

TWELVE WINNING AUTHORS

2015



EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

Carolina Schutti • Luka Bekavac • Gaëlle Josse • Edina Szvoren
Donal Ryan • Lorenzo Amurri • Undinė Radzevičiūtė • Ida Hegazi Høyer
Magdalena Parys • David Machado • Svetlana Žuchová • Sara Stridsberg

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Foreword

Writing, publishing, translating and reading books is fundamental. Not only for communicating, but also for sharing our values and our cultures, our stories and our history as Europeans. This act of community building through literature and reading is all the more important in today's society, where dialogue and interaction are crucial for allowing us to learn from each other and to develop mutual understanding and respect – as recent events have tragically underlined.

I am therefore delighted to present this publication which celebrates reading and puts on display the great diversity of European literature today.

This anthology of the 2015 edition of the European Union Prize for Literature showcases this year's twelve laureates and a selection of excerpts from their award winning books.

Since its creation in 2009, the European Union Prize for Literature has sought to stimulate the widest possible circulation of new and high-quality literary works across Europe. It contributes to promoting and safeguarding our cultural and linguistic diversity – a goal mapped out in the European Union Treaty.

This involves supporting works of fiction from right across the European Union, which now has 24 official languages, more than 60 regional and minority languages, and three alphabets. Literary translation is therefore vital, which is why we support it through Creative Europe, the European Union's funding programme for the cultural and creative sectors.

From 2007 to 2013, under the previous Culture programme, EUR 17.5 million flowed into literary translation. Over this period, the European Union contributed to the translation of more than 3,200 books, involving the official languages of all the 37 countries participating in the programme.

With Creative Europe, we will continue and expand this essential support. We should all be proud of this continuing commitment to European literature. It allows us to facilitate access to great writing across linguistic and cultural barriers, to help writers find new readers and to introduce all of us to new and fascinating stories.

I hope you will enjoy this anthology – and that it will entice you to discover more of the work of these fine European writers.

Tibor Navracsics

European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport



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Carolina Schutti

Einmal muss ich über weiches Gras gelaufen sein (2012)

Once I must have trodden soft grass

Publishing House **Otto Müller Verlag**

Biography

Carolina Schutti was born in 1976 in Innsbruck, where she still lives. She studied German philology, English and American Studies, concert guitar and classical voice. After several years of teaching and following her PhD on Elias Canetti, she taught at the University of Florence, followed by a post as a research assistant at Literaturhaus am Inn. From 2009-2013 she was a board member of Brenner Forum in Innsbruck as well as a member of the board of trustees of Brenner-Archiv. Her publications include essays on literary studies, literary reviews and other texts in literary magazines. She coordinates and moderates literary events and interdisciplinary projects, works as a juror, gives lectures on poetry and holds training seminars in the field of Neue Literatur.

Schutti has received a number of awards for her literary work.

Synopsis

Carolina Schutti's novel is dedicated to the grandmothers. We are told this early on in this slim volume which takes us into the female narrator's world – a sad and archaic world with no place for love, joy or carefree innocence.

After her mother's death, Maja is taken in by her aunt who feeds her and gives her a place to sleep but leaves her in the dark about her past. They live in a nameless village in a remote region and in very poor circumstances. Every attempt by Maja to remember her past leads nowhere. Marek, an elderly man who speaks a strange and mysterious language and lives on his own in another remote and lonely house, is the only person who can make Maja feel at home and accepted.

In a clear and poetic style, Schutti describes the situation of people who have been displaced and she does so in an entirely non-political and clear-sighted way. The search for identity, as suggested in the title *Einmal muss ich über weiches Gras gelaufen sein* (*Once I must have trodden soft grass*), determines the narrator's life throughout the remainder of the story. And although we're eventually told that she is from Belarus, and in spite of the book's referral to the past by dedicating it to the grandmothers, the theme of this novel contains a very contemporary dimension which could apply to countless regions of the world.

*Einmal muss ich über weiches
Gras gelaufen sein*

Carolina Schutti

2. Kapitel: Daunenhöhle

Steh nicht in der Tür herum, sagt die Tante.

Maja drückt sich vom Türstock weg, macht einen Schritt vorwärts, auf die Tante zu.

Ist sie gekommen?, fragt Maja.

Die Tante trocknet ihre nassen Hände am Geschirrtuch ab, nimmt die Strickjacke vom Haken, schlüpft zuerst in den rechten Ärmel, dann in den linken, immer zuerst in den rechten, schließt zwei Knöpfe, krempelt die Ärmel hoch und stellt sich wieder an die Spüle. Maja sieht die Tante von der Seite an, nimmt wortlos ein Geschirrtuch und hilft beim Abtrocknen. Das zarte Sonntagsgeschirr, weißes Porzellan mit hellblauem Muster, die frisch abgetrockneten Teller und Tassen kommen zuunterst in den Schrank. Maja steigt auf einen Stuhl, die Tante hebt vier Teller in die Höhe, Maja schiebt zwei Teller auf einmal unter den Stapel.

Damit das Geschirr in Umlauf bleibt, hat ihr die Tante beigebracht. Die Tassen schafft sie schon allein, die Gläser hat die Tante bereits auf ein eigenes Regal gestellt. Dann kommt das Besteck.

Pass auf, das Messer ist scharf, sagt die Tante, das sagt sie jedes Mal, und Maja fasst es am Griff, trocknet vorsichtig die Klinge, und wenn die Tante nicht hinschaut, greift sie prüfend mit dem Finger an die Schneide, bevor sie es in die Küchenschublade legt. Nur vor den schweren Pfannen hat sie Angst, sie braucht beide Hände, um sie zum Tisch zu tragen, trocknet sie zuerst innen, dreht sie um, trocknet dann Boden und Stiel. Sie lässt sie auf dem Tisch stehen, die Tante hängt sie selbst an die Haken, der Ton, den sie erzeugen, wenn sie an der dicken Steinmauer anschlagen, beendet die schweigsame Stunde: Beim Essen spricht man nicht und beim Abwaschen passt man auf, dass man kein Geschirr zerschlägt, Reden lenkt ab, die Leute reden ohnehin zu viel, sagt die Tante. Maja hängt das Geschirrtuch zum Trocknen über die Stuhllehne, die Tante zieht die Ärmel ihrer Wolljacke über die Handgelenke, reibt die roten Hände aneinander.

Ist sie gekommen?, fragt Maja noch einmal und die Tante schaut sie kurz an, schüttelt den Kopf. Es ist Sonntag, sonntags kommt keine Post und es wird auch nichts mehr kommen, Ostern ist drei Wochen her. Die Tante scheucht Maja aus der Küche, macht eines der kleinen Fenster auf, zieht die Tür hinter sich zu.

(...)

Warum hat der Vater nicht geschrieben, zu Weihnachten nicht, zu Ostern nicht, sonst sind seine Karten immer pünktlich gekommen, manchmal sogar ein oder zwei Wochen zu früh.

Ihr Lieben, frohe Feiertage.

Die Tante hat den knappen Gruß jedes Mal laut vorgelesen und die Karte dann zu den anderen in eine Schachtel gelegt. Wenn Maja wissen wollte, ob da noch mehr stehe, hat die Tante immer den Kopf geschüttelt, und als sie einmal gefragt hat, warum der Vater nicht mehr da sei und warum er nie zu Besuch komme und wo er denn wohne, hat sie gesagt, dass man nach vorne sehen müsse und Maja auf eine Weise angeschaut dabei, dass sie sich auf die Lippen biss, bis sich die Tante umdrehte und den Raum verließ.

Von der Vergangenheit kann man sich keine Scheibe abschneiden, das sagte sie oft, mit Schneiden kennt sich die Tante aus, sie schneidet Brot, sie schneidet Zwiebeln, Speck, Karotten, Tomaten. Sie kocht in emaillierten Töpfen, wärmt auf, was übrig bleibt, bäckt sonntags Kuchen, einfache Kuchen aus Hefeteig mit Streuseln obendrauf oder mit Früchten, das letzte trockene Stück bekommt Maja am Donnerstag nach dem Abendessen. Die Tante achtet darauf, dass das Kind wächst, dass es sauber ist und satt. Satt wird man vom dauernden Fragen nicht, das muss sie Maja noch beibringen, dass Fragen dazu dienen, sich nach der Gesundheit von jemandem zu erkundigen oder nach dem Wetter, dem Appetit oder danach, ob der Tisch schon gedeckt ist und das Essen fertig.

Es ist kühl in der Stube, Maja legt sich die rote Woldecke über die Schultern. Im Ofen liegen Holzscheite und Papier bereit für den Fall, dass es sich einzuheizen lohnt. Diesem Kachelofen hat ihr Vater sein Leben zu verdanken, das hat ihr die Tante einmal erzählt. Dass der Winter in seinem Geburtsjahr besonders streng und der Ofen regelmäßig warm gewesen sei. Dass sie den schwächlichen Säugling in Tücher gepackt und in einem Korb oben auf die Kacheln gestellt habe.

Aber zu den Karten sagte sie nichts und sie sprach auch nicht darüber, warum der Vater weggegangen war, gerade als Maja sich daran gewöhnt hatte, Papa zu ihm zu sagen.

Majas Erinnerung verdichtet sich an dem Moment, als sie das Haus zum ersten Mal betreten hatte. Ihr Vater war ihr voraus gegangen, um sich an den blanken Holztisch zu setzen, Maja blieb in der Tür stehen und verstand nicht, was die Tante von ihr wollte.

Steh nicht in der Tür herum, muss sie gesagt haben, denn das sagt sie immer, wenn sich Maja an den Türstock lehnt, darauf wartet, dass ihr die Tante ein Geschirrtuch in die Hand drückt oder dass sie mit dem Kinn auf den Küchenkasten deutet, wenn Maja den Tisch decken soll.

Es war dämmrig gewesen im Raum, Maja hatte die kleinen Fenster gezählt, adzin, dva, try, bis zehn konnte sie schon zählen, aber es gab nur drei. Drei kleine Fenster in dicken Mauern aus Stein. Eine holzgetäfelte Decke. Eine leinenbespannte Lampe über dem Esstisch, die schwaches Licht gab. Die Tante drehte ihr den Rücken zu, hantierte mit Geschirr, etwas kochte auf dem Herd. Maja kannte den Geruch nicht, der von dem Topf ausging, sie konnte nicht einmal sagen, ob er angenehm war oder nicht. Wie angewurzelt stand sie unter dem Türstock, blickte abwechselnd von ihrem Vater zur Tante und wieder zurück. Vaters Gesicht im Halbschatten. Keiner blickte sie an, die Tante stellte dem Vater ein Glas Milch auf den Tisch, rührte im Topf, der Vater starrte auf die Tischplatte. So, sagte er. Und noch einmal, so. Nach einer Zeit, die Maja endlos vorkam, machte die Tante einige Schritte auf sie zu. Maja stand vor der geblühten Kittelschürze, die Tante wischte ihre nassen Hände daran ab, fasste Maja an der

Schulter und schob sie zum Tisch. Maja setzte sich dem Vater gegenüber, sah zu, wie er seine Milch trank.

(...)

Die Uhr schlägt drei, in einer Stunde wird die Tante wieder da sein. Der Kachelofen ist kalt, die Schläge der Uhr verklingen, das bleiche Nachmittagslicht lässt den Raum noch dunkler wirken als sonst. Maja wickelt sich aus der Wolldecke, horcht, ob wirklich alles ruhig ist im Haus, setzt die Füße nebeneinander auf den Boden und wählt den leisen Weg, schleicht, obgleich sie allein ist, zur Vorratskammer. Irgendwo knackt Holz, ein Balken, die Wandvertäfelung im Flur, der Boden, Maja erschrickt, doch es bleibt ruhig, es war nur das Haus, sie legt die Hand auf die Türklinke, hofft, dass die Tante nicht abgeschlossen hat. Die Tür geht auf, es riecht nach Zwiebeln und Rauchwurst, Maja stellt sich auf die Zehenspitzen, um den Lichtschalter zu erreichen, er hängt lose an einem Kabel von der Decke. Das Licht flackert, dann beruhigt es sich, leuchtet die Regale aus, den verbotenen Raum, den nur die Tante betreten darf. Dabei gibt es nichts, was Kinder anlocken könnte, nur fest verschlossene Marmeladegläser, Packungen mit Zucker und Mehl, Schmalztöpfe, Gemüse, Brot, das erst drei Tage hier liegen muss, bevor es die Tante aufschneidet, damit nicht zu viel davon gegessen wird. Da hinein war die Tante verschwunden, nachdem sie Maja die letzte Karte des Vaters vorgelesen hatte:

Ihr Lieben, frohe Feiertage.

Maja untersucht Regal für Regal, schiebt eine Trittleiter von der hinteren Ecke des Raumes in die Mitte, tastet die oberste Stellage ab. Sie spürt etwas Eckiges, Hartes, festen Karton. Ihre Fingerspitzen kratzen daran, sie ist zu klein, kann ihn

nicht weiter nach vorne ziehen. Dann bekommt sie eine Kante des Deckels zu fassen, steckt ihre Fingerspitzen unter den Rand, zieht die Schachtel nach und nach zu sich heran, bis sie sie in beide Hände nehmen kann. Sie ist leicht, leichter als erwartet. Maja stellt den Karton auf die Trittleiter, nimmt den Deckel ab und holt

Karte für Karte heraus. Sie kann Vaters Schrift nicht lesen, obwohl die Lehrerin sie dafür gelobt hat, dass sie sich die Buchstaben so schnell merken konnte, schneller als die anderen Kinder, aber Vaters Schrift zieht sich in großen Bögen über den knappen Platz auf der Postkarte wie eine Spur im Schnee, verschlungen, unlesbar, ins kalte Weiß gedrückt von herabgefallenen Zweigen oder Schneehäubchen, die in dicken Tropfen von den Ästen gefallen sind. Osterhasen, Weihnachtsbäume und Geburtstagstorten hält Maja ins Licht, die beschriebene Seite hält sie schräg, fährt tastend mit dem Zeigefinger darüber, haucht sie an, befeuchtet den Finger mit Spucke, tupft vorsichtig Feuchtigkeit auf, doch es will sich keine Geheimschrift zeigen, nichts war hingeschrieben und dann doch ausgelöscht worden.

Ihr Lieben, frohe Feiertage, Maja muss es der Tante glauben, ein ganzer Stapel pünktlicher Wünsche in einer alten Schachtel ohne doppelten Boden.

Maja stellt den Karton wieder zurück, berührt die Zwiebeln, die Würste, das Brot, riecht an ihren Fingern, löscht das Licht, schließt die Tür und geht über die Treppe in ihr Zimmer hinauf. Legt sich ins Bett, versteckt sich unter der dicken Daunendecke, achtet darauf, dass keine verräterische Haarsträhne mehr hervorschaut, dass ihre Beine ausgestreckt liegen ohne dass die Knie die Decke zu einem Berg auftürmen,

dass der Atem ruhig geht. Sie atmet ein und aus, die Luft wird warm und dick, dick wie Sirup, den man nicht unverdünnt trinken darf, sie macht ein kleines Luftloch zur Wandseite hin, schließt die Augen. Sie sieht Zwiebeln und Brot, flackerndes Licht, sieht sich Regale abtasten, alles berühren, was sie sieht. Staub klebt an ihrem Finger, sie leckt ihn ab: Wie Zucker, warum hat ihr niemand gesagt, dass Staub nach Zucker schmeckt, oben liegt mehr davon, sie streckt sich, sie will das oberste Regal erreichen, da verlassen ihre Füße den Boden, wie einfach das geht, man muss es sich nur fest genug wünschen, sie schwankt ein wenig in der Luft, höher, noch ein bisschen höher, sie streckt die Arme aus, hält sich am Regal fest, doch statt des Staubes sieht sie Geburtstagstorten, eine neben der anderen. Sie will mit dem Finger in die Creme fahren, doch der bunt gefärbte Sahneüberzug fühlt sich steif an, ausgetrocknet, die Torten sind aus Karton, beklebt mit harten Zuckerherzen. Maja bricht eines ab, ein rosarotes, eingetrocknetes Zuckerherz, es kracht laut, als sie es abbricht, es kracht noch einmal und noch einmal, wie ein Echo, dabei hat sie sich doch nur ein kleines Stück genommen. Auf einmal strömt kalte Luft herein, das Krachen hört auf, die Holzpantoffeln der Tante stehen vor Majas Bett, ihre Hände haben die Decke mit einem energischen Ruck weggezogen.

Tagsüber schlafen, das gibt es nicht, nicht bei mir, sagt sie, die Kartontorten verschwinden, die Herzen, der Zucker, das Schweben. Nicht bei mir, sagt die Tante, nicht laut, leise beinahe, aber so bestimmt, dass Maja Tränen in die Augen treten und sie wortlos aufsteht, Kopfkissen und Decke aufschüttelt, hinter der Tante hergeht, die kein Wort mehr sagt, sondern mit dem Kinn auf die Küchentür deutet, auf den Küchenkasten, auf den Tisch, ein bisschen später auf das Brotmesser und auf den Topf für das Teewasser.

Das geht so nicht, sagt sie dann, als sie am Tisch sitzen, ich ziehe hier keinen Tagedieb auf, und Maja weiß, dass sie keinen Grund hat zu weinen, die Tante schreit nicht und sie schlägt nicht, und Maja stellt sich vor, wie das Wasser, das in ihren Augen steht, versickert, bevor es nach draußen rinnen kann, sie stellt es sich ganz fest vor, damit die Tante sieht, dass sie ein vernünftiges, großes Mädchen ist, und es gelingt ihr, sie schluckt die Tränen, verspricht, sich nützlich zu machen, auch am Sonntag.

Once I must have trodden soft grass

Carolina Schutti

Translated from the German (Austria) by Nick Somers

Chapter 2: Under the Eiderdown

“Don’t stand at the door,” says Maja’s aunt.

Maja pushes herself away from the door frame and takes a step towards her aunt.

“Has it arrived?” asks Maja.

Her aunt dries her wet hands, takes her cardigan from the hook and puts it on, first the right arm, then the left – always the right arm first – before rolling the sleeves up and turning back to the sink. Maja stands to the side and watches her aunt take a dishcloth and start to dry the dishes. The delicate Sunday service, white porcelain with a light-blue pattern, the freshly dried plates and cups go undermost in the cupboard. Maja then stands on a chair and her aunt lifts four plates, Maja inserting two plates together underneath the stack in the cupboard so that all dishes get used in turn, as her aunt had taught her. The cups she can manage herself. Her aunt has already put the glasses away. Then come the knives and forks.

Watch out, that knife is sharp, says her aunt, as usual. Maja takes it by the handle, carefully dries the blade and, when her aunt isn’t looking, cautiously runs her finger along the knife edge before putting it in the kitchen drawer. The heavy

pans are the only things she's afraid of. She needs both hands to carry them to the table, drying first the inside and then turning them over and drying the bottoms and handles. She leaves them on the table for her aunt to hang on the hooks. The noise they make as they clang against the thick stone wall breaks the silence. Meals are eaten without talking, and when washing up care has to be taken so that nothing gets chipped. Talking is a distraction. People talk too much anyway, says her aunt. Maja hangs the dishcloth over the back of the chair to dry. Her aunt pulls down the sleeves of her cardigan and rubs her reddened hands together.

"Has it arrived?" asks Maja again, and her aunt looks at her briefly and shakes her head. It's Sunday and there's no post on Sundays and nothing will come now anyway. Easter was three weeks ago. Her aunt shoos Maja out of the kitchen, opens the small window and pulls the door closed behind her.

(...)

Why didn't father write at Christmas or Easter, when his cards always arrived so punctually, sometimes a week or two in advance?

'Dear all, happy holidays.'

Her aunt read out the brief greeting every time and then placed the card with the others in the box. If Maja asked if there was anything else written, her aunt always shook her head, and when she asked again why her father was no longer there and why he never came to visit and where he lived, she said that it was better to think of the future, giving Maja such a look that she had to bite her lip until her aunt turned away and left the room.

You can't cut off a slice from the past, she would often say. Her aunt knows all about cutting: she cuts bread, she cuts onions, lard, carrots, tomatoes. She cooks in enamel pots, heats up the leftovers, bakes cakes on Sundays, simple cakes made of yeast dough with crumble on top, or with fruit. Maja gets the last dry piece on Thursday after supper. Her aunt makes sure that the child is growing, that it is clean and well fed. You won't get full from incessant questions. She will have to teach Maja that you ask questions about someone's health or about the weather, you ask if they are hungry, if the table is laid, or if dinner is ready.

It's chilly in the room. Maja wraps the red woollen blanket around her shoulders. There are logs and paper in the stove in case it has to be lit. This tiled stove saved her father's life, her aunt told her once. The winter in the year he was born was particularly severe, and the stove was kept nice and warm. The frail infant was swaddled in clothes and placed in a basket sitting on the tiles.

But she wouldn't discuss the cards or why her father had left just as Maja had got used to calling him Daddy.

Maja's memory narrows down to the moment she entered the house for the first time. Her father had gone ahead of her to sit at the bare wooden table. Maja remained by the door and couldn't understand what her aunt wanted from her.

Don't stand at the door, she must have said, because that's what she always says when Maja leans against the door frame waiting for her aunt to hand her a dishcloth or nod towards the kitchen cabinet when Maja is supposed to lay the table.

It had got dark in the room. Maja counted the small windows: *adzin, dva, try*. She could already count to ten, but there were

only three. Three small windows in thick stone walls. A wood-panelled ceiling. A lamp with a linen shade over the dining table, which gave off a weak light. Her aunt turned her back on Maja, busied herself with the pots, cooking something on the stove. Maja didn't recognise the smell coming from the pot and couldn't even decide whether it was nice or not. She stood rooted to the spot in the doorway, glancing from her father to her aunt and then back again. Father's face half in shadow. Neither looked at her. Her aunt placed a glass of milk on the table for her father and went back to stirring the pot. Her father stared at the tabletop. "So," he said. "So," he said again. After what seemed to Maja like an eternity, her aunt came towards her. Maja looked at the flowered apron. Her aunt wiped her wet hands on it, took Maja by the shoulder and pushed her towards the table. Maja sat down opposite her father and watched him drink his milk.

(...)

The clock in the parlour strikes three. Her aunt will be back in an hour. The tiled stove is cold, the sound of the chimes fades, the pale afternoon light makes the room seem darker than usual. Maja unwraps the woollen blanket, checks that everything is quiet in the house, places her feet on the floor and, although she is alone, makes her way softly and quietly towards the pantry. Somewhere there is a creak, a floorboard, the wood panelling in the hall. She places her hand on the door handle, hoping that her aunt hasn't locked it. The door opens. It smells of onions and smoked sausage. Maja stands on her tiptoes to reach the light switch, which hangs loosely on a cable from the ceiling. The light flickers then stays on, illuminating the shelves, the forbidden room that only her aunt is allowed to enter. Even though there is nothing of interest to a

child, only tightly closed jam jars, packets of sugar and flour, pots of dripping, vegetables, bread that has to wait three days before her aunt will cut it to make sure not too much of it is eaten. It was here that her aunt had disappeared after reading Maja the last card from her father.

'Dear all, happy holidays.'

Maja searches the shelves one at a time, pushes a stepladder from the far corner of the room to the middle, feels along the top of the shelves. She senses something angular, hard, a solid box. Her fingertips scratch at it but she is too small and she can't pull it any further forward. Then she manages to get hold of a corner of the lid, sticks her fingertips under the edge, gradually pulls the box towards her until she can get hold of it with both hands. It's light, lighter than she expects. Maja places the box on the stepladder, removes the lid and takes the cards out one at a time. She can't read her father's handwriting, although the teacher praised her for learning her letters so quickly, quicker than the other children, but father's handwriting fills up the small space on the card with sweeping strokes, like tracks in the snow, entwined, illegible, pressed into the cold whiteness by falling twigs or mounds of snow dropping off the branches. Maja holds up Easter bunnies, Christmas trees and birthday cakes to the light, angling the side with writing on it, running her finger over it, breathing on it, moistening her finger with saliva, carefully dabbing the moisture on it, but no secret writing appears, nothing written and then erased.

'Dear all, happy holidays.' Maja has no choice but to believe her aunt. A stack of punctual wishes in an old box without a double bottom.

Maja puts the box back, touches the onions, the sausages, the bread, smells her fingers, switches off the light, closes the door and goes up the stairs to her room. She lies down on the bed, hides under the thick eiderdown, making sure that no give-away strands of hair can be seen, that her legs are straight so that her knees don't form a bulge under the cover, and that she is breathing quietly. She breathes in and out. The air becomes warm and thick, thick as syrup that you aren't allowed to drink undiluted. She makes a small breathing hole on the side facing the wall and closes her eyes. She sees onions and bread, flickering light, imagines herself feeling the shelves, touching everything she sees. Dust sticks to her finger. She licks it off: like sugar. Why has no one ever told her that dust tastes of sugar? There is more higher up. She stretches to reach the top shelf and her feet leave the ground. How easy it is, you just have to wish for it to happen. She floats in the air, higher, a bit higher, stretches her arms out, holds on tightly to the shelf. But instead of dust she sees the birthday cakes, one after another. She wants to poke her finger in the cream, but the coloured icing is stiff and dry. The cakes are made of cardboard with hard sugar hearts stuck on them. Maja breaks one off, a dried pink sugar heart. It makes a loud snapping noise when she breaks it off. It snaps again, and again, like an echo, even though she has only taken a small piece. Suddenly cold air streams in, the snapping noise stops, and her aunt's wooden clogs are standing in front of Maja's bed. She has pulled off the cover with an energetic tug.

No sleeping during the day, not here, she says. The cardboard cakes, the hearts, the sugar, the floating feeling all disappear. Not here, says her aunt, not loudly, quietly in fact, but so firmly that Maja feels tears welling up. She gets up silently, shakes the pillow and eiderdown, follows her aunt, who doesn't say

another word but nods towards the kitchen door, the kitchen cabinet, the table, a little later the bread knife and then the saucepan to boil water for the tea.

That won't do, she says when they are sitting at the table. I'll not have idlers here. And Maja realises that she has no reason to cry. Her aunt is not shouting or hitting her, and Maja imagines the water in her eyes trickling away before it can overflow. She concentrates hard so as to show her aunt that she is a big and sensible girl. She manages to force back the tears and promises to make herself useful, even on Sundays.



Luka Bekavac

Viljevo (2013)

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Biography

Luka Bekavac, born in 1976 in Osijek, is a writer, translator and literary theorist. He teaches at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb University (Comparative Literature Department) and has contributed articles on philosophy, literary theory, music and literature to a number of magazines, radio programmes and peer-reviewed publications, including *Performance Research*, *Frakcija*, *Filozofska istraživanja* and *Književna smotra*. He has translated works by Martin Amis, Jonathan Franzen, Alberto Toscano, Naomi Klein, Aleksandar Hemon and others, and worked as an editor for *Quorum* literary magazine (2004-2006), focusing on links between popular culture, experimental music and philosophy. His critically acclaimed novels *Drenje* (2011) and *Viljevo* (2013) were nominated for a number of regional awards. *Viljevo* won the Janko Polić Kamov Award in 2014.

Synopsis

Viljevo is a novel about memory, trauma and transcommunication: a triptych of different voices, weaving together historiography, speculative fiction and highly-stylised prose.

It opens with 'August', a monologue transcribed from a corrupt reel-to-reel tape, inviting readers into virtually uninhabited Slavonian plains. This poetic and fragmentary narrative, removed from any recognisable timeline, revolves around the themes of solitude and recollection, nature and technology, the final stages of decaying civilisations, as well as the possibility of transcommunication – contact with the 'beyond'.

'After Midnight' is a raw and intense document of such an attempt at channelling the unknown: a sequence of questions and answers between the characters of 'August' and their obscure counterparts. Reading as a strict interrogation, this section resolves certain ambiguities of the introductory monologue, while introducing new doubts about the basic framework of the story.

The final chapter, 'Marković', brings about a change of pace and context. Set in occupied Osijek in 1943 and written as part memoir, part painstakingly constructed (para)scientific article, it revolves around the activities of an illegal anti-fascist radio station. Mysterious technical difficulties that keep obstructing its work are gradually revealed, providing a captivating backdrop to the entire book: they offer a series of new explanations, ultimately leaving the final interpretation open.

Viljevo

Luka Bekavac

Događaji koje ću opisati zbivali su se u Osijeku tokom ljeta 1943. godine.

Pamtim te mjesece kao gluho vrijeme: na svjetskim je frontama rat bio u punom zamahu, kao i u unutrašnjosti Hrvatske, tada u savezu sa silama Osovine, no u samom Osijeku, prijestolnici Velike župe Baranja i Kammerhoferovom sjedištu, buka je zamrla. Katarina Garaj, Ignac Šlezinger i ja, kao izolirana ćelija u samom središtu grada, vodili smo radiostanicu koja je tjedno emitirala proglase, a dnevno održavala kontakt s oslobođenim teritorijima. Od sredine lipnja pa sve do početka rujna radili smo iz velikog četverosobnog stana na trećem katu Ustaške 9. Stan je, koliko se sjećam, prije toga pripadao obitelji Korsky ili Kohn. Ne znam što se poslije dogodilo s njima. Deportacije Židova počele su još u proljeće 1941., nakon spaljivanja sinagoge, a sredinom kolovoza 1942. oko tri tisuće Osječana, zajedno s desecima obitelji protjeranih iz drugih gradova, odvedeno je u Auschwitz ili Jasenovac. Nakon toga sam se često pitao ima li borba za ovaj grad još uopće smisla.

Ono o čemu bih ovdje htio govoriti počelo je više-manje neprimjetno, krajem srpnja ili početkom kolovoza. Ne mogu ulaziti u detalje vezane za naše poslove; mogu samo reći da smo primijetili prve klice te pojave upravo za vrijeme ilegalnog djelovanja. Nažalost, ne sjećam se više o čemu se točno radilo: o jednoj od naših emisija ili šifriranoj transmisiji prema našim drugim grupama; sjećam se samo da je jedne večeri netko čuo kako se zvuk na djeliće sekunde prekida, izrešetan kratkim periodima tišine, kao da dolazi kroz pokvaren zvučnik koji

negdje gubi kontakt. Provjerili smo svoju opremu; činilo se da je sve u redu, ali smetnja se već sutradan ponovila, no ovoga puta usred dnevnih emisija Krugovala. Činilo se da netko pokušava sabotirati njihov signal. To je trajalo satima.

Pokušali smo saznati nešto o tome od drugih ćelija, ali bez rezultata. Preostalo nam je samo opet rastaviti, provjeriti i sastaviti opremu. Međutim, nismo pronašli nikakav kvar, a smetnja se narednih dana pomalo pojačavala: postajala bi posebno intenzivna za vrijeme naših emisija, zbog čega smo opet pomislili da se radi o nekoj novoj tehnologiji ometanja signala, ali trajala je čak i između programskih frekvencija, u šumu radiovalova. Tada se netko sjetio magnetofona: snimili smo oko trideset minuta te buke između stanica, tamo gdje je smetnja bila najjača i takoreći najčistija. Dok je mikrofonski bio okrenut prema zvučniku, razgovarali smo potpuno slobodno i nevezano o događajima tih dana, o nevažnim sitnicama koje su nam, dok nismo emitirali, sačinjavale svakodnevni život, takav kakav je bio, sličan zatvoru ili samostanu.

Kad smo nekoliko sati kasnije preslušali snimku, doživjeli smo dva zasebna šoka.

Prvi šok je nastupio kad smo pojačali zvuk tako da se bolje čuju intervali tišine, odnosno smetnje koje su proteklih dana onemogućavale svu aktivnost na radiju. Ispostavilo se da to nije tišina: svaka smetnja je bila obrazovana kao kratak udarac, nalikovala je škljocaju neke vrste sklopke za kojim se, nejasno i sasvim tiho, čulo nešto što je zvučalo kao ženski glas.

Drugi je šok bio mnogo jači ali i slojevitiji. Gotovo u istom trenutku shvatili smo, prvo: da se neke riječi i rečenice, ponekad krnje ili jedva raspoznavljive, ponekad jasne i povezane u niz od jedne ili dvije misli, mogu povezati s temama o kojima smo razgovarali dok je magnetofon snimao; drugo:

da se neke od tih rečenica mogu shvatiti i kao “odgovori” na pojedina pitanja koja smo upućivali jedni drugima tokom snimanja.

Priznajem da je u tom trenutku privremeno zavladao panika. Pomisao na to da nas netko prisluškuje značila je sigurnu smrt: ratni sud u Osijeku imao je ovlaštenje za likvidaciju svih koje bi optužio za sabotaze ili propagandu. Međutim, pometnja je ipak trajala kratko. Shvatili smo da bi onaj tko nas prisluškuje, da je imao zle namjere, već odavno djelovao. Nametnula se sljedeća hipoteza: to je još jedna od naših ćelija, opremljena tehnologijom čije nam karakteristike nisu poznate, koja se pokušava probiti do nas. No bilo je nemoguće opravdati tu pretpostavku zbog izostanka svakog protokola; kontakt se uspostavljao i nestajao naizgled stihijski, bez formalne najave i odjave, ton govora je bio krajnje neprirodan, kao da se radi o mašinama, ali je sadržaj poruka bio prijateljski, bez posebnih zahtjeva osim toga da odgovorimo, svakodnevno ponavljane molbe da komuniciramo, da se javimo.

Kad smo sve to utvrdili i zbrojili, ostalo je očigledno da zapravo ne znamo ništa o onome što se događa: tko stoji iza transmisija, kako ih tehnički organizira, zašto se javlja na tako neobičan način i s kojom svrhom. Tada smo počeli intenzivnije razmišljati o tim “smetnjama”, snimati ih i proučavati. Pokazalo se da je dovoljno uključiti magnetofon da bismo primili poruku. To nije funkcioniralo uvijek, no više nije bilo potrebno češljanje šuma radiovalova između stanica – mogli smo jednostavno ukopčati mikrofonski u magnetofon i početi sa snimanjem. Mi ne bismo čuli ništa, ali glas bi, sasvim tih i slabašan, ipak ostajao na traci, bez obzira na to što u sobi nije uključen niti jedan radioapar, bez obzira na to što u sobi nema nikoga.

* * *

Nema kraja. [24 cm oštećeno] nikada ne počinje niti završava... a ako [smetnje 1 minuta 48 sekundi] što nema fizičkog kanala prema njima... samo ti brojčanici... ali kako uopće to objasniti nekome ako to nisu brojčanici telefona ili sefova, nešto što se može uhvatiti rukom... navigiranje u gustoj magli, neprozirnoj, bez koordinata, plovidba prema izvoru signala koji ne šalje nikakve poruke, koji te samo... ugađa, zateže te i otpušta, kao žicu, postavlja na pravu frekvenciju, u slobodni koridor... i to odbrojavanje, takoreći, prije nego što se otvori druga strana... izletjela sam iz kreveta kad je progovorio, isti kao bilo kakav drugi glas, kao da je u kutu sobe živ muškarac, samo možda sakriven, u zasjedi... psi su bili nervozni cijeli dan, mogla sam misliti da se nešto događa... uvijek je zvučalo tako, tih prvih par trenutaka, uvijek je počinjalo bilo kada, bilo gdje, bez uvoda, bez ikakvih predosjećaja, bez mrmljanja ili šaptanja, bez šumova koji bi se pretvorili u govor: jednostavno je odjednom bio tu, potpuno običan, kao bilo čiji glas, samo se nikome nije mogao pridružiti, i nitko ga nije mogao [smetnje 16 sekundi] poslije ponoći je druga zemlja, s potpuno drugim zakonima... ne mogu ništa, tamo sam na milosti i nemilosti, poslije ponoći nemam izbora, od mene ostane samo prolaz, kao cijev ili kabel prema nečemu što zapravo nikada nismo vidjele... kao prostor u kojem više ne postojim, ali ne postoji ni ona, niti taj netko treći, ili koliko ih god već ima, legija [smetnje 48 sekundi] uopće ne prestaje, kao da nikad ne spava, udarci najprije dolaze s tavana, cijelu noć, dok smo još zajedno, a onda po cijele dane iz salona, kao oklopni kukac, nekakvo ratoborno, diluvijalno čudovište... udara rilom po tom zidu koji nas je nekim čudom zaštitio... sigurno se bolje osjećala onda, na bijegu, kad se stalno nešto događalo, kad je bila korisna, glavna, neslužbena prvosvećenica našeg kola,

kad smo pokušavale sve druge izvući iz vatre, dok je i nama prijetilo spaljivanje... sada mi je teško sve to zamisliti, kao da se nikad nije [10 cm oštećeno] prijelazno vrijeme, dok ovdje još nije bilo nereda, ali se sve više govorilo o tomu da se Zapad već srušio, da cijela Europska unija izgleda kao Sibir [smetnje 8 sekundi] teritorij poslije nuklearne eksplozije... na kraju se zid prema njima podigao toliko visoko da se više nitko nije usuđivao [šumovi 3 sekunde] televizijske slike, fotografije ili svjedočanstva koja bi potvrdila sve na što se sumnjalo... dok je nisu konačno uklonili iz svih trgovina i spalili, vjerojatno iza neke osječke periferije, sva takva roba je nosila naljepnice s upozorenjem, *OPREZ: ovaj proizvod sadrži sastojke europskog podrijetla*... ali mislile smo da su to i dalje preuveličavanja, jednostavno nismo mogle zamisliti slom koji bi vratio Europu u nekakvu feudalnu zimu, a [smetnje 39 sekundi] oduvijek bili provincija, na rubu zbivanja, zaostali i zaboravljeni... relativno sigurni zbog drugih centara u regiji koji su još uvijek bili aktivni u eteru, iako su stvarali tolike probleme i izazivali strah stotinama kilometara oko [15 cm oštećeno] počelo nešto veliko, nešto ozbiljno... opet bježati, sada, nakon svega?... zapravo, mislila sam da je *ovo*, ova kuća, to *nakon svega*... sve je bilo gotovo davno prije nego što smo se skrasile ovdje, i stvarno se činilo da je... da je time sve završeno, riganje vatre, smrt i uništenje, mislile smo da je došao kraj, da se ždrijelo zatvorilo... ostale su samo te naplavine katastrofe, misija čišćenja ruševina, na nebu i na zemlji, barem je tako [šumovi 7 sekundi] u bijegu, bez hrane, bez prenoćišta, to je već bilo previše, mislila sam da ću poludjeti, i kad su prestali, još dugo nakon što su prestali, i dalje sam osluškivala, čekala sam da ponovno počnu... jedan sasvim mali dio [nerazgovjetno] radar, u stanju pripravnosti, uvijek budan, i pročešljavao eter, provjeravao ne čuje li se ipak negdje netko... ali stvarno

više nije bilo nikoga... ne znam što mi se dogodilo u međuvremenu... možda je *ovo* odgovor na [smetnje 18 sekundi] s takvima, *naplavljenima*, taj potpuno suh, mehanički govor, muka ga je već i slušati, kao da dešifriram zvukove nekakvog stroja... doduše, niti *ja* tamo nisam [smetnje 58 sekundi] na kojem bi one visoke frekvencije, iznad onih koji su *preživjeli* katastrofu, mogle i dalje djelovati na sve ispod neba, onda bi to mjesto moralo imati ime kao Viljevo... pojma nemam je li to zbog ovih ruševina ili [šumovi 5 sekundi] energetske efluvije koji se povlači po ravnici, ali samo to ime, *Viljevo*, čim smo prošle pored ploče s tim natpisom... teško je reći [nerazgovijetno] pseudonim za nešto drugo, nešto što uopće nije ime naselja... ne znam što je [nerazgovijetno] tisuća mikroskopskih lampica u potpunom mraku, ili ubod stotina minijaturnih igala po cijelom tijelu, ime [smetnje 12 sekundi] iskri i kad je ovako oblačno, žari [nerazgovijetno] najjačom kišom... *Viljevo*... kao da znači *ovdje počinje*... ili *aktivirano je*... [tišina 9 sekundi]... ili *otvara se prozor*... [tišina 9 minuta 15 sekundi]... nešto se događa.

