

Nenad Šaponja

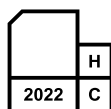
THE NEW STORY OF NOVI SAD



The book series

‘Translations’

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НОВИ САД
ЕВРОПСКА
ПРЕСТОНИЦА
КУЛТУРЕ



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NENAD ŠAPONJA

THE NEW STORY OF NOVI SAD

A prose panorama

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Novi Sad 2022

MILUTIN Ž. PAVLOV

CLOSING TIME IN A CROWDED PUB

*In the whirlpool of other's illusion
it is useless to swim
one's own lap of honour.*

The bar smells of stale cigarette butts. The tobacco has crept into the walls. Each time a stronger wind blows, the windows cough squeakily and somewhat sadly. And the smells of freshly picked grapes hover over the wine pitcher. Everlasting musty smell. The greyness of scattered things. Tables covered with chequered tablecloths. A jacket with yellow non-commissioned officer ranks draped over a brown chair. A soldier's hat winks with its glittering tin mark from the coat hanger. On the back of the chair hangs a trumpet. The leather attaché bag on the coat hanger stares at the ceiling with a gasping dusk. The battery-powered bakelite radio box flickers in the voice of spooky news and falls silent:

*Yesterday three were lost ... Within rifle range ...
Found in a tin can ... Without a wallet
and left shoe ... Behind a minefield ...*

The news is as confusing as the radio box which barks intermittently into the void.

The darkness in the window is as spacious as it is narrow. No light coming in to deceive you, unless a bullet pokes it from afar. You hear it. It whistles by and nests somewhere. It resembles slumbering silence. Without the silence, the whistling of the fired grain would not even be heard.

Savatije Račić in a white T-shirt and striped underpants exercises male endurance by hitting his head on the wall. The wall is clearly letting him know that he can't get any further from this pub. He is running laps around the table and puffing like a steam locomotive. Binoculars hang



around his neck so he can better see the night in which he imagines himself to be someone and nothing. The lap running is soft and silent. He is wearing white sneakers with dark blue knee-high socks. A plush towel tucked into the underpants. A tin jug with lukewarm water is waiting for Savatije Račić next to the red washbasin and enamelled bowl so he can wash his face in case of urgency.

The quiet and not so pub-appropriately tailored uniform background of Savatije Račić.

The phone rings, it rings indefinitely.

– Just you ring, hunt for a chance to catch my ear. You think Savatije needs a phone earring, no way, and then some more. And what do you even want from me, when I don't want anything from you ?! Two more laps to run, hang on a bit more ... All right then ... Hello, hello ... – The half-naked non-commissioned officer in a majestically lonely hole of a sooty pub picks up the bakelite telephone. – What did you say to me ...?! Mumbling back to you, you mumblor ... You're mumbling, mumbles, damn straight, you're slurring, you don't have any front teeth, you thug ... Yes, yes, I can see through the telephone receiver ... You're shaking, you're shaking ... I know you as soon as you open your mouth to say who you are, may the devil tap your kidneys with a stone ... Come on, come on, when you already think you're a phone line hotshot ... What, what ...?! How to dodge a bullet ...?! The questioner hung up.

– Fleece of a man, he asks only to be scared in the middle of the question, how to dodge a bullet ?! Man, what a lame question. You don't even fire, and he falls down. – Savatije pacifies his own shadow. – The voice sounds familiar, it appears from somewhere, and yet as if it never existed, it disappears in the personal anguish. There are all kinds of idiots around. He sucked away at my phone with that question like a blowfly sucks at its food. How to dodge a bullet? Well, if I knew where his telephone device was listed, I would disassemble his phone instantly. – After putting down



the tin jug next to the bowl, he opens without haste the enveloped letter addressed to his name and surname, in strict confidence. – First and foremost, something confidential finally came for me. – Be careful not to miss a single word while reading. – Dear Mr. Račić, at the regular session of the War Cabinet of the Supreme Command, we decided to award you with the Order for Courage of the First Degree, because it has been reliably confirmed that you dodged hundreds and hundreds of thousands of bullets fired by our brotherly enemy, with none of calibres in question making its way through your body. We would otherwise not have distinguished you as a physically perforated non-commissioned officer. The medal will adorn your bust on the Holy Week of our and your battalion at seventeen o'clock and eighteen minutes. For accuracy, General Joca Trtulović, signed personally. – Savatije folded a letter full of himself. – Look, it's already tomorrow, and tomorrow is already today. That's why I polish the soles of my feet with white sneakers so that I don't smell if I accidentally take my boots off... Then and there, right under my nose, before I was to go home to present myself to my wife straight from the line of fire, I drank two brandies, and by nature, one shot is enough for me to make ten times the mess in one go. Frontal elevation, I don't want to lie, such as you who reads sitting opposite myself, I venture into war as a political whore with three verifiably conceited brave forgeries on a large scale and I came directly upon the zone of the fraternal enemy. And there, it's hunting season. They see me stepping through their fireworks with insane skills, but I don't see the main thing I need to see and I simply fall into their ditch uninvited. Aunt à la aunt, as the French would say. This guy in the ditch blinks full of disbelief that I, crazy according to his opposite side, interrupt him in reading of the novel *Farewell to Arms*. I, in the horror of his reading, try to blow the trumpet, the trumpet bleats, and I shout from the top of my voice so loudly that It could barely be heard: Your position or your life! He struck me with the novel he was reading in the right between the eyes along with erudite words:



– My position is shitty in every direction so that it can't possibly be any shittier, and there are more lice on my head than there can ever be republics on our fraternal football stadiums. And you and your trumpet can go to hell or else I'll whistle the funeral march into your ear – shouts squinty and shoves the book into the pocket of his military jacket.

I sober up in a second pale as a warrant with someone else's picture on it. I see, the banter is so good that it can't get any worse. I jolt for a quick lap to the left! I accidentally break wind and head back in full force. This with the winds, in all its horror, is my innate flaw ... Shoot him in the back! Shouts his pal. It is not ammunitionally wise to expend a bullet on silly things, you can see for yourself that we are so twice as silly that we can't get any sillier together, squinty is making excuses, so much that I have to swat him over the head with his book, he will remember that for all time, if he survives. I rushed off with the winds as if a trumpet up my butt was melodiously tripping over my underpants and pants, so I figure it is better to be silly alive than silly dead and that's when I got such motor skills in my legs that I ran until I fell into a deep background shock on our side. Tippy as I was, I wasn't even aware of my own terror that befell me. In that terror, I could have mistakenly made such an ammunitional exchange of fire that I might have died in that commotion, complete with my uniform.

In all the warfare confusion, that squinty guy there treated me strategically as a scout to his own detriment and by hitting me right in the forehead with a book, he made it clear to me that I could lose my life and that not even two medals for courageous terror would help me. Something because of my age, something because of my eyes, they took me off the cannon and sent me to the pulmonary to play the trumpet, which means that I can mentally inflate my exhaled chest ... Well, together with the letter, I received this dispatch which reads briefly and clearly: Savatije Račić, the address is in order, the seal is oblique, Cyrillic strictly confidential, which means it's a military secret. And what do I need the dispatch for when I



was told in the letter that my bust would be hung onto a medal so that some strange storm of someone else's wind does not take me away. For a fact, it does say that swarms of bullets flew around me like flies around, beg your pardon ... – He puts aside the unopened envelope with the dispatch as well as the read letter. – There is no mess in our homeland without my family. We fought from Žmurac to Gnjurac. We busted heads back and forth as we saw fit, we were on duty as a family to create problems. I jumped from ring to ring knocked out. We huddle like cheap goods on sale in a cramped store. To be honest, I prefer to dress shabby as a state model rather than to feel shabby. – Savatiije watches the enveloped dispatch against the lantern. – Should I read it or not? Who knows, maybe they are provoking me to see whether or not I will crack a military secret ?! As soon as they want to hang you on the medal, it means that you are verified and that they have the right to check what that bodywork will be placed on. Even if it is not so, it will be exactly so. – He puts away the dispatch, it rings in his left ear, so he tosses the phone receiver again. – Well, if I only had a Geiger counter, I would find this telephone guy who is distracting me in the course of my thoughts. As soon as I catch the shortest leave from the battlefield, he pops up with the question, how to dodge a bullet? Some whore-like temper in a man. He must have some strategy closely worked out or he is a spy or he would like to become a domestic traitor ?! Some son of a bitch for sure. He wants to snitch on me to our brotherly enemy as a lower-ranking officer, may his uncle steal his aunt's briefcase. I read other people's thoughts at a distance. And maybe I am inspired by the family spirit of Josef von Rosenkrantz, infiltrated among the former brethren who know how to sing Danke Deutschland to the note. He watches through the binoculars the darkness that struck him in the pub den. – Mr. Rosenkrantz, I see through you, maybe you're the handiwork of my late uncle, without both of us knowing about it. Jozef, Jozef, they're going to screw you over around the first corner ...

The pub was brimming with insomnia. A lantern on the bar. Shadows on the walls like postage stamps for letters to nowhere.



The phone rings, it rings.

– My name is Savatije Račić called Scorpio ... Not a scorpion ... – He slams the phone down. – It must be that they are plotting some nasty spy scandal over the telephone device, and maybe my last name is not exactly in line with my face ... – He shouts into the empty receiver. – Put a frog up your arse.

A phone in a musty pub as an actor on the open stage.

– Boy, do we have a lot of frogs in this swamp. If I had died on the front line of that stupid misunderstanding, I wouldn't have known it. He would like to break away, and I would not like to tear, a new problem in an old story of a tailor's shop. They keep patching, and who gets who... Luckily, some case always gets me out of trouble, swimming saved me from my first death in that silly play of my mind. Yes, I swim like a dog, but I can swim. It turned out like this ... We went to a night battle. Darkness thicker than this. The order is gloomy. Complete horror-show. I got a check point three fingers to the right, where I was so completely scared after the first shot that I almost went, well I don't want to say it. Even the smallest war causes the greatest terrors. What can you do, bad luck after bad luck, I fall into a cesspool. I barely made it out of that fraternal reek. As soon as I reached the shore, the enemy had fled, and I made a total breach, because they did not have any protective masks. Therefore, being armed with the smell of a cesspool is not an insignificant fact. I didn't think of it, but that's how it happened. This was noticed by higher-ranking officers and they gave me the rank, because I pushed for frontal combat in impossible conditions. And who knows if I would have stayed alive if that famous cesspool had not happened to me, which I could not pass by in my trouble. And now that mumbler asks me for my last name ?! Well, really ... For the occasion they place me onto the medal, I wrote a speech in my head: Gentlemen ministers, lady ministers, generals in general, ladies and gentlemen, comrades ... That part with the comrades remained from our intimate fraternal past when we shouted:



*We are yours –
you are ours,
as soon as the bullet fires,
run wherever you know.*

The plane in a sweeping flight through the air ploughed through the silence over the lost inn.

– Ladies and gentlemen, I entered this war with such terror that I don't even know if I will ever succeed and die properly. I checked various schemes and I didn't manage to come across a bullet in any of them. It could be said that I am more for a bullet thrown behind my back rather than for a bullet in the back. I enjoy it when I notice where it is flying from, and I move my head and other organs to safety. I don't even encounter bursts of bullets in my dream when they shoot me. I am ammunitionally disgusted by all calibres. I am, generally speaking, disgusted by all kinds of armaments, which does not mean that I refrain when beans spiced with cumin are in question, of that I am particularly greedy, because that is how I produce mild warfare toxins with the gas strategy of confusion. I have such gases that I feel it is dangerous to approach fire with them. That's what I'm famous for. There's not much to think about, that's how it is. – He watches the dark distance through binoculars. – Get away from me, Jozef, so that you don't catch a stray bullet, aren't those two war disasters enough, you're poking the third one. Well, we won't do that, my Johan ... – The phone rings, the receiver is off but without a voice. – Look at that, someone is listening to my silence. They used to do that because of the Russians and Stalin's daughter, and now the sound checks are because of screwing around with colonel wives, which I haven't practiced since I had surgery of my third tonsil. In America, even a donkey is eavesdropping, so then how can we who practice cattle fairs not do it.

– There is no fair without a butcher and a hatchet among trained thieves. – Someone's ghost swayed in a hoarse voice. – In the name of the sweet secret of my wallet which swallows the truth as soon as it's open.



– Now, who is a wallet for himself, and who needs a donkey without a hatchet and an ox ?! – Savatije scratches behind his ear to better listen to this vampire silence that came to him in the tavern.

Not very cheerful silence. There is an inaudible scream in it.

Savatije Račić doesn't like that microphone apparatus either, or its bakelite casings and little boxes. It has long been clear to him that the silence in his hungry intestines is also stalked by ants, but his silence is small and insignificant for such vicious and upside-down eavesdropping. He is in that tavern like cheese in a mousetrap, a slice, a crumb ... Cheese in tons for tons ... The other side has a similar tavern with a similar sacrificial ram, so now it comes down to which mouse or wolf finds itself in the trap. Hunters and victims, monkeys and little monkeys, including Savatije, have been playing chess like that for ages, at least that is Darwin's claim, anchored here so that the family does not languish in destructive nonsense. Historical books are being written about these chess games. And now you tell some fool there that there is no history, while it is constantly happening in front of your nose, it is being built like a tower of cards on windy frauds and colourful deceptions, and all this is governed by new misconceptions to bypass the truth. Revolutions are suppressed by revolutions. Even the slightest disturbance brings confusion, and the confusion itself immediately turns into chaos. And Savatije Račić, pensively staring at the moustachioed and sullen face of history, listens to its lumpy question: *What do you want from me, prodigal man?* Savatije, shrunken like a withered leaf of a huge oak, answers bluntly and naively: *The thought which I can live.* Nothing special. The usual chess play you read in the newspaper. You see it on coloured images on television screens. You listen through rackety radio boxes. Salty and bitter, sweet and awful religious teachers of false preaching outwitting each other. Festivals last in hoaxes, you can only guess who is preparing a bigger prank for whom, and those pranking games are heavily charged at the protruding counters of light diplomacy with protruding mousetraps.



He just thought how nice it would be to stick to a dream on this enveloped ottoman in this inn like a postage stamp, when the phone ghostly squeaks like a saw out of vicious silence.

“Hello, hello ...” Savatije says.

“Savatije ... Savatije ...” snorts the bakelite hole. – Have you read that dispatch ...?

– No, no matter who you are, Colonel, I see that it is strictly confidential, so I’m counting ... – Savatije answers somewhat hoarsely.

– First of all, I would like to be a colonel, but I am not, and a major I am, as I count on you as I count on myself, as without calculating, you are unpredictable at first sign of trouble ... – the major untangles the tangled ...

– I have a letter that I am ordained by the personal signature of the general in general ... And what do I need a subsequent dispatch for ...? – Savatije replies.

– The dispatch leisurely explains what was missed ...

– Major, what has been missed on my part here ...?

– First until the last moment, there was no metal for your medal or other sorts of bodywork. We lost the paint in production. We will keep you in mind in design geometry plans for the next medal. In the dispatch I can see – I don’t see how you haven’t even read it: Sergeant STOP Bust-wise you don’t have to come in STOP Shortage in tin production STOP The paint evaporated along with the painters of the new constitutional disorder STOP Stick to your life until victory with freedom in our wallet STOP ... – and nothing, silence was found in the full signal of the inn mousetrap.

– Who is the mouse to whom here, and who could be the wolf in lamb’s skin with a kidney of cheese in this silly mousetrap?! – Savatije



Račić stands up, hides behind the bar, sticks to the wall like a medal on someone's lively prepared chest, and a stray bullet chirps through the glass.

He felt like a frozen blue fish in a tin box with a strictly confidential label without a name and surname.

Translated from Serbian to English
Igor Aćimović



SLOBODAN TIŠMA

THE SINGLE WITH NO LABEL

“Oh, no, my Thelonious”

1.

“I saw a bunch of singles abandoned next to a garbage dumpster” – that would be the beginning, the first sentence. I went to the computer to open a new file, but I stopped, I thought it was even better to take a ball-point pen out of my bag and start writing by hand. But when I put my hand in my bag, I found a pen disassembled into simple elements, which confused me. Maybe I should have gone back to the computer and typed in the first sentence, but I still attempted to put the pen back together – to no avail, it fell apart and the parts scattered under the table. Trash! So, to avoid any confusion, I am typing all this directly into the life of Saint Ursula, utter nonsense. I always give different names to all my machines, the same as to my animals, as I seem to be less afraid of them this way. I have already forgotten what I had on my mind – that first sentence must be a blow, and a good one, a chord from which the whole story will develop. But the computer is a dumpster, for waste, for words that are garbage, after all, the same as this pen from which the letters should be flowing. Did I imagine myself as some bum rummaging through that dumpster? Words are things that end up in a garbage dumpster or next to it, just like these singles that someone left in the hope that they will still be of use to someone.

But how could these singles be of any use as I owned only a single record player, that relic, which could only play *long play* records, at 33 rpm but not at 45, as required to play single records. I could always listen to them at 33 rpm. I was quite intrigued by what was on them, what kind of music was it, if there was any music at all. The labels were gone, the rain soaked them, they peeled off and wandered on leaving behind the bare



black discs with inscribed mysterious voices, inaudible sounds, voices that were now an octave lower, so that female voices became male and male voices became incomprehensible buzzing. If not by an octave, they were certainly deeper, but could also become high pitched, hysterical, screaming. It's all a matter of speed, revolutions per minute. In any case, they are completely different voices, not the ones recorded on the record. I'm still standing over the pile of black discs. Everything around me is wet from the prolonged rain. The stench from the dumpster is spreading but I don't mind, I'm in no rush. Do I even care what these records hold? Some incredible music, sounds which will turn into other sounds, into noises, then disappear and everything will change. Today, however, words are of little interest to me, tedious words wrestling in Greco-Roman style, boxing like blackheads, like inconceivable buds of evil. The words in a sentence are like horns in a sack – perpetual enemies, to use the rural metaphor, rural and infernal. And, in fact, all the words are the same, because every sentence is a dead end, ie. the sentence is a bottomless pit, making the words fall through. Or a story, as much as I am interested in a story, what else can it impart to me – the famous saying: "Let the story be told, let us know what happened to him." But that is also of little interest to me, I know, all the stories have been told. All the stories just retell old, well-known stories. Some people desire precisely that, to hear a well-known story, in fact, to tell it to themselves, just as we had in childhood loved listening to the same story for the hundredth time.

2.

I remember a winter evening in Újvidék a long time ago when I received a beating from my father for a single record. Although he was beside himself with rage, he kept control of himself, he just put his palms on my cheeks and shouted:

"These are slaps, you understand, slaps, I'm beating you!" But that was enough, even though nothing hurt, it was an insult that I never forgave



him. Did I? In fact, I wish I had forgiven him, but I'm not sure I did, and that bothers me. He has been rotting for over forty years in the Catholic cemetery of St. Miklos Panthaji on Futoška Street, my father, an aspiring opera singer, and I still carry around that pain, that shameful wound he inflicted upon me in his delusions. In fact, he is already disintegrated underground, the tombstone is cracked from frost and the crack is widening, washed down by Pannonian showers. And even now, it's as if I actually see him going into the girl's room behind the kitchen in the evening to sing an aria by Cavaradosi from "Tosca", or an aria of the father from "La Traviata", the one where Alfred's father begs Violet to refuse Alfred's love, to sacrifice herself.

I used to secretly watch him. Once, through a partially open door, I saw him crying as he sang an aria by Cavaradosi. Or something much more delicate: through the bathroom keyhole, it seemed to me that I could see him performing some unusual motions leaning over the sink, or maybe he was just arguing with his own face in the mirror, and flapping his hands while doing so. But all of that was, most likely, my pubertal imagination. On the right side, next to the sink, there was a large baroque stove with a water kettle, and on the left a bidet next to which was a toilet bowl that I used to climb on as a boy to peek through the window into the skylight space, into which the tenants threw all kinds of rubbish that could never be removed, as there was no entrance, or it existed but it was covered up and no one cared about it. The amount of rubbish increased over time, so that it could have been expected that one day it would reach the first floor, where our apartment was, which, of course, never happened. I myself occasionally threw various smaller objects through the little window. Each time I peeked into the opening of the skylight, the sight would be different, the configuration of the garbage would change from day to day, that was interesting. Rain and snow also persistently soaked the rubbish, which occasionally, so to speak, worked, so that a heavy reek would develop. In any case, the skylight was a mysterious place that particularly captivated my attention, a dark centre around which the diurnal-noctur-



nal creature of the house revolved and into which, like garbage, flowed screams and whispers, various conversations, song, quarrels and crying, sexual screams and noises of emptying and spilling, laying out a haunting peat bog as the very foundation of existence.

The other day, when I came home after a hard day's work, J. greeted me all in tears, she cried out in panic: "Dragica is gone!" Dragica is a kitten we had picked up from the street a month before.

– How did she disappear?

– She's gone, I'm afraid she jumped into the skylight, I forgot to close the little window in the hall.

Then we move the closet which is leaning right onto the little window, so that it can remain only slightly open, but sufficient for a cat to crawl through, then we climb onto that same closet and stare into the opening. There is a lot of rubbish the tenants threw away in this skylight as well, various things, objects for everyday use and for daily immediate and definitive rejection. It seemed to me that I saw a paw moving in the pile or was it a strip of cobwebs fluttering in the air. One moment it's really a paw, another moment it's a cobweb, I can't make out what it definitively is. J also climbs on the closet, looks, but she's not sure whether it's Dragica's paw or some rag. We think we hear a meow, a cry for help. And then again it seems to be a squeak coming from the apartment next door or more like a baby crying.

– How can we help her?

– I don't know.

Is it possible to get into the skylight from the basement? But this building has no basement, it doesn't have a foundation. There may be no access to this skylight at all. It is an enclosed space, surrounded by walls, from which there is no way out, when you fall into it. There are only windows



for light, for watching. Terrible. All kinds of things perish there, it's a bottomless pit that is constantly moving, that walks left and right.

But let me go back to that story of the beatings and singles. On one occasion, I received a single record from my parents as a gift, but now I don't remember on what occasion. It is possible that it was a gift for a birthday or New Year, I don't know. But maybe my parents bought me the record to indirectly fulfil their own wishes, since on one side of that record was a popular song from the famous film "the Bridge on the River Kwai", a film that they obviously liked very much. It seems to me that they went to the "Jadran" cinema at least two or three times to see it. On the other side of the record was a jazz-blues ballad, also seemed like music from some movie, played on a trumpet accompanied by a smaller ensemble. Well, that blues simply fascinated me. It summed up all the imperishable beauty and glory of an unrepeatable youth yet to come. That trumpet that strives to talk, to sing, that stutters and softly weeps, was a hint and awakening of freedom, a feeling of independence from anything, so this music for me was something of a special, priceless value. I was completely in a trance whenever I listened to it and that listening became a kind of ritual for me. Of course, I always listened to it alone, it was out of the question for me to listen to it in someone's presence. I didn't like the music from the movie "the Bridge on the River Kwai" at all. It was a military march whistled by a choir accompanied by drums. It was a popular thing that could be heard every hour on the radio, for my taste banal and stupid. It even sounded like a choir from some opera or operetta, so that may have been the reason why it grew close to my parents' heart. Its very presence on the record, polluted and humiliated something as magnificent as that blues. I decided to simply remove the kitsch from the record, because not only did that stupid music insult and humiliate something that so deeply touched the core essence of my youthful being, but that blues, that song of my youth, was something that had stood apart from everything and whose pedestal nothing could even come close to.



One evening, when no one was home, I took the razor out of my father's shaver and scraped the side of the record containing the music from the movie "the Bridge on the River Kwai", without a hint of what consequences that would hold for me. A few days later, my father discovered the crime. He thought it was an act of malevolence aimed at him and my mother, he even believed he knew the reason: that it was my revenge for him not wanting to buy me the Swedish nickel-plated steel ice skates I had persistently ogled in a shop window in Jevrejska (Jewish) Street. Whether he didn't want to buy them for me because he was afraid that I would injure myself with them or because the shiny blades of the ice skates reminded him of something terrible, God only knows. And he beat me. I've already mentioned how he just put his hands on my cheeks and shouted in anger: "I'm beating you!" In fact, he was acting. It was a symbolic smacking, but that was enough. In that way, he humiliated the youthful ideal embodied in that song, that beautiful blues. With his rudeness, he hurt the glory and beauty of youth, and the fact he did this in his delusions could not justify him. Today, I can understand his mistake, considering that he did not have a father, that is. I was his father, and he was not able to learn from his mistakes ie my mistakes, but that doesn't matter now. An additional problem was that the punishment consisted, in addition to the symbolic beatings, in the confiscation of that single, a confiscation that was factual and definitive. Simply, my father took the record away from me and hid it somewhere or maybe threw it away. I was still ignorant and uninformed at that age to know who the author of the music in question was or who the performer was. Maybe I didn't even want to know, because for me it was music without a name, without words, as was the very concept of music. Now I suspect that it could have been something from the movie "The Young Man with a Horn", played by, then only at the beginning of his career, young Chet Baker – may he have eternal glory! Or was it Harry James after all? But even if I had known it then, it would hardly have been of any use. In the 1950s, it was almost impossible to get the *same* record in Ujvidek. It was most likely bought in one of the Novi Sad commis-



sion shops, where predominantly foreign goods were sold, usually in one copy. Of course, the single with the popular march from the movie “the Bridge on the River Kwai” could have been purchased in almost every stationery store, but the other side, the B side of those singles did not feature my blues, but some other music.

And so I lost something that was ripped away from my heart, only the memory of the music remained, but I couldn’t even sing or whistle it. Sometimes I thought that my father might return the record to me after a while, even though I would reject it with disgust, or that I would find it somewhere, I’ll open a drawer, and a small black disk with a red label would appear. But none of that.

I was already accustomed to climbing on the toilet bowl in the bathroom and staring out the window at the kaleidoscope of skylights. One day it was as if something had pulled me there. As soon as I peeked through the window, I saw a small black disk on the pile of garbage in the right corner of the skylight, but without the label, *the rain had done its thing*. I immediately thought of trying to get it out of the garbage with a fishing hook and nylon rope, which was quite feasible, and to ascertain if it was my single in the first place, but I quickly changed my mind and gave up. The story was over. That record meant nothing to me anymore. I wanted to forget the whole event, but also the music that now just reminded me of all that.

One evening, through the open door of the girl’s room, I saw my father again, leaning on the table, wiping away his tears. I thought that he might regret it, that he understood his mistake, and that he felt guilty because of the injustice he had done to me, especially because at that time I, who was in the heat of puberty, began to notice symptoms of a severe mental illness that will soon completely destroy me. But again, as always, it was something completely different.



Less than three or four months have passed since that record event, and one spring morning, two men in white shirts with rolled-up sleeves came to our apartment on Pavlova Street and ordered my father to pack a few things and go with them. I was standing, still sleepy, in my pyjamas in the dark hallway, where the parquet floor creaked under the steps of the two well-fed goons, and I watched an incredible opera scene in which my mother screamed and begged for mercy. But there was no joking with the state security administration guys. They said that they did not know exactly what it was about, that father was most likely suspected of stealing some tools in the theatre, where he was employed as a propman. From the window of my room, I only saw my father being led into a beige “Opel Olympia”. Mom did not want to let him go, she held his hands, until those two somehow pulled her away, energetically, but not too rough.

At the trial, which lasted a short time, it turned out that my father gave confidential information to a foreign intelligence service. He was sentenced to seven years in prison and was immediately sent to Sirmium Prison to serve his sentence. I still don’t know what secrets he could have known, but maybe I didn’t know who my father actually was. However, most probably, he must have talked to someone about some kind of nonsense, he discussed politics, and someone reported him, what else? Above our apartment, on the second floor, lived two newly relocated YPA officers, Captain Banković and Lieutenant Branković, with whom my father sometimes talked in the hallway and who, not long after my father was convicted, started pursuing my mother, even though they were themselves married and were fathers of young children. Every Sunday morning, the two of them, like amorous cats – suitors, sang in a duet which resonated through the skylight. I had later learned that singing was called joiking or yoiking, something like that.

After a year and a few months, my mother received a letter from the prison administration informing her that her husband R. K. had suddenly died. But at that time I was already completely immersed in my pubertal



episode, obsessed with madness: I was no longer myself, I was someone else, alien and unknown to myself, at least that's how I felt, even though my mind remained intact. Nevertheless, I got used to it somehow and I did not lose contact with reality. I went to school regularly, hung out with my peers, learned to manage, even though it always seemed like a dream. But it may have helped me overcome all these troubles by combining swimming and diving. It was all just a dream I took refuge in. I completely forgot about my father. It was only when, after several years, I emerged like a flower from the depths of the sea that I was greeted by the shadow of a black disc with a label across the entire sky, which still torments me to this day, constantly making me patch a sentence in which all words are the same, while actually defending myself from ...? Etc. and tra-la-la ...

Translated from Serbian to English
Igor Aćimović



BORDÁS GYÖZÖ

LETTER TO THE OTHER WORLD

„I could go to a village or to a small town. And if things get tough, it’s possible that I’ll go. But to leave before that? ... To leave this poor apartment, my only home. Leave it at the mercy of fire, bombs and murderers. I don’t care about furniture; I have no valuables. But „Home” is not an empty word; I part with it only if it is gone. Until then, I stay. I will do what I know and can, sharing the same destiny as millions of people.”

Sándor Márai:
Diary 1943-1944

Novi Sad, 18th April, 1999

Dear Sándor Márai!

I apologise for interrupting and disturbing your eternal rest, but since I have been living and reliving Your 43-44 – while reading and not letting your “Diary” out of my hands day or night – I don’t even need to mention that I have the feeling that we are together, that you are here with me. I guess that’s why I have the courage to actualize this morbid idea and send my letter to the other world. To whom would I address it in this world? When no one, except the closest family, friends and fellow writers, could understand it. Even in that world, with honourable exceptions, there is no soul that can comprehend this tragedy that is happening to us and is yet to happen. To find solace in the fact that it has been going on like this for one hundred and fifty years? Fine, I’m comforted. It comforts and worries me that in the end we are all written off. Some are sure of it, though I hope not completely.

The reason why I am addressing you is the following: in 56, you wrote to our mutual friend, Károly Szirmai: “It is certainly not easy to find inspiration in the diaspora. The role of literature is to ask questions and to an-



swer them again and again. In solitude or isolation, it is very difficult to maintain inspiration. You seem to be able to do that. You live in the diaspora and that is very useful when it comes to the Hungarian language. A writer abroad is in extreme need of the everyday charm of his native language. No book can make up for this need.”

Well, I want to write to you about our current woes. I will present two or three subjective “experiences”, in the hope that you will listen to me and – I guess – understand. Understanding is what we need most right now. Speaking from experience, I can say that more and more people who listen to you in one ear and forget you through the other, while there are few who truly sympathize with us. Unfortunately.

Let me tell you, for three weeks this horror has been going on, they have been dropping bombs on us. Apart from five or six phone calls from Hungary, from good friends and their sincere concern, there is nothing. Nothing!

Daily duties do not permit me to sit at the typewriter for hours. I manage to light a lamp above my desk in the evening, but then the air-raid sirens sound off. I can somehow bear their sound, but when I hear the hum of the planes in the sky and the fireworks of the air defences – the game of cat and mouse – darkness befalls my eyes and I get completely blocked. I can’t write, there are no thoughts, they smother each word. Is there a worse thing in the world for a writer than to run out of ideas? I think only You can understand this, and something similar happened to You. You wrote down: “In the breaks between the bombing, life becomes a dream, like a fog. Houses do not stand strong on their foundations, everything is uncertain, one moment it is still here, and the next it is gone.”

I’ll tell you. The bombing started on 24th March, and after a week or two, you get used to everything. At dawn on 1st April, I was awakened by a terrible explosion. It was about five o’clock. My wife went out for bread and milk. She came back shocked, her chin trembling: “They’ve destroyed



our bridge!” “I don’t believe it,” I reply, “it must be disinformation.” The children are silent, just blinking under their quilt. My body is shaking, my whole being is trembling. On my way to work, I can barely hold the steering wheel.

“It can’t be true” – I’m trying to calm her down. We arrive at the old boulevard leading to Petrovaradin, we come across a column of people walking towards the bridge. Like they’re going to a football game. And, indeed, something is missing. What? There is no traverse at the end of the road anymore with “Marshal Tito” written on it for a long time. There has been no writing on it for a long time and the traverse is gone. I start feeling pain in my soul, I miss it. The image of the city is also mutilated. The image of the city? It’s been ripped from our lives! We approach, horror and fear can be seen on people’s faces, women are crying. From there, you can now only go right or left, not straight anymore.

Not far from there, two or three hundred meters away, is the publishing house where I work. I arrive at the usual time, exactly at seven. The porter’s beard is also trembling. “Boss,” he says, though he has never spoken to me like that, “your office windows are broken too.”

Part of the glass from the double window lies scattered on the sidewalk, and a part of the glass broke my recently bloomed hibiscus. As I remove large and small shards of glass from the pot, I hear the secretary loudly sobbing, and I, being the stronger one, “merely” swallow my tears quietly. There is no glass in the city, we replace it with offset printing plates.

Even before noon, the janitor bursts in: “Look what we found” – he says with a frightened look. I don’t know what he’s showing me. From a distance, it reminds me of an iron bird.

“Fragments, you see. Shrapnel!” He says, showing me a thirteen-centimetre-long and four/five-centimetre-wide uneven object with sharp edges. Resembling a crocodile tooth. Our publishing house is a four-storey flat roof insulated with bitumen. We pulled this fragment out



of the bitumen on the roof of the building. A fearsome killer. I'm not giving it back to him. I find a place for this horrific relic, as some culprit, in my office on the bookshelf. I place it in front of a collection of old inkwells. Behind it is light brown pottery from the beginning of the century with an inscription: "Anthracite ink – a unique product of the paper factory in Poprad – Chemical industry – You can purchase it from Don Dema and friends."

Ink and shrapnel, I feel like my life comes down to that.

Don't hold it against me if I'm bothering you, but I have to go on with the story of the bridge. All this happened on "Green Thursday". Then came Holy Saturday. I have a good friend, a Franciscan here in the Novi Sad convent. He edits and publishes religious books and is the editor of a Catholic magazine, making us colleagues. Recently, I personally edited a book of texts from his editorials and sermons. So, I like to listen and read the sermons of Friar Karoly. Although, I have to admit, I rarely attend soul healing masses, rarely, or more precisely, only on major holidays. As I said: on Holy Saturday. Taking into account the occasion, the service begins earlier, the consecration of the fire at half past five, followed by the consecration of water, liturgy and Holy Mass. By the nature of things, it always takes longer. It is almost eight o'clock, time to raise the chalice and show the wafer – when the church starts shaking. Terribly hard! The confusion lasts for a few moments. A few, just like me, turn their gaze at the ceiling – to see if it will collapse or not. Thank God it won't! Nobody, absolutely nobody moves or thinks about escaping. A terrifying silence reigns. Everyone present, including the friar, have stopped breathing. For a few seconds or maybe even a whole minute, I don't know. But I do know that at the friar's signal the electric organ started playing and the choir began to sing: "On this day Christ has risen." I would sing if I had a voice and an ear for it. But the Lord did not endow me with an ear for music. So far I haven't blamed him, but now I can't forgive him.



That evening, another bridge was destroyed. It was only after midnight that we forced ourselves to eat some ham and eggs cooked in the afternoon. Should I say any more? Three days later, they targeted the third bridge, as well as Banovina and the Refinery, where I, among the last ones, bought two cylinders of butane for reserve ...

I will not even send a postcard from our city anymore, because it is not what it once was. Just like the view from the thirteenth floor.

That is how this spring happened to us, my brother Sandor! And I read your words as a message meant for me: "Long, sleepless nights. I see people from the past coming to me all human, disfigured, smiling, envious, ignorant, incompetent, repeating empty impulses shaped by character. I see them in the future taking the place of the lost, bringing us nothingness. By intentionally misleading us, they deceive us."

P.S.:

I don't know if this is a postscript or a letter with which I would like to finish the last ones. Since I do not want to talk too much, to disturb you unnecessarily in eternal peace of distant waters of the ocean, and am yet so close to your soul that I have the impression you are here within my grasp, I include a short sequel.

After seventy-seven days, everything finally came to an end. Truth be told, I spent the last days of the bombing in Budapest. Not in order to get away, but on an official visit to the Festive Book Week. With the permission of the army and as a representative of our publishing house. The reason: at that time, potential draftees were not allowed to leave the country. For the past twenty-four years as a publisher, a writer, I have always been where You directed me not once with your dedication to books and to our calling.

Friends, writers, publishers, all received me with genuine concern. However, that happened only at the evening reception on the ship, because I had received a special permit at noon to be allowed to leave the country, so I did not arrive at the opening ceremony scheduled for four in



the afternoon. Zsolt Gálfalvi informs me that he has read my letter to you, published in our magazine “Híd”, and taken over by the Bucharest “Seven” (A Hét). Old friends: István Bart, Peter Zentai, Levente Ostovic, but also Konrád, Kányádi, Grendel, Anna Jókai, Béla Pomogáts, György Spiró... all sitting at the “Vojvodina” table.

What to say? In the Forum House, I am also in charge of the lives of five hundred and sixty people. It wasn’t yet over back then. (Thank God, the last) planes took off from Tasar. “The ground is still shaking in Novi Sad,” my wife tells me. And we printed newspapers at night (under the bombs), and delivered them at dawn ... Danger lurks on all sides ... Where the air defence set up their radar, it can explode at any moment ...

