

EURO
PEAN
STOR
IES

EUROPEAN
UNION
PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE

AUTHORS
2024



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DENMARK
Theis ØRNTOFT



NETHERLANDS
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ALBANIA
Rita PETRO



ICELAND
María Elisabet
BRAGADÓTTIR



SLOVENIA
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GERMANY
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LATVIA
Daina TABŪNA

PORTUGAL
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BULGARIA
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HUNGARY
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SERBIA
Bojan KRIVOKAPIĆ



TUNISIA
Arbia BRAHAM



MALTA
Aleks FARRUGIA

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FOREWORD

Dear readers,

Welcome to an extraordinary journey through the pages of this anthology, where you have the opportunity to explore the rich tapestry of European literature through the eyes of 13 remarkable authors. Within these pages, you will encounter 13 distinct voices hailing from 13 different countries. Together, they represent the shared heritage of creativity and imagination within the vibrant landscape of 'Creative Europe.'

As you embark on this literary adventure, I invite you to immerse yourself in a diverse array of characters and genres that will transport you to worlds both familiar and entirely new, offering fresh perspectives and insights into the human experience. This anthology, showcasing the nominees of the 2024 European Union Prize for Literature, epitomises the essence of the prize since its inception in 2009: celebrating the boundless creativity and diversity inherent in contemporary European literature.

In 2024, we are closing the current three-year cycle of the European Union Prize for Literature, during which we have discovered 40 emerging writers from 40 Creative Europe countries.

This initiative has been instrumental in promoting cultural exchange, supporting emerging writers and fostering a deeper appreciation for European literature. It is a testament to our commitment to nurturing creativity and bridging cultural divides.

The year 2024 also holds special significance as it marks the 10-year anniversary of the Creative Europe Programme which has brought together – and reinforced – the EU's Culture and Media programmes: 10 years of creativity, cultural diversity and cooperation in Europe.

Before delving into the pages of this year's anthology, I extend my heartfelt congratulations to the laureates. Their exceptional talents and compelling narratives are sure to captivate readers across Europe and beyond. I wish each of them a fulfilling and successful literary journey, confident that their contributions will enrich the literary landscape for years to come.

Enjoy the exploration,

Iliana Ivanova
European Commissioner for
Innovation, Research, Culture,
Education and Youth

EUROPEAN JURY

The European jury is composed of seven members, all of whom are literary experts with highly recognised professional reputations and are competent and influential in the field of literature and translation. The members are appointed by the EUPL consortium after consultation with experts in the sector. In each edition of the prize, experts are appointed to form the European jury. The members of the jury come from or represent countries not featured in the current edition of the prize.

Andreï Kurkov (born 23 April 1961 in Leningrad, Russia) is a Ukrainian novelist who writes in Russian. He is the author of more than 20 novels and 10 books for children. His work is currently translated into 42 languages, including Chinese, English, French, Hebrew, Japanese and Swedish. He has also written assorted articles for various publications worldwide, including *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *Libération*, *Le Monde*, *Die Welt* and *Die Zeit*.

From 2018 to 2022 he was the acting President of PEN Ukraine, running international and national literary and sociopolitical projects.

For his novels and his literary and human rights activities, he was awarded the Halldor Laxness Prize (Iceland, 2022), the Legion of Honour (France, 2015), the Medici Prize for Best Foreign Novel (France, 2022), the Freedom of Expression Award (Index on Censorship, London, 2022), the Readers' Award (France, 2012), the Hans and Sophie Scholl Prize (Germany, 2022) and others.

His books are full of black humour, Soviet and post-Soviet reality with elements of surrealism.

Elena Loewenthal (born in Turin, Italy in 1960) is a writer, journalist and translator of Jewish literature. She writes for the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* and since 1990 has published essays and fiction books. She has lectured for many years at Università Vita Salute – San Raffaele in Milan and at IUSS – Istituto Universitario di Studi Superiori in Pavia. Since 2020 she is the director of Fondazione Circolo dei Lettori in Turin, whose mission is promoting and creating culture. The Fondazione is also in charge of the cultural events of the Salone Internazionale del Libro in Turin.

Kostas Spatharakis was born in Athens, Greece in 1980. He studied law in Athens and comparative literature in

Thessaloniki. He worked for many years as freelance translator and proofreader, and in 2014 he founded Antipodes, an independent publishing house based in Athens.

Daniel Medin is Professor of Comparative Literature at the American University of Paris, where he is a director of the Center for Writers and Translators and one of the editors of its Cahiers Series. He has judged numerous awards for translated fiction, among them the International Booker Prize, the HKW Internationaler Literaturpreis and the Prix Fragonard de littérature étrangère.

Aurélie Bontout Roche is Translations Manager for the French publishing Groupe Libella (Buchen Chastel, Phébus, Libretto, Noir Sur Blanc, Cahiers Dessinés) and has worked in publishing for 20 years. She is passionate about European literature, languages, culture and travel, and lives between Paris and Brussels, in the heart of Europe.

Raluca Selejan (born in 1988) studied Romanian and English language and literature at West University of Timișoara. She has an MA in Cultural Management with a diploma in Art & Literature in Unconventional Spaces. Since 2016, she has co-owned and

co-managed La Două Bufnițe (At Two Owls), an independent bookshop in Timișoara. Raluca is responsible for communication, events, internships and partnerships. She has also worked as a communications officer at the Department of Communications, Image and Institutional Marketing of West University of Timișoara and at Association Timișoara 2021 – European Capital of Culture.

Tauno Vahter (born in 1978) is an Estonian publisher, translator and author. He has studied public administration and works as an editor-in-chief of Tānapäev Publishers, which is one of the biggest Estonian publishing houses. He has completed the Frankfurt Book Fair fellowship programme, written many articles about literature and publishing, and translated from English and Finnish. As an author, he has so far published three books of fiction which are published in several languages, and written a scenario for a TV series on Estonian history.

VERDICT OF THE EUROPEAN JURY

What better place this year than Brussels, the heart of Europe, to meet as members and wonderful colleagues of the jury! Although we come from different European countries, we had a wonderful time sharing our passion for literature, which made this literary journey through books and the encounters with talented authors and different cultures unforgettable.

It was not easy to make a decision, because all 13 nominated books are rich in diverse talents and greatness. All these books deserve to be translated into many European languages and beyond. We look forward to reading them in each of our mother tongues. They deal with different literary styles, themes and messages, but at the same time they all highlight the beauty and the importance of literature in transmitting poetry, humanism and empathy in their search for European and universal values and personal self-knowledge, and they are testimony to the challenges facing our contemporary society.

Written in different languages, they all speak a single one. From Albania, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Tunisia. From North to South, from East to West and beyond borders. All these books are full of humanity and its love, happiness, fears of climate change, the power of language, migrants, cultural appropriation, the struggle with evil and with oneself, the quest for truth, relationships between men and women, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, motherhood and the role of women in our society, what we pass on from one generation to the next, the heritage of European history, sometimes from a child's perspective, the criticism of consumerism, our ultra-connectedness, the consequences of our choices and a tribute to literature and traditions, including folk tales and fairy tales.

Literature and its wealth, the power of fiction and the freedom of the imagination give us the opportunity to get closer to one another, despite

our differences, to fight against the horrors of war and death and to see the beauty of the world. Literature helps us to understand each other, overcome our traumas, our fears and our past, individually and collectively, in order to build the future we dream of, despite the threat of war and the climate crisis.

More than ever, Europe must remain united, and literature must help to convey its magnificent values.

Literature has the power to transform reality for us to understand it better. Literature provides comfort, heals and forgives. It forces us to step outside ourselves to discover other ways of looking at reality. Literature builds bridges, both outward to the world and inward to ourselves. It does not claim to answer all our questions and also poses other questions – the breadcrumbs we can follow to find our way and our place in a world of increasing complexity.

Reading these 13 wonderful books reflecting Europe's rich cultural and literary heritage and talking with the amazing colleagues in the jury reinforces our belief in the power of literature. We are convinced that it is necessary for each human being to read books that will perhaps lead them to change their lives and find harmony. Different voices and perspectives help us to discover and heal ourselves.

First, we will list the five special mentions in alphabetical order of their countries of origin. It was not an easy

process to choose the six books, nor to distinguish one winner among them. But we are all quite sure that these books and authors will be translated by wonderful translators in many countries, to be read and understood. We look forward to seeing how these books will leave their mark in the minds of readers everywhere in Europe and around the world.

SPECIAL MENTIONS

Todor Todorov – Bulgaria

Brimming with exuberance, *Hagabula* is a genre-bending delight of novelistic inventiveness. First, you feel as if you are reading an epic tale following the expedition of Hernán Cortés; then, you realise that you are part of an epic story about us, our society and what the consequences of our choices are.

Deniz Utlu – Germany

Deniz Utlu's book *Vaters Meer* is a delicate, sensitive and poetic tale of a son trying to communicate with his father suffering from locked-in syndrome. Although it is largely a tale of a German family's Turkish roots, it stands out as a compelling work of literature that defies the boundaries of the 'immigration literature' genre.

María Elísabet Bragadóttir – Iceland

María Elísabet Bragadóttir's *The Soap Bird* is a small but sharp collection of stories on the fragile beauty of misfits – three short stories with a deep, ironic and

compassionate concern for humanity in all its weaknesses and emotional potential. In *The Soap Bird*, Bragadóttir combines contemporary issues with basic and complex emotions in a way that testifies to a very gifted and promising young author.

Sholeh Rezazadeh – The Netherlands

We were blown away by the originality of this novel, mixing fiction and literary genres – it is an intricate story of a nomadic community in Iran whose existence is tied to a river whose moving waters are like an eternal dream, providing the rhythm for the narration, and the story of a modern woman who decides to travel to Iran, leaving her hectic existence in Europe. The novel explores several universal topics, showing in a very beautifully poetic style with words full of imagery that we should not distance ourselves from nature or especially from each other. This novel is a perfect candidate for multiple translations across Europe.

Tina Vrščaj – Slovenia

Tina Vrščaj has created a tender, convincing and fascinating story of Eva, a young mother of two girls who is forced to deal with the questions posed by life itself, and questions that the heroine herself considers important because of her firm beliefs and principles. Family, motherhood and the social and environmental responsibility of each person – these are topics that

cannot be called lightweight and that are the main themes of the novel *On Slope*.

WINNER

Theis Ørntoft – Denmark

Jordisk is a novel trying to encapsulate the state of the world across several generations of siblings, taking place mostly in Denmark and the United States. Despite the critiques of consumerism, shortsightedness in politics and capitalism, it is not a dystopian or utopian novel, and although characters are living their hectic everyday lives, a certain uncomfortable future or fate seems to be looming over them. *Jordisk* is an ambitious and major work in several ways, tackling many subjects, not trying to answer too many big questions, but describing our common journey through small stories which can also be read just as a generational novel.

Jordisk by Theis Ørntoft is a classic novel in a broad sense: the complexity of the plot and the linearity of its prose are really surprising in a literary panorama where autofiction and memoirs are so common. Here, on the contrary, we find extremely broad horizons in time and space combined with an extraordinary stylistic coherence.

The European Jury 2024

THE EUROPEAN UNION PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is an annual initiative launched in 2009 that recognises the best emerging fiction writers in Europe. Its aim is to spotlight the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature in the field of fiction, promote the circulation of literature within Europe and encourage greater interest in non-national literary works.

The prize is open to the 40 countries currently involved in the Creative Europe programme. Each year, national organisations in one third of the participating countries nominate a novel they trust has the potential to find an audience outside of their national borders, with all participating countries and language areas represented over a 3-year cycle.

This fifth cycle of the project marks a restructuring of the prize, with a seven-member European jury now choosing

one award winner for each edition of the EUPL, along with five special mentions. All nominated authors will be promoted continuously on a European stage, aiming to reach a wider and international audience and to connect with readers beyond their national and linguistic borders.

The prize is financed by the EU Creative Europe programme, which aims to achieve three main goals: promote the cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector, encourage the transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output and foster intercultural dialogue.

SELECTION PROCESS

The 13 nominated novels were proposed by national entities that are familiar with the literary scene of their country, used to promoting their own literature abroad and have expertise in literary quality

and assessing the translatability potential of a book. The aim of the prize is to give international visibility to authors who are at the beginning of their career in the country of their nationality/residence and who have started to have international visibility. National selections are made on the basis of criteria stipulated by the EUPL consortium in agreement with the European Commission, and fulfil the requirements listed below.

- The proposed book must be written in one or more of the officially recognised languages in that country.
- The author of the proposed book must have the nationality or be a permanent resident of the selected country.
- The proposed book must respect the EU's values of respect and tolerance.
- The proposed book must demonstrate literary excellence and be translatable.
- The nominated book must ideally have been published no more than 18 months before the date of announcement of the prizewinner (deadline for 2024: 4 October 2022); however, EUPL may reconsider this criterion depending on the availability of the book in bookshops and whether the promotion of the author is still possible and relevant. For the 2024 prize, this is the case for Bulgaria, Iceland, Latvia, Portugal and Slovenia, where the book has been published no more than 24 months before the date of announcement of the prizewinner.
- The nominated book must be the author's most recently published book.
- The author of the nominated book must have published between two and four fiction books in total (other genres are excluded, unless the author is already

known on the international scene through this publication).

- The author of the nominated book cannot be currently employed by any EU institutions.
- All books published by the author must not have been translated into more than four languages.
- The selection of the national nominee must be the result of a consensus within the organisation.

All national organisations must respect the selection rules. The jury chooses one award winner and five special mentions, based on translated excerpts from the nominated books. The jury's choice is made on the basis of lists of books nominated at the national level, one for each participating country.

THE CONSORTIUM

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

NOMINATING ORGANISATIONS

For the past three years, in each of the participating countries, organisations with expertise in the field of literature have organised debates and/or juries to select the nominated book in accordance with the criteria of the prize.

2022:

- **Austria:** Hauptverband des Österreichischen Buchhandels
- **Belgium (Flemish-speaking):** Flanders Literature
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** P.E.N. Centar Bosne i Hercegovine
- **Georgia:** Writers' House of Georgia
- **Greece:** GreekLit
- **Ireland:** Literature Ireland
- **Italy:** Fondazione Circolo dei Lettori
- **Lithuania:** Lithuanian Culture Institute
- **North Macedonia:** Kontrapunkt (Cultural Center Tochka)
- **Norway:** NORLA Norwegian Literature Abroad
- **Romania:** Romanian Cultural Institute
- **Slovakia:** Literary Information Centre
- **Spain:** Acción Cultural Española
- **Ukraine:** Ukrainian Book Institute

2023:

- **Armenia:** PEN Armenia
- **Croatia:** Croatian Literature
- **Cyprus:** PEN Cyprus
- **Czechia:** CzechLit
- **Estonia:** Estonian Literature Centre
- **Finland:** The Finnish Reading Center
- **France:** Bureau International de l'Édition Française
- **Kosovo:** National Library of Kosovo
- **Liechtenstein:** Literaturhaus Liechtenstein
- **Luxembourg:** Kultur||x
- **Montenegro:** Forum mladih pisaca
- **Poland:** Polska Izba Książki (PIK)
- **Sweden:** Swedish Booksellers Association & Swedish Publishers Association

2024:

- **Albania:** National Center for Books and Reading
- **Bulgaria:** Bulgarian Book Association
- **Denmark:** Danish Arts Foundation
- **Germany:** Goethe-Institut e.V.
- **Hungary:** International Book Festival Budapest
- **Iceland:** Icelandic Publishers Association
- **Latvia:** International Writers' and Translators' House
- **Malta:** National Book Council in Malta
- **Netherlands:** VLAM21
- **Portugal:** Directorate-General for Books, Archives and Libraries (DGLAB)
- **Serbia:** Serbian PEN
- **Slovenia:** Slovenian Book Agency
- **Tunisia:** Union of Tunisian Publishers

ALBANIA



Rita PETRO

Lindur së prapthi *Untethered*

Onufri, 2022

Language: Albanian

ISBN: 9789928391056

BIOGRAPHY

Rita Petro (Filipi) was born on 13 March 1962 in Tirana, Albania. She graduated from the University of Tirana with a degree in Literature and Albanian Language (1980–1984) and specialised in ancient philosophy and culture at the University of Athens (1993). She was an editor and didactic specialist (1985–2000) at the state-owned publishing house. In 2000, she co-founded Albas publishing house (Albania, Kosovo¹, North Macedonia and Preševa in Serbia). Additionally, she is a co-author of 45 textbooks about literature and the Albanian language.

She has earned a spot in contemporary Albanian literature for children and adults with the following titles: *Shija e instinktit* (1998), *Këtu poshtë këndohet live* (2002), *Vrima* (2014) and *Lindur së prapthi* (2022). Petro is the winner of the Onufri Prize, (1999), the Prize for Poetry Career, (2014) and the National Prize of Bibliophile Lumo Skëndo (2014) with the poem *Vrima* as the most critically successful publication of the author – as well as the most controversial, as it was opposed by the opinion of a conservative society.

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

Petro is also a well-known public figure and very active in media, using her own experiences and art to share empowering messages about women's rights and the emancipation of society.

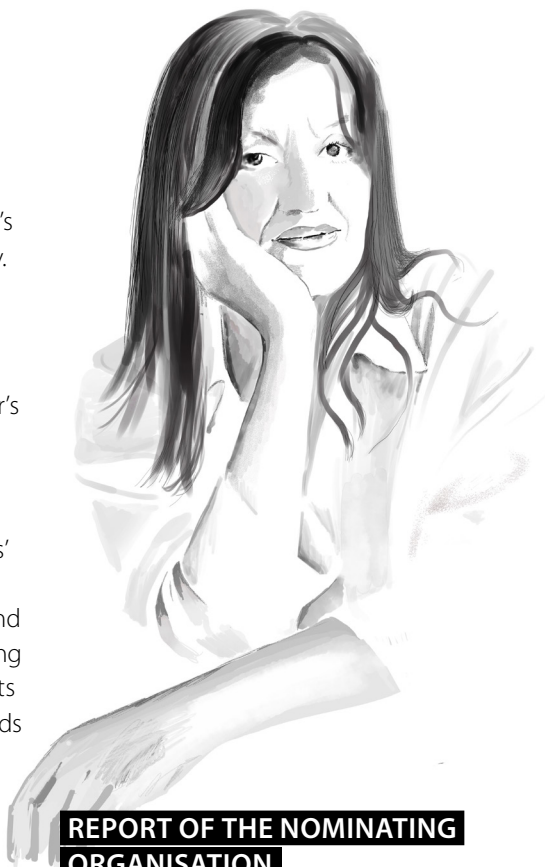
SYNOPSIS

This novel recounts the main character's impressions based on memories from early childhood to maturity during the communist era in Albania.

The child/girl is called 'born backwards' by her family. Walking with her hands first, she sees the world from below, and everything seems grand to her, reaching up to the sky. As she grows up and puts her feet on the ground, she understands the truths of everyday reality, and her inner rebellion begins.

The character's flat is located in a confined space that symbolises the closed borders of communist Albania. To the left of the building is the Orthodox church, which was converted into a gymnasium. To the right is the Catholic church, which was converted into a youth cinema named 'Kino Rinia'. A bit further away is the mosque, which was converted into a city company of communist billboards. In front of the building lies 'Rruga e Ambasadave', the road where all the embassies are located; playing with her foreign peers is forbidden.

In this topography, an entire city, life and era are in movement: dreams rise and fall, enemies are invented, crimes are committed, forbidden poems are read and unhappy babies are conceived.



REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The jury decided to nominate Rita Petro with her prose work, *Lindur së prapthi*, for its interesting theme, character and eloquence of language. Her prose gives a description of the communist environment from the perspective of a female child, and later a grown woman comes to face every prejudice. It develops the main character physically, emotionally and psychologically. The scandal of being different and thinking differently in the communist era is presented in such an easy and simple way that it provokes few smiles. It is very rare to find in Albanian literature a prose character who so deeply wishes to discover the sexual world.

National Center for Books and Reading

Lindur së prapthi

Rita Petro



Fantazma ujk dhe Mili

Gjumi më doli nga disa zhurma të mbytura. I hodha sytë te muri në të djathtën time, ku u shfaq një fantazmë hije. Pastaj doli fytyra në profil e një ujku me gojën e hapur. I dukeshin dhe dhëmbët. Bëri një si hedhje drejt një gjëje të vogël që lëvizte para tij. Pastaj u zhduk.

Isha mësuar që në errësirën e natës t'ia ngulja sytë murit, ku shfaqeshin forma hijesh nga më të ndryshmet. Pastaj ato zhdukeshin dhe shihja vetëm dritat që hynin në dhomë nga rruga. Motra gjithnjë flinte e qetë. Unë përgjoja. Prisja zhurmën e makinës që vinte nga rruga përballë pallatit tonë. Dhe, fap, pas zhurmës, muri mbushej me figura të ndryshme gjethesh, degësh që zgjateshin si krahë fantazmash. Dhe pasi deformoheshin në zgjatim e zgjerim, zhdukeshin për fare.

Por sot e ndjeva se pashë një fantazmë të vërtetë dhe një ujk të vërtetë. Ata donin t'i bënin keq diçkaje që guxonte të lëvizte. Ngrita veshët si ai lepurushi i përrallës së djeshme, që dëgjova në mbrëmje në radio. Këmbakëmbës i ishte vënë ujku pas. Papritmas dëgjova zhurmë hapash mbi tavan. Dhe, ja, gërvishtje te dera. Duhet ta shpëtoja se s'bën. Hodha batanijen dhe doja të ngrihesha, por nuk mund të lëvizja fare. Papritmas ndjeva që trupi m'u ngrit lart, pastaj këmbët m'u ulën në tokë. Doja të ecja me duar, se e kisha më kollaj. Por pastaj ndërrova mendje. Ngrita krahët para. Shtëpia nxinte. Nga dritarja nuk po futej më asnjë dritë rruge. Duhet të gjeja derën që ta futja lepurushin brenda. Duart m'u përplasën në një mur.

– Zemër, – dëgjoj pëshpëritjen e mamit te veshi. – Eja këtej me ngadalë.

Dhe dora e saj më mbuloi me kujdes me batanije, duke më lënë jash-të vetëm hundën.

Kur hapa sytë, një rreze dielli ishte futur përmes hapësirës mes dy perdeve. Zgjata dorën ta kapja. Njëpër dhomë ndriçonin ca si forma rrathësh të vegjël ngjyra-ngjyra si ylber. U ngrita dhe fillova t'i ndjek pas.

– Nuk e kap dot dritën, – më tha motra. – Kot lodhesh.

– Si jo, – i thashë dhe vazhdova lojën time duke folur me vete. Motra doli nga dhoma. Pas pak hyri në dhomë mami. Kur më pa ashtu, doli dhe dëgjova se i tha babit që unë duhet të kontrollohesha te një doktor. Pastaj dëgjova dhe fjalën sona... sonamb... sonambul.

Atë kohë ra dera dhe hyri brenda xhaxhi Stefi, rrobaqepësi më i mirë në botë, sipas mamit. Ndërsa gruaja e tij, teta Dhora, ishte grua zonjë. Ata ishin komshinjtë tanë. Fjala zonjë ishte e ndaluar, por mami thoshte se e përdorte jo në atë kuptim atë fjalë.

– E morët vesh çfarë ka ndodhur me komshinjtë tuaj ngjitur? – tha xhaxhi Stefi.

– Jo, – u përgjigj e trembur mami.

– Kanë ikur, – zbuloi me zë të lartë të fshehtë e frikshme xhaxhi Stefani.

– Sa të fshehtë paskan genë, – tha mami.

– Do t'i kenë hequr. Dje kam dëgjuar zhurma natën. I paskan internuar, – tha babi.

“Edhe unë, edhe unë kam dëgjuar zhurma, kam parë dhe fantazma. Kam parë dhe gojën me dhëmbë të ujkut”, doja të bërtisja. Po e mbylla gojën dhe ngrita lart veshët të dëgjoja më shumë.

– Brenda natës?! – mami vazhdonte të ishte e habitur.

– Në fakt, ia kishin vënë syrin. Mua më kanë pyetur disa herë: “Hë si sillet ai që e ka gruan bullgare?”

– Po ti?

– Normal të vërtetën u kam thënë. Njerëz shumë të mirë. Kalojmë mirë bashkë, – tha babi.

– Të huajt dihet i kanë në vëzhgim. Atë të shkretën as e kanë lënë të shkojë në Sofje, ku ka familjarët, – tha mami.

– Edhe mua më kanë pyetur, – tha xhaxhi Stefi me zë më

të ulët se babi. – Edhe unë të njëjtën gjë u kam thënë. Nuk mund të sajoj. Njerëz të mirë ishin.

“Pra, ata nuk janë më – mendova. – Ishin, tha xhaxhi Stefi.”

As Mili nuk është më. Ishte, sipas xhaxhi Stefit. Pra, Milin unë nuk do ta shihja më kurrë prapa atyre harqeve prej hekuri të lakuara, që i ndanin të dyja ballkonet e apartamenteve tona. Mili ishte aq i bukur, me fytyrë rrumbullake, me vrima te faqet kur qeshte, me flokët e drejtë si të lëpirë e të ndarë anash me një vijë të dukshme. Një ditë kisha dëgjuar gjyshen që i thoshte mamit: “Të voglën ta martojmë me Milin”.

Me Milin luanim gjithnjë pa e kapërcyer gardhin. Na pëlqenin ato harqet e bukura që na ndanin dhe të gjitha lojërat i sajnim në përshtatje me to. Shkëmbenim librat. Ai kishte libra më të bukur se librat e mi, që shumica ishin bardhezi. Sa të bukura ishin ilustrimet me ngjyra! Librat më të bukur i kishte me ca shkronja që nuk i kuptoja. Mami thoshte që i ka në gjuhën e nënës. Gjuha ime e nënës ishte shqipja, ndërsa e Milit bullgarishtja. Unë vetëm mund t’i soditja ato figura të mrekullueshme, ndërsa Mili i lexonte dhe m’i tregonte edhe mua historitë. Janë përralla bullgare, thoshte mami. Kur vinte ora e ngrënies së çokollatës, unë e nxirrja nga xhepi dhe

e ndaja me të. Ndërsa ai më zgjaste një ëmbëlsirë të veçantë, që e bënte mami i tij. Edhe ëmbëlsira sikurse librat, ishte bullgare ose specialitet bullgar, siç thoshte mami im. Se ajo merrte përherë një kafshatë nga ëmbëlsira që më kishte dhënë Mili. Mili kishte dhe një mace. Ngjyrëdhelprë, i thosha unë. Për të vetmen që mami nuk thoshte se ishte bullgare. Nuk e di pse e kisha quajtur Ngjyrëdhelprë. Mbase sepse një natë po shihja një ëndërr. Krevati im ishte afër ballkonit. Në ëndërr po shihja një dhelprë që m'i kishte ngulur sytë dhe po tallej me mua. Ajo afroi fytyrën aq shumë te hunda ime, sa më doli gjumi e frikësuar. Aty te krevati pashë vërtet një dhelprë të vogël. Thirra e frikësuar fort dhe mami erdhi në moment dhe më qetësoi. “Është macja e Milit, – më tha, – është futur nga dera e ballkonit. E sheh që e ke lënë hapur?”

Untethered

Rita Petro

Translated into English by Suzana Vuljevic

Mili and the Ghost Wolf

I was woken up by several muffled sounds. My eyes darted toward the wall on my right where a dark shadow appeared. I made out the side profile of a wolf with its mouth open wide. You could make out the teeth as well. The wolf sprung for something small stirring in front of it, and then disappeared.

I got into the habit of staring at the wall at night, making out all kinds of shapes and shadows. Then they would all disappear and I'd see only the light peeking in from the street. My sister slept soundly through it all. I kept close watch. I'd wait for the sound of the car that came from the street in front of our building. Then, *wham*, after the noise, the wall was filled with all kinds of different shapes, leaves, branches that stretched out like ghost wings. Then they'd become deformed in the lengthening and expanding, then disappear altogether.

But today I sensed that I had seen a real ghost and a real wolf. They wanted to do bad to something that dared to move. My ears perked up like the bunny from the fairy tale I'd heard on the evening radio the night before. The wolf was on his tail. Suddenly, I heard the sound of footsteps on the ceiling. And, there, scratches on the door. I had to rescue him – how could I not? I threw the blanket off me and tried to get up but I couldn't move a muscle. Without warning, I felt my body float, and then my feet settled to the ground. I wanted to walk on my hands because it came more easily to me. But then I changed my mind. I raised my hands. The house was pitch black. There were no rays of light coming through the window from the

street. I had to find the door so that I could let the bunny in. My arms hit a wall.

‘Sweetheart,’ I heard my mother whisper in my ear. ‘Come this way, slowly.’

And she covered me gently with a blanket, leaving only my nose exposed.

When I opened my eyes, a ray of sunlight had made its way through the crevice between two curtains. I extended my arm to grab it. Throughout the room all kinds of small, colourful circles lit up like a rainbow. I got up and followed them.

‘You can’t catch it,’ my sister said to me. ‘You’re wasting your time.’

‘Why not?’ I said, continuing to play my game and talk to myself. My sister left the room and my mom entered after some time. When she saw me, she left and I heard her tell my dad that I needed to be checked out by a doctor. Then I heard the word *sona... sonamb... sonanbul*.

The doorbell rang and Uncle Stefi, the best tailor in all the world according to my mother, came strolling in. His wife, on the other hand, Auntie Dora, was a real lady. They were our neighbours. The word ‘lady’ was forbidden, but mom said that she used it in another sense.

‘Did you hear what happened with your next-door neighbours?’ Uncle Stefi said.

‘No,’ Mom replied warily.

‘They left,’ Uncle Stefani revealed the secret loudly.

‘They were so sneaky,’ my mom said.

‘They must’ve gotten rid of them. I heard noises last night. They must’ve interned them,’ Dad said.

‘Me too, I heard the noises too, and I saw ghosts. I saw the mouth and the teeth of a wolf,’ I wanted to shout. But I shut my mouth and perked up my ears so I could listen more closely.

‘In the night?!’ Mom was still confused.

‘In fact, they were onto them. They asked me a bunch of times: So, what’s with the guy with the Bulgarian wife?’

‘What’d you say?’

‘The truth of course. That they’re good people. That we got along well,’ Dad said.

‘You can be sure that they have their eyes on the foreigners. They didn’t even let the poor girl go to Sofia to see her family,’ Mom said.

‘They asked me, too,’ Uncle Stefi said in a quieter voice. ‘I said the same thing to them. I can’t say something that’s not true. They’re good people.’

‘Well, they’re not anymore,’ I thought to myself. ‘Were,’ Uncle Stefi said.

Mili isn’t any more either. He was, according to Uncle Stefi.

In fact, I wouldn’t see Mili behind those curved iron arches that separated our two balconies ever again. Mili was so handsome. He had a round face, dimples that formed when he laughed, straight hair as if slicked and parted in a clear line. One day I heard my grandma tell Mom: ‘We’ll marry the little one off to Mili.’

We always played with Mili without jumping over the fence. We liked those beautiful arches that separated us and all of our games were modified to accommodate them. We exchanged books. His books were nicer than mine, most of which were black and white. How beautiful colour illustrations were! The nicest books had some letters that I didn’t understand. Mom said that they were in his mother tongue. My mother tongue was Albanian, his was Bulgari-

an. I could only stand by and watch those wondrous figures, while Mili read and told me their stories. They're Bulgarian fairy tales, Mom would say. When it came time to have our chocolate, I took mine out of my pocket and split it with him, and he'd offer me a special treat that his mom made him. And the sweets, just as the books, were Bulgarian or a Bulgarian specialty, as my mom said. She always took a bite of the treats that Mili gave me. Mili had a cat. It was the colour of a fox, I'd say, and it was the only thing that mom didn't say was Bulgarian. I don't know why I called it fox-coloured. Maybe because I had a dream one night. My bed was near the balcony. I dreamt that a fox narrowed its eyes on me and taunted me. It drew its face so close in on mine that I woke up from fright. I saw an actual fox, a small one, by the bed. Frightened, I called for my mom and she burst into the room to console me. 'It's Mili's cat,' she said. 'It came in through the door of the balcony. You see? You left the door open.'