Viljevo

Luka Bekavac

Translated from the Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

The events I'm going to describe took place in Osijek during the summer of 1943.

I remember those months as a time of deafness: on the world front, the war was at full swing, just as it was in inland Croatia, then in alliance with the Axis powers; but in Osijek itself, the capital of the Great Parish of Baranja and Kammerhofer's headquarters, the noise stopped. Katarina Garaj, Ignac Šlezinger and I, members of the isolated cell in the very heart of the town, were in charge of a radio station that transmitted weekly proclamations and kept daily contact with the liberated territories. From mid June to early September we worked out of a large four-bedroom apartment on the third floor of 9 Ustashe Street. The place, as far as I remember, used to belong to the Korskys or the Kohns. I don't know what happened to them. The deportations of Jews began back in the spring of 1941, after the synagogue had gone up in flames, and by mid August 1942, around 3,000 people in Osijek, together with dozens of families banished from other towns, were taken to Auschwitz or Jasenovac. After that, I often asked if fighting for this place made any sense at all.

What I'd like to reflect on here began more or less inconspicuously, in late July or early August. I can't go into details about our business. I can only say that we noticed the first spark of this occurrence precisely at the time of our illegal activities. Unfortunately, I no longer remember what it was exactly: one of our shows, or an encrypted transmission to

one of our groups. I remember only that one evening someone heard brief interruptions in the sound, lasting for only a fraction of a second, machine-gunned with short periods of silence, as if coming from a broken speaker, losing contact somewhere in the wiring. We checked all of our equipment; everything seemed all right, but the disturbance came up again the following day, this time in the middle of Ustashe National Radio's daily program. Someone seemed to be trying to sabotage the signal. It lasted for hours.

We tried to get some information on it from other cells, but to no avail. The only thing we could do was to disassemble, check, and reassemble our equipment again. However, we found no glitches, and in the days to come the disturbance gradually amplified and became particularly intensive during our program, which made us think that it was some new technology of signal distortion, but it went on even between program frequencies, in the crackle of radio waves. Then a tape recorder came to someone's mind: we recorded about 30 minutes of that noise between stations, where the disturbance was the strongest and, one might say, the purest. While the microphone was turned towards the speaker, we conversed freely and without mention of the events that took place those days, about unimportant trivialities, which, when we did not transmit, made our everyday life similar to that in a prison or a monastery.

Several hours later, when we played the tape, we experienced two separate shocks.

The first shock came when we turned up the volume to enhance the intervals of 'quiet', that is, disturbances, which in the past few days made any activities on the radio impossible. It turned out this was not silence: every disturbance was in

fact a short jolt, resembling the clicking of a switch of some kind, after which another sound could be heard – similar to a woman's voice.

The second shock was much stronger and had more layers. Almost at the same moment, we realized two things. Firstly, some words and sentences – sometimes fragmented or barely comprehensible, sometimes intelligible and linked into a series of thoughts – could be connected to the topics we were discussing while the tape recorder did its work. Secondly, some of these sentences could be understood as 'answers' to particular questions we directed at each other during the recording.

I admit that at that moment panic temporarily struck. The thought that someone was listening in on us meant certain death: court martial in Osijek had the authority to liquidate all those accused of sabotage or propaganda. However, the confusion was short-lived. We realized that those listening in on us, if their intentions had been ill, would have acted long ago. The following hypothesis ensued: this was one of our cells, equipped with technology whose features were unknown to us, trying to reach us. But it was impossible to confirm this assumption due to the nonexistence of any protocol: the contact was established and broken seemingly at its own volition, without previous warning or announcement, the tone of the speech was completely unnatural, as if these were machines, but the content of the messages was friendly, without any special request but to answer, a daily repeated request to communicate, to respond.

When we accounted for all of this, it became obvious that in fact we didn't know anything: who were the people behind the transmissions, how they organized them technically, why

they called in such an unusual way and with what purpose. Then we dedicated ourselves more intensively to these disturbances, recording and studying them. It turned out that it was enough to turn on the tape recorder to receive the message. This did not always work, but we no longer needed to comb through the noise of the radio waves between stations – we could simply plug in the tape recorder and start recording. We would not hear anything; nevertheless, the voice, quiet and feeble, remained on the tape, regardless of the fact that no radios were turned on in the room, regardless of the fact that there was no one there.

* * *

No end... [24 cm damaged] it never starts nor ends... and if [1 minute 48 seconds of disturbance] because there's no physical channel towards them... only those dials... but how to explain this to anyone if these aren't phone or safe dials, something you can't put your hand on... navigating in a thick fog, impervious, without coordinates, sailing towards the signal's source that sends no messages, that only... tunes you, tightens and loosens, like a wire, sets you to a right frequency, into a free corridor... and that countdown, so to speak, before the other side opens... I flew out of my bed when he spoke, the same as any other voice, as if a living man were standing in the corner of the room, only perhaps hidden, waiting in ambush... all day the dogs were nervous, I could've sensed something was going on... it always sounded like that, those first few moments, it always began whenever, wherever, without introduction, without premonition, without mumbling or whispering, without noise that turned into speech: just like that, it was suddenly there, plain, a voice that could belong to anyone, but it could not join anyone, and no one

could [16 *seconds of disturbance*] after midnight it is a different country, with completely different laws... I can't do anything, I'm thrown at their mercy, after midnight I have no choice, only a passage remains of me, like a pipe or a cable leading towards something we've actually never seen... like a space in which I no longer exist, neither does she, nor that third person, or however many there are, a *legion* [48 *seconds of disturbance*] never stops, at all, as if it never sleeps, first knocks come from the attic, they go on, the whole night, when we're still together, and then from the salon, lasting for days, like an armoured beetle, some belligerent, diluvial monster... pounding with its proboscis against the wall, which by some miracle protected us... she must have felt better then, on the lam, when something was always going on, when she was useful, in charge, the unofficial prioress of our circle, when we were trying to get the others out of the flames, when the incineration had not yet threatened us... it's so hard to imagine it all now, as if it had never [10 *cm damaged*] transition time, when chaos hadn't yet set in, but when the word went around that the West had already collapsed, that the whole of the European Union looked like Siberia [8 *seconds of disturbance*] territory after nuclear explosion... in the end the wall in front of them rose so high that no one dared [3 *seconds of noise*] TV images, photographs, or witness accounts that confirmed everything that had been suspected... until they finally removed it from all stores and burned it, probably on the outskirts of some Osijek periphery, all such merchandise had labels saying, *WARNING: this product contains ingredients of European origin*... but we still thought all of that was just an exaggeration, we just couldn't imagine a breakdown that would send Europe back to some feudal winter, and [39 *seconds of disturbance*] we've always been a province,

the edge of everything, backward and forgotten... relatively safe because of other centres in the region that were still active on the air, even though they created so many problems and spread fear for hundreds of kilometres around [*15 centimetres damaged*] something big, something serious began... to go on the run, again, now, after everything?... actually, I thought that *this*, this house, was *after everything*... everything had finished long before we settled here, and it really seemed as if... as if it all ended, the spitting of fire, death and destruction, we thought an end had come, that the gorge had shut... what remained was the washout of disaster, the mission of clearing out the ruins, in the heavens and on earth, at least that's [*7 seconds of noise*] on the run, without food, without place to sleep, that was too much, I thought I'd go mad, and when they stopped, for a long time after they'd stopped, I still listened, waited for them to start again... one tiny portion [*inaudible*] radar, on alert, always awake, combing the radio air, checking if someone could be heard somewhere, after all... but there was no one, not any more... I don't know what happened to them in the meantime... perhaps *this* is the answer to [*18 seconds of disturbance*] with such, with the *washouts*, this completely dry, mechanical speech, I feel sick from listening to it, as if I'm deciphering sounds from a machine... to be fair, *I'm* not there either [*58 seconds of disturbance*] where those high frequencies, above those who *survived* the catastrophe, could still affect all those under the sky, then that place should have a name like Viljevo... I have no idea if these ruins cause it or if [*5 seconds of noise*] energy effluvium dragging along the plains, but that name, the very name, *Viljevo*, the moment we passed the sign bearing that name... it's hard to say [*inaudible*] a pseudonym for something else, for something that's not a name of a place... I don't know what it is

[*inaudible*] thousands of microscopic lights going off in total darkness, or a tingle of hundreds of miniature needles all over your body, the name [*12 seconds of disturbance*] sparkles even on a cloudy day like this, burns [*inaudible*] with the torrential rain... *Viljevo*... as if it means *it all begins here*... or *it is activated*... [*9 seconds of silence*]... or *the window opens*... [*9 minutes and 15 seconds of silence*]... *something is happening*.



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Gaëlle Josse

Le dernier gardien d'Ellis Island (2014)

The Last Guardian of Ellis Island

Publishing House **Notabilia – Éditions Noir sur Blanc**

Biography

Having started out as a poet, Gaëlle Josse's debut novel, *Les heures silencieuses* (*The Quiet Hours*) was published in 2011. It was followed by *Nos vies désaccordées* (*Our Out of Tune Lives*) in 2012 and *Noces de neige* (*Snow Wedding*) in 2013.

All three books won several prizes, including the 2013 Alain-Fournier Prize for *Our Out of Tune Lives*. *The Quiet Hours* has been translated into several languages, and a film adaptation of *Snow Wedding* is in progress. After several years in New Caledonia, Josse now lives and works in Paris. *Le dernier gardien d'Ellis Island* (*The Last Guardian of Ellis Island*) was awarded with the Grand Livre du Mois Literary Prize last autumn.

Synopsis

New York, 3 November 1954. In five days, the immigration station on Ellis Island, which all immigrants from Europe since 1892 have had to pass through, will close its doors. Alone in this huge deserted space, John Mitchell, an officer of the Bureau of Immigration, is both a watchman and a prisoner of this tiny island in the Hudson River facing Manhattan. A few days before he has to leave, Mitchell feels the need to free himself from the memory of several events in his life at Ellis, so he starts a diary. Until...

Two women, two boats, two stories that have left their mark on his life: Liz, his beloved wife, and Nella, the Sardinian immigrant with a strange past. Other ghosts emerge from that time of memory and soul-searching: Lazzarini, the Italian anarchist; Kovacs, the Hungarian writer, a communist dissident fleeing the regime in Budapest with his wife; Brian, the friend from his Brooklyn childhood, and many others.

Remorse, transgression, duty, loss, loneliness, exile... as well as emotion, love and sincerity: John Mitchell looks back over the course of his life and an era of North American history.

Le dernier gardien d'Ellis Island

Gaëlle Josse

Pendant quarante-cinq années – j'ai eu le temps de les compter –, j'ai vu passer ces hommes, ces femmes, ces enfants, dignes et égarés dans leurs vêtements les plus convenables, dans leur sueur, leur fatigue, leurs regards perdus, essayant de comprendre une langue dont ils ne savaient pas un mot, avec leurs rêves posés là au milieu de leurs bagages. Des malles, des cantines, des paniers, des valises, des sacs, des tapis, des couvertures, et à l'intérieur tout ce qui reste d'une vie d'avant, celle qu'ils ont quittée, et qu'ils doivent, pour ne pas l'oublier, garder dans un lieu fermé au plus profond de leur cœur afin de ne pas céder au déchirement des séparations, à la douleur de se souvenir des visages qu'ils ne reverront jamais. Il faut avancer, s'adapter à une autre vie, à une autre langue, à d'autres gestes, à d'autres habitudes, à d'autres nourritures, à un autre climat. Apprendre, apprendre vite et ne pas se retourner. Je ne sais pas si pour la plupart d'entre eux le rêve s'est accompli, ou s'ils ont brutalement été jetés dans un quotidien qui valait à peine celui qu'ils avaient fui. Trop tard pour y penser, leur exil est sans retour.

Je me souviens de ce jour, il y a de nombreuses années maintenant, où le sens de quelques phrases, inscrites en moi depuis l'enfance, m'a été révélé en un instant, un peu à la façon d'un objet que l'on croit inutile, mais que l'on garde sans savoir pourquoi au fond d'une poche, et qui un jour montre son utilité.

*Sur les bords des fleuves de Babylone,
nous étions assis et nous pleurons,
en nous souvenant de Sion.*

*Aux saules de la contrée
nous avons suspendu nos harpes.*

*Là, nos vainqueurs nous demandaient des chants,
et nos oppresseurs de la joie :
Chantez-nous quelques-uns des cantiques de Sion !*

*Comment chanterions-nous les cantiques de l'Éternel
sur une terre étrangère ?*

Ce psaume de l'exil m'est revenu en mémoire avec une étonnante précision, de façon abrupte, et j'ai eu l'impression de heurter en pleine nuit un obstacle dans un couloir, et de me souvenir alors de sa présence. L'office du dimanche, quand j'étais enfant. J'entends encore la voix du révérend Hackson, silhouette de moineau dans sa robe noire, démarche saccadée, gestes heurtés, et sa voix hésitante, engourdie au fond de sa poitrine, un peu plus affermie à chaque phrase, jusqu'à devenir un flot, une houle dont je doutais chaque fois qu'elle puisse un jour finir. Dans le froid de l'hiver, dans le temple mal chauffé, les cheveux encore humides du récurage du dimanche matin, engoncé dans une veste qui me semblait rétrécir chaque semaine, je n'attendais que la fin de l'office, puis la fin du déjeuner familial avec sa rituelle tourte au bœuf, pour pouvoir aller jouer au base-ball. Les mots de ce psaume me demeuraient incompréhensibles.

En fait de fleuves, je ne connaissais guère que l'Hudson, industriel et gris, et je ne voyais pas comment suspendre des harpes

à des saules inexistants. J'avais tout au plus la vague image des sucres d'orge accrochés aux branches du sapin de Noël que mes parents faisaient l'effort de dresser pour moi chaque année dans notre étroite pièce de séjour. Et si la terre d'exode était un désert, je ne voyais pas comment des fleuves pouvaient alors s'y trouver. Les paroles bibliques ne m'atteignaient guère et je me suis empressé d'abandonner la fréquentation du temple dès que j'ai pu me soustraire à cette exigence dominicale. Il faut croire que les mots creusent parfois des galeries souterraines, mystérieuses, et que ce que l'on croit enfoui, oublié ou perdu à jamais, ne demande qu'à ressurgir au moment le plus inattendu. Ils nous saisissent au col, et on n'y peut rien. À Ellis, les harpes s'étaient tues. Je l'avais enfin compris.

Le temps s'est figé ici, tous sont allés vers leur vie, je suis resté à la mienne, ici à quai, spectateur de ces destinées multiples, témoin de ces heures ou de ces jours de passage qui ont définitivement changé le visage de leur existence. *Welcome to America!* L'attente anxieuse de la bénédiction, de l'acte de baptême, du laissez-passer, du certificat d'aptitude à devenir américain, à la vie, à la mort. Et s'ouvre la Porte d'or... Pour beaucoup, elle n'aura été qu'un portail grinçant et ils n'auront cessé de l'embellir pour les générations à venir. Car aucun miracle ne les attendait ici, sauf celui dont ils seraient les seuls artisans. Un travail dur et mal payé dans le meilleur des cas, un logement insalubre et bruyant, mais la liberté, et la possibilité d'un nouveau départ.

Toutes ces scènes se sont déroulées ici, dans ces espaces aménagés entre les quatre tourelles d'angle du bâtiment d'accueil, avec leur habillage de briques et de surfaces blanches alternées, avec leurs clochetons en forme de bulbe, dont j'imagine

qu'à beaucoup, elles ont rappelé les clochers de leurs terres natales. Pour le reste, nous sommes cernés d'eau, de verre et de métal. Nous n'avons pas d'autre horizon.

11 heures, ce soir.

Avec le temps, le rôle du centre a évolué, tout comme le mien, au gré des responsabilités que j'ai exercées ici. J'ai été simple employé, chargé d'orienter les flux humains d'immigrants à leur arrivée, lorsqu'ils descendaient avec leurs paquets de la barge ou du ferry les transbordant depuis Battery Park, à la pointe sud de Manhattan où accostaient les bateaux, libérant tout d'abord les passagers des première et deuxième classes avec leurs papiers en règle, déjà vérifiés à bord, les hommes en pardessus à col de fourrure et les femmes en chapeaux à voilette et souliers fins.

Ma connaissance de tous les rouages, de la disposition précise des lieux, les quelques propositions que j'ai pu faire pour en améliorer le fonctionnement, la constance et la vigilance dont j'ai fait preuve m'ont permis de monter rapidement en grade, de diriger des hommes, toujours plus nombreux, de résoudre des questions techniques ou administratives, toujours plus complexes. J'ai longtemps occupé la place de second, et lorsque mon prédécesseur a été appelé à d'autres fonctions, on a dû trouver plus simple de me proposer le poste, plutôt que de faire appel à un autre inspecteur en chef, accablé rien qu'à l'idée de devoir vivre ici. Je ne m'y attendais pas et me préparais déjà à me soumettre à un nouveau supérieur, avec ses lubies et ses habitudes auxquelles je devrais m'adapter. J'ai donc accepté, en essayant de ne pas manifester de surprise excessive. Et j'ai vite réalisé que l'exercice d'un pouvoir,

d'une autorité, si minime et dérisoire soit-elle, s'accompagne de silence, de solitude et de réserve quant à l'expression des sentiments. De tels paravents me convenaient parfaitement. J'ai endossé le rôle.

Avec ses couloirs et ses escaliers semblables aux coursives des bateaux que les immigrants viennent de quitter, Ellis ressemble au premier abord à un labyrinthe, à un espace dont je suis à peu près le seul à connaître tous les replis, car chaque corps de métier n'en possède qu'une vision fragmentée qui correspond à son domaine. Partout dans le bâtiment principal flotte cette odeur prenante de crésyl qui m'est si familière que je n'y prête plus attention. J'étais très attentif à l'hygiène et à la désinfection. C'était presque devenu une obsession, j'en conviens, mais avec tous les passagers qui débarquaient ici avec poux, vermine et maladies de toutes sortes, ça s'imposait. Et je ne le sais que de façon trop cruelle.

Les services de l'immigration recherchaient des gens comme moi, j'imagine, dévoués, efficaces. Et pour des raisons que je livrerai peut-être plus tard dans ces pages, si je parviens à y être aussi sincère que je le voudrais, car tout cela me pèse maintenant, j'ai toujours refusé de quitter l'île. Qui, mieux que moi, vivant sur place, maîtrisait l'organisation de ce dédale ? Avec les années, avec la guerre, l'immigration a décliné et les flots d'arrivants ont été remplacés par des troupes à l'entraînement, puis par des prisonniers politiques en attente d'expulsion. À certains, j'ai ouvert la Porte d'or ; à d'autres, j'ai refermé les grilles sur tous leurs espoirs ; pour d'autres encore, je n'ai été qu'un directeur de prison, une ombre passante, silencieuse et austère, dont le pire est toujours à attendre. Servir son pays prend parfois d'étranges aspects, on ne décide pas toujours du visage que l'on présente à autrui.

Nous fermons donc les portes, comme une auberge insalubre contrainte de cesser son activité, ou un hôtel sans clients, trop éloigné des routes fréquentées, ou une prison sans prisonniers, ou tout cela à la fois. Il en a été décidé ainsi par le gouvernement, qui souhaite tourner une page de notre histoire et rendre cette île et ses bâtiments présentables pour le soixante-dixième anniversaire de la statue, celle qui fascine le monde depuis qu'elle est là, dressée dans la baie depuis 1886. Notre symbole, l'œuvre, le cadeau de la France ! Étrange chemin que prennent les choses. Toujours est-il que pendant les deux années à venir, personne ne va ménager sa peine pour lui offrir un anniversaire grandiose, à la hauteur de cet emblème qui n'en finit pas d'éblouir la terre entière. *God bless America* ! J'ose à peine imaginer toutes les cérémonies, les commémorations, les discours officiels, les hymnes, les fanfares, cuivres et tambours, claquements de talons, demi-tour, droite, les défilés drapeaux au vent qui vont se succéder. Peut-être me demandera-t-on, vestige parmi les autres, de remettre mon uniforme pour la circonstance, et d'y guider de prestigieux visiteurs, qui viendront se recueillir dans ce lieu qui a vu passer depuis son ouverture plus de douze millions d'immigrants venus de toute l'Europe. Peut-être me demandera-t-on de leur expliquer comment se passaient les choses, de satisfaire leur curiosité et de leur révéler quelques anecdotes poignantes. Pour ça, ils peuvent être rassurés, j'en ai plus qu'il n'en faut. Mais comment imaginer ce qui s'est passé ici, dans ces espaces abandonnés, entre ces carreaux cassés, ces dortoirs déserts et ces pontons vermoulus ?

L'heure n'est plus à rêver. Je reste seul dans ce décor oublié, les derniers employés et le dernier passager sont partis il y a quelques jours ; je me fais l'effet d'un capitaine debout à la

proue de son bateau qui sombre, mais en ce qui me concerne, j'ai déjà fait naufrage depuis longtemps, et je ne sais plus si partir sera déchirement ou délivrance. Le dernier hôte d'Ellis Island vient de quitter le centre, un marin norvégien, roux et taciturne, un colosse, qui errait ici dans l'attente d'une décision de justice. C'est chose faite, il vient d'être libéré, accueilli en terre d'Amérique et prié d'aller se faire pendre ailleurs... L'odeur âcre de son tabac avait fini par m'être familière, nous échangeions quelques mots en nous croisant dans nos déambulations respectives, tous deux conscients d'être là, oubliés de tous sur un îlot délaissé, au bord du monde, chacun de nous enfermé dans son rôle, et décidé à le jouer jusqu'au bout : le suspect étranger et le gardien du camp. Non, j'exagère : je lui ai parfois offert un verre, le soir, et partagé une partie d'échecs avec lui, transgressant les règles les plus élémentaires de ma fonction, mais je ne pourrais dire si ces attentions s'adressaient à lui ou à moi-même. Parfois, la solitude pèse. Nous nous sommes serré la main, entre hommes, quand il est parti, son sac de marin sur l'épaule, cigarette au bec, sans se retourner, vers sa nouvelle patrie. Il était libre. Il a rejoint le bateau et il est parti pour Manhattan. Arne Peterssen. Mon dernier prisonnier.

L'histoire singulière de ce Viking mutique a fini par s'effacer de ma mémoire, comme tant d'autres, et celles qui y sont demeurées ne sont pas les plus heureuses. Pour quelle raison Peterssen était-il longuement resté à Ellis, dans ce face-à-face muet, une sorte de danse d'esquive ou de duel, où chaque adversaire cherche davantage à rompre qu'à avancer ? Je crois me souvenir qu'il avait pris part, dans des circonstances confuses qu'une enquête tentait de démêler, à une bagarre à bord. Un officier s'y était trouvé mêlé, et quelles qu'en soient

les raisons, c'est quelque chose qui ne pardonne pas. La marine norvégienne nous offrait volontiers ce spécimen difficilement contrôlable qui avait demandé la nationalité américaine. Cette requête supposait des investigations complémentaires, des témoignages à recouper, c'est-à-dire une invraisemblable quantité de papiers officiels à en-têtes, tamponnés en tous sens, qui transformaient un soir de bordée d'une triste banalité, avec des quantités d'alcool absorbées dans un de ces bars de port où des femmes en bas noirs prêtent leur ventre à un désir pressé et triste, vite assouvi, en procès languissant aux logiques irréconciliables. En dehors de cet incident, le parcours de Peterssen s'était révélé sans tache, il semblait avoir toujours fait preuve de loyauté et de compétence. Magnanime, l'Amérique avait fini par pardonner cet écart qui ne la concernait pas. De plus, il était apparu que l'officier en question avait sa part de responsabilité dans cette rixe nocturne qui l'avait opposé à ce matelot, dans un de ces lieux où les hôtessees avaient dû en voir bien d'autres.

The Last Guardian of Ellis Island

Gaëlle Josse

Translated from the French by Donald Winkler

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

For 45 years – I’ve had the time to count them – I saw those men, those women, those children, in their dignity and confusion and in their most presentable clothing, with their perspiration, their fatigue, their absent gazes, struggling to comprehend a language of which they didn’t know a single word, their dreams set down in the midst of their baggage. Trunks of wood or metal, baskets, suitcases, bags, carpets, blankets, and within themselves all that remained of a former life, the one they had left behind, and that, not to forget it, they had to keep locked away deep in their hearts so as not to yield to the anguish of separation, to the pain of remembering faces they would never again see. They had to move on, adapt to another life, another language, new signals, new customs, new foods, a different climate. To learn, to learn quickly, and not to look back. I don’t know if for most of them the dream was realized or if they were brutally launched into a day-to-day life that was barely worth the one they had fled. Too late to think about it, there was no going back on their exile.

I remember the day, many years ago now, when the meaning of a few sentences, etched in my memory since childhood, was shown to me in an instant, as if an object one thought to be of no use, but which one kept in the bottom of one's pocket without knowing why, had one day revealed its purpose.

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea,
we wept, when we remembered Zion.*

*We hanged our harps upon the willows
in the midst thereof.*

*For there they that carried us away captive required
of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth,
saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.*

How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?

That psalm of exile came back to me with amazing precision and great suddenness, and I felt as if, in the middle of the night, I had stumbled against an obstacle in a hallway, and only then remembered it was there. The Sunday service, when I was a child. I still remember the voice of Reverend Hackson, his sparrow-like silhouette in a black robe, his halting gait, his convulsive gestures, and his diffident voice lodged deep in his chest, a bit more assertive with each phrase, until it became a flood, a swell that I thought each time would never end. In the winter cold, in the poorly heated church, my hair still damp from the Sunday morning scouring, wedged into a jacket that seemed to shrink a bit more each week, I could hardly wait for the service to end, along with the family lunch with its ritual of beef pie, so I might run off and play baseball.

The psalm's words remained impenetrable to me.

Practically the only river I knew was the Hudson, grey and industrial, and I couldn't see how one might hang harps from non-existent willows. At most, I had a vague picture of candy canes hooked to the branches of the Christmas tree that my parents laboured to decorate for me every year in our cramped living room. And if the land of exodus was a desert, I couldn't see what rivers might be doing there. The biblical words barely touched me, and I stopped going to church as soon as I could spare myself that Lord's Day obligation. You have to believe that words sometimes burrow underground tunnels, mysterious, and that what one thought to be buried, forgotten, or lost forever, is only asking to resurface at the most surprising moment. We are grabbed by the collar, and there's nothing we can do. At Ellis Island the harps had gone silent. Finally, I understood.

Here time had stopped, all moved on with their lives and I was left with mine, standing at the dock, gazing down on those multiple destinies, witness to the hours and days of passage that had changed forever what fate held in store for them. *Welcome to America!* The anxious vigil, waiting for the blessing, the baptismal act, the permit, the certification that would make one an American, for life, unto death. And the golden door swung open... For many it was a creaking door, and they would never stop gilding it for the generations to come. For no miracle awaited them here, other than the one they made for themselves. Hard, poorly paid work in the best of cases; a noisy, insalubrious place to live, but freedom, and the hope for a new beginning.

All those scenes unfolded here, in the areas set up between the reception building's four corner towers, with their facades

of brick and stone, and their bulb-shaped pinnacles that reminded many, I imagine, of the steeples in their native lands. For the rest, we were surrounded by water, glass, and metal. We had no other horizon.

11 o'clock, this evening.

In time the centre's role changed, as did mine, along with my responsibilities. I was a simple employee responsible for putting some order into the human flood of immigrants on their arrival, as they made their way down with their burdens from the barge or ferry transferring them from Battery Park, at Manhattan's southernmost point. There the boats docked, first unloading the first and second class passengers with their papers in order, already verified on board, the men in fur-collared overcoats and the women in hats with veils and fine-leather shoes.

My familiarity with the way things worked and with the exact layout of the site, the few recommendations I had been able to make to improve procedures, the constancy and the vigilance I'd shown, enabled me to rapidly move up in the ranks, managing men, ever more numerous, and solving technical and administrative problems, increasingly complex. For a long time I was second in command, and when my predecessor was posted elsewhere, the path of least resistance was to offer me the position rather than to put out the call for a new chief inspector, who would be disheartened at the very thought of having to live here. I wasn't expecting it, and was already preparing myself to submit to a new superior, with hobbyhorses and habits to which I would have to adapt myself. And so I accepted, trying not to show too much surprise. I soon realized that the exercise of power and authority,

however minimal and insignificant it might be, imposed on one silence, solitude, and where the expression of feelings was concerned, discretion. Such buffers suited me perfectly. I assumed the role.

With its corridors and stairways not unlike the gangways of the boats the immigrants had just left, Ellis at first sight seemed like a labyrinth, a space all of whose recesses I was almost the only one to know intimately, as each trade had but a limited view proper to its own domain. Everywhere in the main building there hovered the clinging odour of Lysol, so familiar to me that I paid it no attention. I was very scrupulous when it came to hygiene and disinfection. It almost, I confess, became an obsession, but with so many passengers disembarking with lice, vermin, and sicknesses of all sorts, it was necessary. I had learned that from experience.

The immigration services sought out people like me, I presume, who were dedicated and efficient. I always refused to leave the island, for reasons I will perhaps disclose further on in these pages, if I can be as honest as I would wish, with so much weighing upon me now. Who, better than me, living *in situ*, could master the configuration of this maze? With the years, and with the war, immigration declined, and the waves of newcomers were supplanted by troops in training, then by political prisoners waiting to be extradited. For some, I threw open the golden door; for others, I barred the way to all their hopes; for still others I was but a prison warden, a passing shadow, silent and severe, from whom the worst was yet to come. To serve one's country may lead one down strange paths, and the face one presents to others is not always a choice freely made.

And so we are closing all the doors, as on an unsavoury inn constrained to cease operation, or a hotel with no clients, too remote from well-trafficked roads, or a prison with no prisoners, or all that at once. This was decided on by the government, which hoped to turn a page on our history and to make these buildings presentable for the seventieth anniversary of the statue, the same that has held the world spellbound ever since it was hoisted up in the middle of the bay in 1886. Our emblem, the work and the gift of France! Things take strange turns. Whatever the case, during the two years to come, no effort will be spared to offer it a grandiose birthday celebration, worthy of this icon that never fails to dazzle the entire world. *God bless America!* I can barely conceive of all the ceremonies, commemorations, official speeches, hymns, fanfares, trumpets and drums, clicking heels, about-turns-to-the-rights, parades with flags fluttering in the wind, that will succeed one another. Perhaps I will be asked, as one relic among many, to don my uniform one more time just for the occasion, and to serve as a guide for distinguished visitors who will congregate at this place that, since its opening, saw more than 12 million immigrants from all over Europe pass through its doors. Perhaps I will be asked to explain to them how things transpired, to satisfy their curiosity, and to share with them some poignant anecdotes. Of those, they may be assured, I have more than enough. But how to imagine what happened here in these abandoned spaces, among these broken panes, these deserted dormitories, and these worm-eaten landing stages?

The time for dreams is ended. I am alone on this forgotten stage set, the last employees and the last passenger left a few days ago; I feel like a captain standing at the bow of a sinking

ship, but my shipwreck is long in the past, and I no longer know whether leaving here will be a trauma or a deliverance. Ellis Island's last guest has just left the centre, a Norwegian sailor, red-headed and taciturn, a colossus, who landed up here while waiting for a judicial decision. It's come down, he's just been freed, welcomed onto American territory, and sent on his way... I'd got used to the pungent aroma of his tobacco, we exchanged a few words when we passed each other in our respective meandering, both aware of being forgotten by all on an abandoned island at the edge of the world, each locked in his role, and determined to play it out to the end: the suspect foreigner and the camp guard. No, I'm exaggerating: I sometimes offered him a drink in the evening, and played a game of checkers with him, violating the most elementary rules of my position, but I couldn't say if these attentions were for his sake or mine. Sometimes solitude weighs you down. We shook hands, between men, when he went off, his sailor's bag over his shoulder, cigarette between his lips, not looking back, on his way to his new land. He was free. He boarded the boat and left for Manhattan. Arne Peterssen. My last prisoner.

The singular story of this mute Viking was wiped from my memory like so many others, while those that lingered on were not the happiest. Why did Peterssen stay so long at Ellis, in this mute standoff, this sort of posturing or evasive dance, where each adversary was trying more to extricate itself than to move on? I think I remember that he had taken part, under obscure circumstances that an inquest tried to clarify, in an on-board brawl. An officer was involved, and whatever the circumstances, that's something not easily forgiven. The Norwegian Navy made us a willing offer of this difficult to control specimen, who sought American citizenship. His request led

to further investigations and testimonies that had to be confirmed, in other words to an unlikely accumulation of letter-headed official papers, stamped every which way. Thus a sadly banal, alcohol-fuelled one-night spree in one of the dockside bars where women in black stockings lend their abdomens to a quickly slaked, urgent and glum desire, was transformed into an interminable trial featuring irreconcilable points of view. Aside from this incident, Peterssen's record was shown to be spotless, and he seemed always to have shown himself to be loyal and competent. Magnanimous, America finally pardoned him this misdemeanour, which was none of its concern. What is more, it appeared that the officer in question bore his own responsibility for the nocturnal fracas that had opposed him to the sailor, in one of those settings where the hostesses must have witnessed a long line of similar spectacles.



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Edina Szvoren

Nincs, és ne is legyen (2012)

There Is None, Nor Let There Be

Publishing House **Palatinus**

Biography

Edina Szvoren was born in 1974 in Budapest. An alumni of Béla Bartók Music High School, she currently teaches solfeggio and music theory there. She holds a degree as chorus-master from the Franz Liszt Academy of Music. She has had work published regularly since 2005, including two works of prose. Her work has been recognized by the following awards: the Sándor Bródy Prize for the best first novel of the year in 2011, the Artisjus Prize and the Attila József Prize.

Synopsis

Edina Szvoren's stories contain a lot of dry humour, yet at the same time they sizzle, as she reveals the drama in the minutiae of human relationships. When describing Szvoren's literary world, reviewers have brought up the names of two radically different predecessors: the analytical prose of Péter Nádas and the graceful giant of grotesque, Péter Hajnóczy. The stories of *Nincs, és ne is legyen* will convince the reader that Szvoren is a mature author with a unique storytelling voice. The family, which is both the centre stage and model of our lives, stands firmly in the middle of the stories, regardless of whether we are struggling on that stage or are just on the outside looking in.

Nincs, és ne is legyen

Edina Szvoren

Jó reggelt. Miért épp hét nap tartozna össze, gondolom. Nem szeretném, hogy hetente ismétlődjön a napok neve. Az idő néha elakad, és akkor van egy kis szünet. Nemcsak azt nem tudom, mi lesz, azt sem tudom, lesz-e egyáltalán valami. Nem hiszem el, hogy egyszer felnőt看 leszek. Nem lehetnek gyerekeim, biztosan tudom. Senki nem fogja akarni, hogy levetkőzzem, és a ruhátlan testét nézzem ruhátlanul. A vétkeim bevallhatatlanok. Ha kihagy az idő, annak nincs látható jele. Az osztálytársaim legalábbis nem veszik észre, pedig a pad alatt átadott levél nálam akad el. Emmi néni rám mosolyog a szürke pöttyös fejkendő alól, s neki sem tűnik fel, hogy sehol sem vagyok. Csak a levelet látja meg. Elveszi, de nem olvassa el, ahogy más tanárok. Ki se bontja. Emmi néninek távol ülő szemei vannak, széles homloka, kerek orra. Emmi néni téved: azt hiszi, szeretetre méltó vagyok. Sikerült megtévesztenem, s most már arról álmodozom, hogy majd csalódik. Naplót nyitottam, Édesanya vette a névnapomra: beleírtam, hogy meghalok. Pedig azt se hiszem, hogy megszülettem. Soha senkit nem szerettem még úgy, mint Emmi nénit – ezt is beleírom, rögtön az első lapra, kisebb betűkkel. Örvendek, hogy a napló lapjai sárgák, merevek és zörögnek, mint Papika fiókjában a tervrajzok, az iratok vagy a gót betűs német nyelvű levelek. Nem örvidenek, ha boltszaga volna a füzetnek. Nem szeretem az új dolgokat. Jó reggelt. Mit jelent az, hogy süt a nap: láthatom a szobámból a sugarait. Abban a kegyelemben részesültem, hogy ágyban fekve is látom a napot. Vannak, akik az ablakból sem látják, mint például Majorék, akiket a manzárdunkba

költöztettek. Bárhogy forgatják a fejüket, a manzárdból csupán a palatető meg a lyukas eresz látszik. Nekik ez jutott. De azért világos, hogy mi keltünk föl, nem a nap.

Megpróbálok naplóhoz méltóan élni. Bevetem Papika ágycsónakát, és egy forintért kimosom a harisnyáját. Nem követelőzőm, amiért múltkor többet adott. Majorékat nem csepülöm, pedig ők lusták és bűdösek. A napló zöld, kemény fedeles. Ha megütném vele Dodikát, maradandó sérüléseket okoznék neki, megvakulna vagy betörne a feje. De a világ semmi pénzért nem bántanám, hiszen szeretem. A világon legjobban őt szeretem. Nem úgy szeretem, ahogy Emmi nénit, mert Emmi nénitől azt várom, hogy meglazítsa a csomót a tarkójánál. Szarvasra utaztunk tavaly, a Vöröskereszt buszával. A tábor-tűz elaludt, Emmi néni kendője megázott a felhőszakadásban. Zápor, írom a naplóba, zivatar, javítom át. Közelről nézve nem is pöttyös Emmi néni kendője, én mégis szeretem. Szarvason rájöttem, hogy a szürke pöttyök valójában szőrös kis négyzetek. Megáztunk mind a harmincketten. Az egész osztály bezsúfolódott Emmi néni faházába, még az Illés úti zöldséges ikrei is. Emmi néni végigdörgölte a fejünket a fürdőlepedőjével. Pöttyös kendője közben a nyakába csúszott, haja a vállára omlott, a kendő alól pedig kiszabadult valami nem is annyira kellemes illat. Mint a vizes mogyoróé, mikor kint felejtjük a kertben. Vagy inkább a konyharuháé, ami azért olyan bűdös, mert Papika kézmosás nélkül törli bele a zsíros kezét. Édesanya egyszer Papika arcára suhintott vele. Papika harisnyájának a szaga egy másik világ.

