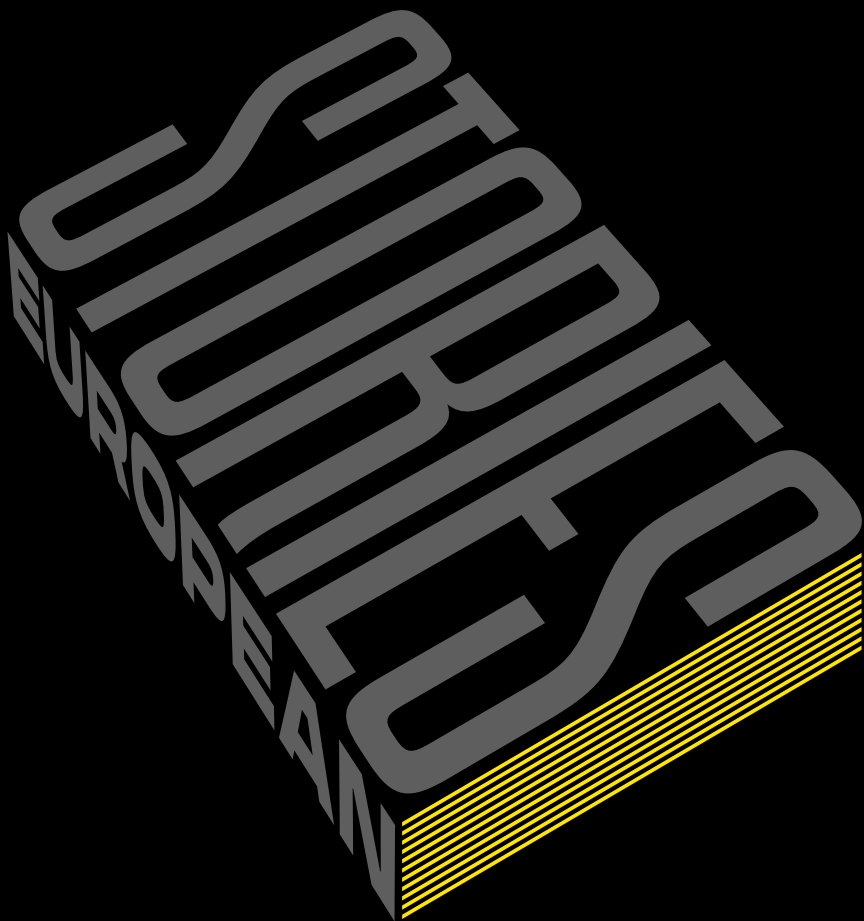




EUROPEAN
UNION
PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE

**AUTHORS
2026**



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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2026

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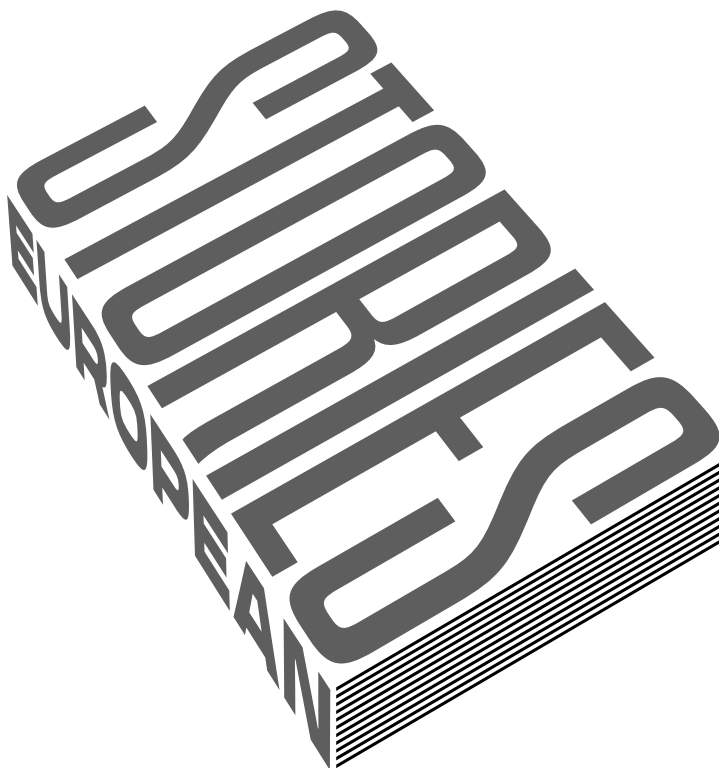
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Illustrations: Claudia Daman

Print
ISBN 978-92-68-37739-0
ISSN 2600-0725
doi:10.2766/8564715
NC-01-26-040-P9-C

PDF
ISBN 978-92-68-37738-3
ISSN 2600-0733
doi:10.2766/9429864
NC-01-26-040-P9-N

EPUB
ISBN 978-92-68-37737-6
ISSN 2600-0733
doi:10.2766/6069909
NC-01-26-040-P9-E



**EUROPEAN
UNION
PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE**

**AUTHORS
2026**



**Creative
Europe**



**FEDERATION OF EUROPEAN PUBLISHERS
FÉDÉRATION DES ÉDITEURS EUROPÉENS**



The voice of booksellers



CYPRUS
Evridiki
PERICLEOUS-
PAPADOPOULOU



CZECHIA
Dora KAPRÁLOVÁ



ESTONIA
Lilli LUUK



FINLAND
Susanna HAST



FRANCE
Hélène FRÉDÉRICK



KOSOVO
Arben IDRIZI



LIECHTENSTEIN
Mathias OSPELT



LUXEMBOURG
Elise SCHMIT



MOLDOVA
Paula ERIZANU



MONTENEGRO
Vladimir VUJOVIĆ



**NORTH
MACEDONIA**
Ivan SHOPOV



SWEDEN
Frans
WACHTMEISTER



ARMENIA
Sargis HOVSEPYAN



CROATIA
Lora TOMAŠ

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FOREWORD

Dear readers,

The best sign that a book has moved us is that we want someone else to read it.

We recommend it to a friend. We talk about a character as if we had met them. A powerful book travels with us.

That is the quiet force of literature. It helps us recognise ourselves in lives very different from our own. It gives shape to fears, hopes and contradictions we may not yet have found the words for. And in doing so, it brings people closer together.

Europe is full of extraordinary books like that. Books waiting to be discovered. Written in languages that most of us do not speak. Carrying stories that all of us would recognise. The European Union Prize for Literature is designed to find those books – to build cultural bridges, remove linguistic barriers and let these stories travel.

It supports emerging authors from the 41 Creative Europe countries and helps their work reach new readers, new languages and new conversations. It is

a way of celebrating Europe's cultural diversity as something living: written, translated, shared and rediscovered.

I think, for example, of *Il-Gaġġa (The Cage)* by Frans Sammut. Written in Maltese and deeply rooted in Malta, it still speaks to questions that go far beyond one country: identity, belonging, ambition, constraint and the search for freedom. Europe has many such stories.

It is an honour to present this year's anthology, featuring the shortlisted authors of the 2026 European Union Prize for Literature. I warmly congratulate our Grand Prize laureate Dora Kaprálová for her novel *Mariborská hypnóza (The Maribor Hypnosis)* and our Special Mentions, Hélène Frédéric, from France, for *Lézardes (Rivers of White)* and Vladimir Vujović, from Montenegro, for *Slobodni udarci (Free Kicks)*. And also all the shortlisted authors for their outstanding contributions to contemporary European literature. Your work is proof that Europe's literary landscape is extraordinary.

I also extend my thanks to the jury, for their difficult task of choosing among exceptional talents, and to our partners, the Federation of European Publishers and the European and International Booksellers Federation.

The European Commission is proud to support these writers through the Creative Europe programme and the Culture Compass for Europe.

So read these books. Let them surprise you. Let them move you.

And when they do, share them.

That is how literature travels.
That is how Europe grows
closer together.

Glenn Micallef
Commissioner for
Intergenerational
Fairness, Youth,
Culture and Sport



EUROPEAN JURY

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

Kostas Spatharakis (Greece)

Kostas Spatharakis studied law in Athens and comparative literature in Thessaloniki. He worked for many years as a freelance translator, copy editor and proofreader, and in 2014 he founded an independent publishing house, based in Athens (Antipodes).

Ákos Brunner (Hungary)

Ákos Brunner studied philosophy at the University of Pécs, Hungary, and completed his doctoral studies at Central European University (CEU), Budapest, specialising in ancient Greek and Roman thought. From 2011 onward, he worked as a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at CEU and Eötvös Loránd University. Since 2019, he has worked in publishing. In 2022, he joined Typotex Publishing House, an independent Hungarian publisher known for its science and popular science catalogue and its contemporary European fiction series, which includes works by several winners

and nominees of the EUPL. Alongside his editorial work, Brunner also coordinates Typotex's ongoing Creative Europe literary translation project under the 'Circulation of European literary works' scheme.

Sinéad Mac Aodha (Ireland)

Sinéad Mac Aodha is the director of Literature Ireland, a government-funded organisation that promotes Irish literature abroad. She served as the Irish expert on the European Union OMC Working Group on Translation and Multilingualism. She recently co-edited an anthology of Irish short stories in Spanish, *Cuentos irlandeses contemporáneos*. Current projects include curating an exhibition of Irish authors' photographs at the European Parliament in Brussels and organising a conference celebrating Ireland's many European literary translators in Dublin. She was managing director of the Centre Culturel Irlandais Paris from 2016–2017. Mac Aodha currently sits on a number of literature and translation prize juries.

Bernhard L. Mohr (Norway)

Bernhard L. Mohr works as an acquiring editor of international fiction at Cappelen Damm, the largest publishing house in Norway. He publishes a wide range of literary authors in translation, among them Nobel prize laureates László Krasznahorkai and Kazuo

Ishiguro, Andrey Kurkov and Elisa Shua Dusapin. A Slavist by education, Mohr has written several critically acclaimed non-fiction books about Russia and its relationship with the West. In 2024, he initiated a support programme for non-fiction and fiction authors in Ukraine, a collaboration between the Norwegian writers' organisations, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and PEN Ukraine.

Alexandra Harvanová (Slovakia)

Alexandra Harvanová is a dedicated literary advocate and the face behind the independent bookstore Kníhkupectvo Na Korze in eastern Slovakia. Her career spans journalism, cultural production for the European Capital of Culture project, and bookstore management. As an author and organiser, she is best known for her innovative community initiatives, including student reading scholarships and charity book campaigns. Her work focuses on bridging the gap between quality literature and the general public, fostering a vibrant local community of readers. Harvanová brought to the jury the unique perspective of a bookseller who works daily to connect diverse audiences with European literature.

Barbara Anderlič (Slovenia)

Barbara Anderlič is an interpreter, translator and cultural worker from

Slovenia. She studied translation studies in Graz and Valladolid. Her most recent translation is Jurij Devetak's graphic novel *Nekropolis* (Schaltzeit Verlag, 2023) based on Boris Pahor's autobiographical book. Over the years, she has interpreted for several artists and writers, including Graciela Iturbide and Ana Schnabl. She also moderates literary events and works together with the Traduki network for literature and books. Anderlič was the recipient of the 2014 exil-DramatikerInnenpreis and a member of the Viennale audience jury in 2012. Having lived abroad for several years, she is currently based in Ljubljana.

Carmen Posadas (Spain)

Carmen Posadas is an award-winning Uruguayan-Spanish writer whose work spans children's literature, novels, essays and screenwriting. The daughter of a diplomat, she spent her childhood in Uruguay before moving to Madrid and later living in Moscow, Buenos Aires and London. She began her literary career in 1980 and has since published more than 15 children's books, 12 novels, biographies and numerous film and television scripts. Her novel *Pequeñas infamias* won Spain's Premio Planeta in 1998. Her works have been translated into more than 30 languages.

VERDICT OF THE EUROPEAN JURY

INTRODUCTION

The fourteen nominated books for the 2026 European Union Prize for Literature span the whole gamut of human experience. From complicated, frosty parent–child relationships, where the narrator’s gaze is firmly fixed upon the most intimate of catastrophes, to sweeping stories about whole countries and their destinies, we read about people seeking answers and redemption, often demonstrating compassion and bearing witness. From Japan to India to Maribor and to the Estonian bogland, these fictional works encompass a variety of styles ranging from high literary narratives to more experimental forms. Building on the great European literary traditions, these writers are also carving out new territories of their own. The future of European writing looks bright.

Jury motivations

LAUREATE: Czechia – Dora Kaprálová, *Mariborská hypnóza* (*The Maribor Hypnosis*)

Czech writer Dora Kaprálová achieves something quite remarkable with her short, snappy novel, *The Maribor Hypnosis*. Ostensibly framed as ‘just’ a guidebook to Maribor, the second largest city in Slovenia, Kaprálová’s nimble, light-footed jaunt through the city’s history belies the sheer craft behind this perfectly measured piece of writing. Kaprálová expertly shifts between the past and the present, playfully conjuring and honouring a shared European history and literary legacy. Think Joseph Roth meets Franz Kafka on a FlixBus. And they are headed to meet Tito.

As in Georgi Gospodinov’s *Natural Novel* and Amin Maalouf’s *The First Century after Beatrice*, one of the characters is the humble housefly, which plays an outsized role far surpassing its miniature proportions. This tiny, oftentimes unloved insect asks us to look closer at

reality – and the illusions, manipulations and, perhaps, hypnoses that have played a part in creating, addressing and understanding life throughout history. By also scrutinising the life of the famed Maribor illusionist Svengali, Kaprálová makes the reader reflect on our contemporary predicaments, the fleeting miracle that is life – scarcely a month in the case of housefly – and the significance of ordinary, smaller things.

With humour and irony, Kaprálová creates a freewheeling tour de force about universal truths that is, nonetheless, quintessentially European and, most importantly, an utterly delightful and compelling read.

SPECIAL MENTION: Montenegro – Vladimir Vujović, *Slobodni udarci* (Free Kicks)

In his short story collection *Free Kicks*, Montenegrin writer Vladimir Vujović showcases the breadth of his writing skills. Tackling a variety of themes – from personal childhood trauma to geopolitical catastrophes – Vujović carefully chooses his tone to fit the stories at hand, either employing traces of magic realism to subvert the reader's expectations or dialling up hyperbole and sarcasm to unflinchingly unmask the cruelty of the world. He expertly draws on both the American and the European short story traditions.

The pacing and rhythm of these stories unexpectedly change gears to keep readers guessing, albeit while exposing the smug and self-centred gaze of a

coddled bunch of literati or observing the almost hallucinatory thoughts of an adult cut off from society.

Vujović has proven to be a great new talent on the European literary scene – ready to take his free kick, a suspended moment in time, when everything seems possible.

SPECIAL MENTION: France – Hélène Frédérick, *Lézardes* (Rivers of White)

In her novel *Rivers of White*, Canadian-born Hélène Frédérick draws on personal experiences to depict the life of a Paris-based Quebecoise copy editor and writer. The fragmented yet fluid prose juxtaposes intimate ruminations on the narrator's relationship with her electrical mechanic father with reflections on work, planned obsolescence, precarity and social class.

The copy editor's job is to constrain free-flowing language and to hunt down errors, something that is completely contrarian to anarchist sentiments. Yet, gradually, a connection between anarchism and copy editing is exposed, revealing the anarchist characters that have previously peopled the world of typography. The narrator herself finds that the restrictions of work offer her more freedom as a writer – one craft seemingly nurturing the other.

Rivers of White is a poetic and deeply felt tribute to language, to the people who shape us and to those who have 'edited' the life story that we tell ourselves.

THE EUROPEAN UNION PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2009, the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is an annual initiative that recognises the best emerging fiction writers in Europe. Its aim is to spotlight the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature in the field of fiction, promote the circulation of literature within Europe and encourage greater interest in literary works beyond national borders. The EUPL is open to 41 countries currently involved in the Creative Europe programme. Each year, national organisations in a third of the participating countries select novels they trust have the potential to find an audience outside of their national borders, making it possible for all countries and language areas to be represented over a three-year cycle.

The prize is co-financed by the Creative Europe programme of the European

Union, which aims to achieve three main goals: promote the cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector, encourage the transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output and foster intercultural dialogue.

SELECTION PROCESS

During each yearly edition, the shortlisted books are proposed by national nominating organisations that are familiar with the literary scene in their country. They are used to promoting their own literature abroad and have expertise in literary quality and in assessing the translatability potential of a book. The nominating organisations are chosen based on criteria stipulated by the EUPL consortium in agreement with the European Commission, and they accept to abide by the following principles.

- The choice of the national nominee must be made fairly and independently by the relevant organisation designated by the EUPL.
- The names of the members of the national committees responsible for making the selections should be recorded and shared internally with the EUPL.
- All decisions must be taken based on consensus within the organisation and mutual agreement with the EUPL.
- The organisations designated by the EUPL cannot submit a work by an author with whom they have direct ties.
- The organisations designated by the EUPL cannot submit a book published by a publishing house with which they have direct ties.
- The organisations designated by the EUPL cannot submit a self-published book and/or one not distributed in the country's bookshops.
- The content of the nominated book must respect the values of the European Union, namely the respect for human rights, human dignity, freedom and equality, and the rights of persons belonging to minorities.
- The author of the shortlisted book cannot be currently employed by the European institutions.
- The author of the shortlisted book should be ready to take part in EUPL-related activities.
- The nominating organisations should proactively engage with publishers.

All national organisations must respect the selection rules. Based on translated

excerpts from the shortlisted books, the jury chooses one laureate and two special mentions. The jury's choice is based on a list of books nominated at the national level, one for each participating country.

THE CONSORTIUM

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

NOMINATING ORGANISATIONS

Each year, books are shortlisted at the national level by organisations experienced in promoting national literature abroad and that assess literary works for their quality, translatability and export potential. Nominating organisations are invited to submit their choice, which consists of a book and a nominated author. They are experts on their national literature scenes and know how to boost authors' international visibility.

The nominating organisations in 2026 are the following:

- **Armenia:** PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists) Armenia
- **Croatia:** Croatian Literature / Ministry of Culture and Media
- **Cyprus:** Writers Union / Literature and Criticism Association (OLK) / PEN Cyprus / Hellenic Cultural Association of Greek Cypriots (EPOK CYPRUS)
- **Czechia:** CzechLit
- **Estonia:** Estonian Literature Centre
- **Finland:** The Finnish Reading Centre
- **France:** Institut Français / Société des Gens de Lettres
- **Kosovo:** Biblioteka Kombëtare e Kosovës 'Pjetër Bogdani' / National Library of Kosovo
- **Liechtenstein:** Literaturhaus Liechtenstein
- **Luxembourg:** Kultur|lx
- **Moldova:** Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române din Chișinău / National Museum of Romanian Literature, Chișinău
- **Montenegro:** Forum mladih pisaca
- **North Macedonia:** Biblioteka Brakja Miladinovci
- **Sweden:** Gothenburg Book Fair / Bokmassan

ARMENIA



Sargis HOVSEPYAN

Դու էսօր մեռի, ես՝ վաղը
You Die Today, I Die Tomorrow

Metro Publishing, 2024
Armenian

ISBN: 978-9939-9343-0-3

BIOGRAPHY

Sargis Hovsepyan (b. 1977, Yerevan) is an Armenian fiction writer, screenwriter, playwright, educator, and cultural manager. He is the author of a collection of short stories and two novels, and he also holds a BA in Screenwriting from the Yerevan State Institute of Theatre and Cinema. Since 2018, he has taught creative writing at the TUMO Center for Creative Technologies, working with young writers and emerging voices. In 2022, he became Head of Television Projects at the cultural channel Boon TV, and in 2025 was appointed Director of Yerevan State University's Cultural Center. He volunteered as a soldier during the 44-Day War (Nagorno Karabakh, 2020) and his reflections on the conflict are expressed in his short story, 'Flat Rock', published by Asymptote Journal. He is married and the father of one daughter.

SYNOPSIS

Sargis Hovsepyan's *You Die Today, I Die Tomorrow* moves between past and present, revealing how suppressed histories continue to shape everyday life. The novel focuses on Frida, a young woman in Yerevan whose research into the fate of a forgotten victim of Stalinist repression leads her beyond archives and into the silences of her own family. Set in contemporary Armenia in the spring of 2022, as

Russian refugees arrive in Yerevan after the invasion of Ukraine, the novel weaves together personal relationships and political tensions. In parallel with the tense narratives of Frida and her grandfather, the city emerges as a layered witness to history, its streets and squares reflecting intertwined times, memories, and the lingering presence of imperial violence. As hidden stories surface, the narrative unfolds like a subdued investigation, gradually revealing the logic behind its unsettling title.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

You Die Today, I Die Tomorrow displays a rare ability to connect personal memory with contemporary European realities through a compelling narrative voice. At a moment when Europe is once again confronted with war, displacement, and unanswered questions about responsibility, this novel speaks quietly but directly to the present.