SPECIAL
MENTION

BULGARIA



Todor P. TODOROV

Хагабула

Hagabula

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BIOGRAPHY

Todor P. Todorov (born in 1977 in Sofia) is a Bulgarian philosopher and fiction writer. He is the author of two collections of short stories and one novel: *Tales for Melancholic Children* (2010), *Always the Night* (2012) and *Hagabula* (2022). His short stories were translated and published in Germany by Groessenwahn Verlag (Frankfurt am Main). In 2011, he won the Rashko Sougarev Prize for best fiction short story for 'Van Gogh in Paris'. His novel *Hagabula* received the Bulgarian National Literary Prize from the national '13 Centuries Bulgaria' fund for best

novel of the year in 2023. Todorov has been a guest writer at many book fairs and festivals, including the Leipzig International Book Fair. In 2015, Todorov gave a talk at the 'A Night of Philosophy' event in New York, organised by the Cultural Services of the French embassy and the Ukrainian Institute of America. Since 2001, Todorov has taught courses on the history of philosophy, media culture, posthumanism, and mythologies of the future at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Todorov speaks English and German fluently.

SYNOPSIS

Hagabula is a utopian alternate history of the West. Set in the early 16th century, it follows Hernán Cortes' expedition to a mystical black mountain, the navel of the Earth, somewhere in the western Atlantic Ocean, beyond the 'meridian of fear'. The protagonists traverse an enchanting, dreamlike reality, which leads them to unpredictable discoveries and an ending of cosmogonic scale. The story takes on the nostalgia for the original forces and meanings of life – the painful longing that defines the modern condition – from an ecological, feminist and postcolonial perspective. Playing with genres, *Hagabula* encompasses magical realism while employing adventurous, mythical and surrealist narratives. It often uses a fictional, counterfactual history or geography,

introducing a simultaneously familiar and unexpected reality. The novel subverts and reverses the factual history of the conquest of the New World, bringing a new understanding of the destiny of Western civilisation with its progressist projects of power and domination over nature and life.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

In his novel, Todor P. Todorov tells us about the expedition of the Spaniard Hernán Cortes and the conquistadors to the New World, but if in the chronicles they remained as destroyers of the Aztec country, here Todorov offers us a 'counterfactual' story, as he defines the book. The writer intertwines history with fiction, horror and erotica, moving beyond factuality to a fairy-tale scary and all-human treatise on the eternal clash between aspirations and harsh reality, the spiritual and the perishable, the female and the male, the heart and the mind, and nature and people. The novel captivates us even more with its colourful, bright cover and its strange title. Salgado explains that 'hagabula' is a word that witches borrow from nature and symbolises the awakening and turning of the world. It is precisely this overturning – layer by layer and story by story – that the readers witness. And on the cover, a spiral swirls around the title – just as the narrative moves according to the stories that the characters take turns to tell us. They swirl on the edge between reality and the invisible, we get to somewhere and go back to repeat it, see it from another angle, and understand that there is no ultimate truth, and move on again. The language is as vivid as the images it describes. An extremely rich vocabulary and an endless range of concepts and ideas. Picturesque,

melodic sequences of ringing words, somehow startlingly and unexpectedly arranged in short sentences. The same story is told again and again, different characters pick it up where it was left off, repeat and reverse the events, so that the same character is both victim and executioner, good and evil turn out to be two sides of one and the same fabric. The woman is both a girl, a beauty born to love and give birth, and an old woman whiter than snow. The relations between men and women, believers and barbarians, encounters between nations and civilisations, between nature and culture, land and water, reality and fantasy, are dramatic, mutually engendering and mutually destructive. A novel that we consider to be an event, in terms of style, the unusualness of the look, the originality of the writing, the historical depth, and because it brings something different to literature. Something that is new. After all, we have a novel rehabilitation of the humiliated and the offended, and this comparison brings it close to the great examples of world literature. The role of this novel is to return us to the common human, the magical, the forgotten, to teach us to 'guard the heart', as Ophelia tries to teach Hernán, and to arrive with dignity and hope to our personal hagabula.

Bulgarian Book Association



Хагабула

Тодор П. Тодоров



1. Ернан сънува

Кондор се спуска над океана. Едва докосва водата – прохлада, благодат. Всичко свети – крилата и небето, вълните, лумнали в пламъци. Бяло платно блести в синевата. У дома ленен чаршаф повтаря същия рефрен, подухван от вятъра. Две тихи ръце, аромат на сапун и пролет. И краят на времето – в дланта на дете. Изгряват земята, небето, дъждът, всяко стръкче трева. Божурът се разтваря за слънцето. Лъхва повей, потреперва игликата, пчела каца в синия цвят. Капка роса се таи в листото на ореха. Дете сънува пеперуди, озарени от мълния. Някой бяга. Следобедът спуска жалози над житата, става късно. Жена плаче, окъпана в луна. Звезди огряват висините, светулки рисуват нощта. Лятото е майка и светът няма край. Но ето, нещо тъмнее. Кондорът търси сушата, сянка пленява крилете му. Самотен кораб потъва в морето. Всичко е далеч – младостта, часовете, годините. Само Испания е вечна, никога забравена. Гръм изяжда съня на рибата, погълнала корабкрушенец. В сърцето на тигъра се ражда елен. Студен циклон пори степта, подгонва вълци, жерави, змии. Пустошта се разклаца, нещо в тайгата мълчи. Завързват лодките в пристанището. Вятърът шепне черна молитва, рибарите надяват ботуши. Тъмна луна изгрява – слънце от мрак. И ето, нощ връхлита от онзи свят в този. Хагабула навсякъде.

Ернан се събужда, по челото му е избила пот. Очите му са отвлечени, още непрогледнали отгатакъ съня. Изправя се и тръгва по палубата. Нощта грее над него – инкрустирано с огън наметало. Той се вира в тъмнината напред. Лицето му е обгорено от слънцето, косата – разпиляна от южни ветрове, опалена от жегата. Червените му като кръв ботуши, направени от кожата на саламандър, проскъръцват върху дъсчения под. Вятърът разгръща дрехите, гъделичка кожата, кара костите да изтръпват приятно. Стъпките му разсичат тишината. Колко мъртвешки тихо е тук. Светът е изгубен – струва му се, че е единственият човек на земята.

Самотна бодлоперка пресича водата под кораба и смрачените талази припламват за миг в сребристото ѝ сияние. Не се интересува от флотилията горе, очите ѝ са вковани в морската глъб. Далеч долу нещо в пясъците се раздвижва. Земята вече се вижда отпред, на два-три часа плаване. Монолитни зъбери и сиви скали, окъпани в луна брегове, зад тях – гори, неприветливи като веждите на спящо чудовище.

- Черна родино, кърмилнице на чудеса! Ето ме! - възкликва Кортес. Отвръщат му само вятърът и безсърдечният вой на горите.

Стъпват на брега, пясъкът е още горещ. Въпреки тъмнината, всичко белее. Всяко камъче, всяка пясъчинка – светлина. Експедицията разтоварва корабите и се придвижва пеш през тесния брод отвъд скалата, водейки конете, натоварени с дисаги, оръжия, торби с карти, компаси, хранителни припаси, тютюн.

- Салгадо – казва Ернан.

Салгадо, неговият секретар, носи неподрязана брада, обрамчила изпито–лице, косите му са вързани отзад на опашка. Извръща се бавно – не буден човек, а сомнамбул.

Пламъкът на факлите озарява очите му, стъклени езера. Нещо страховито се пробужда в недрата им. Чуждо и плашещо е онова, което проглежда там. Кожата му е нечовешки бледа – прилича на аскет, на изгубен пророк. На някой, изоставен завинаги.

- Къде си, Господи? - промълвя Салгадо. И след малко: - Нищо добро не ни чака.

Настава тишина. После той се обажда отново:

- Нищо добро.

Облак скрива за кратко луната, става студено. Кортес не казва нищо, само се усмихва, но в очите му плуват сенки. Уморен е, безсъние преглъща нощите му. Едва сега, преди да стигнат, го преборва демонът на съня. Той дава нареждане да съберат отряд от хаитянци, африканци и група испански отрепки – комарджии и разбойници, прибрани от вертепите по островите. Раздава заповеди и няколко лодки потеглят, чезнейки между корабите. Чуват се груби гласове, възклицания, ругатни на испански и други езици, ръмжене, сподавен кикот. После всичко замлъква. Лумват искри, огнени кълба се спускат над платната. Дървените скелети се пропукват, въздишат, огъват крайници – овъглени мъртърци, захвърлени в океана. Миг по-късно всичко гори – „Санта Мария“, „Санта Анна“, „Сан Михел“ и „Сан Антонио“ са пратени в ада. Още шест кораба ги следват, триумфална процесия към пепелта. Морето пламти.

Щом минава скалния рид, Кортес заварва триста мъже и тринайсет коня, смълчани под дяволско небе. Мъжете бледнеят под купола на нощта – армия от призраци, взрени нагоре с влажни очи. Довчера воители, обръгнали на кървища и неправди, сега приличат на деца, изплашени от настъпваща сянка. Какво са изгубили? Защо оплакват края на света?

Къде е храбростта, къде отиде мъжеството, мисли Кортес.

Висините са обагрени в кърваво зарево, небесните сфери горят. Свещеникът Доминго се изправя с протегнати нагоре ръце, сякаш зове нещо или някого – мъченик, който всеки миг сам ще бъде погълнат от бездна. Облаци като гладни псета ръфат звездния свод. Свалил ботушите си, Агилар седи на дънер отстрани, дъвче парче месо и наблюдава надвисналите отвред дървета с мъгливите върхари над тях. Щом забелязва Кортес, се изправя и прави няколко стъпки. Косите му блестят гарванови. Песъчинките, разнасяни от вихъра, бръснат лицето му. Скитаща звезда пори простора над него. Той се изплюва и за момент всички замръзват, озовали се в непозната тишина. Тишина, нашепваща съдбовни поличби в сърцата, очи в очи с вечността на неизвестното. Тогава Агилар казва:

- Ето ти кърмилница на чудеса. Ето ти проклетие адово.

Оглежда се. Вятърът свири, нощта затваря юмрук.

- Ето скалите, по които ще гние плътта ни. Вижте планината. Тя знае една дума и думата е смърт. Черна е душата на тази земя, черни ще зейнат очите ви.

Мъжете мълчат и слушат. Думите на Агилар съживяват в тях онова страшно предчувствие, бездруго загнездено в гърлата им през целия път.

Къде са неродените ни деца? Кого даряват с ласки жените, които оставихме? Затова ли живяхме – да умрем клетници? Да озъбим скелети в чужда земя? Не, няма надежда тук, в тази забравена от Бога страна.

- Достатъчно, Пабло – прекъсва го Кортес.

- Ти подпали корабите, дяволе. Ти погребя Испания, връщане назад няма – отвръща Агилар.

- Няма – съгласява се Кортес. – Няма топъл хляб, няма майчина прегръдка, няма ложе и сит стомах. Нито съпружеска утеха, нито овнешко и вино, нито родна стряха, нито камбанен звън. И бащината къща ще виждате само насън. Нелек е животът на моряка, от горчива слава са ковани дните му. Но бъдете горди, синове на Испания! И бъдете нащрек. Съдбата неслучайно ни вика тук.

- След час започваме изкачването. Вече няма дом зад гърба ни, нищо няма. Единственият път е нагоре – добавя след малко той. И сочи горите отпред. От начумереното небе се сипе пепелта на изгорелите кораби. Студът пари кожата. Няколко отломки се връзват в пясъка на брега, изхвърлени от вълните. Никой не обелва дума.

След малко слънцето изгрява от изток, океанът е поръсен в златиста светлина. Черен дим се стеле над шубраците. Мъжете наблюдават морето, в чийто стомах потъват лодките и чезнат платната. Някъде там, от другата страна, са островните пристанища, озарени от слънце и съблазън, с техните проститутки, красиви креолки и пуерториканки, с бордеите, кръчмите и меката постеля, с лютата храна и отлежалото вино. Още по-далеч пък, отвъд всичко обозримо, отвъд нощта, лежи Испания – гола, кървава, горда, докосната от слънцето и Бога.

Синевата засиява. Мъжете поемат бавно нагоре по стръмна пътека между зъберите и дървесните стволове. Не след дълго навлизат в огромен лес. Веднъж прекрачили границите му, не могат да се освободят от неспокойното присъствие на листа, треви и клони. Чувстват се наблюдавани. Усещат се пленници не само на своята, но и на чужда тревога. Откакто стъпват тук, ги обзема необяснимо униние, излъхнато сякаш от самата земя. Неизвестни птици пищят откъм мрачините. Всички се взират в сенките наоколо и проклинат наум съдбата си,

проклинат безумеца, оставил ги без път обратно, без дом, без надежда. С напредването им сърцата се изпълват със смътна боязън, в гърдите пролазва недоверие. Денят постепенно отстъпва място на здрача, здрачът се превръща в синя зора, експедицията продължава. Прескачат корени, заобикалят камъни с причудливи форми, мъгла като жълто мляко лепне по нозете им, а досами земята, подобно на бисери, загадъчно просветват блуждаещи огънове. Никой не ги докосва. Още няма пладне, а всичко притъмнява, спуска се булото на ненавременна нощ. След малко става толкова влажно и задушно, че конете едва пристъпват, а мъжете са облени в пот. Потта капе в очите, замъглява зрението, избива на мокри петна по ризите, кара устите да пресъхват болезнено.

Високо над чукарите прелита кондор, крилете му порят лазура, погледът му се спуска над света долу: студения океан, едва забележимата линия на бреговете около черната планина – масивна, безкрайна, възвисена в средата на света. Самотен пъп — око, вторачено зловеццо в небесата.

Hagabula

Todor Todorov

Translated into English by Ekaterina Petrova

1. Hernán Dreams

A condor swoops over the ocean. It barely touches the water – serenity, grace. All is aglow – the wings and the sky, and the waves, ablaze in flames. A white sail shines in the azure. At home, a linen sheet repeats the same refrain, blown by the wind. Two quiet hands, the scent of soap and spring. And the thread of time – in the palm of a child’s hand. The earth, the sky, the rain, each blade of grass, everything rises. The peony unfurls for the sun. A gust wafts, the primrose quivers, a bee lands into the blue blossom. A dewdrop lurks in the walnut leaf. A child dreams of butterflies illuminated by a bolt of lightning. Someone is running. The afternoon lowers its shutters over the wheat fields, it’s getting late. A woman is crying, bathed in moonlight. Stars illuminate the firmament, fireflies paint over the night. Summer is a mother, and the world is endless. But there, something darkens. The condor searches for land, a shadow captures its wings. A lonely ship sinks into the sea. All is distant – the youth, the hours, the years. Only Spain is forever, never forgotten. Thunder devours the dream of the fish that has swallowed a castaway. In the heart of the tiger, a deer is born. A cold cyclone rips through the steppe, chases after wolves, cranes, snakes. The wilderness sways, something in the taiga keeps silent. The boats are moored in the harbour. The wind whispers a black prayer, the fishermen pull on their boots. A dusky moon rises – a sun of darkness. And there, the night rushes in from the other world to this one. Hagabula everywhere.

Hernán awakes, sweat has broken over his forehead. His eyes are distracted, still unseeing beyond the dream. He stands up and

walks along the deck. The night shines above him – a cloak incrust-ed with fire. He peers into the darkness ahead. His face is sunburnt, his hair is scattered by the southern winds, scorched by the heat. His boots, blood red and made from salamander skin, creak over the wooden floor. The wind spreads open his clothes, tickles his skin, sends a pleasant tingle through his bones. His steps slash through the silence. How deadly quiet it is here. The world is lost – he feels like the last man on earth.

A lone ray-finned fish slices the water beneath the ship, and its sil-very sheen briefly sets the dusky billows aflame. It has no interest in the flotilla above, keeping its eyes fixed on the ocean depths. Far down in the sands, something stirs. The land ahead is already visible, just a few hours of sailing away. Monolithic cliffs and grey rocks, shores bathed in moonlight, and beyond them – forests, as inhospitable as the brows of a sleeping monster.

‘Black motherland, womb of wonders! Here I am!’ Cortés exclaims. Only the wind and the heartless wail of the forests respond.

They set foot ashore, the sand is still scorching. Despite the dark-ness, everything shines white. Every pebble, every grain of sand – all is light. The expedition unloads the ships and makes its way through the narrow ford beyond the rocks on foot, leading the hors-es laden with saddlebags, weapons, sacks full of maps, compasses, food provisions, tobacco.

‘Salgado,’ Hernán says.

Salgado, his secretary, is wearing an unshorn beard that frames his gaunt face, and his hair is tied back in a ponytail. He turns around slowly – not an awake man, but a sleepwalker. The flame of the torches illuminates his eyes, which shine like lakes of glass. Some-thing terrifying awakens in their depths. An alien and frightening gaze. His skin is inhumanly pale – he looks like a hermit, a lost prophet. Like someone forever abandoned.

‘Where are you, God?’ Salgado utters. And then: ‘Nothing good awaits us here.’ A silence sets in. Then he repeats: ‘Nothing good.’

A cloud briefly conceals the moon, coldness sets in. Cortés says nothing, just smiles, but shadows float around his eyes. He’s tired, sleeplessness has devoured his nights. But now, right before they arrive, he is overcome by the demon of sleep. He orders a squad to be formed of Haitians, Africans, and a gang of Spanish scum – gamblers and bandits gathered up from the brothels around the islands. He gives his commands, and several boats set off, disappearing among the ships. Sounds are heard of rough voices, exclamations, curses in Spanish and other languages, growling, suppressed laughter. Then everything falls silent. Sparks burst into flames, fiery balls descend upon the sails. The wooden skeletons crack, sigh, bend their limbs – charred corpses are thrown into the ocean. A moment later, everything is burning – *Santa Maria*, *Santa Anna*, *San Miguel*, and *San Antonio* are sent to hell. Six more ships follow, a triumphant procession toward the ashes. The sea is in flames.

Once he crosses the rocky ridge, Cortés finds three hundred men and thirteen horses, all silent under the devilish sky. The men look pale beneath the vault of the night – an army of ghosts gazing upward with damp eyes. Yesterday’s warriors, inured to bloodshed and injustice, now look like children frightened by a looming shadow. What have they lost? Why are they mourning the end of the world?

Where is courage, where has bravery gone?, Cortés wonders.

The firmament is painted in a bloody glow, the heavenly spheres are burning. The priest Domingo stands with his arms lifted upward, as though calling for something or somebody – a martyr who will soon be swallowed by an abyss. Clouds like hungry dogs gnaw at the celestial vault. Having taken off his boots, Aguilar is sitting on a stump to the side, chewing on a piece of meat and watching

the overhanging trees topped by foggy crowns. When he notices Cortés, he stands up and takes a few steps forward. His hair shines, raven-like. The sandy grains blown by the gusts of wind singe his face. A wandering star rips through the expanse above him. He spits, and they all suddenly freeze, finding themselves in an unfamiliar silence. A silence that whispers fateful omens into their hearts, face to face with the eternity of the unknown.

Then Aguilar says: 'Here is your womb of wonders. Here is your infernal curse.' He looks around. The wind whistles, the night closes its fist. 'Here are the rocks where our flesh will rot. Look at the mountain. It knows only one word, and that word is death. Black is the soul of this land, black and hollow your eyes will turn.'

The men stay silent and listen. Aguilar's words awaken in them that frightening premonition that has been stuck in their throats during the whole voyage.

Where are our unborn children? Who are the women we left behind caressing now? Is that why we lived – to die in misery? To turn into teeth-baring skeletons in this foreign land? No, there is no hope here, in this godforsaken land.

'That's enough, Pablo,' Cortés interrupts.

'You set the ships on fire, you devil. You buried Spain, there's no going back now,' Aguilar replies.

'There isn't,' Cortés concedes. 'No warm bread, no mother's embrace, no comfortable bed, and no sated stomach. No lover's solace, no mutton or wine, no home, and no sound of bells. You'll only see your father's house in your dreams. The sailor's life is hard, his days are cast in bitter glory. But be proud, you sons of Spain! And be vigilant. It's no accident that fate has called us here.'

'We'll start the ascent in an hour. There's no home behind us now, there's nothing. The only way is up,' he soon adds. And points to

the forests ahead. Raining from the frowning sky, the ashes of the burned ships are coming down. The cold stings the skin. Some debris stabs into the sand, washed ashore by the waves. Nobody says a word.

Soon the sun rises from the east, the ocean is sprinkled with a golden light. Black smoke drifts over the brushwood. The men gaze at the sea as it devours the sinking boats and the vanishing sails into its stomach. Somewhere over on the other side lie the island harbours, illuminated by sun and seduction, with their prostitutes, beautiful Creoles and Puerto Ricans, with their brothels, taverns, and soft beds, with their spicy food and aged wine. And even further away, beyond all that is visible, beyond the night, lies Spain – naked, bloody, proud, touched by the sun and God.

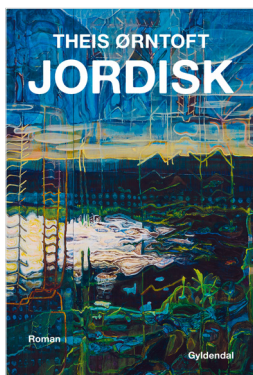
The azure sky turns radiant. The men slowly start to climb the steep path between the cliffs and the tree trunks. They soon enter an immense forest. Once having crossed into it, they can't escape the restless presence of leaves, grasses, and branches. They feel as though they're being watched. They feel like captives not just of their own anxiety, but also of somebody else's. Since setting foot here, they've been seized by an inexplicable despair, which the earth itself seems to exude. Strange birds scream from the darkness. The men peer into the surrounding shadows and silently curse their fate, curse the madman who left them with no way back, no home, no hope. As they advance, their hearts fill with a dread, suspicion creeps into their chests. The world slowly retreats and makes space for dusk, dusk slowly turns into blue twilight, the expedition continues. They step over roots, go around rocks with strange shapes, a haze like yellow milk sticks to their feet, and low by the ground will-o'-wisps mysteriously flicker like pearls. Nobody touches them. It is not even noon, and yet everything grows dark, the shroud of untimely night descends. Soon it gets so humid and stifling that the horses can barely walk, and the men are covered in sweat. The sweat drips into

their eyes, blurs their vision, stains their shirts, causes their lips to turn painfully dry.

A condor flies high over the cliffs, its wings rip through the azure sky, its gaze sweeps over the world below: the cold ocean, the barely visible shorelines around the black mountain – massive, endless, exalted in the middle of the world. A lone navel – an eye ominously staring into the heavens.

AWARD
WINNER

DENMARK



Theis ØRNTOFT

Jordisk Worldly

Gyldendal, 2023

Language: Danish

ISBN: 9788702315448

BIOGRAPHY

Theis Ørntoft (born in 1984) attended the Danish School of Writing from 2007 to 2009. He made his debut as a writer in 2009 with the poetry collection *Yeah Suiten*, and from then on he was recognised as one of the most distinctive voices of his generation. For *Yeah Suiten* he received Denmark's highest debutant award, the Bodil and Jørgen Munch Christensen Cultural Grant, and the poetry collection was also nominated for the Montana Literature Prize 2009. In 2014, Theis

Ørntoft published his second poetry collection, the critically acclaimed *Digte 2014*, for which he also received several literary prizes and nominations. His first novel, *Solar*, was published in 2018.

Solar is a modern adventure through Jutland forests, Copenhagen nightclubs, Fitness World, unexpected love, animal underworlds, wild sex and sunlight. And a desperate, dystopian generational novel, a hallucinated road trip and a space journey into the reptilian brain. In 2023, Theis Ørntoft published his second novel, *Jordisk (Worldly)*. The work received a stunning response from both critics and readers.

SYNOPSIS

After two award-winning poetry collections and the 2018 dystopian novel *Solar*, Theis Ørntoft is back with the generational novel *Worldly*. Over the course of its 600 pages the novel follows a trio of siblings, developing into a story about three generations of a family across the years 1967–2036. A sprawling tale of love and work, nature and capitalism, of gold, silver, oil, marble and the slow decline of the West, but above all, of a three-generation family connected across time and space in ways they don't even realise. *Worldly* is an original family portrait that depicts the time from 1967 and into the future to 2036. It is a journey from the city of

Silkeborg of the 1960s to post-9/11 New York and from there to a self-sufficient society in a future United States stricken by crisis. Ørntoft's contemporary novel tackles the deep forces that bind us to each other, to Earth and to the universe. The novel consists of five razor-sharp mini-novels written with a compelling narrative delight that explores love, forgiveness and humanity's evolutionary and cultural history all the way back to the origins of the universe. Nothing less. The excellence is in Ørntoft's prose, which is constantly raging with infectious narrative joy when it comes to focusing on the family members portrayed in the novel.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

A novel that reimagines the family saga, *Worldly* tells the story not just of one particular family, but the family we're all a part of: humanity and life here on Earth. Not just of human constructs – capital, art, architecture – but our often overlooked identity as a species within the great cosmic order. Over 600 pages and a plot spanning 69 years, our near history unfolds, painting with utmost clarity a picture of a world simultaneously teetering on the edge of demise and brimming with hope. While it is part of the wave of European literature challenging an ethnocentric world view, *Worldly* also uses its cast of vibrant characters to explore the limitations of human perception itself, regardless of how self-aware and self-critical we might perceive ourselves to be. It is a novel that transcends



borders, and attempts in many ways to embody the ideals chosen for the Voyager Golden Records that were sent into space in 1977: striving for ultimate comprehensibility while simultaneously representing Earth and humanity in all their intricate reality. *Worldly* emerges as an intrepid explorer: a literary work venturing into the world brimming with profound insights and aiming to push the frontiers of what we understand to be true.

Danish Arts Foundation

Jordisk

Theis Ørntoft



Det siges, at alt i universet forfalder. Det sker langsomt og uundgåeligt, på grund af naturlovene. Hvis ikke man hver dag gør et arbejde for at opretholde en given orden, vil den blive nedbrudt med tiden. Det gælder bygninger, transportmidler, haver, elektronik, solsystemer og galakser. Det gælder også menneskelige relationer. Loven synes at være i alt, og naturvidenskaben har døbt den entropien. Hver dag er fuld af små tegn på entropi; en aften læner man sig tilbage ved spisebordet, stolens ryglæn løsner sig, og man vælter bagover. Papkasserne ude på terrassen blødgøres af eftermiddagsregnen, indtil de til sidst går i opløsning. Man kommer hjem en dag, og vandhanen er begyndt at dryppe. Det modsatte sker aldrig, en stol samler ikke sig selv, hvis blot man venter længe nok, en vandhane stopper ikke med at dryppe, før nogen reparerer den, nedbrydning og forfald er uomgængelige processer i naturen. Stuegulvene dækkes af støv, hvis ikke man gør rent, pludselig en dag er der en revne i væggen, og nogle måneder senere har revnen delt sig i to. Fugten siver ind, skænderier begynder at opstå, ligegyldighed og irritation finder vej til samtalerne, umærkeligt, gennem gentagelser og hverdage, med en hastighed, der er hinsides den menneskelige forstand, måske tættere på geologiens.

Det siges, at mennesket er et destruktivt væsen. Det er ikke vanskeligt at finde eksempler på. Men mennesket er også et ordnende, organiserende fænomen i universet. Det samler og bygger ting op, danner fællesskaber og institutioner, opfører huse og byer, bringer materien frem mod en højere orden med sine myriader af insiste-

rende projekter, og på den måde modarbejder mennesket på forunderlig vis entropien, en af fysikkens mest grundlæggende love. Med Rheas nabo Tommy er det mere uklart, hvad der går for sig. Han samler ting i sin have, tønder, maskiner, køkkenredskaber, bilvrag, men uden at gøre noget ved dem, de står blot og forfalder yderligere. Og hvad med Rhea selv? Modarbejder hun entropien, som hun ligger der i kollektivets stue på Møn, mens hun følger en debat om leopardkampvogne på DR2 og med gru tænker tilbage på den ene gang i sit liv, hvor hun selv deltog i en lignende debat? Det var på P1, og alt hvad hun sagde, blev så flakkende og usammenhængende, hun følte sig som et ubehjælpsomt barn blandt en hær af velfungerende voksne. Måske modarbejder hun ikke universets forfald, som hun ligger der med computeren i sit skød. Men tidligere på dagen rensede hun alger af husmuren og terrassen. Hun stod på trappestigen ved gavlen, med den lune forårssol i ryggen og skurede hårdt og længe på de søgrønne plamager. De havde været vanskelige at få af, og hun havde måttet lægge kræfter i. Senere, efter at have set debatten på DR2 færdig og konkluderet, at debatter måske også bare var noget ubrugeligt bras, en lille grim støj i et stort og ellers smukt kosmos, hjalp hun Hans i køkkenhaven. Det var lørdag eftermiddag. Temperaturen var for første gang i år gledet op over tyve grader. Rhea arbejdede i T-shirt. Hans kørte kompost i trillebør, hun lagde kartofler, hun gravede huller som hun efterfølgende lagde de knoldede rod-frugter ned i og dækkede over med jord. I udkanten af hendes synsfelt, som et sorgløst flimmer, løb Birgittes to små børn rundt og sparkede til en bold. Rhea var vant til at have en konstant, næsten umærkelig nervøsitet løbende rundt i kroppen som en svag, ængstelig elektricitet, men lige nu var hun så rolig som det var muligt for hende at være. Hun lå på alle fire under en høj, blå himmel. Hun havde haft et par udmærkede arbejdsuger, to større artikler var det blevet til, og begge var blevet trykt, deriblandt en om Coca-Colas slogans gennem årtierne, og om hvordan de fungerede som skiftende spejle for tiden, der omgav dem.

Børnenes gule plastikbold landede under en meter fra hende. Birgitte råbte noget irettesættende, Rhea vinkede de to børn an og spar-kede bolden tilbage. Længere inde i køkkenhaven var Hans i gang med at sætte porrer. Både porrer og kartofler havde stået i drivhuset gennem vinteren og det tidlige forår, forleden var de på hans initiativ blevet flyttet udenfor i gården i kasser. Nu blev de sat ud, vist lidt sent, så vidt Rhea kunne forstå.

Birgitte sagde, at det var trist med Jena. Hun stod og så ud over den skriggule rapsmark, der stødte op til kollektivets have. Rhea greb trækassen og flyttede sig en meter længere ned mod ribsbuskene. Hun kunne høre fuglekvidderet omkring dem, det kvidrede og svirrede i hele haven, og lydene var ikke kun smukke, de var også larmende, næsten svulstige i deres filtrede intensitet.

“Hvad er det nu Jena laver?” sagde Birgitte.

Hans sagde at Jena havde arbejdet på et krisecenter i nogle år.

“Men oprindelig er hun vist uddannet pædagog.”

“Kommer hun nogensinde til at gå igen, tror du?” sagde Rhea.

Hans greb om trillebøren og flyttede den et par meter.

“Det er vist tvivlsomt,” sagde han. “Lægerne vil ikke rigtig komme med nogen prognose. Men nu er hun i det mindste vågnet op af sin koma. Og hun genkender Tao. Påstår han i hvert fald.”

“Stakkels Jena og Tao,” sagde Birgitte.

“Hvornår kommer han i dag?” sagde Rhea.

“Ved firetiden,” sagde Hans. “Jeg henter ham inde i Vordingborg.”

De genoptog arbejdet. På et tidspunkt råbte børnene på Birgitte, hun forsvandt over mod hovedhuset med dem, og Rhea og Hans fortsatte alene. Da den sidste kartoffel var lagt, gik Rhea ind i skuret og hentede en af de store tilitersvandkander. Hun trådte gummi-

støvlerne af og fandt ind i bryggerset, hvor hun satte kanden i bunden af den store metalvask, tændte for vandet og gik ud og tissede. Mens hun sad på toilettet og mærkede kulden fra brættet, dukkede linjen fra en sangtekst op.

Every time the sun comes up, I see trouble.

Hun huskede ikke stemmen, bare ordene og melodien.

Hun lukkede øjnene. Inde i køkkenet råbte William og Alma op; en af dem løb over trægulvet, så det buldrede, Birgitte sagde noget til dem, men hvad kunne Rhea ikke høre.