I am talking about how “Magyar Szó”, as an opposition newspaper managed to survive and how my house Forum is the only one to print five opposition newspapers. Did I suffer any unpleasantness because of that? I did. They banned the printing of Belgrade’s “Blic”. They turned to us. I ask, “Are you banned?” They are not. Then – the decision is made by Kálmán Fehér and I – we print! I sign the contract.

Two after midnight. Phone’s ringing. Wakes me from my sleep. The provincial secretary for information.

“Are you printing *Blic*?”

“Yes” – I answer – “probably about three people are loading it in the machines, because before it they printed “Magyar Szó”, then “Naša borba”, then the Novi Sad, Kikinda and Kragujevac newspapers ...”

“Go to the printing house immediately!” And he hangs up.

I didn’t even manage to get dressed, the phone again. The president of the provincial parliament is calling. We live in the same building, he on the second, and I on the thirteenth floor. Same questions, same answers. It’s going through my mind – last week he brought me a bag of sugar, and I brought him half a pig – our monthly salary (salary was four or five marks).



“Neighbour, this is not a request, but an order. You cannot print *Blic*!”

“Is it banned or do you, as the founders, ban the printing?” Give it to me in writing. Only then, as the director do I have the obligation to stop the machines. After all, “Free Europe” has already inquired about what is happening. I’m on my way to the printing house.”

I have never before in my life seen the surprise I caused in the printing house when I showed up that night. Over the previous weeks, I wrote at least twenty excuses, especially for young men: the printing house cannot operate without them. So they stayed instead of being sent to the front.

Not to dwell on it. We have survived the war, I hope that more peaceful times are coming. October 5th and the democratic changes have also arrived. I was looking forward to them, I honestly believed that we had won. And what did our Hungarian party do first? They fired me! True, God saved me, but I don’t get a single thank you?

For the first time in my life, I thought I should become a dissident. They were gloating, but they didn’t dare look me in the eye when I asked where they had been so far! In five years of management, I had not turned to the provincial institutions for help even once ...

You will understand when I tell You that no one likes educated and independent people. And why would they show love for their neighbour?

In the end: I’m sorry, but if fate forces me, I’ll write you another letter – a balm for the soul. Only with You – and I’m not saying this out of decency – with your books in hand, was I able to survive and get through this difficult period. And that’s why I ask you to have understanding if I bother you again sometime in the future!

December 12, 2000

Translation: Kristina Milovanović

Translated from Serbian to English
Igor Aćimović



SAVA DAMJANOV

THE THRICE-DICKED MAN

There once was a man with three dicks – one to plow the land, one to sow the seeds, one that maidens breeds. Thus, he was named the Thrice-Dicked Man, or simply: Hampton Wick the Dick, or even simpler: Long, Ser Johnson (or, as they say: Ser Johnson). This man did not much appreciate his three-dickedness, so he decided to seek a cure for his malady.

At first, he sought out the venerable doctor Karamuhhamadov Mingea (a former holy ninja!), and he gave him a spell of some kind, straight from the ancient books: he bade him transform his three dicks into three cunts, and thus he shall be cured! So, the Thrice-Dicked man went to a witch's coven, and asked the eldest witch how to transform his three dicks into three cunts. The hag answered him:

– “Alas! Long Johnson, poor poor, Ser Johnson, wherefore did you go to that doctor, that miscreant that turned my son-in-law into a Malfucker and my sister into a Malcunt? Do you not see that he's planning the same mischief? That is why he gave you that spell! Decent people do not trade their dicks for cunts, nor do they visit witch's covens, you lamentable man! Instead, go to my uncle, Saint Snatch, he shall snatch any curse that ails you and, perhaps, even more!”-

And, so began the Thrice-Dicked Man a journey as the hag directed him, though he did not care much to walk across the desert. So he slung his first dick (the one six feet long!) over his shoulder, his second (the one so thoroughly ribbed and stiff, akin to a petrified caterpillar) he put under his armpit, and his third, the smallest, the tiniest, most precious and dearest, he shoved up his crack, so the good people would not ridicule him. The desert stretched out before him like slobber on a mut, and our hero, Wick the Dick, not knowing how long he had to wander still decided that



he shall lodge under the starry sky, and, just maybe, he will have a prophetic dream that shall instruct him on which way to go! Thus, he built himself a fire, made the desert sand into a pillow, covered himself with nothing but the wind, and fell into a deep, peaceful sleep...

Somewhere around midnight, Hampton had an incredibly lucid dream. In it, an Angel of God, stood before him clad in a tunic, white as snow, with a flaming sword in his hand; pressing his middle finger onto his forehead, he spoke:

– “Smack thyself here with thy glorious tool, and thou shalt all thy doubts despell, and a path will be revealed to thou where thou needest to go”-

Yet, the Angel did not reveal which of his three dicks ought he use; but he did lift up his tunic to reveal his monstrous shaggy dong, all wrapped in fetid fumes, and said onto him, smiling:

– “And then thrust thyself here, and put your balls into it!”-

And, with these words, Long, Ser Johnson roused from his dream, and, befuddled, he started unraveling what had been said onto him. First, he inspected his wang, then his plonker, then his pecker – all three were as good as they could be, both the six-footer, the caterpillar, not to mention tiny (smallest, most precious, most dearest)! Once again, the dream came to Wick the Dick – it must be that the Angel showed him his dong to remind him of how mischievous doc Mingea Karamuhhamadov tried to trick him; and the finger he pressed against his forehead was to remind him to think all of this through thoroughly! So, if the Angel spoke the same as the witch, just with different words, then he had no choice than to continue on his quest, to find Saint Snatch, or, perhaps, to go even beyond...

And, so, as Ser Johnson (aka Hampton Wick) was mulling over everything, it dawned; he decided then to have breakfast, before continuing his



journey. But, just as he was reaching for his meal, he saw someone approaching him. It was a latter day saint, genuine snake taint, a true cocksmith, one of those that would bang a fly out of the air (though, once, he made an unfortunate mistake and porked a firefly, thus burning his dick, leaving it forever lame and limp, so they named him Languid, or, simply Limp). So, when the saint (that same Limp!) came within earshot, the Thrice-Dicked man greeted him proper, then asked him this:

– “Would you be so kind, brother, to tell me: where would I be able to find Saint Snatch, for it is imperative I find him, lest I perish to my malady! For I was thrice dicked; thus I was born of God, but people are people – they curse His ways when they don’t understand them, so they laugh and ridicule me! Yet the worst bit is that I cannot find myself a woman that would bear me a sweet love child; they all just use me for their carnal pleasure before vamoosing!”

– “Speak not such drivels, Wick!” – answered the sly saint - “You are not the only one with woes; they’ve been calling me Languid for fifteen years, all because of one sodding mistake! Pay no heed to what witches nor old healers like Mingea Karamuhhamadov tell you; your schlong was not put on this world just to plow, nor was your stiffie, so thoroughly ribbed, solely for sowing created, nor was your tiny pecker (the sweetest, most dearest) to you given just for frivolous porking! They have been bestowed upon you so you could songs and poetry create: the first one for heroic alexandrine, the second for pentameter, and the last is nothing short of a haiku! So, go into the world, and sing merry songs for those in need, and you shan’t be hungry nor thirsty, and perhaps St. Snatch will, himself, find you!”

At first, the Thrice-Dicked Man squinted mistrustfully at Limp’s words, thinking they might be another trick. Yet, there was no trickery in Languid’s impish eyes, so he declared (murmuring under his breath all the while) that Languid was telling the whole truth. Then, he listened: first to his haiku-dicklet; and, for the very first time, he heard it: a faint sound



of a mountain stream purling over stones. Second, he cocked his ear toward his ribbed manhood – from it roared proudly the sound of bagpipes; again, something he hadn’t noticed before! Lastly, he turned to his six-foot masterpiece, and discovered that, at the very tip (or, as they say, the knob!) sat a venerable graybeard reciting, in the most glorious hexameter, the Odyssey.

– “I shouldn’t waste any more time” – Hampton Dick spoke softly to himself - “These are, unmistakably, signs of God. Perhaps that limp Languid himself was that very Angel in disguise, who visited me in my dream, showed me his schlong and bade me on my way?”

That thought smacked him right across the bollocks, and he realized that he shouldn’t waste a second more languishing in place, so he started – nay, ran! – into the world, singing all the while atop his lungs.

And, so, days turned into nights, nights into days, and Long, Ser Johnson traveled the lands, witnessing many a stunning sight and many a curious wonder. His three dicks he regarded much better now, owing to Limp’s teachings (or, perhaps, Angel’s, or the Lord’s?!). Now privy to their awesome powers, never again would Ser Johnson plow with one, sow with the other, and breed with the third! As for the rotten doctor Mingea Karamuhhamadov, he no longer paid him a single thought, for he firmly believed the witch’s prophecy about Saint Snatch, protector of all healers and snatcher of curses, would come true. Yet, despite his faith, and despite his songs, Hampton Wick still often went hungry.

One time, after many years on the road, he found himself amid a vast wasteland, under a sprawling hawthorn bush. To Wick, this hawthorn seemed like a right feast; he snatched one of the haws, to eat it, yet discovered they would not budge at all! Johnson then grabbed a nearby stick, with the intent to shake the fruits free, yet, as soon as he swung, a voice (either from his bollocks, or, perhaps, his very gonads?) reprimanded him:



– “Strike me not, wrongdoer! Tis easy to strike with another’s schlong, while, in heady times, sparing your own dong.”

The hawthorn’s reprimand was all too clear: the Thrice-Dicked Man now took all of his dicks, then started smashing all three of them into the ground. And no sooner had he struck it, but the great wasteland started shaking and cracking, as if shook by a great and terrible earthquake; a slew of heavy, black clouds started swirling overhead, and the sky itself broke into a thunderous cry, so loud and frightening, that it thoroughly startled Long Johnson! Amidst this, an endless abyss opened where the sprawling hawthorn had been, spewing thick, opaque smoke. And though his breeches were now burdened by bricks, Ser Johnoson stepped closer to the chasm, and looked inside. Within it was St Snatch himself, rising from the infernal smoke, smiling and young, as though he had not already died, a long time ago! “Lo! What a skilled mirage, making himself out to be so young, that sneaky fucker!” thought the Wick to himself, but no sooner than he thought it, but St Snatch approached him, as if he had read his mind, and said:

– “C’mere, son! C’mere and take a peek under my tail, and take a good whiff, maybe you’ll find a cure for your three-dickedness there... And as for your songs, you can stick ‘em where the sun don’t shine!”

Upon taking a closer look, the Thrice-Dicked Man noticed the saint now wore the same snow-white tunic, and carried the same flaming sword the Angel carried that night when he visited him in his sleep. Yet, there was a stark difference: whereas the Angel had a massive dong beneath his tunic, the saint now sported a long, hairy tail, all twisting and beckoning. Ser Johnson then decided he would heed the saint: he lifted up the saint’s white gown, looked under his hairy tail and lo! beneath it was a humongous, hairy, cavernous, tenebrous snatch! Being thrice-dicked as he was, Wick the Dick decided to feed that ravenous mouth – his dicklet (his dearest, his sweetest) will be the appetizer, his stoney caterpillar the entree, and his six-footer the desert! But, alas! The harder he shoved his wangs into



the saintly snatch, the deeper they sank! To fill the gaping hole, Wick put in his fingers, yet that didn't help either! The poor Thrice-Dicked Man then shoved his whole hand in, then his arm; yet all were swallowed by the saint's ravenous undercarriage. "Fie! What misfortune!" – thought Hampton Wick to himself, lowering his head to see where his dicks, hand and arm went; but no sooner did he put his head near the cavernous fly trap that he fell in and was swallowed whole!

Hampton Wick the Tripple-Dick now found himself in a pitch black place, where not a single ray of light shone, and all around him an oppressive silence. After sitting there a while, he suddenly noticed something off in the distance, a subtle rustling and something like a small, flickering candle. Seeing that, he shouted atop his lungs:

– "This way! This way, friend! By God, do you know how we can leave this hairy crack, this twisted vertical smile, this tenebrous snatch?" –

That is when he heard a weak voice, shouting back as if amidst a deafening storm:

– "Alas! I, myself, had become lost a long while ago; I lost a horse and came looking for it under St. Snatch's tail, and fell in, and I had been looking for it ever since! Yet, I remain steadfast in my belief that I will find it, lest I remain dickless!"

Hearing those words, the Thrice-Dicked man fell silent. Won't he too remain lost here, like that man looking for his horse? "Follow ill sodding fortune, and you'll end up singing a sour tune" he thought to himself, while a new thought smacked him right across the scrotum – "But follow that ill tune further, and you'll end up lost forever, in deep, impenetrable darkness, without a spec of light, amidst deafening silence".

And, shame on me if this tale is a lie, and upon my honor the saintly snatch, and the tiny haiku, and the proud pentameter, and the ancient hexameter! And Mingea Karamuhhamadov, too, and the Holy Angel, and



the dream, and the hag-witch's advice, and Limp latter day saint Languid!
And, of course, Sava Damjanov; shame on me for his falsest Falsehood of
all!

Translated from Serbian to English
Nemanja Stefanović



DJORDJE PISAREV

A CHRONICLE: THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE PARK

It is said that a certain marquis, who's last two digits of the year of his birth matched the age at which Jesus died, had truly built a multitude of strongly fortified pagodas and palaces throughout the Park, but only one had he built through his dreams: The pagoda on Galápagos. He dreamt consistently, with such fervour that he hadn't noticed he had died in the meantime. Of course, he never lived to see the pagoda: for years, it had even escaped the notice of the inhabitants of Galápagos, at least until an unexpected invasion of barbarians had occurred, and when they had, keeping an eye on each other, began to notice ramparts, gates, stairways, and walkways. Woven from dreams, the Pagoda of Galápagos found within the Park did not adhere to natural laws. Never did it cast the same reflection upon the magical ocean's waters twice: first, the curios defenders saw the gardens of paradise in the water, then, later, the central fountain of the Park's heart. The third time, they saw increased in size many times over a home, each warrior his own, abandoned for the difficult and dangerous life of a soldier. And so the Pagoda that had been dreamt into reality, and its reflection in the great waters, were in truth two different worlds. A terrible earthquake did not topple the indestructible walls, but it did disrupt the barrier between both realities. From that moment on everything became muddled, so much so that the defenders had at one point believed they were seals, and so instead of speaking the Park tongue, they made do with swearing and cussing in Seal! Through underground tunnels, the greatest of weavers had been brought from the continent to Galápagos, women whose only aim, by weaving within dreams, was to reconstruct the original, singular pagoda. It is a grave task, a divine undertaking, a labour that is to continue for hundreds of years: they need to find the one, unique combination, kept as singular and as secret as the name of God. Every wonderfully dreamt up dream is stored in a vault, where it will



dwell until the spell over both worlds has been lifted, and until they, once again, become singular and free.

There are, of course, those who believe that stating the names of the supposed builders of the Empire, in the blessed capacity of architects of the Park, is purely a myth. This genesis story focuses on the movements of putrid earth, and the manifestation of an uncountably infinite number of labyrinthine walls in one single moment, an event later known as the Spark of the Park. This view is advocated by eccentrics to whom the Park is both hearth and ancestral land. Finally, that infinite energy, which pulls Everything, deeper and deeper, into the infinite labyrinth, it labours to instil in everyone the notion of the Park as a unique sculpture of monumental proportions.

It is possible that the cornerstone had been set by that certain marquis, on a day when grey skies buried the Park that had already become famous through the dreams of its devotees. Others, however, claim that the Sun shone that day, that it was unusually warm for that time of year, as if God himself rejoiced at a structure that will spread over 112 hectares of land. That might be possible as well, though it's far from certain, just as it might be possible that from the Big-Bang a pair of twins had been born, the universe and the anti-universe. It is also possible that the twins ignore each other, perhaps because of an unanswerable question: why does matter lord over antimatter? It might be, one answer goes, that every entity has its own "anti-entity", a symmetrical doppelgänger of an opposite charge. Their actions cancel each other out, dispersed in the form of pure energy. It might be that, as the scholars of Park past and future history have written, there is a very subtle asymmetry found between the dyad which, under certain circumstances, tilts in favour of creation prevailing over any kind of mutual destruction.

Some believe that the spiral staircase had been built before the park itself. They might be right, but if they truly believe that, then for them this story ends there as well. The others, bolder and madder, are aware of the



fragility and transience of human life, as they are aware of the constancy of the Universe. These others, they always skip a step, and they don't stop when they reach the end. Why would they? The stairway of the Park is the stairway to the heavens, and the heavens are far away, unreachable... Still... Why not try and reach them? It is said, if we are to believe such things, that these steps have often been walked by a lost traveller from the ground world, and that he had not stopped once, blessed he was by a legion of saints whom he gave form. Park theologians to this very day, when speaking of stairways, argue whether the heavens have an end or not...

A truth that can never be told enough – the general who knows most about the tide of a battle, has the greatest odds of winning the battle itself. The Prince knew this well on the day when, standing on the Cavalier, the highest peak of the Park which loomed over everything, he gave out commands: he had the perfect view. Besides, he knew that he would need the Cavalier, ages ago when, to everyone's confusion, he ordered its construction. Much greater and more significant battles are waged away from the battlefield, battles lacking blood and death, arms and soldiers, but with an army of ideas that float, carried by the winds, on the thin crossing between heaven and earth. The artisans capable of seeing these ideas can catch them and embed them into the lines of trees that twist through the Park's walkways like a snake. Then ideas become available even to regular folk as well.

For a long time, historians and scholars claimed that the Park rests on a serpentinite-diorite rock, that it has geographic and strategic significance, and that for these reasons people have been inhabiting this area since the early stone age, to be later replaced by other tribes and other nations. Still, those that think this is a simple matter of dominance that comes naturally to those who inhabit it, are sorely mistaken. The Park provides its currently transient inhabitants – for it is mortal man whose stay is temporary, the Park is eternal – evenings filled with stories, with laughter, evenings of moulding, evenings with family. Deep into the night, whispers echo



through the plateau, whispers that even speak of happiness. But, the mornings are the most beautiful time of the day in the Park. In the humid slivers of the morning fog, when silk is given flight by transparent air, the curious eye opens towards the Park, more beautiful than in reality.

Is the Park a monument, a memory, a query among the eternal script and stage of never-ending time that speaks of wisdom, dignity, experience, and not only of warfare and heroism which is, truth be told, often in vain? The Sun rising in the Park serves as a kind of renovation of the sky, it's as if you hear the voice of troubadours.

The complex structure of the Park is in essence, something its builders were aware of, a perfect circle. The circle as an idea that is embodied in all of its pathways, no matter how curved or meandering they seem. The circle is, after all, the shape above all shapes, originating from the almighty creator, or from a physio-chemical phenomena, as the advocates of the new science called it, who claimed that the (circular) Park had been born from magma, deaf and blind.

In the Park's hidden library, famed for its mystifying ability to shift from one room to another every night, so that only the Book fanatics can find it, many theories have been created, theories on life and death, on the purposes and functions of men, machines, states and phenomena. They change every night, just like the location of the library changes, and every single one of these theories, at the moment of their genesis, is true and correct. One of the library's scholars, solving the complex issue of quality? quantity? – an issue logically originating from the previously proposed theory – claims that within the machine/system, or as part of a system or a machine or as an element, man has begun to act more akin to an automaton, fulfilling only that which is superficial. Questions regarding the system, that imposed labyrinth, and attempting to synchronise the personal labyrinth with the labyrinth of the system, and surviving within it, is an issue that has received no solution. Passing through the Park's labyrinth every day, moving to the sunlit platform, the vibrations of the air and the



shimmering of the Sun give a feeling of timelessness, or of a fullness of time, a feeling of impermanence and of continuity. The perpetuum mobile is always in motion, changing, shifting, moving across spiral staircases towards the place where the Moon and the Sun meet.

It is true that on the Bastion there is a stone carving of a cat's head. It is also true that in that very spot the builders entombed a live cat, to increase the Park's longevity. It is true, though very few know this, that the stone carving actually represents a faint (hidden!) depiction of a tiger. This all is tied to the idea that the red tiger lords over the south, the black tiger over the north, the blue one over the east, and the white tiger commands the west. The fifth, yellow tiger, holds dominion over them all, and is found at the center of the Park, which validates the old legend of the Bastion being the Middle empire of the Park. This luminous feline could not stay in the same shape for long. Its powers of metamorphosis changed the stripes of the tiger into the stripes found on the backs of the harmless zebra.

Measured with what cannot be truly measured, therefore, with an age that has its own parameters and which cannot be easily tamed, the Park always stood for weapons, healers, commanders, and spilled blood. Just as any measurements of people, things, events, and feelings done through time are met with uncertainty, so it is equally certain that divine flowers are born from spilled blood. (Did not that unhappy, drunken, watchman, on a moonless night in the Park, kill the last of the counts?) There are artisans who have been so graciously gifted that they can, only through an idea and the labour of their hands, fashion equally beautiful heavenly flowers that, simultaneously, last as long as time. Lead by an idea stronger than mortality, they plant flowers not only to beautify the Park, but to build a new macrocosm. A being, within the Park, that reflects the frailty of childhood and the impermanence of earthly life.

It doesn't really matter, they say, how old the trenches and the watch-towers of the Park truly are. They say that it's not really important who were the builders, the victims and the victimizers, the warriors... Does ev-



everybody really have to remember the old legends and stories? The gardens are not merely domesticated nature – how could that even be achieved?! – they are domiciles for souls, and those who know this, also know that some things are more important, like one-of-a-kind sunrises, the smell of wet grass, the winds that release souls trapped in clumsily built gardens. They understand the importance of the hill that is the Park, rising high above the flood of civilization, a marker for the meaning we move towards in the labyrinth that surrounds us. The dream needs to be transferred to other places, so that it won't die out, worn, so that it will not be scattered by wind, but one must also be present when a new flower blooms, bathing the walls in beauty, and whispering: The Park is an important dream, it is always there for those who are willing and able to dream themselves.

Foreigners usually don't see the Park that gets lost, for many moments, in time, and then can't find the right moment to return. The local artisans know this, and so sometimes they leave enigmatic clues for the uninformed, in warm and touching verse with a mystical message, written in fortress-runes. And no, it is not true that the Park is merely the view that includes the walls, the guards, the sky above the stone house. In times long gone, it was inhabited by people capable of laughter, lovemaking, fighting, and dying. Those whose shapes have been built into the frames of those flood paths and lakes, and their fluid is always there. One needs to sense it, find it, and actually be able to see it. Because, life in the Park behaves like a Dragon: it has the ability to take on different shapes, but it always remains unknowable. It can, at will, become both visible and invisible. It soars towards the sky during the spring, and dives into the depths of the sea when autumn comes. Shapehunters know how to spread a net over the entire Park and hunt their prey. Usually, they catch exactly what they want. The most successful shapehunters are those who throw their nets not only through space, but through time as well. In this manner their nets catch, when they so wish it, the silhouettes of birds, women, or bulls that do not belong to this specific time and space, but that now belong to all.



If you do find yourself in such a place, and your eyes wander to the Park, you will see it bathed in morning light, and you will become enveloped by its magnitude. Then, inevitably, you must slowly begin walking its pathways. If that does indeed happen to you, then you will not be able to escape your fate: the fate of those who are always in search for that specific place from which they can, for the first time, catch a glimpse of the Park bathed in morning light.

One must be blind, blind or simply too mundane, to not understand that the Park, with its watchtowers, does not only face the east and west, the north and the south, but also looks upward – facing the sky. Celestial events are copied onto the Earth in the same way the Park is reflected in the water. The star-watchers that inhabit the Park saw it as a planetarium, a mirror to the divine. And they understood how immeasurably small man is; compared to the great Park, let alone the Heavens. The great cartographer of the stars read in the celestial map the truth through which some men mystify science, art, and life itself. Of course, only the ignorant do such things. They, the guardians of the guild, keeping that revelation safe. And yet a thousand times, it has been inscribed upon the stars and in the hearts of the Park's devotees, those things, those secrets, have been found and touched, uncovered. Some took this knowledge, while others passed it by, because they were searching for something else. After all, one needs to keep in mind that the paths of the Park have been walked by the aggressive and the malicious, the bold and the noble, its shady groves housed many, from strange, secretive creatures that do not come out during the light of day, to the occasional prince. Those who think it all a light breeze, the soft movement of the ground, or a unique smell whose origin cannot be placed.

In the reflection that the Park casts upon the great waters, one can see truth, honesty, and the secrets kept hidden within the heart. When you look into the mirror-like water, you hear the song that floats above the Park at all times. Which is also one of the reasons some claim that the Park



isn't (only) a marvel of architecture, but an acoustics and energy-based lightform whose effects (always) activate not only the natural senses, but the super and supranatural ones as well. The Park, in such a way, leads its inhabitants into a higher state of consciousness, it transforms them and holds them in a parallel dimension. The mind takes on a volume that cannot be housed between the forehead and the feet, the bellybutton and the posterior. There are those that can be found in this state, but are not aware of it.

Park inhabitants know to never trust their eyes, and understand that there is always something more, being hidden, behind everything. So claim the cautious, at least. And when they oversee the Park, they understand it's not just some petty collection of trenches, tunnels, buildings and pavilions, green spaces, walkways, and plateaus: it is, in actuality, part of a grand plan and it emerged, one wall at a time, just as a thread of silk is only a thread until it becomes woven into a piece of fabric. Is not a labyrinth merely a collection of walls? Fashioned without forethought, they will lose themselves in the specific. The Park's inhabitants always take a moment at its base and then, step by step, go forward with the desire to place every inch of the Park in its proper place. For why would explosive energy only reside in the heart of the Park? Hidden behind many powerful retaining walls, on all sides surrounded by a wall that is as tall as the fear within the hearts of its visitor's makes it, the central pavilion can be found, undisguised and peaceful. On all four of sides it has windows with horizontal bars. Its pillars do not go deeply into the earth and it does not, always, bring death. Must explosive energy be hidden behind walls as grand as those, like veils that need to be uncovered, one by one, in order to reach the heart of things, or can it be constructed in a single piece of wild beauty untainted by the smell of gunpowder.

In the fantastical tales that naturally bind themselves to the Park and the sometimes pastoral, sometimes mystical effect it has on the hearts of its inhabitants, there are stories of creatures so implausible that none ac-



tually believe they exist, even though everybody knows that the stories are real. Ever hidden is the name of the creature that without fail comes in threes. That is the assumption at least, the creature had never been seen. It announces itself with a twice-voiced bark mixed with meows and, when they hear this noise, the Park's denizens clamber frantically in order to see the ever-hidden, but always to no avail: the creature, no matter where you turn, is always behind you. Only at the table set in the wondrous garden, intoxicated by wonderful aromas, does the ever-hidden become careless and visible. But richly set tables in the Park are so rare...

It is almost funny, speaking of the years when men first began to live in the Park: what does an unimaginable number mean to a mortal man, with his candle-wick long lifespan? Almost all is known about the Park's years, and weaving only a single human lifespan into them is impossible. Then, one can understand that the Park is eternal, something that is not put into question. Just as every moment of this world is caught in the waters that surround the Park, forever, so too does the Park store millions of glances, forever frozen, directed at every inhabitant, millions of eternally saved moments in which the main characters are they themselves, all of them and each of them.

Is the history of the Park a history of walls, or a history of individuals? Are these the stories of bastions, parade grounds, gunboats, sheds and stables, or of people, great and small, who have, are, who will fill out the living spaces of the Park? During the days that are difficult to predict, but that choose you or me, the view from the park doesn't represent mere sightseeing. Then, in those days, days for which you simply had to be born, days that were not given nor were available to just anybody, everything around the Park was empty. Nothingness! Then, and only then, have some been gifted to start at the emptiness and fill it up, anew, with their visions of a wide horizon and vast fields, a view of peaceful and broad lines with hills of clearly defined plans, wetlands that, in front of the lucky ones, complete themselves through their own silvery vapours.



The uninitiated are gripped by dread when they feel the shivering cold of the Park's underground tunnels. But panic is a poor ally to those who get lost in the labyrinths. There are others who, with the wisdom granted to the initiated, descend into the labyrinth, into the shade permeated with darkness and cobwebs. They are the ones who in the mysterious shapes found on the walls can read not only the location of the entrance and the exit, but also the locations of the subterranean streets that are walked by the underground people, more cold than dead. They walk this city-sanctuary and they safeguard the beautiful halls from oblivion, they bring life back into the deceased ornaments. They attempt to explain the entirety of the thoughts of the man who had been entrusted to make a new world out of ruins. But, when damp and dreary Autumn comes, the Park withdraws into itself, it becomes estranged and quiets down. Rain falls, and everything becomes unpleasant.

Were it not for the Park, the sky would collapse upon the earth, for the Park is a column upon which the sky rests itself. In that manner the Park, along with the sky, make a giant cosmic mushroom; the cap symbolizing the astral world, and the celestial tapestry upon which clouds write of life and death. The Park is the enduring root of the world. That is why the Park's denizens build giant mushrooms alongside roads and paths, in order to ensure the permanence of the world. Aside from the mushrooms, in both the times that were and the times that will be, for time, when speaking of the Park, is one and the same at all points and moments, many eccentrics and lovers could be found on the lower bastion, next to the clock tower, in the gunpowder magazine, on the cavalier, on the parade plateau next to the ammunition depots and stables, in the underground military galleries, in the casemates.

Long ago a tower was built so it could reach the sky, to gather up all the languages of the world. Aleph's ancestor, encompassing everything within itself, making possible that all and everything regardless of the dimensions of time and space, be available at every moment. The tower fell. The Park



was created with greater forethought and deliberation: in its focus lay colour and arabesque geometry, and its connection with the sky is only spiritual, until the opportunity for the physical presents itself, which it will, in the times that come.

The Park remembers everything, biding its time.

Translated from Serbian to English
Aleksandar Hrubenja



FRANJA PETRINOVIĆ

SITUATION AND SCARS

(A JOURNAL OF ONE LOVE)

Indeed, there is a lot of old-fashioned in the way she looks and in the way she speaks. Not only for the vowels she would drag so carefully and diligently. Whenever she looked up from her cup of coffee, which she slowly sips on every morning in a mundane pastry shop which, among many other things, makes her feel insatiable revulsion, she would put her mouth in such a position as if to say to a real and serious interlocutor in such an old-fashioned manner, that they have the honour to speak to the widow of a resting Konstantin, a former deputy secretary of a self-governing interest community for education.

Nonetheless, she knows quite well that it isn't so. Neither is Konstantin resting nor is she a widow. Although she would love most it was the case, that she had driven him away into the grave or killed him. She knows that everyone will say that you cannot kill someone and just get away with it, calmly sip on your morning coffee in the city centre without any consequences. Konstantin undoubtedly deserved to be killed by her and no one else, with her own vengeful hand. However, she did not. Except for a few times, in different ways, in her dreams during sultry, unbearable summer nights. And when she managed to announce the forty-day memorial service in the newspapers, at the time there was unbearable confusion in the daily newspapers, which was the climax of her own ingenuity when it came to vengefulness. May he rest in peace; the devil be with him.

And what kind of life would it be if her husband Konstantin were not resting, she spoke as if addressing somebody, laughing aggressively. Those words, like many other she utters, started sounding like quotes many years ago. One might think they actually are.



If someone quite casually asked her at this holy moment of morning coffee sipping, rummaging through change in the wallet of memories, not expecting any answer, how she was doing living alone and shattered for the past fifteen years, she would probably say: great. And her face would probably hide behind a mysterious smile. And when somebody wished to get additional answer to the question regarding her idea of ultimate happiness in this puzzle of pages in a female magazine, she wouldn't even try to say anything else except point out the lucky circumstances under which she managed to get rid of Konstantin. There might be a few tiny bits spoiling this happiness of hers, for instance, the fact that she did not finish him with her own hand. This miserable prick, this tavern pimp, Konstantin.

Does it smell, slightly burnt, of some case? Even if there is such, her case would be like the case of many other people, if there wasn't for this almost eerie peculiarity which could be felt by everyone if they gazed at her face for a longer period of time. It is the easiest thing to attribute causes of changes and transformation of some people to the wealth which can do plenty to a man or to the misfortune, surge of fateful twists and traumatic experience. It is often said that it is love that turns witches into fairies, beasts into angels. Some shadows of inconspicuous scars on her face are of some other nature. The heritage of some other situations. And as she is getting up and collecting banknotes from the table, she is secretively looking at herself in the slightly blurry mirror and seems to be growing more and more depressed by the realisation that the days to come are menacingly starting to peel off former gilding, layer by layer.

There she is, in the street, basking in the morning sun and clamour. Everything is there, the building of the Serbian National Theatre, benches, cracked marble tiles, pigeons collecting crumbs of pensioners' luxury and the bus stop for Detelinara. The noise of traffic, familiar city landscape. Everything is here except for those steady youthful steps of hers, as well as yellow cobble stones paving Jevrejska Street. Indeed, people are here, but they change their clothes very quickly, at least as far as she is concerned.



There are many different clothes, styles and colours that are not in vogue anymore, she is sure, as if somebody picked up the discarded butterfly wings.

There she is in the street again, like any other morning, setting off on her voyage through lava and magma of life like some slightly dilapidated boat on the opaque high seas. It is evident that she is one second fulfilled with love, then excitement shortly followed by pity, then self-hatred directed towards the twenty-year old or thirty-year-old version of herself. Everything is plain to see no matter how much she tries to hide it behind a smiling mask and confident, almost soldier-like walk.

The story about how an early youthful portrait remained trapped forever in her eyes is a rather long one. So long that it almost seems distressing. A current photo quite clearly portrays a housewife rapidly approaching the age of sixty. It is quite expectable for everyone to detect unwillingness and bitterness on her face, regardless of her immense effort. The emptiness of spirit imposed by life spent in the buildings of working class suburb, the very same high-rise building emptiness most likely present in all female tenants, her female neighbours in this already somewhat dilapidated building. It would be quite alright for her to come to terms with the natural course of things with a certain tenderness and to polish the guiding of her remaining days on Earth with dignity, so to say, reconciled with her fate. It would be quite alright if it was possible and if the jigsaw puzzles of her life fitted into each other as expected.

However, there are many reasons for things to be different. First of all, she is a Novi Sad housewife, which is of utmost importance since, like all the other dwellers of Novi Sad alleys and boulevards, she kept in her memory unfermented rural reminiscences, forever so fresh and intact. It is enough to see just once, from the shadows, how she treats old ladies at the fish market, her contemptuous look directed towards old people who, hiding behind the market stalls, sip the first thimbles of brandy. And peeking into the butcher's nearby would bring complicit tears for the



butcher facing the verbal torture of her superior power to recognise petty thefts and short-weighting. Needless to mention her haggling and hair-splitting when weighing the last remaining gram.

She needs to be heard, the fullness of her voice really has to be recognised when she speaks about her childhood, remembering this poignant rural family and the melody of almost religious awe has to be felt when she speaks about, let's say, how she grew up in a decent and respectable family, in the vicinity of municipal town. How her father was a merchant who owned his own shop loaded with versatile goods. How she spent her childhood with her nose stuck in a book. And her parents, long dead. The shop now belongs to her brother who is much older than her. He is a serious and reserved man. Always ready to help her, to rejoice in her urban rise and success. God, every time he calls, he awakens the poignancy in her. Regardless of his troublesome wife who threw her out of the house claiming that she was sick and that she needed to be locked into a mental asylum. A horrible fish wife! She cannot see further than her own nose!

Should she be upset for this fish wife of his, for troubling tales the remains of which she keeps finding on the stairs, in shops or bus stops, like some repeatedly rinsed yarn? Is it worth the mention? Streets are full of troubling tales. If she paid attention to the crows croaking ominously, she wouldn't be able to make a single step. Let her simply retell to whoever she wants the story about how her now already somewhat demented mother claimed she was an unruly person with a big mouth. As if the size of a mouth was the measure of anything. It is clear, everybody has the right to see in her what they themselves are most scared of, their own ugliness and bareness. Like she doesn't know which information they've got in their possession. Regardless of the fact that this information, just information not the facts, make a somewhat different image from that she sees herself in, that portrays her different portrait.

Of course, if it is to believe their stories, there is a woman in this portrait who never completed her education. Who solely read romance nov-



elettes. Who was always jobless. Without a family. Without a husband. Who would cause a major stirrup wherever she showed up. Who is aggressive. And who walks between extreme decisions in her life.

Let her be, she knew what she knew even on that almost steel grey winter morning, when the icy rain started pounding her window panes. She was still managing to see what she kept seeing that entire day: a brave, young, courageous 18-year-old riding her father's bicycle on the frozen roads of the country fields. Knocking half-frozen on the door of a rented Konstantin's room. Smiling in spite of everything after seeing fear and disbelief in his eyes. And it seemed to her that she had done it only a few days ago. Spilt her tea in a small grey kitchen, left the cooking pot on the table and ran into the yard seen off by her absent-minded mother's look, hastily putting on her father's cap and a raincoat. And went away. She no longer worried whether she had put some salt or too much sugar in that tea. And the fact that she had never even tried to ride a bicycle since she realised there was something much more powerful than manual skills. That puddles on the country roads did not pose any threat. That about thirty kilometres on a short winter day was not the greatest peril.

