på kjøkkenet, jeg lot det være mørkt, spiste, drakk, så på tv. Jeg trodde det gradvis skulle gi seg, men selv da jeg dro tilbake til min egen leilighet var jeg våken, og heller ikke om dagen kunne jeg sove. Jeg spydde

og hakket tenner. Om kroppen gikk i krig eller i brems, det vet jeg ikke, en rekke normalreaksjoner, sa legen, søvnproblemer, følelse av apati, nedsatt matlyst. Jeg fikk et papir med en firkant på. Firkanten skulle jeg være inni, det var noe med å ha kontakt med følelsene sine eller ikke.

Jeg bretta papiret sammen og putta det i veska, prøvde å ta det til meg, tenke på firkanten, var på vakt. Når jeg spydde, spiste jeg etterpå, og når jeg hakket tenner, pusta jeg inn med nesa og ut med munnen.

5. Brevet var datert dagen før, eller to dager før, det var bretta sammen, det lå i jakkelomma hans. Det var ikke langt, noen få setninger som jeg ikke husker eksakt, men det stod noe sånt som at han var sliten og at denne gangen orka han ikke mer. Han må ha prøvd å unnslippe det, eller han må ha visst at han ikke kom til å bli frisk igjen. Kanskje det var derfor han ikke gjorde så mye ut av seg, han søkte ikke hjelp. Han gikk til psykiateren, hun satte en sprøyte i rumpa hans og han gikk hjem igjen. Var det en ro over det hele?

6. Det er ikke langt. Hvis man vil gå inn til skogen fra leiligheten til Nils, så går man bare litt oppover i borettslaget, langs veien og gjennom bommen og under ei gangbru, det blir færre og færre hus jo lenger ut man kommer. Det er skogen og det er blokkene, som er plassert symmetrisk foran hverandre. Det er mørk gran og furu og noen vann, og hvis man går langt, er det enda mer skog, flere vann, og noen gårder.

7. Nils bodde i gråblokkene, de store som mange synes er stygge fordi de ser ut som russerblokker. Det finnes ikke mange slike

blokker i Osloområdet. Det er Rødtvet, Tveita og Ammerud, det er flere også, sikkert. Som barn tulla vi ofte med at jeg kom til å ende opp som trebarnsmor i blokkene, vi tulla med at blokkene bare var for narkiser og trygda folk eller innvandrere som presser alle barna sine inn på ett rom.

De var ment å skulle påvirke beboerne på en positiv måte, den umiddelbare nærheten til skogen rundt, et kjøpesenter like bortenfor, banen ned til byen. Jeg vet ikke helt hva som gikk galt.

8. Blokkene ble pussa opp for kanskje to år siden, og da var det store oppslag i avisene, om at nå skulle det bli bedre å bo der, og mer barnevennlig, og det var noen som hadde reagert på den skrekkefilmen som ble spilt inn i samme blokk, at det var negativt for miljøet. Nå skulle obos pusse opp slik at blokkene ble mindre betong! De la kunstgressmatte som gulv på alle verandaene, de satte inn store glassplater over rekkverket, så verandaen kan bli et helt rom eller en boks eller et drivhus, det blir mindre kaldt om vinteren og enda varmere på sommeren. For å kikke ut og ned på bakken må man skyve glassene til side, da kan man lene seg ut. Utsikten går til baksida på gamlehjemmet, en gressplen, en bilvei og skogen.

9. Jeg var ikke hjemme hos han mange ganger. Leiligheten var liten og beregna på én person, selv om det er flere familier som bor i blokka, kanskje er leilighetene i forskjellig størrelse, det vet jeg ikke helt. Det var fint for han å ha sitt eget sted. Jeg spiste middag og sov over to ganger, den ene gangen lagde han biff, den var mør og lys rosa inni, perfekt stekt, han hadde lagd fløtepotetene fra bunnen av, sa han. Jeg sov på en madrass og han sov i sovesofaen. Han stod opp midt på natta og satt lenge på verandaen og røyka.

Den andre gangen hadde han lagd suppe. Jeg var der kanskje en gang til, for å hente noe eller for å gi han et råd.



# Book of Grief (The Story of Nils in the Woods)

*Maria Navarro Skaranger*

Translated from Norwegian by Rachel Rankin

## **CLEARING OUT (THE ACCIDENT)**

1. My favourite photos of Nils are the ones where he's messing about. The photos where he's drinking a beer, sticking his tongue out, pulling faces. It looks so genuine.