Hun gjorde sig færdig, så greb hun vandkanden fra vasken og gik ud i solskinnet. Dagen var næsten vindstille. Solen varmede, men der var stadig et strejf af kølighed i luften. Hun skræede over gårdspladsen, forbi de fire bambusser, som Hannah havde købt i Vordingborg for nylig, men ikke plantet ud endnu. Hun fortsatte forbi drivhuset, som lige nu mest af alt var et rod af opskårne spagnumposer og trækasser omgivet af kalket, beskidt glas. Oppe for enden af indkørslen passerede hun det store brændelæs, som mureren havde leveret i sidste uge. Midt ude på græsplænen lå to store bunker haveaffald og ventede på, at nogen kørte dem på genbrugsstationen. Brændelæserne i den ene bunke var begyndt at visne, men brombærrankererne i den anden bunke lå stadig og så nøjagtig lige så friske, saftige og fjendtlige ud, som hvis de stadig levede. De havde brugt en hel weekend i april på at rydde det massive tjørnekraut ud af buskadset nede ved markerne. Rhea havde foreslået at de fik sprængt rødderne væk, men Birgitte og Hannah havde insisteret på, at de selv forsøgte at grave det op. Så det havde de gjort.

Højt oppe på den blå himmel gled et fly afsted. Den hvide stribe spredte sig tykt ud efter den lille, solglimtende prik, der vel rummede omkring hundrede mennesker, hundrede kufferter og lige så mange livshistorier, tænkte hun, og mens hun så derop, krydsede

flyet en an-den, ældre stribe, der hang og gik i opløsning, så en form for skråt, hvidt kors opstod.

Every time the sun comes up, I see trouble.

Hun passerede syrenerne, der var ved at springe ud. Bierne og de an-dre insekter summede i buskadset. Hun fortsatte forbi bunken af mur-brokker fra skorstenen, som stadig lå og ventede på at blive organiseret. På afstand så hun Hans sidde på hug og ryge en cigaret. Han så ud til at befinde sig i overvejelser over køkkenhaven som sådan, i hvert fald blev han ved med at stirre frem for sig uden at se op, da Rhea stillede sig ved siden af ham. Hans grønne termojakke lå i græsset. Ærmerne på hans sorte Tool-T-shirt blafrede let i brisen.

Worldly

Theis Ørntoft

Translated into English by Paul Russell Garrett

THEY SAY EVERYTHING in the universe decays. Slowly and inevitably, in accordance with the laws of nature. If no effort is made each day to preserve a given order, it will break down over time. This holds true for buildings, transport, gardens, electronics, solar systems and galaxies. This also holds true for human relations. The law appears to be in everything, and science has given it the name entropy. Each day is filled with small signs of entropy; one evening you are sitting at the dining table, the back of your chair comes loose and you tumble backwards. The cardboard boxes on the terrace get drenched by the afternoon rain and eventually they start to disintegrate. You come home one day, and the tap has started to drip. The opposite never happens, a chair does not reassemble itself if you wait long enough, a tap will not stop dripping until it is repaired, disintegration and decay are unavoidable processes in nature. The floors become covered in dust if you do not clean them, one day a crack suddenly appears in the wall and months later, the crack has split into two. The damp seeps in, arguments break out, apathy and annoyance work their way into conversations almost imperceptibly, through repetition and daily routine, faster than human understanding, perhaps nearer a geological one.

They say humans are destructive beings. It is not difficult to find examples of this. But humans also create order, an organising phenomenon in the universe. One that assembles and builds, creates communities and institutions, constructs houses and cities, leaves matter in a more ordered state, with its myriad of insistent projects, and in so doing, remarkably, humans counteract entropy, one of the most fundamental laws of physics. With Rhea's neighbour

Tommy, it is more uncertain what is occurring. He collects things in his garden – barrels, machines, kitchen utensils, wrecked cars – but he does nothing with them, they just sit there and fall further into disrepair. And as for Rhea? Does she counteract entropy, lying in the living room of the collective on the island of Møn, watching a debate about leopard tanks on DR2, thinking back with dread to the time she once participated in a similar debate? It was broadcast on P1, and everything she said was so fitful and so disjointed she had felt like a helpless child among an army of well-functioning adults. Lying there with her computer in her lap she might not be counteracting the decay of the universe, but earlier that day she scrubbed algae off the terrace and the side of the house. She had stood on the stepladder by the gable, with the warm spring sun on her back, scrubbing long and hard at the patches of sea green algae. It had been difficult work, she really had to put her back into it. Later, after watching the end of the debate on DR2 and concluding that debates might also be a load of useless junk, some ugly noise in a vast and otherwise beautiful cosmos, she helped Hans in the vegetable garden. It was Saturday afternoon. For the first time that year, the temperature had climbed above twenty degrees. Rhea was working in a T-shirt. Hans carted the compost around in the wheelbarrow, she planted potatoes, digging holes before carefully placing the tuberous roots inside and covering them with soil. Out of the corner of her eye, a carefree flicker, she saw Birgitte's two young children running around kicking a ball. Rhea was used to having a constant, almost imperceptible nervousness flowing through her, a faint and apprehensive electricity, but right now, she was as calm as was possible for her. She was on her hands and knees under a tall, blue sky. The last few weeks at work had been excellent – she had written two longish articles, both of which had been published, including one about Coca-Cola slogans over the decades, and how they acted as shifting mirrors of the times.

The children's yellow plastic ball landed less than a metre away. Birgitte shouted at them in rebuke, but Rhea simply waved at the children and kicked the ball back to them. Further along in the garden, Hans was planting leeks. The leeks and the potatoes had been in the greenhouse all winter and early spring. The other day, on his initiative, they moved them out into the garden in boxes. Now they were planting them, probably a little late, as far as Rhea understood.

Birgitte said it was sad news, what happened to Jena. She stood peering across the bright-yellow field of rapeseed bordering the garden of the collective. Rhea picked up the wooden box and moved another metre down towards the redcurrant bushes. She could hear the chirping of birds all around, the entire garden was alive with twittering and whirring. The sounds were not only beautiful, but they were also noisy, almost bombastic in their matted intensity.

'What does Jena do for a living?' Birgitte asked.

Hans told her Jena had worked at a crisis centre for some years.

'But before that she was a qualified teacher.'

'Do you think she'll ever walk again?' Rhea said.

Hans lifted the wheelbarrow and shifted it a few metres.

'Doubtful, apparently,' he said. 'The doctors don't want to give a prognosis. But at least now she's woken up from her coma. And she recognises Tao. Or so he says.'

'Poor Jena and Tao,' Birgitte said.

'What time is he getting her?' Rhea asked.

'Around four,' Hans replied. 'I'm picking him up in Vordingborg.'

They resumed their work. At one point, the children shouted at Birgitte, and she marched off with them towards the main building, leaving Rhea and Hans to continue on their own. When the last po-

tato was planted, Rhea went into the shed to fetch one of the large, ten-litre watering jugs. She slipped out of her wellies and went into the utility room, where she placed the watering can at the bottom of the large metal sink, turned on the water and went to the bathroom for a wee. While she sat there on the cold toilet seat, a line from a song popped into her head.

Every time the sun comes up, I see trouble.

She could not remember who sang it, only the words and the melody.

She closed her eyes. In the kitchen, William and Alma were shouting; one of them stamped across the wooden floor. Birgitte said something, but Rhea could not hear what she said to them.

She finished up, grabbed the watering can from the sink and walked out into the sunshine. There was barely a breeze that day. The sun was warming, though there was still a bit of a chill in the air. She cut across the farmyard past the four bamboo trees Hannah had recently bought in Vordingborg though still not planted. She continued past the greenhouse, which was currently a jumble of empty peat moss bags and wooden boxes, enclosed by panes of dirty glass encrusted with limescale. At the end of the drive, she passed the large load of firewood that the bricklayer had delivered last week. In the middle of the lawn were two large piles of garden waste, waiting to be driven to the recycling centre. In one pile, the stinging nettles had begun to wilt, however the pile of blackberry vines looked as fresh, succulent and hostile as when still alive. An entire weekend in April had been spent clearing the dense thorn-bush from the scrub down by the fields. Rhea had suggested they have the roots blasted out, but Birgitte and Hannah had insisted on trying to dig them up themselves. And so they had.

High up in the deep blue sky, an airplane soared past. A thick white line tailed the small, glistening dot, which probably held a hundred

suitcases, a hundred passengers, and a similar number of stories, she thought, and as she watched, the plane crossed an older line, floating, dispersing, forming a kind of diagonal white cross.

Every time the sun comes up, I see trouble.

She passed the lilacs, just coming into bloom. Bees and other insects droned in the thicket. She continued past the heap of rubble from the chimney, still waiting to be organised. In the distance, she saw Hans squatting down smoking a cigarette. He appeared to be contemplating the state of the vegetable garden as such, at any rate he stared ahead and did not look up when Rhea positioned herself next to him. His green thermal jacket lay in the grass. The sleeves of his black Tool T-shirt flapped gently in the breeze.

SPECIAL
MENTION

GERMANY



Deniz UTLU

Vaters Meer

My Father's Ocean

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BIOGRAPHY

Deniz Utlu was born in Hanover in 1983 and studied economics at the Free University of Berlin and at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. His debut novel *Die Ungehaltenen* was published in 2014 and was adapted for the stage at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin in 2015. His second novel, *Gegen Morgen*, was published by Suhrkamp Verlag in 2019. In addition, he is the author of plays, poetry and essays, and also conducts research at the German Institute for Human Rights. In 2021, he was awarded the Alfred-Döblin Prize for

an extract from *Vaters Meer*. In 2023, he won the Bavarian Book Prize for *Vaters Meer*. Utlu lives in Berlin.

SYNOPSIS

Deniz Utlu, through a combination of recollection, research and literary imagination, manages to reconstruct the life and death of a father figure. As a young man, the father emigrated from southern Anatolia via Istanbul to Germany, where he found work in Hanover, started a family and came to feel at home. Two strokes and the resultant 'locked in' syndrome meant that for many years the father was able to communicate only by means of his eyes. His son now, as it were, summons up the conversation that he might have had with his father but which in reality scarcely if ever took place. He reconstructs his father's origins in a Turkish–Arabic family in the Anatolian town Mardin; he describes or imagines how his parents came to meet each other, how his father managed to find his feet in a new country, and recounts the complex consequences for the life of the family following the father's illness and loss of the power of speech. On the surface, Utlu's novel is concerned with past origins and the move to a new environment, with family and the differences between

generations, with the experience of being culturally well rooted or totally rootless; but on a more abstract and equally important level, the novel is about the acquisition and loss of language and about the question as to whether remembrance is actually possible.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Deniz Utlu's novel, which is highly regarded in Germany, recounts in a personally and aesthetically sensitive manner the story of a difficult father-son relationship. The father's illness and premature death have left the son with numerous unanswered questions, which he now faces up to through a process of recollective self-examination combined with poetical

researches. The primary focus is not on his conflict with his father, but on his efforts to do justice to a man who frequently tended to display strengths and weaknesses at precisely the wrong moment. By proceeding in this way, Deniz Utlu reconstructs an archetypal story of migration in the 1960s. Back in those days the father, originally from southern Anatolia, found himself in Hanover. It is here that the son grows up and tries as a young adult to find a language he can call his own, while his father is deprived of language altogether after suffering two strokes. Utlu now retrospectively imagines the conversation that had been difficult, not to say impossible, during his father's lifetime, partly because of his illness, but also because of the cultural differences separating the Turkish-Arabic father from his German-Turkish son. For the author the process of recollection itself becomes his subject matter, but a decidedly problematic one. As the primary metaphor to express the ups and downs of this process, Utlu chooses the sea. It was by sea that the father had travelled from Istanbul to his job in Germany back in the day, and for the son it is water that has become, as it were, the vehicle for his own poetical reflections. With his novel *Vaters Meer*, Deniz Utlu has succeeded touchingly in throwing refreshing new light on a hitherto insufficiently regarded episode in our culture: Turkish immigration to Germany.

Goethe-Institut



Vaters Meer

Deniz Utlu



MEINE ERSTE REISE

Vor meiner ersten und, was ich damals nicht wusste, einzigen Reise allein mit meinem Vater hatte ich Angst. Ich fragte Mutter, ob ich denn mitfahren müsse. Sie sagte, sie würde mir raten, meinen Vater zu begleiten, seine Stadt zu sehen, meine Großmutter kennenzulernen, wer weiß, sagte sie, vielleicht würde sich diese Gelegenheit nicht mehr ergeben. Ich könnte einmal bereuen, diese Reise nicht angetreten zu haben, mir würde für immer etwas fehlen. An der Art, wie Mutter ihren Kopf gebeugt hielt, während sie mit mir redete, merkte ich, dass etwas in ihr arbeitete. Durch ihre Worte versuchte sie, mich zu überzeugen, mit Vater von Kızkalesi nach Mardin zu fahren, ihr Körper erzählte eine andere Geschichte : Ihr Sohn, der ihr nie von der Seite gewichen war, auf den sie immer achtgegeben hatte, in einem Maße, wie sie es dem Vater niemals zutrauen würde, sollte nun ohne sie verreisen, und das nicht irgendwohin, sondern nach Mardin, in jene Stadt, in der die festgeschriebenen Gesetze nicht galten und das erlernte Wissen nichts taugte, in das inmitten von endlosen Ebenen gelegene Mardin sollte sie jetzt ihren Sohn fahren lassen ? Es fiel ihr nicht leicht. Aber sie wusste auch, dass dies der Ort war, an dem die Geschichte begann, die ihres Mannes und letztlich auch ihre eigene. Kannst du nicht mitkommen ?, fragte ich. Wovor hast du Angst ?, fragte sie. Das ist dein Vater, ihm kannst du vertrauen. Aber er ist so schnell böse. Dann benimm dich und weich ihm nicht von der Seite, hörst du ! Lass ihn niemals aus den Augen.

Es war schon dunkel draußen, und wir hatten die Lichter in der Wohnung eingeschaltet, als Vater nach Hause kam. Er sagte, ich solle jetzt schlafen gehen, wir würden vor Sonnenaufgang aufbrechen. Alle

Reisen beginnen nachts, denke ich, die Straßen sind leergefegt, die Taxifahrer riechen nach Kölnischwasser, die Busfahrer wirken müde mit ihren eingefallenen Schultern, es gibt Çay, wenn man sich einmal eingerichtet hat in den durchgesessenen Polstern der interregionalen Busse.

In Adana war es noch immer Nacht. Ein Kind in meinem Alter bot meinem Vater Zigaretten an. Ich hätte Angst gehabt, hier allein zu sein, in dieser Nacht, an diesem Busbahnhof, inmitten dieser fremden Männer, deren Augen ständig die Umgebung absuchten, als würden sie Beute wittern, der rauchenden Putzkräfte, die an ihren Besenstielen lehnten, der Bettler, die unaufhörlich alte Zeitungen falteten, um sie unter den Hintern zu schieben. Hier verkaufte ein kleiner Junge Zigaretten. Er lief auf die andere Seite des Bahnhofs, nachdem mein Vater abgelehnt hatte. Wir sahen ihm beide hinterher. Warum geht er nicht nach Hause und schläft ?, fragte ich Vater. Ich war auch so als Kind, sagte er.

Dann stand da der Bus, und ich musste den Fuß weit heben, um ihn auf die erste Stufe zu setzen. Der Fahrer nickte uns zu, wir balancierten vorbei an Männern mit buschigen Schnauzbärten, die müde an ihren Zigaretten zogen und den Rauch aushauchten, als wäre es immer auch ein Stück Leben, was sich im Raum auflöste. Wir fuhren vorbei an Häusern mit Wassertanks auf den Dächern, viele waren nicht fertig gebaut, die Ziegelsteine in der Dämmerung schienen rot auf wie aufgeschnittenes Fleisch. Der Geruch verbrannten Grases zog in den Bus. Ein junger Mann mit blauem, kurzärmeligem Hemd, kassierte das Fahrgeld von den Reisenden und träufelte ihnen aus einem Flakon Kolonya in die Hände. Als Vater und ich uns die erfrischende Flüssigkeit ins Gesicht schmierten, hatte sich der Geruch aus Zitrone und scharfem Alkohol bereits mit dem würzigen Rauch türkischen Tabaks und dem wohligen Räucherduft verbrannter Gräser verbunden. Mein Vater begann ein Gespräch mit dem Mann, der in der Reihe hinter uns saß. Der trug einen weißen, von der Reise zerknitterten Anzug und hatte eine rote Kufiya auf dem Kopf. Vater redete arabisch mit ihm, erzählte ihm wahrscheinlich von unserer Reise, zeigte auch auf mich beim Reden. Ich blickte schüchtern zu Boden. Der Mann

streckte seine Hand zwischen den Sitzen durch und öffnete die Faust voller Nüsse, Vater und ich pickten uns Pistazienkerne und getrocknete Kichererbsen heraus. Können wir dem Mann trauen ?, fragte ich meinen Vater auf Deutsch. Die Menschen in dieser Region sind die herzlichsten, die du dir vorstellen kannst, antwortete er und lächelte mir dabei zu, während ich das Salzig-Geröstete auf meiner Zunge schmeckte. Und er darf wissen, dass wir aus Deutschland kommen ?, fragte ich Vater weiter, denn Mutter hatte mir eingebläut, nie Deutsch zu reden und nicht die Aufmerksamkeit auf mich zu ziehen. Aber mein Vater sagte, dass ich mir keine Sorgen machen müsse, solange ich ihm nicht von der Seite weiche, er komme von hier, kenne die Menschen und Wege.

Schau, sagte Vater und wies mit der Hand zur Vorderseite. Ich folgte seinem Zeichen und konnte meinen Augen nicht trauen : Aus der Straße wuchs am Horizont ein enormer Feuerball, dem wir entgegenfuhren. Die schwarzen Schöpfe der Schlafenden wackelten auf den Lehnen. Der Busfahrer war winzig, verschwindend klein im Vergleich zur riesigen Windschutzscheibe unseres Busses, und der Himmel war eine orangefarbene, perfekt kreisrunde Mauer aus Feuer. Das ist die Sonne Mardins, sagte Vater.

Ich fühlte mich dem Himmel so nah wie nie zuvor, und auch später empfand ich diese Nähe nie wieder so wie auf jener Reise. Es stimmt, was du gesagt hast, flüsterte ich, ohne den Blick von der Sonne nehmen zu können, man kann mit dem Auto in den Himmel fahren, in Mardin gibt es eine Straße zum Mond. Ich hatte geglaubt, das wäre wieder eines der Märchen der Erwachsenen, aber es stimmt ja wirklich. Vater sagte : Baba erzählt keine Märchen, mein Junge, oder alle Märchen, die ich dir erzähle, sind wahr. Das ist hier eine andere Welt, meine Welt, wenn du willst auch deine, in Mardin gelten eigene Regeln, was sie woanders für Zauber halten, ist hier Alltag. Und ja, zu den Sternen ist es nur ein Katzensprung.

So ging unsere Reise damals, so fuhren wir weiter, und die Sonne, die eben aufgegangen war, ging wieder unter, was niemanden zu kümmern schien. An einem Ort in der Nähe von Mardin, womöglich in Diyarbakır, stiegen wir in einen Wagen um, der etwas größer war

als ein PKW, aber noch nicht so groß wie ein Dolmuş. Wir und zwei, drei andere Menschen fuhren so in die absolute Finsternis. Um uns herum und auch in der Ferne gab es kein Licht, nicht das kleinste Leuchten. Das Scheinwerferlicht des Wagens wurde sofort absorbiert von der Dunkelheit, sodass gerade noch ein Stück von der Straße kenntlich war. Das starke Ruckeln schläfernte mich ein und bald fielen mir die Augen zu, sodass ich die Ankunft in Mardin verpasste. Ich wachte erst auf, als mein Vater mich sanft wachrüttelte. Wir sind da. Der Wagen stand schief an einem Abhang, Vater stieg zuerst aus und half mir, damit ich nicht stürzte. Wir gingen, jeder seine Tasche in der Hand, er eine größere, ich eine kleine, durch schmale, unbeleuchtete Gassen, durch die kein Auto gepasst hätte, und so kamen wir schließlich bei Stufen an, die hinunter in eine weitere, aber diesmal leicht beleuchtete Gasse führten. Mein Vater fand sich in diesem Labyrinth problemlos zurecht. Es schien mir, als wären es seine Straßen, durch die wir liefen. Plötzlich waren da Schritte, und ich sah, wie weiter vorne ein junger Mann stehen blieb, etwa fünfzehn oder sechzehn Jahre alt. Das laute Klopfen seiner Schritte hatten die offenen Holzschuhe erzeugt, die gegen die Steinplatten des Bodens schlugen. Man nennt diese Schuhe Takunya, sagte Vater, eigentlich trägt man sie im Hamam, und das ist dein Cousin Munir. Mein Vater umarmte ihn, sie sprachen einige Sätze auf Arabisch, und der junge Mann küsste mich auf die Wangen, dann trug er unsere Taschen hoch in das Haus, das gleich neben dem Treppenaufgang war, den wir eben hinuntergestiegen waren. Dies ist die Straße der Metzger, sagte Vater, hier ist das Geschäft meines Vaters, das jetzt dein Onkel betreibt, Munirs Vater Murat, wir schauen uns das morgen an.

Wir stiegen die Stufen hoch in die Wohnung über der Metzgerei, wo Murat mit seiner Frau und seinen Kindern lebte, zusammen mit meiner Großmutter, Mama Hacı.

Meine Großmutter saß im Schneidersitz. Letzteres vermutete ich nur, weil ich ihre Füße nicht sah. Ihre Glieder zeichneten sich unter dem Stoff ihrer weiten Gewänder kaum ab. Das geräumige Wohnzimmer war lichtdurchflutet. Die Unmöglichkeit, sich ihr mittels Sprache zu nähern, gab ihr etwas Erhabenes. Wie bei jemandem, der so groß

war, dass man ihm nicht in die Augen sehen konnte. In ihrem Gesicht erkannte ich eine deutliche Ähnlichkeit mit meinem Vater. Die weite Stirn, die markante Nase, der Branton ungeschälter Mandeln ihrer Haut. Wie mein Vater trug sie eine Brille mit dicken Gläsern, die ihre braunen Augen vergrößerten. Auch Murat, der viel kleiner war als sein großer Bruder, der Einzige unter den Geschwistern, der in Mardin geblieben war, hatte eine entfernte Ähnlichkeit mit meinem Vater, etwas in der Bewegung seines Mundes. Ich konnte es nicht fassen. Dem Vater, den ich kannte, sah niemand ähnlich, er, der von nirgendwo kam, auf dem Weg in ein anderes Nirgendwo, eine Handvoll Heiterkeit hier, eine halbe Fingerlänge Vergnügen dort, etwas davon immer in den Innentaschen des Jacketts hortend oder zwischen den Backenzähnen wendend, und eine ganze Botanik der Enttäuschungen und Herzbrüche auf den Feldern links und rechts des Pfades, der erst beim Gehen entsteht. Er kam einmal irgendwoher, aber dieses Irgendwo war verdunstet, in den Himmel aufgestiegen und Teil des sich ausweitenden Weltalls, verstreut inmitten von Milliarden von Sternen. Er hatte eine Familie, aber aus biblischen Zeiten, seine Mutter hieß Lilith, sein Vater Adam, oder seine Mutter hieß Hagar, sein Vater Abraham. Oder er selbst wurde aus Schlamm geformt, er, der erste Mensch. Mein Vater stand allein, wo immer er stand, er hatte die Gabe, zu unterhalten und zu verführen, und er trug auf seinen Schultern die Last der Einsamkeit aller Menschen, die im unendlichen Raum ohne ihresgleichen, ohne Hoffnung auf auch nur ein weiteres Lebewesen ihre Bahn drehten, der Verfall ihrer Zellen immer ein Stück schneller als ihre Fähigkeit, zu verstehen.

In der Nacht schliefen Vater und ich in einem Zimmer. In jedem Raum stand ein brauner Metallofen, mit dem im Winter geheizt und auf dem auch Tee oder Kaffee zubereitet wurde, so auch in unserem Schlafzimmer. Für mich hatte man auf einem Sofa einen Schlafplatz eingerichtet, Vater legte sich auf eine Decke auf dem Boden. Er hatte schon die Hand nach dem Nachtlcht gestreckt, da kam seine Mutter ins Zimmer, in jeder Hand ein Glas Wasser. Sie stellte eines auf meinen Nachttisch und reichte das andere meinem Vater. Er richtete sich etwas auf, stützte sich auf seinen Unterarm, um seiner Mutter näher zu sein, die sich auf einen Hocker vor ihn setzte. Ich verstand kein

Wort von ihrem Gespräch, nicht weil sie flüsterten, wie man nachts kurz vor dem Schlafen eben redet, sondern weil sie sich auf Arabisch unterhielten. Vaters Arabisch war so zärtlich, wie ich es von ihm nie zuvor gehört hatte. In unserem gemeinsamen Leben sprach er nur Arabisch, wenn er fluchte, mehr noch : verfluchte. In der nächtlichen Stille in Mardin, kurz bevor er sich schlafen legte, klangen die arabischen Worte aus seinem Mund wie die lilafarbenen Blütenblätter bittersüßer Nachtschatten auf dem Schallkörper eines tiefgestimmten Saiteninstruments. Vater war ein Kind, seine Mutter war gekommen, um ihn zu Bett zu bringen, ihm gute Nacht zu wünschen, so wie es auch meine Mutter jeden Abend tat. Wie auch meine Mutter sich an meinen Bettrand setzte, nachdem sie überprüft hatte, dass ich fest umwickelt war von der Decke und kein Luftzug mich gefährdete. Manchmal hatten wir noch etwas zu besprechen, gab es noch ein Ereignis, das Revue passiert werden, quasi abgeschüttelt werden musste, ab und an schallte noch das helle Lachen meiner Mutter durch das bereits abgedunkelte Zimmer. Die Verbindung von Eltern und Kind, von der eine intensivere kaum möglich ist, weil vielleicht niemals und nie wieder jemand einen so bedingungslos schützen wird, ist in dieser Stunde zwischen Tag und Nacht, zwischen Wachsein und Schlaf noch fester. Es war unglaublich, unvorstellbar, auch mein Vater war der Sohn einer Mutter. Auch dieser Mann war einmal geschützt und geliebt worden. Meine Großmutter wünschte uns geruhsame Nacht und verließ den Raum. Warum hat sie uns Wasser gebracht ?, fragte ich Vater. Weil sie uns liebt, antwortete er. Schlaf schön, mein Junge. Dann schaltete er das Licht aus, und vollständige Dunkelheit, wie ich sie vor unserer Ankunft in Mardin nicht gekannt hatte, erfüllte den Raum. Ich lag noch eine Weile wach und horchte den Klängen nach, die eben noch durch dieses Zimmer gehalten hatten. Ich wusste genau, dass etwas Einmaliges geschehen war, auch wenn ich es nicht benennen konnte. Heute weiß ich : Zum ersten und zum letzten Mal waren die drei Generationen unserer Familie für einige wenige Minuten ganz unter sich in einem Raum gewesen, Großmutter, Vater, Sohn. Für ein einziges Mal war mein Vater genauso Kind gewesen wie ich, wir hatten nebeneinander gelegen und waren aus der Sicht dieser Frau alle beide zwei kleine Kinder, die es zu schützen galt in der unbekanntten, rohen Welt da draußen. İyi geceler.

My Father's Ocean

Deniz Utlu

Translated into English by Katy Derbyshire

MY FIRST JOURNEY

Before my first and, though I didn't know it at the time, only journey alone with my father, I was afraid. I asked my mother if I had to go with him. She said she'd advise me to go along with my father, to see his city and meet my grandmother; who knows, she said, perhaps I wouldn't have another opportunity. I might one day regret not going on the trip, something would be missing forever. By the way my mother held her head tilted as she spoke to me, I could tell something was going on inside her. Her words were trying to persuade me to go to Mardin from Kızıkalesi with my father; her body told a different story: her son, who had never left her side, whom she'd always taken care of to an extent she'd never trust my father to do, was to travel without her, and not just anywhere but to Mardin, the city where the word of law did not apply and learned knowledge was of no use, and she was supposed to let her son travel to this Mardin in the midst of endless plains? It wasn't easy for her. But she knew too that this was the place where the story began, her husband's story and ultimately also her own.

Can't you come with us? I asked. What are you afraid of? she asked. He's your father, you can trust him. But he gets cross so quickly. Then be good, and don't leave his side, you hear? Never let him out of your sight.

It was dark outside, and we'd turned on the lights in the flat by the time my father came home. He told me to go to sleep now, we'd set out at daybreak.

All journeys begin at night, I think; the streets are deserted, the taxi drivers smell of eau de cologne, the bus drivers look tired with their sagging shoulders, and you get a glass of *çay* once you've settled into the worn upholstery of the inter-regional buses.

It was still night in Adana. A child my age offered my father cigarettes. I'd have been afraid there alone, in that night, at that bus station, in the midst of those strange men whose eyes were constantly scanning the surroundings as if scenting prey, the smoking cleaners leaning on their broom handles, the beggars unceasingly folding old newspapers to place underneath their backsides. A little boy was selling cigarettes here. After my father said no, the boy walked to the other side of the station. We both watched him. Why doesn't he go home to bed? I asked my father. I was like that as a child, he said.

Then the bus was there, and I had to lift my foot high to climb up the first step. The driver nodded at us, and we balanced past men with bushy moustaches, taking tired drags of their cigarettes and breathing out the smoke as if it were a sliver of life dissolving in the space.

We drove past houses with water tanks on their roofs, many of them not yet finished, the bricks shining red in the dawn like cut meat. The smell of burnt grass permeated the bus. A young man in a short-sleeved blue shirt took the fares from the passengers and sprinkled a bottle of *kolonya* on their hands. By the time my father and I rubbed the refreshing liquid on our faces, the sharp scent of lemon and alcohol had already melded with the spicy smoke of Turkish tobacco and the pleasant smell of burnt grasses. My father began a conversation with the man in the seat behind us. He was wearing a white suit, crumpled from the journey, with a red *kufiya* wrapped around his head. My father spoke Arabic to him, probably telling him about our trip, pointing at me as he spoke. I looked shyly at the floor. The man reached his hand between the seats and

opened up a fist full of nuts; my father and I picked out pistachios and dried chickpeas. Can we trust this man? I asked my father in German. The people in this region are the most wonderful people you can imagine, he answered, smiling at me as I tasted the salty roasted flavour on my tongue. And is it alright for him to know we're from Germany? I asked; my mother had drummed into me never to attract attention by speaking German. But my father said there was no need to worry as long as I didn't leave his side; this was where he came from, he knew the people and their ways.

Look, said my father, pointing towards the front. I followed his hand and couldn't believe my eyes: out of the road grew an enormous fireball, which we were driving towards. The sleeping passengers' black heads wobbled against their seats. The bus driver was tiny, miniscule in comparison to the huge windscreen of our bus, and the sky was a perfectly circular wall of orange fire. That's the sun of Mardin, my father said.

I felt closer to the sky than ever before, and I never felt that closeness again in the same way as on that journey. What you said is true, I whispered, unable to take my eyes off the sun, you can drive into the sky, there's a road to the moon in Mardin. I'd thought it was another of the adults' fairy tales, but it was really true. My father said: Baba doesn't tell fairy tales, my boy, or all the fairy tales I tell you are true. It's another world here, my world, yours too if you like, we have different rules in Mardin, what they think elsewhere is magic is just part of everyday life here. And yes, it's just a hop, skip and jump to the stars.

That's how our journey went back then, that's how we went on driving, and the sun that had just risen set again, which didn't seem to bother anyone. In a place near Mardin, possibly in Diyarbakır, we switched to a vehicle slightly larger than a car, but not as big as a *dolmuş*. We and two or three other people drove into absolute darkness. There was no light around us and not the slightest glimmer in

the distance. The vehicle's headlamps were instantly absorbed by the dark, only a small piece of the road visible. The steady juddering sent me to sleep and my eyes soon fell shut, making me miss our arrival in Mardin. I only woke when my father gently shook me. We're here. The car was parked diagonally on a slope; my father got out first and helped me so I wouldn't fall. We walked, each of us with his bag in his hand, his larger, mine small, along narrow unlit alleys not wide enough for cars, and that was how we eventually came to some steps that led down into another alley, this time dimly lit. My father had no problem finding his way through this labyrinth. It seemed to me as if the streets we were walking were his. Suddenly there were footsteps, and I saw a young man stopping further ahead, about fifteen or sixteen years old. The loud sound of his footsteps came from wooden clogs beating against the stone flags on the ground. We call those shoes *takunya*, my father said, they're actually for wearing in the hammam, and that's your cousin Munir. My father hugged him, they exchanged a few words in Arabic, and the young man kissed me on the cheeks and then carried our bags up into the house right beside the staircase we'd just descended. This is the butchers' street, my father said, and here's my father's shop which your uncle runs now, Munir's father Murat. We'll take a look at it tomorrow.