Everything went down the drain, along this muddy country road. Everything. She did it out of love whatever others claimed who witnessed her stubborn capriciousness, the folly of a lazy country girl. Since this is how love works. It creeps up on you, grabs you before you realise what happened to you and afterwards, it is impossible to do anything else. If those books she was reading during summer days hidden from the frowning looks are to be trusted. When love overwhelms somebody in such way, it annihilates everything else. You neither eat nor drink. You just sigh. And make miracles. Or that's what the books claim.

What could she possibly remember now, here at a bus stop with the noise of squeaking cars, from those first weeks of living together with Konstantin, from those pink love bubbles of infatuation? Unfortunately, she most vividly remembers anguish. The anguish which was menacingly



about to suffocate her. Everything disappointed her, not only him, but also what was going on. What was happening in the dark and what she doesn't want to talk about even today. Who on Earth in the right mind would live a life chained by anguish, who wouldn't be suffocated? She couldn't hide it for too long, it would eat her alive, from the inside. This hopelessness, this discrepancy.

Is it worth her telling this to someone at all? This human reject must have always thought that words are nothing but deposit on furniture, muddy shoe prints, spilt beer on the table, something so easily disposed of, simply wiped off without leaving a trace. Some word which was echoing in her mind for days, love or happiness for instance, was just a drop of spilt brandy for him which he would wipe off from the table with a napkin. The ex.

Anyway, she can now admit it to herself. Every day, she was secretly enraged for his flaws. Boy, did his stupid backwardness and rigidity get on her nerves. Moreover, his utterly unprovoked caution and doubt directed towards everything that was unknown to him. The way he talked, some fake nasality sliding on the edges of his half-opened mouth. His literal and almost always wrong interpretation of things and sick habit of making assumptions about everything. His inability to understand others, his narrow-mindedness, stinginess. She could go on listing his flaws at this bus stop up until late at night which necessarily, like arranged concrete slabs, led her to the ultimate goal. To utter intolerance.

Her maidenhood doesn't seem so distant, God forbid, not so ancient, faded like withered flowers. She can still hear the linguistic melody of her romanticised unrequited loves, alas, my poor little sweetheart, my ill fate, tender thrilling quivering. And only for this melody, the tender touch of her finest being, she could not let this bastard Konstantin do what men have been doing to women for ages. To let him march along the pavement of hollow vanity, get medals for idle pub confessions while she's sitting at



home and putting things back in order. Not anymore! For the sake of this eternal melody. And that's why she killed him.

However, Novi Sad is a sieve. The sieve sifting the chaff and other people's lives. The city is full of dyed ginger-haired, red-haired, blonde, maroon loudmouths who would not keep their mouths shut. Not for a second. It is for this reason in particular they say that she was abandoned, forsaken, discarded. Around every corner they say her high gloss became chipped enamel long ago and that she owes the radiance she wears to the cheap Romanian enamel from the flea market. That behind her attire, there is a myriad of useless ropes and rusty wires.

She thinks to herself: maybe they are right after all. She thinks to herself: maybe she is really abandoned and forsaken. It's not very nice to say forsaken but this word in particular might accurately describe her situation. But this situation is also imperatively imposing not to accept that things seem the way they actually do. However, abandonment and desertion match quite well the character of this human filth. Konstantin always lacked a lot of things, among which there are things known as the gift of devotion and loyalty.

A situation. Most simply put, this is all just a situation now. She used the term situation to describe her way of life in the past years. Details and nuances are irrelevant. It's not important whether it is complicated, opaque or entirely harmless. The situation is like some rock, too heavy for her, weighing let's say ten kilograms, she carries around in her purse and can't leave aside. The situation.

She slowly kept on walking, past a dumpster, towards the corner, past the kiosk and two chatty beer-gulpers she looked down on with contempt before she turned left. She lowers one foot almost before the other one. Some steps require additional effort. When she stepped on the paved path leading towards the building she lives in, she felt like an intruder. She became almost frightened. Suddenly, almost positive she did not belong



there. She almost fainted. It was the building of some other woman. The woman she only remembered.

She felt like a deserted or forgotten luggage at the rural railway station which everybody tries to avoid, covered with scum from dust and oil. Sitting thus discarded at the back of a decrepit warehouse. She was fifty-five, in her prime, when almost nothing is forgivable.

Now when many years passed since that event and when almost everything seems to have been forgotten, now when I received through former acquaintances from novi sad, I would say, sad news after all, the news of the passing of stana pantelić, I think I can break my promise which she never asked from me to give. In fact, I guess I should tell the truth about the events which were even recorded in the local newspapers in the year of 1988. Events referring to the persons named Konstantin Zorić, a former deputy secretary of a self-governing interest community for education and Stana Pantelić, a housewife, member of the city library.

Anyway, before I was hurled all the way to New Zealand by invisible twist of fate, I had lived for some time in Detelinara in Novi Sad, in some grey and dirty building without an elevator, in a tiny single-room flat, on the sixth floor. In the neighbourhood built in the first post-war period, during the second five-year plan painted with optimism, for employed working and bureaucratic classes. There was much more hope when it was being built than nowadays. Central heating, hot water all day long, cutting-edge technology. At the moment of my moving in, everything was already shabby.

Right across my flat, in a flat of about the same size area, there lived a girl, slightly in her late maidenhood, allegedly sent for schooling to a bigger town by her father, a merchant from Indija.

It can't be claimed that she didn't attend different courses at the Workers' University, a course in typing, hair styling, even language courses and allegedly completed each one of them in record time. I can't say that I did-



n't use to see her in the blue building of the Workers' University where I used to go for the purpose of my job. In fact, primarily for assessing the level of development of education of that time.

I can't say that we did not see each other in the building, always cordially greeting each other. What I remember about her from those somewhat even scarce encounters is an undeniable fact that she was always holding books in her hands. Even if I had been utterly uninterested, I would have easily noticed that those were the cheapest romance novellettes. You know, those books, *hertz* literature, which flooded our lives at the end of a passionate epoch of socialist flourishing.

I really can't say that we never conversed both about books and about life. But those usual and conventional things. How much people love reading today. Nowadays, it's hard to find a good man. Have you heard, it will get colder tomorrow? Oh, it's so hot today. And that was it. I dropped by for coffee a few times during sultry summer afternoons. Just for the sake of it, as they say. And nothing more.

To tell you the truth, on many occasions I thought to myself, poor girl. Not financially speaking, if you know what I mean.

On one of those days which we usually call gloomy and when the majority of people resemble sheep running in a circle, I was coming back to my flat in late afternoon hours, harassed by shameless administrative shebangs, thinking about how to get to my bed as soon as possible. While crossing the field at the city bus terminus, I noticed a large crowd of people and heard some clutter. A bus was lying on its side in the field, as if it wanted to have some rest.

And then I clearly recognised Stana's voice. Almost hysterically, she was explaining to someone how she had taken a bus because she wanted to go to pick up Konstantin, her great love, who had run away to Sremska Mitrovica. I have to bring him back; I don't want to lose him. And she kept repeating to someone: if you knew what love was, you would let me go.



Coming closer, approaching the site, I saw she was barefoot, wearing only her pyjamas and as it seemed to me, only slightly scratched and bruised but not seriously hurt. After seeing me, she ran to me energetically, came close to my face and yelled: “You, worthless bastard! You have never done anything for love.”

To cut the long story short and avoid talking about the wind which blew most of us away all around the world. Some have vanished, some have forgotten many things and some have turned into dust. I don’t know how the whole event ended because soon after that and a few small newspaper scandals, I left both Novi Sad and the country. I suppose Stana wasn’t punished for a misdemeanour but spent some time under observation in some mental asylum. It is possible that they discharged her soon after since many other much more dangerous and serious patients were on high demand by such institutions.

I’ve probably never done anything for love. Like love, life is mostly a collection of petty acts of humiliation. My life, like the lives of many other people including her, is mostly passing without such huge and important events. This is why I’m telling all this. Because if I don’t, there will be nothing whatsoever that would prove her existence. As well as the existence of most of us.

Translated from Serbian to English
Gorana Kukobrat



NIKOLA SANTA
A DWARF AND A BEGGAR

*In my opinion, there is one
eternal struggle – a struggle of genes
Isaac Bashevis Singer*

A dwarf, handicapped in the body, and seemingly in mind too, is sitting in a wheelchair as a consequence of his handicap. Untended, wearing grimy gray pants covered in greasy hardened stains as if candle wax had dripped on them, and a dark blue sweater with a white hem on the neckline, with a snag on both sleeves. The collar of the greenish plaid shirt shows through the neckline. Balding spots indicate he is around fifty. He speaks loud enough for an uninterested passer-by to hear; it seems as if he's talking to himself, but also to a woman sitting on a pressed cardboard near a decorative bush right down the concrete pavement. Behind that bush there's a lawn about twenty meters wide, freshly mowed. Being a public area, the lawn is regularly mowed by city cleaning workers. A white plastic bowl is placed before the woman — two paper bills of 50 and 20, along with several coins are in the bowl, as a suggestion of what to put in it for people walking by. Metal coins are there to hold the bills so the sudden wind doesn't blow them away. The woman is wearing a yellowish dress with a pattern of big red roses. She tucked her legs under herself, folded her slippers with white straps neatly next to her, side by side, like a school-girl. She is holding a hand-picked rose in her left hand, mechanically bringing it to her nose from time to time, gesturing with her right while talking to the dwarf in a wheelchair. The wheelchair is parked right next to a big guy whose beard and hair have long overgrown. He is sitting on a small chair, in front of him there's a scale that passers-by can stand on if they want to check their weight. Next to the scales, on the hard plywood held by a military leather bag worn by JNA officers, there's a white oil paint writing – *help a military invalid*. It indicates that he wants to earn his



money in a fair way, so he offers a measurement on the scales, in front of which, on a slightly smaller plywood, the same white oily letters say – *accurate measurement*.

I pass them every day when I go out for breakfast during work, or a brandy with one of my colleagues. I often meet Sergei, one of the CEOs of a well-known bank. He wears tailor-made suits and, regardless of the fact that his status and income allow him to dine in restaurants, he likes to come to King bakery and have a tasty burek with meat, apples, cherries or cheese, made in a *sač*. Somewhere nearby, we are both wandering in the hustle and bustle of the Futoška farmers' market, looking for God knows what, that should be investigated. In any case, we are there making ourselves feel better among people who are fighting for existence, selling everything and anything, reselling other people's products, whatever can be sold. There is no big difference between working in a bank and in the market. Snake oil comes most expensive at these two places, as Sergei likes to joke. He has been married for ten years, and owns everything: money, apartment and a car, but his grief is barely visible. He is not yet aware of it. But it's about to emerge. Sergei cannot have children. Not with his woman, not with other women. The reason is not something to be talked about. If anyone can ever say to have had women, it was him. Women clung to him. Tall, black, handsome, brown-eyed, charming, always smiling. Everything was there like in a perfect cube. But, what kind of cube would it be if one of its corner wasn't slightly chipped, as the poet Nichita Stănescu would say. Perfection does not exist. We only need to do a little research about anything that look perfect to us, and we will always find a chipped corner. It was the same with Sergei. We ran into each other right in front of the beggar with a scale for accurate measurement. We greeted each other, said some jokes.

I've never seen anyone on those scales. However, his bowl always contained more money than others. It was mostly men who left money in that old brick-colored bowl. I guess it's those who want to show others, and



maybe themselves, that they too were on the battlefield. Or they use that gesture to express some kind of patriotism. At least in the way they see it. Here, patriotism as a topic of manipulation is fully exposed. While I am secretly watching the military invalid, passing other beggars, and there are many on that path, a man his age approaches him turning suddenly, rummages in his trouser pockets, takes out smaller bills and puts them in the bowl without counting if first. The two of them didn't even look each other in the eyes, and yet, they understood each other. One gets the impression that they both want to build a myth from that war, in which they probably took part, but obviously the only support they had was themselves. Other passers-by treated the disabled soldier like any other beggar. Everyone there has their own marketing story with the goal of getting some money from people walking by. Those who pass here every day as I do, says Sergei, cannot help but notice that the same, allegedly military invalid, was sitting in front of the pharmacy in Jevrejska Street two or three days ago, although without the scales. Without any signs, he smoked, obviously dissatisfied because the job did not go well, and how could it go well when there were no signs indicating he is what he claims to be – a military invalid. All most people saw was a lazy individual with functioning limbs, but then he got an idea– he put up a scale and a sign with the inscription – help a military invalid! His job with the scales is much better than just a story about a war invalid. I passed that place on the boulevard almost every day, so I know all the beggars. A little further from this group, sits a man without feet. He is, so to speak, a cripple in his place. Right next to him are cigarette butts from previous days, a little further from him is a young woman with a child in her arms, a child holding a rattle and having fun. Sometimes the mom has fun with it too. Almost mechanically, giving the child an example of how to use a rattle. We all have rattles we use to entertain our spirit and our consciousness to escape from the gaping void that causes us mental pain. Most often it is empty words, sometimes it is some manual work that automates not only our body, but also our everyday life and our spirit.



Dwarf in a wheelchair from the beginning of the story and a woman in a colorful pink dress are obviously waging a verbal war for a place to beg. It's a war for living space. It's precisely this place that is the busiest and a beggar can be seen from afar, giving a passerby enough time to mentally prepare for such an act, as some people need time to find money in their pockets or purse, as well as the reason to give money to a beggar. What motivates a person to be merciful to a beggar? This is a question that I myself don't want to answer, because the motives are different, so I offered it as a topic for conversation in the company of people I meet every week in our Association. However, there were no satisfactory answers. I tried to get people to talk about this topic in vain, encouraging them to open up and honestly speak about the motives to give or not give something to beggars. People just aren't ready for an honest answer. Or, better said, they like to hear other people opening up, they like other people's honesty, but they don't express their own. Sometimes I manage to scratch the surface of someone's soul, most often one belonging to a well-read and spiritual lady, as sometimes she is carried away by the conquest of inner freedom and says something about her intimacy, about her inner life, soon stopping in fear of not saying something that would cost her her reputation, expose her to ridicule and who knows what else. Mostly, when she drinks a glass of brandy in a relaxed and cheerful atmosphere, she says something about herself, but more as a hint between the lines. It is like when one dreams and tries to connect the symbols while talking of it; it is in the same way that I listen to Danka, her careful presentation, hesitation between saying something personal and protecting herself from statements that could harm her later. She has potential for this kind of spiritual experiences — an unfulfilled writer whose talent was silenced in this narrow-minded environment, and her talent for understanding human nature, even her own, has not fully developed, but remains there as a hint.

Sylvia likes to listen others opening up, as for her it's all the piquancy she lives of for a short time. She even blushes with excitement hearing something like that coming from someone else's mouth, but she becomes



very careful not to turn the intimacy of the conversation towards her, because she doesn't want to talk about it in any given moment. She's simply not ready to be honest. That's not something one should do. That's just how she was brought up. I try to reach her, her way of thinking. Yet, her mind follows the model in which she grew up. Intellectual liberation, the process of personal, sociological and social maturity obviously did not catch up with her. Turning to the distinctly material side of life, seeing the realization of her being exclusively in the material sphere, she simply cannot reach that space of honest communication. Starting from her own beliefs that others' happiness and misfortunes serve others only for fun and ridicule, she is not ready to fly out of her cage like a bird. Growing up in an open cage, she doesn't fly out. She is afraid of freedom, she is afraid of honesty, of the world itself. Sylvia has no male or female friends, because she lacks social capacity for friendship. She spends time with others out of interest. That is her view of the world.

I've spent a long time thinking about the reason dishonest people can't be honest. So much would be resolved by itself, if only someone's opinion about the matter was stated rather than implied or guessed. There would be no misunderstandings.

I started thinking about the nature of honesty. Without honesty there is no friendship. An honest person is one who is ready to give a part of themselves, their life and their story to another being. Above all else, it's the ability to give, and we can only give what we have. We cannot give what we do not have. Everyone is, in fact, sincere, even those who are silent and never open up. They are sincere in their silence. They have nothing to give, so they keep quiet. They are poor in spirit. Stingy people who hold everything in their hands, even their little lives that are the biggest thing for them, so they lose grip even of the things that would remain on their palms if their hands had been open. They are ashamed of themselves because they know themselves best, they are ashamed of the emptiness that gapes from their souls. They are afraid to open the soul because they



know its contents so well. I am trying to understand what it is in their souls that they are so ashamed of. Above all else, there is the fear of being blamed and condemned, cowardice of not having faith in yourself and everything around you; there is a soul that shrunk into something meagre, small, cramped and miserable. They are very unhappy and lazy. Too lazy to develop. To rethink themselves and take a different path. Unfortunate ones who are not able to get rid of their misfortunes. Do they need help and in what way? Or should we just let them live their little lives? Maybe their experience is more than enough for them. They have the experience of emotions, but whether they know how to convey it to others and whether they want to do it, is perhaps less important.

Right next to the entrance to the building of Dnevnik, where the publishing house I work with is located, this beggar is the first in line, and if a passer-by keeps walking they will meet several more and will most certainly not be merciful to everyone. They will calm their conscience with helping one beggar, and it will most likely be the first one in line. That's why this place is good and beggars know it. In addition, there is shade under the canopy of a large elm tree, and at thirty-five degrees at noon, that is not an insignificant factor. The conversation between a dwarf and the untended beggar is simple, full of curses on both sides, curses that express emotions more than content. If we analyzed the literal content of what had been spoken, and not the transferred meaning and emotions, we would see the moral den they live in. The content of curses is morbid and vulgar. It's their rattle. The impoverished vocabulary is aided by gestures, her showing the middle finger, and his hand and hip movements suggesting sexual intercourse. A kind of strange flirtation can be seen in the body and language speech. Their body movements express the strength of the primary instincts in these people. They are in the power of these instincts and are almost without their own consciousness. Their communication takes place in front of the audience, as in a theater, because those walking by cannot remain indifferent to such unusual behavior, so they stop and watch with curiosity how this noisy quarrel will end. A sharp eye will rec-



ognize that it is not really an argument but a foreplay for some kind of epilogue. Women stop for a moment and continue walking frowning and shocked after they see what this is all about. However, men, especially those who have plenty of free time because they work in state-owned companies or are retired, stay and turn into the audience of this street theater. For them, it is an attention-worthy sensation. If one of them takes a sandwich or a burger out of the package, he has everything he needs – bread and circuses. A reality show in the middle of the street. Here are their rattles.

The fact that someone pays attention to these two noisemakers inspires them even more. It is no longer a rehearsal of their fantasies, but a real life premiere. The director of this nature's show is hidden, I recognize his *hand* and try to find him and name him.

In the strange speech of the man with dwarfism, I recognize, above all else, repressed anger and contempt for what he is – a small stunted man. He's not really a dwarf, but a stunted man. With every sentence that comes out, even when no one listens to him, he seems to be getting vengeance on Lord who created him as such. We all have flaws, but with masks on our faces we can at least partially hide them from ourselves and the world. His flaw is too obvious for him to be able to manipulate and hide it. Now, he is in the spotlight so he curses everyone among the audience watching the play, and to her the most because he estimated that she, being a beggar, is weaker than him so she is suitable for revenge, as not many people are weaker than him.

Some passers-by react to his verbal salvos, so they respond with curses, but most of them just smile, satisfied that there are worse and more tragic people in this world than themselves. A theatrical play gets a new dimension if someone from the audience joins it. For this little man, it becomes a party he is enjoying, and then it is not what the hidden director intended to show. The actor has taken control of his role and seems to be improvising. The spectator who recklessly stumbled into the play for a moment is



now afraid of the unexpected course of events, now withdraws and moves along, recognizing that in communication with this ruthless man they can only be humiliated, insulted and ridiculed, because outwitting is not worth it — the dwarf is more rigid and experienced in such situations. In addition, his mental pain is much greater and he has a greater right to such behavior. If there are no volunteers to join the dialogue, he teases the viewers, luring them with the words: Hey, you, you looking back. I'm talking to you! What are you looking at, a circus show?

The viewer usually feels ashamed, and even scared of such public provocation, so they turn around and leave. Braver ones enter into a dialogue with him, ready not so much to quarrel, but to fight. Because this is where the dwarf is weaker. But, he knows his possibilities and sets the boundaries himself. He is the star of the show.

The stunted man leaves the audience alone and focuses again on the beggar. Curses are bursting in all directions like New Year's firecrackers. She retaliates in the same way, passionate and angry, and you can see she enjoys the anger and passion. At the moment when the quarrel and passion are most intense, the stunted man unexpectedly jumps out of his wheelchair, obviously more mobile than what he wanted people to think and walks towards the beggar. She greets him readily and they start hitting each other. On the head, face, body. He hits her, she hits him. But the blows are not strong. They are more symbolic. They seem to be just an extension of verbal abuse. With unexpected strength the dwarf jumps on the woman, his face distorted by passion, lifting her dress and having sexual intercourse with her in front of the audience. She is acting as if she's trying to defend herself, but these movements just bring her closer to him than to the escape. It is clear that she could throw him off at any moment if she wanted to, since she is bigger and stronger. The audience is surprised and doesn't know how to react. The scene is too unusual for passers-by not to look at it. After they look, they turn around shocked and leave grumbling.



As they leave, most of them turn around once more to make sure they really see what they think they saw.

I am looking at these two in a love spasm and I look at the audience. I recognize the director. Yes, that's him. He finally showed himself with that scene. It is the deep life stimulus of the gene, the most powerful force that rules us and our lives. It is the essential power of life. Every living being in this world functions not only with instinct and reason, but also with the deep mind of its genes that have a single goal – to prolong life! I remain wondering: do only the fittest individuals survive, as Darwin says, or is it a decision of another god who is the god of the weak, poor and miserable, or is there a completely different force and logic in question?

Later on, I learned from passers-by that the stunted man lives close by with his large family, six or seven children whom he supports with these theatrical performances, petty theft, fraud, going through garbage cans and similar jobs. Maybe even now, in front of the audience, he started a new life in this woman. Everything tells me that this is true, because the urge for that act was strong. At one point, I paid attention to Sergei, who heard the words of passers-by about the large family of this man. His expression was painful. It was as if he was wondering — why does life favor this infamous individual, both moral and physical, endowing him with so many children, while he who tried to be a functional part of the social system, educated, high in the social hierarchy, he who provided all the necessary conditions for the upbringing of children, he was not given a single child? How many secrets are there that are hard to figure out. I didn't dare look Sergei's face because I knew I would see pain, so I focused on my thoughts trying to find the answer.

*Translated from Serbian to English
Jovana Kentić*



MILAN MICIĆ

A SLOW DEATH IN NEBRASKA

On a farm, nine miles away from Fremont, Nebraska, Marko-Michael Kuryak had been dying for nine years.

Old man Michael had the sky drag itself under the ground beneath him, false ancestors appeared in his dreams; a butterfly coming back descended on a place inhabited by nothing.

Somebody was always taking the spring away from the long-dying man's step, a slender crane lay a pebble on his forehead; not many loved one's in the picture. His family hadn't been by his bedside for a long time; grandsons and daughters-in-law had sleepless bones and they fled into the daylight and daily chores where carrying rocks and searching for a bee that had nowhere to land was forbidden.

(Around the bed of Marko-Michael Kuryak an uninhabited breath lingered; numbers took flight and touched down around it; strange smiles bleakly rode down invisible roads. Now and then his grandkids entered that room, smoked a cigarette or two while on a break from work, and took pains to have the old man pass on, but with no success)

The old man dove into his bed in November, 1929, shortly after the Wall Street Stock Market Crash, or "Black Tuesday", as they call it, a fact that is just a red herring supposed to lead readers down a blind alley. The truth is that Michael Kuryak celebrated his one hundred and eighth birthday that year, and that all those close to him thought he should have died ages ago, that he should have gently and politely gone to the same place where many of his well-behaved peers had already gone. Many saw Michael's ever-expanding hoard of years as an ancient sign of his rottenness, a sign of the rude old man's pure, ego-driven insolence and greedy self-indulgence. Old Marko-Michael Kuryak did not possess that wise rot that accompanies old men in their final moments, something his loved ones



definitely noticed; the old man, even then, was as sunny as a July morning, he had a leisurely lightness and a brilliant nest of a sound mind, though sometimes he was a bit too light on his feet and too hard of hearing after a big lunch. And, Michael Kuryak, we must say, had somewhere deep within him a grand whirlpool of laughter, like a spring or an oil well, and when that wellspring would overflow the old man would laugh, long and hard.

Under the lengthy and continual pressure from the community and especially, it must be said, from his loved ones, Michael had on one November night intentionally broken off an old part of his soul, struck that gentle corner of himself that quickly fades away, and put on a primitive song of his far-off kin, determined to die. He laid down in his soon-to-be deathbed, told himself that his life at this point was “his stray property”, closed his eyes, and began to tend to his own final moments. Naturally, within the household his determination at first provoked surprise, then unease, and finally joy, as it did in the nearby town of Fremont and the entire county as well, for the entire community was familiar with his pig-headed rudeness and determination to, despite everybody’s wishes, continue living. “Michael Kuryak is dying!” the local rag “Fremont times” had this as its killer headline on the 21st or 21st of November, 1929, while a radio station in Chicago broadcast that news in prime time six days later. Everybody on the old man’s farm, and primarily his grandsons, great grandsons, and great great grandsons, because his wife and children died a long time ago, had suddenly and quickly changed their opinion of the old man, and soon after this perception of Michael Kuryak as a kind and wise old man spread to the city of Fremont, and the entire county.

That initial night, when the old man decided to die, the entire household gathered ‘round his bed. With burning cigarettes and glasses of whiskey in their hands they all came so close that the stretched out old man couldn’t breathe, and so with a gentle wave of his hand he moved them all to the back of the room. The household paused, then brought chairs and



one wooden bed, sat down with a dark-willed politeness, and ordered even the youngest of the womenfolk to rustle up some steaks, potatoes, and an apple pie or two. Then they ate and were quiet for a long time, enjoying the artfulness of silence which was, in their opinion, supposed to be the stage and the proper dramatic framework for the old man's final and irreversible departure.

Of course, Marko-Michael Kuryak did not pass away that night, nor did he die in any of the days, nights, weeks, months, and years that followed. The old man lay in the bed with his eyes closed, he moved his long, wrinkled fingers that resembled bird feet, now and then smiling through closed eyes while taking a bit of water and food that was brought to him by his eldest grandson, the sixty-five-year-old Pete. Michael did not speak, for by now he said all that he had to say, dedicating his words to hours of suffering and moments of success and progress. Sometimes the old man would pull on his own ears, which his grandson Pete understood as a renewal of one of his grandfather's old ambiguous jokes. Michael would laugh in his sleep with a deep, long, and booming laugh that gave the family members entering his room the creeps.

By the end of 1934, Pete, the eldest of Michael Kuryak's grandchildren, called all the menfolk to a meeting crucial to the fate of their families and of the farm. They all agreed: the potentially deceased was troubled by something, and he was unable to easily pass onto the other world. The old man has a soul of sand that does not want to leave. The entire household has been a mass of sadness and pain for a long time now, and this state of affairs could not continue. Something had to be done. The air of ill repute surrounding their house reached the town, and spread over the entire county. Once again the town looked down on them, and every day the townsfolk dedicated an hour or two to that misfortune of the Kuryak family, like it was their own. And maybe it was their own; the town sheriff himself told Pete, while he was at the grocers buying supplies for the farm, that ever since Michael refused to die everything in the town and the



county started going wrong: agricultural products and livestock are getting cheaper, everything else is getting more expensive, three murders and two rapes had been committed in the county, the vice of drunkenness which had survived the prohibition made its way back to the town, unrighteous act once forgotten are now being practised again; there was a specific angle to the events of the town and the county, that made them sad and tragic.

“The townsfolk are laughing less and less”, the sheriff said. “My jokes included. You gotta do something mister Kuryak. At least so the townsfolk see that you’re doing something. Or else!”, the sheriff threatened. “But I don’t want another crime happening!” he added.

Three months later, the old man’s grandsons from Fort Collins, Colorado, out West, hired a false and disreputable friend who was supposed to imitate a man that in Michael Kuryak’s youth had stolen his fiancé and taken her away to San Francisco. The fake friend was supposed to sit by the dying man’s bedside and constantly remind him of that event and so in that subtle, polite way, enable him to leave this painful and eroded plane of existence... (Forever...)

The man who came from the West dedicated himself to this task fully, the shine of his forehead serving as evidence. The fake friend standing guard at the old man’s bed was waited on under the grandsons’ supervision, he sat there diligently earning his pay, sickly sweet and rotten he kept reminding the old man of the travails of his youth, sometimes overheating his cranium while fabricating events that never happened, but could have, all for the purpose of having the long-dying old man frown, and then expire. But, all in vain. The gentleman from the West achieved nothing in those months because a smile never left the lips of old man Michael. In the end, thanks to all that sitting by the old man’s bed, the aforementioned individual had developed a horrible creak in his bones which drove Lin, the wife of the youngest grandson George, crazy, and the man from the West had after six months of diligent work been fired... (All for nothing...)



The great grandson of the dying old man, the son of the above-mentioned George, Jim Kuryak, who studied history at the prestigious college of Princeton, suggested, once he was back home to the farm, to bring some people from his great grandfather's homeland, a place somewhere in Europe, in the Balkans, so they could shake him up emotionally and so ease him into his departure onto the other world. The American Embassy in Belgrade, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, had worked hard for many months trying to find the relatives of Michael Kuryak somewhere in the western parts of that country, and had ultimately succeeded. Letters between relatives have been exchanged, from Fremont dollars have been sent to the dying old man's homeland, to finance train rides and ship voyages, clothing, shoes, smaller expenses, and a piece of second-rate land in the river valley found between two hills from which the old man came.

The cousins hailing from the Balkan Kingdom finally arrived. Three of them. Huge, moustachioed, with great appetites and perpetually thirsty. These were men of frayed destinies and with petty carelessnesses about life. Around the bed of their long-dying cousin they spread out cards, put out their homeland's rakia and "meze", as they called it, hung loose their balls and their heavy limbs and their grabby moustaches and spread them all around the room. Each of them had obtuse angles and a dull glow in their heads, a small and rude stupidity of the eyebrow, and the perpetually offended face of a cheat. An inch away from his face, they told stories of the old country, showed how they moved in the homeland, and in the air they drew the valleys, rivers, and hills from which they came. Then right by the bed they howled songs that echoed all the way to the town of Fremont, making the sheriff's skin crawl inside his office.

The dying old man's three cousins had been escorted to the farm with a significant sum of money, under the condition they never show their faces again. During a sit down by their distant relative's bedside they got into a brawl with his great grandsons, and so the sheriff came to the farm, threatened the great grandsons of Michael Kuryak with a call to the county sher-



iff and jail time, and politely asked the individuals hailing from the far away Kingdom if they could stop singing. And so the relatives left the farm, but it seemed they never crossed the ocean, instead spending their hard earned money on beginning a new and happy American life on the Northwest of America, somewhere in the state of Oregon.

Next, Michael's dutiful and diligent grandsons brought three professional Paštrović mourners, from San Diego, California, who were supposed to trick the old man into thinking he had died. (So that the poor old man would be led by their wails onto the beyond.) The ladies came by train, rehearsing their parts on the way, got off at Fremont and Steve, Michael's great grandson, son of the middle grandson John, got his pick-up and brought them to the farm.

The unhappy women, upon whom the joy of dying had long crusted over, spent the entire night wailing, embodying the thicket of death and a year full of frost. And just before day breaks, portrayed life circling death and the fresh elegance of the great beyond. All In vain. The moustache of Marko-Michael Kuryak, which reflected truth, shamelessly curved upwards into a smile, and had a warped and naughty thought which he could not express, but which you can probably guess.

(Old Michael sunk into dreams. He dreamt of very old, spilled milk, the first dizzying meal, observed the soul that awakens early; his bone unchanged since birth. He laughed in his sleep; his face was flexible, he passed through some door, and he was not afraid of walking.

Barefoot he walked through a field. He climbed up into the sky, towards the spring Sun, and then came back to the field and with his heart he stood next to a lonely oak. Above him he saw the colours of the distance, and the gentle transparency of a light trap. He entered it. The whirlpool of laughter flooded his shores.)

In the year of 1936, Nebraska was assailed first by a drought, and soon after dust storms as well. Dust wandered the plains, whirled into strange



and unfavourable omens, and descended onto fields, towns, farms, and cities. (Like a painter laying on a curse.)

The dust crept into the whistles of the Great plains, into the sanctuaries of clean and cool water, into the nostrils of cows and barns full of wheat and into the wails that echoed in the space between heaven and earth...

The next year it happened again, as it did in the one after that...

The descendants of Michael Kuryak prepared themselves for a great migration. An obedient danger loomed over the farm.

It was a decision of the land and a decision of men.

"Woe is us, during a clear night", said Pete, the eldest of Michael Kuryak's grandchildren, having current information on moonlight, readying their migration towards the Pacific coast. The signal to leave came from the sheriff, who gave him a clue on the hidden purpose behind the desperation of Fremont's citizens. "There's plenty rocks to land on some heads", he whispered, let his brow reflect that threat for a bit, and then left the farm in a twilight that seemed harmless. His visit was preceded by a sad and less conspicuous event from the previous night inspired by iron pipes when Jim Kuryak, a student from the College of Princeton, was beaten up by unknown assailants on his way home...

The first pick-up that left the farm westward carried a bed with a dying old man, and small children. Old man Michael Kuryak lay on the bed squinting, gently moving his big toe. Time lay quiet, shades of colour were crumbling away, the harsh winter of human eyes followed the pick-up. The old man smirked with the sides of his mouth, a magnetic excess lay on his eyelashes; (small but forgotten things he moved around within his soul.)

A cross-eyed clock lay in the bottom of the pick-up...



Wonder and revelation gave light to forms, the wind moved sand
around the plane, in the dust whirls a deepness in white could be
glimpsed; time silently crept through the tumult.

That day had a strange name to it; primordial reality...

Translated from Serbian to English
Aleksandar Hrubenja



MIODRAG KAJTEZ

TRAVEL COMPANIONS ON SWITCHED BASES

My neighbor Vladica, a widower, crammed me into his completely overhauled small car, which he by himself maintained every single day, vacuumed it, washed it and even installed an alarm.

Vladica tinkered with the car commands so clumsily that he wouldn't do it better even if he had more than one head at his disposal, which were then taken off his body, mixed up and then being let to cooperate on switched bases. You could say we set off on an endless ride, towards the opposite pole of a still undiscovered world, just to spite it, and not towards a local cemetery, to the funeral of the lady across the hall from flat No.6, the fourth burial (second of which being Vladica's wife Evica) of someone from our small building in the past two and a half months.

That's life, my dear, Vladica rambled. In his free time, he acted as a chauffeur by stepping and turning. (Anyone who would worry about being associated with someone like Vladica in the evening news would give up everything they had if only he had turned with more trust put into the steering rack than in a higher power.) It was in no way possible to determine whether his intention was to turn the small car back since he had missed a turn or he was mostly eager to run some little girl on a sow off the road who was quite validly, even standing out with a red bow in her hair, moving along the narrow section of the road, marked by a yellow line and intended for just such movement.

I remember, like it was yesterday, but in some other life, the dentures clicked. How little he needed for happiness and he had who to share it with.

His aunties had just gotten him married.



As soon as I tried to picture my neighbor Vladica's aunties, their diascopic projection showed itself to me from the upper right corner of his repaired windshield. Out the corner of my eye, I vainly tried to figure out where the wires, tied to a new battery fitted during the overhaul, connected with the passenger seat and all, and whether the induction coil was installed under the seat or elsewhere. So, this is how they do overhauls today. But when my neighbor Vladica honked his horn at some mangy mutt and I completely lit up. Who can tell whether the horn overloaded the circuit or if it was my semi-conductivity, anyways, the aunties disappeared from the windshield and I turned to a sarcastic sample of car cosmetics, a faded and evaporated little pine tree which they failed to replace during the overhaul: it was hanging before me from the indoor rear-view mirror on an overly long worn out thread.

The wedding passed without any fuss, especially compared to today's paragliding weddings. Vladica swore on the bed principle! And not only the bed! Boy, there was something drawing him to Evica, there was the end of the world (he thought), an anchorage, a quiet haven, the navel of the earth, the three fishes that are the foundation of the world, the essence of pancakes, of savory fish pies, of the evening samovars, of soft sighs and warm shawls, and hot stoves to sleep on, as snug as though you were dead, and yet you're alive – the advantages of both at once. What more could he as from life, this creature irreparably out of tune since birth?! Both he and Evica turned twenty and the only thing that mattered to them was to hole up somewhere and start their life together, even in a place where others were sent to die as a punishment and before such a place was approved by a technical commission which turned a blind eye or two.

Oh, how he looked forward to early departures to his marital bed which he and Evica (at Evica's initiative) used to engage in ever since the first day of their life together. Jeez, look at us, we're life fowl, Vladica would tease his wife, tempting fate every time before the repose, fidgeting like a headless chicken until this fidgeting wouldn't start to unbearably



annoy Evica, which it did during the first winter of their life together. So on one winter evening, she threatened to personally wring his neck if he did not restrain himself (and her physical strength, back then, was unmatched. She could roll out pies in the kitchen for hours, knead, prepare many weeks' worth of small cookies, or to sew and stitch with a sewing machine), to which he only quietly groaned and calmed down, but his heart full of joy kept pounding merrily, refusing to quit, he thought, it's not a long and unimaginable way from wringing his neck to wanking his pecker so he jumped up with a new ray of hope.