There are quite a lot of photos of us as children, of him as a child, behaving like a child: running through a meadow, climbing trees, photos from fishing trips. There are ones in which he's unwell. These photos are often cropped a little in the albums. He can be cropped out or cut in half, either because he looks so thin or because that's just the kind of thing you do.

2. Mum's eyes were impossible to read. She said hardly anything either.

The first thing my brother Mik said was: This is what we were afraid of, of course we knew it could happen. He said it very plainly and simply, not surprised, more an affirmation, and my father nodded in agreement – Mik's words had struck a chord, and everyone pretty much agreed, as if we had all, in one way or another, prepared ourselves for it, or considered it before. The thought had

already crossed our minds, and it must have crossed Nils' mind too, probably a long time ago, when he lived in the woods, or maybe during the first few times he was admitted.

We had perhaps already considered that this boy would never grow old, would never have children, get married, buy a house and a car.

3. At first, my father's voice on the telephone was just very dry, sullen, almost angry. Mum always used to say that this sullenness was typical of northern Norwegians. You'll say something to him, and he'll take a very long time to respond – maybe ten seconds.

Afterwards, his facial expression was impossible to read, his eyes wide open, all shiny and glassy. Maybe he was scared, or worried, or both.

He went out running with the dog and was gone for hours. When he came back again, the dog slumped to the floor and fell asleep, lying completely still with its tongue out, as though it were dead as well. My father kept touching his hair, scratching behind his ears, prodding, pushing his hair back with his fingers, looking at his fingers afterwards. He poured a large glass of cola and drank and drank until it was empty. I thought about how the fizz must have given him chills. Afterwards, he filled the glass with water, which he then poured over his hands, splashing his face several times.

4. During the first few nights at Mum's house, I was wide awake. I tried to go to sleep, to keep my eyes closed and lie there, stay there, stay in bed. I lay on my side and then on my back before getting up again, quietly going into the kitchen and eating, drinking, watching TV in the dark. I thought it would slowly wear off, but even when I went back to my own flat, I was wide awake at night and couldn't fall asleep during the day either. I vomited and

ground my teeth. I don't know if my body was at war with itself or breaking down. Sleep issues, feelings of apathy, reduced appetite – a series of normal reactions, the doctor said. I was given a piece of paper with a square on it. I had to be inside the square – it was something to do with being in touch with your feelings, or not.

I folded the paper and put it in my bag. I tried to take it all on board, to think of the square, to be alert. When I vomited, I ate afterwards, and when I ground my teeth, I breathed in through the nose and out through the mouth.

5. The letter was dated the day before, or two days before. It was folded up in his jacket pocket and it wasn't long, just a few sentences which I don't remember exactly, but it said something about how he was exhausted and that this time he couldn't take it anymore. He must have tried to avoid it, or he must have known that he wasn't going to be well again. Maybe that's why he didn't draw much attention to himself. He didn't seek help. He went to the psychiatrist, she stuck a syringe in his backside, and he went home again. Was there a calmness about the whole thing?

6. It's not far away. If you want to go into the woods from Nils' flat, you just have to walk a bit further through the housing cooperative, along the road, then through the barrier and underneath a footbridge. The further you go, the fewer the houses. There are the woods and there are the tower blocks, which are placed symmetrically opposite each other. There are dark pines and spruces and a stretch of water and, if you keep walking, there is even more woodland, more water, and a few farms.

7. Nils lived in one of the grey high-rises, the large ones many people think are ugly because they look like Russian tower blocks. There aren't many like this around the Oslo area. There's Rødtvert, Tveita,

Ammerud, and probably several more. As children, we often joked that I'd end up a mother-of-three living in one of those tower blocks. We joked that they were just for junkies and benefit scroungers, or immigrants who squeezed all their children into one room.

It was meant to have a positive impact on the people who lived there, this close proximity to the surrounding woods, with a shopping centre just beyond and the lane leading down to the town. I'm not exactly sure what went wrong.

8. The tower blocks were renovated maybe two years ago and there was broad coverage about it in the newspapers. They said that it would now be a better place to live, more child friendly. There was also some reaction from people about the horror film which had been filmed in the same building – they said it was bad for local spirit. Now the tower blocks were going to be renovated so there would be less concrete! Artificial grass was laid on the floor of all the verandas and large panes of glass were installed above the railings so that the veranda could be a whole room or a box or a greenhouse, less cold in the winter and ever warmer in the summer. To look out and down to the ground, you have to push the glass sideways and then you can lean out. The view is of the back of the nursing home, a lawn, a road, and the woods.