Դու էսօր մեռի, ես՝ վաղը

Սարգիս Հովսեփյան



Կիրիլի հայտնվելուց հետո Ֆրիդայի չափած-ձևած կենցաղը վերածվեց քառսի: Օրական տասն անգամ անակնկալի էր գալիս՝ մեկ՝ անսպասելի խոհանոցում օտար մարդու հետ դեմ դիմաց դուրս գալով, մեկ՝ զուգարանի կամ բաղնիքի դուռը ամենաանհարմար պահին փակ գտնելով, մեկ՝ խոհանոցի սեղանին ինչ-որ կասկածելի պարունակությամբ ֆաստֆուդի տուփեր հայտնաբերելով, որ Կիրիլն էր իբր իր անտեղի ներկայությունն ինչ-որ կերպ փոխհատուցելու համար աստված գիտի որտեղից բերում: Էլ պիցաներ, էլ սառած շաուրմաներ ու քյաբաբներ, էլ չիպսեր ու տարաբնույթ սնիկերս-բաունտիներ, որ Ֆրիդան հատկապես ասում էր, քանի որ քաղցրի հանդեպ թուլություն ուներ ու արդեն հինգ տարի, ինչ մենակ էր ապրում, երբեք տանը չէր պահում: Ֆրիդայի փոքրիկ բնակարանը վերածվել էր ատրակցիոնի, որտեղ ամեն քայլափոխի ինչ-որ վտանգ կամ գայթակղություն էր սպասում:

Առավոտյան էլի մեխանիկորեն քայլել էր հյուրասենյակ կշեռքին կանգնելու, բայց հենց հյուրասենյակի դռան մոտ հանկարծակիի էր եկել՝ Կիրիլին բազմոցի վրա հայտնաբերելով: Արդեն մի քանի տարի կշեռքը հյուրասենյակի դռան հետևում էր: Հենց առաջին իսկ օրվանից, երբ բերել էր տուն, կանգնել էր հյուրասենյակի մեջտեղում, նայել էր շուրջը, անկյունի վրա բացվող դուռը առաջ էր բերել, տեղավորել էր այնտեղ ու այլևս երբեք այդտեղից չէր տեղափոխել: Ֆրիդայի համար կշեռքի տեղն այնքան հաստատուն էր ու ճիշտ, դռան հետևում՝ եռանկյունու մեջ, որքան սֆինքսի տեղը մեծ բուրգերի կողքին:

Ու հիմա ննջասենյակում մահճակալին նստած չգիտեր ինչ անել: Թափթփված վիճակից ասես հիմարացած լիներ: Երեկ ու դրա նախորդ օրը, երբ արթնացել էր, Կիրիլն արդեն արթուն էր եղել, ուստի միանգամից ներքաշվել էր ինչ-որ գործնական իրարանցման մեջ՝ սուրճ, նախաճաշ, լոգարան, հետո բանկ, տան փնտրտուք և այլն, ու չէր էլ հասցրել մտածել անհարմարության մասին: Այսօր որոշել էր տնից դուրս չգալ, իսկ Կիրիլն էլ հենց այսօր որոշել էր երկար քնել:

Ստածեց՝ գոնե նոթբուքը երեկոյան իր մոտ բերած լիներ, մի բանով կգբաղվեր, մի քիչ գործ կաներ: Տեղից ելավ, անհանգիստ դեսուդեն քայլեց նեղիկ սենյակում, ապա նայեց պահարանի դռան մեծ հայելու մեջ, ուղղեց խալաթը, գոտին ձգեց ու դուրս եկավ սենյակից: Հյուրասենյակի դուռը երեք-չորս քայլի վրա էր, հասավ դռանն ու կանգ առավ: Սրեց լսողությունը: Կիրիլը ծանր շնչում էր: Բազմոցը պատի տակ էր ու դռնից չէր երևում, փոխարենը երևում էր նոթբուքը, հենց դիմացը՝ պատուհանի տակ, աթոռին դրված: Ֆրիդան խոր շունչ քաշեց ու արագ քայլեց դեպի նոթբուքը՝ հայացքը նպատակակետին: Հասնելով աթոռին՝ վերցրեց նոթբուքն ու շրջվեց: Կիրիլի մերկ մարմինը փռված էր բազմոցին, փորի վրա, գլուխը բարձի մեջ խրած, հաստ թևերը դեպի վեր: Ծածկոցը միայն մեկ ոտքն էր ծածկում, մյուսի թաթն անփույթ կախված էր բազմոցի եզրից: Ֆրիդան ակամա դանդաղեցրեց քայլերը: Պիրկ հետույք՝ կարմիր վարտիքի մեջ՝ միակ գունեղ բանն էր Ֆրիդայի միատոն հյուրասենյակում: Մետր ութսունն անց մի հսկա պառկած էր իր բազմոցին, լայնաթիկունք, կիսածալված թևերի վրա ուռած բազուկներով ու մարզված մկանունքով: Դուռը չանցած՝ մի պահ կանգ առավ, հայացքը սահեցրեց վարից վեր՝ ասես մտապատկերում ֆիքսելու համար երկնքից իր բազմոցին ընկած դրագունի մարմինը, ու անցավ խոհանոց:

Առանց ժամանակ կորցնելու ջազվեն դրեց զազօջախին: Սիրտը դառը սուրճ էր ուզում: Նայեց ջազվեի մթության մեջ անշտապ թշշացող սուրճին: Սուրճի երեսը բաց երանգ ստացավ ու սկսեց

բարակ փրփրել: Ներշնչեց սուրճի գոլ բույրն ու մինչ կբարձրանար, դարակից հանեց բաժական ու ափսեւն:

Ստապատկերից չհեռացող հսկայական մարմինը չափազանց շատ տեղ էր զբաղեցնում Ֆրիդայի առավոտյան մտքերում, Ֆրիդայի փոքրիկ հյուրասենյակում, Ֆրիդայի բնակարանում ու քաղաքում: Ֆրիդան դանդաղ շալակում էր այդ մարմինը: Ուր գնում էր, մարմինը հետն էր: Մի կերպ հրելով մտցնում էր Իլիկ, բայց երբ հաջողվում էր, Իլիկի պարունակությունը սլալով ու պատերին քսմովելով դուրս էր պլստում Իլիկից: Հսկայական մարմնի ոտքերի արանքներից դուրս էին թափվում ճզմված նկարիչները, թևերի տակից՝ ճմրթված հարբեցողներն ու խեղճացած փիլիսոփաները: Ֆրիդան փորձում էր այդ անդարդ ու թարմ մարմինը մտցնել իր փոքրիկ Տոյոտա Յարիսը, բայց ավտոմեքենայի աթոռները կոտրվում էին, ծռմռվում էին տարաբնույթ կարգավորիչ ձողերն ու բռնակները, պայթում ապակիները: Ֆրիդան մարմինը հրում էր ջազվեի մեջ, բայց այն չէր անցնում ջազվեի նեղ կոկորդից, լռվում մնում էր այդտեղ՝ իրենով խցանելով ելքը:

Թափվող սուրճի ձայնից ուշքի գալով՝ արագ անջատեց գազն ու լցրեց բաժակը: Նույնիսկ քնի մեջ ինքնավստահ, աչք ծակող առողջությամբ այդ մարմինը Ֆրիդային անտանելի հոգնեցրեց: Նրա ճանաչած բոլոր տղամարդիկ ջիլ ու ոսկոր էին, հոխորտացող հաճախ, բռի երբեմն, մեծամիտ, բայց նաև խոցելի: Այո՛, հենց խոցելի՛, մտածեց Ֆրիդան, դժվար էլ ավելի լավ բառ մտածի: Պապը, որ իր ողջ հպարտությամբ ու ծանրությամբ հանդերձ երբեք իրեն չի պարտադրում, եղբայրը, որ բանակից գալուց մի քանի տարի անց կռունկավարի գործ սովորեց ու հիմա արդեն տարիներ շարունակ օրական տասը ժամ օդում է ապրում՝ կարծես գետնի վրա տարածք չզբաղեցնելու համար: Իջնելուց հետո էլ ամբողջ հոխորտանքը սկսվում ու ավարտվում է ընթրիքի սեղանին մի երկու բաժակ կոնծելու ու քնելատեղին հասնելու արանքներում: Լևոնը, որ խելքին փչածը դուրս է տալիս, ուղղախոս ինտելեկտուալի հավակնոտությամբ, բայց հերիք է՝

թարս հայացքի արժանանա ուժեղ մեկի կողմից, տեսադաշտից այնպես կանհետանա, ճգնավորի պես կփակվի ինչ-որ ծակում, ասես գոյություն էլ չի ունեցել: Խոցելի ու խեղճ էին Ֆրիդայի ճանաչած բոլոր տղամարդիկ, գոռգոռում ու ճվճվում էին իրենց ներկայության մասին, բայց տարածություն չէին զբաղեցնում այս պարարտի նման, որ նույնիսկ ձայն չի հանում:

Սուրճի բաժակը մի կողմ դրեց, դալկականաչ ափսեն նրբորեն մաքրեց անձեռոցիկով, ապա ձեռքն առնելով՝ սկսեց զննել, ասես առաջին անգամ էր տեսնում: Նորից բաժակը հետ վերադարձրեց ափսեի մեջ ու տեղից ելնելով մոտեցավ անմիջապես գազօջախի վերևում գտնվող դարակին: Արագ մի սպիտակ ափսե վերցրեց, որի բաժակը վաղուց էր կոտրվել, փակեց դարակն ու սկսեց շուրջը նայել: Ավելի հարմար տեղ չգտնելով՝ ափսեն կտրուկ հարվածեց խոհանոցի սեղանի անկյունին: Խուլ ձայն եկավ, ու ափսեն կտոր-կտոր շաղ եկավ հատակին: Ֆրիդան տեղից ելավ, հատակից վերցրեց երկու մեծ կտորները, ապա բերեց ավելն ու սկսեց ավել հատակը: Դեռ չէր ավարտել, դռան մեջ երևաց Կիրիլը՝ սպորտային հագուստով, վարդագույն դեմքով ու անհերթի ժպիտը աչքերի մեջ:

– Բան է պատահել, Ֆրիդա: Համ էլ բարի լույս:

Ֆրիդան կտորտանքները լցրեց աղբի դույն ու ավելը դրեց անկյունում:

– Ափսեն կոտրվեց: Ոչ մի լուրջ բան:

– Դե լավ է: Կարո՞ղ եմ օտվել լոգարանից:

– Այո, իհարկե,– մինչ Կիրիլը կհեռանար, Ֆրիդան ավելացրեց,– գիտե՞ս, մտածում էի՝ տեսնես որքանով է ռեալ սրանով եղունգ խարտելը:

Կիրիլը շրջվեց ու զարմացած նայեց Ֆրիդային, որ ափի մեջ կոտրված ափսեի երկու կտորները պահած՝ կանգնած էր գազօջախի ու սեղանի արանքում:

– Հիշում ես, ասում էիր՝ Տեմլագում կանայք էսպիսի կտորներով էին իրենց եղունգները մշակում:

Կիրիլի դեմքը լարվեց, ասես ուզում էր հիշել: Հետո մոտեցավ Ֆրիդային ու վերցրեց կտորներից մեկը: Զննեց, շուռումուռ տվեց ձեռքում, ապա գտավ այն եզրը, որը տափակ էր, առանց թեքության ու ձախ ձեռքի խոշոր ցուցամատը տնկելով՝ սկսեց ավստի կտորը քսել եղունգին: Տասը-քսան վայրկյան ջանասիրաբար ավստի կտորը տարուբերելուց հետո մատը վեր բարձրացրեց այնպես, որ Ֆրիդան էլ տեսնի փոքր-ինչ մաշված եղունգը:

– Փաստորեն աշխատում է: Մտքովս չէր անցել փորձել:

– Էսօր ուզում եմ մի փոքր գործ անել: Եթե բան չունես անելու, կօգնե՞ս: Մի երկու հարց կա տեղանքի հետ կապված, որ լավ չեմ պատկերացնում:

– Տուն պիտի նայենք: Ցավոք, չեմ կարող: Կներես:

Կիրիլը ավստի կտորը դրեց սեղանին ու դուրս եկավ խոհանոցից:

You Die Today, I Die Tomorrow

Sargis Hovsepyan

Translated from Armenian by Nazareth Seferian

After Kirill's arrival, Frida's orderly routine had plunged into chaos. She would find herself taken by surprise a dozen times a day, unexpectedly coming across the man in the kitchen, finding the toilet or bathroom door locked at the most inopportune moment, discovering on the kitchen table packages of suspicious items from fast-food chains, bought by Kirill from God knows where in an attempt to compensate for his inconvenient presence. Pizzas, cold shawarmas and kebabs, potato chips, and all kinds of chocolate, from Snickers to Bounty bars, which Frida particularly hated because she had a weakness for candy and had not kept any at home for the five years that she had been living alone. Frida's little apartment had become a roller coaster on which a new risk or temptation lay ahead at every turn.

That morning, she had once again automatically walked into the living room to weigh herself but had been taken aback at the door when she spotted Kirill on the couch. For several years now, she had kept the scales behind the living room door. That very first day she had brought them home, she had weighed herself in the middle of the living room, looked around, opened the door in the corner, placed the scales there, and never moved them since. She considered the scales' location to be final and fitting, in that triangular corner behind the door, just like the Sphinx is in its rightful place next to the Pyramids.

And now, sitting on her bed in her room, she did not know what to do. She was stunned by the untidy state of her apartment. When she had woken yesterday and the day before, Kirill had already been awake, so she had quickly been embroiled in his many tasks – cof-

fee, breakfast, a trip to the bathroom, then the bank, looking for a house – and hadn't had time to dwell on the inconvenience. She had decided to stay at home today, but Kirill had picked the very same day to sleep in.

If only she had brought her notebook into her bedroom the previous evening, she would have had something to keep her busy, she could have managed to get some work done! She got up and paced nervously in the cramped room, then she glanced at the large mirror on the cupboard door, straightened her robe, tightened its belt, and stepped out of her room. The living room was three or four paces away. She reached the door and stopped. She pricked her ears. Kirill was breathing deeply. The couch was located on the other side of the wall, and she could not see it from her position at the door. What she could see instead was her notebook, right in front of her, on a chair near the window. Frida drew a deep breath and walked quickly to the notebook, staring at the device. She reached the chair, seized the notebook and turned around. Kirill's naked body was sprawled on the couch. He was lying on his stomach, his face buried in a pillow, his thick arms pointed upwards. The sheet only covered one of his legs, while the other foot hung awkwardly off the edge of the couch. Frida could not help but slow down. Firm buttocks in red underwear, the only colourful thing in Frida's monochrome living room. A giant, taller than one metre eighty, was lying on her couch – broad-shouldered, with bulging biceps visible on his semi-folded arms, and an athletic build. Before she crossed the threshold, she stopped for a moment, sliding her gaze up and down, as if trying to capture a mental image of the dragoon who had seemingly fallen on her couch from the heavens. Then she slipped into the kitchen.

Without wasting any more time, she placed the *jazve* on the gas stove. She really wanted a cup of bitter coffee. She stared at the coffee hissing languidly in the darkness of the pot. The surface of the coffee grew a tinge lighter, and a thin layer began to bubble. She inhaled the warm fragrance of the beverage and turned to take a cup and saucer from the cupboard before the coffee could rise.

The picture in her mind's eye of that massive body took up too much space in Frida's morning thoughts, Frida's small living room, Frida's apartment and the city. Frida was slowly carrying that body around. It was with her wherever she went. She somehow shoved it into a café called Ilik, but it would slip out of there as soon as it could, spilling items on the floor and rubbing against Ilik's walls. The space between those gigantic legs would spill over with squished artists, while its armpits would drop wrinkled drunks and miserable philosophers. Frida tried to stuff that carefree and fresh body into her tiny Toyota Yaris, but the seats of the car would break, its various regulating rods and handles creaking, its windows shattering. Frida dumped that body into the *jazve*, but it got stuck in its narrow neck, unable to move, blocking the way out.

The sound of the overflowing coffee snapped her out of her reverie, and she quickly turned off the gas and poured herself a cup. That body, so full of confidence even when it slept, eye-achingly fit, had exhausted her. All the men she had known were sinew and bone, often cocky, sometimes crude and arrogant, but also vulnerable. Yes, that was it: vulnerable, Frida thought to herself, she would be hard pressed for a better word. Her grandfather – who never imposed himself on her despite his pride and *gravitas*. Her brother – who had learned how to operate a construction crane a few years after he returned from the army and had been spending ten hours a day up in the air for several years now, as if to avoid taking up any

space on the ground. Once he was back down, his whole cockiness would start and end at the dinner table, between downing a couple of shots and making it to bed. Levon – who would say anything that was on his mind, posing as a straight-talking intellectual, but all it took was a single raised eyebrow from a person with real power and he would disappear from sight, hiding like some kind of hermit in a hole, as if he had never really existed. All the men that Frida knew were vulnerable and miserable, shouting and screeching to show their presence but not taking up any real space, unlike this abundance that was lying there, making no sound.

She put aside her cup of coffee, delicately wiped the yellow-green saucer with a paper napkin, and then held it close and examined it, as if seeing it for the first time. She returned her cup to its saucer and got up from where she was sitting, walking over to the drawer that was located immediately above the gas stove. She quickly picked up a white saucer whose cup had broken a long time ago, closed the drawer and started looking around. Finding no better spot, she quickly smashed the saucer against the corner of the kitchen table. A dull sound rang out, and the saucer shattered into several pieces that scattered to the floor. Frida got up, picked up two of the larger pieces from the floor, then grabbed a broom and began to sweep up the mess. She had not finished when Kirill appeared in the doorway wearing a tracksuit, his face pink and an absurd smile on his face.

‘Everything okay, Frida? Oh, and good morning.’

Frida emptied the pieces into the dustbin and put the broom away.

‘A broken saucer. Nothing serious.’

‘That’s good. May I use the bathroom?’

‘Yes, of course,’ and before Kirill could leave, Frida added, ‘I was wondering, you know, to what extent someone could actually use one of these as a nail file.’

Kirill turned around and looked in surprise at Frida, who held two of the larger pieces from the broken saucer in her palm as she stood between the stove and the table.

‘You remember how you told me that the women at Temlag used pieces like these as nail files?’

Kirill’s face tensed, as if he were trying to recall. Then he walked over to Frida and took one of the pieces from her. He examined it, turned it around in his hand, and found an edge that was flatter, without any angles. He stuck out the large index finger on his left hand and began to rub the fragment of saucer against his nail. After he had diligently moved it this way and that for ten or twenty seconds, he raised his finger so that Frida could see how his nail was now slightly shorter.

‘I guess it works. I had never thought to try it.’

‘I want to do a little work today. If you’re free, could you help? There are a couple of issues with the location that I’m struggling to understand.’

‘I have to look at a couple of houses, so I can’t, unfortunately. Sorry.’

Kirill placed the piece of saucer on the table and left the kitchen.

CROATIA



Lora TOMAŠ
Papir tvoje kože
Paper of Your Skin

Hena com, 2024

Croatian

ISBN: 978-953-259-497-3

BIOGRAPHY

Lora Tomaš (b.1981, Zagreb) earned a master's degree in Indology and English Language and Literature from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, and a master's degree in Gender Studies from Central European University in Budapest. She co-edited and co-translated into Croatian (from English, Hindi, and Urdu) two anthologies of contemporary Indian short prose and poetry. The early version of her manuscript *Slani mrak / Salt Dark* (2020) was shortlisted for the V.B.Z. Literary Prize for the Best Unpublished Novel in 2019. The novel was longlisted for the T-Portal Prize for Croatian Novel of the Year and awarded the Slavić Prize for Best Debut Book. Her second novel, *Paper of Your Skin* (2024), won the prestigious Fric Award. She has spent several years in South Asia, contributing literary criticism and reportage to regional publications.

SYNOPSIS

Paper of Your Skin engages with memory and trauma, the dynamics of toxic relationships, as well as women's travel and travel writing. The novel is divided into two parts, Before and After, and is largely written in epistolary form. The protagonist is in India, preparing her second anthology of Indian

literature. She meets K. in Delhi and moves with him to Bangalore. In the first two chapters, we still do not know who Priya is (although she is mentioned, and the protagonist addresses her directly in the letters), nor what happened to her. Mysterious phone calls to K. and the figures of threatening men are also introduced. Shortly thereafter, it becomes clear that Priya is K.'s deceased mother, who left behind a beauty salon that K. is trying to keep alive.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Combining memoirist, essayistic, poetic, and reportage elements, *Paper of Your Skin* addresses trauma and violence against women, but also women's travel and travel writing. Through close readings of various women's texts, the author explores the question of the female gaze, the concept and practice of women's flânerie, female creativity, as well as the relationship between literature and travel. *Paper of Your Skin* is a highly subtle and emotionally charged act of writing about oneself and one's own emotional experience.

Papir tvoje kože

Lora Tomaš



Ako mislite da ovo nije swing, možda biste trebali posjetiti doktora za ritam, dreči džingl Radija Ohio, američke stanice na koju sam se navukla. Dobar dan, Ohio, kakav divan kišan dan, cvrkuće voditelj u moju vrelu bangaloršku noć. Grad prevučen preko grada, kao fotografija preko fotografije. Samo glazba i vremenska prognoza, ali ni to mi ne pomaže da zaspim. Kroz sinkopirane taktove trube, našim nenamještenim sobama opet odzvanja onih nekoliko tonova marimbe. Iritantna, beskrajna petlja u mojoj glavi koju K katkad prekida time što prihvati poziv. Vidim kako mu se mijenja lice, stisnu usne, gravira čelo. Ili ga samo zamišljam takvog dok s ove strane vrata osluškujem kako mu se glas probija kroz grlo, hrapavo i nejednako, kao da je pijan.

Rekao sam vam da me više ne zovete, čujem ga kako izgovara taj potisnuti bijes, kako korača po kuhinji i odvrće slavinu na najjače da mu mlaz zagluši riječi, da ne bih čula kad potom kaže da nema nikakve veze s tim.

Prijavit ću vas policiji, prijeti im, ponavlja da nema nikakve veze s tim.

Zatim posve gasi mobitel i baca ga na kuhinjski pult. Udaljava se od njega kao lik na pozornici. Nikad ne govori o tome, ne izgovara rečenice koje mu izgovaraju s druge strane, koje bi ovdje stajale u kurzivu. Otvara hladnjak – zamišljam kako mu njegovo svjetlo kupa lice kao svetačko. Grabi vlažnu bocu piva, zalupi natrag vratima i prilazi prozoru dnevne sobe; lagano odmiče zastor i gleda na ulicu.

Traži siluete pod lampama, kao da su jebena Lili Marleen. Navika koju sam pokupila od njega, ili on od mene, pitam se dok prilazim fiksnim rešetkama uvijek otvorena prozora, praznih ruku.

Prevrtim ponovo svoje radnje od prije sat vremena, provjeravam jesam li zaključala sva vrata: ona dvostruka, staklena, na vrhu vanjskih stepenica, ona u hodniku i ova od moje sobe. Zatim neprimjetno odškrinem zastor, pukotinu u vanjski svijet, i udahnem miris topla biskvita iz slastičarnice prekoputa što mi se kao zubni konac provlači kroz pore: čajni keksi i kolači s glazurom u jarko otrovnim bojama – neonsko ružičasta, harlekinska zelena, cijan. Spužvaste lego kocke aranžirane u piramidalne strukture iza prljava stakla vitrine. Kad ih poželim, sjetim se da su samo znakovi, da ne možeš jesti jezik. Njihov miris isprepleten s hormonskom truleži rubinskih zrnaca nara u zdjelici koju sam odavno ostavila nasred tvoga stola prekrivši je listom papira, svejedno opkoljenoj mušicama. Ovdje ih ima cijele godine, narova, cijele godine je i svojevrsno ljeto, moj biološki sat trajno pošemergen.

Iznad slastičarnice, na betonskoj ogradi krovne terase, demon plazi jezik da odagna zlo, kao da jezik posjeduje takvu moć. Uz prugu preko puta Mosque Road, šarena crkvice sv. Antonija izranja iz lima i kartona slama, kič optimizma, ali ne zanima me sada on, previše me podsjeća na tebe. Zabijam pogled u leđa muškarca koji joj zapišava bočni zid, zatim povlači patent u slijepoj ulici tvoga sjećanja: gesta koju uvijek prati olakšanje, ove ili one vrste.

K je na sjeveru, fotografira tekstilne radnike u okolici Delhija. Projekt za koji je dobio državnu stipendiju. Njegov dosadašnji rad odiše slatkim ludilom, rekao je poznati indijski fotograf u obrazloženju koje je dostavio povjerenstvu. K je umjetnik koji je već ispunio sva obećanja.

Često ga nema kod kuće čak i kad je u gradu. Popodne, kad se vrati, pita jesam li već jela. To je i prvo pitanje koje postavlja vozačima rikši i taksistima čim se zavalj odostraga. Pitanje koje se u ovom

gradu koristi umjesto pozdrava. Prisno je, majčinski. Učas potone kroz slojeve psihe, na dno zdjelice, kao i svako drugo na koje nismo u stanju odgovoriti, ili ga postaviti.

Zato ga ništa ne pitam u vezi tih poziva.

Ne znam tko je s druge strane. Znam samo da su muškarci, da je sve nekako povezano, s tobom u središtu. K mi je rekao da su u pitanju nedovršeni poslovi, da me ne želi uplitati.

Jednom će mi objasniti, rekao je. Ne još.

Tražim ih, ali nalazim samo uobičajene sumnjivce. Muškarce koji vječito sjede ispod moga prozora, na ugašenim motorima. Puše i čekaju svoj red u muškom salunu ljepote Džentlmen, otvorenom dokasna.

Džentlmen nudi *svjež svadbeni look*, stoji rukom ispisano iznad ulaza valovitim trodimenzionalnim fontom Futura u plavoj i crvenoj boji: dramatičnost koja priziva indijske filmske plakate. Muškarci začehjavaju brkove nadolje, u apostrofe ili jednostruke navodnike. Uokviruju usta koja govore, ono što izlazi iz njih, kao trajni podsmijeh.

On bi volio da nije tako, ali još uvijek ne osjećam da je ovo moja kuća: tvoje je gotovo sve pokretno u njoj. Strankinja sam okružena tvojim predmetima. Uljez. Druga žena, iako znam da ti ne bi imala ništa protiv da ga dijeliš sa mnom.

Kuća je naša prva u ovom gradu na jugu, tvome gradu. Naš prvi pokušaj doma.