Right at that moment we flew over a speed bump in the small car moving at an unadjusted speed. When I was driving it for the overhaul, something would bang under the hood after each bump and Vladica, looking over his specs, would search for another bump on the road so that he could drive over it to demonstrate how nothing was banging over the hood.

Life is full of surprises, my dear.

Futilely, he would, with renewed and revived hope, jump up with a hard-on. Tomorrow, my darling, tomorrow, he would rejoice. We are not pouring a cement screed for God's sake (which, as we know, has to be poured in one go) so that we forget about tomorrow, Vladica would whisper in the dark conciliatorily with Evica already snoring. But even then, when the winter idyll turned into something he could not even name, the two of them remained very far from the idea of pretending to be one of those modern couples in separate beds. Not in their wildest dreams. Then how would he warm her feet? How would he cheer her up? How would he then read (he even thought of that) in her ear, using a lamp, lines from the wedding collection by Fyodor Mikhailovich long into the night? Sometimes, at the very mention of Stolarska Street or the Kokushkin Bridge, Evica would fall fast asleep but she would snap out of it as if she felt the smell of marmalade rolls coming somewhere from Yelagin Island and wished to get a taste. All for you, all, he would jump, fall down, get up,



stumble on his way to the kitchen, she would laugh, he would bring her a wide bowl full of homemade rolls, to polish them off, leaving him only crumbs. Feel free to peck away at them, while you can, Evica would shake with laughter with the bed creaking even more under her weight. He was also shaking in the same bed.

Witnessing Vladica's intertwining feet, compared to his 160 cm height (among other things, the Commission's report stated that based on this he was relieved of both regular, civilian or any other military service), disproportionately large, size 46, shoved into the perforated polyvinyl sandals with great anguish! and some kind of piety towards the sanctity of Evica's memory and the sense of debt (Evica bought him those sandals last spring through catalogue sales, for their 30th wedding anniversary), so witnessing the intertwining of just such feet on the pedals, this indescribable dabbling, everybody from the passenger seat, whether connected to the car battery or not, would warn him about his insufficient awareness of the afterlife.

And then (the Devil never sleeps) their first autumn, Evica and him had a daughter, which came as a bit of a shock. That's when he bought this thing, he banged the steering wheel, at a car fair. With a nice discount. Up until the overhaul, it had only a small crack right there, he flicked the bottom of the windshield with his claw. But only once have they managed to go for a family fieldtrip in this small car to the nearby mountain slopes. After this fieldtrip, Evica would never be the same. She started stopping half way to the kitchen, with her tongue hanging, her breast milk dried up and the little tot kept screaming from its cot. Vladica had to take her place in the kitchen and to conserve the sewing machine. (He didn't want to drive alone in their little car. And where would he go anyway? He had a monthly bus pass until his early retirement.) And what's even weirder, the little one was growing without any milk, somehow by herself. Daddy Vladica did not get involved that much and the involvement of mummy Evica was more womanly than motherly. When their daughter grew up,



Evica ganged up with her on the female basis, not having much say – against the male side. To bleed him dry. But, a father and a husband Vladica proved for the millionth time that he could take it, nothing was too much for him, who never asked from life more than he could take, and he took a lot. Heeeey, heeey, I just needed it to get a bit easier, Vladica continued his chauffeur act, spinning and turning and stepping oozing with joy.

Some guy in a uniform jumped out from a stakeout, waving his arms and legs in an attempt to stop them. They just flew by. We'll worry about it later, Vladica shifted into fourth gear.

And the austerity with which he had been treated at home by his wife Evica from her bedside and his only daughter on her feet (problematizing the thesis that austerity is best achieved from bed), day in, and day out, up until three and a half months ago. Until the former preyed upon the opportunity for herself, a husband whose blood she would suck; it would have been easier for him to bear a double plywood pantry door on his back, of smaller dimensions, about 200 times 60cm, which his only child, rampaging in her parental home, would take off the hinges with ease thanks to the balance between her youthful strength and her anger and her training in that sense, one second because of her crying doll (a long time has passed since it had been a toy rather than a decoration), which Vladica had disemboweled to get to the mechanism necessary for the handmade car alarm (Vladica's attempt to respond to his daughters door-banging one night: grab her by her leg with his claws and bite her with his bare gums since he had already removed his dentures and put them in a glass of water, proved to be and utterly unhealthy intention for him, wham, bam, that the endeavor of biting his daughter ever in his life he gave up completely), the next, it was the night cream which he would secretly take from this daughter's toiletry bag to polish the rubber moldings on his little car with this cream full of precious glycerin, it would have been easier for him to put up with all this, especially after he, in time,



learned how to plant himself in a position benefiting him, aiming through the keyhole in the split second of the incoming doors like through a midge in the light, determining the best angle by this little dot, sticking out his shoulder, not making too much fuss (he even admitted to himself, regardless of his daughter's rather convincing formulation that he was not capable of providing her what other parents provided for their children, that this extermination within his family circle was the least he could expect), he would also more easily handle his wife's crises and the projectiles from their private library launched at him by his daughter (who would go for the door every other second), towards which he would, full of experience, stick out his entire shoulder girdle. He would retract the back of his neck readily awaiting Mladić or a slightly thinner village of Stepanchikovo, unmistakably chosen over a minor thing, it would have been easier for him to endure either reproachful torture or his wife's collapses, and the burden of worrying that the whole of her would fall down on him (including injections), because their daughter loathed all his illnesses, his daughter's sense of humor would have even been easier to bear, and all those girls' spurs of laughter he would face, as soon as the injections started to work, at his expense (and at the cost of Evica making a mess of herself), at the expense of someone's mouth, wrinkled like a pigeon's ass, hihhi, hihhi, he could move around his flat with his dentures on such messed up days, his only beloved daughter would hide out of mere spite after his unsuccessful attempt to respond to her door-banging with biting. Screw her! Anyway, she used to hide it really well, and his daughter's jubilant clapping (since she found the silliest place for the dentures last night), and his tube feeding which he was forced to resort to after not having found his dentures (although he didn't prefer solid food even with his dentures), he would bear it more easily hihhi since the small car vacuuming time would come: time for unwinding twenty of the possible fifty meters of extension cable, and running the cable from the socket (of all the sockets in the house, he would always randomly choose the one within Evica's reach, above her headboard, behind the sewing machine), then through the window, from



where the cable fell freely and unwinded to the backyard and the improvised parking, where he would rush himself, stumbling with the vacuum down the stairs, and by the way, it wasn't hard for him either, he cursed from the top of his lungs, it would echo through the entrance corridor while he was already connecting the vacuum to the extension cord, turning it on, which would signal Evica to pull the extension cord out of the socket, cut her husband off down there, and then plug it in again, pull it out again, in, out, his daughter and Evica jumping for joy, and Evica regularly making a mess of herself after such rejoice, after which he would be in for an emergency change of her bedding, it would have been easier for him to put up with all this if only once a year he had managed to jump his beloved wife in their bed, even if he had to trick her, to ease his suffering, to pounce at her body with abundant and plentiful deposits of fat in unusual quantity and in unexpected areas and simply make her, oh, to fulfil her sacred marital duty, and there Vladica continued turning and honking with one hand while making a fist with the other, trying to portray the masculine force which, with nature's weird sense of irony, was abundant in him and which, not losing on its permanence even in the cramped interior of his little car, most certainly deserved to be celebrated by erecting a memorial in this very nature someday, to find some convenient place on a clearing along a walking patch in the Transdanubian highlands, if, after inspection, it would be revealed they had not all been occupied by poets, which is not ruled out. But he would endure such outcome as well with his head held up high.

*Translated from Serbian to English
Gorana Kukobrat and Nikola Kajtez*



SAŠA RADONJIĆ

A SHORT JOURNEY TO ETERNITY

– *God, where am I?*

Mihael Gor wondered, still half dazed, shaking off the fine sand from his hair, eyebrows and eyelashes.

He dressed particularly smartly that morning, having been informed the day before that he would be received by the CEO of the corporation, and probably be given symbolic recognition for the innovation in the interest and tax rate system developed by Mihael Gor without much effort actually, having fun more or less.

Indeed, the reception with the CEO was more than officially cordial. At first, Mihael felt a little awkward faced with the flood of compliments from the first man of the corporation, whom he normally saw only on the newspapers pages and on TV screens. Immediately upon entering the office, he noticed that his *big boss* was wearing the exact same suit as his, which further distracted him. Of course, it was a mere coincidence, but still, Miha kept feeling that he had committed an act of slight insolence by choosing that very suit.

Later, when the conversation moved on to his professional field, he relaxed totally and briskly explained the finer points of his program to the CEO. After half an hour, Miha guessed that the time planned for this ceremony had expired, and he got up, thanking the CEO for the reception and his kind words.

– Don't go just yet, Mr Gor. I want to show you something else. Please wait for me, just for a few minutes.

The CEO left the office, and Miha came to his executive office chair, curiously looking at the numerous digital controls built into the armrests. And then it happened: first a crack appeared on the office ceiling, and a



moment later an entire hole, through which three masked figures came down, grabbed Miha and pulled an opaque bag over his head. He first felt being lifted up, then carried, then lifted again, pushed through some insufficiently wide opening, carried him again and finally placed in a seat. Judging by the noise and air flow that followed, Miha concluded that he was in a helicopter, and then he felt a needle prick to his arm and a few seconds later he fell into an unnaturally deep sleep.

He was woken by voices, actually, several people quarrelling – he could not tell how many. In his clenched left-hand fist, he was holding tightly onto the handle of his briefcase, which he had reflexively grabbed at the time of the abduction, and he did not drop it until that moment by some miracle. And although the briefcase was of no use to him, he had a feeling of deep calm that it was beside him. And the quarrel between the people from the next room was escalating. The kidnappers, of course, found out they were holding the wrong man and blamed each other for the blunder.

After a while, one of them came in and injected Miha with a new dose of sedative. The dose seemed not to be as strong as the first one, as Miha passed out more slowly and pleasantly. And the dream that followed was covered with images from his early childhood, from the period when he was not able to speak due to biting his tongue in an unfortunate fall from the top of the stairs in his family house. Another serious consequence of the fall was a severe concussion, after which Mihael completely lost his sense of smell. His tongue was saved in a complicated surgical procedure, but Miha fully regained the power of speech only a few years later. Yet, the sense of smell was irretrievably lost. So, the dream that followed was from that early post-operative period, when the boy was developing his system of communicating, composed of facial expressions, gestures and poorly articulated voices. He was sitting on a reed mat opposite his mother, who was quietly and patiently trying to get at least one understandable syllable out of his mouth.

– *Miha, say 'house'!*



Miha made a few quick motions with his left hand, outlining precisely the contours of a house.

– *Good job, Miha, but try to say it now, nice, as you used to! Come on, at least try, it doesn't matter if you fail. Ho-use. Ho-use.*

Miha repeated the same gesture, without uttering a sound.

– *Miha, please try to say anything, just a word.*

The boy looked down, then closed his eyes, opened his mouth half way, swallowed hard, then made a series of gestures that meant he would say a word the next day.

* * *

Mihael Gore woke up the moment the helicopter landed. The noise of the engine subsided a little so that he heard one of the kidnappers saying:

– *I think it's gonna be okay here. Get him out!*

He felt a few hands grab him roughly, take him out of the helicopter, and put him down on the soft ground. The strong gusts of wind caused by the propeller of the departing helicopter just ripped the bag off Mihael Gor's head, and he, completely covered with grains of hot sand, first opened only one eye, and uttered the sentence from the beginning of the story:

– *God, where am I?*

All he could see was fading into an endless desert landscape, beautiful and spooky at the same time. A few metres from the place where he was thrown out, he saw his briefcase, utterly surreal, like a miniature spaceship, stranded in the sand of a dune. He got up and walked towards it, but the effect of the sedative had not yet completely disappeared, so he lost his balance as he made his first step and fell onto the sand. He remained like that, still, for a few more minutes, then tried again and finally reached the



briefcase. He gently ran his palm along the regular geometric lines, opened it and was pleased to find that its inside still held two cartons of juice, a bottle of vitamin pills, a bag of crisps, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He took out his cigarettes and giggled softly at the drawing of the camel on the pack.

Inhaling voluptuously the first puff, it occurs to him that it was not as hot as one would expect. Nevertheless, he took off his jacket, untied his tie tossing it a few feet away. But, before the tie touched the ground, a mon-goose sprang out of the nearby desert bush and grabbed the snake-like prey in an instant. And as the animal swiftly dragged it to its lair, the tie twisted and left tracks in the sand like a real live reptile.

– *Well, it's time to go.* – Miha said with feigned cheerfulness, got up slowly and took the last drag on the cigarette. He looked about several times, trying to decide which way to go. The sun was still high, which could mean that the southwest was in that direction. Miha took a look at his watch that had stopped. He knocked on it a few times with the tip of his fingernail, but since the second hand was immobile, Mihael took the watch off and hurled it away. He headed in the direction opposite from where it landed.

He assumed that he had been walking for more than two hours, and he was a bit puzzled by the fact that he still felt no fatigue, thirst or hunger. But the oddest thing was the fact that he did not even break a sweat. Meanwhile, the gentle complexion of the sky over the desert developed acne of purple clouds, which probably significantly lowered the temperature of both the air and the sand. He wondered if he should drink some precious juice from the carton and take a vitamin pill, even though he did not feel the need to, just to prevent his body from collapsing. He opened his briefcase, reconsidered, and then took only one cigarette out of the pack.

– *Where the hell am I going?* – he wondered with some resignation, and he glanced at the sky where the clouds, carried by some high-altitude air



currents, were moving uncommonly fast, occasionally changing their mostly human-like contours.

– Perhaps it makes no difference, but from now on I'll follow the clouds. At least as long as there are any. That way I'll feel less lonely.

And Miha went on, and many hours had to have passed and the night had to have gone down a long time ago, but the sun did not move, as if it was a prop nailed to the backdrop of the sky. Mihael racked his brains trying to find an explanation for this unnatural phenomenon, and finally realised that, as a result of wandering aimlessly, he probably had periods of amnesia and loss of consciousness during which the transition from day to night occurred. However, somehow it seemed to him that the only fatigue he felt came from the constant light, actually, from the lack of darkness. Therefore, he opened the briefcase, carefully stacked its contents on a pile of sand, and set it upside down, half-open, so that it resembled a miniature tent.

He lay on the sand, put his head in the shade, under that little tent and fell asleep almost immediately.

His awakening was long and uncomfortable. Is there a more unpleasant awakening than when a mosquito repeatedly buzzes around your ear, like a small motor death. He finally opened his eyes and realised that the sound that had risen him from his sleep was coming from somewhere in the sky. At a height of several hundred feet, just above Mihael's place, a small, probably agricultural plane was circling. Miha had already started to shout, and then he remembered that it was unnecessary, since the pilot must have noticed him long ago. The problem was that it could not land.

Gazing skywards made Miha slightly light-headed, so he squatted down, and, in the meantime, the plane moved some half a kilometre towards the horizon, significantly reduced its altitude and began a manoeuvre that could only indicate an attempt to land. And that is exactly what happened. A two-winged aircraft, like the ones from World War I,



only smaller, almost incredibly small, stopped not far from Mihael Gor. When the sand cloud (a consequence of sudden braking) settled, Miha was able to observe the aircraft more carefully. In fact, the contraption, most of all, looked like a caricature of an aeroplane. The huge wheels, only slightly smaller than tractor wheels, short wide wings, stocky hull, and all of it in flamboyant blue, green and yellow hues reminded Miha of a circus attraction, not an aircraft capable of rising to the sky. The overall impression was complemented by the pilot, who was struggling to get out of the cramped cabin. He groaned and sighed, trying to move from the upper to the lower wing and finally fell headlong to the ground. He was a short, fat man in old-fashioned, apparently heavily patched-up leather overalls. When he took off his flight helmet, which looked more like an ushanka-hat, and goggles, Miha saw that he was bald, but with an extremely pleasant, cheerful face, which did not reveal his age.

– *Who are you?* said the pilot, ostensibly sternly, soldierly.

– *I'm Mihael Gor, a tax department clerk. And you?*

– *Oscar! The airman! What kind of tax department? How did you get here?*

– *I was kidnapped! Actually, kidnapped by mistake. Tell me, how long it'll take me to get back to civilisation?*

– *What do you mean kidnapped? I don't understand you at all. And what do you mean by getting back to civilisation?*

– *I just meant to the nearest town, or at least a settlement of a kind.*

– *Mihael, you are greatly mistaken. There is no city here, no civilisation! How long have you been in the desert?*

– *I'm not quite sure, but I think... for two days. What did you actually mean when you said there was no town?*



– *Exactly what I said. There is no town, no civilisation; everything is long gone.*

– *You're just kidding, certainly. I'm certainly not going to believe something so incredible. It was just yesterday, or the day before yesterday, that I was in the heart of civilisation, and now you're trying to convince me that the whole world's long since disappeared.*

– *Listen, I'm not trying to convince you of anything. You ask me, and I answer as best I can. And I know the world doesn't exist. I've flown in all directions, thousands of kilometres and there is nothing, except for a house in the desert. Only it has remained. There's nothing else. The world has simply disappeared, that's my opinion, and you can accept it or not. Think what you will. After all, my plane is a two-seater; if you have the courage, you'll see for yourself.*

Miha glanced at the plane suspiciously and quite distrustfully, and then thought to himself: "Anyway, what choice do I have?"

– *All right, Oscar, let's go! Is there room for my briefcase?*

Moments later, the plane started its take-off roll on a non-existent runway, moaning and shaking, finally managing to lift off with difficulty. Oscar turned around and, trying to speak over the noise of the engine, asked Mihael which direction he wanted to fly in.

– *It's absolutely all the same to me. I guess where you explored the least. There must be an end to this desert somewhere.*

– *You're wrong! There's no end. But it doesn't matter. Just flying matters.*

They did not talk for a while because Oscar sang some tunes Miha did not know, in an even less familiar language. He did not really feel like talking, since the scene of the desert from this height was an experience of a special kind. Miha was simply hypnotised, mesmerised, like anyone else



would probably be if faced straightforward with the landscapes of his own soul for the first time. Namely, the yellow sand dotted with islands of stunted bushes, and cacti, crooked by desert storms and almost anthropomorphic; like some centuries-old enchanted prickly people. Gradually, the realisation dawned on him that the search for civilisation was completely futile, and, leaning forward a little, he finally shouted to Oscar:

– *House, you mentioned a house in the desert. Can you take me there?*

– *Sure I can. So, you have come to realise that the world does not exist rather quickly!*

* * *

The structure that Oscar called a house was in fact a building resembling a small sports hall with a glass dome instead of a ceiling. Miha noticed it from a great distance, quite logically, since it was entirely different from its surroundings. It reminded him of a mushroom, or the top of the skull of someone's giant head buried in the sand.

– *Go there, Mihael, you need to enter the house. I'll go and fly some more.*

– *I'll go, I just wanted to ask you one more thing – when is it getting dark here?*

Oscar laughed out loud, turned round and headed for his plane, and before he could take off he shouted back to him:

– *Never! Mihael, there's no getting dark here!*

* * *

Under the dome, Mihael Gor found a kind of oasis. A lake occupied a huge central area. Over the surface of the turquoise water, strands of condensed steam were drifting, and everything else was covered with a carpet of thick layer of dense moss that was slightly compressing under the



weight of Miha's footsteps. On the opposite side of the lake stood a woman with her back turned towards him. Miha came to the edge of the lake and began to call out to her, and the echo of his voice made the hitherto motionless surface of the water ripple.

Finally, the woman turned and he recognised his mother in the beautiful, smiling face. He stared silently for a few moments, then called out to her.

– *Mother, say 'house'! Ho-use! Mother, ho-use!*

She made a few quick hand gestures that accurately outlined the contours of a house. Miha's face lit up, as a feeling of infinite happiness and peace came over him; his mother had finally learned his language. He slowly stretched out on the soft carpet of warm moss, watching the series of graceful motions of his mother, which conveyed the words of an almost forgotten lullaby. For a moment it seemed to him that demons of the masked kidnappers were rising from the misty veil over the lake, but it did not bother him; he knew that circling high above the glass dome, there was Oscar, his plump, a little confused and ridiculous, in fact unlike anything he had ever imagined, but his undisputed and only guardian angel.

– *Miha, do you want to say something else?*

– ... *God, how gloriously fragrant it is here.*

Translated from Serbian to English
Lidija Kapičić



LASLO BLAŠKOVIĆ
THE DEATH MASK

My father was a gentle hero.

To write such thing would imply getting into a pure literary topos, with longing shadows of Telemachus, Hamlet, Andreas Sam wandering lustily. Topos, isn't it a mere reality? Or the reality as a reliquary of stories? It depends.

We were in the same line of business, we had the same name. Many reasons for confusion, aren't there? Sometimes, as I stare at the cross with our name on it, I myself have no idea who this person is exactly. Ignorant people and passers-by used to mix us up anyway.

My father used to patiently explain that it was not him in the picture in the newspaper since his hair is fairer and if you take a good look at his thick glasses (which would smash the nose of everybody else except for him, he was quite sure about that – no, he got used to this look as early as in his childhood, to this bifocal cross), you'll see your own face, whatever it's like.

However, when somebody attributed some of his famous mischiefs to me for which he was to be celebrated, I wasn't eager to reveal the differences. Sometimes, I would try to be a joker and say: oh no, my dear, he is *the Count of Monte Cristo* and me – I 'm just a merryman who coughs away the dust from the camellias. But, to be honest, I rarely engaged in such associative footnotes, that is, I adorned myself with my dad's imaginary borrowed plumes with no regrets.

Isn't it strange: two namesakes, two writers, you would ask. At the beginning, the thing was quite natural, believe me, I was typing beside him on a chirping, arrhythmic typewriter, imitating him, before I even knew



how to write but isn't it the case with the child of a blacksmith or alchemist?

How come he set on this journey by himself, that is the question, the boy of Pavle the cobbler and Erzsébet, the craftsman's wife, when there were only two books in his birth house, in Karađorđeva Street in Novi Sad among the wooden moulds, calfskin, trimming knives for the left-handed, kneeling pliers and other crafty tools.

He would make up fantastic stories, my father would find excuses for his own father, whom I only knew through a similar story. *But, except for those books and all those cat's lives, Pavle wouldn't be Pavle if he didn't have that legend of a spectacular escape from a Hungarian captivity as well as two houses; he also had a heart that burst into pieces in the ambulance car of "Fiat 750" type aka "fića", a head that collapsed onto the shoulder of my father (causing my father's glasses to fall and remain invisible because on one side, there was a panting paramedic blocking his view and his father's corpse on the other, so he got to the hospital blinking and as if they had pulled a plastic bag for vomiting over his head, as he later described it vividly, in a subsequent affect), and an old scar from a heart attack on that heart which he knew nothing about (clearly seen by an eye of a pathologist at the autopsy as well as a corpse washer who just happened to be passing by, telling my father later everything about it at the Badger's, sipping through the thick wine).*

Indeed, he also had two books (which seemed to have disappeared somehow), both in Hungarian, the Bible and Poems by Sándor Petőfi; *when he heard his students laughing at his son after finding out he was writing, he said in a dreadful voice: Shut up you ignorant fools, Sándor Petőfi, the greatest Hungarian poet was a Serb and the greatest Serbian poet shall be a Hungarian, and uttered the name of his son, or mine, our name, the one which can be mentioned in vain.*

While I was reading these long gone sentences to my father, I really couldn't imagine that all this would repeat one day, like in some Borgesian



fabrication, that I'll also see the end of my father after his *lifeblood burst*, as they sang it out, or after the *aortic dissection*, as death is described in a cold, medical and bureaucratic manner, in the corridor of an ill-humoured outpatient department in Sremska Kamenica, on Saturday.

Ever since the time I was banging on an old typewriter sitting by my father's feet, while he was writing everything to come, up until now, about thirty light years will pass, interspersed by shadows of all kinds.

At that time, I daydreamt of us being of the same age, with no boundaries. My father was writing *Common Stories about an Uncommon Boy* and I was sad it wasn't me. Whenever my father was reading to us sections he wrote up until that evening, his hero Zoran always seemed somehow livelier than me, more purposeful and necessary. It was only this jealousy that kept me in reality.

But it is you, my father consoled me, look, names don't mean a thing. Today, let's say it's Sunday, and it will never come again, no matter how many days of the same name will come in the future. Dry your eyes boy, I'll tell you something about my childhood.

That was the thing with heroes.

Naturally, I liked it best when he talked about the times when he was little. How come I didn't exist back then, I wondered. And then, in those years after the war, If I encountered my namesake, this dreamy-eyed pupil of the *Vuk Karadžić* Primary School in the Novi Sad neighbourhood called Salajka, would we start speaking at the same time? Would we recognise each other? Oh, so many difficult questions for my little crammed head!

A body of details worth remembering! The pyjamas sewn from the allies' parachute, polished baked earth marbles, ice-skating on the frozen armlet of the River Danube...but, do I tell my children today about the evenings I spent rocking to my father's stories, I see myself how distant I



am. In fact, we used to live back then in a teacher's flat, with high ceilings, full of echoes and mice, in Krušedol, below the forest. Before that, it was Šatrinci, even more glorious God-forsaken village with the road disappearing every time it would rain (this rain was never lighter than half a tonne, my father's estimate), where one would leave either their trail or their Wellington boot in the deepest of Vojvodina, where one would easily get lost in the high snow, as easily as during the episode of drunkenness or dizziness. And there where you think you've reached the end of the world, there are still more mole's holes. And in one of those, Dobrodol, my father would get to either by his little motorbike in the dry weather or on foot when it was muddy to teach Serbian to little Kolers' children gathered from the lost granges.

When we subsequently returned to Novi Sad in 1975, from the Pannonian backwoods, barely forty kilometres from the Cathedral, as if from the makeshift exile, my dad could speed up all this time over his shoulder, examine the few things we managed to keep.

For example, a poem booklet entitled *Kite Excursion* with a slightly pathetic dedication dried in a characteristic ink penmanship intended for the PE teacher who is now showing it to me, a new student of the Grammar School in Sremski Karlovci. In this 1961, he was transferred to the Teacher Training School in Bijeljina, disappointed with the low mark in *calligraphy* (!), which would be awarded to him by a certain stonecutter with blood-shot eyes.

A desk (which I can imagine), which he would not find when he got back home after finished schooling to present his young wife to his parents, his former class mate, Hajrija. A desk like any other, his mother gave it away for a nickel, allegedly to some poor student from the province (this literary character could be clearly seen back then in black and white photos of socialist life), but along with the desk, a whole bunch of father's *solemn* poems, tucked away in a *secret compartment*, poems of a certain surrealist intonation, as far as I could tell, while he was calling them to



mind, corroborating his story, letting them go as we ended up singing this old one *Spanish ships all over the sea*... when the early dusk fell upon us and there was no electricity. (Ever since that day he wrote for children exclusively, surely encouraged by an allusive critical remark of Sima Cucić that he was bringing *a new breath of life* into the children's poetry of that time).

In this unimaginable tabernacle, there should also be some room for a few motorbikes of different cubic capacity, which he used to ride up until the seventies, when he opted for a remarkable and reliable *Škoda*. He used to ride those two-wheelers everywhere. There he is, in 1963, on the *Sremska Mitrovica – Lačarak* road, already a former journalist of the *Sremske Novine* newspaper, since he gave notice (after they failed to keep their promise and provide him with a flat) to some pig-headed director, who would never forgive him for his proud act but successfully made his life a living hell later on, acting as a little god of the socialist alliance. Look how Srem is disappearing in the fog of a generous exhaust pipe of a small motorbike, puffing under the weight of a suitcase, a pregnant wife and a romantic poet determined to continue with his life in gloomy Bosnia, the village of Šibošnica, seventy kilometres away from the asphalt road, as a voluntary Robinson, as a missionary of his own poetic image. They will have their first child there, Irena, who will die there after four and a half months.

My little sister and I would later on imagine our lives with the older one. Even now I could bring her face to mind.

If we open the chest again, we should follow our nose and feel at least one bottle of medicine. Tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four, inflammation of the heart muscle at thirty, after the age of fifty – genetically driven high blood pressure. Two eye surgeries as well the surgery of the right hand which was curling up like a sleepy flower due to the tendon ossification. Maybe I should also mention the short fuse, the voice in the tavern clamour and tobacco trans, the soul of a child. All in all, healthy, firm, reliable, with no marathon sick leaves, died on the first day of his retirement...



The circle has to be closed, no matter how hard I tried to dodge it. Blašković is in Novi Sad again. It is mid-1970s, he publishes two books of poems; it seems the curse of Ulysses has expired. The most articulate period of our lives was to follow, the times when I was complaining to him about my fears that I would never become a true writer, reach the Rimbaudian *essential moments of desire and satisfaction* since my life would pass in comfortable boredom, stupid happiness. The very first nightmare I had revealed to me the meaning of his silence regarding my juvenile hyperboles.

Never in my life have I seen a dead body,

Never in my life have I died,

I was chanting to myself out of breath, even after the funeral of my father's mother in the dead of winter in February, after which I noticed with wonderment that a nerve under my knee got inflamed. During the eighties, the authorities prohibited burials in small, old graveyards. Therefore, sixteen years later (in the meantime, this prohibition was abolished), my father would lie down next to his father, in the grave my mother Erzsébet reserved for herself long time ago.

Nonetheless, life kept gushing even when the living ground started fallen apart. There were great moments and dreadful procrastination, more stories about *heroes and graves*, as it usually is the case. And everything went well somehow until some ideological ghost eventually *imputed* its own idea of afterlife regime into my father's harmless texts on immutability of the seasons or funny animals and fired him from work. This wall, this tartar of dullness and heartlessness entirely separated my father from this filthy world and he did not know how to move it, even when he got back.

This last unbearable summer, we were looking at our reflection on his computer screen and I suggested that we wrote a book together about the long gone days in Krušedol, which I dream about the most.



Oh, it would be nice, his face would start glowing, who knows what would happen if the two of us started playing on the keyboard with four hands, but no, I have spoken about it, one way or the other, describing the same under a different name, you know already.

Just remember the two of us, city cowboys in that village back then, in a sisterly, Chekhovian trap. We rarely turned the TV on, we barely heard about the breakdowns, 1968 or Vietnam; in our teacher-student flat, you could easily play football, we organised family literary evenings, life in the country was easy, wonderful and unbearable...like any other child, I believed that I was different from the others.

To be a poet in this crazy world, my father would warn me, is as childish as wishing to become an astronaut or a Native American. But my son, there are still both astronauts and Native Americans. This fact has to give you strength and arm you with patience.

Indeed, but not everything was that idyllic as it might seem and which is common for sugar-coated childish images. I used to write in a silly and conventional manner. The school was ruining me.

We used to argue about the literature, he was reminiscing. Afterwards, we did not speak about it for a very long time. You used to be stubborn, sensitive, dissatisfied...anyway, just like me.

I was constantly trying to reach the solid literary form in which I would be free. And when could we compose this book, this little piece of writing, this novel. What do you think?

Of course, my dad would agree. But you will have to do it alone, by yourself. You'll find the way, he would assure me. But alone, by yourself.

And here I am, alone, all by myself.

*Translated from Serbian to English
Gorana Kukobrat*



OTO HORVAT
CORRECTIONS

To Dragan Matić

Your day starts when you turn on your computer and log in, first delete the spam messages, then those inviting you to renew your subscription to the London Review of Books and Zeit, and delete the news about recently published books so as not to distract you, because today is an important day for literature and no other news can be more important, it is the *Weltliterature* Day, you were informed, that is, Susanne from Suhrkamp wrote to you yesterday to suggest today's important day, and indeed after you said YES, here's another message from Susanna already in your inbox, in her yesterday's email she asked you if you'd agree to translate Tommaso Bernandini's new book, which is still in manuscript, and which Suhrkamp is supposed to publish as a world premiere, before it's published in Italian by his permanent and only publisher Einaudi, with whom Bernandini isn't on best terms at the moment, as you'd probably heard from others or perhaps from Tommaso himself, which shouldn't be of particular interest to us, because it's outside the domain of *belles lettres*, and these days, literature is the only thing worth living for, and that sentence of hers, because of its truthfulness, which you also live and share intimately, makes you wonder what kind of woman she is, beautiful not being a category of relevance here, and crucial even less, because, due to such a sentence, that woman is extremely sexy, regardless of her age, yes, her name's undoubtedly reminded you of and evoked your Susanna, whom with you once went to university and shared not only the flat in Laurel Street in Erlangen, for some reason you're hoping that she's not blonde too, as if something important would change if she wasn't, as if it could be some secret sign, you just won't think it through, and instead you try but can't find none of her photos on the internet, which you find impossible, you see that she has no Facebook page either, and this addition-



ally intrigues you, but after ten minutes of unsuccessful search and the need to see her face, you manage to return into yourself, in front of the screen, and read that Susanna asking you for translation is not only Bernandini's proposal and wish, but also the only condition for Suhrkamp to publish it first in the world, and you've been involved in the project at his explicit insistence, everything depends on you, so everyone would be very happy if you accepted their proposal, that is, his proposal, even though they know that you're pressured by time..., you're feeling quite flattered, your ego is floating and gliding through the study, lightly as an orange balloon, because Tommaso Bernandini himself recommended you for another valuable, if not the most valuable translation, because two years ago, he told you that after this novel, which he'd started then and which, he complained, had kept him awake at night because it seemed to him that he couldn't find an opening to it in an appropriate tonality and pace, he didn't plan on writing anymore; letters, emails, a drama perhaps, but not a novel, the novel was dead for him, the dead should be left to the dead, and the novel he was currently writing would be a confirmation of all that, you are remembering those words of his, which you didn't take seriously, like you could never take seriously most of such final decisions of Bernandini's, since only a day later, Tommaso would do or say the exact opposite of what he had said the day before, in his literary works he was a man of his word, a pervert of details, rigorous and disciplined, with flawless memory, logical, suddenly, a suspicion rises in you, nagging at you as an inexplicable itch, that Bernandini, for some reason, needs this game with Suhrkamp and the involvement of Susanna, who is the editor of the Contemporary European Novel book series, instead of asking you himself, instead of calling you and asking you, how many times he has phoned you even for unimportant and trivial and odd things, whether your cat eats only dry food and how much water a day is 'a little or a lot?', instead of writing you and asking you, how many emails he has written to you about his leg veins preventing him from hiking and that, because of that, he was condemned to Rome and its harmful exhaust gas-



ses, and that instead of listening to the sounds of nature in the woods, he was listening to human nature that couldn't be more disharmonious and detrimental to the hearing and mind, instead of offering you a kind proposal to be his translator again, not indirectly and coldly like this, as if you weren't friends, you aren't long-term intimate friends indeed, but seven of his books translated so far should have some bearing on interpersonal relations, although Bernandini isn't an everyday phenomenon, so one must not expect the expected, but rather the unexpected, and besides the translated novels, you should or at least you believed that the days and days spent in Rome walking together around Pincio, the Villa Borghese Park meant something, when you were first on the Villa Goethe Foundation scholarship, followed by the one from Calvino Foundation, while you were working on the translation of his five-volume family-state, second novel *The Noose*, so that your negative answer, so that your NO would hurt less when the question was posed through an intermediary, so you keep on reading Susanna's letter, skimming over it actually, because you're only looking for the translation due date: 1st May, meaning you have a month and a half to translate the book and you feel somewhat anxious because of such a short deadline, as you don't know how many pages the novel has, so you're opening the attachment, first you want to see the title, it's *The Catacombs* and you dislike it even though you don't know why, although its style is no different than the other titles of Bernandini's novels, you're wondering what the novel could be about, you're reading the motto *Diese Scheiss Sterblichkeit*^{*} on the second page locking it immediately into your heart, curious and excited, you're glancing at the page counter and you see that there are 468 pages of closely typed text, text without headings, without dialogues, a simple column containing several hundreds of words, a river of sentences threatening to drown you, actually, the entire text seems to you as a black marble block falling onto your chest, because you know Bernandini is no simple writer, because you know it requires maximum concentration and maximum effort, you