9. I didn't visit him at home a lot. The flat was small, designed for one person, even though there were several families who lived in the tower block – maybe the flats are different sizes, I'm not entirely sure. It was nice for him to have his own place. I had dinner and stayed over twice. One time, he made beef. It was tender and light pink inside, cooked perfectly, and he had made potatoes *au gratin*, from scratch, he said. I slept on a mattress and he slept on the sofa bed. He got up in the middle of the night and sat on the veranda for a long time, smoking.

The second time, he had made soup. I was there maybe one more time after that, to collect something, or to give him a piece of advice.

# SPAIN

**Irene Solà**

## **Canto jo i la muntanya balla**

***I Sing and the Mountain Dances***

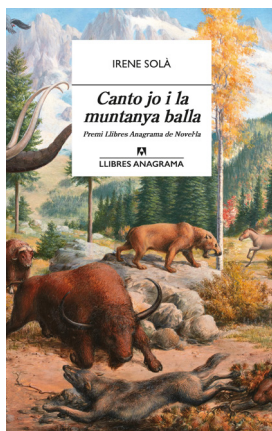
Anagrama, Barcelona, 2019

Language: Catalan

ISBN: 978-8-4339-1568-9

### **BIOGRAPHY**

**Irene Solà** (born in Malla, near Barcelona, in 1990) has a degree in fine arts from the University of Barcelona and a master's in literature, film and visual culture from the University of Sussex. Her first book of poems, *Bèstia* (Galerada, 2012), was awarded the Amadeu Oller Poetry Prize and has been translated into English (as *Beast*, Shearsman Books, 2017). Her first novel, *Els dics* (*The Dams*, L'Altra Editorial, 2018), won the Documenta prize and was awarded a grant for literary creation by the Catalan Department of Culture. In 2018, she was a resident writer at the Alan Cheuse International Writers Center of George Mason University (Virginia, United States) and in late 2019 she was selected to participate in the Art Omi: Writers Ledig House programme (New York). In 2019, she was awarded the Premi Llibres Anagrama de Novel·la for *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* (*I Sing and the*



*Mountain Dances*). The same year, she also received the Núvol Prize, and the Cálamo Prize for the Spanish edition of the book.

### **SYNOPSIS**

Starting with the death of a farmer caused by lightning, the novel tells a set of stories, in which reality and fiction overlap, about the inhabitants of a mountainous area between Camprodon and Prats de Molló, two villages in the Pyrenees. Stories about mythical beings like water women, about war, about the survival of humans and wild animals, about fanaticism... but also about beauty and goodness. A narrative that emulates that of great authors of Catalan literature such as Víctor Català or Mercè Rodoreda, with an evocative and poetic style.

### **♥ JURY REPORT**

The jury has selected this work for the richness, naturalness and expressiveness of its language, and for its poetic and imaginative way of explaining a series of stories located in a natural and border setting, through various narrators, some of them unexpected. A novel that combines beauty and toughness, with its own universe, narrated in a vigorous and surprising style. A work that is also the result of its author's interdisciplinary approach as a poet, narrator and plastic artist. *I Sing and the Mountain Dances* also confirms all the great expectations created by its writer's narrative debut *Els dics* (*The Dams*).



# Canto jo i la muntanya balla

*Irene Solà*



## EL LLAMP

Vam arribar amb les panxes plenes. Doloroses. Els ventres negres, carregats d'aigua fosca i freda i de llamps i de trons. Veníem del mar i d'altres muntanyes, i ves a saber de quins llocs més, i ves a saber què havíem vist. Rascàvem la pedra dalt dels cims, com sal, perquè no hi brotessin ni les males herbes. Triàvem el color de les carenes i dels camps, i la brillantor dels rius i dels ulls que miren enlaire. Quan ens van llambregar, les bèsties salvatgines es van arraulir caus endintre i van arronsar el coll i van aixecar el muse-ll, per sentir l'olor de terra molla que s'apropava. Els vam tapar a tots com una manta. Als roures i als boixos i als bedolls i als avets. Xssssst. I tots plegats van fer silenci, perquè érem un sostre sever que decidia sobre la tranquil·litat i la felicitat de tenir l'esperit sec.

Després de l'arribada, i de la quietud, i de la pressió, i d'arraconar l'aire fi ben avall, vam disparar el primer llamp. Bang! Com un descans. I els cargols cargolats van estremir-se dins de les seves solitàries cases, sense cap déu ni cap pregària, sabent que si no morien ofegats, sortirien, redimits, a respirar la mullena. I aleshores vam vessar l'aigua a gotes immenses, com monedes sobre la terra i l'herba i les pedres, i el tro escruixidor va ressonar dins les cavitats toràciques de totes les bèsties. Va ser llavors, que l'home va dir cago'n seuna. Ho va dir en veu alta, perquè quan hom

està sol no fa falta pensar en silenci. Cago'n seuna, inútil, que t'has deixat atrapar pel temporal. I nosaltres vam riure, uh, uh, uh, uh, mentre li mullàvem el cap, i la nostra aigua se li ficava coll de la camisa endintre, i li resseguia l'espatlla i els lloms, i eren fredes i despertaven el mal humor, les nostres gotetes.

