



EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

2016



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Jasmin B. Frelih – Slovenia

Na/pol (2013)

In/Half

Publishing House **Cankarjeva Založba**

Biography

Jasmin B. Frelih was born in Kranj, Slovenia, in 1986. He studied comparative literature, and literary theory and history, at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. His first novel *Na/pol (In/Half)* was published in 2013 by Cankarjeva Založba to considerable media attention and critical acclaim. It received the best literary debut award at the annual Slovenian Book Fair, was shortlisted for the novel of the year and book of the year awards, and was showcased as the Slovenian entry for the 2014 European First Novel Festival in Budapest, Hungary. His short story collection *Ideoluzije (Tiny Ideologies)* was published by LUD Literatura in 2015. In his five years as a prose fiction editor for the literary review *I.D.I.O.T.*, he worked with some of the best writers and poets of the new Slovenian literary generation. His short fiction, essays and translations of American authors appear in the leading Slovenian literary reviews *Sodobnost*, *Literatura*, and *Dialogi*. His translations of Slovenian poetry into English have been published in *Banipal*, *Versopolis*, and international anthologies of the *I.D.I.O.T.* literary review.

Synopsis

In/Half is a globalist novel set in a post-globalist future. The book interweaves three distinct narrative threads: Evan, an addict theatre director in Tokyo in the future, is staging a play and lamenting the loss of the love of his life. Kras, a family patriarch and ex-war-minister, is celebrating his 50th birthday in the Slovenian part of what could nowadays be called Fortress Europe. Zoja, an anarchist poet, is getting ready to read at the Brooklyn festival Poetrylitics, attended by a motley crew of intellectuals, artists and madmen. *In/Half* uses every trick in the postmodernist playbook, while also taking the tricks seriously. Not content to push the limits of text's possibilities, the novel charges its investigations into the fate of the individual, of the family, and of society, with a solemn ontology and sends its characters hurtling through a disconnected world filled with the debris of past histories for them to find a sense of belonging. With its sharp focus on the contradictions of modernity, and with the reading experience likened to an extended surfing session on a world wide web crafted by an ingenious demiurge, *In/Half* is a powerful statement on the nature of the novel by a voice from the new generation of writers.

Na/pol

Jasmin B. Frelih

Utrinek je utonil v oranžno nebo. Zvezde trkajo po oblaku smoga in nihče jim ne pride odpret. Pod pokrovom so ljudje prikrajšani za svetlobo iz časa dinozavrov. Nekdo zahupa, nekje. Krik osamljene mehanične zveri. Iz streh se usuva prah. Veter s svojo metlo iz soli. Morje se leno obrača na bok, v daljavi. Plaže je slekla oseka, a jih ni sram. Okna stolpnic kradejo svetlobo zase.

»Grozno tremo imam,« pravi kitarist in stiska vrat kitare, kot bi davil raco.

»Zakaj?« ga vpraša Zoja.

»Še nikoli nisem videl toliko ljudi na kupu.«

Pri izhodu na oder stoji, eno oko uperi v občinstvo in ga takoj odvrne z drgetom vsega telesa. Zoja stori korak proti njemu, kar občuti kot rahlo grožnjo. Rad bi se osredotočil na glasbo, na njeno samostojnost, njeno neodvisnost od inštrumenta, na njen učinek, in odmisli njen vzrok, njen človeški izvor, zato ga Zojino telo, ki v zornem kotu postaja vedno večje, spravlja v nemir.

»Ne boj se,« mu reče Zoja. V odgovor skrivi usta navzdol in rezko pihne med ustnicami.