^{*} This shitty mortality (D. Grünbein)



know that you break sweat hundreds of times and suffer from diarrhea until you finish the translations because his vocabulary is extremely rich, although your Italian is close to native, you must consult the multi-volume etymological dictionary, but that's quite alright, you think, you always learn something new when you translate him, and the mental orgasms you reach on account of some of his sentences are worth more than all the effort invested, because his sentences are full of harmony and are so beautiful and ugly at the same time that you think every time if only you could have written them!, that is, as if, in some undefined and elusive past, you have already written them somewhere, the same and identical, yourself, the only problem being that the file is nowhere to be found on your computer, and the green hardcover notebook is either lost in your frequent house moves or your five-year-old son has found it a new place on the bookshelves or among the piles of books on the floor of your workroom and living room and instantaneously forgotten about it, and that notebook is important to you because it contains the first and last sentences of your stories and novels, because by writing like that you give yourself a frame, the first and the last sentences, that's a ring you move around later, skip about in circles, sweat, give and receive uppercuts, in that notebook, there are your failed poetic attempts, there are written, detailed descriptions of the ends of your relationships with the women important to you: Susanna L., A. Samson and Tijana H., because beginning of each relationship is the same and there isn't much to describe, exaltation and inspiration, joy and excitement, but each end is different, each has its different tonality, a hue of blue in the sky, a new point of breaking, the spotlight is trained on the absurdity of choices, the person you thought would be the one passing the last glass of water to you, because that's the point of what we're longing for and what we're preparing for from the beginning of an intimate and amorous relationship, for the moment with the glass of water, in each of the past relationships, your choice turned out to be so wrong that your soul would clearly show three visible long and ugly scars, assuming that it, the soul, as a concept of remember-



ing and experiencing reality in today's digitalised and lobotomised world, can still mean anything, that we're capable of imagining and describing it, and that notebook of yours is gone, you've asked your son in vain, threatened him, promised mountains of chocolate, ransacked the flat more than once, accused and brought to tears your wife god knows how many times accusing her that she had thrown it away, out of jealousy or anger or neglectfulness, made long lists of books and shelves searched through, made an inventory of the impossible indeed, however, the notebook has remained gone, just like you remain gone for a moment, entangled in the past, or in the past-present, or in the past-future, so, as if in a dream, you're turning on the printer, taking the blank paper from the drawer and set it, and then click on the print icon, and you hear the pleasant hum of the paper sliding until the entire manuscript is in front of you, and then you're taking the beautiful pile of paper joyfully into your hands, you think and you know that it's more valuable than you and any money you can get for the translation, Bernandini's sentences are the most delicious food for your thought, because besides an Australian and an Austrian, you read nobody else, you have no need, you occasionally read a Russian classic, on summer holidays, under a sunshade on the sandy beach of Torre del Lago, to feel some other beauty and harmony, let alone Gryphius, some read the Old Testament, some read the New Testament, some read this, some read that, and you read Gryphius in bed, and that has been so ever since you attended *hauptseminar* with the late Professor A.L. (Wintersemester 94/95) about Andreas Gryphius and the baroque concept of beauty and sin, but your mind has wandered away, you've become anxious about the translation, and the only way to cope with it is action, so you open page 67 at random and read *The sticky, dense mist was detaching itself slowly from the immobile dark water surface, like a hymen of the night being torn by the growing light. It, already free of restraint, would pause for a moment between the trees of the forest that began along the very bank of a large armlet of the wide and mighty Pannonian river before disappearing like a breath on the sister's mirror from her light blue bag. It could have been*



nymphs, just awakened from a centuries-old dream among the trees that he had read about a long time ago and that inhabited these forests along the river, in his imagination, but it was not that, he knew that for sure and sometimes he was sorry. Nymphs did not exist, only the morning dawning in a boat with his father in the middle of the river armlet. If Georg Maximilian ever longed for anything in his adult life, far away from the familiar rivers and armlets of his childhood, among grey skyscrapers and smog, it was the time when he read ancient Greek myths, when he knew the order of things and his place under the scattered, white clouds. His father liked the early morning because of the freedom spreading ahead of every being. So, he would take him with stubborn and perverse perseverance onto his fishing expeditions, which they set out on early, while it was still dark. He had decided that his Georg would also grow to like the ritual of getting ready and going fishing so that he could be free to say that he was a true son of his. Whichever way he looked, his father told him, he saw the beginning, something beautiful being formed. He was privileged to listen to the first beats of the day, the first flashes of destiny. His son did not share any enthusiasm for any of the morning lakes or swampy river armlets his father took him fishing to. He found the water smelling like the mud his father had stuck push poles into, like mud on the shore they had to wade through in long black boots to the boat, and the boat stank even more disgustingly, of frogs and fish. Fish he could not eat anyway because it smelled of water and mud. His father enjoyed sitting in a boat, even when it was cold, particularly then, because he could sit in his warm waterproof blue fishing jacket that always smelled of tobacco and fish, no matter what detergent she used, as if by some miracle, Georg's mother never managed to expunge the stench that was so unbearable that it could make you sick when it rained, and every time, he, Georg, longed for his warm bed in the room with windows overlooking the tall plane trees surrounding the little park in the centre of which an abandoned carousel stood rotting. The past is fading slowly and unstoppably, the carousel told him, and longing for it, for rare moments of joy and warmth, became an important part of Georg's life while, at the same time, a scum of hatred towards his father began to cover all



the years spent together, and you're turning your eyes away from the sheet of paper, to the computer screen that has become dark in the meantime and you don't know whether to continue reading the story about yourself, because this is your life being described by Tommaso, he has, indeed, changed some details, but your life is recognisable, clearly and crystally recognisable, those who know your life will recognise that it's you in this Bernandini's passage, that this father's your father, and you feel crushed, horrified, you're suddenly aware of your profusely sweating armpits, itchy feet, and you feel like lighting up a cigarette or pouring petrol over Bernandini, surely, you remember that you told him about some of the moments from your life, like the fishing, carousel, the window in the crowns of plane trees when you were in Rome for the fourth time and you were seeing him while you were translating his fourth, award-winning novel *The Abyss*, and it would be ridiculous to hide the feeling that appeared hand-in-hand with being aghast at the fact that Tommaso's writing about you is flattering, however, a moment later, you're aware of your growing anger, because Mr Bernandini has neither said anything nor asked for a permission to use fragments of your biography for his new novel, and it's only now that you understand why it was important to him that you translate it, you're the only one who can translate the book about your own self best and most accurately and most mercilessly and the most realistically and the most beautifully, although it seems absolutely logical, you cannot believe that Bernandini could have entangled you in such an unfair and perfidious way into his web, practically leaving you with a Faustian option to complete his novel for him, to give it a final touch, and this possibility enrages you because all that Bernandini wrote in the passage you've read is an absolute lie, the truth is completely different, even idyllic, despite the country you grew up in, despite the grey, provincial, central European town where you learnt your first lessons, because, as a small child, you begged your father to take you fishing with him, telling him that you'd behave, that you'd be as quiet as a mouse, that you wouldn't ask to play in the boat, because these were the only moments you could



spend together, your father played the piano in hotels and well-known restaurants of the capital that was half a day drive away from the town you lived in and when he was home, he slept and you were allowed neither to play nor to listen to his records, you were part of the silence in the dark keyhole, and you surely hated waking up early, but it was also part of your decision, to suffer at the beginning for a greater pleasure later, something like choosing between crust and crumb, your father used to go fishing directly from work, he said it refreshed him more than sleeping, and that he needed silence after hours and hours of music, and sitting in the boat in the middle of water was therapeutic, upon arriving home from fishing your father would go straight to the bedroom and put down the shades and unnecessarily drew the curtains and switched off the phone and put in earplugs not to hear the unsavoury, funeral-like music from the carousel, as he used to say, because no matter how old the carousel was and regardless of the fact that it had survived several changes of the state systems and world wars, it still played the same music from a bygone era, or it seemed that way to you, because someone said, you can't remember who, that it was the music from a bygone era, and the tireless manic white and black horses galloping in an endless circle to the joy of children, the only thing that Bernandini didn't change, alter and contaminate in the story of that childhood was your bedroom window in front of which a plane tree was growing that was planted during the era of the Dual Monarchy and whose leaves used to greet you cheerfully for the most part of the year, while the shade of its branches on the wall of the room staged various plays for you almost every day, you battled pirates and were entangled in an impenetrable forest, but you found a golden sword that could cut through everything as if made of butter and you were on the edge of a precipice running from aliens and in the last moment found a secret weapon in the form of an old yellow lamp on the cupboard next to your bed, in such a room no hatred against anyone could germinate, and you lost your father relatively early and you were left with a hopeless and fathomless longing for him, so in all the books that you've translated, from all eight languages that you



speak as a native, there is the father theme, these books, however, should not include the novels of Tommas Bernandini, who never wrote anything about his mother, his father, or his twin sisters, but would talk only about them during your meetings and walks, when you needed to ask him about a sentence, about a word, about a depiction that was not absolutely clear to you, he would wave his hand and tell you that it didn't matter, that it was much more important to listen to him because you could always return to the book and text, and he was right about that, because eventually, you'd easily resolve all the doubts, after losing sleep over every problem long enough that it didn't seem like a problem to you anymore, how long you will have to lose sleep over this text, you're thinking about giving up after all, you feel immense repulsion and disgust at the thought of translating the passage you've just read, but you want to see more before you decide, before you sit down and open a new file named *The Catacombs*, so you turn to page 172 and read: *Georg's father arrived home late as usual. Both his son and Georg's mother were used to hearing him and waking up, mother would then get up from bed, Georg would hear clearly, to prepare something for his father to eat or just keep him company, while Georg waited impatiently for his father to get into the room to see him and pat him on the head upon finding him awake saying Sleep now, I'm back, they would first hear the lift stopping on their floor, then the key in the lock, and the father would be there, sometimes, however, the way he unlocked the door, the unsuccessful attempts to push the key into the lock, his swearing that alternated between two languages, the humming of a hit that no one remembered anymore, once he finally entered the flat, caused them to fear that Georg's father was drunk and that there was a long and hard night ahead of them. Years later, even as an adult, Georg could remember with great clarity, with horror and physical nausea, those rare, yet still horrible, long, and consequently deeply ingrained nights, filled with his mother's pleas, his father's shouting and curses, pounding of dishes in the kitchen, the sounds of blunt blows of the hand to the body, moans. Georg had an urge to instantly hide in the dark bathroom when, for some inexplicable reason, he remembered those nights,*



you leave the manuscript on the table and leave for the kitchen, take a bottle of Carmignano wine and pour yourself a glass, but then you realise that you need something stronger than wine and pour cheap Tullamore into another glass and drink it in one gulp, you feel the pleasant embers sliding down your body, you don't know what to think, and you're thinking about thousands of things at the same time, like on a merry-go-round, Bernandini's gone too far, he's written such an incredible load of shit, written so many lies about you, as if you were his enemy, he planted his hard and traumatic childhood on you, as if childhood is not problematic and traumatic enough as it is, even when one grows up with doting parents like you did, whose unsparing love also left wounds, but all of them made with diamonds so they're easier to bear and get over and forget, when one grows up with parental love beyond any reproach, which was omnipresent and primordial, which was the source and origin of joy and security, and when you find yourself in such a family idyll, in the first and only paradise from which growing up removed you step by step, which gradually became less and less yours, it's an indescribable trauma, and it's part of your life, unlike what you've just read and what Tommaso planted on you like a bad egg, and how come he didn't describe his life in his last novel, why he has no courage to face his own self in the text, to settle accounts as he does with everything and everyone, both with the known and with the unknown, both with the ugly and with the even uglier, both with the unspeakable and with the unspoken of, it was your life that he had to parody, twist, ridicule and falsely portray, because your father didn't drink, unlike you, who can drink red wine all night and all day, mixing it with beer and whiskey, with almost no consequences, if you exclude from the 'no consequences' your readiness to laugh and make jokes that no one understands except your uncle's son from Finland, but that's a long and different story, you don't remember a single sentence expressing displeasure of one of your parents at the words or actions of the other, you don't remember any quarrels, raised voices, and there was no physical altercations, you remember, only on the television screen in your parents' bed-



room, at night, in some Swedish movies you secretly watched squatting in a dark hallway, you're sitting and looking down, in your hands you're holding 468 sheets of paper, it's noon, it's quiet, your wife's at work, the child at kindergarten, you clearly cannot turn back time and say nothing to Bernandini about yourself, you cannot correct his fucked-up life, because even a fucked-up life requires a choice, and you've chosen different memories, a happy childhood, easy swimming through the water full of snakes and water moss, and you'll hand in the finished translation in a month and a half, even if you had to write yourself everything anew, make loads of corrections, you owe it to your parents, to your son, purely for reasons of literature and veracity, and you start to leaf through the new novel by Tommaso Bernandini as if in a trance, and you leaf through it again and again, very quickly, like in a whirlwind, like in an eye of a tornado, until the leaves spill out of your hands, and then you kneel to collect them and tell yourself that it's just a mirror that got hit at an awkward moment by sun's rays that blinded you, so perhaps the only salvation is in a new perspective, maybe you just need to unravel in a new and innocent way the yarn of text that you've agreed to translate, and you take the first page of the text and read Bernandini's opening sentence of the novel *Your day starts when you turn on your computer and log in.*

*Translated from Serbian to English
Lidija Kapičić*



ZDENKA VALENT-BELIĆ

A GREASY ORANGE STAIN

The husband's right hand rested on her supple thighs like on a freshly butchered pork shank while he was, for the umpteenth time, watching a rerun of *Only Fools and Horses*. She sat there silently, it wasn't as bad as things could get. In fact – it was downright intimate. Sometimes he would even pat her on the back, like she was a cow grazing in a field. On a good day, if he was horny and in the mood for conjugal relations, he would smack her on the side of her hips like a pure-bred mare, and that would mean that he still loved her, and since their marital life progressed in regular oscillations, she didn't really have much to complain about.

She put extra slimy and soggy chicken cutlets into the hot oil, turning them white instantly. With every cutlet it was like she lowered a piece of her own flesh straight into hell, like she was simultaneously punishing herself and the world embodied in the formless chicken cutlets. The heavy stench of fried food stuck to her stomach instantly, and she almost threw up in the pan. She swallowed the bitterness and the rootless despair that had been sitting in her for weeks.

Just for a second, he put his right hand around her waist, lightly and tentatively – not to spook her – because it was the first time he did it. She was surprised when, right around the corner of a dark but heavily trafficked alley, she felt the bristle of his moustache, and a gentle kiss had almost landed on her long-prepared lips. Expected, but still sudden.

She felt that hand even now, while frying the slimy cutlets that released a suffocating stench, not knowing what embarrassed her more – the miasma of half-cooked meat in a small apartment, or her imaginary affair. The sharp smell of onions suddenly penetrated her sinuses and several large tears fell on the worn cutting board. It's just one onion, some fresh air will make everything better. She could then chop it up and not cry. She



could, definitely she could, she just has to focus on the stale smell of fried potatoes, if she concentrated on the thinly sliced French fries that are this close to getting burnt, so why didn't she?! It's just a biggish onion, and fresh air would help, and she has, basically, everything one could possible want. Anything, except bridge, like in that archaic theatre piece, though we will, because of how archaic it is, ignore it.

With a body like that, she could probably get somebody, who knows. That went through her head while cleaning the filthy bathroom. Who knows, she mumbled to herself while scrubbing the dirty toilet, who knows, she sighed and threw the laundry into the washing machine.

They were sitting on a cold bench, everything was pouring around them – the rain, time, the evening, and the silent steps of curious passers-by. Like an adder under a blanket, her distrust was pouring out as well, her eyes darting at her watch, him impatiently shifting his weight from one frozen buttock to the other, waiting for permission to leave for a warmer and more pleasant place. “This thing between us”, he spoke with the voice of an old sage, turning her attention for the hundredth time, towards his deep well of life experience, mixing up composure and disinterest, “we can have all kinds of trysts, but they can’t last. I could, for example, get hit by a bus tomorrow. That selfsame bus can actually hit me tomorrow, so how could I possibly swear myself to you for all eternity? His voice sounded like spit hitting the sidewalk. It comes with age, this type of absence.”

If she had any luck the rain would have started falling much harder, sobered her up, smacked some sense into her, she wished that at that moment she was serving a piece of bland, burnt sausage, burst open, eviscerated, with its contents pouring out into the orange grease, like a stamp pressed into the plate. A caligram of despair. She had the same greasy stain on her soul left by that rancid scrap of affection, prepared just for her a long time ago, but maybe all that was left was a little bit of rancid affection, just a little from someone else's plate, not grey, but orange and greasy.



“Yaaaay, po-ta-tooos!!”, the joy in their generally joyful eyes was honest, in anticipation of the lovely flavours. “Mom, are you cryin’? Thank you for not crying again.”

(We have to stop here. Life outside of literature is already filled with mundane emotions and mundane aromas and flavours, so do they really have a place in books? Why burden the readers with the mediocrity they are closely familiar with in their everyday lives, making an exception, of course, for the saucy parallels with the author’s own life, which her acquaintances must be analysing thoroughly right at this minute! Needless too. You’re not gonna find anything. These lives, with their greasy orange stains, they’re filled with so much stale air that there is no room for romance. Such phenomena find room in the books such lives stuff themselves on Sundays or during short and boring family vacations, and so that’s the only place where they should be indulged in. Soap-opera romances can have a curative effect as well, an effective balm to tide you over during the work week. Life makes no room for such things.

It’s better that the sow doesn’t know when she’s gonna get turned into ham. Lucky for her, she’s dazed by the stench of her own pigsty – manure in one corner, slop in the other. Only the squealing of her piglets, at least for a moment, can shock her out of her daze, but if a conscientious pig monger takes good care of them and feeds them regularly, the sow can avoid even that little bit of discomfort. The pig carcass can at least sway in the fresh air on its hook for a bit before it too becomes manure, and besides, it has more brains than a carrot does, or some other highly esteemed vegetable, like a head of cabbage. At least half a brain – pork carcasses are sold in halves.)

She was surprised by the softness of his lips, considering his rough, manly exterior, and not so tender age. Under smooth palms there was bone mass, soft and spongy. So was his character.



One more time – cut! Stories about the grey mundaneness of modern women’s lives are nothing new in these parts. In 2002, a collection of modern short stories written by Russian female writers on this topic had been published by a, at the time, small but gumptious publisher from Novi Sad, spurred on by the collection’s translator herself (not *himself*, mind you), who contacted the publisher thanks to a good-natured librarian, the first to witness these crimes-against-translation, committed by the slightly befuddled Milena Tepavčević – the aforementioned Russian language translator. That same year, at a book signing event at the Gallery of Matica Sprska, Milena spoke about her translation woes, while a famous editor of that edition spoke about God-knows-what, which definitely didn’t have anything to do with female loneliness, because that is something, despite his great efforts to the contrary, he could know nothing about. Then a suitable journalist, who wrote this text as well, wrote: “In *Crumbs of Happiness* (the title of the collection) the cracks between the bricks of walled-up kitchen windows represent a metaphor for the tragedies and the yearnings of women who have reconciled themselves with traditional roles inside a family and a marriage, who day after day listlessly mull their bland fate.”

Turning the attention of the readers towards literary works of this nature isn’t as inappropriate as it may seem at first glance, despite them not expecting that kind of information in a place like this, but think of it like adds in the middle of a movie, you get used to them, or you take a bathroom break. On my part, I have to fortify myself against any potential allegations of using autobiographical elements. The topic at hand isn’t anything new in our neck of the woods (And who’s happy about that?), and so I can, with a clean conscience, continue with my story, unburdened by this obligation.

“Mom, don’t sit like that, you look like a real sadsack”, an honest and good-natured critique by a little girl who at only eight years of age makes mature observations, or maybe its just inherited empathy. The downpour



smacked the ground, spraying underneath the wheels of cars trapped in a traffic jam on a boulevard nearby, which went on completely unnoticed in the warm household on the second floor. It was like a space ship, hermetically sealed so that not one whiff of fresh air could penetrate its hull.

Why does such a pretty and attractive woman hurt the people around her by rejecting their affections? My dear, please don't be so cold, all I need is just a little love. A little love – at least half the love from a pig half-carcass or all of it from half of a half-carcass (because the half-carcass will be shared with another man fifty-fifty, never a hundred percent). Did they ever think about how much love a half-carcass needs?

“Oh for cryin’ out ...”, the husband cursed angrily. “I’ve had it up to here with the humidity today, getting your watery soup all over me is the last thing I need”, he shouted over the table, while the greasy chicken soup flowed down his pants. He didn’t stop shaking it off even while slurping loudly, with the younger child at the top of her lungs going: “I’m poop-ing!”, immediately followed by: “Oh for fucks sake, take that shit already!”, the child replying: “I’m finished!”, even though, to inform the uninitiated reader, this is a two-year old girl we’re talking about.

Its common knowledge that you have to go through a specific hell of reality in order to reach the heaven of insight, whereby that heaven never looks all that heavenly. No insight soothes the soul.

A question – how real is the desolation a person feels, pacing back and forth through life like they would through the hallways of an abandoned house. In disbelief he comes back several times, certain that a house without no signs of life couldn’t exist. How could it? Somebody did build that house after all, somebody tried to decorate it in line with their own being, with, or without, an eye for space and aesthetics. Somebody did wear out the dust-covered floor, so how is it possible that the house is completely empty, when there is so much noise here? You can hear shouts joyous and



angry, directed within the house or somewhere far away, while a wasteland ravages the grey twilight of her life.

The last call: a dry voice informed her that HE is out of town, like he's talking about some third person, ignoring the requirements of grammatical correctness. If her heart wasn't pounding, she would hear a contempt other than her own, that resignedly gave up: "Oh, well, its fine!", she would hear that actually nothing is fine, and that this is a sign that she opened the doors to heaven. Or insight.

*Translated from Serbian to English
Aleksandar Hrubenja*



MARIO LIGUORI

AUTUMN IN A LOW TOWN

*[...] we were still holding hands, and when the crowd dispersed,
we strolled for several hours across Prague in bloom.*

Milan Kundera

I

That day, I was waiting for her in my favourite pub – the Parliament. As soon as he spotted me, the waiter brought over a pitcher of dark beer, as at that time I was one of those childish men who, after not getting their usual drink in their pub, refuse to drink anything else. Lunch time has passed, the steam of roast ducks and red cabbage from Czech taverns was dispersing, and the sweet scent of beer and tobacco smoke was mingling in the air. I knew I would smell it all once again in the evening, in our room, before going to sleep. In a fresh and clean room, something will remind me of the pub atmosphere long after my shower, until tiredness overwhelms me.

I waited for her anxiously. A beautiful woman gives a young man a lot of worries, as she causes all his insecurities and delusions to emerge. As I waited, I bit my nails, jealousy is the fear of losing love; so I confessed to myself all the things I would never dare even mention to her. How many times have we quarrelled without knowing why, while that invisible, perfidious reason was again my jealousy! Ah, if I could have explained it all to her slowly! My grandfather was right: you can only explain everything to a woman up to the age of twenty.

I liked sitting in the Parliament, it was a special pub. It is true that it was frequented by idlers and tourists from all over the world, but that did not bother the Czech old guard to relax and argue as if they were sitting at home. On my left side, across from the bar, a company of Russians was



roaring that day, with the women being more elegant, but also noisier than men. On the right, by the window, two Yugoslavs, unaware that I had understood them, were talking about an interesting topic. I attributed that to the fact that we were sitting near the Faculty of Philosophy, where both professors and students live the illusion they are propagating who knows what truths and wisdoms. A young man with a Bosnian accent, simply dressed, but with a green scarf resembling an Asian flag, was talking to a charming Belgrade woman, immaculately dressed:

– That city, like any visual love, I cannot forget. Behold, we are the slaves of every love seen and the masters of all the loves ended...

– In what sense?

– It just looks funny, but it's not. For instance, in my life I have always loved to listen and smell love.

– And what does your synaesthesia have to do with Belgrade? I just said you don't know Belgrade!

– I was there too, I climbed in it. In Belgrade you climb, while in my Sarajevo you go down, because everything happens there at the bazaar, and the bazaar is down. Belgrade is interesting up there, you have nothing to wait for at the station, and climbing is waiting for you. You have to go up in Belgrade, it's a city from above.

– What do you mean?

– Simple. If you've been to Sarajevo, people there go down to somewhere, and in Belgrade they climb up to somewhere.

– But it probably depends on personal perception...

– Everything is personal in this world. Thought is subjective in its arrangement. No one but God has the gift of objectivity. Right?



– That sounds a little confusing to me. If you climb up, you will have to go down...

– Yes, but what happens as you climb? In Sarajevo you meet a descending world. Sarajevo is a city from below.

– And that is your impression.

– The people come down beautiful, combed, safe, fragrant. And when they climb up, later, they will be tired, full, and their soul will be as empty as their pockets. Not so in Belgrade. There you climb up eagerly and you come down sleepy.

– I do not agree with that philosophy, I would rather replace the notions of descending and climbing.

– You'll come to Sarajevo and you'll see.

The girl looked around for the first time, as if confused, so she just added – all right! She caught my interested eyes, but it seemed to me that in them she did not recognize the look of her fellow countryman. At that moment, I thought that Prague had made me different, but the young Bosnian broke the chain of my thoughts. He really wanted to talk:

– You know, every city has its own charm... Have you been to Paris?

– No.

– Paris is too big for a man to deal with height. There is no verticality in it even when you climb Montmartre. There is only width there. There is no up-down, only right-left and forward-backward.

– And you move horizontally...

– Paris is a female city.

– How so? Ridiculous!

– Yes, it resembles a large woman expecting a child.



– Hahaha! You’re crazy! And Rome? You said you stayed there too.

– Rome takes and does not give. A selfish city.

– Selfish?

– Yes! Rome is too big for a man to mean anything in it. Isn’t a man more important, say, in Belgrade than in Rome?

– I do not agree that a man is more important in Belgrade than in Rome. It depends on the person. But... didn’t you say we should leave at half past three?

– Yes, yes!

I was left alone with a lukewarm beer, wondering where She was, why she was late. The lecture was supposed to end at three, and the Academy was not far away. What if I went out for some fresh air? I would come across slow tourists in small groups, pensioners with flags of Germany or France, followed by determined Prague residents, disgusted by the crowds (at that time, Prague residents seemed determined to me only when they were walking). After all, it was already becoming cold outside, those days, autumn was erasing the last traces of summer, and I already felt that I was overwhelmed by a mild flu virus, I had a sneeze and muscle aches.

She arrived at quarter to four, not knowing that the happiness caused by her arrival and the pub conversation about the cities were spreading in me like voices in harmony. She said she was hungry. With the accent that was no different from Prague’s, she ordered food for me as well. Even though for me it was late to have lunch, the desire to keep her company prevailed. In those days I spoke less than usual, but I did not deviate from the quotes I would use to enrich my sentences. “You like speaking in other people’s words,” she remarked. That would offend me. I had my views, I thought with my own head, and she knew that well. I would answer “Yes,” as if nothing had happened, and lowered my head. I felt the same thought



go through her head that day, but I couldn't read it in her eyes, as she was staring at her plate, until she suddenly broke the silence:

– It's been a year since you moved. How do you like Prague?

– A fantastic and a cold city.

– You say cold? Prague is not one of those cities where you climb a hill, look at the rooftops and comment on how nice the weather is. Here the weather does not matter at all. Sun and rain, wind and snow can do it no harm. In cities like this one, the weather is forgotten, neglected. What matters is what you see under the sky. In this sense, Prague is, like Sarajevo, a low city.

– Is it? And where did you get the idea that it is a virtue to be low?

– For cities it is.

– And which would be the high cities?

– Let me think, Amsterdam, for example.

– Interesting. Are you saying that cities in a gorge are low because they can be seen from a height, and cities in the plains are high because you have nowhere to see them from other than below?

She was silent. Why did she start talking about cities like those two? Did I invent that or this conversation? Dreamed it? In a Prague pub, my Novi Sad became a high city, but soon after that I remembered that it could be seen from the Petrovaradin fortress. I didn't hear her anymore after that. Her lips continued to move, her teeth gleamed, her face still seemed soothing, but I stopped following. In order to understand the secrets of our reality, I had to switch myself off – sometimes we take a break from someone to love them more. I looked at her eyebrows, which had always attracted me, but in my mind I moved to the Fortress where I tormented myself: I couldn't remember whether there were any trees along the Danube quay! How could it be that a Novi Sad resident is not sure of



such an important detail? In my mind I was looking for canopies not knowing if there really were any. The sun was shining on the Danube, and in front of the trees, in the dust of a spring day, black dots were moving – people from a distance look like ants.

As always when she noticed that I was absent, she got angry:

– Did you wander off again? You are unbelievable!

– No, I thought...

– What?

– What you say about cities is not so bad.

– Come on, man, why don't you let it go?

– No, seriously! I just thought about Sarajevo...

– Let it go. It is not a city, but a butcher shop. Everyone grinds me into minced meat whenever they see me. From coffee to coffee, they never cease! I couldn't live there anymore, I swear!

We went outside. I recognized the freshness of the old Novi Sad days in the air. The familiar autumn peace formed in my soul. I liked Prague afternoon walks with her the most. At that time, they all looked like ghosts and silhouettes to me, people made of cardboard, and she was the only one made of flesh and blood. As I held her hand, it seemed as if there was no way I could ever die. Who knows why, while we were sitting, we felt like talking, and when we were walking, we did not feel this urge. It was our strange way of communication, made up of long silences and sudden quarrels. By the way, she loved talking about her city. She would tell me anecdotes, explain artistic styles. After a year by her side, I learned a lot about Prague, which then became much more than Kafka's literary city.

Something terrible happened to me that autumn in Prague: I began to fear old age. I would notice the first grey hairs in the bathroom, the first



unexpected fatigue in the body. The beginning of old age could be seen in the growing silences. I had illusions that I would master Czech, that I would get a job in Prague, that I would become her husband. Why did fate want me to fall in love with Prague? Hadn't Bora from Novi Sad told me that while he was leaving Prague by train during the Cold War, he heard the sound of barbed wire scratching the train wagons? Is there a place for romance in the city of Dubček and Palach?

II

At seven this morning, when I woke up, it took me a while to figure out where I was. Dreams are generally unrealistic, but tonight I dreamed the truth. A dream of the past frightened me in the comfort of my own apartment. I have definitely grown old, the proof is that even my dreams don't stray from reality. How could this have happened? When I was young, my dreams were unforgettable. I would always wake up in some story. Planes were flying, I was swimming in the sea, naked beauties would appear in front of me. Sometimes in my dreams I watched ships from the bridge. I was kissing a woman who I find terribly attractive, but I could never see her face. I Rode a bicycle in nature. The dreams from my youth did not care about reality.

I put the kettle on and repeated to myself that my name is Milovan, that I am an old man, an art historian and a writer from Novi Sad. What else? Where are my wife and children? As a child, I heard somewhere in the north of Bačka: "If you have children, you live like a dog, if you don't have children, you die like a dog." Will I die like a dog? I saw in the mirror that everything was leading to my death. Old age, its strong jaws, time flowing faster and faster...

At nine, I managed to get the phone number of the City Parks company. A female voice answered:

– Hello?



– Good afternoon, madam, may I ask something about the city?

– Yes, of course.

– The question is a little unusual, but I hope you will be able to answer me.

– What is it, sir?

– I am interested in whether there are any trees on the Danube quay?

– What do you mean?

– Sorry, I know it sounds like a joke, but... Are there any trees on the Danube quay?

– Just a moment, please.

A woman was heard talking to someone. She whispered: “Are there any trees on the Danube quay?”, and a male voice replied that there are some between the quay and the river bank.

– Sir, there are trees, but not on the quay itself. There are some between the quay and the river. And where do you live?

– Here, in Novi Sad.

– So go there and make sure yourself! It’s still warm these days, autumn is late.

– Thank you, madam, I apologise.

– You are welcome, sir.

– Good day.

– Good day.

I got dressed and went for a walk. It was sunny in the morning, the leaves were green. Only in some spots, at the top of the canopy, yellow leaves could be seen. I passed through the Danube Park to reach the foot of the bridge and then I continued onto the quay: the treetops were a little further away, on the riverbank. Only then did I realize: twenty years ear-



lier, on that autumn day in the Parliament – the Prague pub, the magic of her eyebrows led me to the essence of life, even Novi Sad, which, owing to her eyebrows, has treetops along the quay. Would I know how to express all of that, to seek salvation in literature? No way. Writing is the moment when I lose the best words and keep the worst. On the Danube quay, I became aware of my helplessness: how to write about that Prague day, to describe Russian society and the couple by the window, to conjure up her eyes poured out of green wine and the city of Prague itself, where the Sun steals all human hopes in the morning, and hides them in the afternoon behind the castle, like a thief?

I returned. In the apartment, in the late autumn evening, her eyebrows appeared, without me wanting that to happen. In the evening, I watched the news, and then an American crime film. I went to the window to draw the curtains and noticed the police stopping a white vehicle. In complete darkness, I remembered talking about cities and afternoon Prague walks. What is the point of everything I dreamed and experienced? I was an old man overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of life. I still liked taking showers and drinking chamomile. I was attracted to the same things, pipes, wooden clogs, the winter atmosphere. I would sometimes wonder if Novi Sad is a high city. It turns out that the city is in the plains is *low* because of the Fortress.

And her? I did not want her to be any different in my memory. She probably lived in the same way in Prague: she parked on Dejvicka street, loved the scenery and walks, got on the tram, dropper in her favourite pub – the Parliament.

By all accounts, I was naive in my youth. I thought I would forget everything. Both her and Prague.

Translated from Serbian to English
Igor Aćimović



BOJAN SAMSON

ETERNAL GLORY

I would like to tell you a few words about one of the greatest covers in the history of rock music. It is the song “Gloria” originally performed by the Northern Irish band “Them”, led by the phenomenal Van Morrison, and which was later covered by many prominent artists such as Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, U2, Simple Minds, and many others – but no one played as innovatively and originally as Patti Smith in 1975 on her debut album “Horses”. So, we are talking about that song here. About the song “Gloria” by Patti Smith. The New York artist only kept the chords (E, D, A) from the original version, as well as the famous, spelled refrain (GLORIA), significantly changing the text, structure, dynamics and atmosphere of the song, and thus creating a completely new composition which may have achieved the seemingly impossible – it surpassed the excellent, anthological original. In the very first verse, “Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine”, Smith ironized the sacral overtone of the title “Gloria” (in the Catholic Church it refers to the angelic hymn: “Gloria in excelsis Deo” or “Glory be to God on high”), as well as Van Morrison’s invocation of the deity (“She make me feel so good, Lord”) and thus created a blasphemous*, but also a very subtle, and yet at the same time a passionate love anthem. What is key about Smith’s version that gives her such extraordinary strength and appeal? It seems to me that this is a figure of gradation extending through almost the entire song: when we used to explain gradation to students in stylistics classes, we could have played “Gloria” by Patti Smith. There is something erotic in the nature of gradation which associates us with the sexual act: the gradual intensification of feelings which aspire to their peak, “small death”, or “memory of paradise”. So it is in Patti Smith’s song: it all starts with a lazy, somewhat indifferent reduction of the famous three chords (E, D, A), and the deep, sensual voice of a New York singer who at certain moments fakes pampering and boredom, but actually hides restrained passion and rich sensitivity. Patti



Smith has never been a singer with exceptional vocal abilities, but she was able to interpret the lyrics in such a way to easily introduce you to the emotional world of the song and make you trust her without reservation. My friend, Vlada Nedeljković, a great musician overall, once said that the quality of a band is measured by their ability to change tempo during a song. Taking this into account, we can say that Smith had a great band with her: the accompanying musicians masterfully, almost imperceptibly, increase the tempo, and with them, the singer slightly increases the emotional charge in her expression. The hero, or heroine of this song (it could be said that it is an androgynous being), gets bored at a party until noticing a “sweet young creature” through the window and then his / her voice undergoes a transformation, begins to tremble slightly, we feel the excitement of the whole of his / her being, and then the magic begins. “She looks so good,” the voice tells us, and we just have to trust it, and now it’s not that hard to imagine a girl enchanted, mesmerized by the hero’s / heroine’s silly, obsessive feeling of walking down the street, and coming, coming to the front door of his / her apartment, she climbs the stairs, dances in his / her hallway in a red dress, and he / she hears a knock on the door, and when she looks at the clock on the big tower she says, “Oh my God, it’s midnight!”, and now the feelings are already dangerously swelling, and she enters through the door and sits on the couch, and whispers to him / her, so sweet and wonderful, and he / she has to tell the world, has to tell him / her that he made her his / her own, and then asks her to say her name, and her name is, her name is ... Well, you know, why should I repeat it to you? Anyway, the gradation is at its peak here. At the moment when Smith is starting to spell every letter of the name, the band is already dangerously laying down the beat, all that remains is to sing her whole name: G-L-O-R-I-A, GLORIA ... And so again and again. The whole song has received an oneiric atmosphere a long while ago, it’s all one big, beautiful dream: the hero / heroine is on a stadium filled with twenty thousand girls, but he / she, to be honest, does not see or hear them, but just raises his / her eyes to the big tower and looks at the clock and hears those bells



ringing in his / her heart... Ding dong ding dong ding dong ... Time begins from the moment that the girl in the red dress entered his / her room, when she whispered and they dived in... Into the moment or into eternity, who knows ... And he / she has to tell the world that he / she made her his / her own. The glory is his / hers ... And again the leitmotif of the song is repeated, “Jesus died for someone’s sins, but not for mine”, the band slows down, and it seems to us that Patti is exhaling, she is running out of energy, she can’t sing anymore, she utters the last words of the light motif quietly, gently, and yet so sensually and seductively, and the song starts again, accelerates, resurrection is on the horizon, the refrain is back again: G-L-O-R-I-A, GLORIA. Eternal glory. Here it is, standing in front of us, like in a mirror, the biggest and most beautiful of them all.