Tvoji su tanjuri, neki okrhnuti, porculanski, drugi metalni, s onim odjeljcima koji su me isprva podsjećali na zatvorske i školske kantine, ali su polako postali stvar stečenog ukusa, kao drama. Tvoj ekspres lonac, u kojemu kuham ista jela kao i ti, rižu i *dal*, ali ukusi i teksture potpuno su različiti, napola uspjeti, zauvijek ću ti biti pripravnica. Tvoju veliku drvenu zdjelu u kojoj si mijesila tijesto pre-

namijenila sam u zdjelu za salatu; kamenu tavu na kojoj si spravljala okruglice od prosenog brašna i masale, K-ove najdraže, smatram nekovrsnim artefaktom i uopće ne koristim, tek povremeno prijedem prstima preko nje da se uvjerim da tave mogu biti od kamena. Tvoj je i filter za južnoindijsku kavu koji sam ukrala iz tvog salona ljepote misleći da nijedna neće primijetiti. Tvoja plinska pećica na radnoj plohi u kuhinji – nova je jedino plinska boca na koju smo je spojili. Pijemo iz tvojih čaša, usne priljubljujem na isto staklo s kojeg su isprani tragovi tvojih, ruke brišem o tvoje krpe. Spavamo na vašem madracu, i to mi se katkad čini kao oskvrnuće, a kojiput me obuzme nelagoda, čak i gađenje, ali ne želim povrijediti K, niti ulaziti u nepotrebnii trošak.

Možda sam samo navikla nalijegati u oris kredom koji je tvoje tijelo ostavilo na različitim površinama, još uvijek toplim.

Paper of Your Skin

Lora Tomaš

Translated from Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać

If you think this ain't swing, go see a rhythm doctor, blasts the jingle of Radio Ohio, an American station I've become addicted to. *Good morning, Ohio, such a glorious rainy day,* chirps the anchor into my scorching hot Bangalore night. City overlaying city, like a photograph laid over a photograph. Only music and a weather forecast, but even that doesn't help me fall asleep. Through the syncopated beats of the trumpet, our unfurnished rooms reverberate with the few tones of a marimba. Irritating, an endless jumble in my head which K sometimes interrupts by taking a call. I see his face change, his lips press tight together, his forehead etch. Or I'm just imagining him that way from eavesdropping on his voice from behind the door, blurring from his throat, rough and uneven, as if he's drunk.

'I told you to stop calling me.' I hear how he's speaking with suppressed rage, how he paces the kitchen and turns the faucet on full force so the gushing water will drown out his words, so I won't hear him when he says he has nothing to do with this.

'I'll report you to the police,' he threatens, repeating that he has nothing to do with this.

Then he turns off his cell phone and tosses it onto the kitchen counter. Like a character on stage, he steps back. He never speaks about this, doesn't report the sentences they're saying at the other end, which would be in italics if this were a script. He opens the refrigerator – I imagine how its light bathes his face like a saint's. Grabs a moist bottle of beer, bangs the door shut again and goes over to the living-room window. Slowly parting the curtain, he peers out onto the street. Seeking silhouettes under the street lamps, as if they're

a fucking Lili Marleen. A habit I picked up from him, or he from me, I muse as I go over to the fixed bars of the always open window, my hands empty.

Again I rerun my actions of an hour earlier, checking whether I'd locked all the doors: the double-paned one, glass, at the top of the outdoor stairs, the hallway door and this one from my room. Then, imperceptibly, I part the curtain, a crack into the outside world, and inhale the aroma of warm cake from the pastry shop across the street, gliding through my pores like dental floss: tea cakes and iced cookies in bright, toxic colours – neon pink, harlequin green, cyan. The spongy Lego blocks arranged in pyramidal structures behind the grimy glass of the display window. When I crave them, I remember they're merely signs, you can't eat language. Their smell mingles with the hormonal rot of ruby-red pomegranate arils in a bowl which I left in the middle of your table a long time ago, covering it with a sheet of paper, though it was besieged, nevertheless, by flies. They have them, pomegranates, all year long here, it's always like summer, my biological clock permanently out of whack.

Above the pastry shop, on the concrete railing around the roof terrace, a demon sticks its tongue out to ward off evil, as if a tongue could be so powerful. Along the tracks across from Mosque Road, the colourful little church of St Anthony's emerges from the tin and cardboard of a slum, the kitsch of optimism, but that doesn't interest me now, it reminds me too much of you. I stab my gaze into the back of a man who is pissing on its side wall and then zips up his fly in the dead end of your memory: a gesture always accompanying relief of one sort or another.

K is up north, shooting photographs of textile workers around Delhi. A state-funded project of his. To date his work articulates a *sweet madness*, as a famous Indian photographer said in the report submitted to the committee. K is an artist who has already fulfilled all promises.

He is often not at home even when he's in town. In the afternoon, when he returns, he asks if I've already eaten. This is the first question he asks the rickshaw and taxi drivers as soon as he settles onto the back seat. A question used in this city in place of a greeting. It is personal, maternal, sinking instantly through the layers of the psyche to the root of the pelvis, like everything else we are unable to answer, or ask.

So that's why I don't ask him about the calls.

I don't know who's at the other end. I know only that it's men, and they are all somehow connected, with you at their centre. K told me it's about unfinished business – business he doesn't want to embroil me in.

He'll explain at some point, he said. Not yet.

I look for them but find only the usual suspects. Men who are forever sitting on motorbikes parked under my window. They smoke and wait in line for Gentlemen, the men's 'beauty saloon', as the sign describes it, open till late.

Gentlemen offers the *fresh wedding* look, as is scrawled above the entrance in a wavy, three-dimensional Futura font in blue and red: a dramatic tone suggestive of Indian movie posters. Men comb their whiskers down into apostrophes or single quote marks. They frame the speaking lips, what they're saying, like a permanent sneer.

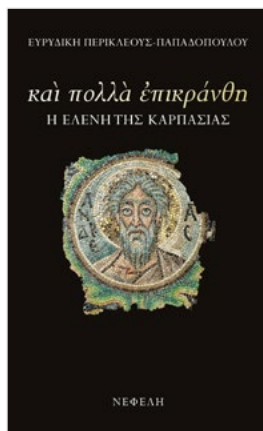
He'd prefer it not to be so, but I still don't feel this to be my house: almost all the moveable property is yours. I'm an outsider surrounded by your things. An intruder. Another woman, though I know you'd have nothing against sharing him with me.

The house is our first in this city in the south, your city. Our first attempt at a home.

Yours are the dishes, some of them chipped porcelain, others metal, with compartments that reminded me at first of prison and school cafeterias but slowly became an acquired taste, like the drama. Your pressure cooker, which I use to make the same dishes you made, rice and *dal*, but the tastes and textures are altogether different, a halfway success, I'll always be your apprentice. I repurposed the big wooden bowl you used for kneading dough as a bowl for salads; I consider the stone tawa in which you prepared millet flour and masala dumplings, K's favourite, an artefact of sorts, and I never use it, only running my fingers over it from time to time to check whether a tawa can truly be made of stone. Yours is the filter for South Indian coffee which I stole from your beauty salon, thinking nobody would notice. Yours the gas burner on the kitchen counter, the only new part the propane tank we hooked up to it. We drink from your glasses, press our lips to the same glass, washed clean of the traces of your lips, we dry our hands on your dish towels. We sleep on your mattress, and sometimes this feels like a violation, and at other times I'm overcome by discomfort, even disgust, but I don't want to insult K or incur unnecessary expense.

Maybe I've just grown accustomed to lying on the chalk outline that your body, still warm, left lingering on surfaces.

CYPRUS



**Evridiki PERICLEOUS-
PAPADOPOULOU**

**καὶ πολλὰ ἐπικράνθη -
Η ΕΛΕΝΗ της Καρπασίας**
***Sorely Grieved:
Eleni of Karpasia***

Nefeli, 2024

Greek

ISBN: 978-960-504-372-8

BIOGRAPHY

EvrIdiki Pericleous-Papadopoulou was born in Nicosia. She worked in Secondary Education, at the Grammar School Nicosia as Director of Culture and Music teacher. She created the Chora Art and Culture Center, the Gallery and the Chora Theater. She writes poetry, prose and plays, and is also involved in research. In 2005 she was awarded the State Poetry Prize for her poetry collection *Choras istoresis*. Her novel, *As Truly. The Life of Haritas Mantoles*, received favorable reviews and was also dramatized and performed on stage. Her plays have been awarded by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus, the Cyprus Theatre Organization (CTO) and Theatre One.

SYNOPSIS

Sorely Grieved: Eleni of Karpasia is inspired by the remarkable life of Eleni Foka, a Greek teacher from Ayia Triada, in Karpasia, who, in the aftermath of 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, chose to remain in the enclave to teach the few children whose families refused to abandon their ancestral homes under daily intimidation, surveillance,

and sabotage by the occupying forces. The work is grounded in testimonies of Eleni Foka's enclaved pupils and Foka herself, personally collected by the author, who undertook ten-year extensive research in collaboration with historians to ensure both accuracy and proper documentation. Most of these experiences are refracted through fictionalized characters, a deliberate narrative strategy designed to safeguard individuals whose identities or circumstances remain sensitive or currently at risk. The reader is thus invited to read between the lines, to decode silences and omissions, and to attend to what remains deliberately unspoken.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

With this novel, the author evolves into the national prose writer of post-war Cyprus (from the tragic year of 1974 until today). Reading this book contributes decisively to the forging of the values of freedom and justice, especially when a country experiences the negative consequences of invasion and occupation.



Καὶ πολλὰ ἐπικράνθη – Ἡ Ελένη της Καρπασίας

Ευρυδίκη Περικλέους-Παπαδοπούλου



Μετά που τέλειωσε την αποστολή της η Ελένη, πήγε στο σημείο ελέγχου, να επιστρέψει με τους άλλους εγκλωβισμένους πίσω στο χωριό της.

«Η ζωή κομμαθκιασμένη, οι οικογένειες χωρισμένες, άλλοι τ'ζει τ'ζ' άλλοι 'δά» έλεγαν με παράπονο οι άνθρωποι, ηλικιωμένοι μα και νεότεροι, που είχαν αφήσει πίσω από το συρματοπλέγμα τους αγαπημένους τους. «Ως πότε εννά αντέχουμεν τούτον το πήαιννε έλα, για να θωρούμεν τους δικούς μας;»

Τους ερεύνησαν όλους, και την Ελένη το ίδιο. Βρήκαν τα παραμύθια που είχε μέσα στο κιβώτιό της και μερικά σταυρουδάκια, που είχαν στείλει φίλοι Ελλαδίτες για τους μαθητές της. Την ανέκριναν ξανά, της έκαναν σωματική έρευνα και την έσπρωξαν με βία να μπει στο αυτοκίνητο της ψευδο-αστυνομίας, να την πάνε στο ψευδο-αρχηγείο τους. Εκείνη έπιασε γερά, με τα χέρια ψηλά, στην ανοικτή πόρτα του αστυνομικού οχήματος και γάντζωσε τα πόδια της κάτω από την πόρτα του αυτοκινήτου. Κρατήθηκε εκεί με δύναμη κι αντίσταση απίστευτη, μα κείνοι άρχισαν να τη χτυπούν στο κεφάλι, στον αυχένα, στην πλάτη, στα πόδια και τα χέρια, για να την εξαναγκάσουν να μπει στο όχημα. Πάλευε η δασκάλα με το σώμα της, που το χτυπούσαν με δύναμη.

Οι ψευδο-αστυνομικοί κατάφεραν να ελευθερώσουν τα γαντζωμένα πόδια της και να τη βάλουν με σπρωξιές ανάποδα μέσα στο αυτοκίνητο, πάνω στο κάθισμα, με τα πόδια ψηλά και το κεφάλι κάτω.

Ντράπηκε η Ελένη με τα πόδια ψηλωμένα μπροστά σε τόσους άνδρες, τόσους δυνάστες.

Φορούσε, όμως, μαύρο χοντρό καλσόν. «Ευτυχώς!» σκέφτηκε, έκατσε ίσια και τακτοποίησε το μαύρο της φόρεμα που ήταν ανεβασμένο μέχρι πάνω από τη μέση της. Έπεσαν τότε από τις τσέπες της ανθοί και φλούδες λεμονιάς που κουβαλούσε πάντοτε μαζί της, να την παρηγορεί το άγγιγμά τους σε μαρτυρικές στιγμές, όπως αυτή.

Την πήραν στη συνέχεια στο ψευδο-αρχηγείο της αστυνομίας του παράνομου καθεστώτος, στην κατεχόμενη Λευκωσία, κι εκεί τη χτύπησαν ακόμα πιο άγρια. Τη γύμνωσαν, της άφησαν μονάχα το κάτω εσώρουχο και τη χτύπησαν σε όλο το σώμα. Κι όλα τούτα, γιατί βρήκαν τα σταυρουδάκια, μια χριστουγεννιάτικη κάρτα και μερικά παραμύθια με χριστουγεννιάτικες ιστορίες! Τα είχε στείλει στον Ερυθρό Σταυρό για τα εγκλωβισμένα παιδιά η Συμέλα Πασινακίδου-Τουμανίδου -πρόσφυγας κι εκείνη, με καταγωγή από τη Μικρά Ασία- που συμπονούσε τα παιδιά κι ήθελε να βοηθήσει με τον δικό της τρόπο. Η Ελένη πήγαινε στους μαθητές της εκείνα τα βιβλία. Ήταν νωρίς ακόμα για τα Χριστούγεννα, μα σκέφτηκε πως θα τους έδινε μεγάλη χαρά ένα εικονογραφημένο χρωματιστό παραμύθι που δεν είχαν ποτέ τους.

Της τα πήραν οι κατακτητές, τα ξέσκισαν και τα έριξαν στον κάλαθο των ακρήστων. Της πήραν και μια χάρτινη εικονίτσα που την είχε σαν φυλαχτό μέσα στην τσάντα της, του Σέρβου Αγίου Ιουστίνου Πόποβιτς, που της την είχε δώσει κάποτε ο Επίσκοπος Ερζεγοβίνης Αθανάσιος Γιέβιτς.

Μετά τα βασανιστήρια πήραν πίσω στο σημείο ελέγχου την Ελένη, κατατσακισμένη κι εξευτελισμένη ως το μεδούλι. Την άφησαν ν' ανεβεί στο λεωφορείο, κι εκείνο έβαλε μπρος -με πολλή καθυστέρηση- για τον προορισμό του. Μέσα ήτανε οι συγχωριανοί της, απελπισμένοι απ' όσα είδαν τα μάτια τους και που δεν μπορούσαν να κάνουν κάτι να τη βοηθήσουν.

«Έν έχουν τέλειωση τα βάσανά μας, κόρη μου!» της είπαν κάτι ηλικιωμένες γυναίκες, σαν την είδαν να μπαίνει ξανά στο λεωφορείο.

Κι άλλη γιαγιούλα τής είπε: «Είσαι πελάς για τζείνους, γιατί μιλάς για το δίτζιον. Μα 'έν αντέχουμεν, κόρη μου, τόσες ώρες να περιμένουμεν μέσα στο λεωφορείο, ώστι να τους γινεί το κκέφιν να σε αφήσουν, τζ' ύστερις να ξεκινήσουμεν τζ' εμείς».

«Συγχώρα μας, κόρη μου, μα 'έν αντέχουμεν να ταλαιπωρούμαστεν άλλον, άμαν έρκεσαι εσού μιτά μας».

«Κάθε φοράν τα ίδια τζαι σσειρόττερα σου κάμνουν, ώστι να παραιτήσεις τζαι να φύεις για πάντα 'πού τα κατεχόμενα. Έν το καταλάβεις τζ' εσού ότι έν' τούτος ο σκοπός τους;»

«Τούτος έν' ο σκοπός τους!» συμφώνησαν όλοι.

Μια άλλη συγχωριανή, πιο απελπισμένη, της είπε: «Σταμάτα τζ' εσού, σουζε κκελλέν να περάσουμεν, κόρη μου. Να σιωπάς, να περάσουμεν ώς τζείθεμερου».

Σαν επέστρεψε στο σπίτι της η δασκάλα -μονάχη, εξαντλημένη, λυπημένη και δυστυχής- έβαλε να ζεστάνει νερό να λουστεί, να διώξει από το σώμα της την ντροπή που είχε νιώσει λίγες ώρες προηγουμένως.

«Το μόνο που σου ξαναζητώ, Θεέ μου, είναι να μη με προδώσει η καρδιά μου, που μια χτυπά δυνατά κι άτσαλα και μια σιωπά και με τρομάζει. Βοήθα, Θεέ μου, να αντέξει ακόμα λίγο, ίσως γίνει κάτι».

Το σκεφτόταν από μέρες η Ελένη. Ήθελε και δεν ήθελε να κόψει τα μαλλιά της. Είχε μια τεράστια πλεξούδα! Τα έπλεκε και τα τύλιγε τριγύρω στο κεφάλι της δυο τρεις φορές, μέχρι να τελειώσει. Έπλεκε το βρουλλίν σαν να έπλεκε μαζί και τα νιάτα της, μα και τα χρόνια που τον περίμενε τον αγνοούμενο της καρδιάς της, σαν μια άλλη Πηνελόπη· καρπασίτισσα Πηνελόπη.

«Να τα τυλίγεις, Ελένη, γύρω γύρω στο κεφάλι σου, να τονίζονται έτσι τα χαρακτηριστικά του προσώπου σου· καστανά λαμπερά μάτια, μάγουλα ροδακιά, χείλη κατακόκκινα, φυσιογνωμία γνήσιας Καρπασιτοπούλας» της είχε ψιθυρίσει, κι εκείνη ένωσε το άγγιγμά του στο πρόσωπό της. Και το αποτύπωμά του έμεινε εκεί και πέτρωσε από τότε. Να αγνοείται εκείνος από τότε, από την καταραμένη εισβολή· εκείνος, ο αγνοούμενος της καρδιάς της.

«Ελα, μάνα, τράβα μian ψαλλιδκιάν» είπε στη μάνα της εκείνο το πρωί. «Κόψε τούτον το μαλλίν, πριν φύεις. Ποιος εννά το κόψει ύστερις;»

«Ασπρίσαν οι κροτάφοι, κόρη μου» της είπε εκείνη.

«Περνούν τα χρόνια, μάνα, τζ' η δεσποσύνη φαίνεται ότι εμεγάλωσεν» είπε με μια δόση πικρίας, κι άρπαξε πλεξούδα και ψαλίδι και τα έβαλε στη χούφτα της μάνας της.

Εκείνο το «δεσποσύνη» που τη φώναζαν τα παιδιά, πολύ την πλήγωνε την Ελένη. Στην αρχή έκλαιγε τα βράδια σαν βρισκόταν μονάχη με τον εαυτό της. «Πώς πεθαίνει μια γυναίκα...» σκεφτόταν.

Μα όπως περνούσαν οι εποχές μονάχες και σβήνανε η μια μέσα στην άλλη, την πελεκούσαν οι λιγοστές νύχτες με άστρα, που της θύμιζαν πως έφτανε το θέρος.

Κάθε που έβγαине καινούργιο φεγγάρι, στεκόταν στο παράθυρο, εκείνο το παράθυρο με τις σιδεριές, και το έβλεπε.

«Ούτε κουβέντα», του έγνεφε, «ούτε κουβέντα! Σιωπή... σιωπή. Ποτέ μη μιλήσεις για προορισμούς που ξεστράτισαν, για εχέμυθα φεγγαρόφωτα που εμπιστευτήκαμε. Λέω για τότε, λέω για κάποτε, λέω για κείνα τα πρώτα πρώτα καρδιοχτύπια που πέτρωσαν λησμονημένα. Σιωπή... σιωπή. Τι δίψα το πέλαγο απόψε! Τι παρηγοριά η νοτισμένη γη!»

Το τεράστιο βρουλλί, που ακουμπούσε στο χώμα σαν το άπλωνε, κόπηκε. Και μαζί του κάθε κοριτσίστικο όνειρο που έκανε, σαν το έπλεκε μπρος στον καθρέφτη.

«Η δεσποσύνη έκοψε τα βρουλλιά της» είπαν ο ένας στον άλλο οι μαθητές της, όταν την είδαν το άλλο πρωί.

Το συζήτησαν μεταξύ τους, τα μικρότερα γέλασαν, άλλα λυπήθηκαν, άλλα το προσπέρασαν αδιάφορα. Μα την ώρα του διαλείμματος άκουσε τα παιδιά που το κρυφοκουβεντιάζανε μεταξύ τους.

«Η δασκάλα, ρε, έκοψε το βρουλλίν, φαίνεται θα φύγει και θα μας αφήσει μόνους μας».

«Πού να πάει, ρε;»

«Κι εμείς πού θα μείνουμε, άμα φύγει η δασκάλα;»

«Θα φύγουμε κι εμείς μαζί της».

«Αν ήθελε να φύγει, τι την ενοχλούσε το βρουλλίν;»

«Τα κόβουν τα βρουλλιά, ρε, για να φαίνονται πιο όμορφες».

«Η δασκάλα μας είναι όμορφη και με βρουλλιά και χωρίς βρουλλιά!» είπαν τα κορίτσια, και τα αγόρια στη συνέχεια συμφώνησαν με την επιμονή τους.

Γέλασε η Ελένη με την αθωότητά τους, και τα φώναξε να μπουν ξανά στην τάξη.

Sorely Grieved: Eleni of Karpasia

Evridiki Pericleous-Papadopoulou

Translated from Greek by Patricia Felisa Barbeito

When her visit ended, Eleni had to go through the checkpoint with the other enclaved to return to her village.

‘Our lives are torn apart, families divided, some here, some there,’ people said with quiet despair, old and young alike, all those who had left their loved ones behind the barbed wire. ‘How long can we go on like this, crossing back and forth just to see our people?’

They searched them all, including Eleni. In her suitcase they found the books of fairy tales and several small crosses that friends from Greece had sent for her pupils. They questioned her again, then ordered her aside and subjected her to a full body search. Without warning they shoved her towards the car of the so-called police, intent on taking her to their headquarters. She caught hold of the open door, raised her arms, braced her feet against the frame, and held fast with astonishing strength. They struck her – on the head, the neck, the back, her arms and legs, trying to force her inside. She resisted with her whole body as the blows fell mercilessly.

At last they tore her grip loose and, with a final heave, thrust her backwards into the vehicle. She landed twisted on the seat, legs lifted high, head thrown back. Shame burned through her: her legs exposed before so many men, so many cruel uniforms.

But she was wearing thick black stockings. Thank God, she thought. She pulled herself upright and smoothed down her dress, which had ridden up past her waist. Blossoms and strips of lemon peel

fell from her pockets, small things she carried to steady herself, to summon scent and touch in moments of ordeal such as this.

They drove her to the so-called police headquarters of the regime in occupied Nicosia. There the blows fell harder. They stripped her down to her underclothes and struck her across her whole body. All this because they had found the crosses, a Christmas card, and a handful of fairy tale books with Christmas stories. They had been sent through the Red Cross for the enclaved children by Symela Patsinakidou-Toumanidou, herself descended from refugees of Asia Minor, who pitied the children and wished to help as she could. Eleni had meant to give the books to her pupils. It was still early for Christmas, but she had imagined the light in their faces at the sight of an illustrated storybook: bright colours, glossy pages – things they had never owned.

The occupiers seized the books, tore them apart, and flung the pieces into a bin. They took, too, the small paper icon she carried in her bag like a talisman, an image of the Serbian Saint Justin Popović once given to her by Bishop Athanasios Jevtić of Herzegovina.

After the beating they returned her to the checkpoint, crushed, humiliated to the bone. At last they allowed her onto the bus, which set off after a long delay. Inside sat her fellow villagers, shaken by what they had witnessed and powerless to intervene.

‘Our suffering has no end, child,’ some elderly women murmured as she climbed aboard.

‘You are a thorn in their side because you speak what is right,’ another said. ‘But we cannot endure the waiting, hour after hour, until it pleases them to release you.’

‘Forgive us, dear, but we cannot bear to be tormented each time you travel with us.’

‘They do this to you every time, and it gets worse and worse, so that you will give up and leave for good. Don’t you see? That is their aim.’