Emmi nénitől azt várom, hogy mikor kibomlik a haja, magához öleljen, és abba a rossz szagba beleszimatolhassak. Jó volna, ha Emmi néni haragudna rám, mert akkor megbocsátana. Szeretem őt, és félek tőle. Azért félek, mert semmi

félelmetes nincs benne. Félek, hogy átváltozhat félelmetessé. Rám sosem haragszik. Kihív furulyázni, és néha nem mozognak az ujjaim. Nyál jön a számból, és csak tilinkózom, ahogy Emmi néni mondja. Félek tőle, pedig megsimogatja a hajam, és a helyemre küld, hogy véget vessen a kínszenvedésnek. Sokan dicsérik a hajam, Emmi néni is. Egyszer majd ráébred, milyen hitvány vagyok, és milyen hitvány a hajam. Akkor talán megharagszik, és megbocsát. Azt akarom, hogy megbocsásson, de ahhoz látnia kell, milyen vagyok. Most már nem csak esténként imádkozom. Két dologra kérem az Istent: hogy bocsásson meg, és hogy lehessen még romlottabb, mert akkor a megbocsátás is nagyobb. Én tudok a legjobban furulyázni, de ha félni kezdek, egyetlen ép hang sem jön ki a hangszeren. Imádkozom, hogy bele ne süljek a dalba, furulyázás közben imádkozom. Azért is imádkozom, hogy belesüljek, és Emmi néni megsimogassa a fejem, a hajam, a hitvány hajam. A gyerekek nevetnek, még az Illés úti zöldséges ikrei is. Éretlen taknyosok.

Imádom Dodikát. Tőle azt várom, hogy a talpa beférjen a számba, és ruganyos, illatos, ennivaló húsa legyen az idők végezetéig. Fintorogjon és rugdalózzon, ha közelítek. Hosszú, éles körme van, Édesanya nem győzi vágni. Teljes erejéből tiltakozik, ha dögönyözöm. Mindketten kimelegszünk a hadakozásban, közben meg tettetnem kell az igazságot. Az az érzésem, hogy Édesanya les valahonnan, a szekreter mögül, a kulcslyukon át. Arca a zebrapálma leveleibe költözött. Édesanya nagyon félti Dodikát, mivel az első szülésbe majdnem belehalt. Enyhe hányingerem van, ha arra gondolok, hogy a többi ember azon a váladékon nőtt föl, ami a mellből szivárog. Elsőre sosem jut eszembe, hogy én vagyok az elsőszülött, én vagyok, aki Édesanya betegsége miatt nem kapott anyatejet. Be kell bizonyítanom, hogy nem török Dodika életére,

máskülönben a büntetés előbb ér el, mint a bűn. Csak játszunk, látod, Édesanya? Mutatnom kell, hogy nem sántikálok semmi rosszban: jóban sántikálok. Attól tartok, hogy a kulcslyuk túloldaláról nézve dögönyözés és gyilkolás között kevés a szemmel látható különbség. Közelről minden más. Dodika hóna alá nyúlok, fölemelem, a nyakába csókolok, ínyemmel harapdálom a lábujjait, a fülcimpáját, az orra hegyét. Alig valamivel erősebben kellene megszorogatnom Dodikát, és belehalna. Lefogom a lábát, ne rugdalózzon, de azért figyelek, hogy a mozdulataimban ne látsszon ártó szándék. Édesanya miatt tettetnem kell, hogy szeretem Dodikát. Pedig szeretem. Dodika göcögése olykor sikításra, olykor fuldoklásra hasonlít, de hát fuldokolni valakinek, akit nem fojtogatnak, éppúgy lehetséges, mint tettetni valamit, ami valóság. El tudnám pusztítani, annyira szeretem. Édesanya föltépi az ajtót. Beront, ellök, és fölpofoz. Fölkapja Dodikát, és Édesapához cibál. Bántani akarta, zokogja. Édesanya zokogása könnyen összetéveszthető a nevetéssel. Bántotta?, kérdezi Papika, aztán bosszúsan megtörli a száját, és anélkül, hogy a szőnyegre vigyázna, hátrahagyja a széket. Igazán?, kérdi szigorúan. Édesanya szomorúan lógatja a fejét, és azt suttogja: az embernek nincs barátja, de ne is legyen. Papika meg sem eszi a tükörtojást, pedig egyedül neki jutott. Fogja a táskáját, megigazítja a mandzsettáját, és megy is. Nem szereti, ha áll a bál. Ha megzavarjuk a nyugalmat, elviszi a kutyát sétálni, vagy dolgozni megy. Az Anyagvizsgálóba a portás éjjel is beengedi. Az Anyagvizsgálóban anyagvizsgáló készülékeket gyártanak. Édesanya a kisszobába vonul Dodikával, mert egyedül azt a szobát fűtjük. Édesanya hiába kérte, Majorék nem vágták föl a fát, mivelhogy lusták és prolik. Leülök az ebédlőasztalhoz a fűtetlen nagyszobában, és megeszem az ott hagyott tükörtojást. A sárgája kifolyt a fehérjén túlra, mint valami dulakodás közben kinyomott

szem. Rossz kedvem lett a szeretettől. Sírás fojtogat. A világon a legeslegjobban Édesanyát szeretem, de közelről minden megváltozik, mint a kendő pöttyei – amik igazából szőrös kis négyzetek. Édesanya miatt tettetnem kell az igazságot. Édesanya és Dodika összebújnak a heverőn. Hallom, hogy mindketten vacogva zokognak vagy vacogva nevetnek, s közben nyikorog az ágy. Ha befogom a fülem, nem tudom tartani a villát. Kihűlt a tojás, ehetetlen, mégis imádkozom, hogy minél tovább tartson az utolsó pár falat. Ha imádkozom, nem tudom tartani a villát. Megeszem Papika ott hagyott piritósát, s amíg rágok, nem hallom a vacogást. Hangosan rágok, csattogtatom a fogsoromat, hevesen csámcsogok. Habzsolok, mintha az öcsém testét enném. A levegőnek, amit rágok, tükörtojás íze van. Már saját lélegzetemet eszem, amikor az idő megint rám tapad, mint a vizes ruha Szarvason. Senki nem látja, hogy rosszul vagyok.

Édesapától azt várom, hogy ha este végre megérkezik, se a kertkaput ne halljuk csapódni, se a lépcsőház súlyos, bordázott faajtáját. Édesapámnál jobban senkit nem szeretek a világon. Egész délután őt várom, de sosem találom el a jövele pillanatát. Egész testemmel az ajtóra tapadok, és a lépcsőház zajait fülelem, aztán mikor már lemondtam róla, váratlanul betoppan. Erős szemöldökét fölborzolja, és táncoltatja a homlokán. Grimaszol, eljátssza, milyen az ember, ha citromba harap, és milyen a citrom, ha emberbe. Olyan csöndet szeretnék, hogy kivehető legyen a nesz, amikor nemet int a kéréseimre, és borostái közben a selyem nyaksálba akadnak. Hétköznap nyakkendőt hord, hétvégén nyaksálat. Nem engedi, hogy az ölébe üljek. Mikor megvacsorázunk, megszán: ad két villavégnyit a húsból. Édesanya tányérján másfél szem krumpli gőzölög egy kiskanálnyi almaszósszal, de Édesanya semmit nem kap Édesapától egy homlokcsókon kívül. Az én adagom

fél szem krumpli, fél kanál szósz. Egyetérttek Édesapával, hogy elég ez nekem, de a hús hiányzik nagyon. Bármennyi húst meg tudnék enni, talán azért falom annyira Dodikát. Hús csak Édesapának jár, hisz a hús nem terem a fán, mint a mogyoró meg a meggy. A mogyoróbokrot még Papika nagyapja ültette, aki udvari tanácsos volt egy kertés házban. Azelőtt. Édesanya orrcimpája reszketni kezd, ha valaki kimondja, hogy azelőtt. A húst Majorék hozták, valamit nagyon el akarnak érni. Félzsidók, súgja Édesanya, izraeliták, csitítja édesapám. Majorék egész délután fűrészeltek és kopácsoltak a garázsban, persze a fát még mindig nem aprították föl. Egyszer halat hoztak, de rózsaszín volt a kopoltyúja alatt. Megint Papika ölébe kérérdzkedem. Azt várom tőle, hogy nemet intsen minden kérésemre, ezért igyekszem teljesíthetetlen kívánságokkal előállni. Miután az utolsó falat hússal szárazra törölte a tányérját, Papika nyújtózik, hátratolja a székét, és föláll: ne rágja a fülem, kisasszony, mert kicsorbul a finoman csipkézett fogacskája. Nem tudom eldönteni, viccel-e, mert amit mond, annak több jelentése van. Megáll a szoba közepén, összedörzsöli a tenyerét. Azt mondja: Jó lesz egy kis hódolás és csönd. Skandalom előre. Azt várom Édesapától, hogy leüljön, olvasson egy órát, rám se nézzen, bort kortyolgasson a cigaretta mellé, és fájduljon meg a torkom a visszafojtott sírástól. Az állólámpa fénykörében sárga az arcbőre, mint a naplóm lapjai, meg a gótbetűs családi levelek. A világon a legjobban a naplómat szeretem. Kinyitom, és beleírom: nincs boldogság a Földön, de ne is legyen.

There Is None, Nor Let There Be

Edina Szvoren

Translated from the Hungarian by Tim Wilkinson

Good morning. Why should precisely seven days belong together, I think to myself. I do not like the way the names of the days are repeated every week. Time sometimes comes to a standstill and then there is a little interval. Not only do I not know what will come next, I don't even know if there will be anything at all. I don't think I'll be a grown-up some day. One thing is for sure: I won't be able to have any children. No one is going to want me to undress and have me look at his naked body. My transgressions cannot be confessed. If time drops out, there is no visible sign of it. At least my classmates do not notice it, though the letter handed on under the desks has stopped with me. Miss Emmy is smiling at me from under her grey polka dot headscarf, and even she does not notice that I am nowhere. All she sees is the letter. She takes it but does not read it the way other teachers do. Doesn't even open it. Miss Emmy has widely separated eyes, a broad forehead, and round nose. Miss Emmy has it wrong: she thinks I am lovable; I have managed to fool her, and now I dream she is going to be disappointed. I have started a diary. Mother bought it for me as a name-day gift: I recorded that I am going to die. Mind you, I don't even think that I was born. I am not yet fond of anyone so much as Miss Emmy – I'll record that, too, straight off on the first page, in smaller letters. I am pleased that the pages of the diary are yellow, stiff, and rustle, like blueprints, documents, or the Gothic characters of the German letters kept in the drawers of Daddy's desk. I would not be too pleased if the

notebook had a shop smell about it. I don't like new things. Good morning. What does it mean that the sun is shining? I can see its rays from my room. I have been accorded the grace of being able to see the sun even when I am lying in bed. Contrast that with people like the Majors, for example, who have moved into our garret flat. However they place their heads, all that can be seen from the attic is the slate roof and the leaky eaves. That was what was granted to them. All the same, it is obvious that we got up, not the sun.

I shall endeavour to live in a manner that befits a diary. I make Daddy's bed, and for a forint I wash his socks. I don't blag him, on account of which I got more the last time. It's not that I'm badmouthing the Majors, but they really are lazy and pong a bit. The diary is green and hard-backed. If I were to strike Joey with it I would cause him permanent injuries; he would go blind or crack his skull. But I wouldn't harm him for all the money in the world as I am fond of him. Of everyone in the world it's him I love most. Not the way I'm fond of Miss Emmy, because what I am expecting from her is that she will loosen the knot on the back of her neck. We made a trip to the town of Szarvas in a Red Cross coach. The campfire burned out; Miss Emmy's headscarf was soaked in the downpour. Shower, I wrote in the diary, but I have corrected that to downpour. From close up, Miss Emmy's headscarf does not actually have grey polka dots. At Szarvas I realized that they are, in fact, little squares with whiskers. All 32 of us got drenched. The whole class crammed into Miss Emmy's cabin, including even the twins from the greengrocer's shop on Elias Road. Miss Emmy rubbed each and every one of our bonces with her bath towel. Meanwhile, her polka dot headscarf slipped down onto her neck, her hair cascaded onto her shoulders, and a none too pleasant odour was released from

under the headscarf. Like that of moist hazelnuts one has forgetfully left behind in the garden. Or rather like that of a dishcloth, which smells so badly because Daddy wipes his greasy hands on it without washing them. Mother once flicked it in Daddy's face. The smell of Daddy's socks is another thing altogether.

What I am waiting for from Miss Emmy is that when her hair is loosened she will hug me and I'll be able to have a sniff of that bad smell. It would be good if she became angry with me, because she would then forgive me. I am fond of her but also scared of her. Scared of her, because there is nothing scary about her. I am scared that she might transform into something scary. She never gets angry with me. She calls me out to the front to play the recorder, but there are times when my fingers just won't move. Slobber comes out of my mouth and I just tinkle, as Miss Emmy puts it. I'm scared of her, though she strokes my hair and sends me back to my place to bring an end to my ordeal. A lot of people admire my hair, Miss Emmy amongst them. Some day she will realize how rubbish I am and how rubbishy my hair is. Maybe then she'll get angry and forgive me. I want her to forgive me, but to do that she will have to see me for what I am. Now I say my prayers not only at bedtime. I ask God for two things: for Him to forgive me and to let me be more wicked, because that way there would be more to forgive. I am the best at playing the recorder, but as soon as I start to get afraid I can't get a peep out of the instrument. So I also pray that I won't dry up and Miss Emmy will stroke me on the head, on my hair, my rubbishy hair. The kids will all laugh, including even the twins from the greengrocer's shop on Elias Road. Snotty-nosed learners.

I adore Joey. What I expect of him is that the soles of his feet will fit in my mouth, and his springy, fragrant flesh, good enough to eat, will be around forever. May he scowl and kick out if any of you go near him. He has long, sharp fingernails. His mother can't keep up with having to cut them. He protests for all he is worth if I pummel him. Both of us get hot while we scrap, but meanwhile I have to play-act the truth. I have a feeling Mother is peeking from somewhere, from behind the bureau or through the keyhole. Her face has moved to the leaves of the calathea prayer plant. Mother worries a lot about Joey because she almost died having me as the firstborn. I feel a bit sick to think that other people grow on the fluid secreted by the breasts. To start with I thought I was the firstborn and it was me who did not get any breast milk because of Mother's illness. I have to prove that I am not out to kill Joey, otherwise the punishment would come before the crime. We're only playing, can't you see, Mother? I have to show that I'm not up to any bad: only good. I fear that from the far side of the keyhole there is little discernible difference between scrap-ping and killing. From close at hand there is a world of difference. I reach out under Joey's armpits and lift him up kiss him on the neck, with my gums bite his toes, his ear lobes, the tip of his nose. I would not have to squeeze Joey much harder for him to die. I catch hold of his feet to stop him kicking about, but I take care that no harmful intention should creep into my movements. For Mother's sake, I have to put on a pretence of loving Joey. And I am fond of him. Joey's bursts of laughter can sometimes resemble shrieking or choking, but it is just as possible for someone to make a choking sound, even when they are not being suffocated, as it is to play-act something for real. I could destroy him, I love him so much. Mother rips open the door. She bursts in, pushes me aside, and slaps me.

She gathers Joey up in her arms and lugs me to Father. She wanted to hurt him, she sobs. Mother's sobbing can easily be mistaken for laughter. Hurt him? Daddy asks before wiping his lips in annoyance and without taking any care of the carpet he pulls his chair back. Really? he asks grimly. Mother is hanging her head in sorrow and whispers a person has no friend, nor let there be. Daddy does not even eat his fried egg, even though it was made especially for him. He picks up his briefcase, adjusts his cuff links, and he's off. He doesn't like it when a row is going on. If his peace and quiet is disturbed, he takes the dog for a walk or goes off to work. At the Materials Testing place the doorman will let him in even at night. At the Materials Testing place they make equipment for testing materials. Mother made her way into the little room with Joey, because that is the only room that is kept heated. For all her pleading, the Majors would not cut any kindling because they are lazy proles. I sit down at the dining table in the unheated main sitting room and eat the fried egg that has been left. The yolk had run outside the white like an eye pushed out in a brawl. Affection had put me in a bad mood. Shedding tears was choking me. I love Mother more than anyone else in the world, but from close up everything changes, like those polka dots, which in fact turn out to be little squares with whiskers. It is because of Mother that I have to play-act the truth. Mother and Joey snuggle up together on the sofa. I can hear that both of them are either crying their eyes out or howling with laughter, and meanwhile the bed is creaking. If I stop my ears I can't also hold my fork. The egg has gone cold, but I still pray that the last couple of bites should last as long as possible. If I pray I can't also hold my fork. I eat the toast that Daddy left, and while I am chewing it I can't hear the chattering. I chew noisily, snap my set of teeth together, and chomp

vigorously. I gobble as if I were eating my younger brother's body. The air that I am chewing has a flavour of fried eggs. I am now eating my own breath, when time again clings to me like the wet dress in Szarvas. Nobody sees that I am ill.

What I expect of Father is that if he finally gets back tonight we shall hear neither a slamming of the garden gate nor the heavy, ribbed wooden door in the staircase. There is no one else in the world I love more than Father. I wait the whole afternoon for him, but I can never guess the moment he will arrive. I paste my whole body to the door and keep an ear open for noises in the staircase, then, after I have given up all hope, he unexpectedly pops up. He fluffs up his bushy eyebrows and makes them dance on his forehead. He pulls faces and plays at what a person looks like biting into a lemon, then a lemon into a person. I would like it to be so quiet as to be able to make out the rustle when he shakes his head in a no to my requests and his bristles meanwhile are caught in his silk neck scarf. During the working week he wears a tie, and at the weekends a neck scarf. He doesn't allow me to sit on his lap. At suppertime he takes pity on me: he gives me two forkfuls of meat. On Mother's plate one and a half spuds are steaming away with a teaspoon of apple sauce, but Mother gets nothing from Father apart from a kiss on the forehead. My portion is half a spud and half a spoon of sauce. I agree with Father that it's enough for me, but I miss the meat dreadfully. I could eat any amount of meat, but there is meat only for Daddy, since meat doesn't grow on trees like hazelnuts and cherries. The hazelnut bush was planted by Daddy's grandfather, who was a King's Counsel and had a house with a garden. Beforehand. Mother's nostrils start to quiver any time anyone says the word beforehand. The meat was brought by the Majors, they must want something. Half-Jewish, Mother whispers,

Israelites, and Father hushes her. The Majors spent the whole afternoon sawing and hammering in the garage, but they have still not got round to chopping the wood for kindling. Once they brought a fish, but it had a pink colour under the gills. I again plead to be taken onto Daddy's lap. I am expecting him to shake his head to all my requests, which is why I endeavour to come up with requests that cannot be fulfilled. Having completely cleaned his plate with the last morsel of meat, Daddy stretches his arms, pushes his seat back, and gets to his feet: no gnawing at my ear, young missy, because your finely scalloped little pegs will get chipped. I can't decide whether he is joking or not, because you can put several meanings on what he is saying. He stands in the middle of the room and rubs his hands. He says: A bit of respect and quiet would be good. I scan it in advance. What I am waiting for from Father is for him to sit down and read for an hour, giving me not a glance, taking a few swigs of wine and smoking a cigarette, and for my throat to get a lump in it from holding back the crying. In the halo of light from the standard lamp his skin is yellow like the pages of my diary and the Gothic characters of the family letters. I love my diary more than anything else in the world. I open it and write: There is no happiness on Earth, nor let there be.



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Donal Ryan

The Spinning Heart (2013)

Le Cœur Qui Tourne

Publishing House **Doubleday Ireland**

Biography

Donal Ryan was born near Nenagh, County Tipperary, in 1976. He was a civil servant for many years, and was only able to devote himself to writing from 2014, following the success of *The Spinning Heart*, the novel he wrote during the evenings of the summer of 2010. Ryan received 47 rejections before finding a publisher. His novels have gathered a great deal of critical acclaim and *The Spinning Heart* was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. He lives in County Limerick with his wife and two children.

Synopsis

"My father still lives back the road past the weir in the cottage I was reared in. I go there every day to see if he dead and every day he lets me down. He hasn't yet missed a day of letting me down."

In the aftermath of Ireland's financial collapse, dangerous tensions surface in an Irish town. As violence flares, the characters face a battle between public persona and inner desires. Through a chorus of unique voices, each struggling to tell their own kind of truth, a single authentic tale unfolds.

The Spinning Heart speaks for contemporary Ireland like no other novel. Wry, vulnerable, all too human, it captures the language and spirit of rural Ireland, and with uncanny perception articulates the words and thoughts of a generation. Technically daring and evocative of Patrick McCabe and JM Synge, this novel of small-town life is witty, dark and sweetly poignant.

Donal Ryan's brilliantly realised debut announces a stunning new voice in literary fiction.

The Spinning Heart

Donal Ryan

Bobby

MY FATHER still lives back the road past the weir in the cottage I was reared in. I go there every day to see is he dead and every day he lets me down. He hasn't yet missed a day of letting me down. He smiles at me; that terrible smile. He knows I'm coming to check is he dead. He knows I know he knows. He laughs his crooked laugh. I ask is he okay for everything and he only laughs. We look at each other for a while and when I can no longer stand the stench off of him, I go away. Good luck, I say, I'll see you tomorrow. You will, he says back. I know I will.

There's a red metal heart in the centre of the low front gate, skewered on a rotating hinge. It's flaking now; the red is nearly gone. It needs to be scraped and sanded and painted and oiled. It still spins in the wind, though. I can hear it creak, creak, creak as I walk away. A flaking, creaking, spinning heart.

When he dies, I'll get the cottage and the two acres that's left. He drank out Granddad's farm years ago. After I have him buried, I'll burn the cottage down and piss on the embers and I'll sell the two acres for as much as I can get. Every day he lives lowers the price I'll get. He knows that too; he stays alive to spite me. His heart is caked with muck and his lungs are shrivelled and black, but still he manages to draw in air and wheeze and cough and spit it back out. I was left go from

my job two months ago and it was the best medicine he could have got. It gave him an extra six months, I'd say. If he ever finds out how Pokey Burke shafted me, he'll surely make a full recovery. Pokey could apply to be beatified then, having had a miracle ascribed to him.

What reason would I have ever had not to trust Pokey Burke? He was young when I started working for him – three years younger than me – but the whole parish had worked for his auld fella and no one ever had a bad word to say much beyond the usual sniping. Pokey Burke was called after the Pope: Seán Pól, his parents christened him. But his brother Eamonn was not yet two years old when his parents brought the new baby home and he decided the new baby was Pokey and everybody agreed away with him and little Seán Pól was stuck with Pokey for a lifetime. And beyond, if he leaves anyone behind that will remember him or talk about him when he's gone.

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN something was up the day last year when Mickey Briars came in asking about his pension. Did ye boys know we're all meant to be in a proper pension? We didn't Mickey. Ya, with some crowd called *SIFF*. A proper pension like, not just the state one. Tis *extra*. Mickey's left hand was outstretched. It held the invisible weight of what he should have been given but wasn't. He tapped out his list of ungiven things, a bony finger slapping on sundried, lime-burnt flesh. There were tears in his yellow eyes. He was after being shafted. Robbed. And not even by a man, but by a little prick. That's what he couldn't get over.

He went over and started to beat the prefab door until Pokey opened it a crack and threw an envelope at him and slammed the door again, just as Mickey put his head down

and went to ram him like an old billy goat. Mickey's hard old skull splintered that door and it very nearly gave way. Pokey must have shat himself inside. I want my fuckin pension you little prick, Mickey roared and roared. I want my fuckin pension and the rest of my stamps. Come out you bollocks till I kill you. For a finish he went on a rampage around the place, turning over barrows and pulling formwork apart and when he picked up a shovel and started swinging, we all ran for cover. Except poor innocent Timmy Hanrahan: he only stood grinning back to his two ears like the gom that he is.

Auld Mickey Briars lamped Timmy Hanrahan twice across both sides of his innocent young head before we subdued him. We locked Mickey into the back of Seanie Shaper's Hiace until he became more philosophical for himself. Then we left him out and we all dragged crying, bleeding Timmy up the road to Ciss's and fed him pints for the evening. Mickey Briars softened his Jameson with tears and told Timmy he was sorry, he was always fond of him, he was a grand boy so he was, it was only that he thought he was laughing at him. I wouldn't laugh at you, Mickey, Timmy said. I know you wouldn't son. I know you wouldn't.

Pokey had shouted after us to put the first round of drink on his slate. There wasn't a man of us put his hand in his pocket all evening. Poor Timmy puked his guts up early on in the session and we slagged him – good-naturedly of course – and he laughed through his snots and his tears and the blood on his head caked up grand and came off in one thin scab before we sent him walking home for himself with a bag of chips and three battered sausages and a dose of concussion that could have easily killed him.

To this day there's a quare auld draw on one of his eyeballs, as if it's not able to keep time with its comrade. But it makes no odds to Tim; if there's a mirror in that house he hardly pays it any heed. And if he's thicker than he was before, who's to say? Who's to care? You don't need brains to shovel shit and carry blocks and take orders from rat-faced little men who'll use you all day and laugh at you all night and never pay in your stamps.

That's the worst of the whole thing. We all went in to draw our stamps and they only laughed at us. Stamps? What stamps? There wasn't a stamp paid in for any of us, nor a screed to the Revenue, either. I showed the little blonde girl at the hatch my last payslip. You could clearly see what was taken out: PRSI, PAYE, Income levy, pension. She held it in front of her with her nose wrinkled up like I was after wiping my armpit with it. Well? I said. Well what? What's the story? There's no story sir. I wasn't on the computer as an employee of Pokey Burke or anyone else. Did you never look for a P60 from your employer? A what, now? You're some fool, she said with her eyes. I know I am, my red cheeks said back. I think she started to feel sorry for me then. But when she looked at the line of goms behind me – Seanie Shaper, innocent Timmy, fat Rory Slattery and the rest of the boys, all clutching their dirty payslips – she started to feel more sorry for herself.

TRIONA LETS ON she doesn't blame me for being taken for a fool. Sure why would you have ever checked, love? It wasn't just you. He fooled everyone. My lovely, lovely Triona, she fairly let herself down when she married me. She could have gone with any of them smart boys that got the real money out of the boom: the architects, solicitors, auctioneers. They

were all after her. She went for me bald-headed though, as if to spite them. She put her hand in mine one night inside in town after the disco and that was that; she never let go of me. She saw more in me than I knew was there. She made me, so she did. She even softened my father. How did you pull her, he wanted to know. She won't stay with you. She's too good for you. You're her bit of rough, he said. All women goes through this auld phase. Ya, I thought, like my mother, except her auld phase didn't end until she died, twisted and knotted up and spent, exhausted, pure solid burnt out from him.

And now I can't pay for the messages. Christ on a bike. I had a right swagger there for a couple of years, thinking I was a great fella. *Foreman*, I was, clearing a grand a week. Set for life. Houses would never stop going up. I'd see babies like our own being pushed around the village below and think: lovely, work for the future, they'll all need their own houses some day too. We knew Pokey was a prick, but none of us cared. What matter what kind of a man he was, once the bank kept giving him money to build more and more? Once they buried that boy of the Cunliffes years ago and his auld auntie grabbed that land and divided it out among the bigshots, we all thought we were feckin elected.

That poor boy knew more than any of us. I remember when they carried him up to the Height, how the Penroses wheeled little one-legged Eugene out on to the street as he passed on his way to lie between his mother and father, and Eugene spat on the hearse and the big dirty gob slid down along the side window. He couldn't stop blackguarding that boy even and he dead. I remember him well. He got kicked around the place and all I ever did was laugh. He was the quietest boy you'd meet, he never threw a shape nor said a cross word, and he ended up getting shot down like a mad dog.

And everyone was glad. We all hated him. We all believed the newspapers, over the evidence of our own eyes and ears and a lifetime of knowing what we knew to be true. We wanted to hate him. He hadn't a hope.

I WAS as smart as any of the posh lads in school. I was well able for the English and geography and history. All those equations in physics and maths made sense to me. I couldn't ever let on I knew anything, though, that would have been suicide in my gang. I did pass maths even though I know I could have done honours. I never opened my mouth in English. A lad from the village wrote an essay one time and Pawsy Rogers praised him from a height; he said it showed great flair and imagination. He got kicked the whole way back to the village.

I had that King Lear's number from the start, well before the teacher started to break things down slowly for the thick lads: he was a stupid prick. He had it all and wanted more, he wanted the whole world to kiss his arse. I had Goneril and Regan pegged for bitches too, and I knew that Cordelia was the one who really, truly loved him. She wouldn't lie to him, no matter how much he wanted her to. You're a man and no more, she said, you're not perfect, but I love you. Cordelia was true of heart. There aren't many Cordelias in this world. Triona is one. I was scared before I knew I was, of facing down Josie Burke, and she told me. I was scared, imagine, even though I was in the right.

Pokey Burke left his father and mother to mop up after him. The auld lad said he didn't know where Pokey was, but I knew he was lying. He owes me money, Josie, I said. Does he now? Did he not pay you a fine wage? He was looking down at me from the third step before his front door. I might as well

have had a cap in my hand and called him sir. My stamps. My pension. My redundancy. I could hear my own voice shaking. The state looks after all that when fellas goes bust, he said. Go in as far as town to the dole office. He said no more, only kept looking down at me, down along his nose. Right so. Right so, I will. I didn't say I'd been there already, we all had, and it turned out Pokey had rowed us up the creek and left us there. I should have said I'd been on to the taxman and the welfare inspectors and the unions and they'd soon soften Pokey's cough, but I hadn't and I didn't and I turned away with a pain in my heart for the man I'd thought I was.

Triona said don't mind them love, don't think about them, the Burkes were always users and crooks dressed up like the salt of the earth. Everyone's seen their real faces now. The whole village knows what they've done. You're a worker and everyone knows it. People look up to you. They'll be fighting each other to take you on once things pick up. Everyone around here knows you're the only one can keep the reins on them madmen. Who else could be a foreman over the lads around here? Who else could knock a day's work out of fat Rory Slattery? And stop Seanie Shaper from trying to get off with himself? I laughed then, through my invisible tears. I couldn't stand myself. I couldn't stand her smiling through her fear and having to coax me out of my misery like a big, sulky child. I wish to God I could talk to her the way she wants me to, besides forever making her guess what I'm thinking. Why can't I find the words?

Right so, right so, right so. Imagine being such a coward and not even knowing it. Imagine being so suddenly useless.

Le Cœur Qui Tourne

Donal Ryan

Translated from the English by Marina Boraso

Bobby

Mon père vit toujours dans la maison où j'ai grandi, sur la route au-delà du barrage. Chaque jour je vais voir s'il est mort, et chaque jour il déçoit mes attentes. Pour ça, je lui fais confiance, il est toujours prêt. Il me sourit de son odieux sourire. Il sait très bien ce qui m'amène, et il n'ignore pas non plus que je sais qu'il le sait. Il rit de son rire tordu. Quand je lui demande si tout va bien, il rigole et puis voilà. Nous nous regardons un moment, et quand je n'en peux plus de sa présence infecte, je m'en vais. Bonne chance, je lui dis alors. Je reviendrai demain. Ça, j'y compte bien, me répond mon père. Et il a tout à fait raison.

Au centre du petit portail de sa maison, il y a un cœur en métal planté sur un pivot. Il est écaillé de partout, le rouge est presque effacé. Il aurait bien besoin qu'on le décape et qu'on le ponce, qu'on y passe un peu d'huile et une couche de peinture. Malgré tout il persiste à tourner au gré du vent. Et moi je l'entends grincer, crisser sans fin tandis que je m'éloigne. Un cœur qui s'effrite et qui tourne en grinçant.

Quand il mourra, la maison et les deux arpents qui restent seront à moi. La ferme de Grand-Père, il y a belle lurette qu'il l'a gaspillée en beuveries. Dès qu'on l'aura mis en terre, j'incendierai la maison et je pisserai sur les braises, et puis je vendrai ensuite les terres au plus offrant. Chaque jour de sa vie entame

la somme que j'en tirerai. Il le sait bien, ça. C'est pour me faire enrager qu'il s'accroche à la vie. Il n'a plus qu'un crassier à la place du cœur, ses poumons goudronneux sont tout rabougris, mais il se débrouille encore pour aspirer un peu d'air et le recracher dans une toux sifflante. Il y a deux mois de ça j'ai perdu mon boulot, et il n'aurait pas pu rêver d'un meilleur remontant. Je parie que ça lui a rallongé la vie de six mois. Si jamais il apprend comment je me suis fait entuber par Pokey Burke, sûr que ça va le requinquer pour de bon. Du coup, Pokey pourra prétendre à la béatification, vu qu'il aura accompli un miracle.

Qu'est-ce qui aurait pu me dissuader de lui faire confiance, à Pokey Burke ? Il était tout jeune quand j'ai commencé à travailler pour lui – trois ans de moins que moi – mais les gens du coin avaient tous bossé pour son père, et personne n'avait jamais eu à s'en plaindre, mis à part les râleurs habituels. Le vrai nom de Pokey, c'était Seán Pól, ses parents l'avaient baptisé comme ça en hommage au pape. Mais Eamonn, son frère aîné, n'avait même pas deux ans quand ils ont ramené le bébé à la maison, et il a décrété séance tenante que le petit s'appellerait Pokey. Tout le monde s'en est remis à sa décision, et ce nom de Pokey l'a suivi toute la vie. Même après sa mort, s'il y a encore des gens pour se souvenir de lui, ce sera toujours Pokey.

Quand Mickey Briars est venu réclamer sa pension de retraite, l'an dernier, j'aurais dû me douter de quelque chose. Hé, les gars, vous savez qu'on a droit à une vraie retraite, normalement ? Non, Mickey. Si, avec une caisse qui s'appelle le SIIF. Une vraie retraite, vous voyez, en plus de ce que paye l'État. Une *complémentaire*, quoi. Il tenait sa main gauche ouverte, comme pour soutenir le poids invisible de ce qui aurait dû lui revenir et dont il n'avait jamais vu la couleur. Et il énumérait

tout ce qu'on lui avait sucré, son doigt osseux tapant dans sa paume desséchée par le soleil et brûlée par la chaux. Ses yeux jaunes étaient remplis de larmes. Il venait de se faire baiser. Arnaquer. Même pas par un homme digne de ce nom, en plus, mais par un petit merdeux. Et ça, c'était pire que tout.

Mickey est allé frapper chez Pokey jusqu'à ce qu'il veuille bien lui lancer une enveloppe par la porte entrebâillée du pré-fabrique, avant de la lui claquer au nez pile à l'instant où il se penchait comme un vieux bouc pour lui mettre un coup de boule. Il a écaillé tout le bois avec sa tête de pioche, et le panneau a bien failli céder. Pokey devait chier dans son froc, là-dedans. Et Mickey qui gueulait à tout-va, Je veux ma retraite, petit con. Je veux cette putain de retraite et le restant de mes cotisations. Sors de là, salopard, je vais te faire la peau. À la fin il s'est complètement déchaîné, il a renversé des brouettes et arraché des coffrages, et quand on l'a vu ramasser une pelle et la brandir en l'air, on s'est tous mis à l'abri. À part ce malheureux Timmy Hanrahan, qui est resté planté là comme une bûche, avec un sourire jusqu'aux oreilles.

Avant qu'on arrive à le neutraliser, le vieux Mickey avait frappé ce pauvre innocent à la tête, deux coups de chaque côté. On a bouclé Mickey à l'arrière du camion de Seanie la Frime, le temps qu'il arrive à prendre les choses avec plus de philosophie. On a fini par le laisser sortir, et on a traîné Timmy, en pleurs et couvert de sang, jusqu'au pub de Ciss Brien où on l'a fait boire toute la soirée. Mickey Briars a coupé sa bière avec ses larmes, il a demandé pardon à Timmy en lui disant qu'il l'aimait bien, il était vraiment chouette, comme mec, il avait juste imaginé qu'il se foutait de lui, là. Mais je rigolerais jamais de toi, Mickey. Je sais, petit. Je sais.

Au moment où on partait, Pokey nous avait crié de mettre la première tournée sur son ardoise. Au final, on n'a pas déboursé un rond de toute la soirée. Le pauvre Timmy a gerbé copieusement en début de course et tout le monde l'a charrié – sans méchanceté, évidemment –, et lui s'est mis à rire à travers ses larmes et sa morve. Le sang avait coagulé sur sa tête, c'était spectaculaire. Une mince croûte s'est détachée juste avant qu'on l'expédie chez lui avec un sachet de frites, trois saucisses écabouillées et un traumatisme qui aurait très bien pu le tuer.

Depuis ce jour, il a un œil qui le tiraille bizarrement, comme s'il ne pouvait plus battre en rythme avec l'autre. Cela dit il s'en balance, Timmy. À supposer qu'il y ait un miroir dans cette baraque où il vit, il doit pas s'arrêter souvent devant. Et si jamais ça l'a rendu plus abruti, on a du mal à en juger. Qui ça intéresse, d'abord ? Pas besoin d'être futé pour pelleter des cochonneries et charrier des parpaings, ni pour se coltiner les ordres d'une face de rat qui t'exploite à longueur de journée, se fiche de ta poire en rentrant chez lui et s'arrange pour esquiver les charges.

Ç'a été le bouquet, ça. Quand on s'est présentés pour réclamer notre allocation chômage, on nous a ri au nez. Des cotisations à votre nom ? Rien du tout. Pas un sou n'avait été versé, rien n'avait été transmis à l'État. J'ai montré mon dernier bulletin de salaire à la petite blonde du guichet, on voyait bien les sommes qui avaient été retirées : la part Sécurité Sociale, l'Avance sur Impôt, les Contributions sur le Revenu Brut, la Cotisation Retraite. Elle a examiné la feuille en fronçant le nez, comme si je m'en étais servi pour m'éponger les aisselles. Alors ? Ben alors quoi ? C'est quoi, ces histoires ? Ce ne sont pas des histoires, monsieur. En résumé, je ne figurais pas dans le système comme salarié de Pokey Burke ni de qui que

ce soit. Vous n'avez jamais réclamé la P60 à votre employeur ? Pardon ? J'ai lu dans son regard qu'elle me prenait pour une andouille, et le rouge qui m'est monté aux joues lui a confirmé que j'étais bien d'accord. J'ai l'impression qu'à ce moment-là, elle a compatie. Mais quand elle a jeté un œil à la brochette de bras cassés qui attendait derrière moi – Seanie la Frime, Timmy l'arriéré, le gros Rory Slattery et les autres, tous en train de serrer leur fiche de paie crasseuse –, c'est surtout elle-même qu'elle a commencé à plaindre.