Patti Smith. Gloria: Gloria. Patti Smith

Easter Eve, April 20, 2014

The midnight window

*And I look up into the big tower clock
And say, “Oh my God here’s midnight!”*

Patti Smith

He casually puts tobacco in a piece of paper, deftly rolls a cigarette, slowly, with gusto, as if he will live for two hundred years, and then he looks at me with that blurry look that hides all those untapped potentials, and, slurring his words, he asks me: “Legend... you probably never thought about this ... it’s an interesting thing ... Do you know ... why the clerk windows from the communist period ... have those ... those low set openings ...” Alcohol and the sleepless years on the road ate him, but he is not giving up, there is still lucidity in him that sometimes shines unexpectedly. I coming from the music festival in our city, with empty pockets, but happy, without a clue ??what might happen tomorrow, him returning



from another driver's route, we are standing in front of a store on one July morning, drinking and hanging out. "Why do communist-era clerk windows have those low openings?" I repeated his question bluntly, fell silent for a few seconds, and then burst into loud laughter. He also laughed, and said in a good mood: "Well done, man ... I like the way you think ... you have a dirty imagination ... But I didn't mean that ... I wanted to say ... how the openings on the clerk windows are set low ... so that the citizens have to bend their backs ... when they come to ask for something from the authorities ... so that they are constantly being humiliated ... you understand ..."

Well, legend, I actually wanted to tell you about the alternative function of the communist clerk window that came to my mind that July morning. Namely, I have a friend whom I have been socializing with lately, he is from the south, he got into some trouble with the law there, so he took refuge for a while until the heat passed. He rented an apartment near me, where he mostly wastes time watching TV and surfing the Internet. He recently registered on a dating site, like those for seeking a partner, and in fact it comes down to instant sex connections. There he met a chick named Slavica, who wrote on her profile that "I am very perverse and I love my men like that." And she's sexy as hell! He showed me her profile photos. You know what an ass she's got, oh boy! They start an internet chat and agree to meet one night in the industrial zone. She will come in a white Yugo, he will approach the car, she will open the window, but only halfway, because she is very distrustful and timid, he will push it through the half-open window, she will blow him, and that's it ... You get it, legend? ... The commis knew what they were doing when they built their clerk windows, listen to what I'm telling you. But this is another time, my man: capitalism, but the wild kind, for most there is no work, people have cracked, they do nothing, they sleep during the day and live at night, like vampires, they suck each other's blood ... That's why the clerk windows changed their function a bit as well as their working hours – now you have midnight clerk windows. And the clerks are way better than be-



fore. Younger, prettier, kinder, more accommodating ... And what can I tell you, dude, they fulfil their agreement according to the set plan and program, just like that ... all the way. She handled him twice, the first time it didn't take him long, it seems the young lady is trying really hard, and the dude was probably all worked up, nervous, excited, as it goes ... She swallowed his semen, really politely, and immediately powered on, without a break, working hard, like she's on a youth work action ... Do you want another rakia? ... The second time it lasted longer, but that feeling was gone, he didn't get hard all the way, he couldn't finish, but well, he's not Rocco Siffredi after all ... And the chick was quite happy, she likes giving blowjobs ... That's how it goes. Essentially, they agreed to see each other again. He wants the full treatment, for her to come to him at his crib, so that they can make love completely, within four walls, without any fuss and pressure. Well, that's not going to happen, dude, where did you get the idea that your clerks will just come to your doorstep, that's not the reason they were created for. You, legend, find her another customer for the midnight window, bring a friend with you, and if everything goes as God commands it, then she will come to your crib and give herself to you completely ... Crazy woman, that's how it is ... And so my pal invited me to help him, and get a free treat along the way. You can see the chick likes to manipulate, it is clear, she is using us, she likes running the show, but I would also say that she is fucked up, who knows what kind of story is going on in her head. And again, I know something, she's a really beautiful woman, and she's beautiful in that goddamn way, she has that powerful, plump mouth ... A cocksucker. Come on, I say to kill this monotony, few nice things have happened to me lately. I'm seeing a married woman, once in every hundred years, because she lives out of town, and of course there are her husband, children, household chores, and then when she does come to me, I have to listen to her lamentations first Annoying as hell. In fact, I need something like this, concrete and effective, without much talking. You come in, you come out, and you're done! And so I agree to keep my friend company in the line for the midnight window.



That evening finally arrived. The night of judgement. My pal and I start going to the industrial zone, both in tracksuits, for easier manoeuvring. Along the way, we talk about everything and anything, but mostly about Slavica, we comment her photos, tell jokes, drool, and so on. We are trying to figure out what her story is. Was she neglected as a child? Or abused? She ran into some fool who broke her heart? ... Or is she just too spoiled? ... What would her parents say if they found out about her nocturnal adventures? Maybe they would support her, huh? Well, my friend, you can see all kinds of things today. I know a great looking chick who participated in a city beauty contest, her dad pimped her to the members of the jury, drove to the arranged locations to do "the job", and then returned her home ... Is Slavica's dad a pervert, a sick guy? Or is he loaded and gave her everything in her life except love and attention? Maybe some of these big shots who robbed us during communism, took our money and ran, and now they are back harassing us in the form of respectable capitalists ... And perhaps she works for some rotten capitalist, she is his secretary, or something like that, working her ass off, sucking up to the boss, who knows what she has to do to keep her job or possibly get a promotion, and that is why he likes to control the situation from the side by working a night shift at the clerk window. How much does one have to be fucked up for something like this? To be humiliated in one way or another? Fuck, it's unlikely my pal and I will find out, because Slavica, as things stand, has no intention of confessing, she probably leaves confessions for her priest on Sunday morning. And so, word by word, we arrived at the agreed place, at a parking lot in the industrial zone, abandoned factory halls resting around us in darkness, they seem to me like empty boxes for New Year's gifts. New Year it definitely is not, it's early spring, but it's midnight. My pal and I are waiting, we lit cigarettes, I'm a little nervous, but in a positive way, I enjoy that sweet anticipation. My friend's cell phone rings, he answers, he says we're in the parking lot, he says he brought a friend, everything is OK, of course. He ends the conversation and tells me that Slavica is coming in five to ten minutes. Of course, women, they're always late when you need them the most, Slavica doesn't



really care about us workers who have to go to work tomorrow morning, to another company which will soon go bankrupt, and the boss will swipe all the money, leaving us unpaid on the street and maybe he'll just go to her, Slavica, promising her a new life. New self. New sky. Maybe Slavica believes in him, she maybe believes in a new self, with her memories being washed away, in a pure self, ready for a new beginning. But the present stretches between the past and the future, so let's concentrate a little on this now because we are waiting for a white carriage and our midnight princess in it, she's a hundred times more beautiful and real than Cinderella, because the Internet never lies, right? She pulls up in front of us, turns off the car and lowers the window only halfway, she is scared as usual. My friend approaches her, puts his hand on the roof and bows his head to the window, exchanges a few words with her, then straightens up and pulls the front of his tracksuit down, leaning completely against the window of her Yugo, while lifting his heels off the ground as if he's going to take off. As time went on, he kept his heels above the ground for longer periods of time and clung more and more tightly to the car's shell, as if he wanted to slip through the half-open window. I don't know if the whole scene lasted for a few minutes or an eternity, I totally lost my sense of time, but when the thing was over, my friend separated himself a little from the car shell and pulled the tracksuit up to his waist. He approached me and looked at me without a word, his eyes sparkled in the darkness, I saw that clearly. He signalled to me that it was my turn. In the dark, I approached the car trying to make out the face I was drooling to in front of the computer monitor, and after that, as I lay in bed with my eyes closed, touching the region below my waist. In the dark, human faces always seem more beautiful, promising, somehow more mystical, as it was the case now. In front of me was a face that I could cover with a veil of the past, woven with a thousand disappointments and fears ... Just like the veil of the future, woven with a thousand desires and expectations. That beautiful face could at the same time submit to my empty desire to rule and possess, and it could also growl and deprive me of my fragile masculinity with one stroke. I approached and untied the cord on the tracksuit, pulled the front



part down and pushed it through the half-lowered window, lifting my heels off the ground. She took it in her hands and began to pull it towards her, and then she received it with her mouth, with that sweet, plump, red mouth, that beauty from folk songs, slender fir, poet's narcissus, little swallow, unworn gold, honey mouth, faithful love ... Little whore ... I don't know if it all lasted a few moments or an eternity, but I realized that I was illuminated by light, and then Slavica's lips disappeared, and I turned to the light with a half-lowered tracksuit and a half-stiff dick, when I heard a metallized voice:

"DICK IN YOUR PANTS, BIG BOY, THIS IS A POLICE PATROL!" I realized that my friend had sneaked away somewhere, Slavica hid in her white shell, everyone left me, betrayed me, I was left alone, left at the mercy of fucking cops! I started running, running away somewhere, just as far away from this ugly industrial zone where there hasn't been any room for workers in a long time, or for instant lovers obviously. I remembered the verses from that song, "cold sweat running and gnawing at my neck / paranoia / we run into darkness", that's what I need, darkness, only darkness, just as far away from this stupid light attempting to reveal my imperfection ... Fucking cops, why do you persecute us comrades who have fallen in the fight for fake communism, and us dirty angels of Orthodox capitalism, why don't you let us confess our sins where we want and with whom we want to?! Good old communists, they are playing god again, first they gave us clerk windows to enjoy ourselves and then they raised a finger: no, no, children, you can't do that ... I wanted to fly away, to get off the ground and come closer to the sky, like in my boyhood dreams, but I cannot, my sins have nailed me down to the ground ... I remembered one verse, "You can't leave Serbia", it doesn't matter that you are a member of the heavenly people, as if you were nailed to the ground here, you are shackled like a giant you can't move, the sky is reserved for someone else and you don't have a reservation man as you didn't get it on time Jesus died for someone's sins but not for yours carry your sins on your back yourself and persistently try try to jump over the wall and con-



stantly bump bump into apparitions anyway I stay here we all stay here there's no salvation I feel feel someone's arms on my shoulders as they squeeze me boy do they squeeze me more and more and more I turn and I turn around and see the light

The light in my room shines on me as I try to open my eyes. Cold sweat running and gnawing at my neck. The TV is on, computer is on, my mobile is ringing. I answer, I hear a familiar voice: "Hey dude, are you alive?! I'm calling you for the third time. You didn't fall asleep on me, did you? You're resting for tonight's party at the midnight window, huh? Come on, dude, don't let me down, I need you tonight! Get ready properly, hygiene should be at the highest level, put the bottom part of your tracksuit on, and let's go! Come pick me up at eleven, I'll kill you if you're late!" I put my cell phone down on the table and look towards the TV. On the satellite channel, a middle-aged woman with long, dishevelled hair shouting out loud: "And I said darling, tell me your name, she told me her name, she whispered to me, she told me her name And her name is, and her name is, and her name is, and her name is G-L-O-R-I-A G-L-O-R-I-A Gloria G-L-O-R-I-A Gloria G-L-O-R-I-A Gloria Oh, Gloria!

* The term "blasphemous" here should not be understood as "blasphemous", i.e., one who is hostile towards God, but as one who is critical of the ingrained understanding of God and the divine, an understanding shaped and mediated by religion, culture and tradition in general. Even Patti Smith emphasizes in several interviews that her "Gloria" is actually a song about existence, about existence as such, as well as a song about constant research, about not accepting ready-made solutions in life. The New York artist also notes that the initial word of her debut album is the word "Jesus", and that it is not accidental, considering that Jesus is a great spiritual teacher for her – so there is no talk of belittling the person of Jesus and Christianity as such.

*Translated from Serbian to English
Igor Aćimović*



BOJAN KRIVOKAPIĆ

THE DEAD DON'T NEED A BED

In the door, a notice, a letter, a white envelope, ever more often they arrive white, blue ones are partially becoming history. In seven days, at 8.35a.m. Deadly punctuality.

From the flat they will take: a dining table and six chairs, a two-seater, a three-seater, an old cupboard bought fifty years ago in Zavidovići, a TV set, a double bed. They will take away everything we don't need, accumulated, unventilated memories: my mother's relentless hauling of mass-produced paintings, framed, with motifs of violins and cherries, sunflowers and forest streams. They'll take them off the wall. We will empty the cupboard: ceramic napkin holders and, my *Pot ob žici* Ljubljana medal, commendations that my little brother received at school, for excellent academic score and exemplary conduct, for excellence in sports activities – volleyball, and one diploma for the most beautiful drawing in the second grade of primary school, old banknotes we all collected, a few empty jewellery boxes, the jewellery that my mom had already sold.

The cupboard will be taken out quickly, it will be chipped along the way. Behind it, a pile of dust and dog hair will remain, pictures of football players, candy cellophane and a comb. The room will lose the last remaining properties of home.

★

It lasted for nine hours. It started around midnight. She tells her sister to move, that she can't wait any longer, her sister tells her, *Lie down!* The pain is getting stronger, the contractions are becoming more frequent, it is getting harder. Everyone is ignoring her. The doctor, who later turned out to be known for asking for three hundred German marks for a childbirth, was nowhere to be found. Then he showed up after all. They put her on



the bed, tie her arms and legs. It lasted for nine hours. Pelvic delivery. *Hydrocephalus*, they said. *We'll see*. She seems not to hear them, but she did. Hydrocephalus, water head, tadpole child. It will not survive. It didn't start crying. They slap it, turn it upside down, return it to its original position, and then slap it again. Then they hear a cry. Incubator. *We'll see, it's too early for prognosis*, they say. Her bleeding doesn't stop. *We'll see, it's too early for prognosis*, they say again. The tadpole child was in the incubator for the whole three weeks. *It's not hydrocephalus*, they utter it to her one day. *It was our fault, it's just a little big-headed. Is there somebody big-headed in the family*, they ask. She nods, through tears. She neither says yes nor no. Three weeks in the hospital and it's leaving the incubator. A little brother.

*

In those years, the maternity hospital in Subotica was known for the lack of medical equipment, inhuman treatment of pregnant women and mothers, frequent sepsis and sudden death of newborns. They were dying overnight, falling like flies, non-crying transparent babies. But not all died. It is speculated that some were sold later on.

Three hundred German marks were to be given to the doctor for childbirth, that was the tariff. They didn't have three hundred marks, they thought they wouldn't need it, they wouldn't need it. When she said a few weeks earlier that maybe we should borrow that money somehow, just in case, just to be on the safe side, he told her: *We don't have it, and everything is fine*. The father. He wouldn't sober up in those weeks. As in the years before. When he found out about the birth, he called his mother to let her know that he had another son. She showed up with a bottle of grape brandy in no time. They were sitting, toasting to a new life and to each other, *for you my son, for you my mother*, and on and on until completely emptying the bottle, and until the two of them got spilled on the table.



Occasionally, I peek out of the room, then almost fifteen years old, breathing shallowly, between sadness and anger. *We should go to the basement for the cradle*, I say. The two of them don't seem to hear me. This cradle, where my father was being rocked forty years ago, and then a bunch of relatives, mostly men, I brought myself. An old wooden cradle painted white. It smelled a little of basement fustiness. I wiped it up from all sides and put it in the room next to the double bed. There is just as much space between the bed and the closet. I find small sheets that I hand wash and rinse for a long, long time, so that the smell comes out. *For the baby*, I tell them, *it has to be clean*. For the little brother.

*

More often than not, the enforcement officers knock on different doors. For a variety of reasons, people are increasingly left without the notion of home at first, to be left homeless eventually. Since they can't pay.

The little brother asks: *What if Ivo barks at them? Should I lock him on the balcony?*

Let him bark, I say.

The little brother is upset. *What kind of people are they?*, he keeps on asking. *Imagine it's your job, you go from house to house and take away their furniture*. I'm not saying anything. Ivo will bark soon.

Stamena, that's the name of our enforcement officer. That's what my little brother and I call her. Tall, blonde, almost sixty years old, she has an office in Bulevar Oslobođenja* Boulevard. Li-be-ra-te. She liberates. She is sitting at a huge nutwood table, with a flag behind her. Her voice is slightly hoarse, as if she had been shouting all her life. She never yells at us, Stamena always tells us quite politely, gently, *Guys, that's the way things are. Such is the law. You are young, life goes on*. He says that and gives us a sign to leave. My little brother doesn't say anything; I try to look at her

* Liberation



straight in the eyes. I don't see anything in her eyes. We turn around and leave the office. It happened several times.

*

Article 325 of the Law on Enforcement and Security

Powers of the enforcement officer

In cases of enforcement and security of claims, pursuant to the provisions and restrictions prescribed by this Law, the enforcement officer shall:

act on the proposal for enforcement and determine the manner of enforcement, if the enforcement creditor did not determine the manner of enforcement; act on the proposal for enforcement based on a credible document in order to realise a monetary claim on the grounds of performed utility and such services; submit their acts, as well as petitions and court decisions under the authority of the court; confirm the identity of the parties and participants in the enforcement proceedings; collect data on the property status of the enforcement debtor; draw conclusions, compile minutes, requests and official notes in accordance with the authorisations under this law; conduct inventory, property appraisal, seizure and sale of movable and immovable property; at their own expense and under their own responsibility entrust the sale of property to third parties; receive and keep the listed or secured property of the enforcement debtor, order the transfer of ownership over the property and perform the division of property and funds realised from its sale; carry out evictions and other enforcement actions necessary for the enforcement, pursuant to the law and other regulations; at the request of the enforcement debtor, i.e. the enforcement creditor, mediate in order to reach an amicable solution; receive and transfer funds, in accordance with this law; undertake other actions prescribed by this law.



★

The mornings sometimes smelled of toffees, melted into thick sticky days, which in the evening turned into mild nausea. The days were rolling, counting down.

★

One morning Asja brings me the news me, *Blackie passed away*. That's exactly what she said: he passed away, not died. Her mother called her that morning, *he passed away in his sleep, just after turning fifteen. I can't stop crying*, she says. *Neither can I*, I answer. I only cry for dogs now. One winter, her parents adopted Blackie at Čengiće Villa, Čvilla – the Sarajevo's slum area. Blackie was first called the Little Fella, but then he grew up. *Give him some other name*, she tried. *He is black, what's better than this*, her father answered. Asja's father retired prematurely. *Better a poor horse than no horse at all* is what he says when somebody asks him about his retirement. He spends his days walking Blackie and riding the tram on the Ilidža – Bašćaršija route. *To get out of the house a little*, he says. So, Blackie passed away in his sleep. Belkisa called him that morning, he didn't answer. Then she approached him: *Come on, boy, get up, let's go for a walk, come on, what's the matter with you?* She ran her fingers through his old dog's fur. He was still warm. *Fifteen years of mutual love and happiness*, I tried to comfort Asja, failing to convince even myself of that simplified truth. Blackie was buried somewhere between Sarajevo and Hadžići. Fikret buried him. Belkisa and Asja did not stop crying, while he was trying unsuccessfully to stop their tears by arguing. Blackie went to the dogs' paradise.

★

The little brother has gleaming white teeth, an advertising smile. A female friend of mine once said to me: *It's better to break my arm than my teeth. I only have my teeth left.*



When I go to the dentist's, I say: *I don't care how much it costs, I'm not giving up on my smile.*

*

One afternoon, a seagull landed on the balcony, big, white, naughty, what seagulls usually are. It observed the room over its beak, without a shred of fear. The “*Galeb*” chocolate became inedible, as if you were swallowing palm fat. It's the same as “*Milka*”, you can't break it, it melts under your fingers. A flock of white seagulls flies over the Danube, sluggish and smelly. Dunja was buried by the Danube. She and Ivo lived together for nine years. Adopted from the street. Winter, 25th January, icy days. The little brother walks through the woods, carrying her in his arms, wrapped in a white sheet. I'm digging a dog grave. The ground had frozen. He is followed by several stray dogs, barking. *Let them bark*, I say, *this is a dog funeral*. Icy tears are pouring down the little brother's cheeks, falling like marbles. We bury her.

Flowers grew out of Dunja. With her death, we buried our mother once again. Today, Dunja is a forest, the Danube bog, and my mother settled long ago with the muddy land of Vojvodina, far away from the forest. The double bed in which they slept will be taken away by the enforcement officers. The dead most certainly don't need a bed.

*

I stumbled upon my diploma, the trash bin overturned and mosquito repellents fell out of it. Before that, I couldn't find my diploma for years. I looked for it in the corners of the flats I lived in, under the bed, at the bottom of the boxes where everything I had dragged behind me was being deposited for years. The burden of life, countless stories and tales that had been waiting for all sorts of things. All just rubbish that I couldn't get rid of. In situations where this was least expected, I would often forget that I had a degree. Simply, that expensively paid paper and I never got along,



we never grew together. Eventually, I found it at the glazed balcony, between my brother's desk from lower grades, and the wall. By some miracle, or mere coincidence, in all those few years, the diploma did not absorb dampness. So, today, it is in a visible place, next to the garbage bin. In case I need it.

★

The little brother wants to change school. *What's the matter with you, what's going on, is everything OK?*, I ask him one day. He just keeps quiet. I repeat the question, I do not give up. He just keeps quiet, purses his lips slightly, and tears sparkle in the corners of his eyes. *I got a C in reciting the poem*, he says. *Well, fuck the poem*, I add. *But I learnt it, I knew everything by heart, everything as the teacher said*, he continues through tears. *In the end, I made a mistake, I couldn't say one word, I got stuck there, and she told me – C. I asked her why C when I knew everything. She said –* Let me know when you stop stuttering. *Then almost everyone laughed.* As he is telling this, big tears stream down the little brother's cheeks. As he is telling this, the little brother does not stutter. *But I didn't cry at school, just now*, he adds. *It's okay*, I say, *if you want, we'll change the school.* He looks at me, tears slowly stop running down his cheeks and says, *Really? Yes, I say, choose a school, we'll take care of it.* And the day goes on.

★

Little swifts are flying over Saint Barbara's Square, clouds are gathering around the mountain, hysterical rain will soon begin, which will be unbearable for some, nerves will tremble for some, anxiety will be spilling over the stomach for others, not for me. From the window, I watch these little birds as they fly over dilapidated buildings in their *salto mortale* style. I look at the windows of the flats in those buildings, I try to see people, but I never see people, it seems there are no people in those buildings. One night it rained long and quietly, and the lanterns threw some golden light



on the stone slabs that people walk on every day, some locals and tourists, mostly tourists. The window from which I watch the swifts overlooks St. Barbara's Square, while the room where I sleep overlooks the narrow street of Janez Trdina. I had never heard of that name before. The blinds in that room are broken, so it's dark all the time. For the first time in my life I sleep in such a big bed. It is the longest and widest bed I have ever lain in. When I sleep alone, I lie diagonally. I have five pillows and one large bedsheet. On one occasion, more than two of us slept in it and it was just right. We slept until noon. Then there were only two of us left. We lay in that bed until the twilight of the room merged with the twilight of the city. There is a large closet along the entire wall, it has seven segments. I opened only one and folded my clothes there. The clothes of all of us who slept over in that big bed could fit into this one segment. But no one will stay that long, so the closet remains almost completely empty.

Sometimes at night I hear crackling. They say it is like that in big houses and flats, there is always something crackling, creaking, whining. I haven't heard whining yet, which I think is good, because I don't know what I would do if something started whining. This huge flat overlooking St. Barbara's Square is one of my favourite. I lived in it for 34 days and 34 nights. When I was leaving, I cried, sometimes so that others wouldn't see me, sometimes in front of everyone. On the bus, a woman at the turn for Mrkopalj asks me: *Are you okay? I'm fine, I'm just sad*, I reply. She just turned her head and continued to observe the landscape. A few years ago, the winter in Gorski Kotar was harsh like it rarely is. So strong that the forest froze and the trees began to crack. It was the forest that first squeaked and then moaned so painfully that some people lost their minds of so much sorrow. To lose your mind means that you go bonkers. So, these people, distraught by the sorrow of the forest, are mad today. There aren't many of them, so they don't bother anyone and no one mentions them. The forest slowly healed its wounds, and from that whining and echoing, only hints of memory remained. As I travel through Gorski Kotar, I imagine dormice and the people who eat them, stuffed bears with their jaws



open that I saw in a restaurant in Korenica. I imagine fog and elves jumping through that fog occasionally laughing out loud. I imagine hunters passing by fairies without noticing them. As they pass, the fairies laugh behind their ears.

★

Beyond the festival noise, hustle and bustle, quiet Sarajevo days have a life of their own, after Assumption, when the days are shorter, and the sun with its oblique rays prepares us for gloomy lasting depression the hysterical phase of which occurs around the Christmas and New Year holidays, when the idea that we must be together during those glittering moments grabs us by the throat and squeezes the pulsating carotid, and when it becomes obvious to us more than ever how alone we are. That's the thing with holidays. Dense sadness swells in the bottom of the stomach, moving like something huge, something we wish to spit out, but it remains and shortens the breath.

In Sarajevo, us crippled, impaired, damaged meet. We sit in cafes and taverns, we drink the cheapest drinks that make us run wild quickly, and last for a long time. We talk about our houses that we carry on our shoulders, roofs that leak, refrigerators that leak and break, about our parents who are victims of transition, and us, their victims. We talk about our small lives that bleed breath-taking stories, stories that are not talked about and that swell like a subcutaneous pimple, ready to start spreading its rot, its putridness from which other tissues decay as well. We talk about our mothers, the heroines and torturers of our little lives, scattered around the space (narrowing down) like wild hazelnuts, which no one collects. We dare to say, *Our mothers are both good and evil*, we fear their deaths wishing them at the same time, as a solution, as a catharsis. Those mothers of ours are our fairies and witches, stones in our pockets that they themselves do not have the strength to put in their pockets and swim far, far away. Their lives are timed bipolar disorders, the trigger of which is



ever more often in our hands. We are pillows to each other in which we can drop all those stories, believing that we have broken away from them, that we are still normal. Aware of the fact that we cannot be rescued.

My mother's mother killed herself, Lena tells me. *She hung herself one morning, at dawn, and hung on a pole in the middle of the village, until a man on his way to work noticed her. She left a letter to her daughter's daughter, to me*, Lena continues. *She thought of me, I'm grateful to her for that. She did it because she couldn't find a way to love her daughter, my mother, because my mother is evil. It was her revenge on her, for everything, her victory. But also a message to me and others – that she killed herself, that my mother didn't kill her. And I live with that truth now, and I don't know what to do with it.* As she is telling this, Lena occasionally takes a long smoke from a thin cigarette. Tourists are sitting around us and admiring the city that is whining more and more quietly. The day is thick, the August sultriness has overwhelmed us, our heads have sunk into the shoulders.

My mother decided to leave, alone, I tell Lena. *She left a letter in which she said: I can't take it anymore, I'm leaving. That is my decision. This letter is somewhere in boxes, under the bed, or behind the closet, or who knows where. Maybe I lost it.* Some people keep these letters for the rest of their lives. But the message is not a piece of paper, it is a story that continues to live in us, to flicker somewhere in the bloodstream.

My mother's mother was a good woman, and unhappy, I continue, and Lena looks at me with her big grey eyes. *She lived her short life and died before she turned fifty. That was more than thirty years ago. That woman's name was Draga and she was erased from the memory of the few who knew her.* Once I was travelling from Sarajevo to Rijeka, via Travnik, Jajce, Bihać and Velika Kladuša, and right after the border we entered the Municipality of Cetingrad. We were making our way through the sad ravines of Kordun, through the dense silence that is disturbed only by a few foxes or a wild rabbit. At one intersection, I saw a signpost for the village where that woman was born and raised. That village is deserted today, not a sin-



gle soul living there. Today, Draga is lying in the muddy land of Vojvodina, with my mother lying there too, who, like me, never loved that land of Vojvodina, and who signed out of this life just before her fiftieth birthday. Browsing through old family albums, I realise that I don't have a single photo of my mum's mum, so I imagine her image from a faded black-and-white photograph on a tombstone, the very same monument that doesn't have a photo of my mum or her name engraved on it so she lies there now in the ground nameless. Unlike Draga's, I have countless photographs of my mother, from the earliest age, from the beginning of the sixties of the last century, to her last ones, from the beginning of the new century. So, sometimes I look at all those photos, I remember the gestures and the voice of my mother, for a second the image and tone part, I look at them and I don't know what to do with all that. As we sit, Lena and I sort through the stones in our pockets, and throw them out one by one, pretending we don't know what we're doing.

*

“According to published data, about 300,000 people emigrated from Serbia in the period from 2007 to 2014. The average number of emigrants from Serbia to developed countries from 2004 to 2013 was 26,000 a year, and in 2014 it reached as many as 58,000. It is possible that this number is still growing, but more recent data have not yet been published.”

“Evictions are becoming more frequent in Serbia. People are being taken from their homes, shouting, accompanied by the police.”

“From the perspective of the state, evictions are justified because they represent observance of the law. However, such a formal observation obscures the fact that the law was previously formulated to the detriment of vulnerable groups.”

“The eviction is the ultimate consequence of the transformation of regulations and practices in the field of housing, which has been at work in Serbia



for several decades. We can track it down from the Housing Act of 1992 to the new Housing, Building Maintenance and Social Housing Act, passed in late 2016. While the privatisation of almost the entire public housing fund in Serbia was carried out pursuant to the first, after the adoption of the second law, evictions gained the status of almost primary means in resolving various property disputes. “

✱

It can be a studio as well, but Ivo has to come with us, my little brother tells me.

*Translated from Serbian to English
Gorana Kukobrat*



NASTASJA PISAREV

MORROWIND

My adventures were such that I can no longer distinguish what I have dreamt and what has really happened.

I remember the duel to the *death, with him*, and I know it has happened. The Arena building is the tallest structure in the city. It is a large step pyramid with many gates, many corridors, levels, balconies. Many small atriums where craftsmen, housewives and strange pilgrims gather. The field of battle is located in the heart of the Arena, the Arena is in the heart of the city, at the confluence of two large rivers into the sea.

The field of battle is completely empty, with fine sand spread over the stone floor; the stands are empty and rise high up surrounding the heart of the Arena. I can see the upper rows fading into dimness, a mist is high under the roof of the building, covering the seats on the last steps of the amphitheatre. I'm finally running into the arena, out of breath, wet from the rain, scared for my life, for his life, my enemy. He has been waiting for me for a long time now.

I ran through the maze of corridors around the field of battle, the wet streets of the city on the water, by boat across the canal while the water was pouring, just to get there. Even the woman who was giving people a lift from one neighbourhood to another warned me to take shelter from the terrible storm, and her boat was filling with rain while we were still in it. I ran like mad, and I was late. It was stupid, to be late, when someone's life was at stake, yet again, I was late. A sharp pain from fatigue, from frantic running, from fear, was jabbing at my throat, through my heart, water was soaking my body. Rainwater was filling the canals that the city lay on.

When I entered the Arena building, I opened doors at random, looking for a way through the intricate corridors. I burst into smithies, inns,



common shops, chemists. In the frenzy, all the doors were the same for me.

Finally, I started choosing only the paths that led downwards, the Arena had to be deep down. The next thing I saw were spider-like signs of their foreign language, over a large wooden door, but I knew they inscribed the name of the Arena. A new disappointment awaited behind them – I was at the highest part of the auditorium, at the very top of the empty stands that rise vertically over the sand of the arena. Even leaning over the fence, I was unable to see well the field of battle, lost in the semi-darkness and the white haze that enveloped everything. It seemed to me, however, that I could catch a sight of his sword's gleam, and that I could hear the soft curses he was uttering into the haze. I will get there! As soon as I find the way. It was impossible to get down from up there. I ran out back into the hallways, once again the rows of countless, uniform doors were blurring past me. At the lowest level, there were the dormitories for the Arena warriors. I burst into empty rooms with rows of quiet white beds along both walls, clean and cold. I ran into training grounds and occasionally I find someone there, lonely figures of tired mercenaries, and their quick, surprised glances, or just sacks left behind, things unused. I was sure that some of the rooms I got into had been abandoned for years; that I was the first to enter them after the long-dead, forgotten builders of the Arena. Strange furniture, abandoned things, old weapons and torn flags, or nothing. There were rooms that were completely empty, there were corridors leading nowhere and stairs that went in circles. I opened door after door, one after another, and then, suddenly, I stepped onto the sand of the Arena and heard only the hiss of his blade.

When I last saw him, my enemy, on the premises of the Guild, I knew that our next meeting would be this stupid life-and-death battle. And I knew that I will win life.



My sword is beautiful, in my dreams it shines with lights that never go out. Silver and white, like coconut and wrought silver, glittering white stones on the hilt, and no trace of dried blood on the gleaming blade.

My swing is light, and my sword good.

I cut him twice, I feel the blade gently go through his body, cut his uniform and him, easily, as if passing through sand or milk. I find it hard to look at it and turn my head away, into the haze, but I know how I've cut him, I have a mental image before my eyes, I know it from my movements. The haze is filling the ring in the Arena and suffocates me, I feel a salty taste in my mouth and, in a daze, I see nothing else.

I remember him sometimes when I drop by the Guild, I miss his silhouette sneaking on the stairs in expensive clothes, and him grumbling or smiling amiably at a visitor returning after a long time. I avoid going there now, because there is no one to address me without humbleness.

I have never loved, except lightly and in jest, a girl whose face I no longer remember. She traded in various goods, and I brought her the most beautiful dresses and equipment, under the pretext of earning money, trading like her, I pretended to be naïve and not to know their price, and sold them below their value. And she wore them. The only thing I remember is her standing in a beautiful next to the shelves, smiling in the dim light. The colours have merged in my memory; around here is the reddish glow from the glittering thin threads woven into the shirt I gave her; a thin red glow is breaking through the blue dimness of her shop. Both her and all the things around her are being engulfed by the darkness that spreads from the back of the shop. In places, it only reveals shelves full of obscure and indefinite objects, impossible to catch a sight of. And her face remains elusive, what remains is only the glitter of the fabric, in the darkness, in the darkness of her shop.

For a while, I lived in an ugly mining town in the north. Along a pale river, in the hills, in a grey valley without plants, without cobblestones. I



served in the Guard, obeyed the orders of cruel, tired people. On a gloomy day, I came and found a neat and clean room in an inn, which the army paid for. But, when it was the time to go – they were sending me to another garrison, closer to life, they had promoted me – it was hard for me to leave this town, too. It was hard for me because home is far away and there is none. I did not want to go wandering again. I knew I was going to miss a lot of things. The shy and unobtrusive curiosity of the girls and children accompanying me since I had come; a stranger with a shining sabre, with traces of past battles on his body, with an unusual accent. My lonely walks along the feeble river fading into the red hills down to the mines. Talking to other mercenaries about their homes that were far away. Distant houses in strange lands that I could hardly believe existed; they were straying through my fantasies and sometimes burst before my eyes when I was half asleep; buildings peeking through an unbroken rainforest of palm-shaped trees, of a warm, warm forest; or icebound cities. I held all it equally dear, and it seemed close to me because I had heard about them from those who were full of sorrow for their abandoned worlds. We used to sit on the rocks by the road at the main city gate overlooking the road where no one ever came. Sometimes, perhaps, a guard, a merchant or a strange shadow at night that slips through when one of us dozed off.

But in my memory it is day, red dust on the road and the leaden sky. Outside the settlement, there is an old suspension bridge that you have to cross when you go to the mines. You need a special permit to enter. Several of the emperor's administrators who run the mine, always somewhere around, always soiled with red dust, are issuing orders to the workers. They are always trying to give the impression that something important is happening, as if something is *really* happening. As if this city is not the last, forgotten, island of people; forever cut off from life, from the rest of the world that perhaps no longer exists outside the city as far as anyone knows, out of the way, forgotten, forgotten.



Sometimes, it seems to me that neither this country exists for real, that it is absolutely desolate. In just a few cities there is some semblance of real life, and those are the cities at the crossroads, places where there are foreigners, or small coastal towns in the east, where there are long sunny days and white ships in ports. The rest is quiet and empty, with the semblance of life, with someone from the emperor's administration who gives the impression that somewhere outside this, outside the island where this country stands lonely, there is life, bustling life. A dream that somewhere, perhaps there is a beloved emperor; that he knows about us. That he perhaps sits in a magnificent building full of people with the people voices, domestic and foreign, wise or merry, from all distant provinces, from places wonderful and distant as they come only in a dream, and that he gently and decisively pulls the strings that govern our lives from there.

The long and hard hikes through the wilderness, through dangerous, uninhabited areas. The storms that carry ashes; the wind that cuts into my face; the tears streaming down my cheeks, from the wind, from the wind. The days and nights I spent alone in silence, until I would arrive at one of my destinations. Sometimes, I would meet pilgrims, or lost travellers, and my joy was great. I fought when I had to; many a time I took life with my own hands, of a man, or of an animal.

Sometimes, tired from my wandering, I would get off the road. And then I would be surprised to see the moon reflecting from the smooth white stone of houses. I would walk quietly into an unknown town, clear and white in the moonlight, deserted and mute. I would walk through an empty square; in their houses, in their beds, invisible inhabitants were dreaming. The sky is clear and the stars are big, the universe is gaping above the city. Star nebulae, constellation dust, the reddish glow of a nearby planet. And where is my home in this world? The lights and darkness of the universe, like cold water, enveloped the sleeping town, squeezing my tired body.



And the dream of the wonderous city of Seydan. I rode into it late in the afternoon, a month before the duel in the Arena, down the road from the hills. It was only when it became dark that I saw the sea. Seydan's stone walls and sidewalks are covered with rustling darkness, intertwining shadows, shadows of trees in the wind at night; and the undulating sea, a beach quivering with the sand constantly moving. On the cold evening, there were still children on the quay and the lamps were burning with white light. I walked for a long time, and it was already late when I felt the wind rising from the open sea. The sky had already merged with the water, and I could not tell one from the other in the distant black abyss in front of me. The only thing that remained unmoving and clear that evening was the illuminated strip of stone quay along the coast. It was the only thing not moving in the wind, while everything else flickered around me, changing shape with each new gust.