‘That is their aim,’ the others echoed.

One villager, more desperate than the rest, leaned towards her. ‘Enough, dear. Lower your head so we may pass. Keep silent, so that we may get through.’

When the teacher reached her house – alone, spent, undone – she set water to heat and washed herself slowly, as though she could cleanse herself of the humiliation still clinging deep inside.

‘The only thing I ask of You, my God’, she whispered, ‘is that my heart not betray me. It races, hard and wild, then falters and frightens me. Let it hold a little longer, my God. Perhaps something may yet change.’

Eleni had been thinking about it for days. She both wanted and did not want to cut her hair. The braid was massive. She would plait it and coil it around her head two, three times, until it reached its end. She braided it as though she were binding into it her youth as well, the years of waiting for the missing man of her heart. Another Penelope, she sometimes thought. A Penelope of Karpasia.

‘Wrap it around your head, Eleni,’ he had once whispered. ‘It sets off your features, those bright brown eyes and peach-coloured cheeks, your red lips. The face of a true Karpasian girl.’ She had felt his hand against her cheek. That touch had burned there ever since.

Since the accursed invasion he had been among the missing – the lost man of her heart.

‘Come, Mother, take the scissors,’ she said one morning. ‘Cut it before you leave. Who will cut it for me afterwards?’

‘Your temples have turned white, my child,’ her mother murmured.

‘The years pass, Mother. Even the “Miss” grows old,’ she answered, a thin edge of bitterness in her voice, and placed the heavy braid and the scissors into her mother’s hands.

That word – Miss, Desposýni. The children’s respectful address pierced her. In the beginning she wept over it at night, alone. How does a woman fade without ever having lived? she would think.

But as the seasons passed in solitude, each dissolving into the next, the rare, star-filled nights worked upon her like a blade on stone, reminding her that summer was nearing.

Each new moon she stood at the window – that window with its iron bars – and watched it rise.

‘Not a word,’ she would murmur.

‘Silence. Say nothing of what was meant to be and never was. Say nothing of vows entrusted to the moonlight. I speak of then, of once upon a time, of first heartbeats that hardened into forgotten stone. Silence. What thirst the sea has tonight! What consolation the damp earth!’

When at last the braid, which nearly brushed the ground when she let it fall, was severed, something else fell with it: the last bright filament of girlhood she had ever woven before a mirror.

‘Miss cut her braid,’ her pupils whispered to one another the next morning when they saw her.

They debated it in small knots. The younger ones giggled; some looked stricken; still others merely shrugged. At recess she caught their whispers drifting towards her.

‘Hey, the teacher’s cut her braid. It means she’s going away.’

‘Going where?’

‘And if she leaves, where will we go?’

‘We’ll go with her.’

‘What has cutting her hair got to do with her leaving?’

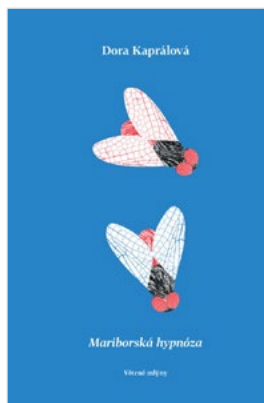
‘They cut their hair when they want to look prettier, don’t they?’

‘Our teacher is beautiful with a braid and without one!’ the girls declared, and the boys, pressed by their certainty, nodded in agreement.

Eleni laughed softly at their earnest speculation and clapped her hands for them to come back inside.

LAUREATE

CZECHIA



Dora KAPRÁLOVÁ
Mariborská hypnóza
The Maribor Hypnosis

Větrné mlýny, 2025
Czech

ISBN: 978-80-7443-549-2



BIOGRAPHY

Dora Kaprálová (b. 1975, Brno) is an award-winning author of books for both adults and children. She has also produced radio documentaries and a wide range of reportage. In recent years, she has increasingly collaborated with Czech theatres. After three prose works published by Druhé město (*Islands, Suffering and Other Genres, A Winter Book of Love*) and various children books published by Baobab (*Mr Nobody and the White Darkness*), her novel *The Maribor Hypnosis* won the main prize of Magnesia Litera — Book of the Year 2026 — and the Luxor Litera for prose. She lives and works mainly in Berlin.

SYNOPSIS

The Maribor Hypnosis brings together the life of a fly, the illusionist/hypnotist Leo Svengali and his lover and assistant Elis, and reflections on magic, writing and the power of illusion. Conceived as a sparkling, fragmentary guide to a foreign city, the novella adopts the disarming perspective of a common housefly; a marginal, almost weightless observer. Yet from this modest vantage point unfolds a text of remarkable density and resonance. *The Maribor*

Hypnosis combines playfulness, humour, and melancholy while reflecting on phenomena such as illusion, fake news, and the boundary between innocent imagination and dangerous lies. Above all, however, it is a poetic reflection on love, faith and hope in an uncertain world.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

By weaving together past and present, intimacy and history, the personal and the political, *The Maribor Hypnosis* creates a quietly powerful statement about perception, responsibility, and love. It is this intricate interplay of levity and lucidity that makes Dora Kaprálová's book an outstanding and deeply European work.

Mariborská hypnóza

Dora Kaprálová



Jsme v rakouském Grazu, necelých osmdesát kilometrů od Mariboru. Na nádraží postávají promoklí cestující a pár alkoholiků. Uprostřed hloučku sedí na velké ptačí kleci postarší venkovsky oblečená žena v černém, v kleci bezvládně leží plyšová opička s knoflíkovými očima, všichni se balkánsky mačkají pod dlouhou střechou z vlnitého plechu, skoro se navzájem dotýkají lokty, davová hypnóza z prudkého deště, je šestého června a venku se honí čerti.

★

V Mariboru je dávno po bouřce.

V odpoledních hodinách se ve vnitřním dvoře pavlačového domu v Korutanské ulici vylíhne moucha domácí.

Z larvy, která za popelnici kolonizovala rozkládající se meloun. V přízemí domu sídlí drahá čínská optika, co kolonizuje lokální slovinskou optiku, nahoře německá jazyková škola, vedle kebabárna Panda, naproti městská hasičárna. Nikdo z obyvatel domu si zrození mouchy nevšiml.

Vylíhnutá moucha měří necelé tři milimetry, váží něco málo přes půl miligramu, má šest nohou, dvě blanitá křídla, aerodynamické tělíčko a dvě hluboké, šibalské oči, které se skládají z tisíce malých složených očíček.

Vidí vše zrychleně, jakoby z řetízkového kolotoče, všemi směry, naspeedovaně, rozostřeně, zazoomovat na detail nedokáže. Zato

na květu pampelišky spatří i to, co my lidským okem nespatříme, mariborské ultrafialové světlo, což je daleko větší div, než byla třeba ta slavná rudá polární záře nad Mariborem z roku 1939.

Skutečnost vnímá moucha stroboskopicky, ale dokáže spatřit i čtyřrozměrný prostor. Je rozená hédonistka a současně melancholička, jako by pocházela ze slovinského Zámuří, ale vzhledem ke své existenci je v Mariboru občankou druhé kategorie, tak jako byli Slovinci méněcennými vůči Italům ve fašistickém Terstu i vůči mariborským Němcům. Moucha nemá rodný list, pas, vzdělání ani zdravotní kartičku. Ráda se směje a ráda pláče, je laskavá, temperamentní a něžná, nejraději sosá kolu a bílé víno, nepohrdne však krví ani obyčejným lidským hovnem.

Mariborská moucha domácí se narodila v domě, kde v lednu roku 1965 zemřel slavný mariborský hypnotizér Svengáli, co tu žil se svou milovanou partnerkou Elis.

Majitel kebabárny Panda pan Mahmed Öge oslaví nevědomě zrození neznámé mouchy malou pauzičkou, sledováním fotbalového zápasu FC Barcelona — Real Madrid.

Podle mých propočtů žije s čerstvě narozenou mouchou domácí v Mariboru přes deset milionů dalších much. Je tedy otázkou, komu stotisícové město ve skutečnosti patří.

★

Svengáliho partnerka Elis se narodila na začátku minulého století zhruba v místech, kde dnes stojí panelák přezdívaný židovský panelák, protože byl první chloubou poválečného jugoslávského socialismu v Murské Sobotě, kde by lidé raději nežili, než žili, a protože ho postavili tam, kde byla za války vypálena městská synagoga. Elis se ve skutečnosti narodila jako Edith, ale kdo se v těch jménech má pořád vyznat. Vážila čtyřicet kilo, nervy měla pevné a srdce ze zlata. Téměř dvoumetrový hypnotizér Svengáli vážil v dospělosti přes osmdesát kilo a k jeho mistrovským eska-

motérským kouskům patřila hypnóza a následná katatonie milované Elis.

Ta vypadala zhruba takto: Elis si lehla na dřevěnou bednu, Svengáli ji zhypnotizoval a poté znehybněl, a když ležela ve štronzu s rukama za hlavou, zvednul partnerku ve vodorovné poloze asi metr nad bednu, a tu pak nohou zlehýnka odkopl. Poté se rozezněl zvuk připomínající drobounce se třítící sklo. Zvuk byl sám o sobě natolik křehký, že se všem zatajil dech. Elis levitovala v namodralém světle pódia, Svengáli k ní opět přistavil stolek a s naleštěnými polobotkami barvy koňaku si stoupl na partnerčino útlé tělo. Ozval se zděšený výkřik z publika. Elis nehnula brvou, neprohnula se pod Svengáliho váhou. Sklo se zdálky pořád ještě drobounce třítící a drolilo, sypalo se a naříkalo a Svengáli na Elis začal tančit valčík. Vídeňský valčík. Jeho podmalované světle šedé oči s černým obočím na bledé tváři byly soustředěně upřené do prázdna, publikum oněmělo vzrušením a Elis dál ležela ve vzduchu v katatonicky vodorovné poloze.

Když se číslo obzvlášť vydařilo, otočila Elis po chvíli svou dětsky laskavou tvář k publiku, oči doširoka otevřené, ve tváři tajemný, vědoucí úsměv. Svengáli ruce pomalounku rozpažil a stoupnul si na špičky, jako by se chystali s Elis odletět. I on na delší okamžik znehybněl. S ležící Elis vytvořili podivuhodné, vznášející se sousoší připomínající vážku. Objekt to byl tak dokonalý, že by ho nedokázal stvořit ani největší umělecký sráč z cirkusu Nikita.

Tohle jsme my, Mariborští, vysílaly teď hypnotizérovy a Elisiny oči k publiku: Elis a já. To my dva vyplňujeme vaši prázdnotu, všednost, únavu, jsme tady pro vás a jsme tady i za ty, co už tu nejsou. Když uvěříte naší zábavně nevinné iluzi, svět se vám nerozpadne, nezmizí ani se neroztříští jako skleněná mísa zasažená šrapnelem lidského neštěstí.

Pak se ozval ostrý gong.

Svengáli seskočil zpátky na zem, ve tváři melancholický výraz vyčerpání, jako by zažil něco mimořádného, jako by se vracel odněkud zdaleka. Chytil padající tělo Elis do náruče a charismatická Elis se stočila do klubíčka a vyslala publiku vzdušný polibek.

Spustil se bouřlivý potlesk.

V Mariboru, v Paříži, ve Vídni, všude.

Takové bylo nejslavnější číslo hypnotizéra a jeho družky, které poprvé vyzkoušeli v mariborské kavárně Union v polovině dvacátých let.

Ale zpět k naší mariborské mouše. Copak neslyšíte, jak netrpělivě bzučí nad plechovkou koly v Korutanské ulici?

★

Čerstvě zrozená moucha od dnešního dne, šestého června, nasává kromě vína, krve a zkažených šťáv především kolu z místní kebabárny Panda. Možná proto je od raného dětství ještě rychlejší a neklidnější než kdokoliv z jejího rozvětveného mariborského příbuzenstva. Kdyby byla dívkou, patrně by byla diagnostikována poruchou ADHD. Jenže je mouchou.

Má zajímavou a dalo by se říct, že i jímavou fyziognomii a duši.

Tenké chlupaté nohy, srdce jako bezmocný anděl, očička neklidná, ale vlídná.

★

Vystoupila jsem z flixbusu a ocitla se v Mariboru. Po bouři se příjemně ochladilo. Nádraží bylo liduprázdné, z městského trávníku stoupala pára. Před kasinem Admirál chlemtal osamělý pejsek vodu z louže.

Společně se mnou vystoupil muž s chlupatými prsty na nohou a trochu šíleným pohledem a malinká útlá žena v obřích slunečních

brýlích, co se po muži nenápadně otáčela, jako by po něm něco chtěla. Za nimi se z autobusu lenivě vysoukal ještě mladý vousatý tloušťík v košili s tropickými vzory i s cigaretovým tabákem American Spirit, který si z kufru vytáhnul kromě krosny i kytaru.

Pak jsme si zmizeli z očí.

The Maribor Hypnosis

Dora Kaprálová

Translated from Czech by Tony Mileman and Melvyn Clarke

We're in Graz, Austria, less than eighty kilometres from Maribor. Some drenched travellers and a few winos are standing about at the station. In the middle of this huddle sits an elderly woman in rustic black, perched atop a large birdcage; inside it lies a limp soft toy monkey with button eyes. Everyone crowds together Balkan-style beneath a long, corrugated-iron roof, almost touching elbows – a kind of mass hypnosis brought on by the pounding rain. It is 6 June, and outside the devils are on the loose.

★

In Maribor, the storm has long since passed.

In the afternoon, a housefly hatches in the inner courtyard of a tenement block on Carinthia Street, from a larva that had colonised a rotting watermelon behind a dustbin. On the ground floor of the building there is an expensive Chinese optician's colonising local Slovenian optics; upstairs, a German language school; next door, the Panda kebab house; opposite, the municipal fire station. None of the tenement block's residents have noticed the fly hatching. The newly hatched fly measures just under three millimetres, weighs just over half a milligram, has six legs, two membranous wings, a tiny aerodynamic body and two deep, mischievous eyes, each composed of a thousand minute compound eyes.

It sees everything at high speed, as if from a swing carousel, in all directions – sped up, blurred, unable to zoom in on any detail. Yet on a dandelion blossom it can see what we cannot with the naked

eye: Maribor's ultraviolet light, a far greater marvel than, say, the famous red Northern Lights over Maribor in 1939.

The fly perceives reality stroboscopically, yet can also perceive four-dimensional space. It is a born hedonist and at the same time a melancholic, as though it hailed from Prekmurje in Slovenia; yet by virtue of its existence it is a second-class citizen in Maribor, just as the Slovenes were considered inferior to the Italians in Fascist Trieste and to the Germans of Maribor. The fly has no birth certificate, passport, schooling or medical card. It likes to laugh and cry; it is kind, temperamental and gentle. It most enjoys sucking up cola and white wine with its proboscis, though it is not above blood or plain human shit either.

The Maribor housefly was born in the house where the famous Maribor hypnotist Svengali, who had lived there with his beloved partner Elis, died in January 1965.

The owner of the Panda kebab house, Mr Mahmed Öge, unknowingly celebrates the birth of the unnoticed fly by taking a short break to watch the football match between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid.

According to my calculations, more than ten million other flies live in Maribor alongside the newly hatched housefly. So the question is who this city of a hundred thousand actually belongs to.

★

Svengali's partner Elis was born at the start of the last century roughly on the current site of a block of flats, which is nicknamed the Jewish Block because it was the first showpiece of post-war Yugoslav socialism in Murska Sobota, where people would rather not live at all, and because it was built on the site where the town synagogue was burned down during the war. Elis was in fact born Edith,

but who can keep track of all those names? She weighed forty kilos, had strong nerves and a heart of gold. The almost two-metre-tall hypnotist Svengali weighed over eighty kilos as an adult, and his masterful conjuring feats included hypnosis and his beloved Elis's subsequent catatonic episode.

It looked roughly like this: Elis lay down on a wooden box; Svengali hypnotised her and she went rigid. When she lay stiff as a board, her hands behind her head, he lifted his partner horizontally about a metre above the box and gently nudged it away with his foot. Then there came a faint sound like crackling glass. The sound itself was so fragile that it took everyone's breath away. Elis levitated in the bluish stage light; Svengali set a small table beside her and, in polished cognac-coloured shoes, stepped onto his partner's slender body. A horrified cry rose from the audience. Elis did not bat an eyelid, did not bend beneath Svengali's weight. From afar the glass was still crackling and crumbling, creaking and spilling out, and Svengali began to waltz on Elis. A Viennese waltz. His pale, lightly shadowed grey eyes stared intently beneath black brows into the void; the audience was speechless with excitement, and Elis continued to lie suspended in the air catatonically horizontal.

When the act went particularly well, Elis would after a few seconds turn her childlike, gentle face towards the audience, her eyes wide open, a mysterious, knowing smile on her lips. Svengali slowly spread his arms and rose on tiptoe, as if he and Elis were about to fly away. He too stood motionless for a long moment. With Elis lying before him, they formed a strange, hovering sculpture resembling a dragonfly. The object was so perfect that not even the greatest artistic shit from the Nikita Circus could have created it.

This is what the hypnotist's and Elis's eyes now conveyed to the audience: Mariborians, Elis and I, we are the ones who fill your emp-

tiness, your ordinariness, your fatigue; we are here for you, and for those who are no longer here. If you believe in our playfully innocent illusion, your world will not fall apart, vanish, or shatter like a glass bowl struck by the shrapnel of human misfortune.

Then a sharp gong stroke rang out.

Svengali leapt lightly back to the ground, a melancholy exhaustion on his face, as though he had experienced something extraordinary, as though he were returning from far away. He caught Elis's falling body in his arms, and a charismatic Elis curled into a ball and blew the audience a kiss.

Thunderous applause broke out.

In Maribor, Paris, Vienna – everywhere.

Such was the most famous act performed by the hypnotist and his partner, premiering at the Union Café in Maribor in the mid-1920s.

But back to our Maribor fly. Can you not hear it buzzing impatiently over a can of cola in Carinthia Street?

★

From this day forth, 6 June, the newly hatched fly imbibes not only wine, blood and putrid juices, but also, more than anything else, cola from the local Panda kebab house. Perhaps that is why, from earliest childhood, it has been swifter and more restless than any member of its extended Maribor family. Had it been a girl, it would doubtless have been diagnosed with ADHD. But it is a fly.

It has an interesting – one might even say affecting – physiognomy and soul.

Slender, downy legs; a heart like a helpless angel; little eyes. Restless yet affable.

★

I stepped off the FlixBus and found myself in Maribor. After the storm, the air had cooled pleasantly. The station was deserted; steam rose from the city lawns. In front of the Admiral Casino, a lone little dog was lapping water from a puddle.

The man with hairy toes and the slightly unhinged look stepped off with me, along with the tiny, slender woman in enormous sunglasses who kept glancing back at him as though she wanted something from him. Behind them, the plump young bearded fellow in the tropical-print shirt, carrying the pouch of American Spirit tobacco, lazily clambered out of the bus, pulling from the luggage hold not only his rucksack but also a guitar.

Then we lost sight of one another.

ESTONIA



Lilli LUUK

Ööema

Night Mother

Saadjärve Kunstikeskus, 2024

Estonian

ISBN: 978-9916-4-2694-4

BIOGRAPHY

Lilli Luuk (b. 1976) received her very first literary prize for her debut, the 2018 Friedebert Tuglas Award for Short Stories. The writer, who uses a pseudonym, has a background in art history, has worked as a teacher and lecturer, and became a full-time freelance writer in 2021. She is a member of the Estonian Writers' Union. Her second novel, *Night Mother*, won the Estonian State Annual Cultural Award and the A.H. Tammsaare Literary Award. Her short stories have won numerous prizes in Estonia and have been published in anthologies and magazines in English, German, Hungarian, Latvian, and Spanish.

SYNOPSIS

The enchanting centre of this novel is the vast Estonian marshland that hides, protects, feeds, but also deceives people, animals and birds. Young artist Krissu becomes lost, together with her mother and aunt, while picking wild cranberries. While looking for a path home in the mysterious foggy landscape, she discovers a milk churn on an island in the bog, where a white parachute blouse, photographs and a diary are also concealed. The secrets

that had been hidden for half a century by the women of the family gradually come to light. This is a family story about putting together, piece by piece, the untold stories that are too painful to even be remembered. Lilli Luuk writes it in a way that you can smell the early-morning bog that she describes; you experience the fear and thirst for life that her characters encounter while lost in that landscape.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Lilli Luuk is an outstandingly unique voice in Estonian literature. Her colourful prose and rich lexicon are steeped in ancestral heritage. She has an exceptional ability to conjure an atmosphere in words, seeing and describing details as only the best artists can do. Reading *Night Mother*, the scents of forests and bogs are palpable – Luuk's descriptions transport the reader straight into the heart of Estonia's pristine natural landscape. It is a story about untold tales that is thrilling, historically accurate, and that awakens all the senses.



Õöema

Lilli Luuk



Sel õhtul ootas Mall veidi kärsitult, et Virve silmad juba kinni vajuksid. Virve omakorda vist tajus ema kärsitust ja ei kippunud sugugi veel suikuma. Kui surve nibu ümber lõpuks vähenes ja Virve pea raskemaks muutus, katsus Mall teda ettevaatlikult rinna otsast eemale tõsta, aga pisikesed huuled löid Malle vähemagi liigutuse peale kohe kinni ja laps hakkas uuesti imema, kuigi Mallele endale tundus, nagu oleks ta juba ammu viimase tilgani tühjaks imetud. Malle enda silmalaudki tahtsid kinni kukkuda, Hinge juba magas voodi seinapoolses servas, suukene paokil, pisike ilanire suunurgast padjale jooksmas, pilutatud püüril oli niiske laik. Hinge hingas natuke vilinal, ebaühtlases rütmis ja ümises hooti arusaamatus lapsekeeles, nagu näeks ärevat und. Mall jäi tema hingamist kuulatama, läks sellega kaasa, kuni järsku end üles võpatas, laup higine, suu kuiv. Virve tema kätel oli raske nagu jahukott, pea tahapoole visatud, huuled paokil, nüüd päriselt magamas. Mall sättis särgi ja kampsuni ühe käega korda ja tõstis siis Virve ettevaatlikult voodisse. Tagatuba tundus talle peaaegu et lämbe, Mall oli uhanud päeval puid ahju alla nii palju, kui andis, nii et ahjuuks oli punane, õue minnes oli tõmmanud villase räti veel üle, vanad maasikakirja käpikud (pöidla alt juba nõelutud) iga kord kätte. Külмага kippusid Malle sõrmed valusaks ja käed karedaks, kuid võidmiseks ei olnud majas enam ühtegi salvi ega kreemi järel, kui just searasvaga ei tahtnud määrada. Või oleks aidanud küll, teadis Mall, aga võid ei olnud küll võimalik niimoodi kulutada, nagu midagi ei olnud kulutada – mis ei läinud kokkuostu, mis ei läinud maksude peale, läks Juhani aitamiseks, kuid ilma Juhani ja tema meeste abita ei oleks Mall suutnud sel aastal ei heinu lakka ega kartulit keldrisse saadagi. Või oleks? Kes oskab öelda, inimeste võimetusel pole piire. Kuidas ema ja Ilmi saavad, nemad on ju ka

ainult naised, aitavad veel Mallegi. Ja Juhanit, kõiki neid mehi, keda mets varjab. Kõik aitavad kedagi, mis siis, et endale pole peaaegu midagi enam jäetud. Malle sõormeisse lõi korraks sookailu lõhna ja südamesse valu nagu puss. Aina! Leo olla keelanud tookord Ainat, ära mine! Ema oli varem öelnud, ärge tulge! Aina oli millalgi Mallele öelnud: Leo arvab, et ma tahan surma saada, et ma olevatki nii metsik, liiga ettevaatamatu, jah, ma lähen tõesti igale poole kaasa, ma teen nüüd kõik kaasa, jah, mul on valus, aga kas ma surra tahan? Ma ei tea, ei, ei taha ju, ma tahan ainult, et seda valu ei oleks! Kas see lein lõpeb kunagi? „Aina, sa saad veel armastada, kunagi, usu! Või armastab keegi sind, leevendab seegi!“ Kas see valu otsa saab, seda Mall veel ei tea. On hea, et temal on lapsed ja loomad ja töö, ta liigub ja rassib hommikust õhtuni ja surebki igal õhtul, sest väsimus on nii suur, et isegi unenägusid ei luba.