L'home venia d'una casa d'allà a la vora, enfilada a mitja carena, sobre un riu que devia ser fred perquè s'amagava sota els arbres. Hi havia deixat dues vaques, un grapat de porcs i de gallines i un gos i dos gats desarrelats, una dona i dues criatures i un vell. Es deia Domènec. I tenia un hort ufanós a mitja muntanya i unes terres mal llaurades vora el riu, perquè l'hort l'hi treballava el vell, que era son pare i que tenia l'esquena plana com una taula, i les terres les llaurava ell. Hi havia vingut a provar versos, en Domènec, cap a aquest voral de muntanya. Per veure quin gust i quin so tenien, i perquè quan hom està sol no fa falta dir versos en veu baixa. I havia trobat un grapat de trompetes de la mort fora de temporada, aquella tarda, tot anant a guaitar el bestiar, i les duia embolicades a la panxa de la camisa. La criatura de braços plorava quan havia deixat la casa, i la dona havia dit «Domènec», com una queixa i com una súplica, i en Domènec havia sortit igualment. És difícil de fer versos i de contemplar la virtut que s'amaga dins de totes les coses, quan els nens ploren amb aquella estridència de garrí escorxat que t'accelera el cor encara que no ho vulguis. I volia anar a mirar les vaques. Havia d'anar a mirar les vaques. Què hi entenia la Sió, de vaques? Res. El vedell feia maaaaaaaaaaaaa, maaaaaaaaaaaaa. Desesperat. No en sabia res, la Sió, de vaques. I va tornar a exclamar, cago'n seuna!, perquè havíem sigut ràpids, caram, imprevisibles i sigil·losos, i l'havíem atrapat. Cago'n seuna!, perquè el vedell tenia la cua enganxada a un manyoc de filferros. Els filferros s'havien encallat entre dos arbres, i de les estrebades li havien esbocinat el darrere de les cames, que ara li lluien ensangonats, oberts i bruts. Feia maaaaaaaaaaaaa, maaaaaaaaaaaaa, atrapat per la cua entre els dos arbres, i la seva mare el vetllava intranquil·la. En

Domènec sota el xàfec va enfile cap a la bèstia. Tenia unes comes ben fetes de tan tresscar muntanya amunt a respirar aire quan els nens cridaven massa, o quan pesaven massa, i pesava massa l'arada, i el silenci del vell, i totes les paraules, una darrere l'altra, de la dona, que es deia Sió, i que era de Camprodon, i que s'havia ben deixat enredar perquè l'havien pujat sola dalt d'aquella muntanya amb un home que s'escapava i un vell que no parlava. I mira que a vegades en Domènec l'estimava i l'estimava fort, a la Sió, encara. Però pesava tant, cago'n Déu i Satanàs, la casa. Hauria de tenir més temps de coneixe's, la gent, abans de casar-se. Més temps de viure abans de fer criatures. A vegades encara l'agafava per la cintura i li feia donar voltes, una darrere l'altra, com quan festejaven, perquè la Sió, Déu, la Sió, quines comes! Va deixar les trompetes a terra. El vedell bramulava. En Domènec s'hi va acostar amb les dues mans a davant. A poc a poc. Dient coses amb una veu greu i amansidora. Xsst, xsst, feia. La mare el sotjava desconfiada. Els cabells d'en Domènec regalimaven. Quan arribés a casa s'hauria de fer escalfar aigua per rentar-se el fred i la pluja. Es va mirar els ferros que esgarrinxaven les potes de l'animal cada vegada que estrebava. Li va agafar la cua amb fermesa, va treure la navalla i va tallar amb habilitat el pèl nuat. I aleshores vam deixar caure el segon llamp. Ràpid com una serp. Enfadat. Obert com una teranyina. Els llamps van on volen, com l'aigua i les allaus i els insectes petits i les garses, que tot el que és bonic i el que brilla els hi omple l'ull. La navalla fora de la butxaca d'en Domènec va brillar com un tresor, com una pedra preciosa, com un grapat de monedes. La fulla de metall ens va emmirallar, polida. Com uns braços oberts, com una crida. Els llamps es fiquen on volen, i el segon llamp es va ficar dins del cap d'en Domènec. Endintre, endintre, fins al cor. I tot el que veia dins dels ulls era negre, de la cremada. L'home es va desplomar sobre l'herba, i el prat li va posar la galta contra la seva, i totes les nostres aigües esverades i contentes se li van ficar per dintre les mànigues de la camisa, per sota el cinturó, dins dels

calçotets i els mitjons, buscant la pell encara seca. I es va morir. I la vaca va marxar esperitada, i el vedell va córrer darrere seu.