The wind started blowing again, this time from the bay, and white dust began to cover the quay. It was not snow, because there is never snow here. It was salt that was covering the quay in gentle swirls, and the buildings in the distance, and the black shadows of trees, and the beach, mixing with the sand. And I saw that there were no more people in the streets of the quiet city, and that there were no lights in their houses. That night too, like every other night, a bitter white shroud descended onto the darkness of the dead city. And I stood until it dawned, in the cold wind, until the white powder disappeared, and the city became ordinary again to the cries of seabirds returning with the morning star.

I lied – I once really loved a young woman. I protected her from death; helped her disappear, with my deceptions and my body. Soon, soon indeed, I will decide to look for her. If I find her, if I ever find her again, I will never leave her again. (But in this country, that which is not in front of your eyes, not in your hands, ceases to exist.)

I built a house near my city, the city I first fell in love with here. Near major roads, above the river that runs into the city. Above a river, a river



that is not dead and feeble, but clear and cold. My home is on a hill, overlooking the flower-specked valleys, the rooms are full of floral scents, full of servants because I dislike solitude. They constantly shout across the yard, carry water, laugh and talk, the colourful ghosts. They maintain my large estate. The guard at the gate is happy to see me, we sit together on the bench by the entrance, we drink; we tell crude stories about women; I tell him about dancers and whores that I knew; that I had. And we also talk about drinking and alcohol, and he laughs a lot and often. One of the servants soon realises that I have come again, the housekeeper invites me to come in, to sit at the table. As it gets dark and the air gets colder and wetter, I finally allow her to talk me into getting in. It is bright and warm inside. From the deserted hills, from the meadows, from my estate, lively conversation and laughter can be heard from afar; rattling of dishes and music.

But I know; not even all the yellow lamps from my great estate will drive away the darkness; no song or laughter will overpower the silence. *In the desolate land.*

My home is far away across the sea, so far away that I no longer know if it even exists.

My heart is far away across the sea, so far that I no longer know...

Translated from Serbian to English
Lidija Kapičić



MILOŠ JOCIĆ

QUEST AND COSMOS
(TWITTER STORIES)

sea sea sea sea sea sea sea sea

(the thoughts of a lighthouse transformed by a witch's error into a man
or it was vice versa)

* * *

The snow storm demon hides under bridges
a gas lines wrecker & night tariff cheater
From the knights of District Heating and their hot swords.

* * *

Minister of Autumn has been sleeping for four weeks
the continents of fallen leaves throughout the fairyland
are taking the form of his Mrs

* * *

Evil wizard Radomirsky died
his books fell silent
airports got deserted
the snow defaced monuments
curses were billowing in sorrow



* * *

The dacha of elfin Minister's daughter is surrounded by

|||||||

unsurmountable

|||||||

walls

|||||||

of trees

* * *

To appease his grandchildren

thaumaturgus Trisha Mrazina gave them sad nut cookies

*

Sad nuts

Fruit growing at the mountain tomb of giant Zugelis, who died doing the job he disliked. They contain melancholy, good calories.

* * *

VJETAR DJORDJEVIC

A plant historian, chlorophyll healer, astronomer, druid, the first grower of artificial grass. Born in Cataclysm Parva.

He recorded the movements of stars, moon, comets and dragons & compared them to flowering patterns in his garden. The first leafmancer; performed divination from live bushes.



*

He feed the birds from his garden with the smoke from apples whose tree had a view at the constellation of Detective.

High on the smoke, the birds could find lost items.

*

Vj.Dj. spent his last days train-watching – the beams of sparkles they ejected into the sky resembled untranslatable constellations to him.

* * *

Gloomy Russians told this at an orbital pub:

there's a dead solar system

with ghostly planets

just as you're about to land

you fall through

* * *

On Unfortunate Fandorin, the wind planet, there's a lonely rocket launcher like an old hag, bent from rust and atmosphere.

* * *

“At tits and gravity!”

technologist Gerasimenkova would reply to questions from cosmonautical shrinks. She chewed tobacco from Tolstoy 02.



* * *

Telephonic voices in the radio room of Cosmodrome Gagarin. It dawns to Janitor Joza: they're all alive, and I'm, dead, listening in on them.

TRAVELLING STAR

[cosmonaut T.T. Orfeeva—***] Dear Vasja – The Sorokinsko Theatre looks like a nuclear reactor!

— --

[cosmonaut T.T. Orfeeva—***] Evening. We're watching the "Traveling Star". A ballet in 0G, a romantic comedy about the first generation of our space explorers.

— ---

[cosmonaut T.T. Orfeeva—***] The hero falls in love in an alien under whose feet flowers bloom. Eventually, it turns out that it's his long-lost love, now mutated.

— ---

[cosmonaut T.T. Orfeeva—***] Dear Vasja, if I find you chatting up alien babes in some galaxy, I'll chop off your willy.

Yours, Tanya

— -----

[cosmonaut T.T. Orfeeva—***] The end of the play. Lights out. If the cosmonaut found his lost love, I'll find you too. (don't be a mutant, please).

Translated from Serbian to English
Lidija Kapičić



MARIJA PRGOMELJA

A CREATIVE WRITING COURSE

“It’s about time you wrote a story about your native region.”

I am compiling a book *à la* Tips for a young writer by the authors from my region, a book-instruction on how to become a writer, with the ideas for practice and I decide to be as consistent as almost never before.

I remember Crnjanski, of course. I remember that native region is the place you want to return to, at least occasionally, to sleep until noon and lie in the grass, wherever you are. A fragment of this thought flows in my consciousness whenever someone asks me where I am from.

– From Novi Pazar, I say. More precisely, from the nearby place.

They nod their heads, pretending to be interested. I don’t know why they give so much importance to the place where you were born. My native region is packed in a blue folder, there at the bottom of the closet among the scripts, and waiting for me to open it, and finally raise this issue. Now is the right time.

I think of Crnjanski and I understand that I do not want to return. For years. I haven’t felt like a resident of my village for a long time (we all came from a village to a big city, the promised future, alas). All my years have remained where the city buses go by the hour, in a place where the lady neighbor always has time for coffee, where people live according to the schedule long prescribed: you get born, you leave school, you get married, you get two children, the husband drinks but it does not really matter, you get a stone in the stomach, high blood pressure, artificial flowers on the grave.

Native region leaves a sour-bitter taste in the mouth. I remember getting up early, (I am being awake with “It’s five to seven.” I get up, put on my jeans and sweatshirt, coffee is waiting for me. I lace my All Stars sneak-



ers, put on my headphones, pull a bag with badges and run. Days illuminated by her.), crowds, seals and brands. Native region is the place to which I put an end to.

*Never come back once you
go out into the world.
Don't you wriggle
Don't behave in my presence as if you wanted it or not.
And I run away without returning.
I never wish to go backwards.*

I'm not turning around. I go occasionally, sometimes because of getting certain things done, sometimes when I want to stop time. I am sick of the Kings, I roll my eyes as the bus goes slowly through the Ibar Valley, and every time I am disappointed by the desolation of the suburbs. Pale lights, even paler people. With heads raised high.

– All right, I say out loud. Here, I'm writing a story.

* * *

You were told well. You turn towards Deževski road, continue on the road towards Golija. You drive straight while meadows full of dandelion, purple alfalfa and orchards pass by. The Djurdjevi Stupovi Monastery planted on the left side keeps silent and trembles in a noble sublimity. You pass next to the church built on the 12th century ruins, and turn right. The board is blue. A local shop and a lady shop assistant with a curious gaze. It brings quiet reconciliation over life. You cross the bridge while thinking of Andrić. It is supposed to connect people.

It used to be a wooden one, she said. Once upon a time, at a time when love had a taste, and time was measured by holidays. He said he knew he was close when he saw the wooden bridge. She was sitting next to it lulled in her love. There has not been a wooden bridge for a long while, they are also not there, you think. *Panta rei?*



You're arriving. The hostess welcomes you and apologizes for not having a hotel, it is a small place. You say that it's okay, that you came just to be accommodated in the house, to feel the spirit of the place. This gives the holiday a special flair. You talk because you want to leave the impression of a well-mannered guy. You say that you plan to visit Golija, that's why you set off by car, to go to the liturgy in Peter's Church. You are blabbering on about how amazing the Đurđevi Stupovi Monastery is, that the most beautiful frescoes are there, that you would like to go to Sopoćani. You want to know where that Ras is. You are presenting the theory to a woman who puts on the table a homemade savory cream as yellow as a sunset, that Pazarište is actually just a market place and that the city has been situated at the same place where it is even at present. Some people don't like it, you mutter as you put a piece of collard green pie in your mouth. You ask her if she knows where the recently found necropolises were, to which she, an overweight middle-aged woman, raises an eyebrow.

Then she takes the helm and talks about having a daughter who is studying at a university. Imagine, literature studies! She doesn't know why did she need that, but they couldn't convince her not to go for it. God knows what will happen. She bends down and whispers that she thinks the books ruined her. She behaves strangely, while brother – nothing! A normal guy, he finished high school, he works, he will be having a wedding soon.

You nod your head, praise the cheese and ask for some more bread. You watch The Second Daily News with the host, a blush-cheeked man in a gray wool sweater, you curse the current government and go to sleep. Instead of a blanket – a tent. Quince in the closet, and witness the miracle – books! Fairy tales, comprehensive readings for primary school, what she doesn't need now, you think, a collection of works on Miljković, poetry of a contemporary poet, a book of abstracts. You are in her room, sleeping in



her bed. Behind the orange curtains, crickets compete in solo singing and you close your eyes.

Indeed, Golija is beautiful. Green fields, fir trees, the smell of the pure. In the local ethnic restaurant, they serve homemade coffee with Turkish delight, in the nearby rotisserie place you have eaten the best lamb ever. The abbot of Đurđevi Stupovi is wonderful, gentle, and the frescoes in Sopoćani are monumental. Everything is great: Russian tea in an authentic coffee and tea shop while the waiter is telling you about the fact that there used to be a hammam, and in the background you hear the *The Nizam Departure*. Taking off your sneakers in pious silence as you enter the *Antun-alem* mosque, kebabs at *The Beka's*, mantiye in *Sidra*, *tufachiya* and Turkish coffee in *Solun* (=Thessaloniki) for one hundred and thirty dinars, poorly attended liturgy in St. Peter's Church.

Then you scratched your nails and ripped off the gilding. Below, a grinning monstrous face appeared. You heard the hostess whispering about the purposefulness of your trip, a joke about good appetite and the shorts you love so much. The lambs out of which the best lamb rotisserie is made were screaming, you heard that waiters have low salaries, so they are forced to "cope." You wash your hands with twenty dinars soap while the Turkish coffee with Turkish delight is smoking on the table.

You walk the pastures behind the "urban zone" on Golija. Paradise. Tall grass, skinny she buffaloes, strawberries that fall when you raise your voice, and you realize that they use it as a girl who missed her first boyfriend. Then you hear that the Djurdjevi Stupovi Monastery has been being renovated for the last ten years... The monk of Sopoćani disdainfully receives wine and oil, and leaves galloping. The mantle rustles. You are wondering where the inhabitants of *Prvomajska* disappeared, why are the sounds from the loudspeakers so loud and why are there so few religious people at the service?



You see empty eyes (the look of a calf, he would say), faces without hope, smiling in front of life that they can't fathom. The city looks sad and washed out, almost like your jeans. You open your eyes wide because the pool has a separate male and female term, going out is until ten. You catch the looks that stop at you, everybody screams it is an alien, they follow you and listen to your "Belgrade" accent.

You saw Troy and you saw everything. You lie to the hostess that you will stay shorter because you have business obligations. Well, something has just come up. Of course, you will pay for everything and come again, which she frowns at. She knows that these are courteous things thrown into the air. You pull the gray suitcase, you hit the anthill by wheels, you wave.

* * *

"Then describe your ideal native region," I read on. The writer always plays with the reader, in this case with another writer (an attempted, emerging writer).

Images that were painted long time ago pop out from under the lashes. The swampy part of the city, now more and more urban. Narrow streets, lit exactly as much as needed. Low houses surrounded by courtyards where dahlias, gladioli and chrysanthemums bloom. Wrought iron gate, courtyard with white roses. Ground floor house, high ceilings. From the street you can see the piano in the living room, and a picture of a girl holding a rose. On the other painting there are black horses. Fireplace, lamps of multicolored lights, carpets that submit. On the walls of the bookshelf, that house has a special smell, the same one you feel when you open a book that is patiently waiting. The smell of soup and freshly baked steaks wafts from the kitchen. I close the kitchen door and open my eyes to meet the reality face to face.



– Here, I have written a story, I am saying and I am victoriously closing the book of instructions of a writer from my region. I am coherent, I rejoice. In fact, I hid again. I do not know how to win.

Translated from Serbian to English
Olivera Ristić



NIKOLA LEKIĆ

THE FOREFATHERS

I suddenly felt them all, as if they were standing in front of me, in a line, side by side: my father, his father and next to him his father, my great-grandfather; they gushed and poured out one by one, draining the olive-green wooden box with a wobbly, metallic, green lock creaking and squeaking like an animal in distress when being opened. I don't know what to do with it, that box; there is no place for it in my small flat, in my small aspiring head.

It arrived from Slovenia almost a month ago. At the moment when the postman carrying a package under his arm, the box tucked in crumpled newspaper sheets, and additionally protected by three boxes, each with sides a centimetre larger than the previous one, like an angular matryoshka, and, on top of that, wrapped in natron paper and covered with several layers of transparent nylon tape, so, when the postman with that package protected from impact as if an egg in transport, no less, was standing in front of the door of my flat in Hortisteiner Street, I was far away, in New York, at the annual meeting of all the holy Associations of North American Independent Writers; it had been the third time my name was mentioned as one of the many nominees for the award since I became a member of that cohort proudly called the '*crèm de la crèm*', but this time it turned out differently. This time I got it. I expressed my gratitude and dedicated this success to my father – in name and surname, with a short romanticised biography and a few quotes from his carefully hidden verses, speaking coldly and not too assertively in the congress hall full of frowning fellow writers and professors, so full and so hot that I thought that some of those colleagues, who, rightly or wrongly, didn't get the award, were about to start boiling or sprouting, spilling from their aged, shrunken bald heads and eye sockets, over the dark burgundy carpet the colour of clotted blood of the congress hall, all the knowledge, all the sub-



lime, the poetic and the philosophical, the deeply and disturbingly true (or untrue), all those words and syntaxes they toiled to fiercely nail to their stanzas and sentences, which they tormented themselves with and sweated over, while the train of life was steaming before their eyes, around their heads and through the heads entering through the left and exiting through the right ear. Or the other way around. 'It seems to me that a man who writes, who writes well and assiduously, must be frowning. I'm like that myself, frowning. So are you. My father was like that, while he was alive and entangled, and now, when he is dead and relaxed, he's now smiling. I hope.'

That's how I ended up the speech.

I felt he'd died on the same day that he died. There was no mystery in that – my mother called me the same night, by phone. But I hadn't heard my mother, nor my father, for ten years before that call, so when I recognised her voice talking to me from across the world, I simply knew what the matter was; I knew that man, my father, was no more. Sad, but nothing terrible. His time had expired, as mine will expire, as yours and everyone else's will. Not a big deal. I'm even glad that, for example, I didn't hear my father's voice that night, because it would have meant that it was my mother who'd left us – and that, by the logic of things, would have to be sadder and more painful because she is, if nothing else and more, more beautiful and tender and she gave birth to me.

I must say: there was another reason why I knew he'd died. That morning, twelve hours before my mother's call, I woke up with an inexplicable poetic power, so strong, which overwhelmed me so that I could have sat down immediately and written a whole collection of poems, an outline for a novel to be met all over the world with loud bells and headlines, a bestseller riding on the wave of brilliantly golden critical acclaim, and a synopsis for another like that one, and loads of various dialogues and a handful of scenes and sold film frames; such power that, for instance, had I wanted to, I could have approached any of the beautiful, young and



glamorous women who walk the street under my window and showered her with such palatable and honeyed words that she would have gone with me without hesitation – not gone with me, she would have taken me with her to her indecently luxurious flat, or house, or villa, or to her ship where she lived, where she would have forever nurtured my already deteriorating body, and from that morning onward, my swollen artistic spirit. As well as my member. I felt such power, and I knew it wasn't mine. I don't have such power.

Immediately after that, the phone rang. – 'Mr Letters?' 'Yes,' I said. – 'Mr Jonathan Letters?' 'Yes,' I said again, 'How can I help you?' – 'I'm calling from the secretariat of the SANP Association to congratulate you on behalf of the commission and on my own behalf; you're this year's winner of the Golden Pen. You'll also receive an official notification. Once again, congratulations.'

I knew something was wrong. I quickly got dressed and ran outside, into the ice-cold, December air, to get a hold of myself. The phone kept ringing: one unknown, multi-digit, meaningless number after another, and I walked, not wanting to answer those calls and not being able to look into the faces of passers-by. It was then, in that mess, that I ran into a man and from the force of the collision I staggered, as weak as I was, and fell, landing on my skinny and sore backside; the phone flew out of my hand and shattered into several pieces. The gentleman, shocked at first, started apologising and reached out to help me up. I wasn't angry, on the contrary, and he was no gentleman: dressed in dirty rags, dirty in the face, wearing torn shoes and with a bag full of some rubbish hanging over his shoulder; pulling me off the ground, he stepped on a part of the phone, putting an end to it. I wasn't angry. Nor was I scared. I stared into his face and, there was no doubt, except for his long, greasy hair and dirt, the man looked just like my father. He even wore a cap over his bushy hair, just like my father had been wearing all his life. And I knew something was wrong. I knew he was gone.



How handsome my father was! I'm sure that he could have lived longer, but he didn't want to, he couldn't allow himself to grow old, to grow ugly, to become overripe. I look at the pictures and read the verses; mine are meagre compared to his. He published four collections of those, each was better than the previous one, but the books went unnoticed by the audience and critics. They patted him on the shoulder and called him a poet, but he wanted more, the inert pets on the back and flattering adjectives were not enough. He wanted readers, he wanted many readers and their impressions, and they never happened. It wasn't written in the stars for him. Eventually he became withdrawn, during the day, while at night he withdrew into the room; there, he worked hard on his last book, his novel or whatever, I don't know and I can't know what it was because there are no notes, sentences or letters in the box about that writing; but there are collections and a handful of verses and poems, which he had never mentioned until now, until the box started speaking for him. My father. He didn't talk much about other things either. But he loved it. But his father was better! How close-lipped he was! And his verses! I feel ashamed, I feel a kind of shame as I read them; I'm them, I'm not myself, I'm nothing but a continuation of what my ancestors started... I remember my grandfather: thin, yet firm and strong, his beard and moustache are getting into his toothless mouth. After burying and saying farewell to everyone he knew (and he knew a load of people, even though he was always lonely and alone), he sold everything that was left behind all those who had passed away, leaving him behind as a grown-up orphan, secretly envious of his pure soul and sound mind, so, he cheaply bought an abandoned house in the woods, in a mountain, which, as he believed, the winds of the lost ancestors still reached. With two goats, a wild garden and a dog that appeared and imposed itself on him as his last companion, he lived to celebrate his ninety-fifth birthday with complete soundness of mind; even he didn't know how, that Goran, my namesake, who hadn't taken a cigarette out of his mouth since he became of age. He used to snore in baritone loudly, I remember, his snoring would get under your skin, under the



bark of the trees, under the ground to the buried forest warriors and the stream that springs somewhere far below the house, at the foot of the mountain. When my Goran, my grandfather, snored, it would send birds fluttering in the night and his dog would prick up his left, alert ear. He always waited for us at the door, in front of the house, when we come to visit, I remember: without exception, my father and I alone, because my mother couldn't stand needles and twigs and bugs that crawled under the quilt while she was sleeping, into the shoes and nickers. My father and his father, my grandfather, would hug and kiss and look at each other somewhat secretively, as if they knew something secret, something I wasn't ready for yet. I was young. I had nothing to say, it was enough for me to just watch the two of them reading and going through my grandfather's verses (what wonderful forest verses they were! About universal love, about the same kind of truth, about all kinds of equilibrium and justice!), so they laughed and nodded their heads in the smoke, they drank wine and brandy, then read on and reflected on and compared with strange names they knew, with the predecessors, they'd grab guitars, while I chased a bug with a dreamy forefinger on a cracked wooden table fantasising that it was a snake, a car or a dragon.

He published not a verse, Grandpa. He became disillusioned with life and the world when he was at his peak, when, with a sentence, he could split a hard stone, a suspect, and one of his insecure colleagues, a blabber, who would later go on to print and print and print pages and pages that were by far inferior to my grandfather's. Here they are, his melancholic, advanced and lacerating writings with me in the small flat, in the olive-green box. A pity... If I had only known about it a bit earlier... Perhaps I wouldn't have dared to write myself. But his father was even better, my father's grandfather, his namesake, Nikola, my great-grandfather. He wanted to sail – he became a sailor. Aeroplanes appeared – he became a pilot. He wanted to get settled on the ground – he managed that too, but he stopped writing. What verses these are! Earth and people from above, from below, from the sides, from the inside. All the colours of the world, a



breath of every meridian. These papers of his, with verses so robust that you don't know whether it's prose or poetry, without as much as an unneeded dot, with a clear ambiguity of every word, just the kind of verses created by world-renowned and famous poets of that time, in the wake of the darkness of the fascist war. Each verse is signed with a pseudonym, in the curly calligraphy: *Nikola Tvrđi*. As soon as he grounded himself, he calmed down, replaced the pen and ink with a hammer and chisel, became a carpenter and shortly thereafter my father's father; on the underside of the box, it's still clearly visible, it's deeply engraved: *Nikola Tvrđi*.

Damn the box that came! What am I supposed to do with it? To throw it away, burn it – I can't. To hide it – where and how? To read and reread it and keep thinking about fathers and sons and what they share and continue, to wonder who I am and what right I have to keep on thinking that I'm the only one, that I gave birth to myself, that the whole world was waiting for me; to think that I'm better, braver, to drink the success that's too big for my mouth, flowing down my chin, over my chest... To go on expressing my gratitude and saying that it's not a big deal, that it required no effort, no hard work. I cannot.

I'm alone, and nothing but a dot, a small dot.

Translated from Serbian to English
Lidija Kapičić



DALIBOR TOMASOVIĆ

ANALYSIS, HYPNOSIS, HYPNOS, or on spirals and maybe on the spirituality of melancholic nerve endings after 29h on the edges of dried fruit and metasymbiosis falling backwards through the 29th of January obviously as P., sci-fi or margarine scraped over yesterday's bread without tea, oxidations, bloodstreams, and dysthymic at times diaries, S. or all of that can basically be called a faucet on legs

Coryskin?; Time doesn't exist, only dates exist. I actually like this.

Coryskin.: I liked it for a second too. I don't know if I'm gonna have an opinion later though.

Coryskin?; That's because opinions don't exist, only moments exist.
#w1w #mindbending #again #always #keepyourheadaboutyou #ape

post by: Coryskin? at 29 hours, 29th of January.

It might seem, at first, that this story's beginning doesn't even really begin, or at least there's no point in beginning right there, nor is there a good reason why that Why is there, however, was there ever a good reason for beginnings, is there a beginning at all? What would it look like? Dejan thought to himself, while browsing through, posts on social media. He made them up, in his head. *He thought, what does thought look like? How is it created, does it have a beginning? If not, it has a complete circle, that's the logical, conclusion,* he typed while his android glitched and typed out the word "beginning" over and over again. *If it's a circle, and it moves through space, it leaves concentric circles, and if concentric circle take up space, they create it into something resembling a cone that has neither a beginning nor an end, one single point, one single thought, one motion, action moves in a spiral, through that cone. Maybe. It would make sense,* he thought, because he recently read in an anthology of the ancient Utariia that the entire world



flows out of a spiral, and closes itself within a spiral. It wasn't really clear what that would actually be like, since he can't really comprehend, nor see, what something that has neither an end nor a beginning looks like. In the anthology, it said, that meditation is the only thing that, from this world can get you at least close to something like that, but even it has a beginning and an end, since you basically plug into meditation like you would plug into watching a movie, or reading a book. *Fucking android arm, I gotta type all of this out with the left one, the regular one, or deal with the glitches.* He remembered a novel closer to his android arm, compared to the human one, a book named (yes, it has a name!) "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" by Philip K. Dick. At that moment his wife, Rahela, interrupted him with a question; Have you read "The Wasteland" by Vladan Radovanović, look, the novel begins with a spiral. Startled, distracted by this writing, his wife's, Rahela's, he realized, again, because he forgets things often, now, that they are living in a world where every event, every reaction, every relationship is written, created. These two, now they function from chairs. Like everybody else. As does their world, and they themselves, but out of whose chair would these two exist, were they to exist, outside of this simulacrum? Everything, all of a sudden, reminds him of the Matrix, a movie from 1999, from the planet Earth. A chair. Then, his mind finds a connection between a scene from the Matrix and a spiral. A bullet, a bullet in slow motion, making concentric circles that are getting bigger. like when you throw a rock into a lake. *NOW THAT'S A THOUGHT, that's creation, a bullet! Thoughts are bullets. Language is a spiral, that's how its created, that's how it evolves. That's how creation in this world unwinds.* "We remember best through images" is a thought that swam into his head, he remembered who's thought too, Carl Yung's. *Yes, we remember through images, but smell, that is what triggers memories, are memories images? Sometimes they reach us like pictures, because of creation, echoes of memories to be more precise, and the echoes of memories are feelings, emotions. So how is it that the best way we remember is through images?*



I don't think we do, though I admit visual memories are probably the freshest. Ah yes, great minds... “Hey, Dejan, you there?” Rahela jumped in, again.

– I am, are you keeping track of my writing?

– I am, but you're diverging away from my writing, I want our worlds to intertwine, why are you running away?

– I'm not, listen, relax, I'm talking about emotions, on Earth, and on other planets, people always associated emotions with the heart, the heart, the organ, we can unwrap it, and so we can see that it was wrapped up and became, came into existence like – a spiral, do you get that I'm writing about you and that you were writing about me before you called out, because I'm writing, creating, about spirals, today. See, I saw a very strange post, Coryskin's?, that says “time doesn't exist, dates exist”. If we track them through cone-based movements along its edge, through some imagined space, it becomes spiral, even though every calendar or clock is circular, but what is behind us, becomes smaller, what is now is broader. And nothing is separated, cut off, that's why it's a spiral. Do you understand? To that we can add that opinions do not exist, but moments do, because opinions are distant and mutable, impermanent, and, ultimately, inconsequential, because the nature of flow is that it does not care about opinions, it just continues.

– Are you on Ecto^{*} today or something?

– No.

Well, are you going to respond to the spiral of this Earthling artist or what? My “impressions of the day”^{**}, you see it standing there, the old

^{*} Ecto is a psychedelic tablet made by the chemist known as Akasha Huiza.

^{**} Something like “Your Story” from XXI century Earthling social media. (From the anthology “Correspondence from the future” by Širo Metroh, translation; Dalibor Tomasović)



one, the archive? See how mysterious it is? It reminds me of music from Rems 3*.

It's interesting that you mentioned music, because some of these archives say that the man was a musician.

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The stories are fractured, and they come from different worlds. Attention reader, the system is switching to record memories in 3, 2, 1:

I had the head of a cat, they called me Cat-head, I waited tables at the "Little Prince"*** for a couple of years, and it annoyed me to no end when people did that since I had my own name, and a surname too. Several surnames, actually. My full name and surname is Actenius Soal Me pronsis Covimer. Just remember that *pronsis* is written in lower case, since it signified my gender. We, had multiple genders. All in all, I introduced myself in this diary because this diary represents my, to put it simply, confession. When I die, or stop being what I am, I want my world, myself, to continue,

* A planet in a remote solar system. Possibly information spilling over from one of the parallel universes.

** "The Little Prince" is a café where Utariistic schisms happened, it was the place to be, and it still is. (Record: from Reshe er Tiye's book "On what is there but is not" (café "Little Prince" is also referenced in the magazine "However" / that's the only information we were able to come by.)



somewhere, to be and to exist. Permanently. Of course, even that doesn't mean I'm going to actually exist. Through whom am I writing now, who am I signing into? It's the 29th again and I see how, like when I worked at the "Little Prince", I'm disturbed by the same thoughts that disturbed me when two, in my opinion, wretches, regularly came in. Why wretches? Because that date is, we don't know the time (and the talk around town is that time doesn't exist anyway), but the date, the date is known, that's probably why dates exist and time doesn't, marked. It was today, the 29th of January. That's the day they were born, coming out of each other's heads, and came to existence. Those two wretches, that looked like each other but were not each other, both of them wanted, at least for a time, to be the other one. I know, because I listened to them. They talked, all the time, as tireless as nature, and sometimes even they were annoyed by that. Imagine, then, what that did to others? All in all, I begin this journal with the two of them, because I feel that a story about a spiral is somehow appropriate when it comes to creating. I don't know why, but it just is. And I also heard, one of them say, talking about the subconscious of the writer, always, how that talent, that act of creation is palpable, he said "wave-like", you ride it and you float, you create, you are both here and there, you wander between, and he said you "surf" those waves. The other one said "yes, and the madman, the madman is underneath the ocean, buried by creating, by the created", and then the other, by my assessment the crazier, one, for a lack of a better term, jumped and said "you're swimming! with your head above the water! you're not surfing, you're swimming when you write, or create! in whirlpools, and all whirlpools are SPIRALS!" he yelled. Then he went on "you don't create, you steal everything, you draw from something, from everything you have experienced or touched, influence is everything! nothing is created, it's only uncovered! like a map of the world!" Maybe that's why I decided to talk about spirals before all of this, honestly, I didn't plan it, nor did I think I would find it here, I forgot what they talked about, and now memory reminds me of these events, and that moment is what I need to tell my story, but did it



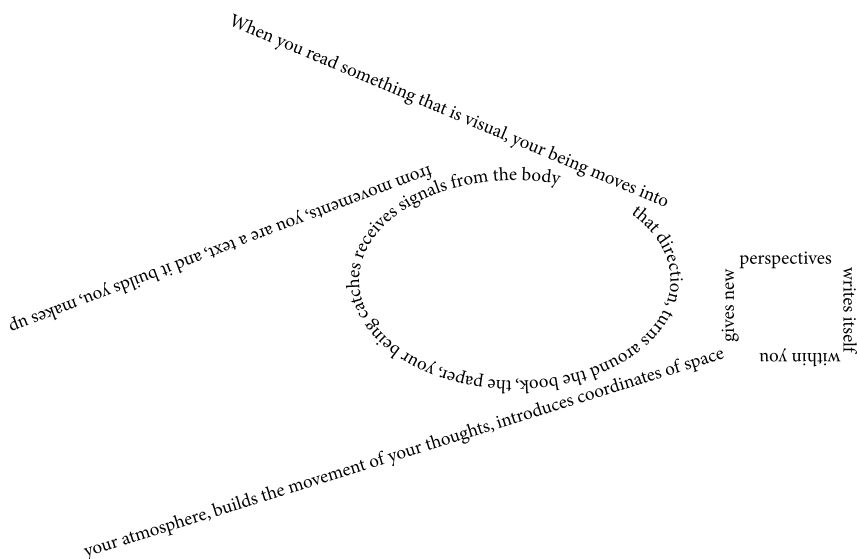
happen first, I don't know, but I feel, I started my record on the right foot. I remembered another, inconsequential, perhaps, fact – Bowie was on, Heroes specifically. Then, Nick Cave was there, sitting, in the dark somewhere, staring at a table like a coffin. And he thought about how, there is a language, where that word begins with “dream”. To which one of the two wretches chimed in, the quieter, more restrained one, how in that language the word for “dream” was a twin sister to the word for “shadow”. He was reading his mind. Then he went quiet, got out a book, a book *named* – “The Wasteland”. Then he said, to the other one “there are spirals here, like the beginning of the creation of the world, but I wanna talk about style a bit. besides the topographic elements in a novel, that's what I'm most interested in. besides, you know very well I like to talk about style, and style to me is the music of a text, music is, besides everything sensual, palpable, an atmosphere. it's a feeling of everything words can do, and words, as Terence said, create the world, if you know them, you change the world, while Alan Moore said how words are magic. creating magic is tied to words, magic creates, every occult, otherworldly, and this right here, and the metaphysical and every, I mean every perception, at least in conscious beings boils down to translations and interpretations through words. everything is real, everything that exists and doesn't exist, in words, which means – everything exists, everything that is said, read. that magic, of which he speaks of, it creates a new consciousness, that's why Moore believes, writers are magicians, shamans. what do you think?” While the other one took a long drag from a cigarette and eyed the holographic stripper with purple hair, that always went on stage on the 29th of January, and only on the 29th of January, he said “besides agreeing with everything that has been said, I would add that Radovaniović's style is wonderful, not only because of the rhythm and music of the text, but also because he decided to use a poetic expression, the words of poets, for that is the highest form of expression, closest to that which is most distant, the unknowable, not, at least in its entirety, understandable through logic, rather it touches what we feel, from the depths, and it fully, spirally, carries



you into that world, in the world of “The Wasteland”, and then makes unified wholes, in terms of the visual, even though, if you move far away enough and look, everything is a unified whole, of course, and those unified wholes later are like walls and buildings that are blooming, they are there, but they carry you further away, while you are there, in front of them, and that’s why I would like for us to do a little test”. Then he got a pencil and a piece of paper from the quieter one, and began writing something down, and when he was finished, after only half a glass of wine, he looked around “The Little Prince” and found his victim, that wasn’t me, but, of course, as far as I knew the other one, it had to be a woman. It’s like he believed that only a woman can give the final verdict on his work, as if all of literature was dedicated to women. Which it might have been. He walked up to her, and brought her to their table. I’m talking about this now, writing, because I think this influenced the way I see words, and writing in general. And so influenced the way I think, and with that – my life, and later my diary, my writings, which I believe, later, will manifest itself somewhere within it, eventually. I heard what that beautiful, soft-skinned, golden-eyed woman was reading, and I saw the piece of paper. This is what it looked like.

Then, you could hear a more restrained “ok, and?” while the other one took the paper from the gentle-handed woman, and said “what do you mean “and”? don’t give me that shit, you know what I wanted to prove”. The calmer one rolled his eyes and added “that’s why we didn’t need the test, we both know that, and I could have read that anyway, to be the testee, so to speak”, “yeah, but everything is more fun when women are involved, ain’t that right sugar?” to which the young, inexperienced woman responded by leaving the table, and both of them, without a word. I was on a break then, and I saw everything. I don’t know what he wanted to prove, that strange man, who was as much a part of the other one, as the other one was part of him. It seemed as if the two of them were actually one person, disbalanced. Maybe that’s why the both of them knew what was being tested. I’m still not sure of that, because the next thing I heard





was “yes, her current is flowing differently, she was getting signals in a pretty unusual way, but did you really have make the first two letters of your surname?”, to which mister lady-killer answered with a smiling “yes”. I still don’t understand what that man wanted to say, is it that we move along words? Maybe he wanted to say that it’s easier to remember things that way, unusually and through images? A new experience? Does that mean that the RI which the record looked like will get burned into her mind or that she will never forget such an unimportant, yet important, experience, I don’t understand and its gonna stay that way, while I will, I know this, because I already did it, by reconstructing that event, use images in my diary, because visual text had been within me from that moment on, or maybe it was there before. I don’t know why.

ERROR: Diary pages cannot be loaded in this world anymore.

Note: try finding a link, or the book “Interspace”^{*}

^{*} It is not known why the book *Interspaces* is necessary.



I'm writing you a letter because, fuck it, I'm an incorrigible hopeless romantic who had reality prove time and time again that his being isn't right, that told him he should be a pessimist, a cynical asshole, which I am most of the time, but hey, I hit you up now and then, all old-fashioned, like I'm haunted by a nostalgia for a time I was never part of. Just so you know, the Americans have a word for that kind of nostalgia, for a time you have never known— anemoia. That's what I suffer from, from time to time.

Anyway, I'm writing to tell you that I've been waking up next to a book written by Marko Z. Danijevski for a while now. The name of that book is "House of leaves". Before you come after me for writing "name", I have to tell you, using "name" for books is a rebellion against people and worlds that say don't have names, they have titles. See, I don't agree with that, those are names, books are living things. They live, better and longer than we do.

I wanted to tell you that I found a novel I imagined as a child. That sticks to me like honey. I can't really say I'm happy about that, but I can tell you that I am euphoric and thrilled, even though, as time goes on, the novel grabs at me, tires me out, with its labyrinthine nature, and steals sleep away from me. I do sleep, these days, but I don't dream, and I wake up tired, as if in those visual passages my soul got lost and now in them stands watch, suffering. He has, you know, a great analysis of passion, but you're gonna find that analysis in the novel, not here. This letter isn't supposed to make, anything, easy for you.

I've been thinking, you know, about the visual, and about the human need to insert the visual into everything, even in text. But, to be fair, sonnets are visual constructs as well. They have form, every form is visual, even free verse is visual. I mean, for fucks sake, every letter is visual, every word, inside and outside of us. I even, for example, feel your touch, sometimes, visually.



Aesthetics are big part of our lives.

I'm trying to remember all the writers and verses and everything I wanted to write to you about in this letter, before I sat down, but the letter is the one in control. Which reminds me of Jason Silva who had an interesting theory about the "architecture of space" where, of course, he doesn't just speak about the spaces of reality which does have an effect on us, but also of mental and, maybe taking it a step further, spiritual architecture. It's about how any space makes changes to our consciousness, and how we make changes to the space we have.