Mall oleks tahtnud ka voodisse jääda, oma soojade laste juurde, kuid enne tuli laudas ära käia, polnud parata, kõik riided tuli veel korra kiht kihi peale selga toppida, pliidipajast auravat vett pange tõsta. Sellise ilmaga jäätusid laudas loomade joogiveed. Kui Mall ämber käe otsas õue astus, olid sinisest mustaks muutunud taevasse torgatud tähed, lääne pool oli latvade kohal veel näha kitsast punetav-helendavat serva, see tähendas, et külm jätkub ka homme. Lumi krudises Malle jalgade all, need olid Juhani vanad saapad, mis ta oli talvisteks töösaabasteks võtnud, jalas oli veel kaks paari jämedamast villasest lõngast sokke ning saapaninadesse oli ta toppinud natuke heinu, sooja pärast ja selleks, et suured saapad jalas liigselt ei loksuks. Nii jäid Mallest sel talvel maha suuremad jäljed, kui ta ise oli.

Laudas oli teistsugune õhk, kuigi inimese ja elajate hingeauru oli näha, oli lehma juures alati soojem. Mall lõhkus kiiniga jääkaaned. Kui ta selle tagasi seina äärde nõjatas, märkas ta üleval nagis Juhani vana presentmantlit rippumas, seda, mida Mall vahel sügisel vihmasel ilmaga rabasse minnes või lauda vahet käies peale tõmbas. Mall surus näo külma kangesse kangasse ja tõmbas sõõrmetesse raba ja metsa jahedat lõhna. Korraks meenus põsele küüniseina jahe puit ja Mall kummardus laterna hämaruses laudaseina poole, nagu lootes sealt auku leida. Kas see lein ka lõpeb kunagi? Nüüd aina tuleb lein

leina järel. Lehma nõudlik ammumine tõi ta aga kohe oma perenaiseelu juurde tagasi, ta võttis lüpsipingi ning istus Musta alla.

Kui Mall lauda ja lehma lõhnavast soojusest tagasi külma öösse astus ja üle kuuvalges helkleva lume toa poole sammus, tungis pakases vaikuses tema kõrvu mingi heli, see polnud lume krudin ega jäätunud puutüvede pinge. Ta seisatas lume alt välja turritava karusmarjapõõsa juures ja kuulatas hetke, ajas pea kuklasse. Lüpsik auras käes ja tähed plinkisid tumesinises taevas, kord olid ühed heledamad, siis jälle teised, võbelesid, ei püsinud kuidagi Malle pilgu ees paigal. Mall oleks kui tundnud sõõrmetes värске heina magusat lõhna, kui kuskilt eemalt, nagu suletekiga summutatult, kostis Malle kõrvu rütmiline hääl, justkui ketramine või saagimine. Saagimine lähenes, muutus järjest kõvemaks jauramiseks, lukustas kõrvad, tähed koondusid kokku kaheks suureks silmaks, mis heitsid oma pimestava valguse Mallele näkku, hakkasid siis otse Malle silme ees kukkuma ning lumi laotas ennast tema jalge ette, autolaternate valgusesse nagu kõige siledam valge siid, kuuvalgus voolas peitu nagu valge piim kohevasse lumme.

Mall oli nagu kogu aeg teadnud, et lõpuks nad tulevad niimoodi. Öösel.

Night Mother

Lilli Luuk

Translated from Estonian by Adam Cullen

That night, Mall waited somewhat impatiently for Virve's eyelids to finally close. Virve must have sensed her mother's restlessness in turn and showed no signs of drifting off to sleep. When the pressure around Mall's nipple finally softened and Virve's head grew heavier, she tried to cautiously lift the child away from her breast, but her tiny lips clamped shut again at the slightest movement and she resumed nursing, even though Mall felt she'd long been sucked dry to the very last drop. Mall's own eyelids were on the verge of sliding shut, Hinge was already asleep on the side of the bed against the wall, her little lips parted, a tiny trickle of saliva running from the corner of her mouth to the pillow, a damp spot forming on the hemstitched pillowcase. Hinge's breath produced a soft whistle, uneven and broken by occasional murmurs of unintelligible child's gibberish as if she were having an anxious dream. Mall listened to her daughter's breathing and her own started to match it until she jerked awake suddenly, forehead perspiring, mouth dry. Virve was as heavy as a sack of flour in her arms, head thrown back, lips parted, now fast asleep. Mall pulled her shirt and sweater down with one hand before delicately resting Virve in the bed. The back bedroom almost seemed stuffy. Mall had heaped as much firewood into the stove as she could that day till the cast-iron door glowed red; every time she went outside, she pulled on a woollen scarf and an old pair of strawberry-patterned mittens (already stitched at the base of the thumbs). Mall's fingers ached and the skin on her hands turned rough in the cold, but there wasn't a single cream or salve left in the house, unless she wanted to rub pork lard over them. Butter might have helped, she knew, but butter certainly wasn't to be wasted like that anymore, just as nothing was to be wasted – whatever wasn't bought up by the state or paid as taxes went to helping Juhan, but without the assistance of Juhan and his men, Mall wouldn't have been able to get hay into the loft or potatoes

into the cellar that year, either. Or would she? Who could say, there are no limits to people's abilities. How did Mother and Ilmi get by, they were only women, too, and even lent Mall a hand. And Juhan, and all the men hidden in the woods. Everyone helped someone, no matter that there was almost nothing left over for themselves any more. For a moment, the smell of wild rosemary flooded her nostrils, and a pain stabbed her heart. Aina! Leo forbade Aina back then, don't go! Before, Mother had said: Don't come! At some point, Aina said to Mall: Leo thinks I have a death wish, he says I'm so savage, too reckless, yes, I honestly do want to go along everywhere, I'm going along with everything now, yes, it's painful for me, but do I wish to die? I don't know, no, I don't, all I want is for this pain to disappear! Will this grief ever end? 'Aina, you'll love again, someday, trust me! Or someone will love you, and that will make things easier!' Whether or not that pain will end, Mall still doesn't know. It's good that she has the children and the livestock and chores, she's on her feet and toiling from dawn till dusk and she dies every night because the exhaustion is so overwhelming that it doesn't even allow for dreams.

Mall would've wished to stay in bed as well, to snuggle up next to her warm children, but first she needed to go to the barn, it couldn't be helped, she had to dress in all her clothes again layer by layer and pour steaming water from the cauldron on the stove into a pail. The livestock's drinking water froze in that kind of weather. When Mall stepped outside, pail dangling from her grip, stars had pricked the sky that had turned from blue to black, a narrow strip of reddish light still glowed above the treetops to the west. It meant the cold would continue tomorrow. The snow crunched under Mall's feet, they were Juhan's old boots that she'd started to use as winter work boots, she also wore two pairs of socks woven from thick wool and had stuffed a little straw into the toes of the oversized footwear for warmth and to keep them from joggling too much around her feet. Thus, Mall left behind greater footprints than her own that winter.

The air in the cowshed was different, though the human's and animal's breaths steamed, it was always warmer by the cow. Mall smashed the icy lids with a billhook. When she leaned the tool back against the wall, she noticed Juhan's old canvas jacket hanging from a peg above her, the one Mall occasionally wore into the bog on drizzly autumn days or pulled on when walking between the house and the shed. She pressed her face into the stiff, cold fabric and inhaled the smell of bog and forest. For a moment, her cheek remembered the cool wood of the barn wall and in the dim light cast by the lantern, she leaned towards the wall of the cowshed as if hoping to find a hole in it. Would this grief ever really end? Now, grief was only followed by more grief. The cow's insistent mooing yanked her back into her domestic existence, she picked up the milking stool and sat down at Blacky's side.

When Mall left the cowshed and the animal's scented warmth, stepped back into the cold night, and walked towards the house across snow glistening in the moonlight, a sound pierced the silence of the frost and found its way to her ear. It wasn't the crunching of snow or the tension of frozen tree trunks. She paused next to a gooseberry bush poking from the snow and listened for a moment, tilting her head back. The milking pail steamed and the stars blinked in the indigo sky, some brighter at one moment, then others, wavering, seemingly refusing to stay still before Mall's gaze. She almost sensed the sweet scent of fresh hay in her nostrils when from somewhere in the distance, as if muffled by a down blanket, a rhythmic noise reached her ears, almost like spinning or sawing. The sawing drew closer, growing louder and louder and turning to a roar, deafening her, the stars condensed into two great eyes that cast their blinding light straight into Mall's face, then began falling right before her eyes and the snow spread itself out at her feet, entering the beams of the headlights like the smoothest white silk, the moonlight streamed into hiding like white milk into the downy snow.

Mall had always known they would eventually come this way. At night.

FINLAND



Susanna HAST
Toivottomuus
Despair

Kustantamo S&S, 2025
Finnish
ISBN: 978-951-52-6427-5

BIOGRAPHY

Susanna Hast (b. 1981) has a PhD in Social Sciences. She works as a researcher and Associate Professor at Uniarts Helsinki. She has researched war, compassion and corporality. Her intimately personal debut novel *Body of Evidence* (2022) touches on the mechanisms of violence and trauma, and in conjunction, the silent war against women, one that leaves no trace in the history books.

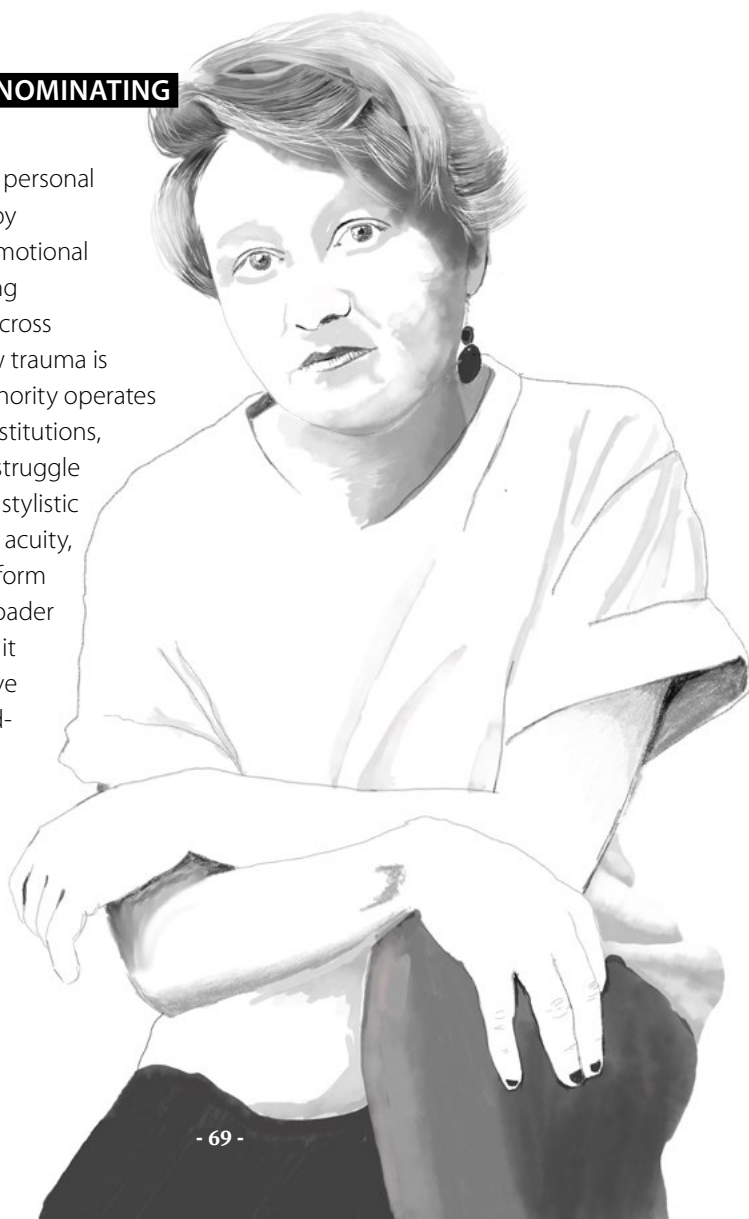
SYNOPSIS

An adult daughter lies in an empty bathtub. She has called her mother to wish her a Happy Mother's Day. Their relationship is like a competition, in which the winner never shows that they need the other. By making the call, the daughter has admitted her defeat. During the conversation, the mother has managed to lower the daughter's defenses only to drop a bomb that drives her into self-doubt and paranoia. The door to the unconscious swings open and rattles. The daughter embarks on a dangerous journey to her hometown, where a devastating disease has collapsed the social order. *Despair* dives deep into the subconscious and casts the institution

of family and the concepts that hold it together – inheritance, gift, father, mother – in merciless light. The work approaches the intrinsic violence of intimate relationships, the necessity of separation, and the horror of the doppelgänger.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Despair explores how personal histories are shaped by power, silence, and emotional inheritance, addressing issues that resonate across national borders: how trauma is transmitted, how authority operates within families and institutions, and how individuals struggle to reclaim agency. Its stylistic daring, psychological acuity, and capacity to transform private pain into a broader cultural inquiry make it a strong representative of innovative, forward-looking European fiction.



Toivottomuus

Susanna Hast



Jalat uppoavat syvälle lumessa. On vaikea päästä eteenpäin. Huohotan ja painan lunta vasten, minun on painuttava umpihangen läpi kohti äidin kammiota. Vasta silloin huomaan. Talo on pienentynyt. Työnnyn eteenpäin lumessa, ja hänen pieni talonsa muuttuu aina vain pehmeämmäksi harmaaksi, siniseksi kuin hänen silmänsä. Ovea on vaikea erottaa seinästä, vaikka ajovalot valaisevat koko pihan. Kolautan käteni porraskaiteeseen, löydän hapuilemalla oven. Läimäytän ovea kämmenellä. Koputan rystysillä. Hakkaan sormenpäillä. Potkin kengänkärjellä, mutta äiti ei avaa.

Tiedän että hän on sisällä, tunnen sen. Hän on sisällä pienentyneenä ja hän kuulee minut, hän kuulee keuhkoni haukkomassa ilmaa. Hän kuulee koputuksen ja potkimisen. Hän on pyytänyt minua ajatuksissaan tulemaan, olen tullut, mutta hänen ei tarvitse avata, koska en voi hermostua siitä, en voi suuttua siitä. En voi tuomita äitiä. En voi pitää häntä terveenä enkä sairaana. Hän ei ole haluni kohde, hän on haluni syy.

Peruutan kauemmas umpisella, se on vaivalloista mutta en voi kääntää selkääni talolle. Otan vielä muutaman raskaan askeleen taaksepäin, otan kintaat kädestä ja etsin takin taskustani vulkaanisen kiven, jonka ympärille olen käärimyt paperia. Puristan pakkettia nyrkissäni, paperi on pehmentynyt ja painautunut tiiviisti kiven ympärille.

Vedän hupun päähän, ojennan käsivartta taakse ja riuhtaisen sen eteen, olkapään jänteet kiristyvät ja hellittävät. Kivi lentää kohti ta-

loa, se kumahtaa ikkunan pintaan, murenee, ja se, mikä ei murene hangen päälle, vajoaa.

Lasken kolme hengitystä. Ei mitään. Auton moottori sammuu, valot pimenevät. Romahdan selälleni kuivaan lumeen ja katson taivaalle. Se näyttää ikuisuudelta, ei lopullisuudelta.

Miksi yrittää sulkea silmukkaa tai kulkea sen loppuun?

Olen maannut paikallani kauan, tai en tiedä, ei tunnu siltä, että aika kuluisi. Alkaa tuntua raskaalta, se tarkoittaa pahan tuulen lähestymistä, sen katkonaisia vaikutuksia. Se vie kunnollisen tietoisuuden mennessään, se kuorii ihon kasvoilta ja vie kielen pala palalta.

Käteni etsivät kovaa pintaa pehmeästä lumesta, pääsen jaloilleni kyljen kautta. Tunnustelen vartalollani omia jälkiäni, ja lähden kahlaamaan niitä pitkin takaisin autolle. Silloin kuulen oven avautuvan.

Sumu tunkeutuu psyykeen ja laskeutuu polttavana iholle: epävarmuus tilanteesta, epävarmuus kyvystämme suoriutua, epävarmuus vastustajan aikeista.

Talon verannalla syttyy lamppu. Äiti on ulkona. Näen hänet osittain, toinen puoli on varjossa. Hänen pintansa on sulanut, rinta-kehästä näkyy läpi, vatsasta näkyy läpi, kaikki hänen elimensä hehkuvat. Näen kaksi soikeaa lihanpalasta kylkiluiden takana, putki joka ulottaa kohti suuta, sikiöltä näyttävä vaalea möykky, sen vieressä punainen pehmeä pala jonka ympärillä on kellertävää kudosta ja valtava loinen käpertyneenä lantion sisään, sen ympärillä toinen kiemurteleva loinen.

Hän liikahtaa, elimet heilahtavat hänen askeleensa mukana. Vain pieni vinkuva henkäys karkaa suustani.

Eikö hän nähnyt minua veitsi kurkulla? Vai eikö hän ei halunnut ajatella itseään veitsi kurkulla? Pahuuden aura, joka levisi sisältäni

veitsi kurkulla muistutti häntä jostakin, ja hän oli vihainen. Äidin täytyy saada vihata lastaan.

Äiti lähtee kävelemään minua kohti. Se ei ole hänen tapaistaan. Olen suututtanut hänet. Olen tunkeutunut hänen pihamaalleen, hänen elämänsä, olen kiukutellut ja itkenyt inhottavaa itkua, olen ajatellut häntä, puhunut hänestä, olen tuonut häpeän hänen sei-niensä sisään.

Hän siirtyy pimeään kohtaan pihassa, en näe häntä enää. Mutta kuulen kuinka hän kahlaa minua kohti. En halua sittenkään koh-data häntä. Kauhon käsillä ja jaloilla lunta, en tiedä törmäänkö pian huonekaluihin tai aitaan, löydänpö raon aidassa, pölyävää lunta ja sumua ei enää erota toisistaan.

Kuulen humahduksen, yritän nähdä äidin, mutta se on talon ta-kaa lennähtävä lintu, harakka otaksun, joka aukoo mustaa kaar-tuvaa nokkaansa ja räähkyy, sen kaula värähtelee, sen siivet iskevät hurjana, ja äiti on perässäni, suussani on lunta, silmissäni on lun-ta, kiteet sulavat vedeksi suussani ja silmissäni, työnnän itseäni eteenpäin reflekseillä, hän huitaisee raivolla ja harakan räähkymi-nen loppuu.

Mustia ja valkoisia höyheniä lentää ilmassa, veripisarat putoilevat hangen pintaan.

Hän pysähtyy. Hänen kiinnostuksensa hiipuu ja sammuu.

Despair

Susanna Hast

Translated from Finnish by David Hackston

My feet sink deep into the snow. It is hard to move forwards. I am panting, I press myself against the thick snow, I have to trudge all the way to my mother's chamber. It is only then that I notice. The house has grown smaller. I push onwards, and her small house becomes an ever-softer grey, blue as her eyes. It is hard to make out the door from the wall, though the car's lights illuminate the whole garden. I knock my hand against the railing by the step and fumble around until I locate the door. I slap the door with the flat of my hand, hammer it with my fists, rap it with my fingertips, kick it with the tip of my shoe, but my mother does not open it.

I know she is in there, I can feel it. She is inside the diminished house, and she can hear me, hear my lungs gasping for air. She can hear the banging and the kicking. In her mind, she has asked me to come here, and I have come, but she doesn't have to open because I can't get angry about it, can't lose my temper over it. I cannot judge my mother. I can consider her neither healthy nor sick. She is not the object of my desires; she is the reason for my desires.

I retreat through the compacted snow; it is hard going, but I cannot turn away from the house. I take a few more sluggish steps backwards, take the mittens from my hands and look for the lump of volcanic rock I have wrapped in a scrap of paper and stashed in my pocket. I clench the small packet in my fist; the paper has softened and is pressed tightly around the rock.

I pull my hood down further, reach my arm back and hurl the rock forwards; the tendons in my shoulders tense, then release. The rock hurtles towards the house, strikes the surface of the window, cru-

mbles, and what doesn't crumble on top of the snowdrift sinks into it.

I breathe and count to three. Nothing. The car's engine switches off; its lights go dark. I collapse on my back in the dry snow and look at the sky. It looks like eternity, not finality.

Why try to tighten the knot or travel all the way to its end?

I have been lying on the spot for a long time ... well, I don't know, it doesn't feel like time is passing. It starts to feel heavy, which means an ill wind is approaching, its intermittent buffeting. It whisks all genuine awareness away with it, stripping the skin from the face and taking the tongue, piece by piece.

My hands look for a hard surface in the soft snow; I roll on my side and stagger to my feet. I feel my footprints with my whole body and begin wading along them all the way back to the car. Then I hear the door opening.

Fog invades my psyche and descends upon my skin, burning: uncertainty about the situation, uncertainty about our ability to manage, to cope, uncertainty about the antagonist's intentions.

On the veranda outside the house, a light goes on. My mother is outside. I can see her partially; her other half is cast in shadow. Her surface has melted, her chest is transparent, her stomach is transparent, all her organs are glowing. I see two oval pieces of flesh behind her ribs, the pipe rising up towards her mouth, a white blob that looks like a foetus, beside it a soft, red mass covered in yellow tissue and an enormous parasite curled inside the pelvis; another parasite is winding its way around it.

She moves and her organs shudder with each step. Only a small, wheezing breath escapes my mouth.

Didn't she see me with a knife at my throat? Or hadn't she wanted to think about herself with a knife at her throat? The aura of evil exuding from within me, a knife at its throat, reminded her of something, and she was angry. A mother must be able to despise her child.

My mother starts walking towards me. This isn't like her. I've made her angry. I have invaded her space, her life, I've been acting up, weeping woeful tears, I have been thinking about her, talking about her, I have brought shame within her walls.

She steps into the dark section of the garden and I cannot see her any more. But I hear her wading towards me. I don't want to confront her after all. I snatch at the snow with my hands and feet. I don't know whether I will soon knock into furniture or the fence, whether I will find the gap in the fence, I can no longer tell the floating snow and the fog apart.

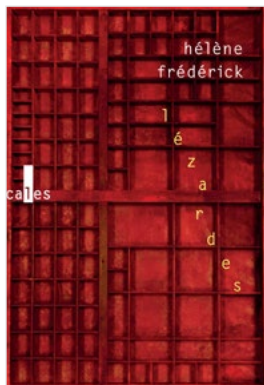
I hear a swoop, I try to see my mother, but it is a bird taking flight behind the house, a magpie, I assume, opening its curved, black beak and squawking; its neck trembles, its wings beat frantically, and my mother is on my tail, there is snow in my mouth, snow in my eyes, the crystals melt, turn to water in my mouth and eyes, I reflexively push myself onwards, she lashes on angrily, and the magpie's squawking comes to an end.

Black and white feathers flutter in the air, droplets of blood cascade to the surface of the snow.

She stops. Her interest wanes, then snuffs itself out.