Les quatre dones que ho van veure van acostar-s'hi. A poc a poc. Perquè no estaven acostumades a sentir interès per la manera com mor la gent. Ni interès pels homes atractius. Ni interès pels homes lletjos. Però l'escena havia sigut ullprenedora. Havia fet una llum tan clara, tot plegat, que no hauria fet falta veure-s'hi mai més. El ganivet havia cridat el llamp, i el llamp blanc havia encertat com una diana el cap de l'home, li havia fet la ratlla al mig dels cabells, i les vaques havien fugit esperitades com en una comèdia. S'hauria hagut d'escriure una cançó sobre els cabells de l'home i la pinta del llamp. S'hauria pogut posar perles als cabells, a la cançó, blanques com la resplendor del ganivet. I dir coses del seu cos, i dels llavis oberts, i dels ulls clars com un got on la pluja es ficava. I del rostre tan bonic per fora i tan cremat per dintre. I de l'aigua que li queia com una torrentera sobre el pit i darrere l'esquena, com si se'l volgués endur. I de les seves mans, hauria parlat la cançó, curtes i gruixudes i calloses, una d'oberta com una flor que veu venir l'abella, l'altra agafada a la navalla com una roca que s'ha ficat dins d'un arbre.

Una de les dones, la que es deia Margarida, li va tocar una mà, mig per saber si l'home cremava amb el llamp a dintre, mig només per la carícia. Llavors, quan les dones el van deixar estar i van collir les trompetes de la mort xopes que l'home havia abandonat, i van donar per vista l'escena, perquè hi havia moltes altres coses a fer, i moltes altres coses a pensar; com si ens haguéssim encomanat de la seva satisfacció i de la feina feta, vam deixar de ploure. Sadolls. Espassats. I quan va ser segur que haviem parat del tot, els ocells van saltironejar fins al centre de les branques i van cantar la cançó dels supervivents, amb l'estómac petit ple de mosquits, estarrufats i plens de fúria en contra nostra. Poc tenien per queixar-se si no haviem ni pedregat, si haviem plogut el temps just de matar un

home i un grapat de cargols. Si amb prou feines havíem fet caure cap niu i no havíem inundat cap camp.

Aleshores ens vam replegar. Extenuats. I ens vam mirar l'obra feta. Les fulles i les branques gotejaven, i nosaltres vam anar, vacus i laxos, cap a una altra banda.

Una vegada vam ploure granotes i una altra vegada vam ploure peixos. Però el millor és pedregar. Les pedres precioses es precipiten sobre els pobles i els cranis i els tomàquets. Rodones i congelades. I omplen els marges i els caminals d'un tresor de glaç. Les granotes van caure com una maledicció. Els homes i les dones corrien, i les granotes, que eren molt i molt petites, s'amagaven. Ai, las. Els peixos van caure com una benedicció sobre els caps dels homes i les dones, com bufetades, i la gent reia i els aixecava enlaire com si ens els volgués tornar, però no ho volien, ni nosaltres tampoc els hauríem volgut. Les granotes rauquen dins dels ventres. Els peixos deixen de moure's però no es moren. Però tant li fa. El millor de tot és pedregar.

# I Sing and the Mountain Dances

*Irene Solà*

Translated from Catalan by Mara Faye Lethem

## THE LIGHTNING BOLT

We arrived with full bellies. Painfully full. Black bellies, burdened with cold dark water, lightning bolts and thunderclaps. We came from the sea and from other mountains, and from unthinkable places, and we'd seen unthinkable things. We scratched the rock atop the peaks, like salt, so not even weeds would sprout there. We chose the color of the crests and the fields, and the gleam of the rivers and in the eyes looking upward. When the wild beasts caught sight of us, they huddled deep in their caves and crimped their necks and lifted their snouts, to catch the scent of damp earth approaching. We covered them all like a blanket. The oak and the boxwood and the birch and the fir. Shhhhhhhh. And they all went silent, because we were a stern ceiling and we decided who would have the tranquility and joy of a dry soul.