»Ne boj se,« mu ponovi. »Včasih so bile množice neskončne. Teh nekaj sto ljudi je kaplja v morje prepletu teles, ki se je nekoč zgrinjal na veliko bolj grozne stvari. Nihče od njih ni prišel, da bi sodil. Prišli so, ker so osamljeni. Ker jih je strah, da jih nihče ne razume. Ker jim je težko.«

»To mi prav nič ne pomaga,« ji tiho reče, bled v obraz, »moja glasba je samo zvok. Nikomur ne more storiti ničesar.«

»Tu ni nobene zahteve. Prišli so, da bi se prepričali, če kdo sploh še verjame.«

»Ne vem, če verjamem.«

»Ni tvoja naloga, da bi verjel zanje.«

»Ampak, če ste rekli...«

»Ti moraš samo čarati.«

»Samo čarati!«

»Ko se boš postavil na oder in dal prste na strune, pozabi, kje si. Pozabi, da je tam toliko lesa in toliko kamna in toliko stekla in toliko najlona in jekla in toliko src in dvakrat toliko zenic, pozabi, da čas teče utrip za utripom, pozabi, da je res vse, kar je res. Stopi v prazno luknjo, ki neuzrta lebdi v prostoru nekje izven naše galaksije. Ne poj ljudem. Poj tistemu praznemu kraju. Tam ni ničesar, samo tvoj zvok. Vse, kar je, je tvoj zvok. Célo tvoje življenje je tvoj zvok. Nisi se rodil, in ne boš umrl, dokler si na tistem kraju, in dokler je tisti kraj tvoj zvok. Nimaš staršev, nimaš otrok, nobenega človeka ne poznaš. Trema? Trema je nekaj, kar te doleti na avtobusu, ko pride sprevodnik po karto. Ko te neznanec prosi za uslugo. Ko bi rad nekemu, ki ga nimaš rad, rekel, rad te imam. Trema dobiš, ko postaneš lačen. Ti si pa prišel ustvarjat. Prišel si razblinjat praznino. Prišel si čarat. Pusti trema njim.«

»Njim?«

»Ljudem, ki so po nekaj prišli.«

»Po kaj pa so prišli?«

»Po nekaj, kar jim nihče ne more dati.«

»...«

»Pojdi ven, izgubi se, zapoj.«

Na njegovem obrazu se zvrtili kalejdoskop občutij, mišice poskačejo na vse strani in nato nenadoma otrpnejo v vdanost usodi. Saj poznate ta obraz. V težkih jutrih vam lebdi v ogledalu. Zoja ga nežno porine in njegovi koraki, ven, na oder, ven, v prostor, so skorajda mirni.

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»Zvonec ni zvonil že leta,« je rekel Lefkas, ko sta se vzpenjala po stopnicah. »Najprej sploh nisem vedel, kaj se dogaja. Ste dolgo čakali?« Evan je dihal suh zrak in čez ograjo gledal v globino. Stopnišče se ni pričelo v pritličju, šlo je globlje. Okrog njega so brenčale muhe. Lefkas je bil oblečen v umazano rožnat kopalni plašč, lase je imel spuščene, na nogah je imel copate. Šop ključev v žepu mu je žvenketal z vsakim korakom. »Niti ne,« je odvrnil Evan, »malo je trajalo, preden sem vas našel.«

»In kaj vas je obsedlo, da ste prišli po zraku?« je vprašal Lefkas.

»Po zraku?«

»Od zunaj.«

»Je kakšna druga pot?«

Lefkas se je namuznil. »Morda.«

Evan humorja ni cenil.

»Prišel sem po mAk.«

Lefkas je za hip zastal, pa zopet nastavil korak s tihim »aha.«

»Kaj pa je ta kraj?« je vprašal Evan.

»Moj dom.«

»Dom?«

»Vsak ga ima.«

Obmolknila sta. Evan je zaznal tih hrum, ki je prihajal iz globin in napajal vse stvari z nežno vibracijo. Ko je prijel ograjo, je šla v kosti.

»Kaj pa je to?«

»Nihče ne ve,« je odvrnil Lefkas.

»Kako, nihče ne ve?«

»Če bi imeli čas, bi vam pokazal.«

»Kaj? Saj mi lahko poveste.«

Lefkas je za trenutek postal, kot bi preudarjal nadvse težke reči, preden je šel dalje.

»Tam spodaj, globoko spodaj, so nekakšna vrata brez kljuge in tečajev.«

»Kako so lahko potem to vrata?«

»No, saj sem vedel, težko je povedati.«

Evan se je opravičil in ga prosil, naj nadaljuje.