Triona répète qu'elle ne m'en veut pas de m'être laissé plumer. Chéri, tu n'avais aucune raison de vérifier, que je sache ? Tu n'es pas seul dans ce cas, il a grugé tout le monde. Ma merveilleuse Triona, je crois qu'elle n'a pas fait une affaire en choisissant de m'épouser. Elle aurait pu se caser facilement avec un des gros malins qui se sont vraiment rempli les poches au moment du boom économique. Architectes, notaires, commissaires-priseurs. Ils lui couraient tous après. Mais c'est sur moi qu'elle a jeté son dévolu sans vouloir en démordre, comme pour les faire enrager. Un soir, en sortant de boîte, elle a glissé sa main dans la mienne, et ça a suffi : elle ne m'a plus jamais lâché. Elle a perçu en moi des choses que j'ignorais posséder. C'est elle qui m'a fait, ni plus ni moins.

Elle a même réussi à amadouer mon père. Comment tu as pu alpaguer cette fille, il me demandait. Elle ne va pas rester, tu verras. Elle est trop bien pour toi. Avec toi elle s'encanaille, c'est tout. C'est un passage obligé pour toutes les femmes. C'est ça, je me disais, ma mère aussi est passée par là, sauf que ça a duré jusqu'à ce qu'elle meure, déformée, rabougrie, usée et épuisée. Consumée par lui.

Quand je pense que je n'ai même plus de quoi payer les commissions. Bordel de Dieu. Je me la suis racontée pendant deux ou trois ans, je me suis pris pour quelqu'un. *Contre-maître*, s'il vous plaît, je rentrais mille euros par semaine, à l'époque. Je me croyais arrivé. Le bâtiment, c'était l'avenir. Quand je croisais des bébés en poussette, au village, je pensais, Formidable, c'est du boulot pour plus tard. Ces gens-là auront forcément besoin de faire construire un jour ou l'autre. Pokey était un connard, on s'en rendait compte, mais tout le monde s'en fichait. Après tout, tant que la banque lui prêtait indéfiniment pour ses projets immobiliers, on n'était pas regardants sur la personne. Il y a des années de ça, quand on a enterré le fils Cunliffe et que sa vieille tante a raflé les terres pour les partager entre les gros richards, on s'est pris pour des élus, comme des cons.

Ce pauvre gosse en savait plus long que nous tous. Je me rappelle le jour où on l'a transporté au cimetière du Height, pour qu'il repose entre ses deux parents – les Penrose poussaient le petit Eugene dans son fauteuil, avec sa jambe amputée, et il a craché sur le corbillard au passage. Le gros glaviot dégoûtant a dégouliné le long de la vitre. Même mort, il fallait qu'il insulte ce garçon. Je le revois très bien. Tout le monde le malmenait, et moi je me contentais de rigoler. Pourtant c'était le gamin le plus tranquille que je connaissais, jamais il n'aurait provoqué ou injurié quelqu'un. Ce qui l'a pas empêché de finir abattu comme un chien enragé. On a tous été contents de ce qui lui arrivait, on le détestait tous. On s'est fiés à ce que racontaient les journaux, au mépris de ce qu'on avait pu observer et entendre pendant des années, au mépris d'une vérité qu'on connaissait tous. On avait envie de le haïr. Il était perdu d'avance.

En classe, je me défendais pas plus mal que tous ces gosses de riches. J'étais plutôt doué en anglais, en histoire et en géographie. En maths et en physique, je me dépatouillais de leurs équations. Cela dit, je me serais jamais avisé de me prendre pour une tronche – dans ma bande c'était l'équivalent du suicide. En maths, je me suis contenté de la moyenne alors que j'aurais pu viser la mention. Pendant le cours d'anglais, je restais bouche cousue. Un jour, un gamin du village a rendu une dissertation, et Pawsy Rogers ne tarissait pas d'éloges, il lui a dit que son travail révélait beaucoup de talent et d'imagination. Ce gus, il s'est ramassé des coups de pied aux fesses pendant tout le chemin du retour.

N'empêche, j'avais tout pigé aux tirades du roi Lear avant que le prof nous décortique la pièce pour aider les moins dégourdis. Quel sombre connard, celui-là. Il avait déjà tout et ça lui suffisait pas, il aurait voulu encore que le monde entier vienne lui lécher le cul. Moi, j'avais bien vu que c'étaient deux sales garces, Goneril et Régane, et que Cordélia était la seule à l'aimer, profondément et sincèrement. Simplement, elle refusait de lui raconter des mensonges, quoi qu'il fasse pour l'y inciter. Elle, elle lui disait, Tu n'es qu'un homme avec ses imperfections, mais je t'aime quand même. Cordélia avait le cœur pur. Les Cordélia sont rares en ce monde, mais Triona en est une. À l'idée d'affronter Josie Burke, j'avais la trouille sans même m'en rendre compte, et elle m'a dit ce qu'elle en pensait. Je ne réclamais que mon dû, et c'est moi qui avais peur.

Pokey Burke a déguerpi en laissant ses parents payer les pots cassés. Le vieux a prétendu qu'il ignorait où était Pokey, mais je sais qu'il m'a menti. Josie, je lui ai dit, Pokey me doit de l'argent. Et là, il m'a répliqué : Est-ce qu'il est au courant ?

Il ne t'a pas versé un bon salaire ? Il me regardait depuis la troisième marche du perron de sa maison, et j'étais pas loin de tenir ma casquette à la main et de lui donner du monsieur. Mes cotisations. Mon allocation chômage. Mes indemnités. Je me rendais compte que ma voix tremblait. L'État prend tout en charge quand une boîte met la clé sous la porte. Tu n'as qu'à aller en ville, au service des allocations. Il n'a rien ajouté, il m'a juste toisé de là-haut, avec son air suffisant. Bon, c'est ce que je vais faire. Je ne lui ai pas dit que j'avais déjà essayé, comme tous les autres, et qu'on s'était aperçus que Pokey avait quitté le navire en nous laissant en rade. J'aurais dû lui répondre que j'avais alerté l'administration fiscale, l'inspection du travail et les syndicats, et qu'ils allaient remonter les bretelles à Pokey, mais ça aurait été du bluff, et d'ailleurs je ne l'ai toujours pas fait. Je suis juste reparti comme ça, en ayant mal au cœur pour l'homme que j'avais cru être.

Triona m'a dit, Ne t'en fais pas, mon chéri, ces Burke ont toujours été des profiteurs et des crapules sapés comme les rois du pétrole. Aujourd'hui les gens les découvrent sous leur véritable jour. Tout le village est au courant de ce qu'ils ont fait. Tu es bon dans ton travail, ce n'est un secret pour personne. Les gens ont de l'estime pour toi, ils se battront pour t'embaucher dès que les affaires commenceront à reprendre. Par ici, ils savent tous que tu es le seul capable de tenir la bride à ce tas de barjots. Tu connais quelqu'un d'autre qui pourrait être leur contremaître ? À part toi, qui réussirait à mettre au boulot ce gros lard de Rory Slattery ? Et à empêcher Seanie la Frime d'essayer de se foutre en l'air ? Je me suis mis à rire à travers mes larmes invisibles. Je me dégoûtais. Je ne supportais pas de la voir sourire malgré son inquiétude, obligée de me cajoler et de me consoler de mes malheurs comme un grand enfant boudeur. Je donnerais n'importe quoi pour

arriver à prononcer les paroles qu'elle attend, au lieu de la laisser deviner indéfiniment ce que j'ai dans la tête. Pourquoi est-ce que je ne les trouve jamais, ces mots-là ?

C'est fou, d'être aussi lâche et de ne même pas le savoir. De se sentir d'un seul coup tellement inutile.



© Fabrizio Caperchi

Lorenzo Amurri

Apnea (2013)

Publishing House **Fandango Libri**

Biography

Writer and musician Lorenzo Amurri was born in Rome in 1971. As a musician, he has collaborated with a variety of Italian artists including Tiromancino and Franco Califano. His life story is marked by a tragic skiing accident that made him a quadriplegic. It was after this accident that he decided to devote himself to writing, first through a blog and then via short stories, one of which was published in the collection *Amore Caro*. *Apnea* is his first novel.

Synopsis

Lorenzo, 25-years-old and from a good family, is a rock guitarist dedicated to the philosophy of living in the moment. During a trip skiing, a collision with a chair lift pylon leaves him completely paralysed from the neck down. From that day begins a long convalescence for his body, but also for his soul – first in an Italian hospital, then in a Swiss clinic, and finally in his parents' house in Rome, where he shuts himself away to pour all his energies into pure self-pity. When his fiancée, who has supported and cared for him for over a year, resigns herself to leaving him, Lorenzo decides to commit suicide. That is unless something pushes him to win her back, and from there to regain his own life.

2. Il volo della speranza

L'ambulanza sfreccia verso l'aeroporto di Ciampino, scortata da una macchina della polizia. Un jet della Rega, una compagnia di soccorso privata, attende il mio arrivo per trasportarmi a Zurigo, più precisamente alla clinica Balgrist, specializzata nel recupero delle lesioni midollari. Sono impacchettato a dovere sulla barella. Il dottore che mi accompagna è seduto accanto al finestrino, impegnato nella lettura di un giornale. Non mi degna di uno sguardo per tutto il tragitto, sembra quasi infastidito dal noioso compito affidatogli. E perché mai dovrebbe curarsi di me? Ai suoi occhi sono l'equivalente di un pacco postale da recapitare a destinazione. Certo, non deve essere un grande dottore se gli affidano compiti da postino, senza offesa per i postini. L'unico che ogni tanto mi chiede se va tutto bene è l'infermiere. L'autista non fa che inveire contro la macchina della polizia rea di correre troppo:

“Ma che se corono 'sti deficienti, tra un po' ce serve a noi l'ambulanza”.

Arriviamo a destinazione. Rimango qualche minuto sulla pista di decollo mentre preparano il piccolo argano per trasferirmi a bordo. Il cielo è azzurro come non l'avevo mai visto, e l'aria è la più fresca e pulita che abbia mai respirato. Dopo un mese e mezzo di terapia intensiva sottoterra, e come se provassi tutto per la prima volta. Dopo un mese e mezzo attaccato a un respiratore; dopo broncoscopie varie; dopo una pancreatite; dopo risonanze magnetiche, tac e radiografie di

ogni tipo; dopo aver ingerito un barile di tranquillanti; dopo essere stato infilzato con aghi di tutte le misure; dopo un arresto cardiaco; dopo aver sentito l'odore della morte tutt'intorno, eccomi qua. In attesa di volare tra le braccia dei maghi d'oltralpe, che con le loro conoscenze, ridaranno vita alle mie mani. Perché così mi è stato detto: le gambe non le muoverai più, ma puoi recuperare le mani.

Le mani, contano solo le mani.

Ho ricordi vaghi del periodo passato nella terapia intensiva dell'ospedale di Terni. Per lo più immagini e sensazioni. Momenti piacevoli: il contatto fisico con mio fratello e mia madre ai quali, in due occasioni, avevano dato il permesso di accedere all'interno del reparto; le parole scambiate attraverso il citofono con amici e fidanzata; la disponibilità e la gentilezza di alcuni infermieri, che mi parlavano cercando di darmi forza. E momenti duri e dolorosi: quando mi issavano sull'impalcatura metallica munita di catene per pulirmi e cambiare le lenzuola del letto; quando pregavo il dottore di turno per ricevere massicce dosi di tranquillanti; il giorno in cui mi avevano messo su un fianco e avevo visto la fila di pazienti morenti che mi circondava e quello in cui avevo percepito - dai suoni e dai movimenti concitati del personale - che ne era morto uno. Ricordo che non capivo perché mi dicevano che avevo perso la sensibilità in gran parte del mio corpo: mi toccavo la pancia e la sentivo, non mi rendevo ancora conto che era la mano a provare la sensazione tattile e non viceversa. E un odore particolare che non ho più sentito: l'odore chimico dei prodotti per le pulizie mischiato a quello che emanavano i corpi immobili dei miei compagni di sventura. Un odore di medicinali che i pori di ognuno trasformava e personalizzava; un concentrato di pensieri, paure, speranze e sogni che

si amalgamavano come gli ingredienti di una ricetta, e rimanevano sospesi nell'aria chiusa del reparto, sospesi tra la vita e la morte. Ricordo anche che una delle prime conversazioni avute con mio fratello riguardava il sesso. Mi rassicurava sul fatto che, nonostante la paralisi, sarei stato perfettamente in grado di farlo:

“I tetraplegici possono avere appuntamenti”.

Ero rimasto alcuni minuti in silenzio, non riuscivo a capire la frase:

“In che senso?”.

“Ai tetraplegici gli funziona tutto in mezzo alle gambe, ai paraplegici in gran parte dei casi no.”

“E io sono paraplegico o tetraplegico?”

“Tetraplegico Lo, tu sei tetraplegico.”

Lo aveva detto con una certa soddisfazione. Quella parola mi faceva paura, mi descriveva e mi collocava in un luogo da dove non sarei più uscito, come un ladro in galera, ma io non avevo rubato niente, al contrario ero stato derubato. Avevo poi anche capito la frase iniziale, l'aveva letta su un giornale specializzato statunitense: “*Quadriplegics can have dates*”. La parola *date* in America significa anche appuntamento galante. Non aveva perso tempo il fratellone. Internet non era ancora la fonte meravigliosa di notizie da cui abbeverarsi che e adesso, e lui, attraverso le sue innumerevoli conoscenze, si era fatto recapitare tutto lo scibile umano cartaceo sulle mielolesioni. La cosa buffa e che tra la moltitudine di articoli medico-scientifici di cui doveva essersi cibato per giorni, quello che mi aveva riportato con estrema eccitazione riguardava il sesso. Non potrai più suonare, avrà pensato, ma il cazzo ti funziona ancora. A me non interessava molto

anzi, mi aveva infastidito. Prima che le dosi massicce di tranquillanti che mi iniettavano liquefacessero quelle parole, mi ero chiesto che importanza potesse avere il sesso di fronte al delirio in cui mi trovavo. Era una frase dettata dal dispiacere, non sapeva cosa dirmi per farmi coraggio e gli era sembrata una grande notizia, una luce da seguire nel buio pesto che mi circondava. In effetti era un'ottima notizia, ma per capirne l'importanza ci sarebbe voluto ancora tanto tempo.

E febbraio ma io sento caldo, un caldo insopportabile. Mi issano a bordo e mi posizionano in un apposito loculo con finestrino, dotato di tutto cio che puo essermi utile: dall'ossigeno al defibrillatore. Fa caldo anche sull'aereo: Johanna dirige il piccolo getto d'aria verso il mio viso. Non erano ammesse visite all'interno della terapia intensiva, potevo vedere le persone attraverso le vetrate che ne formavano il perimetro e, per comunicare, mi attaccavano un citofono all'halo in prossimità dell'orecchio. Ora posso toccarla, posso sentire le sue mani, ma non mi viene naturale. E ancora poco importante rispetto a quello che succede, o ancora non so come si fa. L'aereo decolla. La sento parlare col dottore responsabile e con la hostess-infermiera. Non capisco cosa dicono e neanche m'interessa.

Non mi piace volare. Se mi funzionassero le mani, potrei distrarmi suonando. Durante un volo di ritorno dall'America, qualche anno fa, due stuart molto simpatici mi avevano chiesto di fargli sentire come suonavo. Al tempo, ancora lasciavano portare le chitarre in cabina. Alla mia paura che potessi disturbare gli altri passeggeri avevano risposto divertiti:

“Suona tranquillo, ci pensiamo noi ai passeggeri”.

Erano bastati una decina di minuti di blues a soddisfarli, e a farmi guadagnare un viaggio con trattamento da prima classe.

Guardo fuori dal finestrino: l'azzurro del cielo e ancora piu intenso. E se l'aereo precipitasse? Sarebbe il colmo della tristezza. Gia vedo i titoli dei giornali:

“Dopo un grave incidente cade con il volo che lo portava nella clinica specializzata”.

Forse sarebbe piu triste per i miei compagni di viaggio, io sono un pezzo avanti. Con questo pensiero che mi rimbalza in testa chiudo gli occhi. Quando li riapro siamo gia atterrati e mi stanno caricando sull'ambulanza.

Continuo a sentire caldo, mi manca l'aria.

Mentre il dottore e Johanna continuano a conversare.

Praticamente lui le sta raccontando la sua vita, i suoi progetti per il futuro: adora il suo lavoro e vorrebbe far parte dell'associazione Medici Senza Frontiere, per girare il mondo e aiutare il prossimo. Ci sta provando spudoratamente il dottorino, magari tra poco le chiede di andare con lui. Attiro l'attenzione facendo un rumore secco con la bocca, come si fa quando si monta un cavallo o quando si chiama il gatto. Ho usato questo metodo durante la permanenza in terapia intensiva, e l'unico modo che ho per farmi sentire da quando porto la tracheotomia:

“Apri un finestrino, non si respira qui dentro”.

Johanna estende la richiesta al dottorino che si mette a ridere:

“Guarda che fa freddo fuori, siamo a febbraio”.

“Perche non ti fai i cazzi tuoi e apri questo maledetto finestrino invece di fare il fico con la mia fidanzata? E tu smettila di flirtare con l'imbecille e aprilo tu il finestrino!”

In effetti, considerando la situazione e l'andamento del nostro rapporto negli ultimi mesi, sfruttare l'occasione non

sarebbe affatto una cattiva idea. In fuga con il dottorino sul jet privato, si scrollerebbe di dosso un quintale di problemi in un colpo solo. Magari ci sta anche pensando.

La mia voce si perde dentro la cannula e il labiale e impossibile da decifrare. Johanna si rende comunque conto della mia alterazione e fa aprire un minimo il finestrino, il risultato è lo stesso: fa sempre caldo.

Arriviamo alla clinica. Il passaggio dall'ambulanza all'interno della struttura è bellissimo; fa veramente freddo, ma è quello di cui avevo bisogno, peccato duri troppo poco. Il dottorino effettua il passaggio di consegne: un'ora e mezza di volo e venti minuti di ambulanza per la modica cifra di diecimila dollari, il tutto condito dalla presenza di una biondona svedese. Ti è andata proprio bene stavolta. Incontro mia sorella Valentina che mi ha preceduto per sistemare la burocrazia del caso. E lei la figura pragmatica in famiglia. Brava a organizzare le situazioni, a trovare le soluzioni per risolvere i problemi. Ha sempre avuto una marcia in più. Certe volte eccedeva nel cercare di programarmi la vita, ma lo faceva perché si preoccupava per il mio futuro. Essendo molto più grande di me, mi ha fatto da mamma oltre che da sorella. Dalla scomparsa di nostro padre è diventata il mio punto di riferimento principale.

La clinica sembra molto grande, per quello che posso vedere da steso, i soffitti sono alti e molte pareti sono vetrate. A quelle più ampie sono attaccati grandi adesivi di uccelli neri stilizzati, mi spiegheranno in seguito che servono per evitare che gli uccellini residenti nel parco circostante ci si schiantino contro. La terapia intensiva qui è molto diversa da quella italiana: le visite all'interno sono ammesse senza limitazioni orarie e di vetrata ce n'è una grande che si affaccia sul parco.

Sono circondato da infermieri e dottori che trafficano sul mio corpo insensibile, l'unica cosa che sento è l'ago cannula che mi infilano nel braccio. Sono tutti indaffarati tranne una, nera e molto alta rispetto agli altri, che mi guarda e sorride, un sorriso rassicurante. Troppe facce sconosciute mi stanno innervosendo. Come se avessero sentito il mio pensiero, quasi simultaneamente mi lasciano stare. Al loro posto appaiono, come per magia, Johanna e Valentina. Mi accarezzano il viso e le braccia. All'improvviso mi rendo conto di quanto mi sia mancato il contatto fisico; di quanto sia importante sentire l'odore e il calore delle persone a cui vuoi bene, di cui ti fidi. Mi viene da piangere:

“Ho fatto qualcosa di male per meritarmi tutto questo?”.

“Ma che ti viene in mente, no”, risponde mia sorella.

E allora che ci faccio qui? Non ci voglio stare qui, portatemi via.

Apnea

Lorenzo Amurri

Translated from the Italian by Frederika Randall

2. Destination, Hope

The ambulance is speeding towards Ciampino Airport, a police car escorting us. A jet owned by the private emergency service Rega is waiting to take me to Zurich, to the Balgrist University Hospital department specialising in treating spinal cord injuries. I'm neatly packed into the gurney and the doctor travelling with me sits by the window, reading a newspaper. He gives me not a glance during the whole trip; he seems to think this boring task he's been assigned is a drag. And why should he care? In his eyes, I'm just a parcel to be delivered. True, he's probably not much of a doctor if he's being used as a postman—no offence to postmen. The only one here who occasionally asks if I'm okay is the nurse. The driver just curses the police in the car ahead, criminals, as he sees it, who are driving too fast.

“The way these idiots are going, we'll be the ones needing an ambulance.”

We arrive at Ciampino. For several minutes I'm out on the runway while they ready the winch to lift me up to the plane. The sky is bluer than I've ever seen it, and the air fresher and cleaner than any air I've ever inhaled. After a month and a half of intensive care underground, it's as if I were tasting everything for the first time. A month and half attached to a respirator, undergoing bronchoscopy numerous times, suffering a bout of acute pancreatitis, and having MRIs, CT

scans and X-rays of all kinds. Now, after ingesting a gallon of tranquillisers, being stuck with needles of all sizes, cardiac arrest, weeks when the smell of death was all around me, here I am. Waiting to fly into the arms of sorcerers across the Alps whose skills will bring life back to my hands. For this is what I have been told: you'll never move your legs again, but you might regain the use of your hands.

Hands, only the hands matter.

My memories of the time spent in intensive care at the hospital in Terni are vague, mostly images and sensations. Pleasurable moments: physical contact with my brother and mother, who on two occasions were allowed into the intensive care unit; words exchanged on the intercom with friends and my girlfriend; the kindness and help I received from several nurses, who talked to me and tried to keep my spirits up. And then some hard, painful moments: when they hauled me up with a metal lift on chains to clean me and change the sheets; when I pleaded with the doctor on call to obtain massive doses of tranquillisers; the day they rested me on my side and I saw the row of dying patients all around me, and the day I understood – hearing the noises and the scurrying around me – that one of them had died. I remember how I could not understand why they had told me I'd lost sensibility in most of my body, for when I touched my belly, I could feel it: I still didn't realize that it was my hand that still had a sense of touch, and not my belly. There was an odour, too, a particular odour I've never smelled since: the chemical smell of cleaning products mixed with the bodily smells of my unlucky companions. A medicinal odour transformed and personalized by pores; a concentrate of hopes, fears, thoughts and dreams blended together like prescription ingredients and floating on the unit's stale

air, there between life and death. I remember, too, that one of the first conversations I had with my brother had to do with sex. Despite the paralysis, he reassured me, I would be perfectly able to have it. Sex.

“Quadriplegics can date.”

“In quadriplegics everything between the legs works, while for paraplegics in most cases it doesn’t.”

“And I’m paraplegic or quadriplegic?”

“Quadriplegic, Lorenzo, you’re quadriplegic.”

He said it with a certain satisfaction. The word frightened me, it defined me, consigned me to a place I would never leave, like a thief in jail, though I hadn’t stolen anything, on the contrary, I’d been robbed. I then understood his opening remark, something he had read in an American medical magazine: *Quadriplegics can date*. In America the word *date* means a romantic appointment, or to engage in one. My big brother hadn’t wasted any time. In those days, the internet was not the wondrous source of information it is today, so he relied on his many acquaintances and collected all the printed matter on spinal cord lesions known to man. The funny thing was that out of all that mass of medical-scientific articles he had gorged himself on for days, the one he told me about with the greatest excitement concerned sex. You’ll never play the guitar again, he must have thought, but your dick is still going to work. I wasn’t all that interested; worse, I found it irritating. Before the giant dose of tranquillisers they were injecting obliterated the words, I thought to myself what does sex matter when faced with this crazy mess I’m in? It was something that came to him out of his own displeasure; not knowing what to say to buck me up, it had seemed to him a great piece of news,

a guiding light in the utter darkness around me. In fact, it was excellent news, but it would be quite some time before I was able to take it in.

It's February but I feel hot, unbearably hot. They haul me on board and slot me into a purpose-built loculus, a grave-niche with everything I might need from oxygen to a defibrillator. It's hot on the plane too, and Johanna directs the air nozzle toward my face. No visits had been permitted inside intensive care. I could see people through the glass perimeter wall, and I could communicate through a microphone near my ear attached to the halo brace on my head. Now I can touch her, I can feel her hands touch me, but it doesn't come easily. It's still unimportant compared to what's happening, and I don't yet know how it's done. The plane takes off. I can hear her talking to the doctor and the nurse/flight attendant. I can't understand what they're saying and I'm not interested.

I don't like to fly. If my hands were working, I might distract myself playing music. On a return flight from America a few years before, two really nice flight attendants had asked to hear how I play. At the time, they still let you carry a guitar onto an airplane. When I said I was concerned I'd bother the other passengers, they replied, grinning:

"You just play, we'll take care of the passengers."

Ten minutes of the blues was all I needed to get first class treatment all the way.

I look out the window, and the blue of the sky is still very strong. And if the plane crashes? What could be sadder? I can already see the headlines:

'Following a grave accident, injured man dies in plane crash en route to spinal care clinic.'

Maybe it would be sadder for my fellow passengers; I'm already half there. That thought bobbing around in my head, I close my eyes. When I reopen them we have landed and they are loading me into the ambulance.

I still feel hot, and breathless.

The doctor and Johanna are chatting away.

Effectively, he's telling her the story of his life and his plans for the future. He loves his job and wants to join Doctors Without Borders so he can travel the world and assist other people. He's trying it on shamelessly, our Doctor-boy. Pretty soon he'll be asking her to go to bed with him. I make a sharp, hard clucking noise to get their attention, like when you mount a horse or call a cat. It's a method I devised while in intensive care, the only way I have to be heard with the tracheotomy in place:

"Open a window, I can't breathe in here."

Johanna passes the request to Doctor-boy, who just laughs.

"Come on, it's cold outside, this is February."

"Why don't you mind your own business and open the goddamn window instead of playing Romeo with my girlfriend? And you, stop flirting and open the window yourself!"

In fact, considering the situation and the way our relationship has been going in the past few months, it wouldn't be such a bad idea for her to seize the occasion. By escaping with Doctor-boy on a private jet, she'd wriggle out of a ton of problems in one fell swoop. Maybe she's even thinking about it.

My voice shrinks inside the tube and it's impossible to read my lips. Johanna, though, sees I'm irritated and gets the window open, but even so, it's still hot.

We get to the clinic. The stretch between the ambulance and the inside of the building is fabulous; it's truly cold, but that's what I need, and the pity is it doesn't last long enough. Doctor-boy fills out the forms to hand over. An hour and a half flight, 20 minutes in the ambulance, for the modest sum of \$10,000, sweetened by the presence of a big blond Swedish girl. Okay, things are going my way this time. My sister Valentina, who has come up before me to take care of the bureaucratic details, appears. She's the pragmatic one in the family. Good at organizing things, finding solutions, resolving problems. She's always been a bit sharper than the rest of us that way. There were times when she over-organized my life, but she did it because she was concerned about my future. As she's a lot older, she's been a mother to me as well as a sister. Since our father died, she's my main point of reference.

The clinic appears to be quite large, from what I can see lying down. The ceilings are high, and many of the exterior walls are windows. On the largest ones are affixed huge stickers of stylised blackbirds, and later it will be explained to me that they are there to prevent the birds that live in the surrounding grounds from slamming into the glass. Here, intensive care is quite different from my experience in Italy: visits inside the ward are permitted at any hour, and the large glass window looks out on the grounds outside. I'm surrounded by nurses and doctors who are fiddling with my unfeeling body, and the only thing I do feel is the cannula needle that goes into my arm. All of them are busy doing something except for one, a black woman much taller than the others, who looks at me and smiles, a reassuring smile. Too many unknown faces, making me nervous. Then, as if they'd read my mind, they all leave almost at once. And in their place, Johanna and Valentina appear, as if by magic. They stroke my face, my

arms. All of a sudden I realize how much I have missed physical contact, how much it matters to feel the warmth and smell the smell of people you love, people you trust. I feel the tears coming.

“Did I do something terrible to deserve all this?”

“What are you talking about? Of course not,” says my sister.

“Well then, what am I doing here? I don’t want to be here. Take me away.”



© Agnė Gintalaitė

Undinė Radzevičiūtė

Žuvys ir drakonai (2013)

Fishes and Dragons

Publishing House **Baltos lankos**

Biography

Undinė Radzevičiūtė was born in 1967. She graduated from the Vilnius Academy of Arts where she studied art history, theory and criticism. She worked for ten years as a creative director for international advertising agencies including Saatchi & Saatchi and Leo Burnett.

Her first short novel was published in 2003 and was favourably reviewed. *Fishes and Dragons* is her fourth and biggest book so far. Two of her earlier novels have been translated into Russian, and one into Estonian. Her new novel is due to be published in 2015.

Synopsis

The title of the book symbolically refers to two cultures: Christian European and traditional Chinese. Two different stories are interwoven here: one depicts the life of a Jesuit painter in 18th century China, the other mostly takes place in an old-town flat of a present-day European city. The flat is inhabited by an old woman, her daughter and two adult granddaughters; it eventually turns out that one of them is writing the Chinese line of the book.

The novel is suffused with dialogue that can be seen through the prism of Zen principles (as the author herself has suggested). On the other hand, the misunderstandings and playfulness in the book creates a comic effect with a tinge of the absurd.

With her signature lapidary style, Undinė Radzevičiūtė has written a novel where the texture of the modern European storyline is coloured with oblique reflections of traditional Chinese culture and mentality. The Chinese narrative subtly reveals the unbridgeable gap between Christian European and traditional Chinese mindsets in the context of the failure of the Jesuits' missionary effort.

Žuvys ir drakonai

Undinė Radzevičiūtė

1.

Komisija vėl ilgai abejoja prie jo arklių.

Kai kurie komisijos nariai primerkia tai vieną, tai kitą akį.

Kai kurie – kaišioja smailius liežuvius, tarsi bandytų tuos arklius palaižyti. Iš tolo.

Kai kurie – išverčia apatinę lūpą, kai kurie žvai-ruoja siauromis akimis, kai kurie pučia žandus.

Kaip kokie eunuchai Imperatoriškojo teatro scenoje.

Komisijos nariams atrodo: arklių galvos per mažos, o čiurnos per plonos. Aiškinimas, kad tai – Iberijos arkliai, ir kad jie kaip tik tokie ir turi būti, nepadedą.

Komisija, atrodo, abejoja ne tik dėl Iberijos arklių, bet ir dėl pačios Iberijos.

Ji įsitikinusi: pasaulyje egzistuoja tik mongolų arklys.

Laukinis mongolų arklys.

Kuklus, atkaklus ir šiek tiek klastingas.

Tiek, kiek gali būti klastingas laukinis arklys.

Trumpomis kojomis ir rudomis baltomis dėmėmis.

Kaip karvė.

Ir arklio uodega turi būti balta. Būtinai. Ir būtinai turi siekti žemę, sako komisija, o karčiai būtinai turi dengti akis.

Kam jiems reikalingi nieko nematantys arkliai?

Dar komisija sako: jo arkliai netikri, nes ramūs, o arkliai ramūs nebūna.

Pakartotinis tvirtinimas, kad tokie, kaip tik tokie ir yra Iberijos arkliai, tik padidina komisijos nepasitikėjimą.

Netiki jie nei Iberija, nei Iberijos arkliais.

Dabar jau atvirai.

Komisijos nariams tai – įžūli ir bjauriai tiesmuka apgaulė, galinti net ižveisti Imperatorių.

Žinoma, Penktasis Imperatorius pats neis arklių žiūrėti.

Komisija sako: Imperatoriui ir nėra ko eiti žiūrėti, nes šitie arkliai neturi kaulų.

Jis bando įtikinti žinovus, kad arkliams kaulai nėra būtini, ir girdi savo balse gaidžius.

Geriau jau Penktasis Imperatorius pats ateitų pasižiūrėti, nes Tėvas Kastiljonė pradeda nebetikėti nei savo arkliais, nei Iberija, nei savo misija šitoje žemėje.

Komisija abejoja dėl arklių kaulų garsiai, po to tyliai, o po to pereina prie peizažo kaulų.

Dėl peizažo kaulų komisija visiškai neabejoja.

Jų nėra.

Komisijos nariai reikalauja, kad peizaže tie „kaulai“ būtų ir kuo aiškiausiai matytųsi.

Ir tvirtina: geriausia – jei peizažą aplink arklius tapytų kinas.

Gal Leng Mei arba koks kitas kinas.

Yra čia tų kinų.

Tokiais momentais Tėvas Kastiljonė staiga pradeda nebesuprasti kiniškai ir jam ne visai aišku – kas dabar bus.

Komisija dar nenusprendė, tarsi tik pasakė: nenorinti Tėvui Kastiljonei patikėti ne tik medžių už arklių, bet ir priekyje.

Ji tik prašo jo nupiešti perspektyvos eskizą, o Leng Mei ar kas kitas pagal jį nutapys peizažą su visais medžiais ir jų „kaulais“.

„Kaulais“ kinai vadina daiktų, gyvūnų ir žmonių kontūrus.

Kinams, skirtingai nei europiečiams, kontūrai svarbiau nei erdvė.

O už kontūrus jiems svarbesnė tik tuštuma.

Imperatoriskajai meno žinovų komisijai jokia itališka perspektyva nereikalinga.

Jiems užtenka kiniškos miglos nusileidžiančios.

Nuo kalnų.

Arba pakylančios iš ežero ir uždengiančios visus peizažo erdvės trūkumus.

Perspektyva reikalinga Imperatoriui.

Tik neaišku, kaip ilgai.

Bet apie tai, kad norėtų perspektyvos, Imperatorius pasako tik per komisiją.

Dar komisija Tėvui Kastiljonei sako:

peizaže medžiai ir kalnai neturi būti panašūs į tikrus, kur nors matytus medžius ir kalnus;

Imperatoriumi nereikalingas konkretaus medžio ar kalno atvaizdas;

medis ar kalnas turi apibendrinti visus kada nors matytus medžius ir kalnus;

konkreto medžio tapyba – tai amatininkiškas užsiėmimas;

jeigu į ką nors peizažas ir turi būti panašus, tai visų pirma į senovės kinų peizažo meistrų kūrinius. Visą reikalavimų sarašą komisija vardijs nuobodžiu unisonu.

Kastiljonė supranta: kinai nori, kad medis būtų nepanašus į medį.

Jis galvoja: niekingiau ir žemiau už arklių tapymą gali būti tik natiurmortai.

Su peiliu padalintu melionu ir omarais.

Ir citrinomis.

Spirale.

Nunerta oda.

Tokius natiurmortus geriausia ne tapyti, o valgyti.

Tegu juos tapo olandai.

Kastiljonė klausosi komisijos šiek tiek palenkęs galvą į priekį.

Kastiljonė stengiasi, kad jo galva nenusvirtų.

Nei į kairę, nei į dešinę.

Jis stengiasi stovėti nuleidęs akis ir nežiūrėti tiesiai į komisiją.

Tik įstrižai.

Komisijos nariai kalbasi.

Kastiljonė stengiasi nesiraukyti.

Ir neraukti nosies.

Ir išsaugoti vidinę ramybę.

Ir neatrodyti nusiminęs.

Nors maloniam atrodyti jam greičiausiai irgi nesiseka.

Kastiljonei norisi žiovauti, bet jis stengiasi.
Nežiovauti.
Ir neprikąsti lūpos.

Jis du kartus pereina per savo dirbtuvę.
Santūriai.
Oriai ir solidžiai.
Kastiljonė daro viską tiksliai taip, kaip prisakė
Ignatius Loyola.

Kalbama, kad prieš suformuluodamas šias elgesio taisykles Ignatius Loyola labai daug galvojo.
Net verkė.
Ir septynis kartus malda kreipėsi į...

Sudėjus arklių eskizus į vieną akivaizdą – juose nėra šeimininko, sako komisija.
Šimtas arklių ir šeši piemenys paveiksle – tik svečiai.
Kastiljonė siūlo komisijai išsirinkti vieną arklių.
Ir jis nutapys tą arklių didesnę už kitus.
Kinai juokiasi.
Kastiljonė klausia, ar komisija nori, kad jis nutaptų Imperatorių.
Kinai nesijuokia.
Kastiljonė dar nematė, kad taip greitai juoką pakeistų tylą.
Tylą nutraukia komisijos pirmininkas Syma Cao.
Jis pasitaiso prie diržo kabantį mėlyno šilko maišelį, siuvinėtą aštriais trikampaiais, auksiniais kalnais ir banguotomis upėmis.

Komisijos pirmininkas Syma Cao aukštesnis už daugelį kinų ir apsirengęs puošniau už kitus komisijos narius. Jį iš tolo galima atskirti iš leopardo kepurės. Jei nežinotum jo istorijos ir negirdėtum jo kalbant, galėtum pagalvoti: jis per daug pasipūtęs, per daug išdidus ir per aukštai įvertintas. Ir greičiausiai – be pagrindo.

Syma Cao – eunuchas.

Komisijoje – vienintelis eunuchas.

Kiti meno žinovų komisijos nariai – aukštesniojo rango mandarinai*.

Nuo kitų eunuchų meno komisijos pirmininkas Syma Cao skiriasi ne tik tuo, kad nedvokia šlapimu, bet ir ypatingu protu.

Daugelis Kastiljonės Uždraustajame Mieste sutiktų eunuchų tinka tik vartus atidarinėti, Imperatoriaus žmonas šilko rūbais aprenginėti ir pjesėse žandus s pūsti.

Arba moteris vaidinti.

Kastiljonės mokinyš Leng Mei – gali būti, komisijos pageidavimu jam bus patikėta nutapyti peizažą už arklių, – Tėvui Kastiljonei pasakojo – ir kaip atsitiktinai išgirsta žmogaus istorija gali pakeisti nuomonę apie žmogų ir netgi sukelti jam pagarbą ir meilę – taigi, mokinyš Leng Mei Kastiljonei pasakojo: komisijos pirmininkas Syma Cao tapo eunuchu ne savo ir ne šeimos noru, o Senojo Ketvirtojo Imperatoriaus sprendimu.