After our arrival came the stillness, and the pressure, and we forced the thin air down to bedrock, then let loose the first thunderclap. Bang! Like a reprieve. And the coiled snails shuddered in their secluded homes, godless and without a prayer, knowing that if they didn't drown they would emerge redeemed to breathe the dampness in. And then we poured water out in colossal drops, like coins onto the earth and the grass and the stones, and the astounding thunderclap resounded inside the chest cavities of every

beast. And that was when the man said damn and blast. He said it aloud, because when a man is alone there's no need to think in silence. Damn and blast, you had to go get caught in a storm. And we laughed, huh, huh, huh, huh, as we dampened his head, and our water slunk into his collar, and slid down his shoulder and the small of his back. Our drops were cold and made him cross.

The man came from a house not far off, halfway up to the crest, by a river that must have been cold because it hid beneath the trees. There he'd left behind two cows, a bunch of pigs and hens, a dog and two roving cats, an old man, and a wife and two kids. Domènec was this man's name. And he had a lush garden patch at mid mountain and some poorly plowed fields beside the river, because the patch was tended by the old man — his father, with a back flat as a board — and Domènec plowed the fields. Domènec had come to reel off his verses, over on this side of the mountain. To see what flavor and what sound they had, because when a man is alone there's no need to whisper. And that evening he'd found a fistful of early black chanterelles, when he checked on the herd, and he carried the mushrooms wrapped in the belly of his shirt. The baby cried when he left the house, and his wife said "Domènec" as if protesting, as if pleading, and Domènec went out anyway. It's hard to create verses and contemplate the virtue hidden inside all things, when the kids are crying with the shrillness of a flayed piglet that makes your heart race despite your best efforts to keep calm. And he wanted to go out and look at the cows. He had to go out and look at the cows. What did Sió understand about cows? Nothing. The calf went maaaaaaaaaaaaa, maaaaaaaaaaaaa. Desperately. Sió knew nothing about cows. And again he cried out, damn and blast!, because we'd crept up quickly, hell yeah, unreliable and stealthy, and we'd trapped him. Damn and blast!, because the calf's tail was stuck in a jumble of wires. The wires had gotten lodged between two trees, and what with all the pulling the back of the calf's legs were shredded and gleamed bloody, open, and

dirty. It went maaaaaaaaaaaaa, maaaaaaaaaaaaa, trapped by the tail between the two trees, and its mother guarded over him restlessly. Amid the downpour Domènec climbed over to the animal. His legs were good and strong from barreling up the mountain to take in some air when the kids were yelling too much, or when they weighed too heavy on him, and the plowing weighed too heavy on him, and the old man's silence, and all the words, one after the other, from his wife, who was called Sió, and who was from Camprodon, and who'd gotten herself into a fine fix, agreeing to go up there to that mountaintop with a man who slipped away and an old man who never spoke. And sure sometimes Domènec loved her, loved her fiercely, still. But what a weight, for the ever-loving love of God and Satan, how that house weighed! Folks should have more time to get to know each other before they marry. More time to live before making children. Sometimes he grabbed her by the waist and spun her around, round and round, like when they were courting, because Sió, oh Sió, lord have mercy, those legs! He dropped the chanterelles. The calf lowed. Domènec approached the animal, leading with both his hands. Slowly, step by step. Saying things in a deep, quieting voice. Ssssh, ssssh, he said. Its mother watched him warily. Domènec's hair was streaming water. When he got home he'd have her heat up some water to wash off the cold and the rain. He looked at the wire that cut into the calf's legs every time it struggled. He grabbed its tail firmly, pulled out his knife and deftly cut its knotted switch. And then we let loose the second thunderbolt. Quick as a snake. Angry. Open like a spider web. Lightning goes where it wants to, like water and landslides and little insects and magpies, transfixed by all things pretty and shiny. The knife was out of Domènec's pocket and it gleamed like a treasure, like a precious stone, like a fistful of coins. The metal blade, polished mirror, reflected us back. Like open arms, calling us out. Lightning goes where it will, and the second bolt went into Domènec's head. Deep, deep down inside, to his heart. And everything he saw inside his eyes was black, from



the burn. The man collapsed on the grass, and the meadow placed its cheek against his, and all our giddy, happy waters moved into him through his shirtsleeves, beneath his belt, into his underwear and socks, searching for still dry skin. And he died. And the cow took off in a frenzy, and the calf followed after.