»Vrat se ne da odpreti, nikakor. Poskušali so že, ljudje. Povsem nemogoče je. Sanja se mi ne, kako in od kdaj so vrata tam. Za njimi mora biti kdove kakšna reč, da tako nadležno razbija. Nekakšen stroj ali reaktor, kaj jaz vem. Če nanje prisloniš roko, ti premeče vsako ped telesa. Pa ne bi rekel, da je ravno slab občutek, ampak tako, močan, veste, kot bi ga smel človek doživeti le enkrat v življenju, drugič naj se pa pazi. Ne vem, če mi sledite.«

»Sledim.«

Evan mu je sledil.

»No, saj to je več ali manj to. Jaz sem se že navadil. Ne bom rekel, da me ne zanima, kako je z vsem tem, ampak vsega pa tudi ne moremo vedeti, ne bi rekli?«

Evan si je z glasnim vzdihom s čela pregnal muho. Lefkas ga je pogledal in zamrmral nekaj nerazločnega, kot, mrčes, ja. Pred vrati v stanovanje se je obrnil k Evanu.

»Kje pa imate sponzorja?«

»Crknil mi je.«

»Nadomestni?«

Evan je prikimal.

»Pa veste, kaj se zgodi, če ste predolgo brez?« ga je vprašal Lefkas.

Evan se je začudil.

»Kako, kaj se zgodi? Kaj pa naj bi se zgodilo?«

Lefkas je zmajal z glavo, se s pomilovanjem nasmehnil in pritisnil na kljuko. Vstopila sta, a Evan ni odnehal.

»Čakajte no, kaj ste mislili s tem, če sem predolgo brez? Zjutraj mi je crknila...«

Zdaj se je začudil Lefkas, »ženska?«

»Ženska, ja, Koito nekaj, pred nekaj urami, ne vem, koliko je sploh ura? Kaj pa se zgodi, če si brez?«

Stanovanje je dajalo vtis nenaseljenosti, z izjemo kotička na skrajnem koncu sobe, kjer je nad kupom knjig gorela svetilka. Naslonjaču ob mizi je iz nepreštevnihih lukenj ven štrlela oranžna pena. Preproga, ki je tja vodila čez hodnik, je bila oguljena do sivin. S fotografij v cenениh okvirjih, ki so visele s sten, so v Evana boljčale oči neznancev. Lefkasu ni bil podoben nihče.

»Zaprte vrata, hitro, prosim, zaradi muh.«

Evan jih je zaprl.

»Povejte mi, kaj se zgodi.«

»Nič,« je odvrnil Lefkas, da bi ga utišal, »pozabite, da sem karkoli omenil. Ne tiče se vas.«

»Kako se me ne tiče? Če ste ravnokar rekli...«

Lefkas ga je prekinil z dvignjeno dlanjo.

»Verjemite mi. Prišli ste z razlogom, zato vam ne mislim govoriti o času. Tukaj sva. To je vse.«

Evan se je zdrznil.

»Torej, kaj, kaj torej počnete tukaj?«

»Vero oznanjam,« je dejal Lefkas.

»Tako temu pravite?«

Lefkas se je spustil v naslonjač in razširil roke.

»Vam se zdi hecno morda. Vi imate mAk za popestritev, za šalo, za šus. Da vam malo špila po glavi, kajne? Saj vem, nič se ne branite,« je dejal, ko se je Evan hitel zagovarjati, »da ne boste mislili, da obsojam ali kaj takega. Popolnoma legitimno je, to. Ampak, veste koliko ljudi je tam zunaj mrtvih? Pomislite kdaj? Množice zavesti, ki srkajo dneve skozi preluknjane slamice, ali pa dnevi srkajo njih. Samotarji. Ničvredneži. Norci. Na milijone... Za družbo so jim počena zrcala. Vsak trenutek se spotikajo po plitvinah, vsak trenutek hočejo ven, hočejo noter, hočejo...«

Evana je stisnilo v pljučih. Sključil se je in zajel zrak.

»Ste v redu?« ga je vprašal Lefkas.