We climbed the stairs to the flat above the butcher's shop, where Murat lived with his wife and children, along with my grandmother, Mama Hacı.

My grandmother was sitting cross-legged. I assumed that was the case; I couldn't see her feet. Her limbs were barely visible beneath the fabric of her loose robes. The spacious living room was flooded with light. The impossibility of approaching her by means of language gave her something sublime, like someone so tall you couldn't look them in the eye. I recognised a clear similarity to my father in her face. The broad brow, distinctive nose, the brown shade of unshelled almonds to her skin. Like my father, she wore glasses

with thick lenses that enlarged her brown eyes. Murat too, who was far smaller than his big brother, the only one of the siblings to have stayed in Mardin, had a distant similarity to my father, something in the way his mouth moved. I couldn't believe it. No one looked like the father I knew, the man who came from nowhere, on the way to a different nowhere, a handful of jollity here, half a finger's length of pleasure there, always hoarding some of it in his jacket's inside pocket or turning it between his back teeth, and a whole bot-any of disappointments and heartbreaks on the fields on either side of the path, a path created only as he walked it. He had once come from somewhere, but that somewhere had evaporated, risen into the sky and now part of the expanding cosmos, scattered amidst billions of stars. He had a family, but it was from biblical times, his mother's name was Lilith, his father's Adam, or his mother's name was Hagar, his father's Abraham. Or he himself was formed out of clay, the first man. My father stood alone wherever he stood, he had a gift for entertaining and seducing, and he carried on his shoulders the burden of loneliness felt by all those orbiting in endless space without their own kind, without hope of even one other entity, the deterioration of their cells always a little faster than their ability to understand.

That night, my father and I slept in one room. Every room had a brown metal stove used for heating in winter and for making tea or coffee, as in our bedroom. They made a bed for me on a sofa, and my father lay down on a blanket on the floor. He had already reached out a hand for the nightlight when his mother came in, a glass of water in each hand. She placed one on my bedside table and handed the other to my father. He sat up a little, resting on his lower arm, to be closer to his mother as she sat down on a stool by his side. I didn't understand a word of their conversation, not because they were whispering as people do just before sleeping at night, but because they talked in Arabic. My father's Arabic was so affectionate; I'd never heard him speaking that way before. In our life together,

he spoke Arabic only when he swore, or worse: cursed. In that night silence in Mardin, shortly before he lay down to sleep, the Arabic words from his mouth sounded like purple petals of bitter nightshade falling on an instrument's sound box, its strings tuned low. My father was a child, his mother had come to put him to bed and wish him good night, just as my mother did every night. Just as my mother sat down on the edge of my bed after checking I was tightly tucked in, at no risk of draughts. Sometimes we had something to discuss, there was an event that had to be reviewed, quasi shaken off; now and then my mother's bright laugh rang out in the already darkened room. The tie between a parent and child, a more intense tie almost impossible to imagine because perhaps never again will anyone protect you as unconditionally, is even stronger in that hour between day and night, between waking and sleep. It was incredible, inconceivable: my father too was a mother's son. This man too had once been protected and loved. My grandmother wished us a restful night and left the room. Why did she bring us water? I asked my father. Because she loves us, he answered. Sleep well, my son. Then he switched off the light, and the room was suffused in complete darkness, a kind I hadn't known before our arrival in Mardin. I lay awake for a while, listening for the sounds that had just echoed through the room. I knew very well that something unique had happened, though I couldn't put a name to it.

Now, I know: for the first and last time, the three generations of our family had all been alone in a room for a few minutes, grandmother, father, son. A single time, my father had been just as much a child as I, we had lain side by side and in that woman's eyes we were both little children who needed protecting in the raw unknown world out there. *İyi geceler.*

HUNGARY



Panni PUSKÁS

Megmenteni bárkit *That Any Might Be Saved*

Magvető, 2023

Language: Hungarian

ISBN: 9789631442632

BIOGRAPHY

A writer and journalist, born in 1987 in Győr. She lives in Budapest and works as editor of the Hungarian online literary journal *Revizor*. She is the co-chairperson of the Hungarian Theatre Critics Guild. Her first book was a short story collection entitled *A rezervátum visszafoglalása (Reconquering the Reserve, 2021)*, which was shortlisted for several Hungarian prizes for young writers (Margó Prize for best first book, Horváth Péter Scholarship for authors under 35). She received the prize of the prestigious Budapest

bookshop 'Authors' Store' for the best young author's book in 2021. Her short story 'Reckoning with Bukowski' was published in the *Los Angeles Review*.

SYNOPSIS

Panni Puskás has been hailed by critics as 'provocative' and 'punk'. Her novel is a set of monologues by three women from Budapest – two of them in their thirties, one in her fifties. They talk to the reader as much as to each other, so that gradually we realise that though they seem to have nothing in common, these are in fact two sisters and their mother. Panni Puskás has her protagonists struggle to find meaning in their lives, as they try to comprehend, cope with or rebel against challenges posed by Hungary, Europe and the world today. A batch of inadequate responses to meaningless consumerism, the migration crisis or a severely stressed mother–daughter relationship leave room for a subplot following the story of Santa Lucia, the patron saint of Syracuse.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The Hungarian candidate for the European Union Prize for Literature 2024, based on the unanimous vote of the jury, is *Megmenteni bárkit* by

Panni Puskás (*That Any Might Be Saved*, Magvető, 2023). The novel consists of the monologues of three women who are wanderers and fugitives – people fighting for a better life. The youngest of the three works at a multinational company in Budapest. The second narrator has moved from Hungary to Sicily, where she lives in beautiful surroundings with her lover. The oldest of the three recounts her life in letters written to her younger daughter. The three mosaic-like storylines are connected at the end of the novel, and the three women's destinies confront the reader with many questions. The jury emphasised the fact that the novel sensitively touches on current social issues such as women's roles, same-sex love, the disintegration of families, the anxiety of young people starting their adult lives, post-generational trauma, an empathic approach to the problem of migration, and respect for human and minority rights. It is also a positive feature of the novel that it can be easily translated, which makes it a good candidate for international dissemination. The translation of the three different registers, styles and modes of narration into foreign languages is more of a reward than a challenge for the translator. Also, the novel sensitively portrays the Hungarian pop culture and punk subculture of the 1990s, which is not very well known to the international readership. Panni Puskás is one of

the most promising authors of contemporary Hungarian prose, whose powerful voice was trained on theatre criticism. Hers is a fresh voice in contemporary Hungarian prose, one that focuses on the here and now.

International Book Festival Budapest



Megmenteni bárkit

Panni Puskás



Maria szeretne még dolgokat megnézni. Mindennap kitalál valami új megnézniivalót. Egyik nap bűvárokkal merülünk a tenger alá színes halakat nézni a kékségben. Egy másik nap nagy teljesítményű lámpája és egy nagyító segítségével különböző méretű és formájú dolgok textúráját tanulmányozza. Szerves és szervesetlen anyagokat tesz a nagyító alá: csipketerítőt, muranói üveg nyakláncot, olajfa levelét, kétszersültet. A következő nap azt mondja, nézzük meg Caravaggio híres siracusai festményét, a Santa Lucia temetését. A Palazzo Bellomo felé indulunk, ahol a kép egy utazós blog szerint található. Végigjárjuk az őszeses termet, de nem találjuk. Kérdezzük a teremőröket, ők ezt a képet sosem látták itt.

A Santa Lucia al Sepolcro felé vesszük az irányt, ahol a festmény a Wikipédia szerint van. Mariát nagyon megérintette Santa Lucia története, aki önszántából vágta ki saját szemét és küldte el vőlegényének. Ezzel üzentte meg, hogy eláll házassági szándékától, és örökre ártatlan marad. A hoppon maradt vőlegény bosszúból kereszténységgel vádolta meg szegény, vak Luciát, akit végül egy hóhér torkon szúrt. Ez a nő a város védőszentje. Nyakából tűr áll ki, kezében egy tányér, rajta két szemgolyó. Úgy tűnik, az olaszok szerint semmi probléma nincs ezzel. Fennkölt dolog a szenvedés. Sőt, a szenvedés mértékével egyenes arányban nő a fennköltség mértéke. Lucia szenvedése igen-igen fennkölt. A hajón várakozó menekülteké nem az. Várni elvélgre mindenki tud. Türelmesnek kell lenni.

A Santa Lucia al Sepolcro nevű külvárosi templomban a festmény reprodukcióját találjuk csak meg. Nagy vászon, rossz minőségű utánzat. Egy cikk szerint az eredeti kép 2009-ben átkerült a Santa Lu-

cia alla Badia nevű belvárosi templomba, úgyhogy elindulunk oda. Ám ott sem találjuk. A biztonsági őr azt mondja, az eredeti a Santa Lucia al Sepolcróban van. Jelezzük, hogy onnan jövünk, ő pedig kissé ingerülten, kissé leereszkedően azt mondja, hogy akkor láttuk az eredetit. Mariát nézem, mindjárt elsírja magát. Kimegyünk a templomból, átölelem. Keservesen sír. Mintha ettől a képtől várta volna mesébe illő gyógyulását. Elvégre Santa Luciának is visszánőttek kivájt szemei, amelyek a történet szerint még sokkal szebben ragyogtak, mint korábban. Nem fog meggyógyulni. Ezt most értem meg én is, iszonyú erővel tör rám a felismerés. A gyomromba nyilall.

Este a görög színházban nyári előadást játszanak, Euripidésztől a Bakkhánsnőket. Az első sorba vettünk jegyet, hogy Maria jól lásson. Így mondjuk, de inkább úgy értjük, hogy lásson valamit. A bakkhánsnőket statiszták játsszák. Szép nők üvöltenek a színpadon. Illetve próbálnak üvölni. Nagyon erőtlenül csinálják. Gyenge kiáltásukat mikroportokkal igyekeznek a technikusok felerősíteni. Teiresziasz lép színre. Ember nagyságú, kerekeken guruló férfialarc. Szeme két nagy nyílás, a színész kezei kandikálnak ki rajta. A guruló fej mindennek nekimegy. Nagyon vicces. Miért kell nekünk állandóan vakokat néznünk?

Santa Lucia sétál Siracusa utcáin. Nem is. Két Santa Lucia sétál Siracusa utcáin. Azt mondja az egyik: én aztán biztosan nem fogok férjhez menni. Mire a másik: akkor kaparjuk ki egymás szemét.

Két Santa Lucia kaparja ki egymás szemét Siracusa utcáin. Arra megy Teiresziasz, és megkérdezi: mit csináltok? Mire a két Santa Lucia: kikaparjuk egymás szemét. Mire Teiresziasz: ja, bocs, nem láttam. Két vak Santa Lucia sétál Siracusa utcáin. Szemgödrukéből vér és genny szivárog. Arra megy Teiresziasz, és megkérdezi: nem láttátok véletlenül a gurulós álarcomat? Mire a két Santa Lucia azt válaszolja: nem.

Két vak Santa Lucia sétál Siracusa utcáin. Azt mondja az egyik: bocs. Mire a másik: miért kérsz bocsánatot? Mire az egyik: mert neked mentem. Mire a másik: nem jöttél nekem. Mire Teiresziasz: semmi baj.

Két vak Santa Lucia sétál Siracusa utcáin. Azt mondja az egyik: te, nekem visszanőttek a szemeim. Mire a másik: nekem nem.

Pentheusz úgy gesztikulál, mint egy primadonna, Dionüszosz ripacskodik. Ebből ma már biztosan nem lesz tragédia. Megint fájni kezd a gyomrom. Tompa fájdalommal kezdődik általában. Néha abbamarad. Ha nem, élesedni kezd. Most élesedik. A bakkhánsnők kiáltoznak, de olyan gyengén, hogy az elviselhetetlen. Szedjétek már össze magatokat, sziszegem. Maria meghallja, nevet, de a színpadon folytatódik ugyanaz az erőtlen nyivákolás. Ordítani kezdek a fájdalomtól. Vagy az idegességtől. Darabokra tudnám tépni Pentheuszt, Dionüszoszt, Teiresziaszt, Kadmoszt és az egész hellén drámairodalmat. De főképp az összes bakkhánsnőnek mondott stasztát. Fájdalmas üvöltésem pillanatnyi zavart okoz a színpadon, mindenki felém fordul. A gyomrom viszont kicsit kevésbé fáj, úgyhogy a színpadra rohanok, feltépem a hosszú estélyi ruhám, és tombolok tovább. Az ültetők és a műszak pedig hirtelen nem tudják eldönteni, hogy ez vajon a show része-e. Tanácstalanul mozgolódni kezdenek. Múlik a fájdalom. Mire felém indulnak, hogy levezessenek a színpadról, már egész jó. Abba hagyom az őrjöngést, várom, hogy kivigyenek. Türelmesnek kell lenni. De ők újra megtorpannak, ugyanis nem várt dolog történik: hatalmas nyílt színi tapsot kapok. Mélyen meghajolok, határozott léptekkel az első sor felé indulok, megfogom Maria kezét, és elhagyjuk a nézőteret. Kint eldőlnünk a fűben. Vagy harminc percen keresztül nem tudunk megszólalni, annyira nevetünk. Tiszta fekete lesz a ruhánk, a bőrünk és a könnyektől nedves arcunk a vulkánból odaszállt hamutól.

That Any Might Be Saved

Panni Puskás

Translated into English by Austin Wagner

Maria wants to see all the things. Every day she finds something new to look at. One day we're going snorkelling to see colourful fish against the clear blue. The next day we're using a massive industrial lamp and magnifying glass to study the texture of things of various sizes and shapes. She holds the magnifying glass up to all sorts of materials, organic and inorganic: tablecloth, Murano glass necklace, olive tree leaf, biscotti. The next day she says we should visit Caravaggio's famous painting in Syracuse, the Burial of Santa Lucia. We head to the Palazzo Bellomo, where a travel blog said we'd find the painting. We walk through all the rooms, but we don't find it. We ask the gallery attendants, they've never seen this painting here.

We make our way to the Santa Lucia al Sepolcro, where Wikipedia says the painting is. Maria was deeply moved by the story of Santa Lucia, who willingly cut out her own eyes and sent them to her betrothed, thereby signalling her intent to remain unwed and forever chaste. The suitor, left high and dry and seeking revenge, denounced poor, blind Lucia as a Christian, and she was stabbed through the throat by an executioner. It is this woman who is the patron saint of the city. A dagger protrudes from her throat, the plate in her hands holds her eyes. Italians don't seem to have any problem with this. It's a dignified thing, suffering. Hell, the measure of dignity grows proportionally with the measure of suffering. And Lucia's suffering was tremendously dignified. Not like that of the refugees waiting on the ship. After all, anybody can wait. One must be patient.

In the Basilica Santa Lucia al Sepolcro on the outskirts of the city we only find a reproduction of the painting. A low-quality replica on a large canvas. An article says the original painting was moved to the downtown church of Santa Lucia alla Badia in 2009, so off we go. We don't find it there either. The security guard says the original is in the Santa Lucia al Sepolcro. We say that's where we've just come from, and his slightly irritable, slightly condescending response is that well then, we've seen the original. I glance at Maria, she's on the verge of tears. We leave the church, I hug her. She weeps bitterly. As if she expected a fairy-tale cure from this painting. After all, Santa Lucia's gouged out eyes grew back, and according to legend shimmered more brilliantly than ever before. But she won't get better. It's finally clear to me, and the realisation hits me like a ton of bricks. My stomach twinges.

There's a summer performance in the Greek theatre that night, Euripides' *The Bacchae*. We buy front-row tickets so Maria can have a good view. That's what we say, but we know it's so she can have any view at all. The *Bacchae* are played by extras. Beautiful women wailing on stage. Or trying to wail. They're doing a feeble job of it. Technicians try to amplify their lacklustre cries with microphones. Tiresias takes the stage. A human-sized male face, rolled in on wheels. Two great holes for eyes, the performer's hands visibly peeking out. The rolling head bumps into everything. Hilarious. Why do we constantly have to look at the blind?

Santa Lucia walks the streets of Syracuse. No. Two Santa Lucias walk the streets of Syracuse. One of them says: I will certainly not take a husband. To which the other responds: then let us gouge out each other's eyes.

Two Santa Lucias gouge out each other's eyes on the streets of Syracuse. Tiresias goes over and asks: what are you doing? To which the two Santa Lucias reply: gouging out each other's eyes. To which Tiresias: ah, forgive me, I didn't see.

Two blind Santa Lucias walk the streets of Syracuse. Blood and pus seep from the pits of their eyes. Tiresias goes over and asks: you haven't happened to see my rolling mask, have you? To which the two Santa Lucias reply: no.

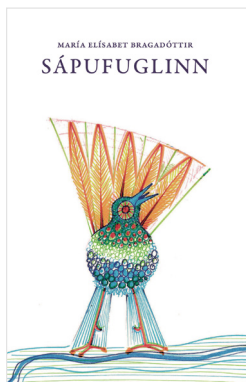
Two blind Santa Lucias walk the streets of Syracuse. One of them says: forgive me. To which the other replies: why do you ask forgiveness? To which the first: because I bumped into you. To which the second: you did not bump into me. To which Tiresias: no problem.

Two blind Santa Lucias walk the streets of Syracuse. One of them says: why, my eyes have grown back. To which the other: mine have not.

Pentheus flails around like a prima donna, Dionysus hams it up. It's clear by now this will not be a tragedy. My stomach starts to hurt again. It usually begins as a dull pain. Sometimes it abates. If not, it begins to sharpen. Now it's sharpening. The Bacchae ululate, but so pathetically that it's unbearable. Pull yourselves together already, I hiss. Maria hears me, she laughs, but the half-hearted mewling persists unchanged. I start shouting from the pain. Or from annoyance. I'd like to tear them limb from limb, Pentheus, Dionysus, Tiresias, Cadmus, the entirety of Hellenic drama. But mostly the extras they're calling the Bacchae. My pained screaming causes a moment of confusion on stage, everyone turns toward me. The pain in my stomach lessens slightly, so I rush up on stage, tear my flowing evening gown to shreds, and rage on. The ushers and crew suddenly can't decide whether this is part of the show or not. Perplexed, they begin to stir. The pain passes. By the time they leap into action to remove me from the stage, I'm absolutely fine. I cease my wailing, wait for them to take me away. One must be patient. But they freeze again, for something unexpected is happening: I'm getting a mid-scene standing ovation. I bow deeply, stride confidently to the front row, take Maria's hand, and we exit the theatre. Outside we collapse in the grass. For a good thirty minutes we're laughing too hard to speak. Our clothes, our skin, our tear-stained faces are soiled in the black of the volcano's ash.

SPECIAL
MENTION

ICELAND



María Elísabet BRAGADÓTTIR

Sápufluglinn

The Soap Bird

Una útgáfuhús, 2022

Language: Icelandic

ISBN: 9789935966148

BIOGRAPHY

María Elísabet Bragadóttir (born in 1993) holds a degree in philosophy and has served as a columnist for an Icelandic newspaper and the national radio station. Her debut book, a collection of short stories titled *Room in Another World*, garnered unanimous acclaim from both critics and readers. It was chosen as the 'Discovery of the Year' by Iceland's leading newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, and voted one of the three best works of fiction of the year by Icelandic booksellers. María has moderated discussions at the Reykjavík International Literary Festival and Icelandic Noir, engaging with notable figures such as Spanish writer Alejandro Palomas and Norwegian novelist Vigdis Hjorth. In 2022, she participated as a guest at Authors' Reading Month, the largest Central European literary festival.



SYNOPSIS

The Soap Bird consists of three stories. *Happy Birthday* follows a single mother in her thirties on a night out, who becomes captivated by a troubled artist. Battling low self-esteem, she grapples with age and unworthiness, revealing self-destructive tendencies intricately woven between the lines. The collection weaves a tapestry of diverse emotions within the human experience, offering a nuanced exploration of relationships, self-discovery and the intricate emotions of daily life. The title story, *The Soap Bird*, is about a 20-year-old café barista who falls for Jóhanna, a truck driver and artist. Their romance is tinged with unease toward Jóhanna's close friend. Unable to articulate her feelings, the unnamed protagonist buys a symbolic soap bird for her love but struggles to find the right time to gift it to her. Amid jealousy and self-doubt, she confronts her sexuality, an aversion to sex and a fervent yearning for love. In *Dwarf with the Ear*, the narrative explores the life of a teenage Icelandic girl navigating her unique time-traveling lineage. The story defies genre norms, blending realism and fantasy to subtly touch on themes of isolation, bullying, depression and generational trauma. The collection weaves a tapestry of diverse emotions within the human experience, offering a nuanced exploration of relationships, self-discovery and the intricate emotions of daily life.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

One of Iceland's leading poets, Linda Vilhjálmisdóttir, rightly remarked on *The Soap Bird*: 'Each story is a whole world, and the characterisations are so well-elaborated that the reader feels as if they know the subject as well as a great novel.' In the first two stories, María Elísabet Bragadóttir shows us how we are not always the best judges of our communications and relationships. Deliberate decisions and comments that seem logical and natural at first glance turn out to be cruel traps from which it is difficult to escape. The third story is burlesque and philosophical at times: 'Time is a substance that comes into being so very deep within a person that it cannot be fully understood.' The narrative of all three stories is beautifully mastered by the author. The style is effortless and elegant. That is why the Icelandic jury nominated *The Soap Bird* to the European Union Prize for Literature.

Icelandic Publishers Association

Sápufluglinn

María Elísabet Bragadóttir



Dvergurinn með eyrað

Dvergurinn með eyrað var löt í beinan kvenlegg, að minnsta kosti “óra ættliði aftur. Það er slæmt að vera löt á Íslandi, þar sem dugnaður og vinnusemi eru æðst dyggða. Samt stærðu formæður hennar sig af letinni. Þetta voru stoltar konur sem gengust við ákúrunum og slúðrinu með reisu. Mamma Dvergsins varð ófrísk fimmtán ára til að sleppa við samræmdu prófin og liggja í ljósabekkjum. Hún hjólaði til og frá sólbaðsstofunni og menn undruðust að hún héldi jafnvægi, svo hægt steig hún á pedalana. Amma Dvergsins var alræmd fiskvinnslukona sem hvarf oft frá línunni til að taka sér kríu bak við karfavélina. Langamma hennar var sögð hafa setið við uppvaskið, haft púða undir vöðvarýrum sitjandanum og sápað diska og bolla lúshægt. Langalangamma hennar átti að hafa drekk sér í bæjarlæknum frekar en að taka þátt í heyskapnum þegar þjarmað var að henni. Hennar seinustu orð voru: Ég nenni þessu alls ekki!

Letin var vísbending um sérkennilegan hæfileika sem gekk konu fram af konu. Þær ferðuðust um í tíma. Allar sem ein voru þær tímaferðalangar. Leti tímaferðalangsins er leyndardómsfull og á henni eru engar þekktar skýringar. Kannski skortur á metnaði fyrir augnablikinu eða óþol fyrir hefðbundinni very í tíma.

Fólk sem ferðast um í rúmi er oft með slæma meltingu því líkamsklukkan vanstillist í háloftunum. Tímaferðalangar fá hins vegar suð fyrir eyrað og þekkjast á því, halda gjarnan um það og biðja

fólk að endurtaka sig: Hvað varstu að segja? Það er erfið sítruflun, sambærileg við kláða eða sviða og getur orðið sársaukafull.

Við styðjum okkur við orð eins og fortíð, nútíð og framtíð en þetta eru villandi hugtök. Staðreyndir um tímaferðalög: Þau lúta engri skiljanlegri lógík og því ómögulegt að rökræða nokkuð sem þeim viðkemur, það er eins og með ástina eða hvaða dularfulla sjúkdóm sem er. Að búa yfir þessum hæfileika er viss tegund af ófrelsi. Miða fæst ekki skipt eða fargað enda eru engir miðar. Það má segja að bindandi samningur hafi verið undirritaður við fæðingu. Ef ferðalangur festist á (akkinu endar það ekki öðruvísi en með dauðsfalli.

Konurnar í kringum Dverginn vissu að í henni blundaði hæfileikinn en samt tók engin þeirra af skarið og sagði henni allt af léttu. Í rauninni hefur (akk í tíma alltaf verið blygðunarhegðun, eins og klósettferðir og kynlíf, svo Dvergurinn þurfti að komast að þessu upp á eigin spýtur. Ferðalög af þessu tagi eru rómantíseruð í bókum og bíómyndum en í alvörunni talað þá er þetta nóturlegt líf.

*

Það voru strákarnir í skólanum sem gáfu henni þetta nafn, Dvergurinn með eyrað. Mamma hennar sagði að hún væri löt að stækka, að hver einasta fruma líkamans væri í þrjóskukasti. Hálfnuð með unglिंगadeild hafði hún náð 147 sentímetrum eða eins og amma hennar sagði: Búklöng en klofstutt. Hún var send til læknis og vigtuð og mæld á alla kanta. Læknirinn sagði: Hún er líkamlega seinþroska og svo er það eyrað á henni sem mun alltaf vera til vandræða, það er allt og sumt.

Endanleg niðurstaða: Hún var grár og gugginn dvergur með suðandi eyra.

Á morgnana læsti hún hjólinu sínu við innganginn að 9. bekkjar-álmunni. Hún átti sæbláan talnalás, 7777 (happatala). Á hjólagrindina hafði einhver skrifað með svörtum túss: Eivör

Magnea í 8-Þ er lítil hóra. Hún settist á hækjur sér, sleit upp túnfífil og nuddaði knúppnum fast yfir nafnið, braut stilkinn af og rúllaði honum eftir járninu. Safinn varð að gulgrænni sliki á stöfunum, en Eivör Magnea í 8-Þ var ennþá lítil hóra.

Orðfærið á göngunum var biblískt, það var alltaf meydómur þetta og meydómur hitt.

Hey, ekki afmeyja kókið mitt, sögðu strákarnir þegar þeir stimpuðust í fatahenginu og á tilskildum tíma hrukku stelpurnar (issandi í gang eins og pínd sirkusdýr. Fyrir stráka var það manndómsvígsla að glata sveindómnum. Hvort sem það var á félagsmiðstöðvarklósetti eða undir upplituðu Manchester United sængurverri, þá skrifu þeir óþreyjufullir í gegnum lostahlið unglingsáranna.

Ef stelpa átti kærasta missti hún meydóminn af skyldurækni, það var hinn almenni skilningur. Kærastinn afmeyjaði hana eins og hann afmeyjaði kókdós með því að taka úr henni fyrsta sopann. Viðbúinn fórnarkostnaður stelpunnar var sviðandi sársauki. Þetta átti ekki að vera ánægjulegt, ekki einu sinni þótt það væri gert undir rómantískum formerkjum. Það var engin leið að (ýja skömmina, stelpa var annað hvort of (jót að missa meydóminn (Eivör Magnea í 8-Þ er lítil hóra) eða of sein (hún er nunna, píkan hennar er samansaumuð og full af sandi).

Það var talað um að tölvufræðikennarinn væri með sand í píkunni. Hvað eiga þeir við með því? spurði Dvergurinn með eyrað og hallaði höfðinu aftur með klósettpappír í báðum nösum. Hún var alltaf með blóðnasir á þessum árum. Bekkjarsystir hennar stóð nær speglinum og makaði sólarpúðri á kinnarnar og bringuna.

Að það þurfi einhver nauðsynlega að ná í skó(u og moka sandinn úr píkunni á henni.

Já, sagði Dvergurinn nefmælt, ég skil hvað þú meinar.

Tölvufræðikennarinn var ekki aðeins með mislanga fótleggi heldur líka lesbía, var sagt. Hún gekk um með lykla í regnbogalituðu bandi um hálsinn. Dag einn mætti hún í skólann í kjól og með varalit. Þvílík transvesta, góluðu strákarnir. Hún var á leið í jarðarför og girti óvart kjólinn ofan í sokkabuxurnar að aftan þegar hún kom haltrandi út af snyrtingunni. Tveimur vikum síðar kom það í fréttunum að heimagerðri sprengju úr (ugeldapúðri hefði verið komið fyrir á fatlaðrakilósettinu í skólanum. Hvern átti að a(ífa á allra heilögustu stundu? Tölvufræðikennarann? Eivöru Magneu í 8-Þ eða kannski Dverginnn með eyrað? Margar óskuðu sér að geta (úið þennan tíma.

*

Dvergurinn missti meydóminn með skólafélaga sem var árinu yngri en hún. Það var mikill aldursmunur, sér í lagi þegar stelpan var eldri.

Ég er samt enginn pedófill, sagði hún.

Nei, ég veit! svaraði hann.

Hann var Íslandsmeistari í sínum þyngdar(okki í karate og með áberandi spékopp á hægri kinn. Þetta er ekki spékoppur, sagði hann. Kinnin var löskuð eftir högg á stórmóti. Á kennarastofunni gekk raunaleg kjaftasaga: Að stjúppabbi hans hefði hrint honum á gluggakistu í bræðiskasti. Þess vegna var hún ekki með rómantískar yfirlýsingar varðandi spékoppinn. Hún sagði honum ekki að hún vildi sjá spékoppinn hans fyllast af vatni og verða að djúpri tjörn sem hún gæti druknað í.

Ég hef heyrt að þú sért algjört brainiac, sagði hann.

Og?

Ég hef heyrt að þú talir sex tungumál.

Og?

Stelpur eru yfirleitt lélegar í stærðfræði því þær ná ekki utan um abstrakt hugsun.

OG?

Þær eru betri í utanbókarlærdómi, tungumálum, íslensku. Ég hef heyrt að pabbi þinn sé í Hells Angels. Er pabbi þinn Pólverji? Ég spyr út af nafninu. Og hvað er málið með eyrað á þér?

Pabbi minn er frá Dalvík og keyrir vörubíl, þakka þér fyrir kærlega, svaraði hún og hélt um eyrað af gömlum vana þótt það væri þögult eins og gröfin. Þetta var undanfari getnaðarins.

Nokkru síðar fékk hún krampakast í sturtu. Fyrirvaralausir túrverkir, hélt hún, en blóðið fossaði niður á milli læranna. Svo fann hún eitthvað detta neðan úr sér. Blóðkögull rann til í baðkarinu. Hún var alls ekki komin langt á leið, fóstrið var ekki í nokkurri mannsmynd en hún sá að þetta voru ekki venjulegar blæðingar. Blóð og slím sytraði ofan í niðurfallið. Hún náði í pappír og veiddi köggulinn klaufalega upp úr karinu og sturtaði ofan í klósettið. Stakk svo matprjón (í baðskápnum kenndi ýmissa grasa, og eins geymdi „ölskyldan stundum naglaklippurnar á eldhúsbörðinu) ofan í niðurfallið til að ganga úr skugga um að það væri óstí(að, þannig að litlu systkini hennar færu ekki í sturtu og upp úr (yti eitthvað hræðilegt. Hún hellti sömuleiðis hálfum brúsa af stí(ueyði ofan í. Margra kynslóða gamalt farg þyngdi alla útlími. Tilfinningin var sönn og óbifanleg: Hún nennti þessu ekki.

Eyrað suðaði sem aldrei fyrr.

The Soap Bird

María Elísabet Bragadóttir

Translated into English by Larissa Kyzer

The Dwarf with the Ear

The Dwarf with the Ear was lazy and descended from a long line of lazy women, at least four generations back. It's not good to be lazy in Iceland, where doggedness and diligence are the highest virtues. And yet, her foremothers boasted about their laziness. They were proud women who bore reproofs and rumours with dignity. The Dwarf's mother got pregnant at fifteen so that she could get out of her oral exams and loll about in tanning beds instead. She biked back and forth from the tanning salon, pedalling so slowly that everyone she passed was amazed she was able to keep herself upright. The Dwarf's grandmother was notorious around the fish processing plant where she worked for walking off the line and curling up for a nap behind the redfish grader. Her great-grandmother was said to have done all her washing-up while seated, a cushion under her scrawny bum as she soaped plates and cups as slow as you please. Her great-great-grandmother supposedly drowned herself in the village creek rather than take part in the haymaking, as everyone was pushing her to do. Her last words: I just can't be bothered!