Ir jis kilęs ne iš žemiausių, kaip kiti eunuchai, o iš aukščiausių visuomenės sluoksnių.

* Mandarinai – patarėjai. Portugalai šį žodį perėmė iš malajų kalbos.

Jo tėvas buvo, Senojo Ketvirtitojo Imperatoriaus manymu, nepaklusnus ir pavojingas generolas. Imperatorius įtakingąjį generolą liepė suimti, o dešimtmečiam jo sūnui – nupjauti genitalijas. Didelės tragedijos neįvyko. Po to paaiškėjo: Senasis Imperatorius gal ir klydo. Dėl generolo neištikimybės. Patikėjo intrigomis. Išaiškėjus tiesai, berniuką Senasis Imperatorius liepė atvežti į Uždraustąjį Miestą. Čia jis užaugo ir padarė karjerą. Jam vienam iš nedaugelio eunuchų leista puoštis tamsiai mėlynais drabužiais: siuvinėtais upėmis ir trikampiais kalnais. Be to, jis gali kreiptis tiesiai į Imperatorių. Kiti meno žinovų komisijos nariai – mandarinai tokio familiarumo sau negali leisti.

Syma Cao rūmuose užima tikrai išskirtinę poziciją. Net nežiūrint į tai, kad Cingų dinastija eunuchus vertina visiškai kitaip nei prieš tai valdžiusi. Nei Mingų, – labai tyliai sako Leng Mei. Ką reiškia – visai kitaip? – klausia Kastiljonė. Cingų dinastijos Imperatoriai nebelaiko eunuchų svarbiais žmonėmis, – sako Leng Mei.

Komisijos pirmininkas Syma Cao nutraukia komisijos narių juoką ir paaiškina Kastiljonei: „šeimininku“ peizaže kinai vadina ne Imperatorių, o didelį kalną. Dažniausiai tapomą dešinėje paveikslo pusėje. Visa kita peizaže vadinama „svečiais“.

Kinijoje – kaip ir Europoje, galvoja Kastiljonė.

Kiekvienas žmogus turi savo vietą.

Savo rangą.

Bet Kinijoje kiekvienas vertinamas ne atskirai, o tik ryšyje su kuo nors kitu.

Kiekvienoje situacijoje žmogus yra arba mokytojas, arba mokinys, arba tėvas, arba sūnus, arba šeimininkas, arba svečias.

Kinijoje savo rangą turi net peizažo elementai, galvoja Kastiljonė.

– Gal Jūs dar norite, kad aš atsakyčiau į klausimą, kodėl du tūkstančiai pirmųjų metų pabaigoje „mesendžeriu“ susirašinėjau erotinėmis temomis? Su rašytoju iš Maltos, – ekrane paklausė Mama Nora.

– Taip. Kodėl? – paklausė žurnalistė ekrane.

Miki pagarsino televizorių, nes to gestų kalba pareikalavo Senelė Amigorena, ir pasipiktinusi pasakė:

– Kodėl-kodėl? Kodėl-kodėl? Kodėl žurnalistai neturi kitų klausimų? Tik tą „Kodėl“. Ką norėjai, tą ir darei tais du tūkstančiai pirmaisiais metais. Tu dabar ką, turi prieš visą tautą atsiklaupusi ant kelių su ašaromis akyse atsiprašyti? O po to gal dar eiti bučiuoti vėliavos? Tu juk ne prezidentė, – pyko ir piktinosi Miki.

Miki dar turėjo jėgų piktintis, bet niekas nebeturėjo jėgų klausytis, visus domino pokalbis ekrane.

– Tu tikrai du tūkstantis pirmaisiais metais kalbėjaisi „mesindžeriu“ erotinėmis temomis su rašytoju iš Maltos? – paklausė Miki.

– Jis visiškai neturėjo nei humoro jausmo, nei analitinio mąstymo, – atsakė Mama Nora. – Tai ir nebuvo apie ką daugiau kalbėtis.

– O ką, du tūkstančiai pirmi metai buvo kuo nors ypatingi? – paklausė Senelė Amigorena. – Tik tuo, kad jie buvo seniai, – pasakė Mama Nora.

– Televizoriuje tu atro dai geriau, – pasakė Senelė Amigorena ir paaiškino: – Storesnė.

Senelė Amigorena sėdi prieš televizorių pasipuošusi jaunystėje našlaitėmis siuvinėtu violetiniu megztuku.

Ji taip išsipusčiusi, tarsi sėdėtų ne šia pus, o anapus ekrano. Bet jai negalima šito sakyti.

Senelei Amigorenai jau aštuoniasdešimt metų ir ji labai nemėgsta žodžio „anapus“.

Užtat jai labai patinka žodis „išgrūdo“.

Dabar ji sėdi priešais televizorių su savo reprezentatyviniu kostiumu. Ne tokiomis iškilmingomis akimirkomis Senelei Amigorenai patinka ir čigonų stilius.

– „Chanel“? – paklausė Senelė Amigorena, rodydama į Mamos Noros juodą megztuką ekrane.

– Beveik, – atsakė Mama Nora.

– Beveik „Chanel“? – paklausė Senelė Amigorena.

Labai gerai, kai namie yra bent vienas toks ypatingas vardas.

To visai užtenka, kad visi kiti tuose namuose būtų pavadinti kaip nors paprasčiau.

Ilgai čia visi galvojo, kad „Amigorena“ reiškia – *visų draugė*, bet vėliau, pasidomėjus ispaniškų žodžių žodynu, paaiškėjo, kad *amigo-reno* ispaniškai reiškia *draugas-vyriškos giminės šiaurės elnias*.

Tai paslaptis, kuri niekada netaps tokia vieša, kad Senelė Amigorena apie ją sužinotų.

[...]

Senelė Amigorena gimė Argentinoje.

Jos tėvai ten emigravo per Pirmąjį pasaulinį karą, o po to grįžo.

Su ja ant rankų.

Ir labai kvailai padarė.

Iš Argentinos laikų Senelė Amigorena prisimena tik keletą ispaniškų žodžių, bet naudoja juos tik kaip keiksmazodžius.

Kalbėti apie Argentiną Senelė Amigorena nemėgsta.

Nuo to ją tik pradeda slėgti.

Tėvų kaltė.

– Klausyk, o kodėl tarp jūsų viskas nutrūko? – per reklamę pauzę įdėmiai stebėdama Mamą Norą paklausė Miki.

– Tarp ko – tarp mūsų? – paklausė Mama Nora.

Abejotina, ar Senelė Amigorena kada nors skaitė Ibseną.

Ji tą Norą kur nors nusižiūrėjo arba nusiklausė.

– Tarp tavęs ir rašytojo iš Maltos, – pasakė Miki.

– Rašytojo Išmaltos? – paklausė Senelė Amigorena.

– Iš Maltos, – pasakė Mama Nora.

– Gali man nekartoti, aš labai gerai girdžiu ir dar viską suprantu, – pasakė Senelė Amigorena. – Aš labai protinga.

– Mes prasilenkėm, – pasakė Mama Nora.

– Kur? – paklausė Miki.

– Mintyse, – pasakė Mama Nora.

– Kokiose, – paklausė Miki, – mintyse?

– Na, aš norėjau pabėgti į salą.

– O jis?

– O jis norėjo pabėgti iš salos, – atsakė Mama Nora.

– Pa... bėgti? – labai susidomėjusi paklausė Senelė Amigorena.

Bet į jos klausimą niekas nesureagavo.

– Tai kai viską išsiaiškinote – išsiskyrėte? – paklausė Miki.

– Ne iš karto, – atsakė Mama Nora. – Aš dar nusiunčiau jam du kalėdinius atvirukus.

– Labai geras darbas, – pasakė Senelė Amigorena.

Fishes and Dragons

Undinė Radzevičiūtė

Translated from Lithuanian by Ada Valaitis

1.

Again, the commission is spending a long time doubting his horses.

Some members of the commission close one eye, and then the other.

While some stick out their pointed tongues, as if trying to lick the horses.

Some furl their bottom lip, some squint, narrowing their eyes, some puff out their cheeks.

Like eunuchs on the stage of an Imperial theatre.

The members of the commission think that the horses' heads are too small, and that their hocks are too thin. The explanation that these are Iberian horses, and that they should look like this, does not help.

It seems that the commission doubts not only the Iberian horses, but Iberia itself.

It is convinced that only the Mongolian horse exists.

The wild Mongolian horse.

Modest, persistent, and somewhat insidious.

As insidious as a wild horse could possibly be. With short legs, and brown and white spots.

Like a cow.

And a horse's tail must be white. Absolutely. And it must reach the ground, says the commission, while the mane should cover the eyes.

Why do they need horses that can't see anything?

The commission also says: his horses aren't real because they are calm, and horses are never calm.

The repeated confirmation of the notion that Iberian horses are just like this only increases the committee's doubts.

They don't believe in either Iberia or Iberian horses.

Now it's out in the open.

To the members of the commission, this is a brazen and nasty unequivocal deception, which might even insult the Emperor.

Of course, the Fifth Emperor will not come to look at the horses himself.

The commission says there is no reason for the Emperor to come and look, because these horses have no bones.

He tries to convince the experts that horses don't need bones, and hears the hesitation in his own voice.

It would be better if the Fifth Emperor came to see for himself, because Fr. Castiglione no longer believes in his horses, or in Iberia, or even in his purpose here on this Earth.

The commission doubts the horses' bones out loud, then silently, and then they move on to the bones of the landscape.

The commission does not at all doubt the bones of the landscape.

There are none.

The members of the commission require that the 'bones' be present and clearly visible in the landscape.

They insist it would be best if a Chinese person paints the landscape around the horses.

Perhaps Leng Mei or some other Chinese person.

There are Chinese people here.

In these moments, Fr. Castiglione suddenly stops understanding Chinese, and he doesn't really know what will happen now.

The commission has not yet made a decision, they only say that they do not want to trust Fr. Castiglione with the trees, not only behind the horses, but also in front of them.

They are only asking him to draw a sketch of the perspective, and Leng Mei or someone else will use it to paint the landscape with all of the trees and their 'bones'.

The Chinese call the contours of things, animals and humans 'bones'.

For the Chinese, unlike Europeans, the contours are more important than the space.

And the only thing more important for them than contours is emptiness.

The Imperial Art Expert Commission has no need for Italian perspective.

A descending Chinese fog is enough.

From the mountains.

Or rising from a lake and covering all of the landscape's empty space.

The Emperor needs perspective.

It's just not clear for how long.

But the Emperor expresses his desire for perspective only through the commission.

The commission continues speaking to Fr.

Castiglione:

In the landscape, trees and mountains do not have to be like real trees and mountains that you've seen before somewhere;

the Emperor doesn't need a portrayal of a specific tree or a mountain;

the tree or mountain should approximate all trees and mountains that you've seen before;

the painting of a specific tree, well, that's the work of a craftsman;

if the landscape has to be similar to something, then primarily it should mirror the works of ancient Chinese landscape painters.

The commission imparts the list of demands in tiresome unison.

Castiglione understands: the Chinese do not want the tree to be like a tree.

He thinks: the only thing lower and beneath painting horses is painting still lifes.

With a sliced melon and lobsters.

And lemons.

Peeled.

In a spiral.

These types of still lifes should be eaten, not painted.

Let the Dutch paint them.

Castiglione listens to the commission with his head slightly tilting forward.

He is trying not to let his head droop.

Neither to the right, nor to the left.

He tries to stand with his eyes looking down, not looking directly at the commission.

Only slanting.

The members of the commission are discussing.

Castiglione tries not to scowl.

Or wrinkle his nose.

And to preserve his inner tranquility.

And not to look upset.

Though he probably can't really look pleasant.

Castiglione wants to yawn, but he tries not to.

And not to bite his lip.

He walks through his studio twice.

Reservedly.

Dignified and solid.

Castiglione does everything just as Ignatius Loyola told him to.

It is said that before formulating these rules of behaviour, Ignatius Loyola contemplated for a long while.

He even cried.

And prayed seven times...

When you combine all the sketches of horses into one, it is clear that there is no master depicted, says the commission.

One hundred horses and six shepherds in the picture – they are only guests.

Castiglione suggests that the commission pick one horse.

And he will paint that horse larger than the others. The Chinese laugh.

Castiglione asks if the commission wants him to paint the Emperor.

The Chinese do not laugh.

Castiglione had never before seen laughter turn to silence so quickly.

The silence is broken by Syma Cao, the chairman of the commission.

He adjusts the blue silk bag hanging from his belt. The bag is embroidered with sharp triangles, with golden mountains and wavy rivers.

Syma Cao is taller than most Chinese men, and is dressed more fancily than the other members of the commission.

You can spot him from afar by his leopard print hat. If you didn't know his history, and had never heard him speak, you might think he's too pompous, too arrogant, and held in too high regard. And most likely undeservedly.

Syma Cao is a eunuch.

He is the only eunuch on the commission. The other members of the Art Expert Commission are senior mandarins. Syma Cao is distinct from other eunuchs, not only because he does not stink of urine, but also because he has an extraordinary mind. Many eunuchs one might meet in Castiglione's Forbidden City are only fit to open gates, dress the Emperor's wives in silk clothes, and puff their cheeks in plays. Or to play women.

Castiglione's student Leng Mei (it may be that the commission will ask him to paint the landscape behind the horses) told Fr. Castiglione that Syma Cao became a eunuch not by his own will or his family's, but because of the decision of the Old Fourth Emperor (a person's story learnt by chance can change your mind about that person, and even elicit respect or love).

And he did not come from the lowest ranks of society, like the other eunuchs, but from the highest social class.

According to the Old Fourth Emperor, his father was a disobedient and dangerous general.

The Emperor ordered that the influential general be arrested, and that the genitalia of his ten-year-old son be cut off.

It was no big tragedy.

Afterwards, it became clear that the Old Emperor was wrong, perhaps.

About the general's disloyalty.

He believed the rumours.

When the truth became known, the Old Emperor ordered that the boy be brought to the Forbidden City.

There, he grew up and started a career.

He is one of the few eunuchs who are allowed to dress in dark blue embroidered with rivers and triangular mountains.

Besides, he can address the Emperor directly.

The other members of the Art Expert Commission, the mandarins, are not allowed this level of familiarity.

Syma Cao really does have a special place in the palace.

Regardless of the fact that the Qing dynasty views eunuchs very differently to the previous one.

"Even the Ming dynasty," Leng Mei says quietly.

"What does that mean, very differently?" asks Castiglione.

"The Emperors of the Qing dynasty do not consider eunuchs important people," says Leng Mei.

The chairman of the commission, Syma Cao, stops the members' laughter and explains to Castiglione: the Chinese do not consider the 'master' of a scene to be the Emperor, but a large mountain.

It is usually painted on the right side of the painting.

Everything else in the landscape is called the 'guests'.

In China, it is just as it is in Europe, thinks Castiglione.

Every person has his place.

His rank.

But in China, every person is valued not individually, but only in relation to someone else.

In every situation, a person is either a teacher or a student, or a father or a son, or a master or a guest.

In China, even the parts of a landscape have their own rank, thinks Castiglione.

“Perhaps you want me to answer the question why, at the end of 2001, I wrote erotic messages to a writer from Malta?”
Mama Nora asked on the screen.

“Yes. Why?” asked the journalist.

Miki turned up the volume on the television, because Grandmother Amigorena asked her to, and said angrily:

“Why-why? Why-why? Why don’t journalists have any other questions? Just this ‘why’. You did what you wanted to do in 2001. And now what, you have to kneel before the entire nation and beg forgiveness with tears in your eyes? And after that, do you have to go and kiss the flag? You’re not the president,” Miki said, in anger and exasperation.

Miki still had the strength to be exasperated, but no one had the strength to listen; everyone was interested in the conversation taking place on the screen.

“Did you really send erotic messages in 2001 to a writer from Malta?” asked Miki.

“He had absolutely no sense of humour, neither did he engage in any sort of analytical thinking,” responded Mama Nora. “So there wasn’t much to talk about.”

“So was 2001 special in some way?” asked Grandmother Amigorena.

“Only in that it happened a long time ago,” said Mama Nora.

“You look better on television,” said Grandmother Amigorena, and went on: “Plumper.”

Grandmother Amigorena sat in front of the television wearing a purple sweater that she had embroidered with pansies in her youth.

She was dressed as if she was sitting on the other side of the television screen.

But you cannot tell her this.

Grandmother Amigorena was 80-years-old, and she really didn’t like the phrase ‘on the other side’.

That was why she liked the phrase ‘forced out’.

She sat in front of the television in her best clothes. Grandmother Amigorena liked the Roma style of dress, when she was not engaged in such solemn moments.

“Chanel?” asked Grandmother Amigorena, pointing at Mama Nora’s black sweater on television.

“Almost,” replied Mama Nora.

“Almost Chanel?” asked Grandmother Amigorena.

It's very good that there is at least one unique name in the house.

It's always enough, so that everyone else in the house can have plainer names.

For a long time, everyone here thought that Amigorena meant 'friend to all', but later they learned that *amigo-reno* in Spanish meant 'friend – male reindeer'.

This is a secret that will never be learnt by Grandmother Amigorena.

[...]

Grandmother Amigorena was born in Argentina.

Her parents emigrated there during the First World War, and then they returned with her in their arms.

It was a ridiculous move.

Grandmother Amigorena only remembers a few Spanish words from her time in Argentina, and she only uses them as curse words.

Grandmother Amigorena does not like talking about Argentina.

It weighs on her.

It's her parent's fault.

"Listen, so why did it all end between you two?" Miki asked during the commercial break, looking intently at Mama Nora.

"Between who – between us?" asked Mama Nora.

"Between you and the writer from Malta," said Miki.

"The writer Fromolta?" asked Grandmother Amigorena.

"From Malta," said Mama Nora.

"You don't have to repeat yourself, I can hear very well, and I also understand everything," said Grandmother Amigorena. "I'm very smart."

“We passed each other by,” said Mama Nora.

“Where?” asked Miki.

“In our thoughts,” said Mama Nora.

“What thoughts?” asked Miki.

“Well, I wanted to run away to the island.”

“And him?”

“He wanted to run away from the island,” said Mama Nora.

“Run... away?” Grandmother Amigorena asked with increased interest.

But no one responded to her question.

“So when you cleared it all up, that’s when you broke up?” asked Miki.

“Not right away,” responded Mama Nora. “I still sent him two Christmas cards.”

“Very well done,” said Grandmother Amigorena.



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Ida Hegazi Høyer

Unnskyld (2014)

Forgive Me

Publishing House **Tiden Norsk Forlag**

Biography

Ida Hegazi Høyer, born in 1981, is a Norwegian citizen with Danish-Egyptian ancestors. Her roots are in Lofoten in the north of Norway, but she grew up in Oslo. Høyer has studied sociology and worked in a clothing store, and she now writes and lives in Oslomarka – the woodlands surrounding Oslo. She is the author of three novels: her debut, *Under the World*, was published in autumn 2012, followed by *Out* in 2013 and *Forgive Me* in 2014. In August 2014

Synopsis

Forgive Me (2014) is an intense novel about love, self-deception and dangerous secrets.

In Ida Hegazi Høyer's third book, a young woman meets a young man, and it's love at first sight. He is a student of philosophy who impresses her deeply with his intellectual talk of individualism and his free spirit – he seems like the perfect man. They move into a small apartment, and in the days and weeks and months to come they become completely engulfed by one another. But it does not take long before she starts harbouring feelings of unease. Small signs, small oddities suggesting that he might not be what he appears to be.

Forgive Me explores the darker sides of everyday life, in a realism that borders onto the dream-like and absurd, with a language that entices and surprises the reader, and through the use of black comedy.

Det sto en seng på fortauet. Helt fra krysset i enden av gata kunne man se at det sto en seng foran oppgangen vår, noen som flytta inn, noen som flytta ut, noe som var i veien. Men ikke før jeg var helt nære, ikke før jeg skulle til å gå inn, så jeg det, at det var vår seng, vår dyne, våre puter, at det hele ligna en installasjon der ute på gata, plutselig, kanskje endelig, i riktig lys.

Det var fridag, nesten sommer nå, jeg kom hjem, og senga vår sto ute. Du hadde redd opp. Dyna var pent bretta, putene uten hodemerker, og sengeteppet, som vi aldri egentlig brukte, hang over gavlen. Et eviglukket avbrutt nattnytt. Antagelig pausa jeg, kjente et vent eller et stopp, ikke gå opp. Og det var varmt, midt på dagen, det brant under himmelen.

Den ene etasjen opp. Ti trinn, to skritt, så resten av trappa. Du hadde ikke latt døra stå åpen. Du hadde låst. Og dette kom jeg aldri til å glemme – du visste jeg var den eneste med nøkkel.

✱

Hunden løp ut. Med det samme jeg låste meg inn kom hun farende forbi meg. Og jeg så. Og jeg innså. Bildene dine, bildene våre, de hang ikke oppe lenger. Skyskraperne sto på gulvet, ryggen ut, to hvite rammer.

Sånn så det ut, rommet: Vinduet vårt var igjen og per-siennene var nede. Skapdørene var lukket, lampene var av, og midt på gulvet, der senga hadde stått, lå en kjøkkenstol. Det fantes ingen lyder, ingen luft som lot seg puste. Klokka var tolv på dagen.

Jeg gikk ikke bort til deg. Men jeg gikk inn i rommet.

Jeg gikk rundt deg, langs veggene, til vinduet, til dagen. Jeg dro opp persiennene, åpna vinduet, og jeg kunne ha hoppa; det ville gått bra, for der nede sto jo senga vår, rett under meg, nøyaktig plassert for fall. Men jeg hoppa ikke, jeg brakk meg, det var alt jeg fikk til, en bitte liten galledråpe som landa nederst i fotenden vår, og så pusta jeg, hardt, én gang, før jeg løp ut, det var siste gang jeg så deg, løp forbi deg, du lukta ingenting, og da jeg kom ned, da jeg kom ut, var gata en annen og himmelen forandra og husene skjeve og takene på vei nedover og trærne galopperende og bilene fra en annen verden og menneskene, alle menneskene, ingen av dem menneskelige lenger.

Jeg hadde ingen steder å dra. Jeg la meg under dyna vår, lå der og kjente på det som var igjen av deg, og av oss. Jeg la meg under dyna vår, i senga på gata under den etende himmelen, og visste, allerede da, at jeg alltid ville se det rommet annerledes.

Det andre rommet: Vinduet er åpent, nattlyset er på. Jeg kommer hjem et halvt døgn tidligere. Klokka er tolv på natta. Du ligger og sover. Eller du ligger og skal sove. Eller du står på badet og pusser tenner. Eller du sitter i stua og ser på tv. Eller du drømmer. Du er varm. Du har en varme. Du ligger og sover. Jeg legger meg inntil deg.

Første gang jeg så deg – jeg kom til å kle av meg alt. Vi var ved havet, det var sommer eller forsommer. Det var to år tidligere og seint på ettermiddagen, lyset strakk seg. Jeg husker ikke hvem jeg hadde vært der med, men jeg var alene nå, gikk langs vannet, og det var andre mennesker der, piknikfolk, folk som sang om kapp med måkene, og jeg gikk langs vannet i den synkende sanda, hadde sola foran meg, ti tusen piler ned i glittersjøen. Da jeg så deg forsvant alt sammen.

Du var også alene. Du satt lenger inn, lenger bort fra vannkanten. Jeg så ikke hva du drev med, om du leste, om du tegna, om du skrev, men siden ville du fortelle at du tenkte, at det var det du holdt på med, du hadde dratt til havet for å filosofere, og så kom jeg, og dette ble vår historie, den eneste begynnelsen.

Jeg så deg og kledde av meg alt. Jeg så deg, og la det være sagt, jeg så deg først. Lenge så jeg på deg. Jeg sto med vannet opp til midt på leggen, det var kaldt, og du så ut som en varmere verden. Ikke fordi du var utenomjordisk pen eller faretruende rolig eller forstyrrende flørtende, du var ikke noe sånt i det hele tatt. Men du turte å være til stede uten å skulle ha noe som helst å gjøre med noen som helst annen. Du var så alene, du var det vakreste jeg hadde sett. Og da du så på meg, da du så meg, må du ha sett meg like svart som hellig, som om du tok til deg og kasta vekk i ett og samme blikk. Imellom oss var alle menneskene. Imellom oss var skrik og sand og stein og stemmer. Og jeg tenkte ikke, hadde ikke en eneste tanke i hodet, så ikke alle øynene foran meg, jeg kledde bare av meg. For deg. Jeg reiv ut hårstrikken, dro av meg klærne, og jeg stilte meg opp, rett imot deg, mot denne herreløse verdenen imellom oss, og du reiste deg, kom imot meg, det var applaus i bølgene.

Du kom imot meg og jeg sto i vannet og du vek ikke med blikket og jeg vek ikke med blikket og du var høy og mager og jeg var lav og naken og du var femogtjue og jeg var tjue og du kom ned til vannet og du tråkka på klærne mine og du bøyde deg ned og du løfta en stein og jeg sto helt stille i det funklande lyset. Jeg kom aldri til å se noe sånt igjen.

Du løfta den største steinen du kunne finne. Den lå halvveis nedi vannet, rett ved føttene mine, må ha veid like mye som en halv voksen mann. Men du fikk den opp, helt opp til brystet, selv om det dirra i armene dine, og du så på meg idet du gikk forbi, langt nedover meg, og så nære var du, jeg kunne lukte saltet av deg, at det kom fra noe rent. Du lukta helt riktig og du hadde på deg olabukser, og du gikk utover, langsomt med den store steinen, mens vannet trakk seg stadig lenger inn, lenger opp, lenger igjennom. Det kom ingen lyder fra land. Det var stille nå, blant massene. Og du stoppa da vannet rakk deg til hofta, du sto med havet inntil livet og venta på meg, og da jeg kom var armene dine røde. Vi sto i havet. Vi sto i lyset. Du var høy og mager, jeg var lav og naken, og du kasta verdens største stein. For meg. Den gikk ikke langt, men det var ikke poenget.

Etterpå satt vi i gresset og frøys, sa ikke stort. Det fløt søppel i vannkanten, de fleste hadde dratt, og du la en arm rundt meg og sa, jeg er realist, smilende, og jeg hadde ikke noe å si til det. Jeg jobber i barnehage, sa jeg, og så vendte vi tilbake til stillheten. Du fikla med en fisketråd, jeg lot som jeg ikke fulgte med. Hvor store hendene dine var. Hvor lange øyevipper du hadde. Hvordan munnen din åpna seg hver gang du så utover havet, som om du lengta, som om du fant på noe. Vi satt helt inntil hverandre. Huden har også et språk.

Da vi gikk på siste buss var vi kjæresten. Da vi gikk av bussen ga du meg ringen. Nå finnes det ikke noe deg og meg lenger, sa du, og jeg var helt sikker på at jeg skjønnte hva du mente. Du hadde fletta fisketråden til en liten sirkel som du tredde på meg. Venstre ringfinger, vena amoris, herfra går det rett til hjertet, hviska du til meg. Det var en ring av gjennomsiktig fiskesnøre, hardt fletta og skarp i kantene, og etter at du hadde tredd den på, stramma du den til og lagde en knute. Fiskeline er det sterkeste som finnes, sa du, og så beit du av tråden over knuta. Du hadde hele hånda mi i munnen din. Sola var på vei til å forsvinne og saltet i huden hadde begynt å klø. Jeg kjente med det samme at det var en ubehagelig ring, en ring som kom til å gnage, men du sa jo den var sterk, sterkere enn gull, sterkere enn blod, at det ikke lenger fantes noe deg eller meg. Denne ringen kommer aldri til å ryke, det var dine ord, og du fikk rett. Vi forlova oss sånn, med fisketråd. Og jeg husker denne dagen. Hvordan vi gjorde hverandre større. Hvordan vi insisterte på ikke å være en tilfeldig-het. Den første natta. De første orda etterpå. Hvordan ingenting virka tilfeldig lenger.

Forgive Me

Ida Hegazi Høyer

Translated from the Norwegian by Diane Oatley

There was a bed on the pavement. All the way from the end of the street you could see that there was a bed in front of our entrance – someone was moving in, someone was moving out, something was wrong. But it wasn't until I came up close and was about to go inside, that I saw that it was our bed, our duvet, our pillows. It all looked like an installation out there on the street.

It was a Sunday, nearly summer now, I came home and our bed was outside. You had made it, the duvet neatly folded, the pillows without head hollows, and the bedspread, which we never actually used, hung over the frame. An eternally closed night-time segment. Probably I paused, sensing a stop or a warning, don't go upstairs. And it was hot, the middle of the day, burning light beneath the sky.

The one flight up. Ten steps, two steps, then ten steps more. You hadn't left the door open. You had locked it. And this I would never forget – you knew I was the only one with a key.

★

The dog ran out. The minute I let myself in, she came running past me. And I saw. And I understood. Your pictures, our pictures, they were no longer hanging on the walls. The skyscrapers were on the floor, face-down, two empty frames of white.

Our window was closed and the blinds were down. The closet doors were shut, the lights were out, and in the middle of the floor, where the bed had been, lay a kitchen chair. Not a sound to be heard, no air to be breathed. Twelve noon.

I did not go over to you. But I went into the room.

I walked around you, along the walls, to the window, to the day. I pulled up the blinds, opened the window, and I could have jumped; it would have been fine, because right there beneath me, positioned precisely for falling, was our bed. But I did not jump, I retched, that was all I managed, a tiny drop of bile that landed at the foot of our bed, and then I inhaled, hard, once, before I ran out, that was the last time I saw you, ran past you, you smelled of nothing, and when I came downstairs, when I came out, the street was a different street and the sky had changed and the houses were crooked and the rooftops were coming down and the trees were galloping and the cars were from another world and the people, all of the people, none of them were human any longer.

I had nowhere to go. I crawled into our bed, lay there lost in what was left of you, and I knew, even then, on a bed in a street in a town under a corrosive sky, that I would always see that room differently.

The other room. The window is open, the night light is on. I come home half a day earlier. Twelve midnight. You are sleeping. You are about to fall asleep. You are in the bathroom brushing your teeth. You are in the living room waiting. You are dreaming. You are warm. You have a warmth. You are sleeping. I lie down next to you.

The first time I saw you – I would end up revealing everything. We were by the sea, it was summer or late spring. It was two years ago and late in the afternoon, the light was stretching. I don't remember who I'd been there with, but I was alone now, walking along the water, and there were other people, picnickers, people who were singing over screaming seagulls, and I walked along the shore in the sinking sand, the sun in front of me, 10,000 arrows of descending light. When I saw you, it all disappeared.

You too were alone. You sat further in, further away from the water's edge. I didn't see what you were doing, if you were reading, or drawing, or writing, but later you'd tell me you were thinking, that you had gone to the sea to philosophise, and then I came along, and this became our story, the only beginning.

I saw you, and I revealed everything. I saw you, and let it be said, I saw you first. I watched you for a long time. I had water halfway up my shins, it was cold, and you looked like a warmer world. Not because you were supernaturally attractive or dangerously calm or disturbingly flirtatious, you were none of those things. But you dared to be present without the need to have anything to do with anyone else. You were so alone, you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. And when you looked at me, when you saw me, you must have seen me as being just as damned and sacred, as if you absorbed and discarded all in that single glance. Between us were all of the people. Between us were the screams and dreams and shouts and voices. And I didn't think, didn't have a single thought in my head, didn't see all the eyes in front of me, I just undressed. For you. I tore the elastic out of my hair, pulled off my clothes, and I stood there, directly facing you,

facing this vagrant world between us, and you stood up, came towards me, and there was applause beneath the waves.

You came towards me and I stood in the water and your gaze did not waver and my gaze did not waver and you were tall and skinny and I was small and naked and you were 25 and I was 20 and you came down to the sea and you stepped on my clothes and you bent over and you lifted a rock and I stood completely still in the light. I would never again see anything like it.

You lifted the biggest rock you could find. It was half-submerged in the water, right by my feet, must have weighed as much as a half-grown man. But you managed to lift it, all the way up to your chest, and you looked at me as you walked past, down the full length of me, so close I could smell the salt on you, that it came from something clean. You smelled exactly right and you were wearing blue jeans, and you walked out, slowly, with the big rock, while the water drew further and further in, further up, further through. There were no sounds from land. It was quiet now, among the masses. And you stopped when the water came up to your hips, you stood with the sea around your waist and waited for me, and when I reached you, your arms were trembling. We stood in the sea. We stood in the light. You were tall and skinny, I was small and naked, and you threw the largest stone. For me. Not very far, but that wasn't the point.

Afterwards we sat in the grass shivering, not saying much. There was trash floating on the water's edge, almost everyone had left, and you put an arm around me and said, I am a realist, smiling, and I had nothing to say to that. I work in a kindergarten, I said, and then we returned to the silence. You were fiddling with a fishing line, I pretended not to notice.

How big your hands seemed. How long your eyelashes were. How your mouth opened every time you looked out across the sea, as if you were yearning, as if you were making something up. We nestled against each other. The skin too, has its language.

When we got on the last bus, we were girlfriend and boyfriend. When we got off the bus, you gave me the ring. Now there is no you and I any longer, you said, and I was sure I knew what you meant. You had braided the fishing line into a ring that you slid onto my hand. The left ring finger, *vena amoris*, from here it goes straight to the heart, you whispered to me. It was a ring of transparent fishing line, braided snugly and sharp at the edges, and after you had slipped it on, you tightened it and tied a knot. Fishing line is the strongest there is, you said, and then you bit the line off above the knot. You had my whole hand in your mouth. The sun was about to slip away and the salt on my skin was starting to itch. I immediately felt that it was an uncomfortable ring, a ring that would chafe, but you did say it was strong, stronger than gold, stronger than blood, that there was no longer any you or I. This ring will never break, those were your words, and you were right. This was how we got engaged, with fishing line. And I remember this day. How we made each other larger. How we insisted on not being a fluke. The first night. The first words afterwards. How nothing seemed random any longer.



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Magdalena Parys

Magik (2014)

Magician

Publishing House Świat Książki

Biography

Magdalena Parys (born 1971) is a poet, writer and translator. She is the founder of the Polish-German literary magazine *Squaws*, and a graduate of Polish philology and pedagogy at Humboldt University in Berlin.

Synopsis

The starting point of the story is a press release: 'In 2010, the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (the German government agency) cleared almost six kilometres of files (20 million pages). It is estimated that in the time of the Iron Curtain about 4,500 people from the Eastern Bloc tried to escape to the West across the Bulgarian borders. About 100 of them lost their lives.' This information provides the inspiration for a multilayered story about people trying to unravel the circumstances of mysterious deaths in the 1980s.

Although the story is set in 2011, its roots go back to the 1950s. That's when an operation called *Magik* began: a brutal operation where GDR Stasi cooperated with Bulgarian border guards to murder refugees from the socialist countries who, in the days of the Iron Curtain, tried to illegally cross the Bulgarian-Turkish or Bulgarian-Greek borders. Although the pretext was to prohibit illegal border crossings, this led to the elimination of opposition activists. In the book, GDR history intertwines with the outbreak of the Solidarity movement, contemporary Berlin, human stories of guilt, punishment and escape from responsibility, as well as a complicated investigation by a disobedient police officer, Kowalski. Though removed from the investigation, he does not give up – and will discover the dark past of some influential politicians in the reunited Germany...

Magik

Magdalena Parys

Odkąd dzieci wyjechały na studia za granicę, jego żona była jakby spokojniejsza, od kilku miesięcy miał nową, młodą kochankę, Felicię. Były to od dawna wyczekiwane zmiany, nie one jednak były najistotniejsze. Najważniejszym wydarzeniem minionego roku był fakt, że w lutym w Urzędzie do spraw Materiałów Stasi poddano kasacji ponad 5,8 kilometrów akt, około dwudziestu milionów stron A4. Zniknęły.

Jeszcze raz ułożył to zdanie w myślach: 5,8 km, prawie 6 km akt zniknęło z Urzędu do spraw Materiałów Stasi. Największy sukces jego życia, najmądrzejsze, szachowe posunięcie, szach mat, akt nie ma. Gdyby za takie życiowe role dawali Oskary, zgarnąłby wszystkie, za produkcję, scenariusz, reżyserię i główną rolę. Christian zaplanował to posunięcie nadzwyczaj skrupulatnie i rozłożył w czasie na pięć lat, nie włączając w nie nikogo z zewnątrz. Całą tę akcję przeprowadził dla niego Frank Derbach, zaufany przyjaciel. Wyświadczał w ten sposób przysługę partyjnemu koledze, pomysłodawcy i sponsorowi tej bezprecedensowej operacji – nie było komu.

Jemu.

Pomijając miesiące po upadku muru, kiedy agenci bezpieki próbowali zniszczyć część archiwum, był to pierwszy przypadek likwidacji akt na tak wielką skalę. Podczas gdy pierwsza próba udaremniona została dzięki zaangażowaniu wzburzonych obywateli dawnej NRD, druga, dwadzieścia lat później, odbyła się przy nader nikłym zainteresowaniu kogokolwiek – 5,8 km akt uznano oficjalnie za nieprzydatne i niepotrzebne

absorbujące czas urzędników. Akta zniknęły. Wersję ich nieprzydatności udało się bez większych problemów sprzedać nielicznym mediom zainteresowanym sprawą. Christian wiedział oczywiście, że wszystkiego nie da się ukryć. W tak zwanych demokracjach na ukrywaniu nie wychodziło się najlepiej. Powodzenie zależało od tego, czy da się to ładnie opakować. Przewidział, że najczęściej do powiedzenia będą mieli dyrektorzy muzeów z Lipska i Berlina, kilku opozycjonistów z byłej NRD, w tym szczególnie jeden, niezmienne od lat denerwujący Christiana, oraz paru dziennikarzy, zbyt młodych, żeby rozumieć, o co tak naprawdę w tym kraju chodzi. Niepokoiły go trochę skrzeczące głosy z FDP, liczące w wyborach na cud i łapiące każdą okazję, także byle jaką, żeby zaistnieć, przypomnieć o sobie, ale na szczęście do poważniejszej debaty nie doszło. Zachodnia opinia publiczna miała ku temu swoje powody. Po prostu rozliczenia ze schedą po Stasi nie wchodziły w zakres ich zainteresowań.

Uśmiechnął się na wspomnienie tego sukcesu. Christian Schlangenberger, były oficer kontrwywiadu, „dobroczyńca”, jak zwykł o nim mówić Frank Derbach (i nie było w tym cynizmu), zyskiwał dzięki tej, trzeba Frankowi przyznać, perfekcyjnie przeprowadzonej akcji, świetlaną przeszłość, a przy okazji wdzięczność wielu wpływowych ludzi, o których, tak jak i o nim, sporo można było się z tych akt dowiedzieć.