Zasolzile so se mu oči. Prikimal je. Pogoltnil cmok.

»Kaj jaz vem, kaj hočejo,« je nadaljeval Lefkas, »da se jih svet usmili, ali da se oni usmilijo sveta. Vse življenje jih že gledam. Dobro jih poznam. In mAk je preprosta spojina. Malce elektrike namaže na opno možganov, par hormonov sprosti, nevtropin, oksitocin, vazopresin in podobno, nič posebnega, saj pravim. Vse to se sprošča v možganih že, ko je človek zaljubljen. Ampak nekateri ljudje niso bili zaljubljeni nikoli. Dobro delo opravljam, se mi zdi, če bi moral iskreno reči. Obujam mrtvece, če pretiravam. Ste v redu?«

Evanu se je osušilo grlo. Ves ta čas se je boril z draženjem, da se ne bi spustil v neskončen kašelj.

»Kozarec vode bi,« je hripnil.

Lefkas je planil pokonci, »moj bonton! Ne zamerite mi preveč,« je govoril na poti v kuhinjo, »ampak se pozna, da nimam pogosto družbe.« Izginil je med vrati. Evan se je pričel potiti. Plinsko masko je vrgel na mizo in s pogledom ošinil hrbte knjig. Ni jih poznal.

»A boste čaj?« se je zaslišalo med ropotanjem posode. »Ne, vodo, prosim, samo vodo,« je odvrnil Evan. Pogladi se je po želodcu. Ničesar še ni jedel. »Imate mogoče kaj za pod zob?« je vprašal in se nakremžil ob besedi.

»Za pod zob?«

»Če imate kaj hrane, oprostite, tako se reče, ničesar še nisem pojedel danes.«

Zvoki kuhinje. Hladilnik se je odprl z vzdihom. Tiktak, tiktak. Evan si je s prsti krožil po sencih. Sproščal se je v pričakovanju. Spet bo čutil.

Lefkas se je primajal s kozarcem v eni roki in krožnikom v drugi.

»Se opravičujem, od včeraj so, upam, da so še dobre. Ja, tudi vso marmelado sem porabil, na žalost, drugega pa nimam za notri.«

Evan je skomignil z rameni. Kozarec je spil na dušek. Eno si je zvil. Ko je zagrizel vanjo, je padel v vodnjak.

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Kras si je že zavezal kravato, ko se je pogledal v ogledalu in se s posmehom obregnil ob lastno ničevost, prst vtaknil v vozel in ga potegnil narazen. Kravato sname in jo vrže na tla. V kovčku nima veliko. Dodaten par čevljev, nekaj srajc, perilo, nogavice, hlače. Če bo pot vodila na sever, ali daleč na jug, bo plašč kupil na letališču. Ničesar zares ne potrebuje. In kravate zagotovo ne.

Posloviti se ne namerava. Tako ali tako ne bo dolgo zdoma, in na vprašanja noče odgovarjati. Njihova prisotnost je še živa v njegovi glavi, zbrani, kot so bili na praznovanju prejšnji dan, družinska slika živih barv. Zdaj so spet raztepeni v svoje okvire, zato jih ne bo obiskoval, da bi se prepričal, preden gre... Zakaj se mu zdi, da je na begu? Nikoli ni bežal. Tudi takrat ne, ko bi morda moral. Ko se je svet lomil in so se sklepale nevarne prisege in je sovraštvo terjalo davek v mesu. Nikjer ni bilo zapisano, da bo njemu uspelo, da bo on preživel, in če bi se takrat znašel na napačni strani, bi ostal za zmeraj tiho. Tudi zdaj ne beži. Samo po sina gre, kjerkoli že je. Samo po otroka. Čeprav ni več otrok. Toliko je star, kot je bil on, tedaj, ko je imel še izbiro.

Zvok zadrge na kovčku. Sprelet dvoma na obrazu. Ko je imel še izbiro. Izbral je zase. Izbral pa je tudi za vse ostale. Kako naj pusti sinu prosto pot, če pa je rojen iz izbire, ki je Krasu pot začrtala in zaprla? Očetje so sebični. Kras to dobro ve.