Sloth of this kind was an indication of a peculiar gift that passed from woman to woman: they travelled through time. All of them, to a woman, were time travellers. The laziness of the time traveller is a mystery, however, for which there are no known explanations. Maybe it stems from a lack of enthusiasm for the present moment or just an intolerance for a traditional life in time.

People who travel through space often have poor digestion because their internal clock gets thrown off mid-air. Time travellers, on the other hand, get a ringing in their ears. You can tell a time traveller by the fact that she's generally holding a hand over one ear and asking people to repeat themselves: What were you saying? It's a difficult and constant source of irritation, comparable to an itch or a burn, and it can be quite painful.

We bolster ourselves with words like *past* and *present* and *future*, but these are misleading concepts. Some facts about time travel: these journeys abide by no intelligible logic and as such, it's impossible to debate anything that pertains to them – no different from love or any mysterious illness you could name. Possessing this gift is, to be sure, a kind of thralldom. You can't change or cancel your ticket; there aren't any tickets. You could think of it like a binding agreement, signed at birth. And if a traveller gets stuck during their wanderings, the only possible outcome is death.

The women around the Dwarf knew that the gift was dormant within her, and yet, none of them stepped up to explain anything to her. That is, time travel has always been considered shameful, like defecation and sex, and so the Dwarf had to figure it out on her own. In books and movies, travel of this nature is always romanticised, but in reality, it's a wretched way to live.

*

It was the boys at school who gave her that name, the Dwarf with the Ear. Her mom said she was a lazy grower, that every cell in her body was in stubborn rebellion. Halfway through upper secondary school, she'd grown to 147 cm, about 4'8" or as her grandma put it: long of body and short of leg. She was sent to a doctor and weighed and measured every which way. The doctor said: Physically, she's a late bloomer and that ear of hers is always going to give her trouble, but that's the extent of it.

Final verdict: she was a pallid and pasty-faced dwarf with a ringing ear.

Every morning, she'd lock her bike at the entrance of the 9th grade wing. She had a sea blue combination lock, 7777 (a lucky number). On the bike frame, someone had scrawled in black marker: *Eivör Magnea in 8B is a little whore*. She crouched on her heels, pulled up a dandelion, and rubbed its blossom, hard, across the name, snapped the stalk and rolled it along the metal bar. The sap lent a yellowish-greenish tinge to the letters, but Eivör Magnea in 8B was still a little whore.

The vernacular of the halls was biblical; it was always virginity this and virginity that. Hey, don't devirginise my Coke, crowed the boys when they stampeded into the coat room, don't pop its cherry. To which, at the designated moment, a gaggle of girls would titter like tortured circus animals. For boys, losing their virginity was a rite of passage. And whether it was in the community centre toilet or under a brightly coloured Manchester United duvet, they were impatient to scrabble through the lusty gates of adolescence.

If a girl had a boyfriend, she lost her virginity out of a sense of duty – that was the common wisdom. Her boyfriend popped her cherry like he popped the cherry of a can of Coke by taking the first sip. In exchange for her sacrifice, the girl was rewarded with searing pain. It wasn't supposed to be nice, not even if done under romantic pretences. There was no escaping the shame, the girl was either too quick to lose her virginity (Eivör Magnea in 8B is a little whore) or too slow (she's a nun, her pussy is sewn shut and full of sand).

People said the computer teacher had sand in her pussy. What do they mean by that? asked the Dwarf with the Ear, tilting her head back with toilet paper stuffed in both nostrils. She always had bloody noses in those days. Her classmate stood close to the mirror dabbing bronzer on her cheeks and chest.

That someone needs to get a shovel and dig the sand out of her hoo-ha.

Right, the Dwarf said snuffily. I get what you mean.

It wasn't just that the computer teacher had legs that were two different lengths, she was also a lesbian, someone said. She wore her keys on a rainbow lanyard around her neck. One day, she came to school in a dress and wearing lipstick. What a tranny, howled the boys. She was going to a funeral and had accidentally tucked her dress into her nylons when she came hobbling out of the washroom. Two weeks later, they got the news that someone had put a bomb in the toilet on the 9th grade wing. Who was supposed to have been assassinated during that most holy of moments? The computer teacher? Eivör Magnea in 8B? Or maybe the Dwarf with the Ear? That was a time that many people would've liked to flee.

*

The Dwarf lost her virginity to a classmate who was a year younger than her. That was a big age gap, but that was okay, especially when the girl was older.

But still, I'm not like, some paedophile, she said.

Of course, I know! he answered.

He was the national karate champion in his weight class and had a deep dimple on his right cheek. It's not a dimple, he said. He got that when he was punched during a big tournament. There was an unhappy rumour going around that his stepfather had shoved him into a window ledge in a rage. Which is why she didn't make any romantic declarations about his dimple. She didn't tell him that she wanted to watch his dimple fill with water and become a deep pond she could drown in.

I've heard you're a total brainiac, he said.

So?

I've heard you speak six languages.

So?

Girls are usually bad at math because they don't get abstract thinking.

SO?

They're usually better at rote memorisation, languages, Icelandic. I've heard your dad is in the Hells Angels. Is your dad a Pole? I just ask 'cuz your name. And what's the deal with your ear?

My dad's from Dalvík and he drives a delivery truck, thank you very much, she said, holding a hand over her ear even though it was silent as the grave.

That was the prelude to her pregnancy.

A few weeks later, she got excruciating cramps in the shower. Just sudden period pain, she thought, blood gushing down her thighs. Then she felt something fall out of her. A bloody clump slipped around the bathtub. She wasn't very far along, the foetus wasn't in any kind of human form, but she could tell that wasn't normal bleeding. Blood and slime swirled around the drain. She grabbed some tissue and clumsily fished the clump out of the tub and flushed it down the toilet. She stuck a chopstick down the drain (all sorts of things could be found in that bathroom cabinet, just as her family often kept the nail clippers on the kitchen table), just to make absolutely sure it wasn't clogged and that her younger siblings wouldn't find something awful the next time they took a shower. She poured in half a bottle of drain cleaner, too. Her limbs were burdened with a weight many generations old. The feeling was true and unswerving: she couldn't be bothered with this.

Her ear started ringing like never before.

LATVIA



Daina TABŪNA

Raganas
Witches

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BIOGRAPHY

Daina Tabūna (born in 1985) is a Latvian writer. She graduated from the Latvian Academy of Culture, specialising in theatre, film and TV drama. Since 2000 she has been publishing prose and articles in cultural media. Her short story collection *Pirmā reize* (*The First Time*), a contemporary coming-of-age book, was shortlisted for the Annual Latvian Literary Award 2014 as the best debut of the year. Tabūna's stories have been published in the United Kingdom by The Emma Press as *The Secret Box*. Tabūna's works have also been translated into Chinese, German, Lithuanian and Slovenian. In 2022, Daina Tabūna's story for children 'Lasis Stasis und Atlasijas okeāns' (Salmon Sammy and the Ocean) was published. It was nominated for the Jānis Baltvilks award in children and youth literature and included in the long list of the Latvian Literature Award in the category 'Best work for children'. In 2023, her first novel *Raganas* (*Witches*) was published.

SYNOPSIS

Daina Tabūna's debut novel *Witches* focuses on a young woman's search for identity after a painful breakup. Despite her scepticism, Alma turns to esotericism, which includes taking courses with a mysterious priestess. In her dreams, she starts seeing women from different centuries who are social misfits and who seek solutions to crises (unwanted pregnancy, witch trials, political oppression, depression) in magical rituals. Alma begins researching the history of witchcraft and eventually translates her spiritual experiences and dreams into stories, which become a

kind of healing therapy. Gradually, Alma becomes aware of herself, discovers her voice and power. Themes such as self-acceptance, spirituality, religion, the feminine experience, the relationship with oneself and the world (family, friends, lovers) appear in the novel.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The novel captivates with its themes and self-irony. The reader can easily identify with the protagonist's experiences as she tries to get past the pain of a breakup and find a new way to make sense of the world. *Witches* has an unusual plot structure which counterbalances the contemporary life of the protagonist with the experiences of marginalised women from earlier centuries. It allows the novel to transcend a narrow focus on the particularities of the protagonist's life and grapple with universal issues, while also providing an intriguing insight into the historical roots of esoteric beliefs and sidestepping the stereotypes. Despite the seemingly patchwork design of the novel, Tabūna manages to keep a consistent tone in her storytelling and weaves the different strands of the narrative into a compelling whole. She also avoids the pitfalls of either preaching or treating the esoteric themes as a joke, striking a delicate balance thanks to a genuine curiosity and strong understanding of the importance of bonds between women, whether family or friends. She welcomes the reader to this journey of self-discovery and provides a clear-eyed view of the age-old desire to look for answers outside of the physical realm. *International Writers' and Translators' House*

Raganas

Daina Tabūna



Kad visas izteikušās, Priesterienes palīdzē visām salej krūzēs tēju, kas gatavota no īpaši izraudzītiem augiem. Kamēr dalībnieces to malko, Priesteriene sāk stāstīt par dievietēm. Viņa runā par šumeru Inannu, kas tika nogalināta, pakārta pie āķa un trīs dienas vēlāk augšāmcēlās – vairāk nekā tūkstoš gadu pirms Jēzus. Viņa stāsta par indiešu Kali – šausminošu, asinskāru, iznīcinošu, bet vienmēr taisnīguma pusē esošu. Priesteriene piemin Gaju un Freiju, Māru un Persefoni. Viņa skaidro, kā ikviena no dievietēm ir kāda no Mātes Dabas šķautnēm un līdz ar to – daļiņa no katras sievietes, no katras šai telpā esošās.

Tad visas tiek aicinātas iekārtoties pēc iespējas ērtāk, vislabāk – atgulties uz paklāja starp spilveniem un aizvērt acis. Tiek ieslēgta mūzika, un Priesteriene sāk noturēt meditāciju. Klausītājas tiek izvadātas pa pļavām un birzīm, gar strautiem un kokiem, līdz tiek aicinātas iztēloties kāpnes, pa kurām lēnām jākāpj augšā. Kad sasniegts beidzamais pakāpiens, katrai no iesaistītajām ceļojums būs jāturpina vienatnē.

Līdzīga veida meditācija bija arī iepriekšējā sesijā. Toreiz, kad Priesterienes balss bija apklususi, Almu pārņēma neliels apjukums. Vai viņai tagad kaut kas būtu jāredz, prātā jāuzrodas kaut kādiem tēliem? Nekas tāds nenotika. Viņa domās sāka piekasīties skanošajai mūzikai – kā tā neatbilst viņas iekšējām izjūtām un drīzāk traucē, nekā palīdz; piemiegtām acīm centās palūrēt, kā šai mirkli izskatās citas, it kā tas varētu ko līdzēt. Nokratīja domas par iepirkumu sarakstu, ko neviļus jau bija sākusi sacerēt. Uz meditācijas beigām Almai tomēr izdevās uztaustīt stīgu, kas likās daudz maz atbilstoša –

tā bija tāda kā saraustīta montāža, atmiņas par dažādām vietām. Tur bija mežs netālu no vecmamma lauku mājas; tur bija nomaļā pludmale, uz kuru viņa reiz vidusskolas laikā spontāni aizstopēja ar draudzenēm; tur bija Bulgārijas kalnu ceļš, ko Alma bija mērojusi pārgājienā, kad piedalījās jauniešu apmaiņas programmā. (No tādām atmiņām, kas saistījās ar Robertu, viņa tišām izvairījās, par tām likās labāk nedomāt.) Viņa atcerējās saules, vēja, ūdens šlakstu pieskārienus savai ādai; kā viņa šajās vietās bija jutusies brīva un priecīga, kaut vai uz mirkli.

Taču, kad dažas pārējās padalījās ar savu meditācijas pieredzi, Alma saprata, ka acīmredzot ir darījusi to nepareizi.

Viņa bija pārsteigta – un, jāatzīst, sajuta arī zināmu skaudību – par to, ar kādu nopietnību citas dalījās ar izvērstiem, fantasmagorišķiem sižetiem; viens pat ietvēra vietējo slavenību piedalīšanos. Ko šie tēli varētu nozīmēt, runātājas lūdza izteikt versijas. Tu to visu vienkārši izdomāji, Almai gribējās atcirst. Taču balsi viņa izteica tikai pāris atturīgas simbolu interpretācijas.

Šoreiz viņa ir izlēmusi, ka darīs tāpat kā citas – dos vaļu fantāzijai, sacerēs kaut kādu brīnumpasaku ar sevi galvenajā lomā. Ja jau pārējās tā var, tad var arī viņa. Kad Priesteriene aicina doties augšup pa kāpnēm, Alma prātā pārtin duci dažādu variantu – ļodzīgas virvju trepes; nodeldētus šķērskokus uz stāvas meža takas; platus marmora pakāpienus. Visbeidzot, kad Priesteriene likusi spert jau pēdējo, desmito soli, Alma ierauga tās pašas akmens kāpnes ar izvītajām margām, pa kurām šodien uzkāpusi šurp. Tad Priesteriene aplkust. Tālāk ir jāiet pašām.

Labi, Alma nolemj, ja reiz kāpnes ir no šejienes, tad tepat vien jāturpina. Viņa izdomā nevis iet, bet gan levitēt mazliet virs grīdas, kā to nesen darījusi sapnī; iztēlojas, kā pārļaižas pāri sliksnim, cauri priekšnamam, garām jaku un zābaku rindai, tad ieslid šai pašā telpā. Domās Alma ierauga visas pārējās sievietes, aizvērtām acīm, nogūlušās uz grīdas, dažas atstutējušās pret sienu. Vai te ir arī Priesteriene? Nē, Alma nolemj, te galvenā būs viņa pati. Viņa

nolaižas pavisam tuvu dažām no līdzgaitniecēm – tā, ka var sajūst viņu elpu, izpētīt poras uz viņu deguniem. Vai šeit atrodas arī pati Alma? Jā, turpat savā vietā, starp sagurušo vēža vīra kundzi un jauniņo, jūsmīgo tuneļu meiteni. Alma nolaižas pie sava ķermeņa – aplūko pavisam sīkās rievīņas uz pieres un ap muti, atpazīst vēnas uz rokām, kas, saliktas virs vēdera, viegli cilājas ieelpā un izelpā. Noturēt sižetu nav viegli – nemitīgi nākas sasprindzināties, lai iztēles ainas neiestrēgtu un neizplēnētu; taču pamazām viņa sāk to mazliet izbaudīt. Viņa izdomā savienoties ar savu ķermeni, ienirst tajā un atkal paceļas augstāk virs grīdas. Meditācijas mūzika uzņem apgrīzienus, un Alma sajūtas ēvergēlīgi. Visām būtu jālido, viņai ienāk prātā. Vienā no pēdējām naktīm viņai sapnī bija sanācis ar skatienu kustināt priekšmetus – sākumā mazus, kā karoti vai grāmatu, bet beigās izdevās noturēt gaisā pat zvārojošos veco laiku televizoru. Sapņos lidināt baru cilvēku viņa droši vien nejaudās vēl ilgi, bet šeit – kādēļ ne! Alma iedomājas, kā, viņai paceļot augšup rokas, no grīdas atraujas visas telpā esošās sievietes. Tūlīt pat pēc Almas pavēles atdarās vaļā logi, lai katra varētu lidot, kur labpatīk. Dažas atver acis un uzreiz izlaižas ārā, citas paliek tāpat guļus stāvoklī, tikai tagad maigi ligojoties sprīdi virs zemes. Alma uzmet viņām pēdējo skatu un izvirpuļo ārā arī pati.

Planējot pāri savai krēslojošai pilsētai, viņa ātri saprot, ka nejut salu. Drēbes kļuvušas liekas, un viņa atbrīvojas no tām. Virs Brīvības ielas Alma nolaižas zemāk un panerro nejaušos kājāmgājējus. Kāds iedzēris tēvainis cenšas aizķert Almas baso stilbu, bet viņai izdodas izvairīties. Bariņš pusaugu meiteņu tver pēc telefoniem un sāk filmēt kailo sievieti, kas plivinās tām virs galvas; no pareizticīgo baznīcas iznākusi tantiņa met krustus un purpina lūgšanas – Alma parāda viņām visām mēli. Bet šādi izklaidēties viņai ātri apnīk, un Alma, atkal izlavierējusi starp trolejbusu vadiem, uzņem augstumu.

Viņu pārņem dzinulis doties prom no pilsētas. Viņa pārulaižas pāri jumtam mājai, kur dzīvo Roberts; tad arī viņas pašas ēka uzzibsnī un izgaist aiz muguras. Jau drīz zem viņas plešas satumsis mežs un

pie apvāršņa sāk iezīmēties jūra. Savos sapņos Alma jau ir lidojusi virs siliem un aizskārusi koku galotnes, laidelējusies pāri ūdeņiem. Bet tagad viņa atskārst, ka nekad nav uzdrošinājusies izmēģināt, cik tieši augstu debesīs var pacelties; kaut kas tur vienmēr biedējis, spiedis uz leju. Alma sasprindzina prātu un sāk brāzties augšup.

Viņa izlaužas cauri mākoņiem, ierauga vēl pēdējos saules starus, kas atblāzmo pie horizonta; tad vēl viens biezs, šķietami necaurbrienams mākoņu slānis. Viņa traucas ātrāk un ātrāk, līdz saprot, ka nonākusi izplatījumā. Zeme palikusi aiz muguras. Almas ķermenis kaut kur pa ceļam ir sairis un atdalījies, bet apziņa turpina nesties starp planētu plejādēm, asteroīdiem un miglājiem. Šeit nav, no kā baidīties. Viņa turpina orbitēt starp zvaigznēm, it kā tā būtu vienīgā lieta, ko viņai jebkad bijis paredzēts darīt.

Witches

Daina Tabūna

Translated into English by Kaija Straumanis

Once everyone has spoken, the Priestess' assistant helps pour everyone a tea prepared from special herbs. While the women sip the tea, the Priestess begins to tell them about goddesses. She talks about the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who was killed, hung up on a hook, and who returned from the underworld three days later – over a thousand years before Jesus. She talks about Kali – the terrifying, bloodthirsty, destructive Indian goddess who was nonetheless always on the side of justice. She talks about Gaia and Freya, Māra and Persephone. She explains that each of the goddesses is an offshoot of Mother Earth and as such is a part of every woman here in this room.

Then they're told to make themselves comfortable and lie down among the pillows on the rug, eyes closed. Music starts to play, and the Priestess guides them through meditation. The women are led through fields and groves, along streams and trees, until they are asked to imagine reaching a staircase that they slowly walk up. When they reach the final step, each of them is to continue their path on their own.

They had a similar guided meditation in the previous session. When the Priestess' voice had fallen silent, Alma had felt a bit confused. Was she supposed to be seeing something, was her mind supposed to show her images? Nothing happened. So instead she began to think about the music, how it didn't match how she was feeling and was more annoying than helpful; keeping her eyelids low, she tried to peek through her lashes to see what the others looked like right then – as if that would help. She wiped her mind of the shopping list she'd unwittingly started to make. Toward the end of the med-

itation, however, she was able to grasp onto a thread that seemed appropriate: it resembled a jumbled montage of memories from various places. The woods near her grandma's countryside home; the hidden beach she and her friends had once hitchhiked to in high school; the Bulgarian mountain trail she'd hiked while on a youth exchange programme. (She purposely avoided memories connected to Roberts – it was better not to go there.) She remembered the sun, wind, and water splashing onto her skin; she remembered how free and happy she'd felt in those places, if even for a moment.

But when some of the women shared their meditation experiences, Alma could see that she'd apparently done it all wrong.

She was surprised, and, admittedly, a bit jealous, over how earnestly these women described the expansive, phantasmagoric things they'd seen – one even included a local celebrity. What did it all mean, the women asked for explanations. You made it all up, Alma wanted to snap. Instead, she offered a few hesitant interpretations.

This time she's decided to do what the other women do – give in to fantasy, make up some kind of fairy tale with herself in the leading role. If the other women can do it, so can she. When the Priestess leads them up the staircase, Alma runs through a dozen options in her mind: a rickety rope ladder; worn-down lengths of lumber on a steep forest path; wide marble steps. When the Priestess tells them they've reached the tenth and final step, Alma sees the same stone steps with the winding banister that she'd climbed today to get here. Then the Priestess falls silent. Now they go on alone.

Okay, Alma thinks, if those are the steps she gets, then those are the steps she'll take. She decides to levitate instead of walk, a bit above the floor, like she's done in a recent dream. She imagines herself floating over the threshold, through the foyer, past the row of coats and boots, and into this very room. In her mind, she sees the other women, eyes closed, lying on the floor or sitting against the wall. Is the Priestess here too? No, Alma decides, she'll be leader here. She

lowers herself very close to a few of the other women, close enough to feel their breathing, see the pores on their noses. Is Alma here? She is, right where she was, between the tired old woman with the cancer-husband and the young, enthusiastic woman with the tunnel piercings. Alma lowers herself over her own body – looks at the tiny lines on her forehead and around her mouth, sees the familiar veins on the backs of her hands, which, resting on her stomach, move slowly up and down as she breathes. It's not easy maintaining the scene – she has to stay focused to keep the images from faltering or dissipating; but little by little she finds herself enjoying it. She decides to reconnect with her body, dive down into it and then rise up again, higher this time. The meditative music takes a turn and Alma feels impish. Everyone should be floating, she thinks. In one of her recent dreams she'd been able to move objects telepathically. Small stuff at first, like a spoon or a book, but in the end she was even able to wobbly levitate an old-school television. She probably won't be able to levitate an entire group of people in her dreams any time soon, but here – why not! Alma imagines all the women in the room rising up off the floor as she lifts her arms. Then the windows open at her command, allowing each woman to fly off to wherever she pleases. A few of them open their eyes and fly out immediately, others remain stretched out with their eyes closed, hovering gently above the floor. Alma takes one more look at them and then also whirls out through the window.

As she floats above her twilight city, she's quick to realise she doesn't feel cold. Her clothes are superfluous, and she sheds them. Above Brīvības Street, Alma floats down to tease unsuspecting passersby. A drunk older man tries to grab her bare leg, but she manages to slip past him. A group of teenaged girls whip out their phones and start to film the naked woman flying overhead; an old woman coming out of the Orthodox church crosses herself and starts muttering prayers – Alma sticks her tongue out at all of them. But she gets

bored of this quickly, and, making her way past the trolley wires, she flies higher.

She's overcome with the desire to leave the city. She flies over the roof of the building where Roberts lives; then her own building flashes in and out of view. Soon she's passing over a darkened forest and up ahead she can make out the sea on the horizon. In her dreams she's flown over pine forests and has touched the treetops, has skimmed over bodies of water. But it occurs to her now that she's never gotten the courage to see just how high up she can go; something has always scared her, held her down. Alma steels her mind and shoots upward.

She breaks through the clouds, spots the last rays of sunlight on the horizon; then through one more thick, seemingly impenetrable layer of clouds. She flies faster and faster until she realises she's reached outer space. She's left Earth behind. Somewhere along the way her body has fallen apart and scattered, but her consciousness continues onward among the planets and galaxies, asteroids and nebulas. There's nothing to fear up here. She keeps orbiting among the stars, as if it were the only thing she was ever meant to do.

MALTA



Ir-Re Borg *The King of Malta*

SKS Publishers, 2022

Language: Maltese

ISBN: 9789993217749

BIOGRAPHY

Aleks Farrugia (born in 1978) is an author, historian and journalist. His first work was a drama, *Iħirsa fil-Mera*. His debut novel *Grasshopper* (2016) was shortlisted for the National Book Prize. His short story collection, *Għall-Glorja tal-Patrija* (2019), secured him the prize in that category in 2020, while his second novel *Camerata!* (2021) was also shortlisted. *Ir-Re Borg* (2022) is his latest novel. Farrugia is Director (Culture) at the Culture Directorate and Site Manager for Valletta as the Unesco World Heritage Site.

SYNOPSIS

Mikiel Borg, a grocer known as 'Iċ-Chopper', transforms from a village debater to an unlikely political disruptor in Aleks Farrugia's *Ir-Re Borg*. After a trivial incident forces him to face Malta's bureaucratic institutions, Mikiel battles profound depression until a media binge sparks him an idea. He launches 'The Monarchical Party of Malta', challenging the two-party system. Despite initial scepticism, Mikiel wins the election, becoming a populist firebrand. However, a viral video stains his triumph, marking the start of a dramatic downfall. Farrugia's satirical narrative delves into Maltese politics, featuring Machiavellian manoeuvres, the unlikely social ascent of Mikiel's band club drinking buddies, all framed against the nuts and bolts of the Maltese electoral campaign and its fallout. Mikiel's flaws mirror the nation's, adding depth to the tragicomedy, inviting readers to ponder populist movements and the challenges of positive change.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The Nomination Board from Malta is nominating Aleks Farrugia's novel *Ir-Re Borg* to be considered by the organisers of the European Union Prize for Literature. This novel is a contemporary portrait of Malta's

idiosyncracies as the smallest Member State of the European Union. It is a literary work that gives voice to the commoner amidst the clamour of super-politicians, who perform politics as a marketing and branding exercise. Mikiel Borg, the main protagonist of the novel, penetrates through this din with an electoral success, but perhaps not deeply enough to realise that he is undoubtedly a result, or a product, of a politics that is detached from the common citizens' everyday life (in this country that could be traversed in 10 minutes from any point on the island). So, do we truly practise democracy in Malta? Mikiel has an answer: 'NO', and the solution for this is a new Maltese Monarchic Party. The monarchy reminds Maltese readers of the country's political past as a British colony (Malta became a republic in 1974), and this is where the writer's prowess comes in, revisiting episodes in Maltese history to weave narratives that relate to the present. In fact, this novel can be considered as an extension of a collection of short stories with which Farrugia won the National Book Prize in 2020. The contradiction between revolutionary thought and the method of monarchic rule (the same rule that the people had rejected in the previous century) is the chink in the armour that leads to the tragic downfall of Mikiel on a personal level, but also on the national level as a



people – have we Maltese learned from our past or are we still tripping over it? The ideological discourse emerges out of strategic plot points that trace Mikiel's political trajectory, the soil from which the Maltese Monarchic Party sprouts. Nevertheless, the narrative does not provide solutions, and the final anticlimax leaves the reader examining their conscience regarding the citizen's role along with that of the politician in Malta, and by extension, the role of the Maltese citizen and politician in the EU. We are therefore nominating this book because by predicting, without being pretentious, what would happen if core democratic values such as human rights and dignity, equality, respect, tolerance and the rule of law are put aside, it invites the reader to strive towards these crucial EU values as an active citizen.

National Book Council in Malta

Ir-Re Borg

Aleks Farrugia



1. L-irċevuta

“Iż-żgħir jibqa’ ż-żgħir u ebd’ Alla mhu se jidhol għalih!”

Mikiel Borg, magħruf mar-raħal bħala ċ-Chopper, sabbat idejh fuq il-bank u l-laned tat-tonn taż-żejt tregħdu. Iż-żewġ nisa weqfin quddiemu barmu xofftejhom u xenglu rashom jaqblu miegħu. Tharsilhom minn wara ma kontx tqishom daqstant żgħar; bejniethom kienu jwasslu minn tarf għall-iehor tal-bank li warajh kien qed jitmašan Mikiel. Imma! F’dal-pajjiż minn tagħna hekk l-affarijiet: aktar ma fik anqas ma ssarraf – perla oħra li kien hareġ biha Mikiel Borg, li reġa’ heżżeż il-bank b’żewġ ponnijiet magħqudin.

“Ebd’ Alla!” irrepeta biex żgur ikun sammar il-punt, u sallab idejh fuq żaqqu.

Iċ-Chopper kellu hanut tal-merċa fih daqs konfessinarju. Kien wiehed minn dawk il-ħwienet werrieta tal-antik, bit-tabella tal-perspex fi gwarniċ tal-aluminju dehbi fuq il-bieb, bil-bank tal-injam bil-wiċċ tal-formajka u fuq ġenb, maqfula fil-plastik, il-cash register trabbi t-trab.

Mikiel iċ-Chopper kelma kien jgħidha. U għal kelma jgħidlek tnejn jew tlieta. Inkella taqbd u l-indiġestjoni.

Mhux anqas żbukkati kienu l-parruċċana. Aktarx imdahħla fiż-żmien, ta' kull filgħodu kienu jingabru biex jixtru l-istess erba' bċejjeċ ta' kuljum – dak il-kwart perżut, ħobża mqatta' kemxejn maħruqa u kartuna ħalib – u waqt li jagħmlu dan itaqtqu bla heda, donnhom il-membri ta' xi setta mehdijin ifasslu kif se jaħkmu d-dinja. U jekk dawk il-parruċċana kienu setta, Mikiel Borg iċ-Chopper kien il-Qassis il-Kbir tagħhom; leħnu jkarwat fuq ta' kulhadd, mimli bl-awtorità li kienet tagħtih l-istiker “I'm the Boss” imdeffsa bejn il-gwarniċ u l-ħġieġa tgħatti l-ħarsa ebetika ta' Dun Ġorġ jifli sieket lil dik il-miġemgħa ċkejka ta' opinjonisti.

“Isma' Mikiel, aġħmilli l-kont xbin, għax illum ma nistax indum,” werżqet Ċetta, tqabbeż sidirha jrid jinbeżaq minn bejn il-buttuni se jisparaw.

“Mela mgħaġġla Ċett?” staqsiha Mikiel, filwaqt li hemiżha kollu nelħ u nkejja, “Jaqaw? Irid illum?”

“U hallini minnek Mikiel! M'għandekx xi tgħid għodu għodu jew?” ħatfitu l-oħra, “Ara, kwart perżut tal-koxxa, ħobża u kartuna mill-bluni. Aġħmilli l-kont!”

“Tuni ċans ħa nagħmlilha l-kont,” qal Mikiel lill-bqija, “Għax mid-dehra llum honeymooner Ċetta!”

U mingħajr ma stenna twegiba lura, ġibed il-ktieb daqs reġistru minn taħt il-bank, tefa' l-biro bejn snienu u fethu min-nofs. Ħażżeż erba' numri fil-kantuniera t'isfel tal-paġna safranija, imbagħad ħasadha minn mal-bqija u newwel it-trijanglu tal-karta lil Ċetta.

“Mela reġ'għola l-ħalib?” staqsietu dik.

“Issa jien xi tridni nagħmel Ċett? Lanqas li għollejtu jien!”

“Ma nafx jien. L-affarijiet jogħlew hekk, mil-lum għal għada. Fejn se nispiċċaw? Li biex tixtri kartuna ħalib trid tissellef mill-bank?”

L-oħrajn qablu magħha, ibarqmu minn taħt l-ilsien donnhom ħamiam, jitkażaw b'kemm għoliet il-ħajja, kif bil-pensjoni ma tlaħħaqx u li jekk l-affarijiet jibqgħu sejrin hekk aħjar Alla jieħdok milli jikkastigak tgħix ta' pensjonant. Ċetta bħal donnha nsiet x'kellha jistenniha daqstant mgħaġġel u qattgħet kwarta oħra ttaqtaq u xxejjer il-ponnijiet kontra l-gvern, bħallikieku minn ġo dik it-toqba xi ħadd f'Kastilja kien se jisma' l-ilmenti tagħha. Imbagħad meta kienet għoddha nħanqet sellmitilhom u dabbret rasha 'l barra.

Bilkemm kienet għadha niżlet l-għatba tal-ħanut li ma sabitx quddiemha ġuvnott bl-ingravata m'għonqu u nuċċali tax-xemx. Bis-saħna li kien għad kellha fuqha kienet diġà lesta biex toħroġ idha u twarrbu min-nofs, imma hu kien eħfef minnha. Għolla idu bħal tat-traffik u amrilha biex tieqaf.

“Xi trid?” staqsietu.

“L-irċevuta,” weġibha.

“X'irċevuta? Ta' xiex?”

“L-irċevuta fiskali,” reġa' dak, “Tax-xirja li għadek kemm għamilt.”

“U mur warrabli min-nofs li ma ngħidlikx,” reġgħet hi se taqbad il-pass biex titlaq 'l hemm.

“Sinjura ...”

“Sinjura xejn, warrabli.”

“Sinjura ma nistax inħallik titlaq. Qed nitlobok l-irċevuta.”

“U jien ma rridx intihielek l-irċevuta!”