Za swoje wieloletnie poświęcenie i odwagę (odkładanie akt na bok było żmudne, męczące, nie mówiąc o ryzyku, i trwało pięć lat) Frank Derbach doczekał się nie tylko bezgranicznego zaufania swojego dobroczyńcy, ale także niemałych pieniędzy. Natomiast sam Christian święcił największy triumf swojego życia i zbił na tym fortunę. Akta przekazał bowiem bogatym i wpływowym ludziom. Czy też, jak woleli to nazywać zainteresowani: zwrócił należne im informacje.

Wśród obdarowanych byli prokuratorzy, urzędnicy, niektórzy politycy opozycji i partii rządzącej, sędziowie i biznesmeni. Co ważniejsze, hermetyczne ponadpartyjne i niezwykle wpływowe środowisko – w biedzie nagle wszyscy stają się sobie równi i podziały znikają – dowiadywało się, że Schlangerberger wciąż żyje i stać go na wiele, a to ostatnie było bezcenne. Siało strach, choć nikt z zainteresowanych tak by tego nie nazwał, a już na pewno nie wypowiedziałby tego głośno. Taka niewiedza, ciągła niepewność i zagrożenie idą w parze ze strachem i wdzięcznością – lepszego Anioła Stróża nie mógł sobie Christian wymarzyć. Nikt z obdarowanych nie wiedział, jakie informacje ich dobroczyńca jeszcze posiada ani SKĄD JE BIERZE i wreszcie co zamierza przedsięwziąć; czy rzeczywiście pozbył się akt, czy oddając je im, zainteresowanym, jak się zarzekał (zazwyczaj w bardzo poufnej rozmowie z każdym z nich z osobna), kładzie kres sprawie, zniszczył bowiem akta, wszystkie zniszczył! W myśl zasady, po co komu taki problem, panie prokuratorze, panie sędzio, panie pośle, panie ministrze, panie prezesie?

Co robić, trzeba sobie ufać, uznało szacowne grono o wpływach stąd do Australii, poza tym Schlangerberger zawsze był taki miły i ułożony. Schlangerberger to rozsądny człowiek przecież, tęga głowa i dżentelmen – szeptano między sobą w zaufanych kręgach, dodając przy tym, że także poważny kandydat na najwyższe stanowiska w kraju. „Dobroczyńca” Christian podkreślał zaś podczas tych poufnych rozmów, że w tej delikatnej sprawie (słowa „akta” nikt z zainteresowanych nie wymawiał) chodzi o dobro ogółu i trzeba się wspierać, zatem wspierali się po cichu wzajemnie. W szczególności zaś wspierali Christiana Schlangerbergera.

Wszystko chodziło więc jak w zegarku, uznał Christian, dlatego duplikaty akt, czasem oryginały, które trzymał w

sejfach bankowych, były u niego na razie „bezpieczne” i nie miał zamiaru z tego arsenału korzystać. Przynajmniej jeszcze nie dziś i nie teraz, był przecież pierwszym w państwie futurologiem. Jak mawiał jego wieszcz i najważniejszy protektor, wielki Kröger: deser, drodzy towarzysze, zostawmy sobie na przyszłość.

Jednakże droga do celu była żmudna, wybrukowana wyrzeczeniami i wymagała cierpliwości. Cierpliwość – niekoniecznie najmocniejsza cecha charakteru Christiana. Niechętnie wspominał czas zmierzchu. Po upadku muru musiał zniknąć na dłuższy czas z areny, usunąć się w cień i poświęcić głównie interesom.

Tymczasem ten znienawidzony czas pracował na jego korzyść. Nikt, nawet on, nie spodziewał się, że zmiany nadejdą tak szybko i będą aż tak radykalne. Po raz kolejny przekonywał się, że pamięć ludzka jest wybiórcza. Ze zdumieniem obserwował sukcesy swoich byłych kolegów i czasem aż nie dowierzał, gdy patrzył, jak licznych zyskiwali sobie wyborców w zjednoczonych Niemczech, dyskontując swoją enerdowską przeszłość. W instytucjach publicznych i w lokalnych parlamentach Niemiec wschodnich aż roilo się od byłych konfidentów. W bliskiej jego sercu Brandenburgii na dwudziestu sześciu posłów partii lewicy do landtagu co czwarty pracował kiedyś dla Stasi.

*

Pierwsze polityczne przemówienie Christiana przeszło do historii.

Wybrał najlepszą strategię z możliwych, bo on zawsze wybiegał na spotkanie epokom, zdarzeniom. Jego początkowa taktyka, dokładnie przemyślana, była śmiesznie prosta i jak

słusznie wyrokował, nad wyraz skuteczna. W rzeczy samej Christian Schlangenberger przerósł samego siebie.

– Genialne! – zachwycił się szwagier Ernesto.

– Niebywałe, szefie, niebywałe! – Irma i Frank Derbach, jego pierwszy sztab wyborczy, triumfowali.

Walenie pięścią w mównicę i słodki ojcowski głos przystojnego, wysportowanego pana po sześćdziesiątce miały przypomnieć zapomnianym kobietom z NRD w nowej RFN kim są, kim były i kim mogą się stać. I on, TAK – ON, im w tym pomoże! To był historyczny moment dla jego nowej partii, a raczej partii, do której ponownie wstąpił. Partii składającej się w czterdziestu procentach z kobiet – i to na nich zamierzał zbudować swój elektorat. I zbudował.

– To komunizm, ustrój tak zbrukany dzisiaj, moje drogie towarzyszki i towarzysze, dał asumpt do rozwoju feminizmu, dopuścił kobiety do ciężkiego przemysłu i za kierownice traktorów. To on wysłał Tierieszkową w kosmos, usankcjonował masowe wyjście kobiet z domu, do pracy. To ON, tak on! – grzmiał Christian z mównicy, zostawiając w mózgach słuchającej go nie tylko żeńskiej lewicy, ale wszystkich słuchających głęboki ślad.

– I to ON budował setki żłobków i przedszkoli, głosił hasła równości płci, ale czy były to tylko hasła, moje drogie towarzyszki, czy tylko hasła? ! – Tu przerwał i z uśmiechem skłonił się damom, które mógł dojrzeć ze sceny, a także tym wszystkim paniom, których nie widział i którym piękna męska młodość, biegając po sali, rozdawała róże. Nie goździki, lecz róże, aby nie budzić niepotrzebnych resentymentów i dać poczucie, że idzie KU NOWEMU. Lepszemu.

Gromkie brawa wstrząsnęły salą kongresową w Berlinie Wschodnim jak za dobrych starych czasów – klaskały młode dziewczyny z zachodu i ze wschodu, klaskały nawet kelnerki i szatniarki, panie z pierwszych rzędów powstawały z krzeseł...

– Kim jesteśmy my, drodzy towarzysze i towarzyszki, kim? – kontynuował Christian Schlangenberger, nowy mesjasz nowej Ligi Kobiet. – Skąd pochodzimy? Z byłej NRD! Taka jest prawda. Nie wstydzmy się tej prawdy! Tu wyrośliśmy, tu!!!

Przemawiał jeszcze dziesięć minut, budząc takie emocje, że musieli go ratować rośli chłopcy z SECURITAS CITY, prawie wynosząc z sali.

Schlangenberger zyskał tytuł największego w historii Niemiec feministy i reformatora, wiele tytułów nabierał przez lata, wiele, mógł więc być przez moment feministą.

To był dobry początek, taki początek to rzecz niemal święta i takich początków się nie zaprzepaszcza. Feminista Schlangenberger odegrał swoją pierwszą wielką rolę w demokracji z pasją i przekonaniem, choć ani jednego, ani drugiego za grosz wobec kobiet nie miał, a przynajmniej nie w tym nasileniu, jakiego życzyłaby sobie liga.

Christian Schlangenberger odegrał wielki show, demonstrując feministyczny fanatyzm. Przekonać i porwać za sobą narody może z pewnością ktoś wielki i autentyczny we wszystkim, co robi, ktoś bezprzykładnie oddany sprawie. Ale tylko geniusz, będąc pozbawiony tych cech, może odegrać tak przekonujące kłamstwo. Oto i on, największy oszust w historii świata kobiet, Schlangenberger Christian, oszust nad oszustami. Kłamca z dyplomem psychologa z moskiewskiej szkoły.

Z czasem, zyskując coraz wyższą pozycję, a o kobietach mówiąc wciąż z atencją i uznaniem, choć już zdecydowanie

rzadziej, bo od święta, piął się coraz wyżej, ale wciąż nie tak wysoko, jak by chciał. Christian chciał więcej, wyżej, dalej.

Doskonale wyczuwał nastroje i trendy, niewiele się zmieniło przez te wszystkie lata. Może i na traktorach jeździły kobiety przez czas jakiś, reperowały samochody, harowały w fabryce, ale zarówno wtedy, jak i dziś, w partii, każdy swoje wiedział i co do tego panowała krystaliczna jasność: choć politycznie każdy był poprawny, to w wyższych kręgach uznawano, że ta prawdziwa polityka to rzecz męska i jeszcze raz męska. Kobiety stanowią dobry filar, dobre tło, można nawet na nich coś ugrać, ale nie oszukujmy się, panowie, poza paroma wyjątkami, jak kanclerz Merkel, kobieta – to tylko kobieta. Polityka to nie jest sprawa dla kobiet, ale o tym to już tylko przy piwie, przy wódce lub przy pokerze u Herza – nigdy oficjalnie w gabinetach. W gabinetach obowiązywało ściskanie dłoni politykierkom. Polityczkom? Paniom politykom?

– Pies je trącał! – śmiał się Christian; unosił litrowy kufel piwa i mrugał do kumpli.

– Pies je trącał! – przytakiwali karciani towarzysze.

Magician

Magdalena Parys

Translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

Ever since the children had gone to college abroad, Christian Schlangenberger's wife seemed calmer, and for a few months he'd had a new, young mistress called Felicia. These were long-awaited changes, but they weren't the most essential. The most significant event of the past year was that, in February, more than 5.8 kilometres of files at the Stasi Records Office, some 20 million pages of A4, had been annulled. They'd disappeared.

He ran through that sentence in his mind once again: 5.8, nearly 6 kilometres of files had disappeared from the Stasi Records Office. The biggest success of his life, the wisest move he'd ever made, like a chess move, checkmate, files gone. If they'd awarded Oscars for that sort of real-life role, he'd have swept the board, for production, screenplay, direction and lead performance. He had planned this move extremely carefully, spreading it over a five-year period, and without involving anyone from outside. The entire operation had been run for him by Frank Derbach, a close and trusted friend, who felt he was doing a favour for a party colleague, the originator and sponsor of this unprecedented operation. He wouldn't have done it for just anyone.

Just for him.

Apart from the months following the fall of the wall, when the security service agents had tried to destroy part of the archive, this was the first incidence of files being eliminated on

such a major scale. While the first attempt had been frustrated, thanks to the involvement of outraged citizens of the former GDR, the second, 20 years later, had taken place without much more than a flicker of interest from anyone at all – 5.8 kilometres of files were officially deemed to be dispensable, needlessly occupying clerical time. So the files vanished. Schlangenberger hadn't had much trouble selling the idea that they were dispensable to the few representatives of the media who were interested in the matter. Of course he knew that not everything could be hidden. In so-called democracies, hiding things never produced the best result. Success depended on whether it could be packaged nicely. He had foreseen that those with the most to say would include the heads of the museums in Leipzig and Berlin, a few members of the opposition from the former GDR, especially one who had been annoying him non-stop for years, and a couple of journalists, too young to understand what was really going on in this country. He was mildly bothered by the strident tones of some members of the Free Democratic Party, who were counting on a miracle in the next election and were seizing every opportunity, any whatsoever, to prove they were there and to remind people of their existence, but luckily it hadn't come to a more serious debate. Western public opinion had its reasons for that. Settling accounts with the legacy of the Stasi simply didn't come into their sphere of interests.

He smiled at the memory of this success. Thanks to this perfectly (all due credit to Frank Derbach) conducted operation, Christian Schlangenberger – former counter-intelligence officer 'benefactor', as Frank was in the habit of calling him (and there was no cynicism intended) – had gained a bright and shiny past, and incidentally the gratitude of many influential people, about whom there was a great deal to be discovered from those files, just as there was about him too.

For his many years of dedication and courage (putting the files aside had been exhausting and laborious – not to mention the risk involved – and had taken five years), Frank had earned himself not just his benefactor's infinite trust, but also quite a sum of money. Meanwhile, Schlangenberger was celebrating the greatest triumph of his life, and had made a fortune out of it, for he had passed the files on to rich and influential people. Or, as the interested parties preferred to put it, he had returned their rightful records to them. The people he gifted in this way included prosecutors, civil servants, some politicians from the opposition and from the ruling party, judges and businessmen. More importantly, a hermetic and extremely influential milieu – suddenly, by necessity, they had all become equal and the divisions between them had vanished – had found out that Schlangenberger was still alive and was capable of a great deal, a fact that was priceless. It spread fear, though none of the interested parties would have called it that, and they certainly wouldn't have said it out loud. This sort of ignorance, constant uncertainty and threat go hand-in-hand with fear and gratitude – Schlangenberger couldn't have dreamed up a better guardian angel for himself. None of the people he gifted knew what other information their benefactor still had in his possession, or WHERE HE GOT IT FROM, or what he was planning to do next – whether he had really got rid of all the files, or whether in handing them over to the interested parties, he was, as he promised (usually in a highly confidential conversation with each of them separately), putting an end to the matter, because he really had destroyed the lot! The principle being that surely nobody needs that sort of problem, Mr Prosecutor, Mr Judge, Mr Member of Parliament, Mr Minister, Mr Chairman?

What can you do? You have to trust yourself, they reckoned, and besides, Schlangenberger was always so pleasant and well-mannered. He's a reasonable man, isn't he? He's a gentleman, with a good head on his shoulders, they whispered to each other in confidential circles, adding by the way that he was also a serious candidate for the highest positions in the country. Whereas Schlangenberger the 'benefactor' stressed during these private conversations that in this delicate matter (none of the interested parties ever uttered the word 'files'), the main concern was the general good and there should be mutual support, therefore they supported each other on the quiet. While in particular supporting Christian Schlangenberger.

So he could tell it was all going like clockwork, and that was why the copies of the files, or sometimes the originals that he was storing in bank vaults, were for the time being 'safe' in his keeping, and he had no intention of putting this arsenal to use. At least not today, and not right now – after all, he was the country's number one futurologist. As his prophet and chief protector, the great Kröger said: "My dear comrades, let us leave the dessert for the future."

However, the road to his goal was arduous, paved with sacrifices, and demanded patience. Patience – not necessarily Schlangenberger's strongest character trait. He didn't like thinking back to the twilight era. After the fall of the wall he had had to disappear from the stage for a long while, retire into the shadows and mainly devote himself to business.

But, in fact, that hateful time had worked to his advantage. Nobody, not even he, had expected the changes to come about so quickly, or to be quite so radical. Yet again he was persuaded that human memory is selective. In astonishment,

he watched his former colleagues' successes; sometimes he could hardly believe his eyes when he saw how many votes they were gaining for themselves in the united Germany, by turning their GDR past to profit. The public institutions and local parliaments of eastern Germany were swarming with former agents. In his beloved Brandenburg, of the 26 Landtag members representing left-wing parties, one in four had once worked for the Stasi.

*

Schlangenberger's first political speech went down in history.

He chose the best of all possible strategies, because he always came out to suit the era and its events. His opening tactic, very carefully thought out, was ridiculously simple, and as he rightly predicted, extremely effective. As a matter of fact, Christian Schlangenberger outdid himself.

"Brilliant!" enthused his brother-in-law, Ernesto.

"Out of this world, boss, out of this world!" crowed Irma and Frank, his first election team.

Thumping his fist on the lectern, together with the sweet, paternal voice of a handsome, fit-looking man of over 60, were meant to remind the forgotten women of the GDR who they were in the new FRG, who they used to be, and who they could be in the future. And he, YES – HE, would help them to get there! It was a historic moment for his new party, or rather the party which he had joined again. A party consisting of 40% women – and it was on them that he intended to build his electorate. And he had done just that.

"It was communism, a system so tarnished nowadays, my dear sisters and brothers, that gave rise to the development of feminism, allowed women to work in heavy industry and to

be tractor drivers. It was communism that sent Tereshkova into space, and sanctioned the mass exodus of women from the home into the workplace. It was communism that did it!” thundered Schlangenberger from the lectern, leaving a deep impression in the minds of not just the female members of his left-wing audience, but all of them.

“And it was communism that built hundreds of nurseries and pre-schools, and broadcast sex equality slogans, but were they just slogans, my dear sisters, were they?” At this point he broke off and smiled as he bowed to the ladies whom he could see from the stage, and to all the ladies he couldn’t see as well, while some handsome young men ran about the auditorium, handing them roses. Not carnations, but roses, to avoid stirring unnecessary resentment, and to give them the feeling that things were moving towards something NEW. Something better.

Loud cheers shook the congress hall in East Berlin, just like in the good old days – young girls from both east and west were applauding, even the waitresses and cloakroom attendants were applauding, and the ladies in the front rows were getting up out of their seats.

“Who are we, my dear sisters and brothers? Who?” continued Schlangenberger, the new messiah of the new Women’s League. “Where do we come from? From the former GDR! That is the truth. Let’s not be ashamed of it! This is where we grew up, right here!”

He spoke for another ten minutes, stirring such strong emotions that the beefy lads from Securitas City had to rescue him, by practically carrying him out of the hall.

Schlangenberger had gained the title of Germany’s greatest ever feminist and reformer – he had gained plenty of titles

over the years, a very large number, so for the time being he could be a feminist.

It was a good start – a start as good as that is something almost sacred, and starts as good as that are not to be squandered. Schlangenberger the feminist had played his first major role in democracy with passion and conviction, though he had neither the former nor the latter towards women, or at least not as intensely as the league would have wished.

He had put on a big show to demonstrate his fanatical feminism. Someone who is great and genuine in everything he does, someone who is exceptionally devoted to the cause is certainly capable of convincing and winning over a whole nation. But without those characteristics, only a genius can possibly pull off such a convincing lie. And here he was, the biggest fraud in the global history of women, Christian Schlangenberger, mega-super-fraud. A liar with a psychology degree from a college in Moscow.

In time, as he gained more and more ground, by continuing to talk about women with deference and recognition, even though he did it decidedly more rarely, just once in a blue moon, he kept on climbing higher, but still not as high as he would have liked. He wanted more, he wanted to go higher, and further.

He had a superb sense of moods and trends – not much had changed in all those years. Maybe women had driven tractors for a while, repaired cars and toiled in factories, but in those days, just like now, within the party everyone knew his own stuff and one thing was crystal clear: though everyone was politically correct, in the higher spheres it was thought that real politics was for men, and for men only. Women made a good buttress, a good background, and you could even win

a few extra points on them, but let's not be under any illusions, gentlemen, apart from a few exceptions, like Chancellor Merkel, a woman is just a woman. Politics is no business for women, but you can only say that over a beer, a glass of vodka or a game of poker at Herz's – never within government offices. There you were obliged to shake hands with the female politicians. Politicianesses? Lady politicians?

"To hell with them!" said Schlangenberger, laughing, raising his mug of beer and winking at his mates.

"To hell with them!" his fellow card-players agreed.



© Mar Babo

David Machado

Índice Médio de Felicidade (2013)

Average Happiness Index

Publishing House **Dom Quixote**

Biography

David Machado was born in Lisbon in 1978. He has a degree in economics from ISEG, Lisbon's School of Economics and Management, but soon devoted himself to writing fiction and children's literature.

In 2005, he was awarded the Branquinho da Fonseca Prize for his children's book *A Noite dos Animais Inventados* and, in 2010, he was awarded the SPA/RTP Author Prize, in the category for Best Children and Youth book, for *O Tubarão na Banheira*.

He is the author of the short story collection *Histórias Possíveis* and the novels *O Fabuloso Teatro do Gigante*, *Deixem Falar as Pedras* and *Índice Médio de Felicidade*, as well as the children's books *Os Quatro Comandantes da Cama Voadora*, *Um Homem Verde num Buraco Muito Fundo*, *A Mala Assombrada*, *Parece Um Pássaro* and *Acho Que Posso Ajudar*. He has contributed work to the literary collections *A Misteriosa Mulher da Ópera*, *Contos de Verão* and *O Segredo*, and has published short stories in Portuguese and foreign newspapers and magazines.

Synopsis

Daniel had a plan, a sort of journal of the future, written in a notebook. Sometimes he went back to rectify small things, but still, life seemed pretty easy – and happiness too. But, all of a sudden, everything changed for the worse: Portugal collapsed and Daniel lost his job. He couldn't afford to pay the mortgage for his house any more. His wife, also unemployed, left with his children, searching for better opportunities. His two best friends are absent: one, Xavier, has been locked inside his house for 12 years, obsessed with statistics and deeply depressed by the fact that the mutual aid website they created has proved a complete failure; the other one, Almodóvar, was arrested in a desperate attempt to mend his life. When thinking of his children and of Almodóvar's child, Daniel tries to understand what kind of hope is left for future generations. And he doesn't want to give up. In spite of the wreck that his life becomes, his will to rebuild everything seems unshakable. Because the Present is meaningless, if we don't anticipate a Future.

Índice Médio de Felicidade

David Machado

Fizemos alguma coisa mal, disse.

O que é que fizemos mal?

O *site*, disse ele. O *site* não está a resultar.

Acreditas? O gajo continuava às voltas com o *site*. Tu já não andavas por cá há cerca de meio ano e o Xavier continuava preocupado com a merda do *site*. Porque tu lhe meteste isso na cabeça. Não te calaste com a história do *site* durante meses, era uma ideia infalível, íamos vender o negócio um ano depois com 10 000% de lucro, pagávamos as prestações ao banco, a educação dos filhos, uma vida mais desafiada, o filme todo; e íamos estar a fazer uma coisa boa, íamos ajudar as pessoas. Ouvi-te falar daquilo tantas vezes. Eu próprio comecei a acreditar também. Parecia uma grande ideia. Para ser sincero, ainda me parece uma grande ideia. Mas a verdade é que eu e tu metemos lá dinheiro, dinheiro que agora me faz falta, dinheiro que talvez te tivesse impedido de fazeres o que fizeste, e nunca mais vimos esse dinheiro. E o Xavier teve aquele trabalho todo a programar o *site*, semanas sem dormir, e quando finalmente ficou pronto não aconteceu nada, os meses passaram e continuava sem acontecer nada. Ele tinha razão: o *site* não estava a resultar. Só que, enquanto para mim há muito tempo isso deixara de ser importante, quase um ano depois o Xavier continuava às voltas com aquilo.

Eu não queria ter aquela conversa inútil, mas procurei ser paciente.

O que é que queres fazer?, perguntei-lhe. Não podemos meter mais dinheiro.

Ele fechou um pouco o ecrã do portátil e a sua cara encheu-se de sombras. Disse:

Há pessoas a usarem o *site*. o problema é que nenhuma dessas pessoas precisa de ajuda.

Resumindo, o enunciado do problema era este: nós criámos uma rede social através da qual pessoas que precisam de ajuda e pessoas que estão dispostas a ajudar podem encontrar-se; durante os primeiros onze meses em que o *site* esteve no ar, inscreveram-se vinte e seis pessoas; dessas vinte e seis, há catorze que nunca escreveram nada, quatro que escrevem regularmente explicando que precisam de ajuda para bater punhetas, limpar o cu, cortar as unhas dos pés, etc., três que usam o *site* para se manterem em contacto entre elas sem nunca terem trocado qualquer pedido de ajuda; uma que, ocasionalmente, se anuncia disponível para ajudar quem quer que seja naquilo que for necessário, em qualquer local e a qualquer hora, e que para isso dispõe de uma carrinha de 9 lugares.

Para mim, a questão mais pertinente é: Quem são estas pessoas? o Xavier levantou-se da cama, pareceu-me que o seu corpo, magro e tão alto, bamboleou, como se houvesse vento a soprar no quarto, acendeu outro cigarro e apontou para a janela fechada. Perguntou:

Lá fora, as pessoas ainda são como antes?

As pessoas são sempre as pessoas, respondi-lhe.

Ainda há pessoas que precisam de ajuda?

Toda a gente precisa de ajuda.

Porque é que não pedem?

Não sei. Se calhar, não conhecem o *site*.

Ele deu dois passos curtos e sentou-se ao meu lado na cama. A cara dele apareceu na franja da luz diáfana do candeeiro, os olhos sacudidos por lágrimas que caíam a qualquer

momento. no entanto, quando falou, a voz era firme, como se a tempestade estivesse toda dentro dele.

Tenho medo do que poderá acontecer se alguém pedir ajuda.

Mas não parecia estar com medo. Eu disse:

Pelo menos haverá sempre uma carrinha de 9 lugares.

Ele agitou a mão que segurava o cigarro e o fumo estendeu-se no escuro em todas as direcções. Não se riu.

Temos de escrever a pedir ajuda, disse ele.

Repara: neste momento, eu podia ter-me levantado e saído. Mas ainda assim fiquei – porque tu, no meu lugar, terias ficado – e ouvi a ideia do Xavier.

Ele queria criar uma conta no *site*, uma identidade falsa, e depois escrever a pedir ajuda, qualquer coisa simples, calafetar uma janela, levar o cão ao veterinário, só para ter a certeza de que alguém responderia.

E se aparece mesmo alguém a oferecer ajuda?, perguntei.

Falas com a pessoa e aceitas a ajuda.

Eu?

Tu não precisas de ajuda para nada?

Não.

Acabaste de dizer que toda a gente precisa de ajuda.

Ninguém vai acreditar que eu preciso de ajuda.

Se disseses a verdade, porque não?

Porque é que não pedes tu ajuda?

Eu não posso sair de casa.

Podes pedir que te venham ajudar aqui a casa. Dizes que não podes sair, que precisas que te tragam as compras do supermercado.

A minha mãe traz-me as compras do supermercado.

Pedes outra coisa qualquer. Frangos assados. O jornal. Uma peruca.

Ele ficou calado muito tempo, a mexer os lábios como se estivesse a resolver um cálculo difícil na cabeça. Depois disse:

Se alguém vier ajudar-me, podes cá estar?

Foda-se, Xavier, isso é absurdo.

Não é.

Esquece o *site*.

Eu esqueço. Fazemos isto, só para sabermos se alguém responde. E depois eu esqueço.

Pensei no assunto durante uns segundos. era uma ideia disparatada e eu não queria fazê-lo. Tu e eu passámos dois terços da nossa vida a satisfazer as vontades mais absurdas daquele cabrão, só por termos medo do que pudesse acontecer caso recusássemos. Mas a verdade é que o Xavier já é crescido para ouvir um «não» de vez em quando.

Está bem, disse-lhe. Eu estou cá quando vierem ajudar-te.

E obriguei-me a recordar aquele instante, a importância daquela promessa.

O Xavier suspirou, como se eu tivesse acabado de lhe salvar a vida.

Eu levantei-me, a cabeça cheia de chumbo. Acontece-me sempre que o visito: entro levado por um alento ingénuo, acredito que vai ser bom vê-lo, que vamos conversar durante horas como quando éramos miúdos, e depois, em poucos minutos, sinto a tristeza que paira no ar do quarto misturada com o fumo e as sombras e só penso em sair dali o mais depressa possível. O Xavier aprendeu a pressentir estes impulsos, como se ali dentro tivesse o poder de ver para lá daquilo que se vê. Disse:

Podes acender a luz.

Eu não respondi. Caminhei até à secretária. Os papéis estavam ordenados em cinco ou seis pilhas: equações escritas à mão, gráficos, números soltos, o costume. Havia uma folha

com uma tabela que ocupava toda a página. Não era uma coisa invulgar naquele quarto, mesmo nas paredes havia tabelas coladas com fita-cola. Mas, repara, o título desta tabela era: ÍNDICE DE FELICIDADE.

O que é isto?

Ele apenas respondeu:

Estatísticas.

Peguei na folha e voltei-a. A tabela continuava do outro lado. Era uma lista de países, 149 países, ordenados pelo Índice Médio de Felicidade. O primeiro da lista era a Costa Rica, o último o Togo. as linhas 127, 128, 129 e 130 da tabela – Bulgária, Burkina Faso, Congo e Costa do Marfim, respectivamente – tinham sido sublinhadas com um marcador verde.

O que é o Índice de Felicidade?, perguntei.

O Xavier deixou-se cair para trás e ficou deitado sobre o edredão, a mão que segurava o cigarro pendurada para fora da cama. Fechou os olhos.

Não é uma estatística muito interessante, uma vez que carece de objectividade, respondeu. Mas é o melhor que temos. Na verdade, baseia-se num questionário com uma única pergunta: Numa escala de 0 a 10, quão satisfeito se sente com a vida no seu todo? Deu uma passa no cigarro. O fumo saiu devagar pelo nariz. Depois acrescentou: Suspeito de que a maior parte das pessoas responde ao questionário levemente, até porque a maior parte das pessoas não percebe nada de felicidade.

Acreditas nisto, Almodôvar? O cabrão do Xavier, o gajo mais infeliz desta cidade, o homem da alma negra, armado em guru da felicidade? Tu sabes: naquele momento, podia ter arrasado o gajo com três ou quatro frases. No entanto, em vez disso, perguntei:

O que é que se passa na Bulgária, no Burkina Faso, no Congo e na Costa do Marfim?

Nesses países o Índice Médio de Felicidade é igual à minha resposta ao questionário.

Tu respondeste ao questionário?

Claro.

Ele continuava deitado na cama, imóvel, o cigarro vertical preso entre os lábios. Abriu os olhos. Depois fechou-os outra vez. Eu fiz a única pergunta que tinha na cabeça:

Porquê?

Porque gosto de quantificar as coisas da vida e do mundo. Tu conheces-me.

Não tens medo daquilo que este valor possa significar?

Tenho mais medo de não conhecer o valor.

...

...

E agora?

E agora o quê?

E agora: o teu grau de satisfação com a vida é 4,4 em 10. O que é que isso quer dizer?

Para ser mais exacto, a minha resposta é: 4,43672. E, entre outras coisas, quer dizer que eu devia mudar-me para a Bulgária ou para o Burkina Faso ou para o Congo ou para a Costa do Marfim.

Porquê?

O Xavier rolou na cama, esticou-se e apagou o cigarro num pires cheio de beatas que estava na mesa-de-cabeceira.

Tenho uma teoria, disse.

Conta.

E, repara, era verdade. Há muito tempo que não sucedia, mas, de repente, naquele momento, eu estava verdadeiramente interessado naquilo que o Xavier tinha para dizer.

Um homem muda-se para o país onde o Índice de Felicidade humano é igual ao seu, começou ele. Encontrando-se rodeado por outras pessoas que são, pelo menos em média, felizes na mesma medida que ele, o homem sentir-se-á mais integrado nessa nova comunidade, mais realizado com aquilo que é. Por outras palavras: mais feliz. Ou seja: o seu Índice de Felicidade humano aumenta, torna-se mais elevado do que o índice médio daquele país e idêntico ao de um outro país qualquer mais acima na tabela. O homem deve então mudar -se para este novo país, nem que seja porque já não se sente tão integrado na população do país onde está. No novo país, o homem volta a sentir-se absolutamente integrado, o que faz aumentar de novo o seu Índice de Felicidade humano, obrigando-o a mudar-se de novo para um país mais acima na tabela. E assim sucessivamente. Por fim, o homem acabará a viver no país no topo da tabela e será tão feliz quanto é fisicamente possível neste planeta.

Existiu um silêncio.

Acreditas nisso?, perguntei por fim.

É uma teoria. Até eu sei que as coisas não são assim tão simples.

Então não te vais mudar para o Burkina Faso?

Provavelmente, não.

Não queres subir na tabela?

Claro que quero. Não é isso que todos queremos? Só que primeiro teria de sair deste quarto. E isso provocaria uma descida imediata no meu Índice de Felicidade humano. Fez uma pausa e olhou para mim. Depois acrescentou: 4,4 já é bastante baixo. Se esse valor cair ainda mais, pode ser perigoso.

Disse aquilo com a voz insuflada de sarcasmo. No entanto, soou como uma constatação matemática universal. Eu disse:

Quero responder ao questionário.

Força, desafiou o Xavier. E acendeu outro cigarro.

Como é que é a pergunta?

Numa escala de 0 a 10, quão satisfeito se sente com a vida no seu todo? Depois acrescentou: Não sejas precipitado a responder, Daniel.

Eu tentei pensar em tudo: a Marta e os miúdos, o meu desemprego, o dinheiro que se acabava, o meu Plano, a minha imagem reflectida no espelho nessa manhã. Por fim, disse: 8.

O Xavier olhou para mim surpreendido. Perguntou:

O que é isso?

A minha resposta. **8,0**.

Eu disse para não te precipitares.

Não me precipitei.

Estiveste calado três minutos e depois disparaste um número que, supostamente, representa o teu grau de satisfação com a vida.

É o meu número.

E, em três minutos, passaste em revista toda a tua existência, contabilizaste tudo, ponderaste todas as variáveis?

Sim. Acho que sim. Quanto tempo é que tu demoraste?

Foda-se, Daniel, eu estou nisto há duas semanas e mesmo assim ainda sinto que não estou a pensar em tudo.

Duas semanas, Xavier? Isto não é um problema de matemática.

Na verdade, até é. Mas, antes disso, é a tua vida. Não podes resolvê-la em três minutos. Repito: a maior parte das pessoas não percebe nada de felicidade.

A tua resposta é 4,4 e eu é que não percebo nada de felicidade.

Estás a interpretar-me mal. Eu não disse que não sentias felicidade. Sentes. Apenas não a percebes.

E tu percebes?

Eu percebo da minha felicidade. É uma equação como outra qualquer que tive de preencher com variáveis e constantes e ponderadores e depois ligar tudo com os sinais certos.

Variáveis? Quais variáveis?

Amigos. Amor. Tempo. Sonhos. Sede. Dores de barriga. Esperança. Inveja. O sabor da comida. Esse género de merdas.

Eu ri-me.

Não podes quantificar isso, disse-lhe.

Se podes quantificar a felicidade, podes muito bem quantificar as saudades que tens de teres oito anos ou o medo de beijares alguém. Claro que algumas dessas variáveis só poderão ser encontradas resolvendo outras equações primeiro. é um sistema, na verdade. É complicado. Mas a vida é complicada, Daniel.

Average Happiness Index

David Machado

Translated from the Portuguese by Rui Vitorino Azevedo

“We did something wrong,” he said.

“What did we do wrong?”

“The site,” he said. “The site isn’t working.”

Can you believe it? The guy was still trying to figure out the site. You weren’t even here about half a year ago and Xavier was still worried about that shitty site. Because you put that into his head. You didn’t shut up about the site for months. It was a foolproof idea. We were going to sell the business a year later with a 10,000% profit. We’d pay off the instalment loans, our children’s education, lead a comfortable lifestyle, the whole film; and we were going to do something good, we were going to help people. I heard you talk about that so many times. I even started to believe it too. It seemed to be a great idea. To be honest, it still seems to me to be a great idea. But the truth is that we put money into it, money that I now need, money that might have stopped you from doing what you did, and we never saw that money again. And Xavier had all that work programming the site, weeks without sleeping, and when it was finally ready nothing happened. Months passed and still nothing happened. He was right: the site wasn’t working. It’s just that, well, for me it stopped being important a long time ago. But almost a year later Xavier was still trying to figure it out.

I didn’t want to have that useless conversation, but I tried to be patient.

“What do you want to do?” I asked him. “We can’t put more money in.”

He closed his laptop monitor a little and his face filled with shadows. He said:

“There are people using the site. The problem is that none of those people need help.”

In short, the problem was this: we created a social network where people who need help and people who are willing to help can meet. During the first 11 months that the site was live, 26 people signed up. Of those 26, there are 14 that never wrote anything, four that write regularly explaining that they need help jerking off, wiping their ass, cutting their toe nails, etc., three that use the site to stay in contact with each other without having ever made any request for help, and one that occasionally announces their availability to help whoever with whatever may be needed, in any place and at any time, and for that reason has a nine seater van.

For me, the most pertinent question is: who are these people? Xavier got up from bed. It looked to me as though his body, thin and so tall, wobbled, as if there were wind blowing in the room. He lit another cigarette and pointed to the closed window. He asked:

“Are people out there the same as before?”

“People are always people,” I replied.

“Are there still people who need help?”

“Everybody needs help.”

“Why don’t they ask for it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they don’t know the site.”

He took two short steps and sat next to me on the bed. His face appeared in the fringe of the lamp’s diaphanous light, the eyes stained with tears that would fall at any moment. However, the voice was firm when he spoke, as if the storm was all inside of him.

“I’m afraid of what might happen if someone asks for help.”

But he did not seem to be afraid. I said:

“At least there will always be a nine seater van.”

He shook the hand holding the cigarette and the smoke rolled out in the dark in all directions. He didn't laugh.

“We have to write and ask for help”, he said.

Look: at this point, I could have gotten up and left. And yet I stayed – because you, in my position, would have stayed – and I heard Xavier's idea.

He wanted to create an account on the site, a false identity, and then write asking for help, any simple thing, caulk a window, take the dog to the veterinarian, just to be sure that someone would answer.

“And what if someone actually shows up offering help?” I asked.

“You speak to the person and accept the help.”

“Me?”

“Don't you need help with anything?”

“No.”

“You just said that everyone needs help.”

“Nobody is going to believe that I need help.”

“If you say the truth, why not?”

“Why don't you ask for help?”

“I can't leave the house.”

“You can ask them to come and help you here at home. You say that you can't leave, that you need someone to bring you the groceries.”

“My mother brings me the groceries.”

“Ask for something else. Roast chicken. A newspaper. A wig.”

He kept quiet for a long time, moving his lips as if he were solving a difficult maths problem in his head. He then said:

“If someone comes to help me, can you be here?”

“Fuck, Xavier, that's absurd.”

“It isn't.”

“Forget the site.”

“I’ll forget it. We are doing this just to see if someone answers. And then I’ll forget it.”

I thought about it for a few seconds. It was a crazy idea and I didn’t want to do it. You and I have spent two-thirds of our life satisfying that bastard’s most absurd wishes, just because we are afraid of what might happen if we refused. But the truth is that Xavier is already grown and can hear a “no” from time to time.

“Alright,” I told him. “I’ll be here when they come and help you.”

And I forced myself to remember that instant, the importance of that promise.

Xavier sighed, as if I had just saved his life.

I got up with my head full of lead. This happens whenever I visit him: I enter led by an ingenuous courage. I believe that it will be good to see him, that we are going to speak for hours like when we were kids, and then, in a few minutes, I feel the sorrow that persists in the room’s air mixed with the smoke and shadows and I only think about getting out of there as quickly as possible. Xavier learned how to sense these impulses, as if, in there, he had the power to see beyond that which can be seen. He said:

“Can you switch the light on?”