Nekaterih reči se mora človek držati. To niso samo besede. To niso samo spomini. In svoboda ne pomeni nič, če jo imaš samo zato, da bi se izognil tistemu, kar je bilo izbrano – zate.

Na dvorišču zahupa taksist. Kras se spusti po stopnicah, ven, kjer s pogledom ošvrkne očeta, visoko tam zgoraj, in zarenči nad župnikom, ki prihiti, da bi se mu izpovedal. Ne zanima ga, kaj se tu dogaja. Z očetom sta opravila dolgo nazaj. Vse ostalo je bila le dolgočasna variacija na temo. Kras je podedoval puščavo. Da bi kaj raslo, je moral zalivati s krvjo. Resnica zgodovine pritiska na čut za pravičnost. Pri močnih ga upogne. Pri šibkih ga zlomi. Nihče ni zmožen videti nedolžnosti, kar je dobro, saj je ni nikjer.

Usede se na zadnje sedeže in voznika ne pogleda. Ko se vozita, strmi skozi okno. Redke kaplje dežja rahljajo pokrov prahu. Oblaki se šopirijo s svojim špehom. Sonca ni. Večer je še daleč. Vse je ujeto sem. Koleno mu nemirno skače. Usnje pete in guma tal zacvilita ob vsakem stiku. Vse je ujeto sem. Kras vekam ne pusti, da bi mu prekinile pogled, zato se mu oči zasolžijo. Pokrajina se ukrivlja ob robovih solznih kapelj.

»Je tu kaj...« zamrmra in voznik ga sicer sliši, vendar ima dovolj zdravega razuma, da ostane tiho. »Je tu kaj, kar je več od mene?« vpraša Volk. Polje se upogne. Gozd na robu se zlije z nebom. »Vse in še, vsaj nekaj, vsaj malo, čez?« Barvi peska in birk se zmešata v umazano zeleno. »Ali je vedno neka luknja,« stisne pest in jo s členki trdo, počasi prisloni ob steklo, »ki srka in srka in ne pusti, da bi se svet napolnil? In ni važno, koliko zmečeš vanjo, še vedno hoče več, in srka, in vsem stvarjem jemlje njihovo polnost... !« S pestjo udari ob steklo. Voznik se premakne na sedežu, vendar ostane tiho. »S čim naj jo zapolnim?«

»Prosim, gospod?«

»Rekel sem, s čim naj zapolnim luknjo?«

»Ne bi vedel, gospod.«

Kras prikima, prekriža noge, odvrne pogled od obzorja in zapre oči.

»Gospod Volk. Preden lahko zapeljem na letališče, moram čez kontrolno točko. Vam kar takoj povem, da se boste morali sezuti.«

Kras se skloni k vezalkam.

»Bova kmalu?«

»Minuto, gospod Volk.«

Samo še minuto.

In/Half

Jasmin B. Frelih

Translated from the Slovenian by Jason Blake

The shooting star sunk into the orange sky. The stars are knocking on clouds of smog and nobody comes to open up for them. Under this cover the people are deprived of light from the time of the dinosaurs. Somebody honks, somewhere. The scream of lonely, mechanical beasts. Dust pours down from the rooftops. The wind with its broom of salt. Off in the distance, the sea lazily turns on its side. The low tide has stripped the beaches, but they are not ashamed. The windows of the skyscrapers steal the light for themselves.

“I’m totally nervous,” the guitarist says and squeezes the neck of his guitar, like he’s strangling a duck.

“Why?” asks Zoja.

“I’ve never seen such a crowd of people.”

He stands by the stage exit, one eye fixed on the audience, and then he immediately looks away, his whole body shivering. Zoja takes a step towards him and to him this feels like a tacit threat. He’d like to concentrate on the music, on its autonomy, its independence from the instrument, on its effect, and not think of its causes, its human origin, which is why Zoja’s body, which from his perspective is getting bigger and bigger, unsettles him.

“Don’t be afraid,” says Zoja. In response he purses his lips, looks down and exhales sharply.