“Sinjura, bil-liġi ...”

“U jien nitnejjek mil-liġi.”

“Inħarrkek!”

Ħabat se jibda jgħolli leĥnu. U ma' Ċetta hadd ma jgħolli leĥnu, lanqas żewġha li daħal il-ħabs darbtejn.

“Ismagħni x’ha ngħidlek,” fethitilha, “Warrabli min-nofs għax rasek ktieb niftaħhiekek. U lili tiġinix bil-liġijiet u mhux liġijiet. Mhux biżżejjed it-taxxi li nħallsu u l-prezzijiet dejjem jogħlew! Xi tridu aktar? Tqaxxruna ħajjin?”

“X’gara Ċett?”

Kien Mikiel, li kif sema’ l-għajjat ġej minn barra feġġ biex jara x’inqala’.

“X’gara Mikiel?! Ġej jitlobni l-irċevuta, ja wiċċ ta’ maħmuġ li hu!”

Mikiel daħal bejn Ċetta u l-ġuvernott tal-ingravata.

“Sir, fehemha ftit. Jien hawn xogħli qed nagħmel. Bagħtuni mid-dipartiment.”

“Allura minn Malta u Għawdex kollha hawn bagħtuk?” staqsih Mikiel, b’subgħu ppuntat anqas minn pulzier bogħod minn imnieher il-ġuvernott.

“Jien fejn jibagħtuni mmur, ħabib,” wiegħbu l-ieħor mingħajr ma tmeżmeż.

“Ħabib xejn,” għolla leĥnu Mikiel, “Mhux biżżejjed kemm inħallas taxxa? Għax ma bagħtukx wara l-bieb ta’ xi pampalun milli jaqlagħlhom il-belli liri għall-partit, mela wara biebi!”

“Sir, kulma rrid huwa li nara l-irċevuta.”

“U dabbar rasek ‘I hemm ja purċinell!” reġgħet Ċetta, li bl-intervent ta’ Mikiel bdiet tħossha eskluża mill-azzjoni.

“Purċinell!” wiegħbu f’kor in-nisa l-oħra, għonqhom imġebbed minn bejn il-ħjut tal-purtiera tal-lewlu, herqanin li huma wkoll juru d-diżapprovazzjoni tagħhom.

Iż-żagħżuġh ħabat se jinfixel.

“Jekk mhux se nara rċevuta se noħroġ taħrika u nagħmel rapport!”

“U lil min se tħarrek bħalek?” staqsih Mikiel, wiċċu vjola.

“Lilek u lil din il-mara!”

“Ma tħarrikx l-ommok hux!” qabżet Ċetta.

L-istoriċi ta’ dan il-pajjiż jaqblu li dak li seħħ dak il-ħin kien il-murtal tal-ftuħ għal episodju li jibqa’ mfakkar fl-istorja ta’ dawn il-gżejjer. Mal-kelma ‘ommok’ u l-bżieq kollu li ħareġ minn ħalqha, Ċetta refgħet idha bil-borża tal-plastik b’kulma kien fiha u bdiet il-proċess li tfajjarha f’wiċċ il-ġuvnott. F’nofs il-proċess, l-id żvelta ta’ Mikiel daħlet fin-nofs biex tilqa’ għad-daqqa ta’ Ċetta, imma bis-saħħa li kienet laħqet ġemgħet dik l-id armata bix-xirja, id Mikiel tħarrket ‘il quddiem sa ma sabet il-wiċċ bla leħja tal-ġuvnott u n-nuċċali tax-xemx dlonk tar minn fuq imnieħru donnu missila, li l-ewwel sparat ‘il fuq u mbagħad dawret ir-rotta ‘l isfel sa ma nfaqgħet mal-art.

Iż-żagħżuġh instaram, Mikiel tnixxef, u Ċetta barmet il-ponnijiet fuq qaddha lestha għat-tieni rawnd.

Il-kor tan-nisa wara l-purtiera leħħen ‘O!’ twila, b’vuċi waħda, ‘O!’ ta’ stennija mdendla b’ħajta tħassib.

Kif għaddielu kemm kemm ix-xokk, iż-żagħżuġh mexa sal-fdalijiet tan-nuċċali, ġabarhom u dar lejn Mikiel, li kien għadu wieqaf donnu l-arblu tad-dawl f’tarf il-bankina. Xengel tnejn rasu u telaq ‘l hemm, bla kliem u bla sliem.

Għal Ċetta dik kienet rebħa. U magħha qabel il-kor.

Imma Mikiel ma kienx daqstant ċert. Filwaqt li Ċetta nisġet paniġierku sħiħ dwar kif dawn ‘tal-gvern’ tmurilhom il-pulikarja kollha malli teqfilhom u turilhom li taf x’inhu d-dritt tiegħek, Mikiel

baqa' b'fommu mitbuq, imtertaq minn ġewwa, jistenna li minn ħin għall-ieħor jara lis-surgent ġej wara biebu.

Ma kienx żbaljat. Bilkem il-kor kien għadu ntona l-Amen wara l-panigierku ta' Ċetta li ma tfaċċawx is-surgent u kuntistabbli miegħu, inemmsu minn wara l-purtiera tal-lewlu. Qalb Mikiel għamlet tikk. Ir-rappreżentanti tal-bon ordni ferqu l-ħjut tal-lewlu u daħlu fil-ħanut.

“Mikiel, tiġi magħna sal-għassa?”

“Sal-għassa?” tenna skunċertat Mikiel.

“Għandna rapport li ma tajtx irċevuta fiskali, li ħebbejt għal ufficcjal pubbliku u li għamiltu danni fi hwejjeġ personali tiegħu.”

“Imma surgent, jaħasra, dak inċident ...”

“Mhux aħjar tiġi sal-għassa tispjegalna kollox?”

“U l-ħanut?”

“Mikiel, il-ħanut tagħlqu. Ejja magħna bil-kelma t-tajba. Isma' minni.”

Mikiel haress lejn il-parruċcana. Quddiem l-uniformi ħadd minnhom ma tniffes. Dlonk nibet f'moħħu d-dubju jekk isibx ruħ fosthom li titla' tixhed favur tiegħu. Lanqas Ċetta, li issa kienet rasha baxxuta tistaħba wara żewġ membri tal-kor. M'hemmx x'tagħmel Mikiel. Mhux aħjar tmur tagħlaq u tara kif se tfehemhom li ma kinitx l-intenzjoni tiegħek li tfajjarha f'wiċċ dak il-ġuvnott?

“Niġi surgent, imma żball qed tagħmlu. Żball kbir! Għax jien ma ridt nagħmel ħsara lil ħadd. Inċident kien.”

“Issa nitkellmu l-għassa,” qallu s-surgent, “Aghlaq, u aħna se nkunu qegħdin nistennewk hawn barra.”

Mikiel fetaħ idejh donnhom se jsallbuh u l-parruċcana ħarġu mill-ħanut f'purċissjoni. Is-surgent u l-kuntistabbli kienu laħqu qabbdu sigarett. Mikiel għalaq il-ħanut u rħewlha t-tlieta li huma lejn l-għassa.

Ma dewmuhx aktar minn nofsiegħa. Talbuh il-verżjoni tiegħu ta' kif seħhew l-affarijiet, iffirma l-istqarrija u baġtuh 'l hemm. Qabel ma ħareġ mill-għassa s-surgent wissieh biex imur ikellem avukat u jelenka x-xhieda li ried itella' l-qorti favurih.

Kif ħareġ minn hemm la kellu ħajra u lanqas saħħa jerġa' jiftaħ il-ħanut. Martu Karmena nħasdet kif ratu ġej lura d-dar qabel il-ħin. Mill-ewwel bassret li nqalghetlu xi ħaġa u mill-bixra ta' wiċċu ntebħet li l-ħaġa kienet kbira sew. Ma kellux aptitha. Ried jitla' jorqod imma kien jaf li jekk ma kienx se jitmagħalha l-kurżità kienet se tibqa' tippersegwitah u xorta ma thallihx imidd rasu fuq l-imħadda. Malli qalilha li kien għadu ġej mill-għassa u rrakkuntalha kulma ġara ħasibha se tibqa' sejra dritt id-dinja l-oħra.

Is-sagħtejn ta' wara qattagħhom magħha l-poliklinik.

The King of Malta

Aleks Farrugia

Translated into English by Kat Storace

‘The little man will always be the little man, and no god will ever stand up for him!’

Mikiel Borg, known as Chopper to everyone in the village, slammed his hands down onto the shop counter and the tuna cans trembled. The two women standing in front of him pursed their lips and nodded their heads in agreement. Looking at them from behind, you wouldn’t exactly consider them little; between them, their figures took up the entire length of the counter behind which Mikiel was simmering with rage. Nevertheless! That’s how things are in this country of ours: the more of you there was, the less you were valued – another of Mikiel Borg’s pearls of wisdom, who shook the counter again with two closed fists.

‘No god!’ he repeated, to really hammer the point home, and crossed his arms over his belly.

Chopper owned a grocery the size of a confessional booth. It was one of those old-style shops with a cast acrylic sign set in a golden aluminium frame above the entrance, and a wooden counter fitted with a Formica top. The cash register stood to one side, secured in a plastic bag, gathering dust.

Mikiel was not one to mince his words. Whenever someone said something to him, his retort would be as immediate as it was lengthy. Any restraint risked giving him indigestion.

His regular customers were just as chatty. Mostly older in age, they’d congregate every morning to buy the same four daily items – a portion of ham, a sliced loaf, slightly toasted, and a carton of milk –

and, in the meantime, they'd natter away endlessly like members of a sect scheming about how they were going to take over the world. And if those customers had indeed been a sect, then Mikiel would've been their High Priest; his voice booming above everyone else's, filled with the authority bestowed upon him by the words on the sticker 'I'm the Boss' jammed between the hanging frame and its glass, and obscuring the idiotic gaze of Dun Ġorġ Preca quietly observing that small gathering of opinionated critics.

'The bill, Mikiel. I can't stay long today,' screamed Cetta, her bosom bouncing up and down threatening to burst through the stretched-out buttons on her shirt.

'In a hurry are we Cett?' asked Mikiel, winking saucily at her. 'How come? In the mood, is he?'

'Oh leave off Mikiel! Haven't you got anything better to do this morning?' she snapped. 'Listen, some ham off the bone, a loaf and one of the blue cartons of milk. And make up the bill!'

'Just a second, let me add up her bill,' said Mikiel to the others, 'because by the sound of things Cetta's a honeymooner today!'

And without waiting for a reply, he pulled out the giant ledger book from under the counter, and taking a pen between his teeth, opened it somewhere in the middle. He scribbled four numbers in the bottom corner of the yellowing page, then ripped it out and passed the triangle of paper to Cetta.

'Price of milk's gone up again, has it?' she asked.

'And what do you want me to do about it, Cett? It's not like I put the price up myself!'

'Oh, I don't know. Everything's becoming more expensive, just like that, from one day to the next. Where will it leave us? We'll all have to borrow money from the bank just to buy some milk.'

The others agreed with her, cooing under their breaths like pigeons, shaking their heads at the cost of living, at how their pension didn't take them far, and that if things continued the way they were going, you'd be better off dead than being condemned to life as a pensioner. Cetta had forgotten whatever it was that was waiting for her in such a hurry and spent another quarter of an hour babbling and waving her fists at the government, as if from that hole in the wall someone in the Prime Minister's office could hear her complaints. Then, when she'd shouted herself hoarse, she said her goodbyes and left.

She'd barely stepped beyond the shop's doorstep when she found a young man standing before her, sunglasses on and tie knotted around his neck. Still feeling riled up, she was prepared to push him out of the way, but he was quicker than her. He lifted his arm like a traffic controller and gestured to her to stop.

'What do you want?' she asked.

'The receipt,' he replied.

'Receipt? For what?'

'The fiscal receipt,' he continued, 'for the stuff you've just bought.'

'Get out of my way, you...,' she said, ready to take off again.

'Sinjura...'

'Don't Sinjura me, out of my way.'

'Sinjura, I can't let you leave. I'm asking you for the receipt.'

'And I don't want to give you the receipt!'

'Sinjura, the law states...'

'And I don't give a damn about the law.'

'I'm warning you, I'll take you to court!'

He was starting to raise his voice. But nobody raised their voice with Cetta, not even her husband, who'd been to prison twice.

'Now you listen to me,' she said. 'Get out of my way before I smash your head open. And don't come to me with your laws and not-laws. Isn't it enough that we pay taxes and the prices keep rising! What more do you want? To skin us alive?'

'What's wrong Cett?'

It was Mikiel, who when he heard the commotion coming from outside, rushed to see what was happening.

'What's wrong?! He's asking me for the receipt, this grubby-faced shit!'

Mikiel stepped between Cetta and the young man wearing the tie.

'Sir, please explain to her,' he said to Mikiel, 'I'm just doing my job here. They sent me from the department.'

'Out of all the places in Malta and Gozo they sent you here?' Mikiel asked, with his finger pointed less than an inch from the young man's nose.

'I go where they send me, my friend,' the young man replied without blinking.

'I'm not your friend,' Mikiel said, raising his voice. 'Isn't it enough that I pay my taxes? Why didn't they send you to the door of some fat cat who donates regularly to the party, why to mine?'

'Sir, all I'm asking is to see the receipt.'

'Why don't you get the hell out of here,' exclaimed Cetta, who felt left out of the action after Mikiel had arrived.

‘Purcinello!’ chimed in the other women, their necks poking out from in between the beaded threads of the curtain, enthusiastic to show their disapproval too.

The youth was looking flustered.

‘If I don’t see a receipt I’m going to issue a fine and file a report!’

‘And who do you think you’re going to fine?’ Mikiel answered back, purple in the face.

‘You and this woman!’

‘Why don’t you go and fine your mother!’ Cetta piped in.

Maltese historians are in agreement that what followed was the opening firework in an episode that will continue to be remembered in the history of these islands. As she spat out the words ‘your mother’, Cetta lifted the arm carrying the plastic bag with everything in it and started the process of launching it at the young man’s face. Mikiel’s hand got in the way to break Cetta’s swing but, with the force of the arm loaded with the shopping, Mikiel’s hand flew forward and connected with the youth’s bearded face, causing his sunglasses to fly off his nose like a missile shooting upwards then changing route and smashing onto the floor.

The young man was stunned, Mikiel remained speechless, while Cetta stood with her hands on her hips, ready for the next round.

The choir of women behind the curtain let out a big ‘Ooo!’, all together, an ‘Ooo!’ of anticipation hanging by a thread of anxiety.

When the initial shock had subsided, the youth walked over to the remains of his sunglasses, picked them up and turned to Mikiel, who’d remained standing still as a lamp post at the edge of the pavement. He shook his head to and fro, and left without uttering another word.

For Cetta, this signalled a victory. And the choir agreed with her.

But Mikiel was less certain. While Cetta let loose with a long tirade about how these ‘government lugs’ lost all their bravado when you stood up to them and showed them that you knew your rights, Mikiel kept his mouth shut, petrified on the inside, expecting to find the police sergeant at his door any minute.

He wasn’t wrong. The choir had barely finished singing the Amen to Cetta’s sermon when the sergeant showed up with the constable in tow, looking in through the shop curtain. Mikiel’s heart jumped. The representatives of law and order parted the beaded threads and stepped into the shop.

‘Mikiel, will you come with us to the station?’

‘To the station?’ asked Mikiel.

‘Yes, we’ve received a report that you didn’t issue a fiscal receipt, that you assaulted a public official and that you caused damage to his personal belongings.’

‘But Sergeant, please, it was an accident...’

‘Hadn’t you better come with us to the station and explain everything?’

‘And the shop?’

‘Close up the shop, Mikiel. Come away quietly. Take my word for it.’

Mikiel looked at the customers. No one breathed a word in the presence of the uniforms. A doubt came creeping in as to whether any of them would be willing to testify in his favour. Not even Cetta, who was now hiding behind two members of the choir with her head bowed. There was nothing to be done, he thought to himself. Hadn’t you better close the shop and figure out how you were going to explain to them that it hadn’t been your intention to smash that boy in the face?

‘I’ll come along Sergeant, but you’re making a mistake. A big mistake! I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. It was all an accident.’

‘We’ll speak at the station,’ the sergeant said to him. ‘Close up, we’ll be waiting for you out here.’

Mikiel spread his arms like he was about to be crucified and the women left the shop in procession. Meanwhile, the sergeant and the constable lit a cigarette. Mikiel closed the shop and the three of them made their way towards the station.

They detained him for no longer than half an hour. They asked him for his version of events, he signed his statement and they sent him away. Before he left the station, the sergeant advised him to consult a lawyer and to gather the witnesses he wanted to testify in his favour in court.

By the time he left the station he had neither the will nor the strength to open the shop again. His wife Karmena was surprised when she saw him coming back home so early, long before closing time. She knew immediately that something was wrong, and by the look on his face she realised that it was something serious. He wasn’t in the mood to explain what had happened. He wanted to go straight up to bed but knew that if he didn’t satisfy her curiosity she’d continue to hound him and wouldn’t let him rest. When he said he’d just come back from the police station and recounted the whole incident to her, he thought she was going to die of shock.

He spent the following two hours by her side at the doctor’s clinic.

SPECIAL
MENTION

NETHERLANDS



Sholeh REZAZADEH

Ik ken een berg die op me wacht

I know a mountain that is waiting for me

Ambo|Anthos, 2023

Language: Dutch

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BIOGRAPHY

Sholeh Rezazadeh (born in 1989) came to the Netherlands from Iran in 2015. Three years after her arrival, she signed a contract for her debut novel *The Sky Is Always Purple* (2021), which was awarded the Debut Award of the Society of Dutch Literature 2022 and the Bronzen Uil Readers Award 2021. It was also on the longlist of the Libris Literature Prize 2022 and the Hebban Debut Prize 2022. Her second novel, *I know a mountain that is waiting for me*, has been published recently.

SYNOPSIS

Aras, the Iranian river that rises high in the mountains, tells the story of a nomadic people camped on its banks. Full of love, but not without jealousy, he observes how the girl Saray becomes a young woman and how a childhood love turns into an adult relationship with Aydin. Among the people on the river is the old carpet weaver who weaves stories. And Doeman, who is different from the others, with eyes that seem to be extinguished and yet see what others do not perceive. And Ashik, who sings about everything that belongs to the life of these people: the animals, the mountains and last but not least Aras, the river. Only now and then does a trader come by and exchange cheap sweets, combs, hand creams and other trinkets for the wonderful carpets. And once he brings a woman who has travelled from a faraway country. She too lives by a river there. In a beautifully poetic style that readers will recognise from her debut novel *The Sky Is Always Purple*, Sholeh Rezazadeh tells the extraordinary story of Saray and the river Aras.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Sholeh Rezazadeh studied medicine in Iran. In 2015, she moved to the Netherlands, where she decided to become a writer. After her award-winning debut novel *The Sky Is Always Purple*, Rezazadeh manages to impress with her second novel as well. This is partly due to the bold choice to use the river Aras as the narrator of the story. *I know a mountain that is waiting for me* tells the story of Alma and the river Amstel in the Netherlands, and Saray and the river Aras in Iran. Sholeh Rezazadeh shows both worlds in a phenomenal way. The hustle and bustle of city people is sharply sketched against the nomadic life in nature. Both worlds are also evident in her language: the soft Persian words full of imagery are mixed with the down-to-earth Dutch language. Sholeh Rezazadeh is an emerging, important voice in the literary field. She manages to bring the poetic richness of the Persian language to Dutch literature, adding new colour thanks to her metaphorical use of language. She reveals new worlds in her stories. Especially in current times, it is important that these stories be told, broadening the reader's perspective. With *I know a mountain that is waiting for me*, Sholeh Rezazadeh poetically shows that we should not distance ourselves from nature, and especially not from each other. A message that should be read in many European countries and languages.

VLAM21

Ik ken een berg die op me wacht

Sholeh Rezazadeh



De klinkende bellen van de geiten en schapen, en mijn brullende water vormen het achtergrondgeluid bij dit verhaal. In elk seizoen bewegen geiten en schapen er hun kop. Dus wanneer je dit verhaal leest, houd dan deze geluiden in je gedachten. En ook de koele wind die er altijd rondwaalt. Hij tikt met zijn koude vingertoppen zachtjes op je huid en is altijd aanwezig, ook in de hete zomers.

Van alle vrouwen die elke ochtend in hun kleurige, tot hun enkels reikende jurken, met vestjes in een donkere kleur, sjaals met bloemenpatroon die hun hoofd en de onderkant van hun mond bedekken, met kleine hoofdbanden die ze in hun nek vastbinden, naar me toe komen met aardewerken kruiken op hun schouders of leren waterzakken in hun handen, en die met mijn heldere water vullen, trekt vooral één vrouw mijn aandacht. Een vrouw met ogen die me doen denken aan die van herten die bij mij water komen drinken. 's Ochtends vroeg, als de zon mij nog niet heeft opgewarmd, of 's avonds, wanneer mijn druppels beginnen af te koelen, zet ze voorzichtig haar voet op de rotsen. Eerst trekt ze haar bloemensjaal strak rond haar hoofd aan en knoopt deze stevig vast. Ze schuift haar hoofdband iets naar achteren waardoor haar zwarte haar met een scheiding in het midden beter te zien is, werpt een blik op mijn kronkelende lichaam en fluistert: 'Mag ik even?'

Ze trekt de leren band van de waterzak los. Met één hand pakt ze de waterzak, die ooit een deel van een levende geit of ram was, en met de andere hand de opening, ooit een warme keel, en ze gaat rustig zitten op de gladde rotsen. Als ze geen schoenen aanheeft, kruip ik soms zacht over haar voeten en raak haar tenen aan. Ze drukt de droge, dorstige lippen van de waterzak op mijn vochtige lippen. Het dode lichaam van de geit wordt gevuld met mijn levende druppels. Terwijl ze vooroverbuigt, valt haar gevlochten haar van onder de kleurrijke sjaal op haar kleine borsten. Ik ga een beetje terug om haar dieper te laten bukken. Zodat haar van gedroogde kruidnagelbloemen gemaakte ketting nat wordt en een lekkere geur verspreidt, en de punten van haar lange haar in mijn water prikken. Ze zet de waterzak opzij, vormt dan haar handen tot een kom en schept ze door mijn koele water. Haar ranke vingers kruipen onder mijn trillende huid en houden dan een paar seconden stil. Ze sluit haar ogen en gooit het water dat ze tussen haar vingers heeft opgevangen een aantal keer in haar gezicht. Ze opent haar ogen en terwijl ze mij aankijkt, drinkt ze van het water dat in haar handen op een klein meer lijkt.

Dan pakt ze de waterzak op en plaatst hem op haar linkerschouder. De waterzak vormt zich naar haar schouder. Ze kijkt naar de bergen, naar de vlakke, naar de wolken, en altijd voordat ze vertrekt een paar seconden naar mij. Naar mijn lichaam dat dit allemaal weerspiegelt. Daarna sluit ze haar ogen weer en luistert ze naar mijn geluid. Het geluid van verdergaan en niet stilstaan. Dan loopt ze weg. Ik zie haar de volgende nacht of ochtend weer. Soms komt ze zonder een waterzak of kruik naar mij toe, dan staart ze naar mijn golven en vult me met haar blik. Zelfs wanneer de geluiden van opgewonden en gespannen mensen, dieren en mijn golven zich vermengen, blijft ze me kalm aankijken.

Elke keer dat ze naar mij kijkt maak ik me zorgen of ze me ook nu weer mooi zal vinden. Of mijn aanwezigheid nog steeds bij haar leven past. Of ze me niet ziet als slechts het verdriet van het verleden of de angst voor de toekomst. Zal ze net zoveel van me houden in een onstuimige herfst als in een rustige zomer? Zal ze me nog willen als ik zo helder als een spiegel ben waarin ze haar eigen mooie gezicht kan zien of als ik zo modderig ben dat mijn kleur lijkt op de urine van een dorstige hond?

Saray is haar naam. Sari-ay. Dat betekent gouden maan, zon.

Haar moeder moest net als de meeste vrouwen uit de bergen ver weg van het ziekenhuis bevallen. Zelfs de ervaren vrouwen die urenlang naast haar waakten, wisten niet wat er aan de hand was, en voordat de jonge mannen uit het dichtstbijzijnde dorp hulp hadden kunnen halen, was het te laat. Ze stierf een paar uur na de bevalling aan een bloeding die maar niet stopte. Haar baby heeft ze nooit vast kunnen houden. Sarays moeder werd naast een boom begraven met een rechtopstaande steen bij het hoofd en een brede steen op het stukje grond waar ze lag. Haar naam werd met spijkers in de steen gebeiteld en haar graf werd ieder jaar bezocht door haar man, haar dochter en haar stam. Een jaar lang droeg Sarays vader zwarte kleren en hoefde hij dankzij het eten en de zorg die hij af en toe van de andere mannen en vrouwen kreeg minder te werken. Rouwen betekende voor hem turen naar de bergen en zijn kind bewonderen, dat minstens even mooi was als zijn overleden vrouw. Na het eerste jaar was haar dood als rook die van tijd tot tijd uit het vuur van hun dagelijks leven opsteeg en in hun ogen en keel prikte.

I know a mountain that is waiting for me

Sholeh Rezazadeh

Translated into English by Michele Hutchison

The tinkling bells of goats and sheep, and my roaring waters, form the background sound to this story. Goats and sheep move around in every season here. So, as you read this story, keep these sounds in your mind, as well as the cool wind that blows through our region, tapping gently on your skin with its cold fingertips, always present, even during the hot summers.

Of all the women who come to me every morning in their colourful, ankle-length dresses, dark-coloured cardigans, floral scarves wrapped around their heads and under the chin, fixed by small headbands they tied at the back of their necks, who come to me with earthenware jars on their shoulders or leather waterskins in their hands, who fill them with my clear water, one woman in particular attracts my attention. A woman with eyes that remind me of the deer who come to drink my water. Early in the morning, when the sun has not yet warmed me, or in the evening, when my droplets begin to cool, she carefully steps onto the rocks. She begins by pulling her floral scarf tight around her head and tying it securely. She pushes her headband back slightly to reveal her black, centre-parted hair, glances at my writhing body, and whispers, 'May I?'

She unfastens her waterskin's leather strap. She takes the waterskin, which was once part of a living goat or ram, in one hand, and in the other hand its opening, once a warm throat, and she sits

down calmly on the smooth rocks. When she is not wearing shoes, I sometimes crawl gently over her feet and touch her toes. She presses the dry, thirsty lips of the waterbag to my moist lips. The dead body of the goat is filled with my living drops. As she bends forward, her plaited hair falls out from under the colourful scarf onto her small breasts. I move back a little to let her bend deeper so that her necklace made of dried clove flowers gets wet and gives off a pleasant scent, and the tip of her long plait dips into my water. She sets the waterskin aside, cups her hands and scoops them into my cool water. Her slender fingers crawl under my trembling skin and then hold still for a few seconds. She closes her eyes and splashes the water she has collected between her fingers onto her face several times. She opens her eyes and as she looks at me, she drinks from the water that resembles a small lake in her hands.

Then she picks up the waterbag and hangs it over her left shoulder. The waterbag moulds to her shoulder. She looks at the mountains, at the plain, at the clouds, and for a few moments before she leaves, she always looks at me, at my body in which the landscape is reflected. Then she closes her eyes again and listens to my sound. The sound of moving forward and never standing still. She walks away. I will see her again the next night or in the morning. Sometimes she comes to me without a waterskin or jug and stares at my waves, filling me with her gaze. Even when the sounds of excited or tense people, animals and my waves mingle, she continues to regard me calmly.

Every time she looks at me, I worry whether she will still find me beautiful. Will my presence still fit into her life? I hope she doesn't see me as just the sadness of the past or the fear of the future. Will she love me as much in a stormy autumn as in a calm summer? Will she want me when I'm as clear as a mirror in which she can see her

own beautiful face or when I am so muddy that my colour resembles the urine of a thirsty dog?

Saray is her name. Sari-ay. It means golden moon, sun.

Like most of the women from the mountains, her mother had to give birth far away from the hospital. Even the experienced women who watched over her for hours did not know what was wrong, and before the young men from the nearest village could fetch help, it was too late. The bleeding wouldn't stop and she died a few hours after giving birth. She was never able to hold her baby. Saray's mother was buried next to a tree with an upright stone near her head and a wide stone over the patch of ground where she lay. Her name was chiselled into the stone and every year her husband, her daughter and her tribe visited her grave. For a year, Saray's father wore black clothes and was able to work less thanks to the food and care he occasionally received from the other men and women. For him, mourning meant gazing at the mountains and admiring his child, who was at least as beautiful as his deceased wife. After the first year, her death was like smoke that rose from time to time from the fire of their daily lives and stung their eyes and throats.

PORTUGAL



Gabriela RUIVO

Lei da Gravidade **The Law of Gravity**

Porto Editora, 2023

Language: Portuguese

ISBN: 9789720036629



BIOGRAPHY

Gabriela Ruivo (born in 1970) has lived in London since 2004. She was the winner of the Prémio LeYa in 2013 for her first novel, *Uma Outra Voz*, which was also awarded with the Prémio PEN Clube Português Primeira Obra (ex aequo) in 2015 and published in Brazil in 2018 (LeYa – Casa da Palavra). Her other works include the poetry collection *Aves Migratórias* (On y va, 2019), *Espécies Protegidas* (short stories, On y va, 2021) and *Lei da Gravidade* (her most recent novel, Porto Editora, 2023). She translated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (*A Cabana do Tio Tom*) by Harriet Beecher Stowe from English to Portuguese (Sibila Publicações, 2020). She manages Miúda Books, an online bookshop specialising in children's literature written in Portuguese and is the head of the AILD Cultural Team in the United Kingdom (International Association of Luso Descendants), where she co-founded PinT – Portuguese in Translation – Book Club, a group meeting bi-monthly on Zoom to discuss books by Portuguese-language authors translated into English. She is a member of Clube das Mulheres Escritoras (Women Writers Club), an initiative aiming to promote the work of contemporary Portuguese female authors.

SYNOPSIS

What do an old man in a hospital bed, the author of a bestseller, a restless pre-teen and a 2-year-old have in common? What fate awaits Maria Ana and Ana Maria – the mirror image of one another? Can one get rid of an abusive husband and the other of the pain of loss? What about Marinela and Mariana? What about the single mother within them? What about the father at the centre of this debacle? What about the future, which insists on becoming the past, and the past, which insists on becoming the future? Time is the great mystery. Laughing at us from the other side of the mirror, the reflection searches for the meaning of existence, rendering back an image of the absurd. It is also time that perpetuates a pattern of violence, the same story repeated against the reader's hope that the cycle will finally be broken. This novel offers an alternative universe where time is subject to the law of gravity – the driving force that brings together past, present and future, and dissolves the contours of reality. It invites us to explore other worlds within the concepts of time and space and, ultimately, of literature itself.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The choice of a book for the European Union Prize for Literature, beyond the formal criteria that must be addressed by every candidate, is, we believe, a task that entails responsibility towards every possible reader. Like any other

cultural device, the book is a force: it transmits values and raises questions. It may bring people together or push them apart, it can build or destroy. Our responsibility is to select a work that we can be sure is making a statement we wish to share with our partners across Europe. We believe that a prize like this, which aims to promote Europe-wide literatures, relies on the certainty that there are issues that have no borders, regardless of their nationality; that there is more that brings us together than sets us apart, and that what remains to be discovered always surpasses our expectations. The Portuguese candidate book is a powerful example of this kind. Written in Portuguese, by a Portuguese psychologist and writer who is living and working in the United Kingdom, the book is a multiple narrative that tackles topics as old and as current as rape, domestic violence, race, abandonment and identity. These are all long-term issues addressed in the story, which uses various characters united around the central axis of time. Time is the eternal question that sustains not-so-different individual answers to the same and everlasting problems, binding us together in this web that is life. In a direct and engaging style, this book concerns all European citizens, regardless of the language they speak.

*Directorate-General for Books, Archives
and Libraries (DGLAB)*

Lei da gravidade

Gabriela Ruivo



A jornalista

Decididamente, isto não está a correr bem.