SPECIAL
MENTION

FRANCE



Hélène FRÉDÉRIK

Lézardes

Rivers of White

Gallimard / Verticales, 2025

French

ISBN: 978-2-07-310417-5

BIOGRAPHY

Hélène Frédérick (b. 1976, Quebec) is a French-speaking novelist, who lives in Paris since 2006. After studying literature, she worked for independent bookshops and in book distribution in Quebec. In Paris, she contributes to magazines, has written radio dramas for Radio France, and has published three collections of prose with the Quebec publisher L'Oie de Cravan. She currently works as a proofreader, a profession she describes in her novel *Rivers of White*, published by Gallimard / Verticales, as well as her three previous novels: *La Poupée de Kokoschka* (2010), *Forêt contraire* (2014) and *La Nuit sauve* (2019).

SYNOPSIS

In her fourth book, *Rivers of White* (2025), Hélène Frédérick explores the world of copy editors, drawing on her own experience at a magazine. The book's originality lies in the writer's personal involvement in learning the craft on the job, and her ability to transform her practical discoveries into literature's raw material. At the roots of the narrative is a tribute to the author's father — a self-taught electro-mechanic — who, from an early age, instilled in her the

love of tinkering with faulty engine parts, much like one hunts for errors in a text. The book is in keeping with the current wave of documentary non-fiction, while quietly nurturing hidden spaces of desire and poetry. Composed of portraits, memories and notes taken

on the spot, *Rivers of White* reads like a poetic investigation into a profession that operates in the shadows. The author explores the unique world of proofreaders in an oblique way, searching for traces left by a few self-taught and libertarian figures. From chapter to chapter, she weaves the intimate with the collective.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Hélène Frédérick's book offers a timely look back at the political history of the book, at the crossroads of typography and anarchism. The precise and sensitive style allows us to experience firsthand the struggles of writing in the age of machines.



Lézardes

Hélène Frédérick



CALENDRIER

Sur la terrasse derrière ton dos, vrais ou faux les cyprès ? Tu vois seulement leur reflet se balancer sur ton écran. Tu as dans le ventre des bouts de cylindre en métal noués à la place des tripes. Au mur, la photo d'un jeune inconnu te regarde. Pendant les temps morts – de plus en plus rares –, tu lui inventes une vie. Des cartes postales ; plus haut, une blague géante à propos d'une virgule. Ça circule, devant, dans les couloirs non éclairés. Ici comme ailleurs, il faut faire des économies. Il fait froid, le chef ouvre le boîtier fiché au mur pour t'expliquer comment mettre le chauffage, mais désolé en ce moment de toute façon il n'y en a pas. C'est une question de calendrier, c'est central, on ne contrôle rien. Ça circule d'autant plus vite et en doudoune dans les couloirs. Parfois ça regarde à l'intérieur, surtout l'icône aux jambes molles, mais rarement ça dit bonjour. Ça chante *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* très fort et sans rire. La présence des dictionnaires à tes côtés heurte ta nonchalance. Au pays de l'exactitude, tu veux être une gigantesque coquille avec bras et jambes et sexe. On dit dans le milieu que plus les fautes sont grosses, moins on les remarque.

Du fond de ton antre, tu donnerais cher, en vérité, pour des phrases bancaires ; tu cultives même un amour pour elles ; tu exècres ce qui est lisse ; tu as l'impression que ça se voit. Le cliquetis de tes ongles sur le clavier, ta bague amulette antibourde vient de loin, c'est un cadeau de ta tante qui la tient de sa mère dont elle fut le souffre-douleur, autrement dit, elle te nuit peut-être. Menace ou protection, le doute ne te quitte pas, surtout depuis que tu as laissé un mauvais folio au sommaire alors que tu avais pourtant

la bague au doigt. D'un naturel espiègle et plutôt doux, Œil de lynx, le chef qui voit tout, a hurlé ton prénom ce jour-là. Quand il est content et quand il a le temps, il vient te voir avec son petit calendrier des prochains bouclages : cela veut dire qu'il a besoin de tes services et que tu gagneras encore des sous. Peut-être ainsi vas-tu pouvoir continuer d'écrire et préserver ce qu'il reste de ta liberté en lambeaux. Tu ne le connais pas encore beaucoup mais, déjà, avec son petit calendrier entre les mains, tu l'aimes bien.

Certains jours tu es triste dans les bureaux modernes. Tes ongles cliquettent dans les ruines d'un temps récent.

RUÉE

Tu fais partie des balbutiants de ce monde. Ta langue entre deux chaises est riche de ses balbutiements comme toute langue de pauvre, comme l'hébreu moderne né dans la misère de Whitechapel où il a puisé ses forces. Révolutionnaire, ta langue a dû s'émanciper et s'inventer pour nommer une réalité qu'elle n'avait jamais eu à nommer jusque-là. Tu sens la langue inscrite dans le corps, tu la sens s'articuler, tendue vers le désir : une ruée intérieure.

Le désir se confond avec la faille où tu as trouvé refuge, il est la condition de ta survie, réelle comme écrite.

POINÇON

Les vrais rebelles ne font pas beaucoup de bruit, tu l'as appris tôt. Ils agissent dans l'ombre et les raisons de leurs gestes échappent aussi aux regards. Il est le premier « en-dehors » que tu as connu, le premier passeur aussi. Le savoir de ton père est ce qu'il a de plus précieux et il est naturel pour lui de le transmettre. En écoutant à ses côtés Brassens ou Ferré ou Barbara, ou les Frères Jacques en rigolant, je balaie, je nettoie les pièces d'outils graisseuses avec du distillat de pétrole, je gratte la rouille à la brosse d'acier ou au jet de sable, le carbone salit les doigts décidément et s'incruste sous les ongles ; j'aide, j'assiste, je classe les pièces neuves reçues de livreurs parfois intimidants, parfois séduisants, j'apprends la soudure à l'étain. J'aime voir mon père installer le fil de cuivre

immaculé et brillant dans un stator ; il suit le schéma complexe qu'il a lui-même tracé au stylo sur du papier en défaisant les bobines cramées du moteur électrique à réparer pour les refaire à l'identique, taille du fil, nombre de tours de fil, taille des bobines, toutes numérotées. Son travail est soigné, reconnu dans toute la région et au-delà. Ils arrivent de loin ou du village voisin dans leur vieux pick-up ou leur voiture rutilante. Les fils de cuivre sont étincelants, encore plus qu'une chevelure de rêve, j'admire leur couleur chaude, j'aide à tailler les papiers spéciaux qui serviront à isoler les bobines les unes des autres. Ces papiers un peu fibreux varient en épaisseur, en couleur aussi, j'aime les toucher ; ils sont à la fois très résistants et doux, et leur rôle est essentiel. Sans leur protection, les charges négative et positive se rejoindraient et il y aurait court-circuit, m'explique-t-il. La notion de force semble entièrement contenue dans cette tension opposant négatif et positif, dans cette impossibilité parfaite que l'on exploite. Sans la distance, infime mais infranchissable, sans isolement des charges, aucun mouvement. C'est ainsi que, adolescente, j'interprète l'idée de puissance et son paradoxe.

Les nouvelles bobines une fois en place, on laisse tremper le moteur dans une cuve de vernis, puis vient l'étape que je préfère : on le met au four exactement comme on ferait cuire un gâteau. Ainsi le vernis se solidifie. Sous mon sarrau bleu informe, j'ai l'impression de jouer à la ménagère dans un monde étrange aux parfums métalliques, au milieu du désordre organisé de mon père. Une fois passé entre ses mains, le moteur électrique réparé puis repeint ressemble à s'y méprendre à un moteur neuf, à la différence près qu'il porte de minuscules initiales inscrites au poinçon : sa signature. L'acte de parapher vient clore et sceller l'ouvrage accompli. Il affirme quelque chose : j'ai pris soin de votre machine, elle fonctionne à nouveau à la perfection et j'y inscrais mon nom abrégé, en toute discrétion, pour le certifier.

Une ombre plane sur mon père, sur vous et moi, pendant ce temps.

Rivers of White

Hélène Fréderick

Translated from French by Sophie Lewis

SCHEDULE

On the terrace behind you, are the cypresses real or fake? You see only their reflection swaying on your screen. You've a bellyful of tangled metal tubing in the place of guts. On the wall, a photo of an unknown youth is looking at you. During your increasingly rare quiet moments, you dream up a life for him. A few postcards; further up, a one-liner about a comma, on a massive scale. People go by outside, in the unlit corridors. Here as elsewhere, belts must be tightened. It's cold and the boss opens the box affixed to the wall to show how you turn the heating on, but sorry there is no central heating anyway just now. It runs to a schedule and that's all controlled at the top, we don't control anything. People move about more quickly now and wear puffer jackets in the corridors. Sometimes someone'll take a look in here, most often the pictures editor with his slacker's saunter, but they rarely say hello. Someone is singing 'The Umbrellas of Cherbourg' very loudly and entirely straight-faced. The dictionaries stacked beside you undermine your casual air. In the land of precision, you'd like to be a ginormous, all-singing, all-dancing typo with balls. As they say in the business: the bigger the error, the harder it is to spot.

Hidden away in your den, the truth is you'd give a lot for a few chaotic sentences; actually you cultivate a passion for them; you can't stand a smooth text – and you sense that it shows. The tapping of your nails on the keyboard, your talismanic anti-clanger ring is from a distant latitude, it was a present from your aunt who had it from your mother whose scapegoat she became; in other words, it could well be a liability. Whether it's a hazard or a protection, doubt anyway dogs your steps, especially since you left a bad folio in a

table of contents despite the ring being on your finger. Naturally impish and a softie at heart, Eagle-eyes, the all-seeing boss, had yelled your name that day. When he's happy and has the time, he drops in on you with his little schedule of the next few press days: this means he could do with your help and you'll earn a few extra pennies. Perhaps this way you'll be able to keep writing while holding on to the tattered remains of your liberty. You don't yet know him well, but already, with the little schedule in his hands, you warm to him.

Some days you feel sad in these modern offices. Your nails tap away amid the ruins of recent history.

RUSH

You are one of the stammerers of this world. Your betwixt and between tongue is rich with its stammerings like every pauper's tongue, like the modern Hebrew born in the poverty of Whitechapel (whence its vitality also came). Revolutionary, your tongue has had to emancipate and invent itself in order to name a reality that had no need of a name before. You feel your native tongue written through your body, you feel its snaking through you, reaching towards desire: an internal rush.

Desire filters into the rift where you found refuge, it is the condition of your survival, both real and written.

STAMP

True rebels make next to no noise, you learned early on. They work away in the background and the reasons for their actions are equally elusive. Your father is your first true 'outsider', and the first sage master in your life too. His knowledge is his most precious possession and passing it on comes naturally to him. Chuckling along with him to Brassens, Ferré, Barbara or to the Frères Jacques, I sweep and clean greasy tool parts with degreaser, I rub off rust with wire wool or the sandblaster, my fingers filthy with the carbon bedded deep under my nails; I help and observe, I sort new

parts received from couriers who are sometimes intimidating and other times seductive, and I learn to solder with tin. I love watching my father wind the gleaming, immaculate copper wire inside a stator; he follows the complicated diagram he has himself plotted out with pen and paper while dismantling the burnt-out coils inside the engine to be repaired, then re-installs them just as they were, same diameter of wire, same number of turns, same size reels, and all parts numbered off. His work is meticulous, and known to be throughout the region and beyond. They come from far away or from the neighbouring village in beat-up vans or gleaming SUVs. The copper wire shines, more brilliant than a head of perfect hair, I admire their auburn sheen and help cut out the special papers to be slipped between the reels. These slightly fibrous papers vary in thickness and colour too, and I like manipulating them; they are at once robust and soft, and their role is crucial. Without their buffer, the negative and positive charges would meet and short-circuit straight away, as my dad explains. For me, the concept of energy seems entirely contained in the tension between opposite charges, in the perfect impossibility of it, and its harnessing. Without that minuscule but impassable distance, without the isolation of the charges, there can be no motion. Thus my adolescent self interprets the phenomenon and the paradox of power.

With the new reels installed, we leave the engine to soak in a vat of varnish, and then comes my favourite step: we put it in the oven just the way you might bake a cake. This fixes the varnish. In my shapeless blue overalls, I feel I'm playing housewife in a strange world of metallic flavours, in the midst of my father's organised chaos. Once passed through his hands, the repaired and repainted engine looks deceptively like a brand-new one, the only difference the tiny initials stamped into it: Dad's signature. The act of signing concludes and seals the completed job. It affirms something: I have cared for your machine, it's working perfectly again and I hereby, discreetly, certify as much.

A shadow hangs over my father, over you and me, during this time.

KOSOVO



Arben IDRIZI

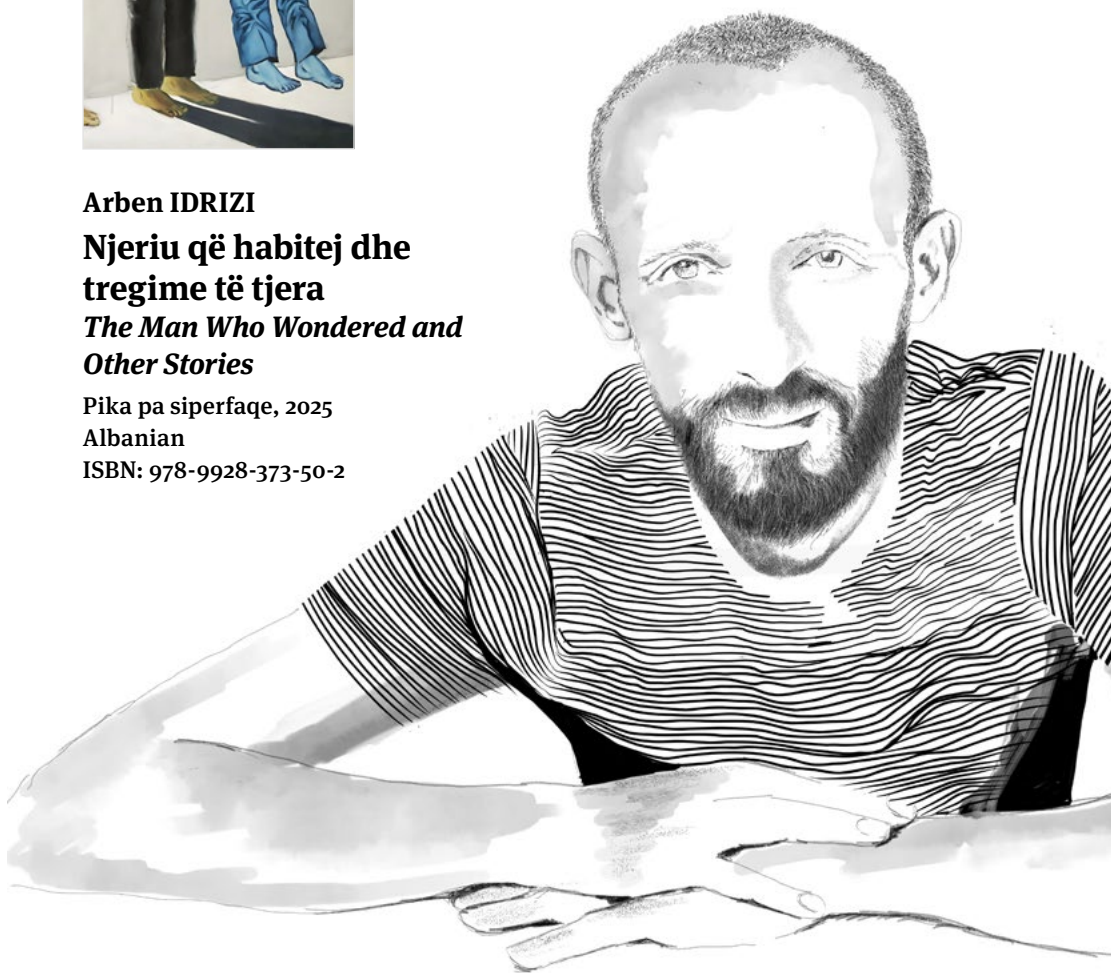
**Njeriu që habitej dhe
tregime të tjera**

***The Man Who Wondered and
Other Stories***

Pika pa sipërfaqe, 2025

Albanian

ISBN: 978-9928-373-50-2



BIOGRAPHY

Arben Idrizi (b. 1974) is a poet, writer, and translator. He is the author of eleven books, including ten poetry collections and one volume of short fiction. His work has been released by several prominent regional publishers and reflects a sustained engagement with contemporary European literary currents. In addition to his original writing, Idrizi has translated major works into Albanian by notable European authors, including Valerio Magrelli, Tino Caspanello, Roberto Calasso, Giacomo Leopardi, and Cesare Pavese.

SYNOPSIS

The Man Who Wondered and Other Stories is a prose work that explores violence, trauma, and wonder as existential conditions of human life in the face of history. At its centre stands the figure of Isak Kodra, a survivor of a wartime massacre who, after witnessing the unthinkable, remains frozen in a state of perpetual astonishment. Through this narrative and a series of thematically connected stories, the book

constructs a dark universe in which violence is not merely an event, but a way of thinking, remembering, and existing. Arben Idrizi's portray war, occupation, deportation, arbitrary killings, and the absurdity of history, shifting from concrete historical reality toward allegorical and metaphysical dimensions.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Arben Idrizi's writing is marked by philosophical depth, narrative precision, and moral seriousness. His sustained focus on war trauma, the dehumanization of the individual, and the paradox of postwar freedom places his work within a broader European conversation on memory, responsibility, and the limits of human understanding.

Njeriu që habitej dhe tregime të tjera

Arben Idrizi



Zoti Kodra në mbretërinë e habisë, 3

Kujt t'i rrëfesh për tmerret dhe krimet? Si të rrëfesh për krimet dhe tmerret? Ato të pësuarra dhe ato të shkaktuara. Njëri, habitej zoti Kodra, duke i dëgjuar, duke i lexuar, duke i parë, i merr si thirrje/mësim për ta bërë të njëjtën gjë, pikërisht ndaj pasardhësve të viktimave/xhelatëve. Tjetri, pa ndier pothuajse asgjë, thjesht për një trill budallallëku e marrëzie, i merr si shembull veprimi. Çka pra nëse një rrëfim i tillë mund t'i frymëzojë nipërit e masakruessve ta përsëritin veprën e gjyshërve? Apo, e kundërta, nipërit e të masakruarve të hakmerren ndaj nipërve të masakruessve, thjesht sepse janë pasardhës të tyre? Pikërisht një rrëfim i tillë dhe asgjë tjetër? Cila është përgjegjësia e rrëfyesit, në këtë rast?

Të shikosh masakrën me sy dhe të mos kesh frikë. Të shikosh dhunimin me sy dhe të mos kesh turp! Të dëshmosh është më e domosdoshme se të mbijetosh!

E gjitha, mendohet, habitej zoti Kodra, mund të kishte qenë ndryshe. Ama, çfarë do të thotë që diçka të jetë ndryshe? Vetëm lufta vetë ndoshta do të mund të konsiderohej si një pikë që e bën dallimin. Me të plasur ajo, me të qenë i përfshirë në të, s'ka më një gjë të vetme që do të mund t'i bënte gjërat të jenë ndryshe. Për këta banorë të këtij fshati, të gjithën e bën ndryshe masakra në ditën e fundit të luftës, pikërisht atëherë kur mund të shpëtonin, pikërisht në ditën kur mund të nisinin ta gëzonin lirinë, nga e cila ishin privuar dhe

për të cilën kishin pësuar gjithë ato vuajtje. Lufta në tërësinë e saj, për këta banorë të këtij fshati, do të ishte përpirë më lehtë gjithsesi, me të përfunduar, pa ato viktime të masakrës me të cilat kishte përfunduar. Viktima kishte pasur, kudo përreth fshatit të tyre, habitej zoti Kodra, dhe kjo gjë do të kishte qenë e dhimbshme e parë në domenin e gjerë të luftës. Ndërsa, duke i pasur viktimat brenda, në atë kohë dhe në atë mënyrë, e gjithë kjo përbënte për ta një ndryshim thelbësor. Ndryshimi nuk vinte më nga lufta si e tillë, por nga ai rast i veçantë, nga ai aksident, nga ajo humbje konkrete që i prekte drejtpërdrejt ata, vetëm ata. Pa atë ngjarje, e gjitha do të ishte ndryshe. Ose, në të vërtetë, të paktën për ata që kishin afërsi të drejtpërdrejtë me viktimat.

Të tjerët, habitej zoti Kodra, do të vazhdonin tutje. Vetë ishin gjallë; prindërit e tyre ishin gjallë; vëllezërit e motrat e tyre ishin gjallë, bijtë e bijat e tyre ishin gjallë. Kjo, habitej zoti Kodra, përbën një ndryshim të madh. Në të vërtetë, përbën ndryshimin themelor.

Pavarësisht të gjithave, pavarësisht se duket e kundërta, pavarësisht se të gjithë e mendojnë të kundërtën, ai ende nuk ka hequr dorë, habitej zoti Kodra, nga kafsha njeri; ende jo përfundimisht. Po çka do ta bënte të hiqte dorë përfundimisht? Nuk mund të hiqet dorë nga tjetri, habitej zoti Kodra, mund të hiqet dorë vetëm nga vetja.

E megjithatë, tekembamja, ky është një rrëfim për të, për vuajtjen e tij përkundrejt vuajtjes së tyre, për atë që ai ndien nga ajo që ata pësuan; nuk është zëri i tyre, i të masakruarve, nuk është mënyra e tyre e të rrëfyerit. Kush mund të na e thotë një fjalë të vetme për atë si ndiheshin ata? Për atë çka ndienin ata në ato çaste të fundit të jetës së tyre? Për atë çka mendonin ata në dorën e xhelatit, me tehun e thikës nën lëkurën e tyre, në mishin e tyre të gjallë? Jo, ne nuk dimë asgjë, habitej zoti Kodra. Ne nuk dimë gjë prej gjëje dhe nëse marrim guximin të hamendësojmë, çkado qoftë, thjesht vetëm sa futemi, lakuriq si në ditën që kemi ardhur në këtë botë, në atë që dikush do të mund ta quante fusha e minuar e moralit.

Ai nuk është dëshmitar luftërash klasike, kolosale; ai nuk është një i mbijetuar i një beteje historike, i ndonjë beteje historike të pavdekshme. Megjithatë, habitej zoti Kodra, është një i mbijetuar i një masakre makabre, të bërë nga njerëz të rëndomtë, të pësuar nga njerëz të rëndomtë të shkretë, të cilët nuk i kishin bërë gjë të keqe askujt, të paktën jo atyre prej të cilëve kishin pësuar. Ata kryes të atij krimi të shëmtuar, habitej zoti Kodra, ndoshta para se të vinin në atë ditë, në atë vend, s'kishin qenë asgjë më shumë se sa ca njerëz të shkretë që s'i kishin bërë gjë të keqe askujt. Ku janë sot? Janë rikthyer në jetën e tyre të rëndomtë, në përditshmërinë e tyre bajate dhe të përjetshme, ku nuk i bëjnë më askujt asgjë të keqe? E vuajnë mizorinë e ekzistencës siç e vuajmë të gjithë ne të tjerët? Apo vazhdojnë t'ia dalin thjesht si keqbërës të rëndomtë, deri sa një ditë shoqëria në gjirin e së cilës marrin frymë të vendosë t'i rrasë brenda, për krimet e tyre të rëndomta në vendin e tyre – pa e çuar mendjen kurrë te krimi i tyre i përbindshëm, në një vend tjetër, kundër ca njerëzve të tjerë, të panjohur?

Vjen nga një vend tjetër, të vret dhe kthehet në vendin e vet, habitej zoti Kodra. Çfarë mund të bësh më? Çfarë mund t'i bësh atij më? A ka një masë ndëshkimi që nuk do të të barazonte me të, që do të të mbante në distancë prej tij?

E ndonjëherë sheh fytyrat e të afërmëve të vet dhe përpiqet të përfytyrojë cili, në rrethana dhe kushte të tjera, do të mund të ishte shumë lehtë ndonjëri prej atyre që e kanë kryer masakrën. Nëse ditën e parë të lindjes do ta kishin marrë dhe rritur në atë vend, si njërin prej atyre masakruesve, fare lehtë do të mund të kishte qenë ai vetë njëri prej atyre, habitej zoti Kodra.