“Don’t be afraid,” she repeats. “There used to be no end to the crowds. These few hundred people are a drop in the ocean compared to the intertwined bodies that used to flock to much more awful things. Nobody has come to judge. They’ve come because they’re lonely. Because they’re afraid nobody understands them. Because they’re in a sad state.”

“That doesn’t really help me much,” he says quietly, pale in the face. “My music is just sound. It can’t do anything for anyone.”

“There are no demands here. They came to convince themselves whether anybody actually still believes.”

“I don’t know whether I believe.”

“It’s not your job to believe for them.”

“But if you said...”

“You just have to work your magic.”

“Work magic?”

“When you’re up there on stage and you’re running your fingers over the strings, just forget where you are. Forget about all that wood and all those stones and all that glass and all that nylon and steel and all those hearts and all those eyeballs, forget that time is passing, beat after beat, forget that everything that’s true is true. Step into the void that’s floating unseen in space somewhere beyond our galaxy. Don’t sing to the people. Sing to that empty space. There’s nothing there, just your sound. The only thing that exists is your sound. Your whole life is your sound. You weren’t born and you won’t die, as long as you’re in this place, and as long as this place is your sound. You have no parents, you have no children, nobody knows you. Nervousness? Nervousness is something you get on a train when the conductor comes to see if you’ve got a

ticket. When a stranger asks you for a favour. When you'd like to say *I love you* to someone you don't love. Nervousness is when you're hungry. But you came to create. You came to light up the emptiness. You came to work magic. Leave the nervousness to them."

"To them?"

"To those people who came for something."

"What have they come for?"

"For something that nobody can give them."

"..."

"Get out there, lose yourself, sing."

A kaleidoscope of emotions washes over his face, his muscles twitch every which way and then suddenly stiffen and give themselves up to fate. But you know that face. It's the one that floats in the mirror on those difficult mornings. Zoja gently nudged him forth and he stepped out, onto the stage, out, into the space, almost calmly.

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"The buzzer hasn't rung for years," said Lefkas, as they were climbing the stairs. "At first I had no idea what was going on. Were you waiting for long?"

Evan breathed in the dry air and looked over the railing to the depths below. The staircase didn't start on the ground floor, it went even deeper down. Flies were buzzing around him. Lefkas was dressed in a dirty pink bathrobe, his hair was dishevelled, and he was wearing slippers. Each step he took rattled the keys in his pocket.

"Not at all," replied Evan. "It didn't take long for me to find you."

“And what got over you? What made you come for air?” asked Lefkas.

“For air?”

“From outside.”

“Is there some other way?”

Lefkas smirked. “Perhaps.”

Evan was not one for humour.

“I came for mAk.”

Lefkas stopped for a moment, but then moved on again with a quiet “aha.”

“What is this place?” asked Evan.

“It’s my home.”

“Home?”

“Everyone has one.”

They fell silent. Evan noticed a low roaring coming from the depths below and making everything vibrate. When he grabbed the railing, the vibration entered his bones.

“What is that?”

“No one knows,” replied Lefkas.

“How’s that, no one knows?”

“If you had time, I’d show you.”

“What? Why don’t you just tell me?”

Before going on, Lefkas stopped for a second, as if he were pondering very weighty matters.

“Down there, way down there, is a door of sorts without a handle and without hinges.”

“Then how can it be a door?”

“Well, I knew it would be tough to explain.”

Evan apologised and asked him to continue.

“The door won’t open, ever. People have tried and tried. It’s impossible to open it. I can’t even imagine how long there’s been a door there. Behind it there must be some who-knows-what making that annoying racket. Some sort of machine or reactor, what do I know. If you put your hand on the door, your whole body shakes. But I wouldn’t exactly say it’s a bad feeling, it’s just so, strong, you know, something you’re allowed to experience just once in your life, the second time one should beware. I don’t know if you’re following.”

“I’m following.”

Evan was following him.

“That’s more or less it, actually. I’m used to it by now. I’m not going to say I’m not interested in what’s up with it, but we can’t know everything, right?”