Ficara exultante com a proposta do chefe de redacção para entrevistar Luís Ricardo Reis, o último escritor-revelação, um fenómeno literário como há muito não se via no país, porventura como nunca se vira. Tinha ali a oportunidade de fazer, ela também, a sua reportagem-revelação. Era um mundo cão, este; tão poucas as histórias realmente interessantes, aquelas que poderiam fazer história. Um mundo de micro-histórias, micronotícias, a maioria desinteressantes, nada de novo a anunciar, porque a quantidade de novidades por minuto era tal, que tudo expirava rapidamente, as calamidades sucediam-se, as naturais e as outras, já nem as bacoradas que saíam da boca do Presidente dos Estados Unidos surpreendiam; o mundo perdera a capacidade de se espantar, de se maravilhar, de se indignar, de se ofender, embora parecesse o contrário, as emoções ao rubro, as queixas de ofensas e assédios a multiplicarem-se como nunca se vira, as mulheres a ganharem voz, uma multidão aos gritos, mas no meio de gritos ninguém se entende e rapidamente deixamos de ouvir o essencial ou de prestar atenção ao que é importante. Como manter o foco da atenção nos dias que correm, aí estava uma boa questão, e um tema suculento; mas, hoje em dia, as pessoas não querem ler matérias suculentas, isso dá muito trabalho, as notícias querem-se como as fotografias, *flashes* de palavras que eternizem uma ideia, poucas, pensar é cansativo, ler parágrafos intermináveis ainda mais, tudo tem de ser de digestão leve, abertura fácil, poucas calorias, mínimo esforço mental. Amanhã

ninguém se lembra dos títulos das primeiras páginas dos jornais de hoje, a não ser que sejam acerca de algo verdadeiramente drástico e surpreendente, o que, nos dias que correm, é praticamente inexistente. Um jornalista está condenado a ver as suas histórias votadas ao esquecimento colectivo, engolidas pelo buraco negro da avidez da novidade; e para quê investir num tema, numa ideia, escrever o que quer que seja, se amanhã já ninguém se lembra? Quem sabe não era essa a essência do jornalismo? Porque afinal as notícias passam, ficam para trás, assim como as coisas acontecem e nós as esquecemos, e só retemos na memória algo considerável ou extraordinário. O permanente é do teor do ensaio ou da literatura. Mas ainda há temas jornalísticos que criam impacto suficiente para se imporem, persistirem, ficarem para os anais da História. Ela sempre acreditara nisso e mantinha a fé, com a vontade de escrever a tal peça, a que ficaria para a posteridade, a que seria lida e relida e lembrada e apontada como exemplo. Não, não era ingênua a ponto de acreditar que uma simples entrevista pudesse ser essa peça, por mais famoso que fosse o entrevistado. Mas poderia ser o primeiro passo. Uma primeira matéria digna de nota, que continuaria a fazer eco nos dias seguintes. No início da entrevista, ficara entusiasmada, o homem debitava ideias com a habilidade de um mestre, ela tinha ali matéria para muito, uma entrevista-reflexão, uma entrevista-ensaio, tantas ideias loucas lhe passaram pela cabeça, uma matéria sobre o propósito da literatura, os leitores que gostam de ouvir histórias desde que não as encontrem nos livros, porque nos livros procuram a verdade; os livros como espelhos, capazes de reflectir uma identidade, a identidade como pedra basilar da coesão social, a crise identitária como directriz principal da crise de valores. Tinha ali matéria para brilhar. Fosse ela capaz de retirar o imediatismo à entrevista, transformá-la em matéria de reflexão, em porta aberta para a conceptualização e exercício do pensamento, sem carregar demasiado na tecla intelectual, para não se tornar cansativo. E quando o homem confessara que, afinal, o livro que escrevera era baseado na sua vida, que era a descrição pura da realidade, ela exultara; além do convite à reflexão, tinha outra tese, in-

teiramente nova, para desenvolver: que a literatura é, na essência, a própria vida. Escreveria de forma arrojada, omitiria as perguntas; apresentaria a entrevista como uma espécie de monólogo interior, um jogo de pergunta-resposta que não obedeceria ao guião, antes ao fluir das ideias do escritor, misturadas com recordações da sua vida; habitaria os pensamentos dele, atrever-se-ia a entrar-lhe para dentro da cabeça, apoderando-se das suas ideias, numa técnica inovadora, uma escrita distanciada do modelo clássico da entrevista e mais próxima da reflexão de um narrador indefinido, um narrador que se funde com o objecto narrado. Debatia-se já com o esquema mental da peça, numa antevisão detalhada de pequenos detalhes técnicos e linguísticos, quando aquela sensação tomou conta de si...

Era uma sensação antiga.

Talvez tivesse sido o tom da voz dele. Aquele toque de impaciência. Os olhos a revirarem-se. O modo como parecera dar-lhe uma lição, como se fizesse um frete, como se tivesse de explicar tudo, e que maçada, porque ela, a coitadinha, a burrinha, não entendia, claro que não. E, nessa altura, o seu cérebro bloqueara, quisera fazer perguntas inteligentes, dizer coisas que viessem a propósito e que demonstrassem a sua clarividência, e nada. Sentira-se burra e actuara como tal. Sabia disso. Tinha perfeita consciência de si própria. Desde criança. Os homens da sua família sempre a tinham feito sentir-se assim. O avô, o pai, o tio. A verdade é que nunca fora uma aluna brilhante. Sempre se esforçara bastante, mas na família reinava a crença de que a verdadeira inteligência é aquela que se apresenta como um prodígio, sem necessidade de esforço, como se a criança tivesse sido abençoada por uma fada madrinha. A outra, a que se consegue à custa do esforço e do trabalho, nunca seria a mesma coisa.

Por isso, vivia à espera da oportunidade de brilhar. De mostrar a todos a fibra de que era feita. Que, afinal, estavam enganados; ela nascera com a estrela na testa, mas, por qualquer motivo, esta não

se dispusera a brilhar de forma espontânea. Sim, ainda haveria de os ver engolir a soberba, as manias de superioridade.

E o homem falava, imparável, e ela distraía-se, espero que esta porcaria não se lembre agora de avariar, o que seria dela se perdesse aquele material? O homem falava e ela permanecia em silêncio, sem saber o que dizer; precisava de intervir, fazer um comentário, uma pergunta que direccionasse a conversa noutro sentido; ele discorria sobre a morte da mulher e do filho, sobre a fase mais negra da sua vida, e ela sentia a escuridão apoderar-se da sua mente, uma maré negra a alastrar, asfixiando a vida marinha, tingindo o verde das águas de luto e desolação; não se podia deixar arrastar para o fundo, havia que se manter à tona, nadar para longe, respirar, não deixar que o petróleo lhe inundasse os pulmões. *O homem é um poço de energia negativa, pensou, com um arrepio, se não reajo, vou ficar infestada, vou perder forças, discernimento, não conseguirei alinhavar dois pensamentos. Vou interrompê-lo, vou dizer qualquer coisa, agora, mas nada lhe saía da boca, nenhum som, como se de facto os pulmões se tivessem intumescido de uma matéria viscosa – ou seriam os neurónios?*

Não, isto não está a correr nada bem.

The Law of Gravity

Gabriela Ruivo

Translated into English by Victor Meadowcroft
and Andrew McDougall

The Reporter

This certainly isn't going well.

She had been thrilled by the chief editor's proposal that she interview Luís Ricardo Reis, the latest breakout sensation, a literary phenomenon unlike any that had been seen in the country for quite some time, if ever. She found herself presented with the chance to produce a breakout article of her own. It was a dog-eat-dog world they were living in; so few really interesting stories, ones that could make history. A world of micro-stories, micro-news items, the majority of them uninteresting, nothing new to report, because the quantity of news stories per minute was such that everything expired quickly, disasters took place – both natural and otherwise – and now not even the drivel coming from the mouth of the President of the United States could surprise anyone; the world had lost its capacity for shock, for wonder, for indignation, for taking offence, although it seemed the opposite was also true, flared emotions, accusations of abuse and harassment multiplying like never before, women had gained a voice, become a baying crowd, but in the midst of an uproar no one can understand each other and we soon stop hearing the essential or paying attention to what's important. Like how to maintain focus in these times we're living through: now there was a good subject, a juicy topic. But these days people no longer want to read about juicy topics – it's too much work – people want articles like photographs, a flash of words that will eter-

nalise an idea – very few words, because thinking is tiring, and reading interminable paragraphs even more so – everything must be easy to digest, accessible, low on calories, minimal mental exertion. Tomorrow, no one will remember the headlines of today's newspapers, unless they're about something truly dramatic and surprising – practically non-existent in this day and age. A reporter is condemned to watch their stories be cast into collective oblivion, swallowed by the black hole of yearning for the new. And why invest in a topic, an idea, why write anything at all, if by tomorrow no one will remember? Perhaps that was the essence of journalism? Because, ultimately, the news moves on, stories get left behind, just like the things that happen to us and are forgotten, our memory only retaining something if it's substantial or extraordinary. The permanent is the substance of essays or literature. But there are still journalistic themes that cause enough impact to matter, to last, to earn their place in the annals of history. She had always believed this and maintained her faith, with a hunger to write such a piece, one that would last for posterity, one that would be read and reread and remembered and cited as an example. No, she wasn't naïve enough to believe that a simple interview could become this piece, no matter how famous her interviewee. But it could be a first step. A first, noteworthy article that would continue to reverberate over the days that followed. At the beginning of the interview, she'd been excited, the man put forward ideas with the skill of a master, there was plenty of material there, for a reflective-interview, an essay-interview, so many crazy notions went through her mind, an article about the purpose of literature, about readers who enjoyed listening to stories as long as they didn't find them in books, because books were where they went looking for truth; books as mirrors, capable of reflecting an identity, identity as the cornerstone of social cohesion, the identity crisis as the main driving force of the crisis of values. She had enough material there to shine. If she could eliminate the immediacy of the interview, transform it into material for reflection, an open door for conceptualisation and contemplation, with-

out leaning too hard on the intellectual side, so as not to become tiresome. And when the man confessed that, in fact, the book he'd written was based on his own life, was a pure description of reality, she was overjoyed; aside from the invitation to reflect, she now had another thesis – an entirely new one – to develop: in essence, literature is life itself. She would write in a bold style, omitting the questions completely; she would present the interview as a kind of interior monologue, a game of questions and answers that didn't follow a script but instead the flow of the writer's ideas, mixed with recollections from his life; she would inhabit his thoughts, venture inside his head, taking possession of his ideas, in an innovative approach, a text distanced from the classic interview model and nearer to the reflections of an undefined narrator, a narrator who fuses with the narrated object. She was already wrestling with the conceptual model for the piece, a detailed preview of the technical and linguistic details, when that feeling came over her...

It was an old feeling.

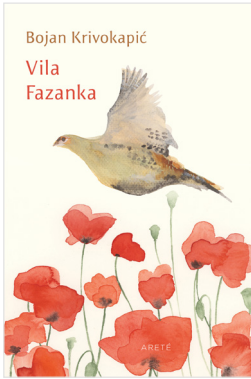
Perhaps it had been his tone of voice. The hint of impatience. That rolling of the eyes. The way he seemed to be giving her a lesson, as if carrying out a laborious task, as if he needed to explain everything, and what a drag, because she – the poor thing, the bimbo – didn't understand, of course she didn't. And at that point her brain had frozen, she had wanted to ask intelligent questions, to say things that were relevant and demonstrated her perceptiveness – but nothing. She had felt stupid and acted accordingly. She realised this. She was perfectly self-aware, and had been ever since she was a child. The men in her family had always made her feel this way. Her grandfather, her father, her uncle. The truth is, she had never been a brilliant student. She always tried very hard, but in her family the belief prevailed that real intelligence presents itself in the form of a prodigy, with no need for effort, as if the child had been blessed by a fairy godmother. The other kind, attained through effort and hard work, would never be the same.

This is why she lived in expectation of her chance to shine. To show everyone the stuff she was made of, and that, in the end, they were all wrong: she *had* been born with the star on her brow, but for some reason it had failed to spontaneously burst into light. Yes, she would live to see them swallow their pride, their air of superiority.

The man talked incessantly and she became distracted, *I hope this piece of junk doesn't decide to stop working* – what would become of her if she lost that material? The man talked, and she kept silent, not knowing what to say; she needed to intervene, make some comment, a question that would lead the conversation in another direction; he spoke about the death of his wife and son, about the blackest period of his life, and she could feel the darkness taking hold of her mind, a dark tide spreading, suffocating the marine life, tinging the green waters with grief and desolation; she couldn't allow herself to be dragged to the bottom, she had to stay afloat, to swim far away, breathe, not allow the petroleum to flood her lungs. *This man is a well of negative energy*, she thought, with a shudder, *if I don't react, I'll become infested, I'll lose my strength, my judgement, I won't be able to string two thoughts together. I'm going to interrupt him, I'm going to say something, now*, but nothing came out of her mouth, not a single sound, as if her lungs were in fact swollen with viscous material – or was it her brain cells?

No, this isn't going well at all.

SERBIA



Bojan KRIVOKAPIĆ

Vila Fazanka

Villa Fazanka

Areté, 2023

Language: Serbian

ISBN: 9788682394211

BIOGRAPHY

Bojan Krivokapić was born in 1985 and holds a degree in Comparative Literature from the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. He has published two novels (*Spring Is on the Road* in 2017 and *Villa Fazanka* in 2023), a short story collection (*Run, Lilith, Daemons Trip and Stumble* in 2013) and two poetry collections (*The Flight of the Cockroach* in 2014 and *The Nest of a Boy* in 2019). He received several awards for his short stories and poems throughout the former Yugoslavia (the Ulaznica Award in 2011, the Đura Đukanov

Award in 2012, the Mak Dizdar Award in 2013, the Lapis Histriae Award in 2021, the Biber Award in 2021, the Milutin Uskoković Award in 2021 and the Laza K. Lazarević Award in 2022), along with the Edo Budiša Award for his collection *Run, Lilith, Daemons Trip and Stumble*, and the Mirko Kovač Award for the best book written by a young author in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia for his novel *Spring Is on the Road*. His prose and poetry have been translated into Albanian, English, Hungarian and Macedonian, while his books have been published in Germany, Italy and Slovenia. He has been an active participant in the literary life in Serbia for over a decade, and in addition to writing, he teaches creative writing and works as an editor. He lives in Novi Sad, Serbia.

SYNOPSIS

Upon returning from abroad, where she spent almost her entire working and adult life, Ana, the main protagonist of *Villa Fazanka*, buys an apartment in Novi Sad, overlooking the Danube River and the Army Veterans' Club. She tries to settle in, but the birds of the past disturb her peace. In the month of August, she goes to the north of the plain, to Villa Fazanka, to look after the house and the dog of her best friend. This marks the beginning of a cluster of stories, encounters and relationships

involving seemingly ordinary, but also very unusual characters. This is a novel about the serene plain that swells like a pimple, and from which the voices of times past and former residents of collapsed houses do not allow the veil of forgetfulness to cover everything around them. *Villa Fazanka*, where the coastal and plain ambiances intermingle, is a novel about potential loves and a world where losses do not necessarily drag us to the depths, but open up new realisations and lead us to tranquillity.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

As an active voice of the young generation, Bojan Krivokapić captured the attention of the readers, critics and juries of relevant awards with his first book, the collection of short stories *Run, Lilith, Daemons Trip and Stumble*, and eventually became the laureate of two awards in Croatia and Serbia for best short story collection. After several years, his debut novel, *Spring Is on the Road*, repeated some poetic instances of his first short story collection, but offered much more in terms of new themes, motifs, ideas and narrative solutions. This is why this novel became shortlisted for several national awards and won the Mirko Kovač Award, a regional award for young writers, while his new novel, *Villa Fazanka*, takes the readers even further, constantly going between the post-Second World War life and the present times. This novel captures the essence of the Serbian

prose of the past decades, with all the identity crises and attempts to break free from the past that have been popular since the mid-20th century, but it is a very modern and open-minded novel that freely discusses a variety of topics, from the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community to individual love stories that end in disasters, leaving their participants shattered and broken. Therefore, the jury believes that *Villa Fazanka* is not just the best piece of writing by a particular writer thus far, but also one of the best novels of his generation and the entire prose production in Serbia in the past 2 years.

Serbian PEN



Vila Fazanka

Bojan Krivokapić



Spuštaju ga s tavana. Mog Mišiku.

Gledam njegov isplaženi jezik. Znam da treba da zažmurim, ali to ne činim. Oko mene krici, uzdasi, cvilež. Sve se smuljalo. Kaša.

Više nemam brata.

Pomislím na to, ali ne osećam ništa, ni užas, ni tugu. Samo gledam, upijam svaki detalj.

Letnji dan. Iz zadnjeg dvorišta čuju se kokoške. Prašina se spekla.

Muve. Selo je postalo smrtni slučaj. Vezuju mi crnu maramu.

To je bila njegova volja, ponavljam sebi godinama kasnije. Tuđu volju treba poštovati. Mantram.

Lakše mi je da je poštujem, da je ne diram. Tuđa volja se ne dira.

Ubrzo za Mišikom odlaze prvo otac, pa majka. Za jedno leto tri lampice su se ugasile. Božja volja, ponavljaju svi oko mene. Božjavolja-božjavolja-božjavolja. Zaglušujuća buka. Selo vergla.

Opet crna marama.

Onda tišina. Kao da se ništa nije dogodilo. Niko ništa ne spominje. Živi ćute. I ja ćutim, ništa ne pitam. Muk. Ali slike same dođu.

Fijuknu. Mišikin isplaženi jezik, očeva suva usta, majčini kapci kako trepere. Okršci.

Neke izmislim. Tako sklapam mozaik.

Naša kuća je bila u Ljubljanskoj 9.

To je bilo pre skoro pola veka.

Sad imam skoro sedamdeset godina.

Život se otkotrljao.

Zovem se Ana.

Prve noći u Vili Fazanki padale su Suze Svetog Lovre. Dan je bio užaren, a Mesec skoro pun, pa suze nisu uspevale da padnu po ružama, lavandi i menti koje su se širile po dvorištu. A i komarci su izvodili svoju odu radosti, što je, u konačnici, potpuno onemogućavalo povezivanje sa suzama. Granda je čula šuškanje među knjigama i verovatno pomislila da je u pitanju miš, pa je poslednjih dva-tri dana provela vrebajući i iščekujući ga, valjda u nadi da će imati priliku da ga lovi i ulovi, jer ipak je ona vižla. Do dana današnjeg nije ustanovljeno da li je to bio miš ili je, jednostavno, u trenucima dokolice, Granda izmislila prisustvo tog neželjenog gosta. Suze Svetog Lovre, dakle, nisu uspele da se sliju po Vili Fazanki.

Noć je bila vrela, jedna od najtoplijih otkad postoji to zdanje. Negde pred zoru, vižla je odlučila da će ipak odustati od noćne smene, popela se na krevet i zaspala. Vila Fazanka, paorska kuća, sagrađena je početkom tridesetih godina prošloga veka, u tihoj ulici na pola puta od reke Mrtvaje do blagog uzvišenja, koje svakako nije brdo, više je brežuljak, ali koje ipak u taj ambijent unosi nužnu dinamiku. Ispred trema granaju se ruže i grmovi lavande, sa strane je stari jorgovan, a pored stablo breskve. Ništa od pomenutog rastinja nije tu slučajno, iza svakog stabla ili grma čuči buket priča koje objedinjuju osam decenija postojanja ove kuće. U dvorištu rastu još i kamilica, bosiljak, korijander i razno drugo začinsko i lekovito bilje. S godinama, ono kao da dobija bitku protiv običnih trava, ako su takve bitke uopšte moguće. U najjužnijem delu dvorišta dominira grm ruzmarina koji odoleva godinama. Veruje se da je on najstariji na ovom komadu zemlje. Trem i dvorište su okrenuti ka svetlijoj strani, ali na njoj nikad nema direktnog sunca. Zraci svetlosti ne udaraju ni u prozore odaja s druge strane. Neimari su, izgleda, vodili računa. Vila Fazanka poznata je po svojoj vlasnici, ali i ostalim povremeno-privremenim stanarima. Maruška, koja je danas jedina vlasnica ovog zdanja, bila je gotovo zatečena kad joj je pre dvadesetak godina na tadašnju gradsku adresu stigla vest da je nasledila veliku kuću na severu. Ispostavilo se da je u pitanju polusestra nje-

nog oca, o kojoj je ona znala samo to da postoji negde „na severu”. Nikad se nisu srele, imala je tek nekoliko njenih fotografija, najviše iz detinjstva, samo jednu na kojoj je imala osamnaest godina i niti jednu na kojoj je ta misteriozna rođaka odrasla žena. Zašto baš nju, da li nije bilo nikog bližeg i dražeg, ili je bilo bližih, ali vlasnica nije mogla očima da ih vidi – pitanja su koja su otišla u ropotarnicu zaborava. Kao tek punoletna devojka, nije previše razmišljala – za nekoliko nedelja postala je nova vlasnica jedne od najlepših kuća na severu. Kući je dala ime: Vila Fazanka.

Gospini dani su se približavali, a s njima i datum njenog polaska. Dobila je poziv od Instituta za proučavanje retkih ptica. U Istraživačkoj stanici Sever, koju već decenijama šibaju ledeni baltički vetrovi, očekuju je za desetak dana. Avion poleće iz Budimpešte, a onda još dva presedanja. Kad cesna sleti na otok, tamo će je čekati Lena, direktorka Instituta. Sešće u njen džip i za manje od dva sata će u udobnoj fotelji, pored prozora koji gleda u beskraj, piti čaj i razmišljati o nedeljama koje su pred njom. Možda će ovo biti njeno poslednje veliko istraživanje, jer već je u sedmoj deceniji života, iako tvrdi da joj te decenije ne predstavljaju problem, da joj ne znače ništa, da ih ne oseća na svojoj grbači. Ipak, treba imati i smirenu starost, osunčanu, bez stalnih vozikanja i presedanja. Ona zapravo i želi takvu starost, baš takvu, mirne dane kroz koje će se katkad prolamati cvrkut ptica i to će biti sve.

Vilu Fazanku i Grandu će čuvati Ana. Ana je najbolja čuvarica lepog i dobrog, njoj može da prepusti sve.

Tri dana kasnije, čuvarica je na kapiji, a pored nje mali crveni kofer. Došla je vozom. Tačna je, ona nikad ne kasni. Tek što su se izgrlile, Maruška kaže: *Jurim, taksista je već tu! Sve sam ti ostavila, sve sam ti objasnila, valjda jesam?*

Leti, mila, nas dve ćemo biti dobro, ne brini, kaže joj Ana kao da je Institut za proučavanje retkih ptica tu iza ćoška. Onda Maruška priđe Grandi i poljubi je u usta. Grandu joj skoči u naručje pa

počne da je liže po licu. Maruški se oči napune suzama. *Ajde, ajde*, procedi. Začuju se točkići velikog srebrnog kofera i za nekoliko sekundi Maruškinе pojave više nema pred njima. Ana bez reči ode da zaključa kapiju, potom pogleda u vižline tužne oči, priđe joj i poljubi je i ona u usta. Podigne pogled prema tremu i udahne punim plućima.

Villa Fazanka

Bojan Krivokapić

Translated into English by Will Firth

They brought him down from the attic. My Mišika.

I looked at his protruding tongue. I knew I was supposed to close my eyes, but I didn't. Cries, sighs and whining all around me. A churning, chaotic mess.

I no longer had a brother.

I thought about that but felt nothing – neither horror nor sadness. I looked at myself and absorbed every detail.

A summer day. Chickens could be heard at the back of the yard. Parched earth and dust. Flies. The village had become a fatality. They tied a black headscarf on me.

It was his decision, I repeated to myself years later. You must respect the will of others was my mantra. It was easiest for me to respect it and not go against it. The will of others is sacrosanct.

Soon after Mišika, father departed, and then mother. Three candles were snuffed out in one summer. The will of God, everyone around me kept saying. The will of God the will of God the will of God. A babble throughout the village, deafening and repetitive.

Out with the black headscarf again.

Then silence, as if nothing had happened. No one spoke. The living were silent, and I was too. I didn't ask a thing. A heavy muteness. But the images came of their own accord, whistling past: Mišika's protruding tongue, father's dry mouth, mother's trembling eyelids. Fragments of memory.

I make some up, and that way I assemble the mosaic.

Our house was at 9 Ljubljanska Street.

Almost half a century ago.

Now I'm almost seventy.

Life has rolled on.

My name is Ana.

On the first night in Villa Fazanka, the Perseids were falling. The day had been scorching, and the moon was almost full, so the shower couldn't fall on the roses, lavender and mint that had spread through the yard. And the mosquitoes were performing their ode to joy, which ultimately made any refreshing shower impossible. Granda had heard a rustling among the books and probably thought it was a mouse, so she spent the next two or three days lying in wait, probably hoping for a chance to hunt and catch it; she's a vizsla after all. To this day, it's not clear if it really was a mouse or if Granda, in idle phases, simply imagined the presence of an unwanted guest. The Perseids, therefore, didn't rain down on Villa Fazanka.

The night was torrid, one of the hottest in all the years the building has stood. Sometime before dawn, the vizsla decided to give up the night shift after all, climbed onto the bed and fell asleep. Villa Fazanka was built for a German family in the early thirties of the last century in a quiet street halfway from the Mrtvaja River to a slight rise, which it would be wrong to call a hill, more of a hummock, but it still brought a vital dynamism to the landscape. The roses and lavender bushes thrive in front of the porch, there's an old lilac tree at the side, and next to it a peach tree. None of the mentioned vegetation is there by chance, and every tree or bush conceals a bouquet of stories that bring together the house's eight decades of existence. Chamomile, basil, coriander and various other herbs and medicinal plants grow in the yard. They seem to be winning the years-long

battle against the common grasses, if such battles are possible at all. The southernmost part of the yard is dominated by a rosemary bush that has withstood the years. It's thought to be the oldest in the area. The porch and the yard are on the brighter side but never get direct sun. Its rays don't enter the windows of the rooms on the other side either. The architects evidently took account of that. Villa Fazanka is known for its owner, but also for other occasional and temporary occupants. Maruška, who today is the sole owner of the proud building, was almost taken aback when she received word at her city address, about twenty years ago, that she'd inherited a large house in the north, in Pannonia. It emerged that the benefactor was her father's half-sister, whom she only knew to live somewhere 'in the north'. They had never met, and she only had a few photos of her, mostly from her childhood – just one in which she was eighteen – and none where the mysterious relative was a grown woman. Why had it come down to her? Was there no one closer and dearer? Or were there closer ones, but the owner couldn't stand the sight of them? These were questions that had long been consigned to the lumber-room of oblivion. Maruška had just come of age and didn't think too much, so in just a few weeks she became the new owner of one of the most beautiful houses in the north. She named it Villa Fazanka.¹

The feasts of Our Lady were coming up, and with them the date of Maruška's departure. She'd received an invitation from the Institute for the Study of Rare Birds. She was expected in ten days' time at Research Station North, which for decades has been lashed by the icy Baltic winds. Her plane would leave from Budapest, and there were two more connecting flights. When the Cessna landed on the island, Lena, the institute director, would be waiting to meet her. She'd get into Lena's jeep, and in less than two hours she'd be sitting in a comfortable armchair by a window that looked out into

¹ A *fazanka* is a female pheasant.

infinity, drinking tea and thinking of the weeks ahead. Perhaps this would be her last major field trip because she'd now entered the seventh decade of her life, although she claimed the years were no problem, that they didn't mean anything to her and she didn't feel their weight on her back. But one should also have a peaceful retirement – sunny, without constant trips and changing planes. She did long for an old age just like that, with placid days interrupted by occasional bursts of birdsong but nothing more.

Villa Fazanka and Granda would be looked after by Ana, the best keeper of the beautiful and the good. She could entrust everything to her.

Three days later, the house-sitter was at the gate with a small red suitcase. She'd come by train. She was punctual, as always. As soon as they'd hugged, Maruška said:

'I'm in a rush, here's the taxi driver! I've left everything for you and explained it all, haven't I?'

'Off you go, my dear, we two will be fine, don't you worry,' Ana told her, as if the Institute for the Study of Rare Birds were just around the corner. Then Maruška went up to Granda and kissed her on the snout. The dog jumped into her arms and started licking her face. Maruška's eyes filled with tears. 'OK now, OK,' she managed to say. The wheels of her large silver suitcase squeaked, and a few seconds later she no longer stood before them. Without a word, Ana went to lock the gate, then she looked into the vizsla's sad eyes, went up to her and kissed her on the snout herself. She gazed up towards the porch and took a deep breath.

SPECIAL
MENTION

SLOVENIA



Tina VRŠČAJ

Na Klancu

On Slope

Cankarjeva založba, 2022

Language: Slovenian

ISBN: 9789612825430

BIOGRAPHY

Tina Vrščaj (born in 1987) is an award-winning writer, literary critic and translator. She graduated from the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana in 2010 with a degree in Comparative Literature and English. She works as an editor. She is a literary critic and writes essays for various magazines and newspapers. She is the author of two children's picture books. She has translated the novel *The Childhood of Jesus* by Nobel-Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee and the philosophical book *The Economy of Desire* by Daniel Bell Jr. into Slovenian. She has won several awards for her

writing: in 2009 the Literatura magazine prize for best contribution for the *Robni zapisi* (*Marginal notes*) section, in 2019 the Sodobnost magazine prize for best Slovenian essay (for 'Srečno pospravljen'), and in 2022 the Modra ptica prize for best (unpublished) novel for adults (for *Na Klancu*).

SYNOPSIS

In the remote village of Slope, a young couple, Eva and Gregor, live on a steep hillside with their two young daughters. A country house on the edge of the forest seems at first the ideal place for a young family, but soon Eva finds that living uphill is exhausting, and little by little, she begins dreaming of the plain. The relationship between the partners is also sliding down a steep slope, what with the care of their two girls, their daily commitments and the omnipresence of digital distractions which Eva rejects, and they reach an impasse. Other circumstances contribute to the rupture in their relationship: Eva's unemployment, Gregor's preoccupation with virtual worlds, the burdens they have brought from their primary families, disagreements about upbringing and the unequal burden of household chores. The action culminates in the loss of the family's home and the expected arrival of a new family member with Eva's pregnancy. Gregor can no longer

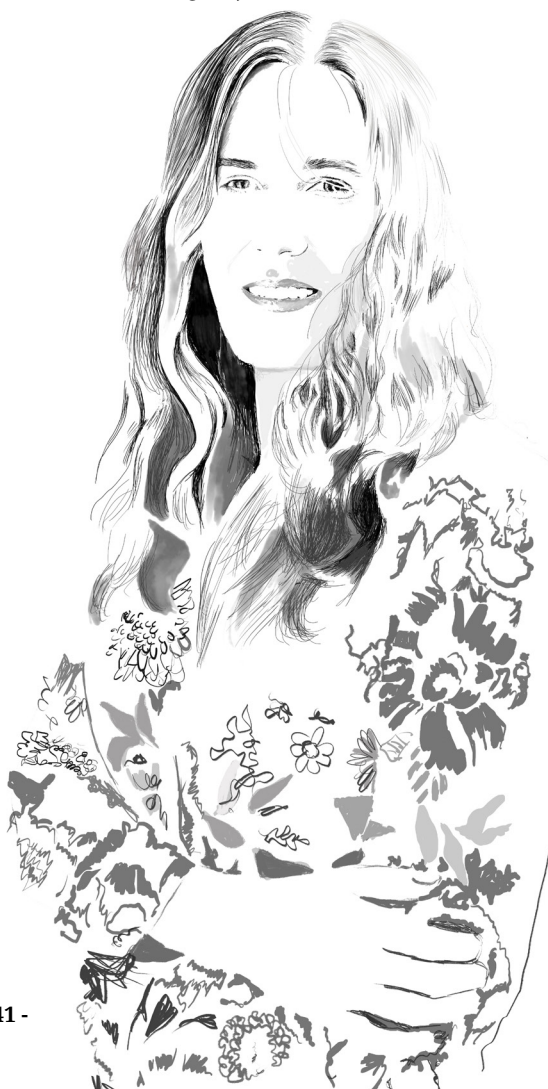
bear this burden and disappears for a while, but when he returns it is too late for a solid family future. Gregor's departure forces Eva to shake off her passivity, look for a job and devote herself to actively raising awareness of environmental issues.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

At the start of Tina Vrščaj's novel *Na Klancu*, the family situation of the parents and their young daughters seems full of warmth and emotion. But soon cracks are felt, namely disagreements over upbringing, unequal burdens of the partners' household chores, the precarious economic situation caused by her unemployment and, finally, the loss of the house where they live. There is no quick turnaround in sight. Although there are hints of the solutions that the women's emancipation project may bring, the road to them will be painful, unpredictable and not without losses for all. In this almost banal, open-ended narrative framework, the female perspective is at the forefront, and the emotionality and sensuality of her experience are strongly accentuated. In addition to motherhood and family, the novel deals with social and globally relevant environmental issues. The protagonist demonstrates her responsibility and respect for nature throughout. Indeed, the destruction of the environment is the theme that ties the whole novel together. The author tackles it with determination, passion and narrative conviction. The depiction

of the characters in the novel is skilful and consistent, and the character traits come to life in carefully thought-out dialogues. The style of the novel is worthy of special mention, carefully trimmed and cleared of unnecessary clutter, self-contained, at times almost poetic. The author uses it to capture a playful child's perception of reality, which has not yet locked the world in a prison of conventional notions, but rather allows it to breathe with different shades of meaning.