I didn’t answer. I walked up to the desk. The papers were organised into five or six piles: equations written by hand, graphics, random numbers, the usual. There was a sheet with a table that occupied the whole page. It was not an unusual thing in that room as there were even tables taped to the walls. But, look, the title of this table was: HAPPINESS INDEX.

“What is this?”

He only replied:

“Statistics.”

I grabbed the sheet of paper and turned it. The table continued on the other side. It was a list of countries, 149 countries, ordered by the Average Happiness Index. The first on the list was Costa Rica, the last Togo. Lines 127, 128, 129 and 130 of the table – Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Congo and the Ivory Coast, respectively – had been underlined with a green marker.

“What is the Happiness Index?” I asked.

Xavier let himself fall back and laid on the duvet, with the hand that held the cigarette hanging out of the bed. He closed his eyes.

“It isn’t a very interesting statistic, since it lacks objectivity,” he replied. “But it’s the best we’ve got. In fact, it’s based on a questionnaire with only one question: On a scale from 0 to 10, how satisfied are you with life as a whole?” He took a drag from the cigarette. The smoke came out slowly from his nose. He then added: “I suspect that the majority of people answer the questionnaire in a frivolous manner, since most people don’t understand anything about happiness.”

Do you believe this, Almodôvar? That bastard Xavier, the unhappiest guy in this city, the man with a black soul, acting like a happiness guru? You know: at that moment, I could have devastated the guy with three or four sentences. However, instead of that, I asked him:

“What is going on in Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Congo and the Ivory Coast?”

“In those countries the Average Happiness Index is the same as my answer to the questionnaire.”

“You answered the questionnaire?”

“Of course.”

He continued lying in bed, motionless, the vertical cigarette stuck between his lips. He opened his eyes. Then closed them again. I asked the only question I had in my head:

“Why?”

“Because I like to quantify things about life and about the world. You know me.”

“Aren’t you afraid of what this value may mean?”

“I’m more afraid of not knowing the value.”

...

...

“And now?”

“And now what?”

“And now: your rank in life satisfaction is 4.4 out of 10. What does that mean?”

“To be more exact, my answer is: 4.43672 and it means, among other things, that I should move to Bulgaria or Burkina Faso or Congo or the Ivory Coast.”

“Why?”

Xavier rolled in bed, stretched and put out the cigarette in a saucer full of cigarette butts on the nightstand.

“I have a theory,” he said.

“Tell me.”

And, look, it was true. It had been a long time since it happened, but, suddenly, at that moment, I was really interested in what Xavier had to say.

“A man moves to a country where the human Happiness Index is equal to his,” he began. “Finding himself surrounded by other people that are, at least on average, happy in the same way that he is, the man will feel more integrated in that new community, and have a greater sense of accomplishment. In other words: happier. That is, his human Happiness Index increases, it becomes higher than the average rate of that

country and identical to that of any other country higher up on the table. The man should then move to this new country, even if it's only because he no longer feels as integrated in the population of the country where he is. In the new country, the man feels absolutely integrated, which makes his human Happiness Index increase again, forcing him to move again to a country higher up on the table. And so on and so forth. Finally, the man will end up living in the country at the top of the table and will be as happy as it is physically possible to be on this planet."

There was silence.

"Do you believe that?" I finally asked.

"It's a theory. Even I know that things are not so simple."

"Then you're not moving to Burkina Faso?"

"Probably not."

"Don't you want to move up on the table?"

"Of course I do. Isn't that what we all want? It's just that first I would have to leave this room. And that would provoke an immediate decrease in my human Happiness Index." He paused and looked at me. He then added: "4.4 is already fairly low. If that value falls even further, it could be dangerous."

He said that with a voice filled with sarcasm. However, it sounded like a universal mathematical fact. I said:

"I want to answer the questionnaire."

"Go for it," Xavier challenged. And he lit another cigarette.

"What's the question again?"

"On a scale from 0 to 10, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?" He then added: "Don't be too hasty in answering, Daniel."

I tried to think about everything: Marta and the kids, my unemployment, the money that was running out, my Plan, my image reflected in the mirror that morning. Finally, I said: "8".

Xavier looked at me astonished. He asked:

“What is that?”

“My answer. **8.0.**”

“I told you not to rush.”

“I didn’t rush.”

“You were quiet for three minutes and then you picked a random number that, supposedly, represents your level of life satisfaction.”

“It’s my number.”

“And, in those three minutes did you review your entire existence, account for everything, ponder all the variables?”

“Yes. I believe so. How long did it take you?”

“Fuck, Daniel, I’ve been on this for two weeks and I still feel that I’m not thinking about everything.”

“Two weeks, Xavier? This isn’t a maths problem.”

“Actually, it is. But, before we get into that, it’s your life. You can’t solve it in three minutes. I repeat: the majority of people know nothing about happiness.”

“Your answer is 4.4 and I’m the one that doesn’t know anything about happiness?”

“You misunderstood me. I didn’t say that you don’t feel happiness. You do. It’s just that you don’t understand it.”

“And you understand it?”

“I understand my happiness. It’s an equation like any other that I had to fill in with variables and constants and weights, and afterwards I had to connect everything with the right signs.”

“Variables? Which variables?”

“Friends. Love. Time. Dreams. Thirst. Stomach aches. Hope. Envy. The flavour of food. That kind of shit.”

I laughed.

“You cannot quantify that,” I told him.

“If you can quantify happiness, then you can also quantify the nostalgia of being eight-years-old or the fear of kissing someone. It’s clear that some of those variables can only be found by solving other equations first. It’s a system, in fact. It’s complicated. But life is complicated, Daniel.”



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Svetlana Žuchová

Obrazy zo života M. (2013)

Scenes from the Life of M.

Publishing House **Marenčin PT**

Biography

Svetlana Žuchová, born in 1976, studied psychology at Vienna University and medicine at the Medical Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava. She works at a psychiatric clinic in Prague. Her stories have been published in journals including *Dotyky*, *Rak*, *Romboid*, *Vlna*, *OS* and the weekly *Slovo*. Twice she was awarded prizes at the annual short story competition *Poviedka* (in 2001 and 2005) and her texts appeared in anthologies of works from this competition. Her first book was the story collection *Dulce de leche* (2003), for which she received the Ivan Krasko Prize. Next came the chamber novella *Yesim* (2006), set in the milieu of Turkish emigrants in Austria and based on the poetical narrative monologue of the principal character, the young woman Yesim, about the key events and circumstances of her life. In the novel *Zlodeji a svedkovia* (*Thieves and Witnesses*, 2011), the author continued to pursue her interest in the psychology of a person living away from home, and also explored relationships within immigrant communities. Her third novel, linked with its predecessor by the narrator and main character Marisia, is *Obrazy zo života M.* (*Scenes from the Life of M.*, 2013). All three novels were included in the final of the most important Slovak literary competition *Anasoft Litera* (2007, 2012 and 2014). Žuchová also translates fiction and non-fiction from English and German, including works by Michel Faber, Sarah Kane, Sophie Kinsella and Sabine Thiesler.

Synopsis

The plot of *Scenes from the Life of M.* loosely follows on from the writer's previous novel, *Thieves and Witnesses*. The main character, Marisia, returns from Vienna to Slovakia after her mother's death, lives with her partner and works as a nurse. While in the first novel, Marisia was looking for a home for herself, this novel shows her finding one. Descriptions of her everyday life alternate with memories of her mother's death, her mundane existence juxtaposed with the extremity of certain situations. The novel's main theme is one of family ties both old and new, close and distant, and their importance and futility.

Obrazy zo života M.

Svetlana Žuchová

Prázdnota

V deň, keď mama zomrela, som išla na kúpalisko. Mama zomrela nadránom a krátko pred siedmou mi volali z nemocnice. V tom období som chodievala každý víkend za mamou, a od piatku do nedele som spávala v jej prázdnom byte. Bolo to v čase, keď sa Janut odsťahoval. Od vzťahu s Janutom som si veľa sľubovala. S Janutom som chcela dospieť, pretože dospelosť ma veľmi zaujímala. Od rána do večera sme mali plné ruky práce na dospelosti. Predstavovala som si, že dospelosť pozostáva zo zariadenia bytu, z nájomnej zmluvy a z úspor na bankovom konte. Svoj záujem o dospelosť som si všimla v jedno víkendové popoludnie v Ikei. Predpokladá sa totiž, že človek si niečo uvedomí v istej konkrétnej chvíli. Napríklad jedna z Otových sestier mi raz povedala, že lásku svojho budúceho manžela si uvedomila, keď jej povedal, že s ňou chce mať dieťa. Janut zas tvrdil, že sa rozhodol nechodiť viac do práce, keď ho šéf zavolať do svojej kancelárie v maringotke. Vraj ho ani nevyzval, aby sa posadil, a Janut musel jeho nadávky počúvať postojacky. Nie som si istá, či je to pravda. Či si isté skutočnosti naozaj uvedomíme z okamihu na okamih. A niečo, čo sme dovtedy nevedeli, zrazu vieme. V presne ohraničenej chvíli. Je možné, že vedomie niečoho v nás skôr pomaly dozrieva a postupne sa dostáva stále bližšie k povrchu. A potom sa, zdanlivo náhle, stane viditeľným. A je rovnako možné, že okamihy uvedomenia v skutočnosti neexistujú, a vytvárajú

sa až spätne v spomienkach. Že postupné, pomalé tlenie sa skondenzuje do spomienky na chvíľu, keď sme si niečo uvedomili. Akoby náhle, z okamihu na okamih.

(...)

Keď Janut prestal chodiť do práce, navrhol, aby sme išli do Ikey. Nemáme síce ešte nájomnú zmluvu a pracovné povolenie, ale na začiatok si môžeme kúpiť aspoň novú posteľ. Súhlasila som a v jedno víkendové popoludnie sme sa vlakom odviezli do nákupného centra. Celý život som mala na nábytok vyhranený vkus. Vyrastala som so starou mamou v dome zariadenom ťažkým starožitným nábytkom. Pri stene v jedálni bol masívny kredenc. Nemali sme konferenčný stolík ani sedáciu súpravu s medovožltými poťahmi, ale jedá- lenský stôl a štyri ťažké stoličky. Rokmi práchniveli a vŕzgali, ale patrili kedysi ešte rodičom starej mamy, a tak sa z piety nesmeli nahradiť. Navyše sme mali na kobercoch porozkladané kožušiny, v ktorých sa držal prach. Okná domu boli obrátené na západ a popoludní jedáleň osvetľovalo agresívne slnečné svetlo, v ktorom vírili prachové čiastočky. Prachu bolo v našom dome vždy dosť. Usadzoval sa na nábytku, na porcelánových soškách v presklenej vitríne a v kožušinách, ktoré sa rokmi štiepili a spôsobovali alergie.

Vždy som bola presvedčená, že svoj byt si zariadim len niekoľkými kusmi ľahkého nábytku. Ušla som od mamy do prázdna, pretože prázdnotu som si veľmi vážila. Veď tam nič nemáš, hovorila mama, keď som si balila pár kusov oblečenia do ruksaku a deklarovala som, že odchádzam do Rakúska. Myslíš, že tam niekoho zaujímaš? Kde budeš bývať a čo budeš jesť? Varovala ma, že budem vo vzduchoprázdne a naletím podvodníkom. Vezmú ti pas, čo si to nečítala v

novinách? Sama som nedokázala pomenovať, že chcem práve to vzduchoprázdno. Predstavovala som si poloprázdne izby a v mojich predstavách boli okná vždy obrátené na východ. Žiadne zaprášené slnečné popoludnia. Niekedy som vo fantázii nemala ani posteľ, ale spávala som na prikrývke položenej rovno na linoleu. Nechcela som ani koberce ani záclony, len žalúzie brániace byt pred prisilným slnkom. Môj priestor mal byť priehľadný.

Keď mama zomrela, musela som vyprázdniť jej byt. Mama vtedy už bývala v prenajatom bratislavskom byte, ktorý musel byť do konca mesiaca prázdny. Nájomnú zmluvu mala vypovedať tri mesiace dopredu, ale vzhľadom na okolnosti na tom majitelia nenástojili. Niekoľko ľudí mi povedalo, že som na to mala myslieť, ale mne to skutočne vôbec nenapadlo. Zavolať majiteľ-ke maminho bytu a vysvetliť, že mama je v nemocnici a pravdepodobne bude musieť vypovedať nájomnú zmluvu. Že presný dátum síce nepoznáme, ale pravdepodobne to bude čoskoro. Našťastie to potom majiteľka chápala a dohodli sme sa, že kľúče jej vrátim do konca mesiaca. Medzitým jej umožním prístup do bytu na prehliadky z realitnej kancelárie. Mama zomrela tridsiateho prvého mája a na vyprázdenie bytu som mala celý jún. Naďalej som cestovala do Bratislavy každý víkend a postupne som všetko odnášala do kontajnera. Nakoniec som pár kusov nábytku dala odviezť do spaľovne. Dedičské konanie ešte neprebehlo, ale mama mala v byte hotovosť a tak som nemusela šetriť. Pár zimných kabátov som rozdala bezdomovkyniam, ktoré posedávali okolo domu.

Janut, s ktorým sme ešte krátko predtým boli v Ikea, sa odsťahoval krátko predtým. Nová posteľ, ktorú sme v to popoludnie kúpili, ostala v našej niekdajšej izbe pre nového nájomníka. S Janutom sme sa v Ikea prechádzali po rozľahlých priestoroch. Pomedzi regály, kancelárske stoličky zo svetlého

dreva a rozkladateľné a ľahko prenosné stoly sme sa dostali až do oddelenia spálňí. Prezerali sme si niekoľko postelí, ktoré pozostávajú z ľahkej konštrukcie. Len z niekoľkých dosák priložených k sebe a na miestach, kde sa krížili, prichytených niekoľkými skrutkami. Zhodli sme sa, že chceme svetlé, prírodné drevo. A potom som si všimla tmavohnedú spálňovú zostavu. Dvojposteľ so záhlavím, dva nočné stolíky so zásuvkami. Na nich položené reklamné výtlacky kníh vo švédčine a dve nočné lampy. Predstavila som si, ako večer vankúše osvetľujú dva kruhy mäkkého svetla. K zostave patrila aj bielizeň a skriňa s posuvnými dverami a zrkadlami na ich vnútornej strane. Na stene boli nakreslené okná zakryté závesmi. Inštinktívne som pocítila útlnosť tej miestnosti. V tom okamihu som si uvedomila, že nahromadené drobnosti tvoria bezpečie, v ktorom môže vyrastať dieťa. Aj usádzajúci sa prach, ktorý treba zodpovedne každý deň utierať. V ten víkend sme s Janutom nakoniec kúpili jednu z tých rozkladacích postelí zo smrekového dreva a niesli sme ju spolu naspäť vlakom. V Ikei sa dala požičať dodávka, ale netrúfli sme si na to. Ja som síce mala vodičský preukaz, ale od maturity som nešoférovala. O tom, že sa mi v skutočnosti páčila skôr tá tmavá spáľňa, som Janutovi nepovedala. Myslím, že už vtedy som vedela, že spolu takú nikdy mať nebudeme. Že taká spáľňa patrí do dospelosti, a tú nedosiahneme spolu.

Keď mama zomrela, zistila som, že moja predstava o dospelosti bola naivná. Zmenu som si chcela vynútiť, opatrne som kládla nohy pred seba, aby som nezišla zo správnej cesty. A zrazu sa bolo treba rozbehnúť a nebol čas ani dýchať. Po prvýkrát som sa zhlboka nadýchla vlastne až vtedy, keď som mamin byt konečne vyprázdnila. Naposledy som sa doň vrátila na stretnutie s majiteľkou. Mala byt skontrolovať, vrátiť mi kauciu a prevziať si kľúče. Prišla som o niečo skôr, aby som

na nič nezabudla. Dvojizbový byt bol teraz celkom prázdny. V jednej miestnosti ostal koberec, ktorý nepatril mame. Boli na ňom stopy po nábytku, štyri priehlbiny v pravidelných odstupoch po nohách postele. Steny potrebovali vymaľovať, na niekoľkých miestach farba praskala a ostali v nej diery po klincoch, na ktorých predtým viseli obrazy. Všade bolo čisto, povysávala som, v kútoch neostali chuchvalce prachu, a zo smaltu umývadla a vane som vydrhla usadeniny vodného kameňa. V kúte kúpeľne ostalo vedro, cez jeho okraj prevesený pár žltých gumených rukavíc a okolo niekoľko čistiacich prostriedkov. To boli jediné predmety v byte. Kým som čakala na majiteľku, sadla som si na dlážku v predsieni a rozhliadla sa po prázdnych izbách. Maminu smrť som si vtedy neuvedomovala. Všimla som si najmä, že zľahka a zhlboka dýcham. Keď majiteľka prišla, zaklopala, ale hneď si odomkla vlastným náhradným kľúčom. Podala mi ruku a znovu povedala úprimnú sústrasť. Poďakovala som sa, že netrvala na výpovednej lehote. Samozrejme, povedala. Vymenili sme si obálky s peniazmi a kľúčmi a rozlúčili sme sa. Vlakom som sa vrátila do Viedne, vyprázdniť svoju a Janutovu izbu.

(...)

V Bratislave som nikoho nepoznala a na celé dni som chodila na plaváreň. Z týždňa na týždeň bolo krajšie počasie. Pred štyrmi rokmi bola pekná teplá jar. Za mamou som chodievala už len vo svetri a na plavárni som plávala aj vo vonkajšom bazéne. Vodu vyhrievali a niekedy tvár oziabala v chladnom vzduchu, ale už svietilo slnko. Raz som sa na chodbe pred maminou izbou stretla s lekárom, ktorý mal práve službu. Vo filmoch trávajú príbuzní v nemocnici celé dni a neustále konzultujú s lekárom zdravotný stav. Mala som výčitky svedomia,

že sa nesprávam rovnako. Maminho lekára som videla prvýkrát. Zastavila som ho a videla som mu na tvári, že je nervózny. Teraz tomu dobre rozumiem. Vo víkendových službách sa počíta každá minúta. Keď sa na našej ambulancii zastavia v nedeľu príbuzní a chcú zavolať lekára, opakujeme, že až v pondelok. Až v pracovný deň, lebo cez víkend je na niekoľkých oddeleniach len jediný pán doktor, a ten sa venuje len naliehavým prípadom. Ale mamin lekár sa pri mne pristavil a chvíľu sme sa rozprávali. Škoda, že mama prišla neskoro. Teraz je v popredí zlyhávanie obličiek pri dehydratácii. Nedarí sa zastaviť stúpajúce hodnoty kreatinínu. Nemožno postupovať v liečbe základného ochorenia. Používal taktný termín základné ochorenie. Mama zle znáša liečbu a v noci je nepokojná, takže musíme pristupovať k obmedzeniu. Neskôr v rekvalifikačnom kurze pre zdravotné sestry sme preberali kapitolu podávania nepriaznivých informácií. Hoci sestry nepriaznivé informácie nepodávajú, to je v kompetencii lekára. Patrí to však k zdravotníckemu vzdelaniu. Hovoriť vecne a držať sa faktov. Nevyhýbať sa, nechodiť okolo horúcej kaše. Zlú správu povedať na začiatku a nehovoriť mrzí ma, že vám to musím povedať. Pri takýchto vetách narastá úzkosť a strach sa nafúkne. Hovoriť jasne a zreteľne, akoby sme udierali na struny cimbalu. Cink. Cink. Mamin lekár sa držal pravidiel, ktoré som vtedy ešte nepoznala. A potom som sa ho spýtala na otázku prognózy. Takto pekne som to sformulovala, hoci do nemocnice som vtedy chodila prvýkrát v živote. Skúseného pána doktora som nezaskočila. Nezneistel, neodkašľal si. Ani sa neospravedlnil, že mi to musí povedať. Reč jeho tela bola prirodzená a reč, ktorou mi odpovedal, profesionálna. Pripomenul, že sa to nedá celkom predvídať. Že závisí od úpravy obličkových parametrov a ďalších komplikácii lieč- by. Zároveň, že mama prišla neskoro a liečba je paliatívna. Pri takomto stupni ochorenia

však najdlhšie tak šesť mesiacov. Nedodal, že v medicíne sa niekedy dejú zázraky, a že najdôležitejšia je nádej. Poďakovala som sa mu a on to prijal. Keď odišiel za roh chodby, zastavil sa v miestnosti sestier. Nedovidela som tam, ale cez otvorené dvere som počula, ako ho milo vítajú.

Mama bola viditeľne veľmi chorá, ale nevedela som si predstaviť, ako zomrie. Kožu na tele mala veľmi krehkú. Praskala a krv špinila obliečky, ktoré sestričky starostlivo vymieňali. Vždy ma spoznala, ale popoludní a večer už nedokázala skladať vety. Bola veľmi chudá a na päťkách sa jej tvorili preležaniny, pod ktoré jej sestričky podkladali zvláštne matrace. Večer robila rukami drobné nástoživé pohyby, akoby z prikrývky zhadzovala hmyz. Niekoľkokrát hovorila o tom, že sa jej narodilo krásne bábätko. Mama hovorila nárečím a nevra-vela bábätko ale bábätko. Televízor bol pustený, ale mama už nedokázala sledovať ani prírodovedné programy bez deja a s peknými scenériami. Raz vysielali program o karibskej oblasti. Na obrazovke boli zábery z Havany. Mama kedysi učila španielčinu a na vysokej škole strávila niekoľko mesiacov na Kube. Chcela som upriamiť jej pozornosť na film, ale už sme to nedokázali. Napriek tomu, že od začiatku jari do mája sa mama z týždňa na týždeň menila, nevedela som si predstaviť mechanizmus smrti. Nevedela som, ako sa zomiera. Väčšinou som na to ani nemyslela, lebo bolo toľko úloh, ktoré som musela plniť, že na rozmýšľanie neostal čas. Neperlivé minerálky, nutridrinky, z vlaku do nemocnice, v nedeľu večer stihnúť posledný vlak späť a v pondelok do práce. Janut bol preč, odsťahoval sa a zrušil si rakúsky mobil, takže som nevedela, kde je. Z Viedne som dvakrát denne mame volávala, ale nemohla už dvíhať mobil. Zdvihla sestrička a povedala, že je všetko v poriadku.

Každotýždenné cestovanie za mamou ma unavovalo. Chcela som, aby bolo konečne pekné počasie a nemusela som so sebou vláčiť kabát. Aj tašku by som mala ľahšiu, keby som v nej nemusela nosiť sveter. Cesty na stanicu a zo stanice by boli príjemnejšie, na zastávkach autobusov a na perónoch by mi nebolo zima. Dokonca z okien vlaku by bol krajší výhľad, nie na tmavohnedé polia rozmočené topiacim sa snehom. A počasie bolo v ústrety letu skutočne z týždňa na týždeň krajšie. Autobus cestou zo stanice obchádzal nákupné stredisko, pred ktorým sa na veľkom ihrisku hrali deti. V helmách liezli po preliezkach lanového parku a skákali na trampolínach. Na plavárni si už niekoľkí ľudia ľahli k bazénu na deku. Onedlho mali otvoriť tobogan. V ten rok prišla jar skoro a sľubovala pekné leto. Ja som si pomaly formulovala plán, že od septembra sa vrátim z Rakúska a zmením zamestnanie. Aby som to mala bližšie k mame. S maminým lekárom som sa na chodbe nemocnice stretla niekedy v apríli. Mama nakoniec nedožila ani tretinu jeho prognózy. A hoci som to vtedy nevedela, nemohla som sa prestať tešiť na leto. Niekedy som sa snažila radosť zastaviť a počítala som, koľko mesiacov je do leta. Ale napriek únave z cestovania som sa v slnečnom počasí nemohla leta dočkať. Životná radosť sa nedala zastaviť.

Scenes from the Life of M.

Svetlana Žuchová

Translated from the Slovak by Heather Trebatická

Emptiness

The day Mum died I went to the swimming pool. Mum died at daybreak and they called me from the hospital just before seven. At that time I was visiting Mum every weekend, and from Friday to Sunday I slept in her empty flat. It was then that Janut moved out. I had placed great hopes in my relationship with Janut. I had wanted to mature with Janut, because maturity was something that fascinated me. From morning to evening we had our hands full working on maturity. I imagined that maturity consisted of furnishing a flat, of a rental agreement and savings in a bank account. I noticed my interest in maturity one weekend afternoon in Ikea. You see, the supposition is that a person becomes aware of something at one particular moment. For example, one of Oto's sisters once told me that she became aware of her future husband's love when he said he wanted to have a child with her. Janut, on the other hand, claimed that he decided not to go to work any more when his boss called him into his office in a caravan. Apparently, he didn't even invite him to sit down and Janut had to listen to his abuse standing up. I'm not sure that it is true. Whether we really become aware of certain facts from one moment to the next and we suddenly know something we didn't know before. At a precise moment in time. It may be rather that our awareness of something slowly ripens within us and gradually gets nearer and nearer to the surface.

And then, seemingly all of a sudden, it becomes visible. And it is equally possible that moments of realisation don't in fact exist and are created retrospectively in our memories. That this gradual, slow smouldering is compressed in our memories into an instant when we became aware of something. As if all of a sudden, from one moment to the next.

(...)

When Janut stopped going to work, he suggested that we should go to Ikea. It's true we haven't yet got a rental agreement or work permit, but for a start we could at least buy a new bed. I agreed and one weekend we took an afternoon train to the shopping centre. All my life I have had a well-defined taste in furniture. I grew up with my grandmother in a house furnished with heavy antique furniture. Along the wall in the dining room there was a massive sideboard. We didn't have a coffee table or a lounge suite with honey-coloured upholstery, but a dining table with four heavy chairs. Over the years they had become rotten and creaky, but they had once belonged to my grandmother's parents, and so out of respect they couldn't be replaced. What's more, spread out on the carpets we had fur rugs that collected the dust. The dining room windows faced west and the aggressive afternoon sunshine lit up the whirling particles of dust. There was always plenty of dust in our house. It settled on the furniture, on the porcelain figurines in the glass cases, and on the fur rugs that became cracked with age and were the cause of allergies.

I had always been convinced that I would furnish my flat with just a few pieces of light furniture. I left Mum to step into empty space, because emptiness was something I greatly valued. But you haven't got anything there, Mum said, when

I packed a few clothes into a rucksack and declared that I was leaving for Austria. Do you think anyone there is interested in you? Where are you going to live and what are you going to eat? She warned me that I would be in a vacuum and fall prey to conmen. They'll take your passport, haven't you read about it in the papers? It was hard to put it into words: the fact was that being in a vacuum was what I wanted. I imagined half-empty rooms and in my imaginings the windows were always facing eastwards. No dusty sunny afternoons. Sometimes I imagined I didn't even have a bed, but slept on a blanket spread out on the linoleum floor. I didn't want carpets or curtains, just blinds protecting the flat from too strong sunshine. My space should be uncluttered.

When Mum died, I had to clear out her flat. By then, Mum was living in Bratislava in a rented flat that had to be empty by the end of the month. She should have terminated the agreement three months in advance, but in view of the circumstances the owner did not insist. Several people told me that I should have thought of this, but it really never occurred to me. To call the owner of Mum's flat and explain that Mum was in hospital and probably would have to terminate the rental agreement. That we don't know the exact date, but it would most likely be very soon. Fortunately, the owner understood and we agreed that I would return the key by the end of the month. In the meantime I would allow access to the flat so the estate agent could show it to prospective tenants. Mum died on the 31st of May and I had the whole of June to empty the flat. I continued to travel to Bratislava every weekend and gradually carried everything out to the dustbins. Finally, I had a couple of bits of furniture taken to the incinerator. The inheritance proceedings had not yet commenced, but Mum had some cash in the flat and so I didn't have to economise.

I gave a few winter coats away to the homeless women who used to sit around near the block of flats.

Janut, who had been with me to Ikea only a short time before, moved out just prior to this. The new bed we had bought that afternoon was left for the next tenant in what had once been our room. In Ikea, Janut and I had wandered through that spacious store. Passing shelves, office chairs of light-coloured wood and extendable and easily portable tables, we reached the bedroom department. We looked at several simply constructed beds made of a few planks held together with a couple of screws. We agreed that we wanted light-coloured, natural wood. And then I noticed a dark brown bedroom suite. A double bed with a headboard, two bedside tables with drawers. Promotional copies of books in Swedish placed on them along with two night lamps. I imagined the pillows lit up in the evening by two circles of soft light. The suite also included a chest of drawers and a wardrobe with sliding doors and mirrors in the middle. Windows had been drawn on the wall and covered with curtains. I instinctively sensed the cosiness of the room. All at once I realised that the little things amassed there created a feeling of security in which a child could grow up. Along with the settling dust that needed to be conscientiously wiped off every day. In the end, that weekend Janut and I bought one of those pine pull-out beds and together we carried it back on the train. It was possible to borrow a van from Ikea, but we didn't dare to. It's true, I did have a driving licence, but I had not driven since leaving school. I didn't tell Janut I really liked the dark bedroom better. I think I already knew we would never have one like that together. A bedroom like that belonged to maturity, and that was something we would not reach together.

When Mum died, I discovered that my idea of maturity had been naïve. I had wanted to make a deliberate change; I cautiously moved forward step by step, in order not to veer from the right path. And, all of a sudden, I had to break into a run and there was not even time to catch my breath. I actually breathed in deeply for the first time only when I had at last cleared out Mum's flat. I went back to it for the last time to meet the owner. She was there to check the flat, return the deposit and take back the keys. I arrived a little early in order not to forget anything. The two-room flat was now completely empty. In one room there remained a carpet which had not belonged to my mother. There were marks left by the furniture, four depressions at regular intervals made by the feet of the bed. The walls needed painting; in several places the paint was cracked and there were holes in it from nails where pictures had previously hung. Everywhere was clean. I had vacuumed, there were no wads of dust in the corners and I had scrubbed off the deposits of limescale from the enamel of the wash basin and bath. In one corner of the bathroom there was still a bucket with a pair of rubber gloves hanging over the edge and several cleaning agents beside it. They were the only objects in the flat. While I waited for the owner, I sat down on the floor in the hall and gazed around at the empty rooms. I wasn't aware of my mother's death then. The main thing I noticed was how easily and deeply I was breathing. When the owner arrived she knocked, but immediately opened the door with her own spare key. She shook hands and once more offered her condolences. I thanked her for not insisting on the terms of notice. Of course, she replied. We exchanged envelopes with the money and keys and said goodbye. I returned by train to Vienna to clear out the room I had shared with Janut.

(...)

I didn't know anyone in Bratislava and I spent whole days at the swimming pool. The weather got better from week to week. The spring four years ago was lovely and warm. I only wore a sweater when I went to visit Mum, and at the swimming pool I also swam in the outdoor pool. The water was heated and although the cool air sometimes chilled my face, the sun was already shining. Once, in the corridor outside Mum's room, I met her doctor, who happened to be on duty just then. In films, relatives spend whole days in the hospital and keep consulting the patient's state of health with the doctor. I had a guilty conscience for not doing the same. I was seeing my mother's doctor for the first time. I stopped him and I could see from his face that he was irritated. I can understand that very well now. On weekend duty every minute counts. When relatives stop by at our outpatients' department on a Sunday and want us to call the doctor, we keep repeating: not until Monday. Not until a working day, because at the weekend there is only one doctor for several wards and he can only deal with urgent cases. But Mum's doctor stopped and we spoke together for a while. "It is a pity your mother came too late. Now the critical thing is kidney failure due to dehydration. We are not managing to stop the increase in the level of creatine. We can't make any progress in the treatment of the basic illness." He used the tactful term 'basic illness'. "Your mother is responding badly to the treatment and is restless in the night, so we shall have to limit it." Later, in a retraining course for hospital nurses, we studied the chapter on giving unwelcome information. Albeit nurses don't give unwelcome information; only doctors are authorised to do that. However, it is part of medical education. Speak to the

point and keep to the facts. Don't be evasive, don't beat about the bush. Tell the bad news at the beginning and don't say I'm sorry I have to tell you this. Such sentences only increase the listener's anxiety and fear. Speak clearly and distinctly, as if you were hitting the strings of a cimbalom. Plink. Plink. Mum's doctor kept to the rules which at that time I did not yet know. And then I asked him about the prognosis. I formulated it nicely like this, even though it was the first time in my life I had been visiting someone in hospital. The experienced doctor was not taken by surprise. He didn't look confused, he didn't clear his throat. He didn't apologise either for having to tell me. His body language was natural and the language he used to answer me was professional. He reminded me that it was impossible to predict this exactly. That it depended on the improvement of the kidney parameters and other complications arising from the treatment. At the same time, that Mum had come too late and that the treatment was palliative. However, at such a stage in the disease, six months at the most. He did not add that in medicine miracles sometimes happen, and that the most important thing was hope. I thanked him and he accepted my thanks. When he had turned the corner of the corridor, he popped into the nurses' room. I couldn't see that far, but through the open door I heard how pleasantly they greeted him.

Mum looked very ill, but I couldn't imagine her dying. Her skin was very fragile. It tore open and the blood stained the bed linen that the nurses conscientiously changed. She always recognised me, but in the afternoon and evening she could no longer put sentences together. She was very thin and bed sores had formed on her heels, which the nurses supported on special pads. In the evening she made little urgent movements with her hands, as if she was brushing insects off the bed

cover. Several times she talked about having given birth to a beautiful baby. Mum spoke in dialect and didn't say *bábätko* but *bábatko*. The television was on, but Mum could no longer follow even a nature documentary without a plot and with lovely scenery. Once there was a programme about the Caribbean. There were scenic shots of Havana. At one time, Mum had taught Spanish, and while at the university she had spent several months in Cuba. I wanted to draw her attention to the film, but without success. In spite of the fact that, from the beginning of spring to May, Mum changed from week to week, I couldn't imagine the mechanism of death. I didn't know how people died. For the most part I didn't even think about it, because there were so many things I had to do there was no time left for thinking. Bottles of still mineral water, nutritional drinks, getting from the train to the hospital, catching the last train back on Sunday evening and going to work on Monday. Janut was gone: he had moved out and cancelled his Austrian mobile phone number, so I didn't know where he was. I would call Mum twice a day from Vienna, but she could no longer answer the phone. The nurse answered it and said that everything was all right.

Travelling every week to see Mum was tiring me out. I wanted fine weather at last, so I wouldn't have to drag a coat along with me. My bag would be lighter too if I didn't have to carry a sweater in it. The journey to and from the station would be pleasanter; I wouldn't get cold standing at the bus stops and on the platforms. There would even be a more beautiful view from the train windows, not those dark brown fields soaked by the melting snow. As the summer approached, the weather really did get better from week to week. On the way from the station, the bus passed a shopping centre where children were playing outside in a large playground. Wearing helmets,

they were climbing through the jungle gym and jumping on the trampolines. At the swimming pool there were already several people lying on blankets beside the water. The spiral slide was to be opened soon. Spring had come early that year with the promise of a good summer. I was gradually forming a plan to return from Austria in September and change jobs. So as to be nearer to Mum. I had met her doctor in the hospital corridor sometime in April. In the end Mum lived for less than a third of the time he predicted. And even though I didn't know that then, I couldn't help looking forward to summer. Sometimes, I tried to suppress this joyful feeling and I counted how many months it was to summer. But in spite of the weariness from travelling, in the sunny weather I just couldn't wait for summer to come. My enjoyment of life could not be suppressed.



© Caroline Andersson

Sara Stridsberg

Beckomberga – Ode till min familj (2014)

The Gravity of Love

Publishing House **Albert Bonniers Förlag**

Biography

Sara Stridsberg, born in 1972, is a writer and playwright. Her first novel *Happy Sally* was published in 2004, and her breakthrough came two years later with the publication of *The Faculty of Dreams*, her second novel. Her third novel, *Darling River*, was published in 2010.

In addition to several important prizes, she has been shortlisted for the prestigious August Prize three times, the latest in 2012 for her collection of plays, *Medealand*. Stridsberg lives in Stockholm.

Synopsis

When Jimmie Darling is admitted to Beckomberga, a psychiatric hospital outside Stockholm, his daughter Jackie starts to spend increasing amounts of time there, and when her mother leaves for a holiday by the Black Sea, the hospital becomes Jackie's whole world.

The doctor in charge is Edvard Winterson. On some evenings he takes Jimmie and a few other patients to big parties in town. As soon as they pass the gates in Edvard's car, the first bottle of champagne is opened in the back seat. "One night beyond the confines of the hospital makes you human again," he says to his patients.

At the hospital we also meet Inger Vogel, an "angelic nurse in clogs" who seems to inhabit the twilight zone between order and devastation, and the patient Sabina, the object of desire of both Jimmie and Dr Winterson, with her beads, her archery and obsession with freedom and death.

Beckomberga explores Jackie's love for Jimmie and the way she reaches out for him, as a child and as a grown woman and mother. In Sara Stridsberg's beautiful novel, the psychiatric hospital, set in a lovely park close to a lake, takes on almost mythical dimensions, both as a punishing angel and as a rescuer seeking to save distraught souls, like in an old utopian vision.

Beckomberga – Ode till min familj

Sara Stridsberg

På kvällarna lämnar de sjukhuset. När de elektriska dörrarna slås upp och släpper igenom bilen öppnas den första flaskan i baksätet, alltid champagne som har stått på kylning i källaren under dagen. Edvard kör över broarna mot staden, genom sovande villaområden och gator. Ibland väntar en flicka från avdelningen redan i baksätet, ibland är det Sabina, ibland är det någon annan, ofta nedsänkt i halvsömn av medicinerna. Och björkstammarna lyser i skymningen, skyar av fläckig tusch i skärt och gult, späda vilsna moln, fåglar, en slarvig teckning av himlen. Edvard är övertygad om att det är bra för patienterna att lämna avdelningen då och då.

”En natt utanför sjukhusområdet gör er till människor igen”, säger han.

Jim får ett kristallglas och i handskfacket väntar en ny skjorta och en liten påse med någonting som ska få natten att gå fortare. Han ser staden passera utanför, män på väg hem till sina familjer, ensamma kvinnor som går långsamt genom gatorna, och ibland när de blir stående vid ett övergångsställe i väntan på att trafikljusen ska slå om händer det att han ser in i ansiktet på en gammal vän eller arbetskamrat som står där och väntar. En gång, vid ett övergångsställe utanför Utrikesdepartementet, ser han rakt in i Lones ansikte innan bilen rivstartar och far vidare genom det ljus som strömmar ur nattklubbarna som just slagit upp sina dörrar mot natten.

Det händer att en flicka får ett sammanbrott under natten i våningen vid Lill-Jansplan och då får hon följa med tillbaka till sjukhuset när det ljusnar. ”Wintersons leksaker”, som de

kallas, flickorna som driver omkring planlöst på de här festerna, som ibland tar betalt för sitt sällskap, och som när de faller omkull får följa med Edvard ner i bilen. Sedan vaknar de upp i ett vitklätt rum med hans ansikte svävande ovanför.