Evan exhaled loudly to shoo a fly away from his forehead. Lefkas looked at him and mumbled something indecipherable, something like insect, yes. When they were in front of the apartment door, he turned to Evan.

“Where’s your sponsor?”

“He died on me.”

“A replacement?”

Evan nodded.

“Do you know what happens when you go without for too long?” asked Lefkas.

Evan looked up in surprise.

“What do you mean, what happens? What is it that’s supposed to happen?”

Lefkas shook his head, gave a commiserative smile and turned the handle. They entered, but Evan didn’t stop.

“Wait, okay? What did you mean by that, by if I go too long without it? This morning it died out on me...”

Now it was Lefkas’ turn to be amazed, “A woman?”

“A woman, yes. Koito something, a few hours ago, I don’t know. What time is it anyway? What happens if you go without?”

The apartment looked uninhabited, except for a corner at the far end of a room where a lamp was shining above a stack of books. Orange foam was poking out of the innumerable holes in an armchair by a table. A carpet, grey and threadbare, led the way through the hall. From the photos hanging in cheap frames on the walls, the eyes of strangers stared out at Evan. None of them looked like Lefkas.

“Shut the door. Quickly, please. The flies.”

Evan shut the door.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“Nothing,” replied Lefkas, to quieten him down. “Forget I even mentioned it. It doesn’t concern you.”

“How doesn’t it concern me? Didn’t you just say...”

Lefkas interrupted him with a raised hand.

“Believe me. You came here for a reason, so I’m not going to talk about time. We’re here. That’s everything.”

Evan blanched.

“Then what, what are you doing here?”

“I’m proclaiming the faith,” said Lefkas.

“That’s what you call it?”

Lefkas slumped into the armchair and spread his arms.

“It might seem a little funny to you. For you, mAk is a bit of a diversion, a joke, a thrill. Some little mind game, no? You don’t have to defend yourself, I know how it is,” he said when Evan hastened to object. “Just so you don’t think I’m judging you or anything. It’s completely legit, this. But do you know how many people out there are dead? Ever think about that? Masses of consciousness that suck the days through straws, or the days suck them. Loners. Good-for-nothings. Fools. Millions of them... With broken mirrors for company. Every minute they trip about in the shoals, every moment they want out, they want in, they want...”

Evan felt his lungs tightening up. He bent over to catch his breath.

“Are you alright?” asked Lefkas.

Evan had tears in his eyes. He nodded. He swallowed back a lump.

“How should I know what they want?” continued Lefkas. “For the world to have mercy on them? For them to have mercy on the world? My whole life I’ve been watching them. I know them well. And mAk is a simple combination. A little electricity smeared over the brain membrane, a few hormones released: neurotrophin, oxytocin, vasopressin and so on. Like I said, nothing special. If you’re in love, the brain itself releases all of this. But some people have never been in love. If you asked me, honestly, I’d have to say I’m doing charity. To exaggerate, I’m waking the dead. Are you alright?”

Evan's throat was parched. He was desperately fighting back a tickle that would have led to incessant coughing.

"I'd like a glass of water," he croaked.

Lefkas sprang up. "Where are my manners! Don't be too offended," he said on the way to the kitchen. "You can see I don't get a lot of guests." He disappeared through the door. Evan was beginning to sweat. He threw the gas mask on the table and skimmed the spines of the books. They were unfamiliar to him.

"Would you like some tea?" he heard from among clanging pots. "No, water, please, just water," replied Evan. He ran a hand over his stomach. He hadn't eaten yet. "Do you have something to munch on?" he asked, and winced at his words.

"To munch on?"

"If you have some food. Sorry, but I haven't eaten anything today..."

Kitchen sounds. The swoosh of the refrigerator opening. Cling-clang, cling-clang. Evan rubbed his fingers over his temples. He relaxed in expectation. He would once again feel.

Lefkas tottered in with a glass in one hand and a plate of crepes in the other.

"I apologize. I hope they're still good. They're from yesterday. Unfortunately I used up all the jam, but I've got something else to put in them."

Evan gave a shrug. He drained the glass in one go. He rolled a crepe. As he bit into it, he fell into a fountain.