The four women who'd seen, approached him. Bit by bit. Because they weren't used to feeling an interest in how people die. Or an interest in attractive men. Or ugly men, for that matter. But the scene had been captivating. The light so bright and clear that it was enough for a lifetime of seeing. The knife had called to the lightning, the white lightning had hit the man's head like a bull's-eye, it had parted his hair right down the middle, and the cows had fled in a frenzy, like in some comedy. Someone should have written a song about the man's hair and the lightning comb. Putting pearls in his hair, in the song, white like the gleam off the knife. And say something about his body, and his open lips, and his light eyes like a cup filling up with rain. And about his face, so lovely on the outside and so burned on the inside. And about the torrential water that fell on his chest and rushed beneath his back, as if it wanted to carry him off. And about his hands, the song would have spoken, stumpy and thick and calloused, one open like a flower expecting a bee, the other gripping the knife like a rock swallowed by tree roots.

One of the women, the one named Margarida, touched his hand, partly to find out if the man was burning with the thunderbolt inside him, and partly just for the caress. Then the women left him be and gathered up the soaking wet black chanterelles he'd dropped, and abandoned the scene, because they had many other things to do, and many other things to think about. Then it was as if their satisfaction was contagious, and we stopped raining. Sated. Dispersed. And when it was clear we were done, the birds hopped out to the middle of the branches and sang the song of the survivors, their little stomachs filled with mosquitoes, bris-

ting and furious with us. They had little to complain about as we hadn't even hailed, we had rained just enough to kill a man and a handful of snails. We'd barely knocked down a single nest and we hadn't flooded a single field.

Then we retreated. Dog-tired. And we looked at our work. Leaves and branches dripped, and we headed off, vacant and slack, somewhere else.

Once we rained frogs and another time we rained fish. But best of all is the hail. Precious hailstones fall on towns and skulls and tomatoes. Round and frozen. Covering terraced walls and paths with icy treasure. The frogs fell like a plague. The men and women ran, and the frogs, who were eensy teensy, hid. Alas. The fish fell like a blessing on the men and women's heads, like slaps, and the people laughed and lifted the fish up in the air as if they wanted to give them back to us, but they didn't want to and we wouldn't have wanted them back anyway. The frogs croak inside our bellies. The fish stop moving but don't die. But whatever. Best of all are the hailstorms.

# NATIONAL JURIES

National juries

The selected countries for the European Union Prize for Literature in 2020 are Belgium (French-speaking), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Kosovo, Luxembourg, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway and Spain.

## BELGIUM

*President* Gilles Collard, head of the Texts and Creative Writing programme at La Cambre - École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels

*Members*

- Bernard Gérard, former director general of ADEB and Copiebel
- Isabelle Wéry, writer, actress and EUPL 2013 laureate
- Maria Paviadakis, bookseller

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

*President* Faruk Šehić, writer and EUPL 2013 laureate

*Members*

- Edin Salčinović, writer, literary critic and culture editor (Oslobodjenje)
- Nenad Rizvanović, writer, literary critic and editor
- Tanja Stupar-Trifunović, writer and EUPL 2016 laureate
- Đorđe Krajišnik, literary critic and journalist (Oslobodjenje & Магазин Дани/Magazin Dani)

## CROATIA

*President* Boris Perić, writer, literary translator and journalist

*Members*

- Sibila Petlevski, poet, novelist, playwright, literary critic and professor at the University of Zagreb
- Chloé Billion, literary translator
- Romana Perecinec, literary translator and writer

## CYPRUS

*President* Giorgos Moleskis, poet

*Members*

- Antonis Georgiou, writer and EUPL 2016 laureate
- Myrto Azina, writer and EUPL 2010 laureate
- Kyriakos Kyriakou, bookseller
- Stavros Karayanni, writer, critical theorist and associate professor at the European University of Cyprus

## DENMARK

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*Members*

- Kristian Bang Foss, writer and EUPL 2013 laureate
- Marianne Withen, bookshop owner
- Peter Legård Nielsen, writer and board member of the Danish Art Council

## ESTONIA

*President* Tiit Aleksejev, writer and EUPL 2010 laureate

*Members*

- Ilvi Liive, founder of the Estonian Literary Centre (Eesti kirjanduse keskus)
- Rebeka Lotman, literary critic, journalist, translator and editor-in-chief for the publishing house of Tallinn University
- Marju Kirsipuu, development manager for the bookshop Apollo Raamatud
- Tauno Vahter, editor-in-chief (Tänapäev Publishers)

## GERMANY

*President* Lena Falkenhagen, writer and narrative designer

*Members*

- Doris Plöschberger, editorial director (Suhrkamp Verlag)
- Christoph Schröder, literary critic
- Klaus Kowalke, bookseller

## KOSOVO

*President* Lindita Tahiri, poet, translator and professor at the University of Pristina

*Members*

- Lindita Rugova, professor and dean of the Philology Faculty at the

University of Pristina

- Festa Molliqaj, literary translator and professor of foreign language
- Osman Gashi, poet and professor at the University of Pristina