”Lilla vackra vän, var inte rädd, vi ska ta hand om dig.”

”Var är jag någonstans?”

”Det ska du inte tänka på. Du behöver inte tänka mer, min vän.”

Jim: Flickorna blev kvar på sjukhuset i månader. Det var flickor som ingen saknade. Långt senare fick jag höra att vi alla kallades för Wintersons leksaker, inte bara flickorna. Jag bytte om på vägen in mot staden. Edvard ville att vi skulle prata om flickor, han var alltid förälskad i någon av patienterna, ingen av kvinnorna på festerna som kom utifrån intresserade honom, det var bara patienterna som fanns för honom. Vi drack kopiösa mängder på de här tillställningarna, det var kokain, gräs, sömntabletter. Han presenterade mig för vackra, rika människor och någonstans där ute i staden fanns det som hade varit mitt liv. Det existerade inte längre. Allt som fanns var dessa nätter när vi for ut från sjukhusområdet. Natten när Olof Palme dog var våningarna upplysta långt in på morgonen. I fönstren stod folk och skålade.

*

Sabina ger sig av vissa nätter från våningen vid Lill-Jansplan, hennes steg försvinner ner i trapphuset och från gatan vinkar hon till Jim där han sitter med några äldre kvinnor som lyssnar till hans historier från sjukhuset. Det är som en lek, om han får dem att skratta behöver han inte vara rädd för dem, för deras rikedom, för den där lättheten som de rör sig med. Han lyckas alltid, de skrattar med händerna tryckta mot läpparna tills de får röda fläckar på halsen.

”I kulvertarna finns en hel värld”, säger han, ”trädens rötter tränger ner i taket på vissa ställen. Det är otroligt. Förr sprang föräldralösa barn omkring där nere. Nu är det mest Edvard som far omkring på sin sparkcykel.”

”Och Edvard låter er komma ut så här?”

Han rör vid en kvinnas hand, huden är brusten under guldberlocken.

”Ja, det verkar inte bättre.”

På vägen tillbaka sitter en ny flicka i baksätet och ser ut över staden med sömniga ögon. När Jim frågar efter Sabina är Edvard fåordig.

”Hon kommer tillbaka. Sabina är aldrig ute länge. Om några dagar senast.”

”Jag trodde att hon längtade ut.”

Edvard skrattar kort.

”Det tror hon också.”

Tranebergsbron försvinner i ett dallrande vitt gryningsljus. Det ser ut som om den fortsätter in i ingenting, att den saknar fäste på andra sidan. Jim sluter ögonen och somnar. Han vaknar av att vakthundarna skäller utanför bilen. Edvard sitter alldeles stilla intill honom och ser ut över Klockhusparken.

✱

Bildörren slås upp framför Sabina där hon är på väg in i Kungsträdgården, en röst hon känner igen, bleka händer med lätta stänk av fräknar i kupéns dunkel, en slinga rök som långsamt stiger mot taket. Hon har en klarblå rock över jeansen, det är

tidigt på morgonen och hon har varit uppe hela natten och räknat stjärnor. Solen silas mellan träden som genom ett förstoringsglas, hennes hår är tovtigt och smutsigt. I ådrorna rester av sömnmedicin som blandar sig med blodet och någonting annat, någonting hårdare, kristalliskt, dödligt, större än all kärlek. Himlen skimrar i guld ovanför, enstaka fåglar flyger mellan träden.

”Följer du med mig tillbaka till sjukhuset?”

”Vad ska jag göra där?”

”Du kanske är trött, du kanske behöver sova.”

”Kan du hjälpa mig med det?”

”Det vet du att jag kan.”

”Döden vill ändå inte ha mig.”

✱

”Kom in en stund, lilla barn”, ropar butiksmannen där han står med sin väldiga kropp i dörröppningen. Jag slinker in i mörkret och lukten av död slår genast emot mig, jag drar ner den i lungorna. Dörren går igen bakom oss och varje gång jag sträcker ut min hand och rör vid någonting ropar han att jag kan få det. Jag ignorerar honom. ”Du klär i hatt. Det finns så många hattar som skulle passa dig. Jag har en fin slokhatt från Tokyo som du kan få kika på.”

Han rör försiktigt vid pälsen som om jag vore ett riktigt djur. När jag säger att jag letar efter någonting speciellt, till en vän som är på sjukhus, får han bråttom genom butiken. På vägen drar han med sig saker som faller i golvet, solfjädrar och ljusstakar och en naken skyltdocka. Jag plockar försiktigt upp solfjädrarna och lägger tillbaka dem. Skyltdockan ligger

omkullstjälpt framför mig med ben och armar vridna i en konstig ställning, jag kliver över henne för att komma längre in i butiken. Mannen är borta en stund, sedan dyker han upp bakom draperiet med en jordglob i händerna. En sladd släpar i marken bakom honom.

”Den här ska du ha, förstår du. Han ska ha en jordglob.”

Han snurrar på den med tjocka fingrar som lämnar flottiga märken över världshaven.

”Vill du ha den så är den din.”

Jag tar den utan att se på honom och går snabbt mot utgången. När jag vänder mig om ser han hjälplös ut där han står med händerna utsträckta.

”Vänta lite. Jag kan torka av den.”

”Behövs inte”, säger jag.

”Är det din pappa som är sjuk?” frågar han plötsligt som om han kände mig. Kanske ser han allt som händer i kvarteret, kanske vet han allt om oss som bor här på Kammakargatan.

”Det är molnet från Tjernobyl som har gjort honom sjuk”, säger jag och skyndar ut ur butiken.

”Åh herregud. Så fruktansvärt.”

Han får fart på den stora kroppen. Det ser ut som om han vill rusa i min famn för att trösta mig. Jag glider ut och låter dörren slå igen bakom mig innan han hinner fram.

På Adolf Fredriks kyrkogård lyser gravstenarna som ensamma ansikten i skymningen. Kvällarna är så varma nu, tropiska.

Jag tar tunnelbanan till Brommaplan och sedan bussen vidare ut mot Beckomberga, vid sjukhusgrindarna är det oftast bara jag som stiger av. Ibland har jag med mig någonting till Sabina, ett silverpaket eller en liten påse. Jag blir allt mer bunden till sjukhuset, jag börjar drömma om det på nätterna, jag drömmer att jag faller, jag drömmer om Jim, att han faller ur höga träd, att jag har förlorat honom innan jag har hunnit lära känna honom. Jag åker till sjukhuset även när det inte är besökstid och man låter mig vara där. Edvard ordnar så att jag kan komma och gå som jag vill, jag äter med Jim och de andra och jag sitter bredvid honom och de andra i sällskapsrummet när de spelar tärning på kvällarna. Jim får tillstånd att lämna området och möta mig vid busshållplatsen, och innan mörkret kommer följer han mig tillbaka. När bussen åker iväg med mig i den violetta skymningen står han där med handen höjd till farväl, jag vet inte om han vinkar till mig eller om han skyddar ögonen mot ljuset men antagligen är han redan någon annanstans i tankarna för när jag höjer min hand förblir hans orörlig.

Jag står i tamburen framför Lone. Hon måste ha suttit i mörkret och väntat på mig utan att tända några lampor. Försiktigt tar hon av mig hatten och drar fingrarna genom mitt hår, det är tovtigt och fullt av knutar, och ser på mig som om hon såg rakt igenom mig. Hjärta, lungor, inälvor, själ.

”Du har ett stort hjärta”, säger hon och ställer bort jordgloben utan att se på den.

”Har jag?”

Instinktivt håller jag handen för bröstkorgen för att hon inte ska se det, hjärtat i sin hjärtsäck som gömmer sig bakom revbenen. Ett stort hjärta låter som en missbildning, en defekt.

”Berätta om Jim.”

”Jag har ingenting att berätta.”

”Berätta om sjukhuset.”

Jag berättar att blommorna har slagit ut i Klockhusparken nu, det är blommor överallt i det mjuka gräset, att skymningarna där är långsamma, nästan eviga, som om det sista ljuset lika gärna skulle kunna vara det första. När jag säger att jag har träffat Sabina går en skugga hastigt över hennes ansikte.

Jag tycker om när hon drar i mitt hår, det gör mig dåsig och bedövd. Mitt hår har blivit mörkare av solen, den svarta solen vid Judarn. Jag önskar att hon visste hur det ser ut på sjukhuset nu, utan snön, utan mörkret och den kalla vinden.

”Du får åka dit hur mycket du vill, Jackie, men jag vill att du väcker mig när du kommer hem. Jag vill veta att du ligger i din säng om natten.”

Det är en gåta det hon gör med sina händer, när jag öppnar ögonen är håret alldeles mjukt och blankt igen.

”Tror du att det blir sommar efter Tjernoby?” frågar jag för att hon inte ska ta bort sina händer.

”Jag vet inte. Jag vet faktiskt inte om det blir det.”

”När kommer vi att veta?”

”Kanske aldrig. Vissa saker får man aldrig veta. Jag skulle gärna åka dit för att fotografera.”

”Är det inte farligt att vara där?”

”Det är farligt att vara överallt, Jackie.”

The Gravity of Love

Sara Stridsberg

Translated from the Swedish by Deborah Bragan-Turner

In the evenings they get away from the hospital. As the electric gates open and let the car through, the first bottle is uncorked in the back seat, always champagne that has been chilling in the cellar during the day. Edvard drives across the bridges in the direction of the city, through sleeping residential areas and streets. Sometimes a girl from the unit is already waiting in the back: sometimes it's Sabina, sometimes it's someone else, often half-comatose with medication. The birch trees shimmer in the twilight; Indian ink skies dappled with pink and yellow, stray wisps of cloud, birds, a haphazard drawing of the heavens. Edvard is convinced it's good for the patients to get out of the unit every so often.

"One night beyond the confines of the hospital makes you human again," he says.

Jim is given a crystal glass and in the glove compartment there's a new shirt and a little bag of something that will make the night go faster. He sees the city pass by outside, men on their way home to their families, single women walking slowly along the streets, and sometimes, when they have stopped at a pedestrian crossing, waiting for the lights to change, he'll find that he's looking into the face of an old friend or colleague who's standing there, waiting. Once, by a crossing outside the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, he looks straight into Lone's face, before the car accelerates away and drives on through the light streaming out of the clubs that have just opened their doors to the night.

Once in a while a girl has a breakdown during the night in the apartment on Lill-Jans Plan and then she has to go back with them to the hospital at daybreak. “Winterson’s toys” they’re called, the girls who drift aimlessly around these parties, sometimes taking payment for their company, and, when they fall over, going back with Edvard in the car. They wake up later in an all-white room with his face hovering above them.

“Don’t be afraid, sweetheart. We’ll take care of you.”

“Where am I?”

“Never mind about that. You don’t need to think any more, my dear.”

Jim: The girls stayed at the hospital for months. They were girls no-one missed. Much later I learned that we were all called Winterson’s toys, not just the girls. I changed my clothes on the way into the city. Edvard wanted us to talk about girls. He was always in love with one of the patients. None of the women at the parties who came from outside interested him; for him only the patients existed. We drank copious amounts at these events; there was cocaine, grass, sleeping pills. He introduced me to beautiful rich people and somewhere out there in the city was what had been my life. It didn’t exist any longer. All there was were the nights when we drove out of the hospital grounds. The night Olof Palme died, lights were on in the apartments until late in the morning. People stood at windows, raising their glasses.

★

Some nights Sabina leaves the apartment on Lill-Jans Plan, her steps retreating down the stairs, and from the street she waves at Jim, who is sitting with a few older women and regaling

them with his stories about the hospital. It's like a game: if he can make them laugh, he doesn't need to be afraid of them, of their wealth, of the ease with which they move about. He always manages it. They laugh with their hands pressed to their lips until red patches appear on their necks.

"There's a whole world in the underground passages," he says. "Tree roots force their way down through the ceiling in some places. It's incredible. Orphan kids used to run around down there before. Now it's mainly Edvard riding around on his scooter."

"And Edvard lets you come out like this?"

He touches a woman's hand; the skin is wrinkled under the gold charms.

"Yes, it seems like it."

On the way back a new girl is sitting in the back seat, looking out over the city, her eyes heavy. When Jim asks about Sabina, Edvard is taciturn.

"She'll come back. Sabina's never out for long. No more than a few days, at the most."

"I thought she couldn't wait to get out."

Edvard gives a short laugh.

"She thinks so too."

The Traneberg Bridge disappears in the quivering white light of dawn. It looks as though it leads nowhere, as though it has nothing to tether it at the other side. Jim closes his eyes and drops off. He is woken by guard dogs barking at the car. Edvard is sitting quite still beside him, looking out over the Klockhuspark.

★

The car door opens in front of Sabina as she's on her way into Kungsträdgården. A voice she recognizes, pale hands with a light smattering of freckles in the darkness of the coupé's interior, a wreath of smoke rising slowly to the roof. She's wearing a bright blue jacket over her jeans, it's early in the morning and she's been up all night, counting stars. The sun filters through the trees as if through a magnifying glass; her hair is matted and dirty. In her veins the remains of a sedative that mixes with her blood and something else, something harder, crystalline, deadly, weightier than all love. The sky above shimmers gold. Solitary birds fly between the trees.

"Will you come back with me to the hospital?"

"What will I have to do there?"

"Maybe you're tired. You might need to sleep."

"Can you help me with that?"

"You know I can."

"Death doesn't want me, anyway."

★

"Come in for a moment, child," yells the shopkeeper, as he stands there, his enormous body blocking the doorway. I sidle into the darkness; the smell of death hits me and I draw it down into my lungs. The door closes behind us and each time I stretch out my hand and touch something, he shouts that I can't have it. I ignore him.

"You look good in a hat. There are lots of hats that would suit you. I have a very nice slouch hat from Tokyo you can have a look at."

He pats the fur gingerly, as if I were a real animal. When I say I'm looking for something special, for a friend who's in

hospital, he dashes through the shop. On his way, he knocks things over onto the floor, fans and candlesticks and a naked dummy. I carefully pick up the fans and put them back. The mannequin is lying overturned in front of me, her arms and legs twisted in a strange position. I step over her to make my way further into the shop. The man is gone for a while, and then he appears behind the curtain with a globe in his hands. A flex trails behind him on the ground.

“This is what you need. He can have a globe.”

He spins it with his fat fingers and they leave greasy marks on the oceans.

“It’s yours if you want it.”

I take it without looking at him and walk quickly towards the door. When I turn round he looks helpless, standing there with outstretched hands.

“Wait a minute. I can give it a wipe.”

“No need,” I say.

“Is it your dad who’s sick?” he asks suddenly, as if he knew me. Perhaps he sees everything that happens in the neighbourhood, perhaps he knows everything about us who live on Kammakargatan.

“It’s the Chernobyl cloud that’s made him ill,” I say, and hurry out of the shop.

“Oh, good Lord! How dreadful!”

His huge body begins to gather speed. He looks as though he wants to charge into my arms to comfort me. I slip out and let the door close behind me before he makes it.

In Adolf Fredrik’s churchyard, the gravestones shine like lone faces in the half-light. The evenings are so warm now, tropical.



I take the underground to Brommaplan and from there the bus to Beckomberga. At the hospital gates it's usually only me who gets off. Sometimes I have something for Sabina, a silver package or a little bag. I'm becoming more and more tied to the hospital. I start to dream about it at night. I dream I'm falling and I dream about Jim, that he's falling out of towering trees, that I've lost him before I've got to know him. I go to the hospital even when it's not visiting time and they let me stay. Edvard arranges it so that I can come and go as I wish. I eat with Jim and the others and I sit beside him and the rest of them in the day room when they play dice in the evening. Jim is given permission to leave the hospital precinct and meet me at the bus stop, and he takes me back before dark. When the bus drives away with me into the violet dusk, he stands with his hand raised in farewell. I don't know if he's waving at me or shading his eyes against the light, but he's probably already somewhere else in his thoughts, because when I raise my own hand, he remains motionless.

I stand in the hall in front of Lone. She must have been sitting in the dark, waiting for me, without switching on any of the lights. She carefully takes off my hat and runs her fingers through my hair, which is tangled and full of knots, and she looks at me as if she could see right through me. Heart, lungs, innards, soul.

"You have a big heart," she says, putting the globe on one side without looking at it.

"Have I?"

Instinctively I hold my hand in front of my chest so she can't see it, my heart in its pericardium, hiding behind my ribs. A big heart sounds like a deformity, a defect.

“Tell me about Jim.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Tell me about the hospital.”

I tell her that the flowers have come out in the Klockhuspark now, that there are flowers everywhere in the soft grass, and that the sunsets happen slowly, almost never-ending, as if the last light might well also be the first. When I say I’ve met Sabina, instantly a shadow passes over her face.

I like it when she tugs at my hair. It makes me drowsy and relaxed. My hair has got darker in the sun, the black sun of Lake Judarn. I wish she knew what the hospital looks like now, without the snow, without the darkness and the cold wind.

“You can go as often as you like, Jackie, but I want you to wake me when you come home. I want to know that you’re lying in your own bed at night.”

It’s a mystery what she does with her hands; when I open my eyes my hair is completely soft and shiny again.

“Do you think there’ll be a summer after Chernobyl?” I ask, so that she won’t take her hands away.

“I don’t know. I actually don’t know if there will be.”

“When will we know?”

“Maybe never. Some things we never get to know. I’d like to go to take photographs.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to be there?”

“It’s dangerous everywhere, Jackie.”

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Parece Um Pássaro. APCC, 2014.

Contribution to anthologies

O Fantástico Verão do Café Lanterna, in *Contos de Verão* (ebook): Editora Coolbooks, 2004.

Atrás do Escuro Está o Mundo Inteiro, in *O Segredo*. Lisbon: Cavalo de Ferro, 2009.

A chapter in *A Misteriosa Mulher da Ópera* (novel by several authors). Alfragide: Casa das Letras, 2013.

Other

Tu Vais, Eu Fico (short story), in *DN-Jovem*, 2003.

Os Rebuçados de Deus (short story), in *DN-Jovem*, 2003.

Thomas, o Gigante das Antilhas (short story), in *DN-Jovem*, 2003.

Meia Concha de Luz (short story), in *DN-Jovem*, 2003.

O Legado de Avelino (short story), in *Lisboa à Letra – C.M. Lisboa*, 2005.

Sonhos de Solidão (essay), in the catalogue of Fernando Direito's exhibition.

O Natal Espera (short story), in *Expresso*, December 2007.

Assaltos de Dezembro (short story), in *Expresso*, December 2008.

O Leitor (short story), in the catalogue of Joana Pimentel's exhibition, 2008.

A Bisavó não Vai Pegar Fogo (short story), in *Jornal de Notícias*, August 2010.

O Valor das Palavras (crónica), in *blogtailors.com*, February 2010.

História de Um Sorriso (short story), in *Revista Egoísta*, March 2012.

Untitled, in the booklet of Joao Pedro Lomelino's exhibition, *Contemp*, March 2012.

O Passeio (short story), in *Histórias Daninhas*, March 2012.

Slovakia – **Svetlana Žuchová**

Novels

Yesim. Levice: Koloman Kertész Bagala, 2006.

Zlodeji a svedkovia. Bratislava: Marenčin PT 2011.

Obrazy zo života M. Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2013.

Crystal Meth. Bratislava: Marenčin PT, to be published in 2015

Short stories

Dulce de leche. Bratislava: Drewo a srd, 2003.

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Poviedka 2001. Zborník najlepších prác 5 ročníka literárnej súťaže EuroTel. Levice: Koloman Kertész Bagala, 2001.

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Sex po slovensky 2. Zostavil D. Taragel. Bratislava: Ikar, 2005.

Päť x päť. Antológia súčasnej slovenskej prózy. Bratislava: LIC, 2011.

Sweden – **Sara Stridsberg**

Novels

Happy Sally. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2004.

Drömfakulteten. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2006.

Darling River. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2010.

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Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2014.

Theater

Medealand och andra pjäser. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2012.

EUPL 2015 National Juries

Austria

President: **Annette Knoch**, publisher.

Members:

Jacqueline Csuss, literary translator.

Gerhard Ruiss, IG Autorinnen Autoren – Austrian Writers Association.

Croatia

President: **Neven Antičević**, Croatian Association of Publishers and Booksellers.

Members:

Ružica Cindori, Croatian Writers Association.

Nikola Petković, Croatian Writers Society.

Boris Postnikov, Croatian Writers Society.

Lada Žigo, EUPL winner 2012.

France

President: **Stéphane Carrière**, publisher and author.

Members:

Jean Morzadec, journalist and manager of “lechoixdeslibraires.com”.

Stanislas Rigot, bookseller at Lamartine, Paris.

Eric Lafraise, product manager of Literature at Cultura.

Hungary

President: Tamás Prágai, Magyar Írószövetség.

Members:

Imre Barna, MKKE.

Sándor Mészáros, Szépírók Társasága.

Ireland

President: Conor Kostick, former Chairperson of the Irish Writers' Union and Board Member of the Irish Copyright Licensing Agency.

Members:

Fergal Tobin, former publishing Director of Ireland's largest publishing house and former President of the Federation of European Publishers.

Nessa O'Mahony, poet.

Stephen Boylan, Books Category Manager at Eason's.

In charge of book reviews for RTE (the national state television and radio broadcaster).

Louise Phillips, bestselling author of the psychological crime thrillers, *Red Ribbons*, *The Doll's House* and *Last Kiss*.

Italy

President: **Federico Motta**, AIE – Italian Publishers Association. Former President of AIE, of the Italian Federation of Cultural Industries (CCI) and of the Federation of European Publishers.

Members:

Mario Lunetta, SNS – National Writers Union. Writer, poet and literary critic. Former President of the National Writers Union.

Ilaria Milana, ALI – Italian Booksellers Association. Owner of the bookstore Voltapagina in Rome and member of ALI National Council.

Lithuania

President: **Laimantas Jonušys**, critic, translator, Lithuanian Writers Union.

Members:

Rimantas Kmita, poet, critic, literary scholar (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Lithuanian Writers Union).

Antanas A. Jonynas, poet, chairman of the Lithuanian Writers Union.

Eugenijus Ališanka, poet, critic, editor of the Lithuanian Writers Union magazine “The Vilnius Review”.

Aida Dobkevičiūtė, Executive Director of the Lithuanian Publishers Association.

Giedra Radvilavičiūtė, EUPL winner 2012.

Norway

President: **Markus Midré**, author.

Members:

Janneken Øverland, publisher.

Andrine Pollen, NORLA – Norwegian Literature Abroad.

Merete Røsvik Granlund, literary critic.

Poland

President: **Małgorzata Skowrońska**, Publishing Director of Agora and Board Member of the Polish Chamber of Books.

Members:

Anna Nosiłowska, writer, poet, literary critic and professor. Member of the Institute of Literary Research and Board Member of the Association of Polish Writers and the Polish PEN Club.

Michał Nogaś, head of the feature journalism and word editorial sections at the Polish Radio Three station, honoured with the 2012 PIK Laurel for promoting books and reading in the press.

Jakub Bułat, cultural anthropologist and community activist. Owner of the cafe-bookshop Tarabuk in Warsaw and member of the Cyprian Norwid Literary Society.

Portugal

President: João Vasco de Lara Everard Amaral,
Director/Coordinator of general publications at LeYa.

Members:

José Jorge Letria, writer and President of SPA – Sociedade Portuguesa de Autores.

Elísio Maia, Director/Coordinator of Bertrand-Livres.

Slovakia

President: Miroslava Vallová, translator and Director of the Centre for Information on Literature.

Members:

Dana Hučková, literary critic, Director of the Institute of Slovak Literature, Slovak Academy of Sciences.

Radoslav Passia, literary critic, editor-in-chief of literary magazine “Romboid”.

Alexander Balogh, journalist, editor of the literary section for the newspaper SME.

Jana Beňová, writer, EUPL winner 2012.

Sweden

President: **Carl Otto Werkelid**, journalist and writer.
Counsellor for Cultural Affairs at the Swedish Embassy in London 2008-13; editor of the cultural section for Svenska Dagbladet 2001-08.

Members:

Tove Skarstedt, bookseller.

Elise Karlsson, literary critic and writer.

EUPL 2015 Jury Reports

Austria

Carolina Schutti's novel is dedicated to the grandmothers. We are told this early on in this slim volume which takes us into the female narrator's world – a sad and archaic world with no place for love, joy or carefree innocence.

After her mother's death, Maja is taken in by her aunt who feeds her and gives her a place to sleep but leaves her in the dark about her past. They live in a nameless village in a remote region and in very poor circumstances. Every attempt by Maja to remember her past leads nowhere. Marek, an elderly man who speaks a strange and mysterious language and lives on his own in another remote and lonely house, is the only person who can make Maja feel at home and accepted.

In a clear and poetic style, Schutti describes the situation of people who have been displaced and she does so in an entirely non-political and clear-sighted way. The search for identity, as suggested in the title *Einmal muss ich über weiches Gras gelaufen sein* (*Once I Must Have Trodden on Soft Grass*), determines the narrator's life throughout the remainder of the story. And although we're eventually told that she is from Belarus, and in spite of the book's referral to the past by dedicating it to the grandmothers, the theme of this novel contains a very contemporary dimension which could apply to countless regions of the world.

Croatia

In Luka Bekavac's most recent novel *Viljevo*, the reader encounters elements of science fiction, horror, fantasy, essays, dystopian narrative and philosophical discourse. The author also employs ludic elements while subtly toying with contemporary theories of physics, contextualizing them within a contemporary social and national framework.

The localised nature of the book by no means excludes the universal echoes of Bekavac's narrative. Many events that happen in *Viljevo* could happen anywhere else in the world.

Such a mode of 'universalisation' does not imply a universal anthropology. On the contrary, it tells us that we are all strikingly similar in our differences and that the gap between extreme closeness and extreme distance is actually a link that holds everything together.

The textual layers found in this novel are threefold, and displayed in three chapters. Chapter one is a transcript of the audiovisual messages created and disseminated by one of the two sisters who, after an apocalyptic event, live in a deserted house. While trying to communicate with recipients whose faces are unknown to them, her fragmented messages share with the reader an atmosphere of dystopian post-history suggesting the eternal return of sameness. While the second chapter continues this fragmentation, bringing it to the point of miscommunication that can be understood through the recycling and reassembling of inscribed letters and signs, the third part – the most direct one and the only part that has an uninterrupted narrative flow – is in fact an extremely convincing hybrid of mock-essay and more conventional essay-writing. It is a quasi-scientific scholarly work about acoustic phenomena during the war in Croatia in the early 90s, linking it with events in the Croatian city of Osijek in 1943 during World War II.

In *Viljevo*, Bekavac uses literary tools to question and analyse fundamental scientific, ontological and aesthetic topics. While exploring the borders of different discursive regimes – questioning genres and disciplines and linking local geographical and geopolitical features with abstract cosmic laws – Bekavac writes in a sophisticated prose style. *Viljevo* has already been nationally recognized and highly acclaimed by its readership as well as the critics. Therefore, it is not too brave to conclude that this unique novel is one of the most interesting and important recent Croatian narratives whose author is definitely an emerging figure, not only on our national but also on the international literary scene.

France

We have decided to give the France EUPL 2015 Prize to Gaëlle Josse for *The Last Guardian of Ellis Island*.

The novel is elegant in its form and powerful in its evocation of a person's destiny. Delicately weaving history and drama, Josse masterfully realises the potential of her story, crafting a timeless piece on loss, desire and duty.

Reading this novel confirms what we sensed in her book *The Quiet Hours*: Gaëlle Josse has an extremely promising literary career ahead of her. Her precise style and her skillful use of drama infuse her works with a sense of modern classicism. The spirited portrayal of her characters has the potential to open up her work to a wider international audience of readers.

Hungary

Edina Szvoren is one of the most critically acclaimed writers of contemporary Hungarian literature in recent years. Her first book of short stories, *Pertu*, not only received rave reviews, but also an impressive four literary prizes in one year. Her stories contain a lot of dry humour, yet at the same time sizzle, as she reveals the drama in the minutiae of human relationships. In describing Szvoren's literary world, reviewers have brought up the names of two radically different predecessors: the analytical prose of Péter Nádas and the graceful giant of grotesque, Péter Hajnóczy. The stories of *Nincs, és ne is legyen* will convince the reader that Edina Szvoren is a mature author with a unique storytelling voice. The family, which is both the centre stage and model of our lives, stands firmly in the middle of the stories, regardless of whether we are struggling on that stage or are just on the outside looking in.

Ireland

The Spinning Heart by Donal Ryan is a novel of small-town life, set in contemporary Ireland. The central action of the book is the murder of an elderly man. But that event is almost incidental to the novel, which is narrated – chapter by chapter – through the voices of 21 different characters. Their specific anxieties and concerns run obliquely against the shadow of the murder and aggregate to a superbly realised sociology of provincial inertia.

The technique of employing multiple voices is a high-wire act, in which the author takes every risk. It is an act that most editors would warn against – and they would be right – but Ryan pulls it off with astonishing bravura. It would be a superb accomplishment for any writer: for an emerging novelist, it is exceptional.

The world he describes is narrow and constricted. Energy and possibility exist elsewhere; here, there is a bleak resignation. Yet the book sits in an honourable Irish tradition, that of the comedy of despair. There are hints of Beckett and Flann O'Brien in this book, in Ryan's ability to squeeze comic moments from the unpromising littleness of his world.

This is principally a function of rhetoric. The multiple voices are those of demotic small-town Ireland, delivering the story in a kind of Hiberno-English argot which just can't help laughing – or at least smiling – at the dead-end absurdities of daily life. This is what Flann O'Brien once called, "the laugh of lost men." It is a recurring note in Irish writing and is a product of language rather than circumstance. After all, the tedium of witless provincialism is universal, but Irish writers manage to wring more comedy than most out of the emptiness. It is the joke on the edge of the grave, as we throw defiance at our own impotence and failure. And so, like Beckett, we resolve to go on and fail better next time.

It is no accident that the novel is set against the collapse of Ireland's false economic boom. The so-called Celtic Tiger produced no fiction of any great merit. It is as if the Irish imagination (supposing such a sprite to exist at all) does not do success nearly as well as it does failure. If so, in its latest failure it has found in Donal Ryan a voice of eloquent integrity and a novelist of distinction.

Italy

Lorenzo Amurri has written two novels. *Apnea* was his debut, receiving great write-ups from critics, as well as being named as one of the 12 finalists of the 2013 Strega Prize for literature. The novel is autobiographical, starting off from the tragic accident the author experienced while skiing with his girlfriend, going through subsequent convalescence to the rebuilding of everyday life.

His style is immediate, easy to read and without sentimental trumpery. He relates his experiences as a long journey towards getting to grips with his new condition, defining the edges of pain and desperation that, once circumscribed and beaten, led to the peace of acceptance. Similar to a diary, the book tells the story, using irony, of the slow rebirth of the author. Someone who had to go through all of the difficult phases of physical and mental rehabilitation that brought about a redefinition of the space and dimensions of his life. Faced with the great trial that destiny reserved for him, he does not give up.

Lithuania

Undinė Radzevičiūtė's lapidary style, using generous amounts of wit and irony, has been received favourably by critics and readers since the publication of her first book, *Strekaza*, in 2003. Two more books followed in 2010 and 2011.

But many in Lithuania consider her finest achievement is her biggest book to date, *Žuvys ir drakonai*. It is a novel containing two alternating and very different plot lines: one takes place in 18th century China, where a few European Jesuits and painters try, rather unsuccessfully, to understand local culture and mores and to convert at least some influential people to Christianity. The other unfolds in the present day in an unidentified European city, where echoes of Chinese culture, Confucianism and Buddhism are played out against European sensibilities in ironic, playful and often absurd situations within a family of four women.

The author displays a deep knowledge of traditional Chinese culture and mentality, and the novel provides an imaginative study of a clash of two cultures: Christian European and traditional Chinese.

Norway

Forgive Me is Ida Hegazi Høyer's third novel in three years. It demonstrates her great literary talent and displays an individual style distinguished by an engaging temper, reflected compassion and a poetical, often paradoxical, turn of phrase.

The novel further explores themes introduced in her two prior novels: repression as a defence mechanism both on an individual and a communal level. What is hidden to preserve the self-image we can live comfortably with? And at what cost do we reveal it?

A young woman returns home to find that her fiancé has hanged himself. Trying to understand his suicide and her own role in his tragedy, she then recapitulates their history from the day they met and fell wildly in love to a retrospective address to her dead beloved.

At first, the two feel invincible, and keep daring each other to do socially awkward stunts. The young man is a philosophy student who impresses his girlfriend deeply with his intellectual talk of individualism and his free spirit – he seems like the perfect man. But meeting his parents in their strangely quiet and gloomy home gradually changes her view on him. As the suspicion takes hold that he has been lying to her, not once but systematically, she confronts him, not realizing that his past holds painful secrets he himself hasn't been conscious of for years.

Parallel to this storyline, the woman cares for a toddler in her work at a day care centre. When this young boy suddenly bites her in the neck, and changes from his usually charming ways to displaying violent and apathetic behaviour, she turns a blind eye to signs that he is abused by his mother.

By way of a multilayered narrative and effective poetic imagery, Høyer poses important questions that point to the pain behind the blind spots in modern society.

Poland

Atrocious murders, brutal crimes, unexplained mysteries of the past, contemporary Berlin and its inhabitants, the outbreak of the Solidarity movement, the enigmas of the Stasi and the modern domestic secret services... these could be the ingredients of a thriller, but Magdalena Parys' novel far exceeds the frames of the genre.

The starting point of the story is a press release: 'In 2010, the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records (the German Government Agency) cleared almost six kilometres of files (20 million pages). It is estimated that in the time of the Iron Curtain about 4,500 people from the Eastern Bloc tried to escape to the West across the Bulgarian borders. About 100 of them lost their lives.' This information provides the inspiration for a multilayered story about people trying to unravel the circumstances of mysterious deaths in the 1980s.

Containing brilliant narrative and vividly-drawn characters, the book appealingly shows the complexity of fate, set in a captivating and contemporary Berlin, a fascinating multicultural melting pot in which the troubled past has left its imprint. *Magik (Magician)* is a gripping and seductive book. Despite there being some weaker elements to the plot's adrenaline-rushing peaks and subtle lulls, this novel nonetheless deserves the highest praise.

This is the first part of the 'Berlin Trilogy' announced by the author. The subsequent instalments are eagerly anticipated.

Portugal

The Portuguese jury of the European Union Prize for Literature, after having selected and evaluated the five works which, in its opinion, fulfilled the pre-established criteria, decided by unanimous vote to propose that the Prize be awarded to the book entitled *Índice Médio de Felicidade* by David Machado.

This novel was published in 2013, and its main character, in spite of suffering from the economic crisis that affects both Portugal and beyond, doesn't give up on fighting for a decent future for himself and his family, offering a salutary lesson that there is no future without hope.

Índice Médio de Felicidade is an intense account, cinematic, full of realistic and dramatic rhythms that reveal a remarkably steady narrative as well as a clear, agile and efficient literary style. It combines high quality literary skill and powerful storytelling, where its imagination and humour stand out.

David Machado is a promising and emerging talent on the Portuguese and European literary scenes. He deserves to receive this Prize, that must not be seen as a mere reward but above all as an incentive.

Slovakia

The problem of psychological and social adaptation in a strange setting is one of Svetlana Žuchová's central themes. Analytical skill and a feeling for detail characterise her writing, alongside a style based on short, succinct sentences which often pass over from the narrator's observations into the characters' speech. By directing attention to the details of ordinary life, she also reveals reasons why relationships can fracture. She shows how banalities often drown out the fundamental aspects of life, including our relationship with our surroundings, thus enclosing a human being still more tightly in solitude. While in her preceding novels, she laid the stress more on social problems in terms of seeking a place in the world and a status in society, in *Scenes From the Life of M.* she concentrates on existential questions. The main character in her novels is the nurse Marisia, who, after her upwardly mobile migration to Austria (*Thieves and Witnesses*) and an unfulfilled relationship, returns to Slovakia because her mother is dying. Within the plotline about the mother dying, the author presents not only fundamental questions of life but also problems of relationships, maturing, loneliness, and the impossibility of entering the worlds of others, even our nearest and dearest. Relationships are reduced to routine activities, everyday rituals; only somewhere in the background does one feel the distress of loss, of rupture. Distress, on the one hand, is suppressed by the inevitable day-to-day activities, but on the other hand that's also where it comes from. The quest for certainty in relationships and in family bonds offer only restricted certainties, and even more uncertainties, and brings forth the question of genetics.

Sweden

Sara Stridsberg has created an almost mythical novel about hard reality, focusing on a girl called Jackie and her father, Jimmie Darling – a patient at the psychiatric hospital Beckomberga. Jackie's loneliness, love and longing creates an illuminated world out of the shadows; the real, tough world is there but with layers of dream and imagination above and below. The jury was won over by Stridsberg's use of language, which is poetic, beautiful, original and clear, with some distinctive turns of phrase.

The European Union Prize for Literature

The aim of the European Union Prize for Literature is to put the spotlight on the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature in the field of fiction, to promote the circulation of literature within Europe and encourage greater interest in non-national literary works.

The works of the selected winners (one winning author per country participating in the Prize on a rotation basis) will reach a wider and international audience, and touch readers beyond national and linguistic borders.

The Prize is financed by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union whose three main objectives are: to promote cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector; to encourage the transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output; and to foster intercultural dialogue.

Selection process

The winning authors are selected by qualified juries set up in each of the 12 countries participating in the 2015 award.

The nomination of candidates and the final selection of one winner in each country took place between October 2014 and February 2015.

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

- Be a citizen of one of the 12 selected countries
- To have published between 2 and 4 books of fiction
- The winning books should have been published during the five years before the Prize

Juries

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

The jury reports were delivered in the national language, and in English or French translation, justifying the jury's choice and providing relevant information on the winner and his/her work.

The European Commission, DG Education and Culture

www.ec.europa.eu/culture

The Consortium

The European and International Booksellers Federation

eibf-booksellers.org

The European Writers' Council

www.europeanwriters.eu

The Federation of European Publishers

www.fep-fee.eu

The European Union Prize for Literature

www.euprizeliterature.eu

Twelve winning authors



Carolina Schutti • *Einmal muss ich über weiches Gras gelaufen sein*

Luka Bekavac • *Viljevo*

Gaëlle Josse • *Le dernier gardien d'Ellis Island*

Edina Szvoren • *Nincs, és ne is legyen*

Donal Ryan • *The Spinning Heart*

Lorenzo Amurri • *Apnea*

Undinė Radzevičiūtė • *Žuvys ir drakonai*

Ida Hegazi Høyer • *Unnskyld*

Magdalena Parys • *Magik*

David Machado • *Índice Médio de Felicidade*

Svetlana Žuchová • *Obrazy zo života M.*

Sara Stridsberg • *Beckomberga – Ode till min familj*