Slovenian Book Agency



Na Klancu

Tina Vrščaj



Bralce vljudno prosimo, da izklopijo naprave.

Na Klancu zmeraj piha.

Eva skuša pognati korenine v to zemljo. A zemljo odnaša.

Včasih ne hodi po tleh, ampak lebdi. Če pometa listje pred vhodom, se metla ne dotika tal, listje odnaša le zračni vrtinec ob zamahu.

Slike, ki jih naslikajo, pustijo stati v kotu sobe, se bodo že obesile. Sobne rastline so pristale na kompostišču, lončki pa še stojijo na polici, okrušeni.

Eva si predstavlja ravnino, kamorkoli seže oko. Zamišlja si, da so v drugi hiši. Sosedje imajo otroke, stare, kot so njeni, ne pijančujejo pred otroki in ne prenorejajo se. Kolesarijo. Po ravnem lahko kolesari tudi majhen otrok. Včasih si podajajo žogo, ne more jim ulti. Tudi otroci se ne morejo odkotaliti v prepad.

Dekleti sta še novi in dišita po svežem. Prišlekinji na svet.

Seme je obrodilo mimogrede, kot bi jo oprašil veter.

Najprej je prišla prva. Kakšen prihod! Dostavili so jo beli angeli v kočiji. Potem je prišla še druga, spet pretresljivo doživetje. Že s prvim glaskom je bil to joksmeh. Glej: prvega so ji prinesli angeli, v drugo pa se ji je rodil srečen otrok.

Čim sta prišli na svet, sta odprli oči v to hišo s slikami v kotu, s tistimi postrani in z oblekami po tleh. Obleke se množijo na parketu, naslonjalih stolov, kavču, postelji in celo na mizi. Še najmanj jih je v omarah, od katerih puhti po starem. Vse te gore so dokaz, da ima Eva nepospravljeno podstrešje. Mama je govorila:

Pospravi že tisto svoje podstrešje.

Tisto, s katerim mama nima nič.

Oblek je kar naenkrat dvakrat več in vsak mesec je nekaj premajhnih. Otroka rasteta. Zvečer jima obleče dolgo pižamo, zjutraj pa se zbudita v kratkih hlačah. Vsak teden kaj zmanjka in čez dan iščejo, kje je. Potem dobijo vreče od prijateljev. Te nove in rabljene oblekice tvorijo velik klanec v veži. Čakajo na prvo pranje.

Tisto prvo obdobje življenja prve dojenčice je prežeto z vonjem mleka, kakca in pralnega praška. Otrok se podoji in pokaka in kakec si utre pot iz plenice do oblek, v vedno istem zaporedju in vse hitrejšem tempu, kjer med ponavljanji sčasoma ni več nobenega premora. Eva podoji otroka in nato v majici, mokri od mleka, toči vodo v prazno, da bi prišla do tople za umivanje ritke, zamenja plenico in otroka preobleče. Na tleh pri njenih nogah spet kup. Kup je tudi že v kopalnici, da se vrata ne zapirajo. Gmota je v stroju, ki pere. Stroj je tako obremenjen, da poskakuje. Od besa hoče včasih razbiti stene. Kup opranih kosov je v lavorju, ki jih Eva hiti obešat, kadar dojenčica zapre oči in dokler sonce še greje.

Vso proceduro spet ponovi. In spet. In spet ... Kot hrček v kolesu.

Začetek življenja druge dojenčice je prežet z vonjem mleka, kakca in pralnega praška. Drugič je vse enako. A vse drugače. Eva se hitreje vda neprespanim nočem. Lažje poslušaja jok, ker ve, da bo minil. Včasih ob joku ostane povsem mirna. Ve, da je to joksmeh, globoko čudenje življenju.

Včasih je raztresena. Z dojenčki in malčki je pač tako, da vse uhaja izpod nadzora. Kot samo od sebe iz prsi lije mleko, tudi kadar ni pri-

sesanih ustec. Le ena nežna misel, pa ima majico mokro od belega. Ponečedene plenice se grmadijo pred vhodnimi vrati. Na pultu se grmadijo ostanki hrane, ki čakajo, da jih kdo nese na kompost. Pod nogami se kopicijo igrače. Včasih kakšna noga katero stre.

Za to ni kriv nered na njenem podstrešju.

Nekaj drugega je.

Čim sta punčki pokukali iz hiše, sta se zlili v nagnjeno obzorje.

In ko sta, druga za drugo, v presledku dveh let, shodili, sta z najmanjšimi nožicami že racali v hrib. Mala kar v copatkih. Potrebovali sta trdno spodbudo:

»Noge v zrak!«

Po ravnem bi nemara že tekali, a v klanec sta se le oklevaje prebijali. Včasih je Eva katero lopnila po zadnji plati. Ali ju navdihovala z modrostjo:

Noge si zapomnijo, kaj zmorejo, in potem jim noben korak ni odveč.

Ko gredo majhne noge v velik klanec, je to ganljiv prizor.

Včasih pa niso mogle. In takrat ju je ona, drobna, a žilava, kot žaklja krompirja vzela pod pazduhe, dve pazduhi za dve puncici, in je šla, so šle. Če sta pri tem malo viseli na glavo, ju ni nikoli motilo.

On Slope

Tina Vrščaj

Translated into English by Erica Debeljak

Readers are kindly requested to switch off their devices.

It's always windy on Slope.

Eva tries to plant roots in the soil. But the wind blows the soil away.

Sometimes she doesn't walk on the ground but hovers above it. When she sweeps the leaves in front of the door, the broom doesn't touch the floor but moves the leaves with its spinning currents of air.

The paintings are left in a corner of the room to be hung later. The house plants have landed on the compost but the pots remain on the windowsill. Chipped.

Eva imagines flatlands as far as the eye can see. She dreams that they live in another house. The neighbours would have children as old as theirs. They wouldn't drink in front of the children and wouldn't pretend to be other than what they are. They would ride bicycles. Even little children can ride bicycles where it is flat. They can pass a ball between them without it rolling down the hill. Children cannot tumble into the abyss.

The girls are still new and smell fresh. They are newcomers to the world.

The seeds bore fruit easily as if she had been pollinated by the wind.

The first came first. What an arrival! White angels delivered her in a coach. Then the second, again a riveting event. Her first little sound was already crylaughter. Look: the first was brought by angels and the second was born a happy child.

The moment they came into the world, they opened their eyes to the house with the paintings in the corner, some lying aslant, and clothes on the floor. The clothes multiply on the hardwood floor, the armchairs, the couch, the beds, even the table. Least of all in the closets that smell old. All of these mountains are proof that Eva has a messy attic. Her mother used to say:

Clean your attic, what you have upstairs.

The place her mother has nothing to do with.

All of a sudden, there are twice as many clothes and each month many of them are too small. The children grow. In the evening, they get dressed in long pyjamas and wake up in the morning in short pants. Every week something gets lost and is looked for all day. Then they get bags of hand-me-down clothes from friends. The new and used clothes form a steep hill in the entryway. They wait for the first washing.

The first period of life with the first baby is inundated with the smell of milk, poop, and washing powder. The baby nurses, poops, and the poop finds its way from the nappies to the clothes, always in the same order and always at a faster tempo, because there is no time between repetitions. Eva nurses the baby and then, her shirt wet with milk, turns on the faucet and waits for the water to get warm to wash the baby's bottom, change her nappy, and dress her again. Another pile grows at her feet. There is already a pile in the bathroom and the door will not close. There is a pile in the washing machine. The machine is so overburdened that it jumps, as if it wants to hurl itself against the wall in anger. There is a pile of washed clothes in the laundry basket that Eva rushes to hang outside while the baby's eyes are closed and the sun is still shining.

She repeats the whole procedure. And again. And again... Like a hamster on a wheel.

The beginning of the second baby's life is inundated with the smell of milk, poop, and washing powder. The second time is the same. But everything is different. Eva surrenders more quickly to the sleepless

nights. She finds it easier to listen to the baby crying because she knows it will pass. Sometimes she is completely calm when she hears the crying. She knows that this is crylaughter and expresses a deep wonder for life.

Sometimes she is distracted. That's just the way it is with babies and toddlers: everything escapes her control. Just like milk coming out of her breast all by itself, even when there is no sucking little mouth nearby. A single tender thought and her shirt is wet. Dirty nappies pile up in front of the door. Leftovers pile up on the counter, waiting for someone to take them out to the compost. Toys pile up underfoot. Sometimes a foot breaks one.

The mess in her attic is not guilty for all of this.

It is something else.

The moment the little girls look outside of the house, they merge with the slanted horizon.

And when they learn to walk, one after the other over a period of two years, their little legs waddle uphill. The little one in slippers. They need encouragement:

'Lift your feet!'

They would probably have already begun running if it were flat, but on Slope they hesitated. Sometimes Eva spanked them on their bottoms. And then inspired them with wisdom:

Legs remember what they can do, and every step is necessary.

It is a moving scene when the little legs go up the steep hill.

But sometimes they couldn't do it. And then she, small but tough, picked up both of them like sacks of potatoes under her armpits, two armpits for two girls, and she went. They went. It didn't bother them that they were hanging upside down.

TUNISIA



Arbia BRAHAM

جبل الملح

The Mountain of Salt

Editions Arabesques, 2023

Language: Arabic

ISBN: 9789938076998

BIOGRAPHY

Arbia Braham is a Tunisian Senior Teacher of English, born in Zouaouin, a small village in the area of Bizerte in northern Tunisia on 18 December 1979. She has been fond of writing poetry and novels since a young age and received the national second prize of young talented writers at the age of 13. She excels at writing in Arabic, French and English. She pursued her primary education at Zouaouin primary school and her secondary education at Aousja school (where she is currently teaching) and Mohamed Ali Annabi secondary

school in Ras Jebel. She graduated from the University of Human and Social Sciences in Tunis, obtaining a degree in English. She enjoys reading and watching movies in her free time. She is very active on social media, where she is followed by many readers who enjoy her writings. *Jabal Al Milh*, translated as *The Mountain Of Salt* and published in 2023, is her second novel after *Hadeth Istidem* (translated as *Accident* and published in 2019). Now she is living happily with her loving husband and two daughters in Aousja, where she is teaching young learners. She is dreaming of a prosperous Tunisia and a peaceful world where every human being can enjoy freedom and justice. She is also dreaming of a healthy planet that protects all of its creatures.

SYNOPSIS

This is a drama–romance story of Mariem and Aly, a couple forced to separate for years, after which they have a series of accidental or fated meetings happening before, during and after the December 2010 revolution in Tunisia. The love story goes hand-in-hand with thrilling events in Tunisia’s history. Mariem has been loved and betrayed by many people: Aly, Khaled, Karim and Saber all covet this beautiful and distinguished

woman and their lives are joined by a mystical thread of fate. Mariem is struggling against some biased social prejudices as she seeks her freedom as a strong independent woman. She represents the beautiful Tunisia struggling amidst a series of hardships in its recent history. It finishes with an opening window of hope for a better future.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

This is a well-written novel with beautiful poetic language, rich in images and etymologies. It is a lovely romance mixed with drama and hope. The writer's adoration of her native Tunisia is deeply felt in the characters' words and feelings. She describes her country with much reverence, and weaves the events delicately to achieve smooth transitions between the chronicles, mixing fiction with facts in an eloquent way. Since the revolution, Tunisia has become a beacon for democracy and freedom and a model for many countries seeking liberty from the claws of dictatorships. Though the process of change and evolution can be difficult and messy, the

impossible is not Tunisian, and we can do it. The writer is also defending the rights of women for freedom and empowerment against social prejudices. Hope is a key word in the writer's life that she emphasises along the tapestry of this novel. Love, as hard and bitter as it can be, never fails to stir our emotions for a possible resolution. Who knows what could happen next, since the characters are very resilient in this web of relationships and events.

Union of Tunisian Publishers



The Mountain of Salt

Arbia Braham

Translated into English by Miled Faiza and Karen McNeil

Major General Saber El-Arbi fled the house as if he were running away from an encircling Tatar army. He locked the door with the key and started his car then headed toward the sea. He lit a cigarette and then sat looking at the friend/enemy in front of him. The wise, discreet old man, its waves pounding like the beats of a troubled heart. He was like a ball bouncing between high and low tide, between his duty and commitment to his mission, and his unusual attraction to this woman. He had left her imprisoned in his house, while he remained imprisoned in her wolf-like eyes. The cigarette smoke floated up, revealing secrets known only to the cigarettes that had passed between his lips, which had absorbed his silence over years of suffering and loss. His pain was breaking on the rocks of Sidi Ali El Makki, while his modest dreams remained etched on its shores. They may have been battered by the waves, but they endure the currents and escape the grasp of the past, emerging weathered by the salt of the Mediterranean. He gazed through the cigarette smoke to his life story, drawn like the horizon between two edges.

He went back to his childhood, when he was deprived of his parents and his brother when he was just ten years old. They were swallowed by the treacherous sea one summer, in what was supposed to be a time for happiness and relaxation. His six-year-old brother had been caught by a riptide, and when his parents tried to save him they couldn't. All three lost their lives in a tragedy that shook the quiet village and the entire region.

His father was an ordinary farmer working in al-Qat'aya, a small piece of land located in the lower part of Ghar El Melh marsh. He used to grow many kinds of vegetables throughout the year. His small

farm would produce vegetables with an exceptional taste, rich with minerals and very sweet. In spite of the salt that surrounded its sandy land, the roots of the vegetables were able to store the rainwater that came down from the mountain.

His mother spent her time with neighbours, other women and young girls, embroidering lace. She dedicated her days to stitching with utmost precision, following the techniques she had learned from her mother. Arduously, she crafted unique pieces for brides' trousseaus. The lace had a wide array of uses: it could adorn the bride's new home, or form part of the undergarments worn beneath the bride's wedding costume, which varied from region to region, from Raf Raf to Hammamet. One variety included the *mizzo*, wide pants hand-crafted with love by the women of Ghar El Melh, who were renowned for the creativity of their Andalusian heritage.

After his parents' deaths, Saber's grandmother looked after him in her old house near the port building. The house had white walls adorned with natural coloured tiles with Moorish inscriptions, along with windows opening onto the main courtyard.

Saber attended the elementary school on Bourguiba Avenue, then at al-Karraka, the Turkish fort, where he used to haul dirt from the construction site for the new middle school with his friends. The school would make every student who got in trouble haul a wheelbarrow filled with sand out of the site before they would let them go back to class. Most of the boys would do so quite happily, showing off their muscles to each other or to impress the girls. Saber, however, did the job earnestly, afraid that if his grandma found out about his misbehaviour in the school she would punish him and keep him from going to the beach with his friends. Later, he joined the *lycée* of Mohammed Ali Annabi at Ras Jebel for his secondary studies. Every day, he rode the 15 km to Ras Jebel by bus with his childhood friends. Many of them had since gotten jobs, gotten married, became parents, and started families. Some of them had migrated to Europe. Others had

taken up their fathers' vocations in farming, or in fishing or fixing nets and boats. But they had all remained the best of friends.

His grandmother, his only family, struggled greatly to support him and ensure his continued education. She used to embroider lace and was the one who had taught his mother and the village girls. They began calling her 'the master' because of her exceptional skill and the high quality of her handiwork. People from all over the country would contact her to buy her embroidered fabrics. Saber would delight in watching her deft fingers create the intricate shapes of flowers, roses, and butterflies. After finishing a piece, she'd meticulously add what she called 'the dead stitch'. He was always captivated by this peculiar term – a 'dead' stitch that brought beauty to life under the skilled hands of his inventive grandmother. She was able to stitch triangles and squares together with a precision that rivalled the famed Nablian stitch in craftsmanship.

His grandmother was always worried that the sea might betray her and take Saber away from her, as it did with his parents and his brother. But he wasn't afraid of the sea. In fact, he continuously challenged it whenever he went diving. He particularly enjoyed swimming in deep water. His passion was to climb the cliff they called al-Bounta and jump from its top. Swimming in the grottos of Cape Zabib was also a pure pleasure for him, despite the fact that he once broke his foot. In fact, Saber had made memories, happy or sad, throughout the entire coastline of Bizerte. He knew every beach: Ain Mestir, Rafrac, Ras Enjla, Kef Abed, Dar Eljenna, La Grotte, Sidi Meshreg, Sidi Salem, and beyond. The sea's fury never deterred him, no matter how many fractures or cuts he got. Over time, the vast blue sea became his steadfast ally, pain and all.

On every trip to the sea caves, he would feel the souls of his parents and brother floating around him, surrounding him and protecting him from every lurking danger.

Saber learned patience, struggle, challenge, and generosity from the sea. He screamed in the face of strong winds while fighting the current, challenging his friend as if asking for more. And the sea never deprived him of his harvest, as if it was making up for those who it had swallowed into its belly. It made him one of the most skilful fishermen of the area. He would never go home empty-handed from any sea adventure, and his grandmother's house became a sea museum for his harvest.

Despite his grandmother's worries about him, he continued to divide his time between school and fishing, making it impossible for her to stop him from going to the sea. So she resigned herself to praying for his safety and success. When he took the national baccalaureate exam, she waited eagerly to hear of his success, but she passed away a few days before the results came out. Could there be any more shocks waiting for you, Saber?

After he found out that he passed the exam, hearing his name announced over the megaphone with the list of other successful students, he ran like a panther towards the cemetery. He stood next to his grandmother's tomb and asked her, 'Can you hear me, Grandma? I promised you that I would pass the exam with top marks, and here I am. I'll also let Mama and Baba know. Then, I'll tell my brother Joujou, too. They will all be very happy. This summer, Joujou will celebrate his fifteenth birthday. He also passed the exam with top marks, Grandma. My dream of joining the police academy will finally come true. You always wanted to see me join the academy!'

His friends found him that night sleeping in the cemetery. It was a sad night for everybody who knew the grandmother and her grandchild, who no longer had any relatives after her passing. From that day on, Saber was alone, as orphanhood cast a sad curtain over his life. He decided not to allow himself to get attached to anyone, no matter what. All his loved ones had already passed before he fully understood the true meaning of happiness. Loss became his greatest

fear, and he learned how to take care of himself, relying completely on himself. Joining the police academy helped him greatly in that regard. Nothing could defeat him. He mastered military training and became one of the best snipers in the history of the academy. He was sent to many countries to learn different skills; he gave his best to every task assigned to him and excelled in all of them. This dedication kept him alive. His love for Tunisia was boundless and unwavering, as his country remained his eternal devotion.

For all these reasons, he promised himself never to fall in love. He couldn't bear the pain of mourning again. At his age, he doubted he could ever love a woman who might break his heart and leave him. He didn't trust life, which had taken everyone he loved from him, nor did he trust the daughters of Eve. He had already heard enough about the suffering of his colleagues and friends because of women, and he had lived long enough to witness their fickleness and their pursuit of the rich and powerful. And so he grew to hate and disdain them over time. All they wanted was a pocket filled with money and a thick bank account, in exchange for their polluted bodies, consumed by greed. As for feelings and emotions, they would trample them underfoot, crushing longing and breaking hearts.

But then he met Meriam. He collided with her as if he had been thrown from a train onto the tracks. She split open his skull and excised all ideas of gold diggers and such. It was a violent crash that shook him to his core. It was if he was on the floor chained with shackles, his eyes staring into the void. He was breathing as if he was underwater. Every breath that he took plugged his ears with tumultuous water. He wanted to scream and move his imprisoned body but was too weak. He tried to close his eyes then open them again as wide as he could, hoping to get rid of this nightmare, but he couldn't wake up. He was breathing underwater. He was drowning, drowning. Drowning in the salty honey lake of your eyes, Meriam.

جبل الملح عربية ابراهيم



** جبل الملح ** مقتطف من الصفحة 381 الى الصفحة 384

خرج العميد صابر العربي من المنزل و كأنه يفر من جيش من التتار يحاصره .. أغلق الباب بالمفتاح ثم شغل السيارة و اتجه نحو البحر .. أشعل سيجارة و أخذ يتأمل هذا الصديق العدو .. هذا العجوز الحكيم الكتوم .. أمواجه تتلاطم كدقات قلبه المضطربة .. مد و جزر يتقاذفانه بين واجبه المهني و التزامه مهمته، و بين انجذابه غير المسبوق لهذه المرأة التي تركها حبيسة في منزله بينما ظل هو حبيسا لقضبان عينها الذئبيتين .. الدخان الذي ينفثه من سيجارته ييوح بأسرار لا تعرفها إلا السجائر التي أحرقتها طيلة سنوات حياته بين شفاه لا تتحدث عن معاناة السنين أو عن فقد الأحبة .. آلامه تتكسر على صخور هضبة “ سيدي علي المكي “ و أحلامه الصغيرة ظلت محفورة على رمال شاطئه يغرقها الموج المشاغب و لكنها تحسن التخبط بين تياراته فتفلت من قبضة الماضي و تخرج رأسها بشفاه شققها ملح البحر الأبيض المتوسط .. أخذ ينظر عبر نفاثة سيجارته إلى شريط حياته المرسوم كخط الأفق بين طرفين ..

عاد إلى طفولته التي حرمتها من والديه و شقيقه و هو صغير لم يجاوز العاشرة من عمره .. ابتلعهم البحر الغدار ذات صيف كان مفروضا أن يكون للفرح و الاستجمام .. أخوه ذو الستة أعوام وقع في فخ دوامة بحرية و لما حاول الوالدان انتشاله منها لم يفلحا و فقد ثلاثتهم أرواحهم في مأساة هزت جوانب القرية الهادئة و المنطقة بأسرها ..

والده كان فلاحا بسيطا يعمل في “ القطعاية “ و هي قطعة أرض صغيرة تقع في المنخفض المائي لسبخة غار الملح حيث كان يزرع مختلف أنواع الخضار طيلة فصول العام فتنتج خضرا ذات طعم استثنائي غني بالأملاح المعدنية يقطر حلاوة رغم الملح الذي يحاصر أرضها الرملية لكن جذورها نجحت في اختزان الأمطار النازلة من الجبل ..

أما والدته فكانت تقضي وقتها رفقة الجارات و الصبايا في تطريز “ الشبيكة “ حيث تمضي نهارها في تمرير الغرز بمنتهى الدقة كما علمتها أمها حتى تحصل بعد جهد جهيد على قطع

فريدة تستعمل في جهاز العروس من مفروشات و أغطية و قطع تحتية تلبس تحت الكسوة الرفرافية أو الحَمَامِيَّة مثل الـ ”مِيْزُو“ و هي سيقان السراويل العريضة المصنوعة بحب المرأة ”الغارملحية“ لإبداعها ذي الموروث الأندلسي ..

بعد وفاة والديه قامت جدة صابر بالعناية به في بيتها العتيق القريب من ” القشلة “ .. ذلك البيت ذو الجدران البيضاء المزركشة بقطع الجليز ذات النقوش الموريسكية والألوان الطبيعية الفريدة والذي تزين وجناته نوافذ متوسطة الحجم تطل على صحن الدار .. درس صابر مرحلته الابتدائية في مدرسة ”شارع بورقيبة“ ثم في ” الكزّاية “ حيث كان هو و أصدقاؤه يقومون بجَرّ التراب من موقع بناء المدرسة الإعدادية الجديدة .. فكل تلميذ يطرد من القسم أو يحتاج لبطاقة دخول كان القيّمون يقاوضونه ب” برويطة “ رمل يخرجها من موقع البناء .. و كان الأولاد يفعلون ذلك بسرور و يتباهون بعضلاتهم الناشئة أمام بعضهم أو لجلب انتباه الفتيات الصغيرات .. لكن صابر كان يفعل ذلك بكل تفان لأنه لم يكن يرغب بأن تسمع جدته عن مشاغباته في المدرسة فتوبخه و تمنعه من الذهاب مع رفاقه للشاطئ .. و بعد ذلك انتقل إلى معهد ” محمد علي العنابي “ برأس الجبل“ ليستكمل مشوار دراسته الثانوية حيث كان يستقل الحافلة مع رفاق الصبا و الشباب .. أغلبهم توظفوا وتزوجوا و أنجبوا و كَوْنُوا أسرا .. بعضهم هاجر إلى أوروبا و بعضهم الآخر توظف .. و آخرون امتهنوا مهنة الأهل من الفلاحة إلى الصيد و إصلاح الشبك و القوارب .. و لكنهم مازالوا أعز أصدقائه حتى اليوم الحاضر ..

جدته التي باتت عائلته الوحيدة في الدنيا كافحت كثيرا من أجل مواصلة دراسته .. فهي أيضا كانت تقوم بتطريز ”الشبيكة“ وهي التي علمت والدته و كثيرا من بنات القرية .. و قد صاروا يقبونها بالمعلّمة لشدة إتقانها لعملها و حرصها على جودة منتوجها فكانت الطلاب على أصابعها الذهبية التي تتفنن التخريز و التشبيك و الكروشيه تردها من كل مكان من الجمهورية .. و قد كان صابر مغرما برؤية أناملها و هي تتفنن في صنع الأشكال البديعة من أزهار و ورود و فراشات تقتلها بالغرزة ” الميطة “ التي ترتبط ببعضها لتثني به ما خاطته سابقا من صفوف .. و لطالما تعجّب من هذا اللفظ الغريب ” الغرزة الميطة “ التي تنتج هذا الجمال بين يدي جدته المبدعة حيث تقوم بتخريز المربعات و المثلثات بكل دقة حتى تضاهي في جمالها ”غرزة الحساب“ النابلية من شدة إتقانها ..

و يا لشدة ما كانت الجدة تخشى على صابر من البحر و غدره خوفا من أن يسرقه منها كما فعل مع والديه و شقيقه سابقا .. و لكنه لم يكن يهاب البحر .. بل ظل يتحداه كل مرة يلقي فيها نفسه بين أحضانه .. لم تكن تستهويه السباحة إلا في الأعماق .. و كان غرامه يكمن في تسلق الـ ”بونته“ و القفر من أعاليها .. أما السباحة في ”جواي كاب زيب“ فقد ظلت متعة حقيقية بالنسبة له رغم أنه كسر قدمه فيها إحدى المرات .. في الواقع لا يوجد شاطئ في بنزرت لم يكن لصابر فيه ذكرى جميلة أو أليمة .. كل الشواطئ تعرفه من عين مستير في

رفراف إلى رأس إنجلة و كاف عباد و دار الجنة و ”لاقروت“ و سيدي مشرق و سيدي سالم و غيرها .. و مهما تعرض لكسور أو جروح لم يكن يستسلم أبدا لترهيب البحر حتى اتخذه العملاق الأزرق رفيقا رغم الوجع ..

و في كل رحلة إلى أعماق الكهوف البحرية كان يحس أن أرواح والديه و شقيقه تفرغ حوله و تحيط به لتحميه و تحرسه من كل خطر يترصده ..

تعلم صابر من البحر الصبر و الكفاح و التحدي و الكرم .. و ظل يصرخ في وجه الرياح العاتية و هو يصارع التيار متحديا صديقه للمزيد .. و كأن البحر كان يعوضه عمّن ابتلعهم في جوفه فلم يحرمه يوما من خيره .. و جعل منه واحدا من أمهر صيادي المنطقة لا يخرج من غزوة بحرية فارغ الوفاض أبدا حتى صار منزله متحفا بحريا لغنائمه ..

و رغم خوف جدته عليه فقد ظل يراوح بين الدراسة و الإبحار و الصيد فلم تعد قادرة على منعه مكتفية بالدعاء له بالحماية و النجاح .. لقد انتظرت يوم نجاحه في البالكالوريا بفارغ الصبر لكن العمر لم يمهلهما ففارقت الحياة قبل النتيجة بأيام قليلة.. هل من صدمة جديدة تنتظرك أيها الصابر منذ صغرك؟؟

و بعد أن سمع خبر نجاحه عبر البوق ركض كفهذ أسود نحو المقبرة .. وقف عند قبر جدته و سألتها “ هل تسمعينني يا اميمة؟؟ لقد وعدتك أني سأنجح بتفوق و قد كنت عند وعدي .. سأخبر أمي و أبي كذلك .. ثم سأخبر أخي ”جوجو“ أيضا .. سيفرحون كثيرا .. هذا الصيف ”جوجو“ يحتفل بعيد ميلاده الخامس عشر .. لكان هو أيضا قد نجح بتفوق يا اميمة .. أخيرا سأحقق حلمي بالالتحاق بأكاديمية الشرطة كما أردت أن تريني دائما“

وجده أصدقاؤه نائما في المقبرة تلك الليلة و قد كانت ليلة حزينة على كل من عرف الجدة و حفيدها الذي لم يعد له قريب في هذه الدنيا بعدها.. و منذ ذلك اليوم أصبح صابر وحيدا و أسدل اليتيم رداءه الحزين على حياته و قرر أنه لن يعلق حياته بأي شخص مهما كان .. فكل أحبته قد رحلوا قبل أن يعرف للفرح معنى .. صارالفقد أشد مخاوفه .. درّب نفسه على القيام بشؤونه معتمدا كليا على ذاته و كان لانضمامه لصفوف الشرطة فضل كبير في ذلك .. فلا شيء يعجزه .. برع في التدريبات العسكرية.. أصبح أحد أبرع القناصين على مدى تاريخ الأكاديمية.. و قد تم إرساله لعدة دول لتلقي المعارف في مجالات مختلفة فتفوق في كل تكوين جديد تلقاه إذ أنه كان يقدم روحه لعمله بعباء لا يقارن.. فهذا هو ما جعله يبقى على قيد الحياة : حبه اللامحدود لتونس لأن تونس حبيبته التي لا تموت ..

لهذا عاهد نفسه ألا يقع في فخ الحب مطلقا .. لا يمكنه أن يكون فريسة للحزن من جديد .. بعد هذا العمر لا يظن أنه قادر على التعلق بامرأة يمكنها أن تحطم قلبه لتهجره .. هو لا يثق

بالزمن الذي أخذ منه كل من أحبهم .. و لا يثق بينات حواء ..

فقد سمع عن معاناة زملائه و رفاقه منهن الكثير و قد عاش ليرى تلونهن و تهافتهن على أصحاب الجاه و المال و السلطة فأصبح يفتنهن و يحتقرهن .. كل ما يردنه هو جيب ملآن بالنقود و رصيد بنكي سمين يقدمن له أجسادا ملوثة بالجشع .. أما المشاعر و العواطف فيلقين بها تحت أقدامهن ليطأن بها قلوبا تواقه و ملتاعة ..

و لكنه التقى مريم .. اصطدم بها كقطار ألقى به على برودة السكة الحديدية فشقت جمجمته لتخرج منها الأسئلة المتوارثة عن الأنثى الصيادة.. كان حادث اصطدام عنيف رجه رجا .. ظل ملقى على الأرض كأنه مكبل بالأغلال و عيناه شاخصتان إلى الأعلى .. يتنفس كأنه في أعماق البحر .. كل نفس يخرجها يصم أذنيه بتدفق الدماء الصاخب .. يريد أن يصرخ و أن يحرك جسده السجين و لكنه يحس بالعجز .. يحاول أن يغمض عينيه ثم يفتحهما على اتساعهما عله يتخلص من هذا الكابوس لكنه لا يفيق .. إنه يتنفس تحت الماء .. إنه يغرق .. يغرق.. يغرق.. في بحيرة عسل عينيك المالح يا مريم ..

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