Nëse njëri prej atyre vrasësve dënohet, kurdo, kudo, nga ligjet njerëzore, të vetmet që kanë rëndësi, çfarë lehtësimi i sjell atij për gjithë ato dhimbje, ankthe dhe humbje që ka ndier dhe parë? Ai dënim i thirrur te drejtësia a do të mund të ishte ndonjëherë në proporcion me atë vuajtje të pamerituar?

Në mendje i pësëritet shpeshherë një skenë filmike: forcat aleate hyjnë, forcat armike dalin. Në pikën e takimit e përshëndesin njëri-tjetrin me dorën që prek lehtë strehën e kapelës. Pak orë pas masakrës, pak a shumë si për të thënë: ne e përfunduam për këtë herë, pa e arritur gjithë atë që donim, mbajeni deri sa të kthehen pasardhësit tanë ta vazhdojnë aty ku e lamë, edhe nëse nuk do ta arrijnë gjithë atë që do të duan.

The Man Who Wondered and Other Stories

Arben Idrizi

Translated from Albanian by Alexandra Channer

VIII. Mr Kodra in the realm of wonder, 3

Who to tell about the horrors and the crimes? How to recount the crimes and horrors? Those suffered and those perpetrated. A man, wondered Mr Kodra, while listening, while reading, while seeing, might hear it as a call/lesson to repeat exactly the same thing to the descendants of the victims/executioners. Another, barely feeling anything and just for a stupid, mad thrill, might see the act as an example. What if such a tale were to inspire the grandsons of the executioners to repeat the acts of their grandparents? Or the opposite: if the grandchildren of those who were massacred were to take revenge on the grandchildren of the perpetrators simply because they are their descendants? A story precisely like this one, and nothing more? What then is the responsibility of the storyteller in this case?

To see a massacre with your own eyes and not be frightened. To see rape with your own eyes and not feel shame! Bearing witness is more necessary than survival!

Everything, Mr Kodra thought, and wondered, could have been different. But what does it mean for something to be different? Only war itself can perhaps be considered a point that creates divergence. When it breaks out, when you are involved in it, there is nothing left that can change things. For the inhabitants of this village everything was made different by the massacre on the final day of the war, precisely when they could have been saved, precisely

on the day when they could have started to enjoy the freedom they had been denied and for which they had suffered all that pain. The villagers could have come to terms with the totality of the war more easily altogether if it had ended without the massacre victims with which it concluded. There had been victims everywhere outside their village, Mr Kodra wondered, and this would have been painful when viewed in the broader domain of the war. But having victims in the village, at that time and in that manner, constituted a fundamental change for them. This change did not come from the war as such but from that unusual event, that accident, that concrete loss that directly touched them and only them. Without it, everything would have been different. Or, in truth, for those directly related to the victims. The others, wondered Mr Kodra, would have carried on. They were alive; their parents were alive; their brothers and sisters were alive; their sons and daughters were alive. This, wondered Mr Kodra, constituted a vast change. In fact, it constituted a fundamental transformation.

Regardless of everything, even though it seems contrary and although everyone thinks the opposite, he has still not given up on the human animal, Mr Kodra wondered; not definitively. But what would it take to give up forever? One cannot give up on the other, Mr Kodra wondered, he could give up only on himself.

And yet this is a story about him, his suffering compared to their suffering, what he felt and what they experienced; it is not their voice, the voice of the massacred, it is not their manner of storytelling. Who can say a single word about how they were feeling? About what they felt in those final moments of their lives? What they were thinking at the hands of the executioner, with the knife blade on their skin, in their living flesh? No, we know nothing, wondered Mr Kodra. We know nothing of anything, and should we dare to guess at all, we simply step, naked as the day we were born, into what some might call a moral minefield.

He was not a witness to a classic, colossal war; he was not a survivor of a historic battle, an eternal and historic battle. Nonetheless, Mr Kodra wondered, he was one survivor of a macabre massacre perpetrated by ordinary people, experienced by wretched, ordinary people who had done nothing bad to anyone, at least not to those who had made them suffer. Perhaps, Mr Kodra wondered, before coming out on that day, to that place, those perpetrators of that brutal crime had been nothing more than a few wretched people who had done nothing bad to anyone. Where are they today? Have they returned to their ordinary lives, to their boring daily and eternal routine, where they no longer do anything bad to anyone? Do they suffer the cruelty of existence just as the rest of us suffer? Or do they simply continue to behave as common thugs, until one day the society in which they draw breath decides to imprison them for their petty crimes in their homeland – without ever considering their monstrous crimes in another place, against some other unknown people?

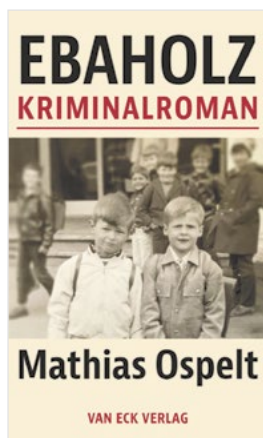
He comes from another country, he kills you, and he returns to his own home, Mr Kodra wondered. What more could you do? What more could you do to him? Was there a punishment that would not equate you with him, that would keep you at a distance from him?

Sometimes he sees the faces of his own relatives and tries to imagine whether, in other circumstances and conditions, it might have been easy for one of them to have perpetrated the massacre. If on the first day of their birth they had been taken and raised in that country, like one of those who committed the massacre, Mr Kodra wondered, they might very easily have been one of them.

If one of those killers is punished, whenever, wherever, by human laws, what relief does it bring him for all the grief, terror and loss he felt and saw? Could that sentence based on the law ever be proportionate to that unwarranted suffering?

In his mind, a film scene constantly repeats: Allied forces enter, enemy forces withdraw. At the meeting point, they salute each other with a hand lightly touching the edge of the cap. A few hours after the massacre, as if to say: we finished the job for the time being, without achieving all we wanted, have it until our descendants return to continue where we left off, even if they don't get everything they want either.

LIECHTENSTEIN



Mathias OSPELT

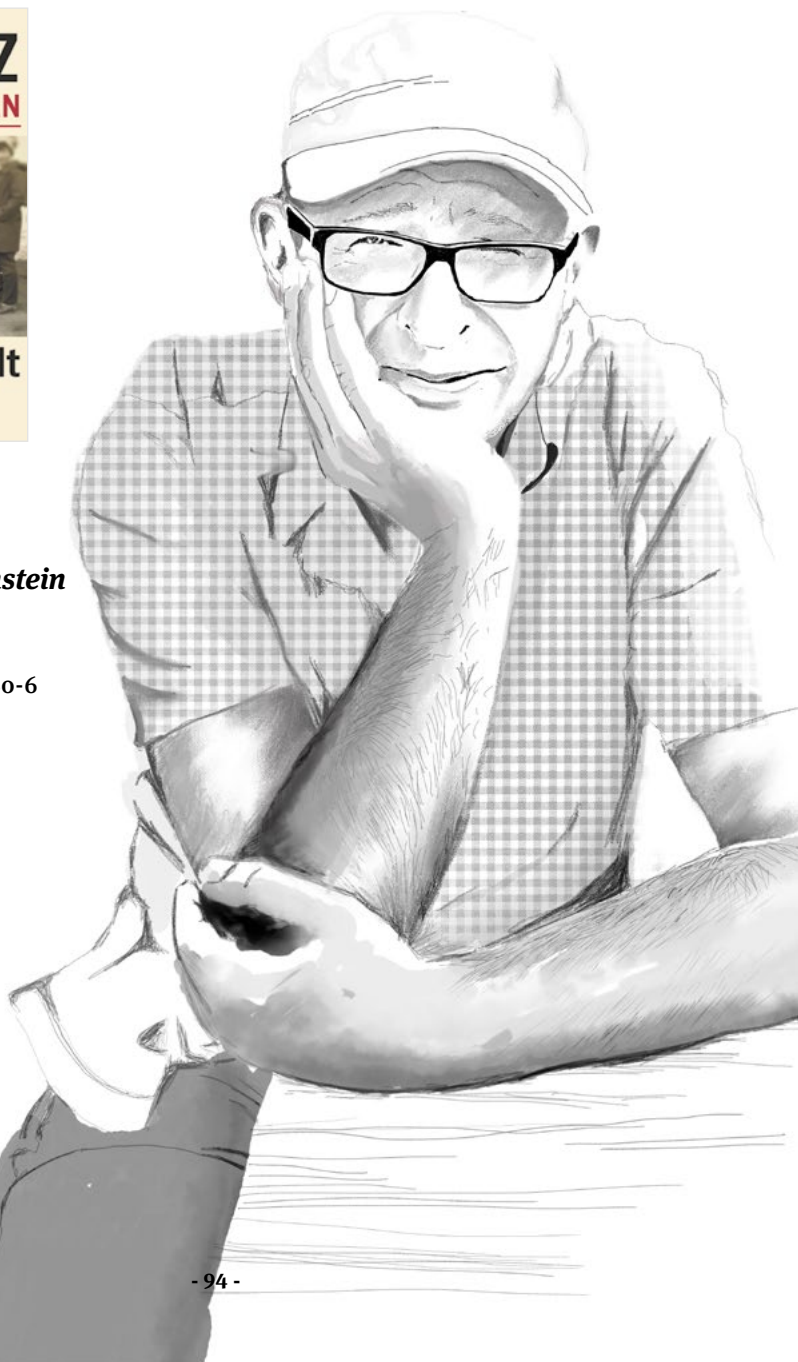
Ebaholz

Ebaholz, Liechtenstein

Van Eck Verlag, 2025

German

ISBN: 978-3-905881-80-6



BIOGRAPHY

Mathias Ospelt (b. 1963) is a Liechtenstein author, cabaret artist, satirist, columnist, translator, librettist and event organiser who has been shaping his country's literary and cultural scene since the early 1990s. He began writing texts for the cabaret Das LiGa and the group Ospelt, Ospelt und Schädler at an early age and has written numerous programmes, plays, festival programmes and musical libretti. At the same time, he published several books, including the short story collections *Als Vaduz noch seinen Hafen hatte* (2004) and the expanded *Wege. Gänge* (2018). Ospelt has received several awards for his literary work, given readings at home and abroad, and represented Liechtenstein at events such as the Printemps des Poètes literature festival in Luxembourg. He is the co-founder of the Schösslekeller small theatre in Vaduz, is president of the Liechtenstein P.E.N. Club and has organised the Liechtenstein Literature Days since 1996.

SYNOPSIS

Ebholz, Liechtenstein takes up a real kidnapping case from 1965 in Vaduz and transforms it into a literarily condensed, multi-layered narrative. At its center is the kidnapping of a child from a wealthy background, an event that shocks the small, seemingly

manageable society of Liechtenstein. Ospelt tells the story not as a pure thriller or detective novel, but as a precise study of the milieu: the police, the family, the village community, and the perpetrators move in a close-knit social space where everyone knows everyone else, or thinks they do. Mistrust, rumors, and moral attributions spread faster than verified facts. The investigation brings to light not only facts, but also repressed conflicts, social dependencies, and fractures within the community.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Ebholz, Liechtenstein thrives on suggestion rather than explicit formulation. Much remains unsaid, is only hinted at or conveyed atmospherically. This condensation forces readers to actively participate in the interpretation. Ospelt does not portray a romanticised province, but an ambivalent world in which confinement, familiarity, harshness and humour coexist.

Ebaholz

Mathias Ospelt



Aber er war sich sicher, dass Helga Krause noch im Haus war. Und ihn aus irgendeinem Winkel des Hauses durch die Gardinen hindurch beobachtete. Gerne hätte er sie nach ihrem Liebhaber befragt. Sofern es den wirklich gab. Denn sollte es ihn geben – wer weiß? –, dann hatte Friedrich vielleicht etwas davon mitbekommen und war verärgert davongelaufen. Kaiser nahm an, dass es kein Kind gerne hatte, wenn Vater oder Mutter plötzlich eine neue Liebschaft mit in die heile Welt brachte. Wäre dem so, dann würde er sicherlich bald wieder auftauchen. Kinderzorn in allen Ehren, aber meistens verflog er so schnell, wie sich der Hunger meldete. Allerdings beantwortete dies nach wie vor nicht die Frage nach Anton. Was hatte er mit dem Ganzen zu tun? Oder hatten beide Jungs gemeinsam etwas Geheimes herausbekommen und dies – einfach mal so dahergedacht – dem Romeo mitgeteilt? Hatten sie sich in den Wahn verstiegen, ihm ein Ultimatum zu stellen? Entweder ... oder ...? Und dieser war daraufhin in Rage geraten? Hatte sich nicht mehr unter Kontrolle gehabt? Vielleicht hatte er ja ebenfalls Familie? So etwas soll schon vorgekommen sein. Aber eines war Kaiser klar: Ohne etwas Konkretes in der Hand zu haben, war da nichts zu machen. Und selbst wenn sich Helga Krause in ihren eigenen vier Wänden befand, konnte er klingeln, bis die Fingerkuppen bluteten. Sie würde ganz bestimmt nicht öffnen. Zumindest nicht ihm.

Und so beschloss Kaiser, nochmals der Frau Nachbarin, Maria Büchel, einen Besuch abzustatten. Vielleicht wusste sie ja mehr. Hatte den Geliebten schon einmal gesehen. Wusste vielleicht sogar seinen Namen. Einfach, damit man endlich ein bisschen vorwärtsskam.

«Ihr schon wieder!», sagte Maria Büchel, als sie Kaiser die Haustür öffnete. An sich war unter der Bevölkerung das allgemeine «Du» bevorzugt, aber in Gesprächen mit Staatsdienern und Fremden, von denen man annahm, dass sie gesellschaftlich eine Stufe höher anzusiedeln waren als man selbst, wechselte man oft zum weniger förmlichen «Ihr». Das «Sie» war eigentlich nur für katholische Würdenträger und Vertreter des Fürstenhauses vorgesehen. «Ich habe schon befürchtet, der alte *Lappi* komme nochmals vorbei.» Erst jetzt bemerkte Kaiser, dass sie ein Nudelholz in der Hand hielt.

«Vorsicht mit dem *Wallholz!*», lachte Kaiser. «Nicht, dass Ihr noch in Konflikt mit dem Gesetz geratet!»

Maria Büchels Gesicht verfinsterte sich. «Gesetz. Aha!» Sie musterte Kaiser von Kopf bis Fuß. «Wollt Ihr einen Kaffee?»

Dankend trat Kaiser ins Haus. «Soll ich die Schuhe ...?»

«Lasst nur! Ich muss nach dem *Spedakel* mit dem Krause eh sauber machen!»

Sie gingen in die Küche. Kaiser setzte sich an den kleinen Küchentisch, Maria Büchel holte ihm eine einstmals vermutlich mit Blumenmustern, nun nur noch mit Mustern versehene Kaffeetasche aus dem Schrank und griff nach der Thermoskanne. Der Kaffee stammte sicherlich noch vom Frühstück. Egal. Lauwarm war auch in Ordnung. Sie schenkte ihm ein. «*Zocker? Melch?*» Kaiser wollte weder noch.

«Und? Muss ich jetzt mit dir auf den Posten?», fragte Maria Büchel.

«Wieso? Hast du etwas verbochen?» Der Kaffee hatte beide in die Du-Situation geführt.

«Was weiß ich? Ich habe den Krause aus dem Haus gejagt. Vermutlich behauptet er jetzt, ich hätte ihn bedroht. Geschlagen. Keine Ahnung!»

«Krause hat gar nichts gesagt. Er ist im Moment mit seiner eigenen Situation beschäftigt.»

«Das wäre ich auch!»

«Drum bin ich auch gar nicht hier.»

«*Werom denn soss?*»

«Der Geliebte von der Helga Krause. Weißt du da mehr? Weißt du, wer er ist?»

Sie blickte Kaiser einen Moment schweigend an. Dann setzte sie sich zu ihm an den Tisch. «Er heißt Paul. Paul Kirschbaumer. Aus dem *Möhlholz*. Hat nicht gerade den besten Ruf. Nach außen hin freundlich. Inwendig bis aufs Mark verdorben. Ein *Hallodri*. Ein *Wiiberi*. Ein Krimineller. Ihr habt ihn sicher in eurer Kartei. Wobei ... Scheint's ist er eine Weile im Ausland gewesen. Wird schon seine Gründe gehabt haben. Früher hat man die Strolche nach Amerika geschickt, heute gehen sie freiwillig ins Welschland! Auf alle Fälle ist er jetzt wieder da.»

«Und beglückt die Damenwelt!» Das war Kaiser rausgerutscht.

«Von dem her, was ich so gehört habe, hat er die Helga tatsächlich glücklich gemacht. Sehr glücklich sogar! Wer mag's ihr verdenken? Bei dem alten Depp!»

Dass sie damit Karl Friedrich Krause meinte, war klar. Dies Nachbarschaft war seit heute auf ewige Zeiten vergiftet. Da konnte kommen, was und wer wollte. Kaiser rührte in seinem Kaffee. Er musste einen Moment nachdenken. Vielleicht hatte Helga Krause genau gewusst, auf wen sie sich einließ. Hatte das Abenteuer gesucht. Zu viele romantische Schlager gehört. Vielleicht wollte sie ja wirklich einfach einmal ... Eben.

«*Soss noch eppes?*» Maria Büchels Stimme klang plötzlich kalt und angriffig. Sie erhob sich vom Tisch.

Kaiser war irritiert. «Nein? Wieso?»

«Ach ...», sagte die Hausherrin so vor sich hin. «Nichts.» Sie nahm seine noch nicht leer getrunkene Kaffeetasse und trug sie zum Spülstein. «Übrigens, Herr *Bolizischt!* Seit vorgestern ist unser Bub nicht mehr nach Hause gekommen! Anton heißt er. Anton Büchel. Sieben Jah-

re alt. Darf ich grad hier eine Personenbeschreibung abgeben oder muss ich damit zu euch runter ins *Städtli*?»

Verflucht!, dachte Kaiser. Wie konnte er das nur vergessen! «Entschuldige, Maria! Das habe ich natürlich nicht vergessen! Wir sind mit Vollgas am Suchen! Seit heute früh wissen wir ja auch, dass die beiden ... dass zumindest Friedrich noch ... Es ist nur: Das eine führt zum anderen. Und ich wollte zuerst ...»

«Ihr habt überhaupt nichts! Keine Idee! Keine Hinweise! Keinen – *wia seet ma?* – Plan! Ihr habt null! Und dann kommst du hierher, plauderst ein bisschen, trinkst Kaffee und fragst mich aus über das Liebesleben der Nachbarin! Wenn alle so arbeiten bei euch, ich glaub, dann komme ich auch zur Polizei!»

«Bitte, Maria! Die ganze Angelegenheit ist sehr schwierig. Wir arbeiten alle auf Hochtouren. Alle Hebel sind in Bewegung! Aber das ist alles so ...»

«Ich sag dir nur eins, Kaiser! Wenn der Kirschbaumer hinter dieser Sache steckt und wenn meinem Anton auch nur ein Härchen gekrümmt worden ist, dann kommt zuerst der Kirschbaumer dran!» Sie machte ein an Eindeutigkeit nicht zu übertreffendes Zeichen mit ihrem Daumen an ihrer Kehle. «Und danach werdet ihr in eurem geschniegelten Beamtenpalast etwas erleben, das ihr *wells Gott* noch nie erlebt habt! Verdammte *huara Nasabori*! Und jetzt verschwind, bevor ich mich komplett vergesse! Der Krause hat noch Glück gehabt! Jetzt aber langt's!» Sie griff zum Nudelholz, ohne es aber zu heben.

Kaiser stand ohne Widerrede auf, schob den Stuhl zurück an den Tisch, sagte «*Adia*, Maria! Vielen Dank für die Informationen. Und den Kaffee!» und ging Richtung Haustür.

Beim Hinausgehen rief ihm Maria Büchel nach: «Betet zu Gott, dass wir den Kirschbaumer nicht vor euch finden, ihr *Flooner*!» Und nachdem er die Tür hinter sich zugezogen hatte: «*Und i hääs Mari, ned Maria, du ... Bolizischt!*».

Ebaholz, Liechtenstein

Mathias Ospelt

Translated from German by Sarah Rimmington

He was certain Helga Krause was still in the house and watching him through the curtains from some corner or other. He would have liked to ask her about her lover. If he really existed. Because if he did, maybe Friedrich had got wind of it and run away in anger. Kaiser took it as read that no child would be happy if their father or mother suddenly introduced a new lover into their perfect little world. If that was what had happened, Friedrich was bound to turn up again soon. Children had tantrums, but these usually evaporated at the first sign of hunger. However, this still didn't explain the matter of Anton. How was he connected with it all? Or had the two boys found out some kind of secret and – he was spitballing here – told Romeo about it? Had they been reckless enough to give him an ultimatum: Either you ... or we ...? And had this made him fly into a rage? Had he lost control? Perhaps he had a family too? This kind of thing happened from time to time. But one thing was clear to Kaiser: without something solid to go on, he could do nothing. He could ring the bell until his fingers bled, but even if Helga Krause was inside the house, there was no way she would open the door. Not to him at least.

So Kaiser decided to pay another visit to the Krauses' neighbour, Maria Büchel. Just to finally move things forward a bit. She might know more. Might have seen lover boy. Might even know his name. 'You again!' said Maria Büchel as she opened the door. 'I was afraid it would be that old chump again.' She had the soft, melodic speech of the Liechtensteiners. It was only now that Kaiser noticed the rolling pin in her hand.

‘Watch what you’re doing with that,’ he joked. ‘You wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of the law!’

Maria Büchel’s face darkened. ‘The law. Aha.’ She looked him up and down. ‘Want a coffee?’

Kaiser thanked her and entered the house. ‘My shoes ... Should I ...?’

‘No, leave them on. I have to clean up after the whole business with Krause anyway.’

They went into the kitchen. Kaiser sat down at the little table. Maria Büchel got out a coffee cup; it had probably once had a flower pattern but the decoration now looked more abstract. She reached for the coffee pot. The coffee was definitely left over from breakfast. Never mind. Lukewarm was OK. She poured some out for him.

‘Sugar? Milk?’

Kaiser said no to both.

‘So? Going to take me down to the station?’ asked Maria Büchel.

‘Why? Did you break the law?’

‘How would I know? I kicked Krause out. He’s probably now claiming I threatened him. Or hit him. I haven’t a clue.’

‘Krause hasn’t said a word. He’s more worried about himself.’

‘So would I be, if I were him!’

‘But that’s not why I’m here.’

‘Why else would you be here?’

‘Helga Krause’s lover. Do you know anything about him? Do you know who he is?’

She regarded Kaiser silently. Then she sat down at the table too. 'His name's Paul. Paul Kirschbaumer. From Mühleholz. Doesn't exactly have the best reputation. Friendly on the outside. Rotten to the core. A lowlife. A deadbeat. A crook. You'll definitely have him on your books. Although ... Seems he's been out of the country for a while. He'll have had his reasons. In the old days they sent troublemakers to America, but now those troublemakers take themselves off to Romania of their own accord! In any case, he's back now.'

'To the delight of ladies everywhere!' Kaiser blurted unthinkingly.

'From what I heard, he actually made Helga happy. Very happy, even. Who could blame her, living with that old fool?'

It was clear she meant Karl Friedrich Krause. Relations between the neighbours were now poisoned for ever. Regardless of what happened next or who came along. Kaiser stirred his coffee. He needed to think. Perhaps Helga Krause had known precisely who she was getting involved with. Had been looking for adventure. Had listened to too many schmaltzy hits. Perhaps for once she'd just wanted ... Well, quite.

'You done?' Maria Büchel's voice had turned cold, hostile. She got up from the table.

Kaiser was irritated. 'Yes. Why?'