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Kras had already tied his tie when he looked at himself in the mirror and laughed at his own vanity. He stuck a finger into the knot and pulled it apart. He took off the tie and threw it to

the floor. He doesn't have much in his suitcase. An extra pair of shoes, a few shirts, underwear, socks, pants. If his path leads him north, or very far south, he'll buy a coat at the airport. There's nothing he really needs. And definitely not a tie.

He has no intention of saying goodbye. In any case he won't be away from home for long and he doesn't want to answer questions. Their presence is still alive in his head, gathered as they were at the celebration the day before, a family picture in living colour. Now they are once again dispersed into their frames, which is why he won't visit them to convince himself before he leaves... Why does it seem like he's fleeing? He's never fled. Not even now when he probably should have. When the world became unhinged and when dangerous oaths were taken and hatred demanded its pound of flesh. Nowhere was it written that he'd succeed, that'd he'd survive, and if he found himself on the wrong side this time, he'd keep quiet forever. And neither is he fleeing now. He's just going for his son, wherever he is. Just for his child. Though he's no longer a child. He's as old as Kras was when he still had a choice.

The sound of the zipper on the suitcase. The shadow of doubt on his face. When he still had a choice. He made a choice for himself. He made a choice also for everyone else. How could he leave a free path for his son, if he was born of a choice which set out and closed off the path for Kras? Fathers are selfish. Kras is well aware of this. There are some things a man must hold on to. Those are not just words. Those are not just memories. And freedom means nothing if you have it only in order to avoid what was chosen for you.

In the courtyard, the taxi is honking. Kras heads down the stairs and outside, where he glances up to his father, way up there, and snarls at the priest and rushed confessions. He's

not interested in what's going on here. He and his father dealt with it a long time ago. Everything else was just a dull variation on a theme. Kras inherited the desert. To make something grow, he had to water it with blood. The truth of history presses on the sense of justice. In the strong, it bends. In the weak, it breaks. No one can see innocence, which is good, because it is nowhere.

He sits in the back seat and doesn't look at the driver. He stares out the window as they drive. A few drops of rain loosen the cover of dust. The greasy clouds are showing off. There's no sun. Evening is a long way off. Everything is captured here. His restless knees jump up and down, the leather heels and the rubber mat squeaking each time they make contact. Everything is captured here. Kras won't let his eyelids interrupt the view, so his eyes begin to water. The landscape curves over the edges of the teardrops.

"Is there a..." he mumbles, and though the driver hears him, he has enough good sense to remain silent. "Is there something here that's bigger than me?" asks Volk. The field bends. The woods at the edge blend with the sky. "Everything and more, at least something, a little beyond?" The colours of the sand and the blades of grass blend into a dirty green. He clenches his fist and runs his knuckles, firmly, slowly, against the glass. "Is there always a hole which sucks and sucks and won't let the world fill up? And no matter how much you throw at it, it always wants more, and sucks and takes away the perfection of everything...!" He bangs his fist against the glass. The driver shifts in his seat, but remains silent. "What should I fill it with?"

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I said, what should I fill the hole with?"

“I wouldn’t know, sir.”

Kras nods, crosses his legs, turns his gaze from the horizon and closes his eyes.

“Mr Volk, before I can take you to the airport we have to go through a control point. I’m telling you right now you’ll have to take your shoes off.”

Kras bends down to untie his laces.

“Will we be there soon?”

“In a minute, Mr Volk.”

Just one more minute.



EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

2016

Jasmin B. Frelih – Slovenia

Na/pol

In/Half

344 pp, 2013

Translations: The book has not been translated yet.
(*Last Update – March 2016*)

Publishing House **Cankarjeva Založba**
Slovenska cesta 29 – 1000 Ljubljana – Slovenia
Tel. + 421 220 723 752

www.mladinska.com/cankarjeva_zalozba

Contact: Publishing House – Andrej Blatnik – andrej.blatnik@cankarjeva-z.si

Rights Agent: Senja Pozar – senja.pozar@mkz.si

ISBN: 978-961-231-946-5

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