## LUXEMBOURG

*President* Jeanne E. Glesener, professor at the University of Luxembourg

- Members*
- Jean-Claude Henkes, bookseller, member of the Strategic Development Comunity of the bookshop Ernster
  - Jérôme Jaminet, teacher, literary mediator and critic
  - Jean Back, writer and EUPL 2010 laureate
  - Claude D. Conter, director of the National Literature Centre of Mersch

## MONTENEGRO

*President* Dragana Tripković, poet and playwright

- Members*
- Aleksander Bečanović, writer, screenwriter, film critic and EUPL 2017 laureate
  - Vlatko Simunović, journalist and literary critic
  - Ognjen Spahić, writer and EUPL 2014 laureate
  - Predrag Uljarevic, publisher (*withdrawn from the deliberation on the winner*)

## NORTH MACEDONIA

*President* Elizabeta Bakovska, poet, novelist and editor-in-chief (Blesok magazine)

- Members*
- Vladimir Jankovski, writer, translator, editor and literary critic
  - Aleksandar Sazdov, bookseller
  - Gjoko Zdraveski, author and literature and poetry editor

## NORWAY

*President* Kari J. Spjeldnæs, publishing director (Aschehoug Forlag)

- Members*
- Helén Foss, bookseller, CEO of the independent bookshops Fri Bokhandel SA
  - Anne Merethe K. Prinos, secretary general of the Norwegian Critics' Association and literary critic
  - Siri Odfjell Risdal, festival director for Kapittel

## SPAIN

*President* Xavier Aliaga, journalist and writer

- Members*
- Antonio Avila, executive director of the Spanish Association of Publishers Guilds
  - Dolors Udina, literary translator
  - Sara Sanchez, bookseller
  - Fernando Valls, writer and accredited professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona

# THE EUROPEAN UNION PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

**T**he European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is an annual initiative that recognises emerging fiction writers from across Europe. It aims to put the spotlight on the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary fiction, to promote the circulation of literature within the continent, and to encourage greater interest in non-national literary works. It is financed by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union whose three main objectives are: to promote cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector, to encourage transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output, and to foster intercultural dialogue. Over cycles of three years, the EUPL includes 41 countries participating in the Creative Europe programme (on a rotating basis) and awards one winning author per country participating. It was first launched in 2009, and since then it has recognised 135 writers, through 12 editions.

## SELECTION PROCESS

The winning authors were selected by qualified juries set up in each of the 13 countries participating in the 2020 award. The nomination of candidates and the final selection of one winner in each country took place between January 2020 and May 2020. The new emerging talents were selected on the basis of criteria stipulated by the European Commission and fulfil in particular the following requirements:

The author must have the nationality or be a permanent resident of the country participating in the Prize's current edition. The author should have published between 2 and 4 contemporary fiction books.

The books of the authors should not have been translated in more than 4 languages. The eligible books must be the latest work of the author, should have ideally been published maximum 18 months before the date of the announcement and/or must still be commercially available.

## JURIES

National juries are composed by a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 members.

Three jury members were appointed by the national members of EWC, FEP and EIBF. The additional jury's members have been selected from a list of prominent literary personalities in each of the 13 countries participating.

The jury reports were delivered in order to justify the jury's choice and provide relevant information on the winner and his/her work.

## THE CONSORTIUM

The EUPL is organised by a Consortium of associations comprising the European Writers' Council (EWC), the Federation of European Publishers (FEP), and the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF), with the support of the European Commission. These three members are jointly responsible for the setting up of the national juries and the practical organisation of the award ceremony. They support the laureates in their promotion across Europe and beyond, online, at bookshops and book fairs' events.





## **THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, DG EDUCATION AND CULTURE**

[www.ec.europa.eu/culture](http://www.ec.europa.eu/culture)

The European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is part of Creative Europe, the EU Framework programme for support to the culture and audiovisual sectors.

### **More information:**

<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/>  
Creative Europe Desks for information and advice are set up in all countries participating in the programme.

### **Contact details:**

[https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/contact\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/contact_en)

## **THE CONSORTIUM**

The European Writers' Council  
[www.europeanwriters.eu](http://www.europeanwriters.eu)

The Federation of European Publishers  
[www.fep-fee.eu](http://www.fep-fee.eu)

The European and International Booksellers Federation  
[www.europeanbooksellers.eu](http://www.europeanbooksellers.eu)

The European Union Prize for Literature  
[www.euprizeliterature.eu](http://www.euprizeliterature.eu)