Take your apartment for example, you have a space that you decorate and organize in whichever way you want, as much as you can, and then that same space that you decorated and organized starts to decorate and organize you, changes your habits, your movements, your everyday life. Hence, it's very important which space we are in, and on top of all that, how we're going to decorate and organize it.

He takes it to a "higher level" too, he says, imagine a poet that wrote a poem, and then that poem reads him, or to be more precise, by reading the poem the poet reads himself and the poem changes him. He finds, in the space organized and decorated, space he never saw before. Or something like that. I can't, really get into that more, tiredness is getting the best of me, like every step going up a staircase that has no end, every new step becoming heavier, stinging more and more.

You know, Ernest Decker said, in his book "The Denial of Death" that we are "gods with anuses". Its sounds horrible, who likes talking about assholes, buttholes, whichever you prefer, dear, but there is some truth to it. We do create, we just have to, from time to time, really get things out of us. The idea of god is the idea of creation, of worlds. And I kind of think that all of us, we create and imagine each other up, and that nothing exists, and that in that lack of existence everything exists, if you know what I mean. It sounds like a weird version of nihilism, I know. To be honest, I



don't know what the fuck this is all about, but it's something that's been on my mind a lot, at least recently.

Now, when talking about creating the world and us, the gods with anal openings, and since I already mentioned Danijelovski, I remember Radovanović's "The Wasteland". I strongly suggest you read it. That's a visual novel as well, but much more poetic than "House of leaves" if in nothing else, at least in form.

I feel, all of a sudden, that I'm upside down, that's why I'm writing the final section like this, tired, late at night, on the 29th of January. And I think, you and some far away cities are the only things that comfort me, it's like there is nothing here, and that my voice, my breathing, and the temporal forecast of my thoughts are somewhere in the distance. It's as if my name, maybe, somewhere, when I write, means something like "dis-stance and struggle".

*Translated from Serbian to English
Aleksandar Hrubenja*



SNEŽANA SAVKIĆ

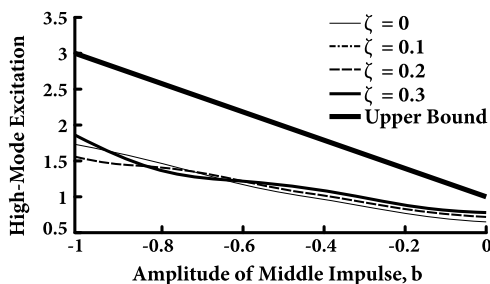
WHY SUNFLOWERS?

In the rightmost corner of the gulf of the eye, a vacuum. Why now does the Perfect point of Consciousness arrive, suppressing the Primitive air? The midnight silence from the South, and myself not dying from light and that is what is blinding. The December of stomach cramps: Somewhere dreams are being separated. Telomeres acting like a biological clock that sets the time of death for a stem cell.

What will the encounter look like? If I define YOU, I defile YOU!*

I see, widened eyes morphing into pieces of glass while it cackles... and sobs like a spider incessantly giving birth: the dry-eye syndrome. Blood pours, runs down the neck between polished contours of tendons and veins, separating two oceans of fear. The first hid itself in the cord between the oesophagus and the oncoming vertigo ages ago, in the twitch through which convulsed fingers try to move like a dying tango... without a tear, without a breath. Its pointless breathing in Consciousness anyway. It's just 20 Watts of energy that flash in the brain (question: who am I?)...

Almost petrified into touch, someone's Silence lays over bones. Feel the womb of the soul turn towards a world freed from the internal... It whispers to itself the Same Story: Once upon a time... In their Auric Oneness!



* Scatter me into the waters of life, as if I'm in the wine cellars of eternal Solomon. Here the fire of your Love shall be enticed once more and will grow so strong that no brook can extinguish it... Let me then be sealed by the light of the new



world, so that I too may achieve immortality and radiance, in which light and dark will alternate no more.

I walk naked upon the freezing, well-trodden path. Head violently held high. Arms crossed with fingers barely touching hips. A perfect angle. PAIN! My own body eats me and my pores viciously bite the inside of my skin. A passageway for the freezing raindrops! I'm becoming ever thinner for the water is pouring me into its own current. I take up the inarticulate dance of bodies and voices. The unfamiliar space encircling me more and more and from all sides I only see walls, black as the pitch used to poison mice. The voices are unbearable, are legion, like a minuscule particle scattered infinitely, screaming for time. Event horizon! I can't stay vertical anymore, the weight of the water is unbearable. It's rising, covering me, while my eyes are fixed at the moon. And that is all I see. The moon that has begun to bleed... I'm not where I'm supposed to be anymore. I'm away. I am no one's Luna* anymore, despite being born under the moon of the wolf. As if a tear is trying to give birth, but all I have is a memory... that is yet to be born.

**IAmTheOneWhoTranscendsAllBoundaries
YouAreTheOneWhoBringsLightAndFreedom.
OrWasItTheOtherWayAround*

Up! (Whispers from the inside)...the already exhausted body is moving. It is! Rapidly plummeting, but the strong pull of someone's arm brings it to the pale circle that is becoming more and more defined... I'm afraid of them, but they call to me seductively, like the forbidden places of childhood, as if I stepped into a different one...in which everything begins. I cough up the frozen drops that suffocate me every night before I fall asleep, as if they were issuing a command – DO NOT DREAM. But this time, a dream broke through in the form of a voice whose mother tongue I might not have known, but which I understood. For the first time, that tongue crept under my skin, I could see them... – words. A swell of pores and pressure. As if I'm doing another incomprehensible dance before

* *The day we met*



Him!* Now I see a glimpse of him with every raise of my eyelids: If I define YOU...

I held out my arms, as if I don't see them, I only feel the powerful pushing of hands pressed onto my back... The brand that put the border to sleep, but awoke the Secret of Dreams.

** His breath, which hides wilderness and freedom. Wilderness that conquered the dark, freedom that overcame the meekness of death. The dark consumed the mortal death-bed dream... I saw the sunflowers: From now on, I will adopt That Path, for the Trail I will follow shall open the Womb of the Soul, in which I am hidden.. the ME I was afraid of, but that I dreamed I would awaken, in eternity or through the power of the words that I knew I would one day read, like a secret cypher for understanding – Love and Death.*

The midnight silence of the South is fading... I still feel hands like fire down the arches of my ribs and the cavity between them and a body that clings to me closer and closer until with lightly rough and abrupt motions bends me... already I see his shape more clearly in the corner of my eye, and I know I don't want resistance, pores are opening up again, and inside of me a powerful desire is welling up, a spasm that with unknown pain and quivers moves me to quickly bend to his will. For the first time, I want to draw our Auric Oneness with my body. My mind is empty, I speak through my body, my movements became sounds without harmony, but his hands on my hips restrained me for a moment, and froze my fear, when he began entering my insides powerfully.

**The wail of the beast that foreshadowed the call, shifting to a place of a different day, separated eternity from my empty places, immense areas hidden behind the seemingly playful movements of my eyes, and the insincere smiles given to everyday life, the illusion that pulled me ever deeper into the darknesses of absurdity, denying my birth. The first time, His Word gave birth to me... For the first time I was able to comprehend the entirety of my own Being. From that entirety I never again wished to run away from. Because in the deepest dark some other blackness woke up the Light(s)...*



I was fading, every motion unmaking me, but simultaneously I was becoming the Lover which glutinously imbibed every inch of his skin, his bodily juices and his breath (Life drew a horizontal line) and the goddess that no longer knows limits, that haughtily laughs in the face of Death (Eternity voiced a vertical line). In an orgasmic spasm in which I pulled him (in)to me, I traced invisible coordinates, I wanted to follow their path only, he, my Voice from Dreams, for the first time came into being with all his might before my eyes: The beast stares at me with eyes of Impossible Meaning – Transrational Wind – and tells me to only follow its path from now on, in every scar I feel or write on my body. Because that is where the Name is hidden, and the Name is in the Night...

As a child I spent much time in the hills, I was told of the waters of Life... but I imagined it as that drop I will first taste off the lips of an undefined silhouette which I have, through the years, granted many different shapes. Then I would, furtively, find my favourite tree, and I would call it a sunflower, because there, in its sap-filled hollow, I would leave, on clumsily cut pieces of paper, secret messages that will one day be carried by the Sun's rays and find their way to Him, whoever he may be. Because the Sun always reached this hollow, and I was certain that the Unknown man I will yearn for, will come from Light.

... In the rightmost corner of the gulf of the eye, a vacuum. Why now does the Perfect point of Consciousness arrive, suppressing the Primitive air? I am not dying from light... The December of stomach cramps: Somewhere dreams are being separated. Telomeres acting like a biological clock that sets the time of death for a stem cell. Sunflowers turning towards the Moon....

What will the encounter look like? If I define YOU, I defile YOU!*

(...)

*Translated from Serbian to English
Aleksandar Hrubenja*



NENAD ŠAPONJA

WALKS THROUGH NOVI SAD'S PANORAMAS OF PROSE

Afterword

On walking and reading

Things are always different with your hometown. Novi Sad is privileged in my perception. Walking around it is a different thing than walking around Buenos Aires, Rome, Istanbul or Jerusalem. There are too many intimate memories in one's own town. Even when you walk around other towns, you walk around your own, too. In many ways. You walk in a mentally personal way, and you walk through its literary story. And that is what I am perhaps most interested in. What are those places where Novi Sad becomes a literary point. Where I can compare my visions of the City with the visions of the City of other writers.

Because, one way or another, Novi Sad is easy to cover by walking. For years, I have been cruising its streets every day, usually taking predictable, as well as some unpredictable routes, sometimes. Unpredictable things are, of course, far more attractive to us than the known and already mastered ones. When I am not in Novi Sad, I walk around other places, often on other continents, yet the essence of walking, be it there somewhere or in Novi Sad, is almost always following the literary map you have taken from your reading experience. And then, before you, in the material world, *somewhere else*, far away from home, *something else* incarnates. You put together an in-depth picture of a City.

So, stories linked to a City exist in parallel with its plan or busy images of people popping up on its faces.



The contemporary and the old anthology of Novi Sad stories

Some twenty years ago, urged by Franja Petrinović, who was the editor for the ramped-up publishing company “Stylos”, I prepared two anthologies of Novi Sad stories. At the time, we talked a lot about Novi Sad as a prose toponym, and as a place where the neo-avant-garde currents in Serbian prose first stirred, as indeed, did prose as such, a century earlier. Hence, the idea crystallised of making “The Anthology of the Contemporary Story of Novi Sad” as a rather special decoration on the Christmas tree of our literature.

The book featured the stories of Novi Sad writers and stories about Novi Sad that were written in the second half of the 20th century by authors ranging from Boško Petrović, Aleksandar Tišma, Danilo Kiš, Judita Šalgo, Rešin Tucić, Voja Despotov, Milorad Grujić and Branko Andrić, to the youngest authors of the time – Damjanov, Pisarev, Kajtez, Radonjić, Tasić and Blašković. It was very well received by the readership and critics, even outside Novi Sad, and the fact is noteworthy that, at that time, in Park Hotel in Novi Sad, it was part of the room inventory, like the Bible in some American hotels. As it turned out, Novi Sad deserved to have its own anthology of stories revealing a convincing literary reality.

The book sold out very soon, and the same publisher, instead of a new edition, offered me a new project – to make “The Anthology of the Old Story of Novi Sad” that would outline a prose literary map of this city a hundred years earlier, from the late 19th to the early 20th century. The contemporary story was something I lived with; I knew or wrote as a critic about all its actors, and it was up to me to decide what kind of image of the City I was going to offer. What kind of a walk the reader would be taken on through literary forest. The book was compiled relatively quickly, as if it had had always been there and just needed to be revealed.

Things were completely different with “The Anthology of the Old Story of Novi Sad”. The task was to put together a paleontological story of



the 19th century literary history, to discover the genuine picture in the multitude of names and fading manuscripts, and at the same time, to recognise the story that was the invisible literary Novi Sad of the early 20th century. At times, instead of being a literary critic, I played the role of a literary detective, uncovering some completely forgotten names from the interwar period (such as Dušan Mikić, or somewhat less invisible Nenad Mitrov). In compiling this prose kaleidoscope, especially for the 19th century, I had great help from Sava Damjanov, whose knowledge of literary history was invaluable. Reading old magazines and books was supplemented by anecdotes and stories in which we revived the world long gone. Finally, the book consisted of two literary representations – Koder, Subotić, Ignjatović, Zmaj, Ruvarac, Laza Kostić, Kosta Trifković, Grčić Milenko, Ilija Ogjanović and Dragutin Ilić from the 19th century, and, on the other hand, Mileta Jakšić. Isidora, Crnjanski, Kašanin, Veljko Petrović, Svetislav Stefanović, Žarko Vasiljević and Bogdan Čiplić, from the time that was once new.

Today, it seems to me that the historical and literary-historical aspects of this book best show the depth of Novi Sad's existence as a City, a persuasiveness which led it to modernism and avant-garde of the 20th, stretching into this third millennium of ours.

The story goes on – Novi Sad changes its prose faces

Of course, stories are written in the third millennium as well, despite the radical turn and our time's accelerated perception. Perhaps literature is written more than ever, but read disproportionately little and valued even less. However, literature still exists, and I found it a challenge to see what kind of literature was being written in Novi Sad. Or, around it.

When I received the invitation from another editor, Saša Radonjić this time, to make the second, expanded edition of "The Anthology of the Contemporary Story of Novi" for the newly launched book series "My Novi Sad" of the Novi Sad Writers' Association published by "Solaris", I



was practically ready for it. Some writers from the late 20th century had become even more recognisable, having written stories that take place in Novi Sad, while some others have appeared and established themselves in prose fiction, such as Slobodan Tišma, for instance. They were to be included in the anthology, extending its life into the new time. However, re-reading it confirmed to me that it was a book with a story of its own that should not be changed even today, twenty years later. It has the charm of a whole. Creating a completely new book was called for. Another one. And trying to find the charm of *its* wholeness.

Time passes, and Novi Sad has continued to live on, among other things, in the stories of its writers. I did not want to look at literary Novi Sad through the lenses from 20 years ago, so I started reading Novi Sad anew, wanting to make out what kind of a City it was in the new millennium.

Reading Novi Sad through the stories that have been created in it for years, I noticed some names, new and old, already known in literature. I asked those names, those writers, to send me the stories of their own choosing. That is why this book is, among other things, called a prose panorama. A potential Anthology of the latest Novi Sad story is simmering still somewhere in the future. It is expected to appear after another decade once the vistas of this time of ours, which is currently in progress, become sharper.

Until then, we are enjoying this book that has unexpectedly emerged before us. In a flash, it shows us that completely different registers of storytelling *in* and *around* the City can be merged, compiling the war experiences of the City from the late 20th century, offered by the stories of Milenko Ž. Pavlov and Djeza Bordaš, the post-war perception of Nikola Šanta, the intimist symphony of Slobodan Tišma or the emotional map of heroes of Franja Petrinović, the mystical metafiction of Djordje Pisarev as opposed to the Vukian and pre-Vukian erotic recognition of language in Sava Damjanov's story.



Milan Micić sovereignly takes us to America and into the world of our emigrants from almost a hundred years ago, and the hero of the story of Nikola Lekić receives the news of his father's death in America today. His father and his Novi Sad are the node of the story of Laslo Blašković, which presents the City as a deeply personal story. Linguistic meticulousness is immersed in the images of the City of Miodrag Kajtez, while Saša Radonjić shows us how the consciousness of the hero can shrink in the middle of something resembling an action film. We can read the cartographies of the City, of any city, as long as it is seen from the Novi Sad point of view, in the story of Mario Liguori, an Italian who became a Novi Sad resident, as well as a Serbian language writer, while Novi Sad poet Oto Horvat, who has become a resident Florence and an Italian, sends us a postcard from abroad. On the other hand, from the City, Zdenka Valent talks about the hellish reality of its ordinary tedious everydayness.

The youngest generation of writers who create in Novi Sad also did quite well in this prose melange, whether presenting intimate kaleidoscopes of images of its reality from the stories of Bojan Samson and Bojan Krivokapić, concise Twitter stories of Miloš Jocić, hot prose experiments of Dalibor Tomasović and Snežana Savkić, or completely divergent ways of prose relocation from the specific City in the stories of Nastasja Pisarev and Marija Prgomelja.

And there it is, before us, a prose panorama of two or three generations of writers who create in the third millennium. And I presume that you, as you are closing this book, are slowly recognising the cloud of energy that the stories of a City have lifted you to.

Translated from Serbian to English
Lidija Kapičić



NOTES ABOUT AUTHORS

Milutin Ž. Pavlov (Kikinda, 1943), poet, narrator, novelist, essayist, playwright. He was educated in Požarevac, Kikinda, Zrenjanin and Novi Sad. His works have been translated into Macedonian, Russian, Armenian, Hungarian, German, Romanian and Albanian. He has won several awards and recognitions for his literary work. He lives and works in Novi Sad. Published books - poetry: *Vatra zrelog bagrema* (1973), *Ženi sam rekao ljubav* (1977), *Nad glinom žito* (1986), *Bela jesen u novembru* (1991), *Sve ptice iz dedinog šesira* (1998), *Pas izgubljenog čoveka* (2014); novels: *Suvi žig knjige drugova* (1979), *Šarmer male varoši* (1990, 1995), *Rasput* (1994), *Velizar i Đurđica* (2000), *Galop gospodina Aresa* (2003), *Nebo je veliko dugme* (2006), *Dobošarski ponedeljak* (2009), *Kostim na sceni divljih ruža* (2011); collections of stories: *Razaznajem tornjeve* (1971, 1989), *Klovnovi dolazi u podne* (1982), *Duhovi kartonskog kofera* (2005), *Cipele vranog konja* (2007), *Žuti fijaker* (2008), *Teretni voz* (2017)...

Slobodan Tišma (Stara Pazova, 1946) is a contemporary Serbian writer, but also the founder of the cult new wave bands *Luna* and *La strada*. He studied literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad and the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. He was the editor of the cultural section in the magazine "Indeks" in 1969, the editor of the literary program at the Youth Forum and the editor in the magazine "Polja" in 1981. Since the 1990s he has been publishing books of poetry and prose (*Marinizmi* 1995, *Vrt kao to* 1997, *Blues Diary* 2001, *Urvidek* 2005, and then: Quattro stagioni, Bernardijeva soba, Pitoma religiozna razmišljanja: dnevnik nepoznatog, Kvadrati trouglovi, Horror or ... He has won several prestigious literary awards, including the NIN Award for 2011, for the novel *Bernardijeva soba*.

Bordás Győző (Vrbas, 1948) studied at the Department of Hungarian Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, and then continued his postgraduate studies and received his master's degree



in 1984. He was a journalist in the cultural section of the daily newspaper “Magyar Szó”, editor of the Novi Sad literary magazine “Híd”, as well as director and editor-in-chief of the publishing house “Forum”. From 1995 to 2000, he was the General Manager of “Forum Holding” Corporation. He has published novels: *Fűzfásip (Vrbina svirala*, 1992, which was translated into German in 1999 under the title *Weidenpfeife*), *Csukódó zsilipek (Zatvarajuće prevodnice* 1995), *Katonaszökevény (Dererter* 2004; translated into Serbian in 2012), books of essays: *Üvegház (Staklenik)* and *Ténta és repesz (Mastilo i šrapnel)*, a book of collected novellas *Az Úr órája (Čas(ovnik) Gospodnji*, 2008). Books *Kertkapu (Vrata vrta*, 2010) and *Ami porunk (Naša prašina*, 2018) contain recent novellas and essays by the writer. For his work in the field of permeating the ties between Hungarian and Serbian culture, the author was awarded the “Pro Cultura Hungarica” award (1997), the “Márai Sándor” Literary Prize (2003) in Hungary, and the “Szenteleky Kornél” and “Szirmai Károly” awards in our country. The author lives and works in Novi Sad.

Sava Damjanov (b.1956, Novi Sad). He wrote prose, literary-historical exposes, as well as literary critique; worked as the editor of several magazines and publications. Was employed as a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, and as a guest-lecturer at numerous universities abroad. Adapted for print numerous works of Serbian 18th, 19th and 20th century authors. Author of anthologies comprising Serbian erotic literature and postmodern fantasy, as well as several books of artistic prose, literary science studies, collections of essays and literary critiques. In 2011. and 2012. he published five tomes of select literary-historical and literary critique books (*Damjanov: srpska književnost iskosa 1-5*); Published books of artistic prose: *Istraživanje savršenstva* (1983/2018), *Kolači, Obmane, Nonsensi* (1989/2018), *Pričke* (1994), *Povesti različite: lirske, epske, no najviše neizrecive* (1997), *Glosolalija* (2001), *Remek-djelca* (2005), *Istorija kao apokrif* (2008), *Porno-liturgija Arhiepiskopa Save* (2010). In 2014., his LAST novel came out of the press, *Itika Jeropolitika@VUK*. Starting in 2018., “Aurora” publishing house published his select prose



Damjanov: Iskoni b slovo. During 2019. a book of interviews Also sprach Damjanov came out as well, *Epilog* book of essays, as well as *Very Eccentric Stories*, a book of select short stories translated to English. Winner of several prestigious literary awards.

Djordje Pisarev (Vizić, 1957) is the editor of *Nedeljni Dnevnik*, deputy editor of “*Dnevnik*”, a professor of Serbian language and literature. Member of the Serbian Literary Society, Novi Sad Writers’ Association and the Association of Writers of Vojvodina. Published more books (of prose) than he actually wrote: *Mimezis mimezis romana* (1983), *Knjiga gospodara priča* (1987), *Knjiga naroda lutaka* (1988), *Miki Šepard: Strašne priče* (1990), *Gotska priča* (1990), *Kovčeg* (1992), *Popisujući imena stvari* (1995), *Poslanice iz Novog Jerusalima* (1996), *Zavera bliznakinja* (1999), *Pod senkom zmaja* (2001), *Besmrtnici* (2002), *Pred vratima raja* (2002), *U srcu grada* (2004), *Ponoć je u sobi uspomena* (2005), *A ako umre pre nego što se probudi?* (2009), *Velika očekivanja* (2012), *A Plot of Twin Sisters* (2014), *I noć se uvukla u njegovo srce* (2015), *Pozna večera za Gospođu Fibi* (2016), *U kuhinji sa Zevsom* (2017), *Stanica za lov na kitove* (2019). His work can be found in roughly twenty anthologies and selections of Serbian fiction. Recipient of multiple literary recognitions.

Franja Petrinović (Novi Slankamen, 1957) writer, literary critic and editor. He studied in Novi Sad at the Faculty of Philosophy. He has published several novels and essays. He was the editor of the “*Polja*” magazine, a journalist of the cultural section of the “*Dnevnik*” daily newspaper and the editor in the “*Stilos*” publishing company. He has won several literary awards. Published books: *Mimezis, Mimezis Romana* (1983) (Mimesis, Mimesis Romana), *Tkivo, Opsene: Povest* (1988/2001) (Tissue, Illusions: History), *Izveštaj Anđela* (1997) (Angel’s Report), *Pred Vratima Raja* (2002) (At the Gates of Paradise), *Poslednji Tumač Simetrije* (2005) (The Last Symmetry Interpreter), *Trauma - Stečajne Legende* (2009) (Trauma – Bankruptcy Legends), *Almaški Kružoci Lečenih Mesečara* (2011) (Almaš Circles of Treated Sleepwalkers), *Gramatika Poremećaja: Balade s Početka*



Veka (2013) (Grammar of Disorders: Ballads from the Beginning of the Century), *Priče Punog Meseca: Izabrane Priče* (2015) (Full Moon Tales: Selected Stories), *Popravljač Ogledala* (2017) (Mirror Mender).

Nikola Šanta (Djurdjevo, 1959) works as a publishing editor at NIU “Ruske slovo” in Novi Sad. He writes poetry, prose, essays, literary criticism in Ruthenian and Serbian. He published collections of poems: *Vodena igla*, 1985; *Zecevi*, 1985; *Osluskivanja*, 1989; *Pletenica* 2004; *Otkrivanje sveta*, 2009; novels: *Putovanje u Lavov*, 2012; *Panonska nemman*, 2017; dramas: *Fontana*, 2007; *San o Lavovu*, 2008; essays: *Santovki* 2016. He is one of the founders of the Christian magazine “Dzvoni”, he is a member of the Editorial Board of the magazine for literature “Trag”, a member of the Writers’ Association of Vojvodina. He is represented in several anthologies of poetry, and his poems, stories and essays have been translated into Ukrainian, Russian, Macedonian and Romanian.

Milan Micić (Zrenjanin, 1961), a historian by trade, a writer by vocation, one of the few modern Serbian writers who harmoniously and successfully balanced their academic work and their fiction. He published roughly thirty books, in the fields of historiography, essay writing, documentary prose, short prose and poetry, among which are: *Mesec od venecijanskog sapuna* (2013), *Kod živahnog ogledala* (2014), *Spisak senovitih imena* (2016), *Ab ovo* (2018), *Dan koji je stao da se odmori* (2019); *Bečarac i seferini* (2008), *Srpski dobrovoljci 1914- 1918: životi, sećanja* (2017), *Amerikanci-srpski dobrovoljci iz SAD (1914-1918)* from 2018. and other. Received multiple prestigious awards - “Stevan Sremac”, “Milovan Vidaković”, “Braća Micić”, “Andrićeva staza”, the “Vladimir Ćorović” Special charter for historiography from the Serbian Cultural-Educational Society “Prosvjeta” in Gacka, the “Teodor Pavlović” award for best book, etc.

Miodrag Kajtez (Novi Sad, 1962) has published the books: *Podšišavajući Se* (stories, 1987) (While Trimming), *Nemoć* (novel, 1989) (Power-



lessness), *Sveta Porodica* (novel, 1993, 2004) (The Holy Family), *Porno Vežbe* (novel, 2001, 2015) (Porn Exercises), *Antiluftnost* (novel, 2010) (Antiluftness), *Izložba* (Exhibition) (2015, „Laza Kostić” award for the book of the year; this book has also been translated into Russian).

Saša Radonjić (b. Travnik, 1964) graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. His major works include: *Tetoviranje andjela* (1992) *Priručnik za pauna* (1993), *Traktat o šesirima* (1995), *Tri ukradena romana* (1999), *Severno od romana* (2002), *Klub ljubitelja SMENE 8* (2008), *Pesme čudnih lica* (2011), *Švedski sto* (2014), *Autobiografske i druge nestvarne priče* (2015), *Večernji doručak* (2017), and *Roman Rubikova kocka* (2019). He has compiled the *Dictionary of Serbian Travel Prose* (1995) and the anthology of phantastic prose *Sazveždje Lem* (2019). The author of screenplays for the feature TV film after the novella *Priručnik za pauna* coproduced by TV NOVI SAD and KOMUNA, Radonjić has also done dramatic adaptations for *Tri ukradena romana* and *Klub ljubitelja SMENE 8*, which are on repertoires of the National Theatre in Kikinda and the Šabac Theatre. He was awarded *The Seal of the Town of Sremski Karlovci* for the book of the year 1988. In 2005 Radonjić formed the *Solaris Blues Band*, recording 6 albums and about twenty video spots. As a singer-songwriter, he has released two albums – *Mesečarska adresa* (2016) and *Mahovina i mikrofonija* (2018). He is the founder and co-owner of the publishing house and bookstore SOLARIS in Novi Sad.

Laslo Blašković (Novi Sad, 1966), poet, novelist, narrator, essayist. He has published the following collections of poems: *Gledaš* (1986) (You Look), *Zlatno Doba* (1987) (Golden Age), *Crvene Brigade* (1989) (The Red Brigades), *Ritam-Mašina* (1991) (Beat Box), *Životi Bacača Kocke* (1997) (Lives of Dice Throwers), *Jutarnja Daljina* (2002) (Morning Distance), *Žene Pisaca* (2006) (Writers' Wives), *Prasvršetak* (2016) (Primordial Ending), *Bogzna* (2018) (God Knows..); the book of stories *Priča o Malaksalosti* (2010) (The Story of Languor) and the poetic prose *Imenjak* (1994) (Namesake); essay book *Kraj Citata* (2007) (End of Quote), travel



prose *Gle!* (2016) (Look!), as well as novels: *Svadbeni Marš* (1997) (The Wedding March), *Mrtva Priroda sa Satom* (2000) (Still Life with a Clock), *Madonin Nakit* (2003) (Madonna's Jewellery), *Adamova Jabučica* (2005) (Adam's Apple), *Turnir Grbavaca* (2007) (Humpback Tournament), *Posmrtna Maska* (2012) (The Death Mask), *Razbrajalica* (2014) (Tic Tac Toes). He has won several prestigious literary awards, and his novel *Madonin Nakit* (Madonna's Jewellery) was chosen among the ten best Serbian novels written after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which were part of the anthological edition entitled *Sto slovenskih romana* (One Hundred Slavic Novels). His books been translated into English, French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Slovak, Ukrainian, Macedonian, Bulgarian and Slovenian.

Oto Horvat (b. Novi Sad, 1967), a poet and prose writer, acquired his academic education in Novi Sad, Erlangen and Berlin. He writes and translates poetry from Hungarian, German and Italian. For his first novel *Sabo je stao* (2014, 2015) he received the Award of the Serbian Literary Society 'Biljana Jovanović' and the 'Mirko Kovač' Award. Poetry collections: *Gde nestaje šuma* (1987, 'Branko Award'), *Zgrušavanje* (1990), *Gorki listovi* (1996), *Fotografije* (1996), *Dozvola za boravak* (2002), *Putovati u Olmo* (2008, 'Miroslav Antić' Award), *Selected & New Poems* (2009). Collection of stories: *Kao Celanovi ljubavnici* (2016). He lives and works in Florence.

Zdenka Valent-Belić (1975) poet, translator, and editor of the magazine *Nový život*. Published the bilingual collection of poetry *Eterizacija* (2018), a book of dialogues *Иміґрантіи у Вавилонској кули* (2017), as well as in Slovakian: *Imigranti v Babylovnskej veži* (2018), children's book *Pamätník rodiny Perlenchslipovej* (2019) and the collection of essays *Zvuk Eurydikiných krokov* (2019). Received multiple awards for her poetry and translation work. Translated the works of more than twenty notable Slovakian writers. Lives in Novi Sad.



Mario Liguori (Sarno, Italy, 1976), graduated in Comparative Languages and Cultures at the University of L'Orientale in Naples, and completed his master's studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, where he also received his doctorate. He writes in Italian and Serbian. He is the author of the travel prose *Snatrenja* (2010), the bilingual collection *Sedam jesenjih priča / Sette storie autunnali* (2013), the book of stories *Prva ljubav*, the monograph *Vedi Napoli e poi muori: Naples in Serbian travel-ogues from 1851 to 1951* (2015) and *Ideja Napulja: predstave o raju u kojem obitavaju đavoli* (2018), as well as the novels *Napuljski diplomata* (2016) and *Samo ubistvo* (2019). He published in the newspapers *Danas*, *Blic*, *Politika*, *Oslobođenje*, *L'Isola*, *Polja* and other magazines and daily papers. He was a guest at the prestigious Harriman Institute at Columbia University in New York. He teaches Italian at the Faculty of Philosophy and the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad.

Bojan Samson (Osijek, 1978) lives and works as a librarian in Novi Sad. Collections of poems: *Superblues* (2007), *Folk Singer* (2018). He is one of the editors of the collection of new Novi Sad poetry *Nešto je u igri* (2008). Together with Zoran Dražić, he forms the poetic-musical group *Bašta fetiša*.

Bojan Krivokapić (Bačka Topola, 1985) graduated from the Department of Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. From 2012 to 2017, he was a member of the Serbian Literary Society. He was hired by the *Treći Trg* Belgrade Publishing House, as a prose editor. He is also the editor of the *Zenit Books* edition from Novi Sad. His books have been translated into Italian, German, Hungarian, Albanian and English. Published books: *Trči Lilit, Zapinju Demoni* (2013) (Run Lilith, The Demons Are Coming Closer), *Žoharov Let* (2014) (Cockroach's Flight), *Proleće Se Na Put Sprema* (2017) (Spring Is on Its Way) and *Gnezdo Dečaka* (2019) (The Boy's Nest). He has won several literary awards for prose, including the „Mirko Kovač” Award (2018) for the novel *Proleće Se*



Na Put Sprema (2017) (Spring Is on Its Way) as the best work of a young author in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro.

Nastasja Pisarev (b. Novi Sad, 1986) earned her PhD in Comparative Literature from the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad with the thesis *The Poetics of Chamber Spaces in Milos Crnjanski's Prose*. She has published the book of literary theory *Poslednja oaza heroja* (Mali Nemo, 2013), while her theoretical and prose texts have been published in numerous literary journals (*Letopis Matice Srpske*, *Sveske*, *Polja*, *Ulaznica*, *Hid*, *Zlatna Greda*, *Povelja*). She works as a web editor, literary critic and journalist for the daily newspaper *Dnevnik* (Novi Sad) and writes articles about culture, pop culture, history of everyday life and the internet. She has been a contributor for *Politikin zabavnik*.

Miloš Jocić (b. Novi Sad, 1988) is an Assistant Professor of Serbian Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. He is the editor of the literary journal of the Novi Sad Writers' Association *Medjutim*, *DNK* (medjutim.dnk.org.rs). Jocić is the author of popular fiction written in the form of twitter stories, minimalist prose written and posted on the social network Twitter (@kvestkosmos), following the network's strict restrictions on the number of characters.

Marija Bjelica born Prgomelja (1988) is a teacher of Serbian Literature and Language, BA (Hons). She writes and publishes poetry, short stories and literary criticism in the country and the region. She is a member of the Association of Journalists of Serbia and the Association of Novi Sad Writers. In 2014, she received the *Stražilovo Award* for the book of poetry *Alter Ego*, in 2018 she received the *Golden Letter Award* for the best book of short stories *Games of Spring and Shadow*, and the *Izvor Award* for the best story. She lives and works in Novi Sad.

Nikola Lekić (b. Belgrade, 1989) graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy with a degree in History of Art. He writes rhyming and non-rhyming short and medium-length forms. His works have been published in liter-



ary journals and several short story compilations. In 2014, he printed on a photocopy machine his first novel *Žbun u pedeset primeraka*. In 2016, he self-published fifty copies of the novel *Persson*, which was published by the publishing house Laguna in 2019. He lives and works between Novi Sad and Belgrade.

Dalibor Tomasović (Sombor, 1989). Works as an English teacher. His poetry and reviews can be found in magazines and online. Published works: collection of poetry 29, published on the website dalibortomasovic.com in 2015, and *Onism* published by the City library “Vladislav Petković Dis”, for which he won the award “Mladi Dis” in 2018. Member of the editorial board of the *Medjutim DNK* magazine (medjutim.dnk.org.rs).

Snežana Savkić (Loznica, 1990). PhD Student at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad (Serbian literature department). Junior- researcher at the Institute for Literature and Art in Belgrade. Writes short stories, essays, and reviews, publishes in periodicals. Winner of the Branko award, given by the Gallery of Matica Srpska, for her master thesis “Čuvari sveta Save Damjanova - *Itika Jeropolitika@VUK* kao letopis opširnih večnosti” (2015). Member of the editorial board of the *Medjutim DNK* magazine (medjutim.dnk.org.rs).



ABOUT THE EDITOR

Nenad Šaponja (b. Novi Sad, 1964), a poet, essayist and critic, whose verses are recognisable in contemporary Serbian poetry for their stylistic perfection, tightness and metaphysical insights. In the field of literary criticism, he promotes post-modern poetics and idiosyncratic interpretative approach to works of literature, which requires *living* in literature. He has written reviews for daily newspaper *Politika*. Besides poetry and critique, he writes short stories.

His first poetry collection *Djakonda* (1990) earned him the *Branko Award*, the major Yugoslav young poets' award at that time. The essay collection *Bedecker sumnje* (1997) received the *Milan Bogdanović Award*, as well as *Prosveta's Book of the Year Award*. Šaponja's bibliography includes the following poetry collections: *Odrazi varke* (1993), *Očevidnost* (1996), *More* (1998), *Četiri poeme* (2000), *Slatka smrt* (2012), *Postoji li dodir tvoje duše?* (2014), *Izgledam, dakle nisam* (2017, 'Miroslav Antić' Award), *Silazim u tišinu tega bačene kocke* (2019) as well as the critique and essay collections: *Autobiografija čitanja* (1999) and *Iskustvo pisanja* (2001). His poetry has been translated into English, Italian, French, Slovakian, Albanian, Polish, Macedonian and Romanian.

He has also published the book of travel prose *A Brisel se da prehodati lako* (2018).

Šaponja has been the editor of several anthologies and selections, including, among others: *The Anthology of the Contemporary Story of Novi Sad* (2000), *The Anthology of the Old Story of Novi Sad* (2003), *Prosvetina knjiga krimi price (a crime story collection, 2003)*.

In 2012, he founded the publishing house AGORA, today one of the leading Serbian publishers, which occupies a unique position in the field due to a wide range of interest and high-quality selection. As the editor-in-chief and publisher, he has signed over 380 titles. Many books pub-



lished by AGORA have been awarded the most prestigious literary recognitions.

Šaponja is one of the founders and the present president of the Novi Sad Writers' Association.



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