'Oh ...,' the woman said, almost to herself. 'Nothing.' He hadn't finished his coffee but she picked up his cup and carried it over to the sink. 'But by the by, Mr Plod, our lad hasn't been home since the day before yesterday. His name's Anton. Anton Büchel. Seven years old. Can I give you a description now, or do I have to do it at the police station?'

Dammit, thought Kaiser. How could he have forgotten? 'I'm so sorry, Maria. Of course I haven't forgotten. We're putting all our efforts into the search. Since this morning we've also known that they're both ... that Friedrich at least is still ... It's just that one thing leads to another. And first I wanted to—'

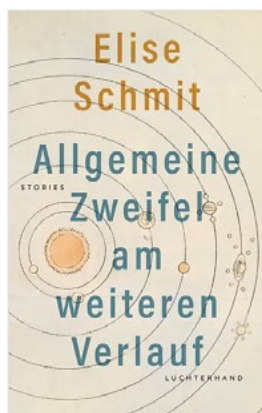
'You've got absolutely nothing! No idea! No leads! No – how do I put it – plan! You have zilch! And then you come round here, chat a little, drink coffee and ask me about my neighbour's love life! If that's what work's like round your place, I think I'll join the police too!'

'Please, Maria! The whole business is very difficult. We're all working flat out. We're pulling out all the stops! But it's all so—'

'I'll tell you one thing, Kaiser! If that Kirschbaumer's behind this, and if he's harmed a single hair on my Anton's head, he'll be for the chop!' She drew her finger across her throat in an unmistakable gesture. 'And then all of you in your swanky palace of bureaucracy, you won't know what the hell's hit you! Bloody layabouts! And now get out before I lose it completely! Krause got lucky, but I've had enough!' She reached for the rolling pin but didn't brandish it.

Kaiser stood without protest, pushed his chair back under the table, said, '*Adieu*, Maria! Thank you very much for the information. And the coffee,' and headed towards the front door. As he was leaving, Maria Büchel called after him, 'You'd better pray to God we don't find Kirschbaumer before you do, you useless oiks!' And once he'd closed the door behind him: 'And my name's Mari, not Maria, you ... policeman!'

LUXEMBOURG



Elise SCHMIT

**Allgemeine Zweifel
am weiteren Verlauf**

***General doubts about
the future course of
events***

Luchterhand Literaturverlag,
2026

German

ISBN: 978-3-630-87827-0

BIOGRAPHY

Elise Schmit (b. 1982, Luxembourg) studied Philosophy and German Literature at Tübingen University. She has worked as a literary critic and a teacher and is currently editor in charge for a series that introduces Luxembourgish literature to schools. She has won several awards at Luxembourg's Concours littéraire national. In 2019, her first short story collection, *Stürze aus unterschiedlichen Fallhöhen*, received the Prix Servais, Luxembourg's most prestigious annual literary award, and became a national bestseller. Schmit also writes for the theatre, has contributed to literary journals and has participated in cultural programs both nationally and internationally. She currently lives in Luxembourg City.

SYNOPSIS

General doubts about the future course of events is a collection of nine short stories that explore pivotal moments of change and uncertainty in individual lives. Schmit's narratives move through a range of scenes: from a beached whale in a northern seaside town where two friends are confronted by their past, to a fleeting social-media video's power to reveal the callousness of a former lover, a

public pool at the very end of summer where a lonely swimmer faces the relentless passage of time, or a young boy's ambitious dream of traveling to Mars. These stories are being interlaced by the striking image of a blue bird that hatches from a mandarin, becoming a singular voice in a world shaken by catastrophe. Schmit focuses on those shimmering instants when the old dissolves but the new has yet to fully emerge, capturing the tension between longing for change and the fear of its consequences. Together, the stories form a nuanced portrait of individuals and society seeking connection and meaning amidst fragmentation and solitude.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Schmit's exceptional power of observation creates character out of the smallest of details. With great depth of understanding and an acute sense of the importance of small shifts in atmosphere and tone, she delivers intense perceptions of existential truths while never losing a humorous distance.



Allgemeine Zweifel am weiteren Verlauf

Elise Schmit



Nach den Waden die Unterarme, die eine Schulter. Es rinnt eisig ins Kreuz. Die andere Schulter, der Wind greift kühl nach den Härchen an den Armen, ein Ruck und hinab, der Stoff des Badeanzugs klebt nass am Bauch, Kälte wie eine Wand, sofort kopfunter, das nicht hinauszögern, sich nicht quälen mit Gedanken an warme Betten oder Jacken. Mein Atem gurgelt an den Ohrmuscheln vorbei nach oben, ich schreie unter Wasser. Es gibt kein besseres Geräusch. Das Wasser quillt in die Haare, nasse Kopfhaut, heißt: los. Also kurz schnaufen, nur einmal, Tritt gegen den Beckenrand mit einem Fuß, keine Zeit für eine gescheite Ausrichtung, gleich wird es warm, kopfunter, kopfüber, gleich ist mir der Wind egal, gleich ist mir alles egal. Ich hole mit aller Kraft aus zu den ersten Zügen, bis sich der Druck auf der Brust löst, ermesse das Rechteck, das jetzt meines ist, olympische Maße und Chlorduft, die Rutschschlange für die Kinder und die Spitze des Springturms auf der anderen Seite der Wiese. Kauern und wachen die Startblöcke auf der gegenüberliegenden Seite. Hinten läuft Karola mit der Reuse vorbei. Sie erinnert mich an was. Ihre Routine kenne ich auswendig. Sie holt den Schlüssel aus dem Büro, öffnet die Tür zu den Duschen, kontrolliert Kabinen und Schließfächer, hebt irgendwo eine Chipstüte auf, die der Putzdienst übersehen hat. Zu Saisonbeginn fischte sie anschließend das Laub aus dem großen Becken, das hieß: ab jetzt beschwimmbar. Jetzt fischt sie morgens als Erstes nach Laub, Priorität, noch vor der In-

spektion der Kabinen. Sie macht das für mich, aber wenn ich mich bedanke, winkt sie ab und sagt, ach was, wofür.

Ich weiß schon, wofür. Alle wissen, wofür. Hier gibt's noch Todesanzeigen in der Zeitung. Hier kommen noch die Nachbarschaft und die Leute von der Arbeit und aus der Schule mit ihren Eltern zur Beerdigung, hier sagen noch irgendwelche entfernten Cousinen deines Vaters, jetzt sei sie endlich erlöst, erlöst, das muss man sich mal vorstellen, man steht dort wie im falschen Film und sieht seinen Vater die Zähne aufeinanderpressen und weiß, die Hände in seinen Manteltaschen sind harte Fäuste, in denen Platz ist für rein überhaupt nichts.

Ich öffne die Augen unter Wasser. Der Beckengrund dämmert blaugrau zwischen den Streifen, die die Bahnen anzeigen, in den Ecken sammeln sich Erde, Steinchen, Laub. Das Ekelzeug wird täglich herausgefischt, Eisstiele aus Holz sind darunter, Tampons, einmal sogar eine tote Maus. Wenn ich das so genau sehen kann, habe ich mich an die Kälte schon fast gewöhnt. Kopfunter, kopfüber weitet sich der Brustkorb, weil ich mich entspanne, weil jetzt mehr Luft in die Lungen passt, weil ich bin, wo ich sein soll, auch wenn es noch sehr kalt ist und widerständig. Ich atme laut aus unter Wasser, wo mich niemand hört, das mache ich oft. Ich schreie, wenn ich Lust habe, und niemand stellt dumme Fragen. Und dann weiß ich auch, woran mich Karola erinnert hat in ihrem roten Polohemd, wie sie, glaube ich, zu mir herübergeschaut hat, während ich wahrscheinlich als eine Art große Amphibie da unten im Becken meine Bahnen ziehe. Betrachten und Schwimmen, das seien geradezu zwei verschiedene Wirklichkeitsebenen, sagte Kosinsky. Da war dieses Gemälde versteigert worden für so viel Geld, wie wir alle zusammen in der Klasse im Leben nicht verdienen würden, ein Mann in einem roten Jackett betrachtet einen Mann, der unten auf dem Grund eines Pools taucht, das Ganze in einer Landschaft mit viel Platz. Jemand hatte gesagt, wenn er malen könne, würde er auch so einen langweiligen Kram malen wie dieser Hockey und reich werden, und

dann könnten wir seinetwegen alle in seinem Pool planschen. »DAVID HOCKNEY«, hatte Kosinsky an die Tafel geschrieben. Sollten wir uns bitte merken, wegen Allgemeinbildung. Sie hatte es dann noch darauf angelegt, dass wir nicht dächten, das sei langweiliger Kram oder egal. Sondern eben das Allerwesentlichste. Was es bedeute, von dem Menschen getrennt zu sein, den man am meisten brauche. Und das muss man sich mal geben, dass man das sogar selbst sein könne. Das Seltsame war, ich wusste sofort, was sie meint. Zu Hause habe ich mir das Bild lange angesehen; ich wollte es meinem Vater zeigen, doch dann habe ich mich nicht getraut.

Ich öffne die Augen über und unter Wasser, mal so, mal so, hebe den Kopf und sehe zu den Bäumen und dahinter zum Hang mit den letzten Häusern der Stadt, das alles ist nicht mehr sehr grün wie im Sommer. Noch sei nicht Herbst, sage ich seit Wochen zu meinem Vater, das Freibad sei noch geöffnet. Dass ich schwimmen gehen darf, auch wenn es kalt ist, auch wenn es regnet, ist unverrückbar.

Du spinnst, Ana, sagt Selim, wenn ich bei Unwetter schwimmen will.

Nass gleich nass, sage ich, und wozu es Föhns gebe.

Wenn ich in den letzten Wochen nicht bei schlechtem Wetter gekommen wäre, hätte mein Vater den Herbst früher einläuten können. Ich schwömmе gegen den Kalender an, sage ich zu Selim, weil mein Vater möchte, dass ich im Herbst zu meiner Tante Melina ziehe. Er wolle nicht, dass ich morgens und abends allein zu Hause hocke, wenn er schlafe oder im Restaurant arbeite, er traue mir das Alleinsein nicht zu. Ab Schulbeginn hätte ich bei meiner Tante wohnen sollen, aber in ihrem Ort gebe es kein Schwimmbad, und hierher sei es zum Schwimmen zu weit; ich müsste quasi mitten in der Nacht aufstehen. Schwimmen müsse ich aber, damit ich schlafen könne und auch sonst nicht umfiele und von der Erdscheibe kippte. Einmal pro Woche Pizza und Fernsehen fände ich sehr in Ordnung, sage ich, aber mein Vater glaube das nicht oder finde es

nicht in Ordnung. Ich wolle nicht, dass mein Vater mich wegschicke, sage ich am Ende zu Selim, er habe ein schlechtes Gewissen, deswegen sei ich noch da.

Hinter dem Zaun, wo die Hochspannungsleitungen über den Bäumen herauschauen oder -lugen, höre ich einen Zug vorbeifahren oder -rattern. Sprache sei ein Spektrum, sagt Kosinsky, Möglichkeiten ermessen und so, je breiter man sich aufstelle, desto größer die Auswahl. Anschlagen, umkehren, jetzt stoße ich mich mit beiden Beinen ab und lege mich ganz gerade ins Wasser, hole bei jedem Zug weit aus, damit die Muskeln richtig wach werden. Acht Längen lang schwimme ich gegen die Härte in mir, das strengt an, bis die Muskeln weich sind, acht Längen, noch so ein Erfahrungswert. Ich stelle mir vor, dass das Becken mir gehört, dass sonst niemand Anspruch darauf hat, sich durch das Wasser zu wühlen, dass das Rauschen in den Ohren meine Sprache ist, als wäre ich ein Tier und das Schwimmbecken mein Lebensraum oder Habitat. Der Trick beim Schwimmen, sage ich zu Selim, sei, dass man das Wasser nicht als Substanz betrachte, sondern als Element. Das sei dasselbe, sagt Selim, Substanz und Element. Ich schüttele den Kopf. Ich weiß nicht, wie ich es besser erklären soll. Es macht mich ein wenig traurig, dass ich unter Wasser nicht atmen kann, dass mich das Element in diesem entscheidenden Punkt zurückweist.

General Doubts About the Future Course of Events

Elise Schmit

Translated from German by Johanna McCalmont

First my calves, then my lower arms, one shoulder. The icy cold washes over my lower back, and the hairs on my upper arms stand up in the cool breeze. Then my other shoulder. I slide right in. The woven fabric of my swimsuit clings to my belly like a cold wall, head underwater, not drawing this out, not torturing myself with thoughts about warm beds or coats. As I breathe out, the bubbles gurgle up past my ears, I scream underwater. There is no better sound. The water flows through my hair, a wet scalp means go! A sharp breath in, just once, I push away from the side of the pool with one foot, no time to properly orientate myself, warm up quickly, head down, head up, soon I won't care about the breeze, soon I won't care about anything. I give it all I've got for the first few strokes, until the pressure in my chest fades. I survey the corner that's now mine, Olympic dimensions and the smell of chlorine, the slide for kids and the top of the diving platform on the other side of the lawn. The starting blocks cower in watch on the opposite side. Karola walks behind them with the bow net. She reminds me of something. I know her routine by heart. She fetches the key from the office, opens the door to the showers, checks the changing rooms and lockers, picks up the odd empty crisp packet the cleaners missed. At the start of the season, she then fished leaves out of the main pool. This meant: ready for swimmers. Now, she fishes the leaves out first, a priority, before inspecting the changing rooms. She does this for me, but when I thank her, she just waves it off and says: what for.

I know what for. Everyone knows what for. There are still death notices in the newspaper here. The neighbours and people from work and people from school with their parents still go to funerals. Here, some distant cousins of your father will still say things like ‘now she is at peace’. At peace, unbelievable that, you’re standing there like you’re in the wrong film, watching your father clench his teeth, knowing his hands are tightly clenched into fists in his pockets, and there is no space in them for anything.

I open my eyes underwater. The bottom of the pool glows a bluish grey between the lines marking out the lanes. Soil, pebbles and leaves collect in the corners. The gross stuff gets fished out every day, wooden ice lolly sticks, tampons; once there was even a dead mouse. When I can see everything so clearly, it means I’ve adapted to the cold. Head down, head up, chest expanding as I relax because there’s more air in my lungs, because I’m where I’m supposed to be, even if it’s still bitterly cold, a resistance. I exhale loudly underwater, where no one can hear me; I often do that. I scream whenever I feel like it, and no one asks stupid questions. And then I realise what Karola reminds me of, in her red polo shirt, as she looks over at me while I swim lengths down in the pool, probably looking like a giant amphibian. Observing and swimming, those are precisely two different levels of reality, says Kosinsky. A painting had sold at auction for an amount that even our entire class combined would never earn in our lifetimes: a man in a red jacket observing another man diving at the bottom of a pool, a vast landscape in the background. One boy had said that if he could paint, he’d paint something as boring as this Hockey person too, get rich, and then we could all splash around in his pool. DAVID HOCKNEY, Kosinsky had written on the board. A name to remember, general knowledge and such. She had also stressed that we should not think of it as boring or unimportant or anything like that. But rather as the most essential thing. What it meant to be separated from the person you

needed most. And that this might even be you. The strange thing was that I understood right away what she meant. At home, I looked at the image for a long time. I wanted to show it to my father, but I then I didn't dare.

I open my eyes above and below the surface, like this, like that. I lift my head and see the trees and the hill behind it, with the last houses in the town, how it is no longer as green as it was during the summer. I've been telling my father for weeks that it's not quite autumn yet, that the lido is still open. I'm allowed to swim, even if it's cold, even if it's raining; it's non-negotiable.

You're crazy, Ana, Selim says when I want to go swimming during a storm.

Wet one way or another, I say. That's what hairdryers are for.

If I hadn't come here during bad weather the past couple of weeks, my father would have already been able to say autumn had arrived. I'm swimming against the calendar, I told Selim, because my father wants me to move in with my Aunt Melina in autumn. He doesn't want me hanging around at home on my own in the mornings and evenings when he's sleeping or working at the restaurant, he doesn't trust me to stay by myself. Although I was supposed to have moved to my aunt's by the time school started, her village doesn't have a pool, and it would have been too far to come here; I would have had to get up in practically the middle of the night. But I have to swim, so I can sleep, and so I won't just collapse and completely fall off the face of the earth. Pizza and TV once a week would be OK, I had said, but my father didn't think that was OK. I don't want my father to send me away, I eventually tell Selim, he has a bad conscience, that's why I'm still there.

Behind the fence, where the high-voltage lines peek – or peer – out above the trees, I can hear a train go – or rumble – past. Language is a spectrum, says Kosinsky. It weighs up possibilities and so on; the broader your approach, the wider the choice. Touch the edge, turn. Now I push off from the side with both feet and stretch out flat in the water, reaching far back on every stroke to really awaken my muscles. For eight lengths, I swim against the stiffness within me. It's hard work, eight lengths, until the muscles have warmed up, something else I know from experience. I imagine the pool belongs to me, that no one else is allowed to use it, to churn through the water, that the rushing sound in my ears is my language, like I'm an animal and the pool is where I live, my habitat.

The trick with swimming, I explain to Selim, is that you shouldn't see water as a substance but rather as an element.

They're the same thing, says Selim, substance and element.

I shake my head. I don't know how to explain it better. I'm a little sad I can't breathe underwater, that this is how this element ultimately rejects me.

MOLDOVA



Paula ERIZANU

Aicea-i și raiul, și iadul. Republica Moldova: un veac de istorie trăită

Here is Both Heaven and Hell. Moldova: A Century of Lived History

Cartier, 2025

Romanian

ISBN: 978-9975-86-883-9

BIOGRAPHY

Paula Erizanu (b. 1992, Chișinău) is a Moldovan writer and journalist. She collaborates with the BBC, *The Guardian*, *London Review of Books* and *Financial Times*, and was shortlisted for the Culture Journalist of the Year Award in the UK's Words by Women competition (2019). She is the author of several works spanning creative non-fiction, poetry, fiction, and literary anthologies. Her writing explores themes such as political change, collective memory, feminism, and lived history, with a particular focus on the Republic of Moldova and the Romanian-speaking cultural space. In addition to her own books, she has co-edited a landmark anthology dedicated to women's poetry. Her work has received significant critical recognition in Romania and internationally.

SYNOPSIS

Here is Both Heaven and Hell. Moldova: A Century of Lived History is a polyphonic account of the history of the Republic of Moldova from the Jewish pogroms in 1903 all the way to the full-scale invasion of neighbouring Ukraine in 2022 and the war in Gaza. The book starts with the story of the narrator's great-grandmother, a widow who lived in four

different countries without ever leaving her village. Building on family stories, Erizanu blends in her grandmother's memoirs, her own observations and insertions, monologues told by people with diverse backgrounds and ideas, invented dialogues and poetic passages. Individual stories

are assembled into a dense narrative structure that creates the image of an unmistakable world from Southeastern Europe. Using fictional and nonfictional elements, she builds a thrilling and collective story of resilience.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Paula Erizanu transforms the lived and told lives of concrete people into high-quality literature. Literature inherently fictionalizes any story that becomes text. In the case of this book, the measured and assumed fictionalization becomes a principle of creation and a key element in its effective reception.



Aicea-i și raiul, și iadul. Republica Moldova: un veac de istorie trăită

Paula Erizanu



Partea a patra – Du-te-vino

În perioada aceea, se tăiau viile pe-un cap, căci Gorbaciov încerca să lupte cu alcoolismul. Au apărut adevăruri noi printre minciunile vechi din ziare. Nu ne mai otrăviți pământurile cu chimie, se scria.

Tot atunci au început să se dea telenovele la TV... Lumea fugea acasă de la câmp, își pierdea papucii pe drum, prin ogradă, doar, doar să reușească să îi vadă pe Jose Armando și pe Mariana în casele lor mari, frumoase și colorate, nemaivăzute pe aici. Lacrimile curgeau pe obraji. Ochii rămâneau țințiți în ecran, însă gândurile cine știe unde zburau. Părinții au început, pentru prima dată, să le spună și ei copiilor că îi iubesc.

S-a schimbat alfabetul. S-au deschis granițele. Pentru prima dată după Al Doilea Război Mondial, timp de două zile, oamenii au putut trece frontiera de pe Prut fără acte. S-au îmbrățișat, au plâns, au aruncat flori pe râu de pe ambele maluri.

Am devenit țară independentă. A căzut Imperiul.

Cozile la Biblioteca Națională creșteau, pline de cei dornici să citească volume în alfabet latin. Pe urmă, doar studenții și cercetătorii o să mai apară.

Mulți și-au pierdut banii agonisiți timp de zeci de ani într-o noapte. Fabricile se închideau. Șmecherii își luau lor grosul, creând companii-surori și lăsându-i pe bieții oameni fără nimic din ce au strâns o viață întreagă.

Mama era gravidă cu mine și ieșea din troleibuz ca să vomite la un copac, apoi urca iar.

Scutece nu se găseau, nimic nu se găsea. Coada la pâine creștea.

A început războiul. Rușii au oprit gazul, și atunci orășenii ieșeau în curți să facă demâncare la foc de tabără. Țăranii, cum au trăit, trăiau și atunci din roadele pământului, făcând focul cu lemne din pădure sau, mai ales, cu ciocleji adunați de ei. Cam atunci m-am născut eu. Printre zgomotele bombardamentelor care se auzeau de la treizeci de kilometri distanță.

Era vineri seara. Era întâi mai și mama fusese la carusel, cu tata și cu nașii. Doctorul îi luase cârticica medicală să o copieze pe curat. Așa că ea a fost plasată în salonul cu femei fără documente. Bărbaților nu li se dădea voie în maternitate. Tata m-a văzut, în cele din urmă, pe geamul cam murdar. Iar doctorii erau toți la ultimul episod al serialului *Sclava Isaura*. Sau, poate, era alt serial. Mama a născut cu o stagiară. Doctorița, cu coafură blondă, înaltă, când a venit, în cele din urmă, a zis, în rusă: pe cine naștem azi, pe Mariana sau pe Jose Armando? Mama avea lapte mult și îl dădea și altor copii din salonul comun, sub privirile pline de ură ale mamelor fără lapte.

Tot atunci au început a se vinde gume, Chupa Chups și Kinder Surprise la tarabe. Abțibilduri cu Madonna cu sutienul ei țuguat, cu cei o sută unu dalmațieni ai lui Disney, apoi cu Natalia Oreiro.

Nemți care plecaseră de aici în Al Doilea Război Mondial reveneau în satele lor natale cu camioane de *gumanitarcă* (1). Mergeam și noi

(1) Ajutor umanitar. (rus.)

la *gumanitarcă*, doar că eu credeam atunci că așa se numeau magazinele. Au apărut și haine produse în Siria, de unde am avut și eu o rochiță galbenă, cu trandafirași.

La țară, lumina apărea și se stingea o dată la două ore. Salariile întârziu cu lunile. Unii le primeau în saci de cartofi sau de zahăr.

În parc primeam foi volante despre sfârșitul lumii. La sat se vorbea deschis despre Dumnezeu. La oraș, despre zodii. Lumea mergea tot mai des la ghicitoare.

Când n-au mai avut cu ce crește copiii, oamenii au pornit la drum. Acuma se putea... Se duceau în noapte, legați de fundul camioanelor sau ascunși în frigidere. Plăteau bani grei, împrumutați, ca să plece.

Femeilor li se promitea că o să devină cântărețe și dansatoare cunoscute, li se luau actele și, uneori, li se smulgeau și dinții. Ca să practice mai ușor sexul oral. În Bosnia a apărut acel graffiti al unui soldat olandez: *No teeth...? A mustache...? Smel like shit...? Bosnian girl!* (Fără dinți...? Cu mustață...? Pute a căcat...? O fată bosniacă!) Ar fi putut fi vorba și de moldovencele traficate, mi-a zis tata.

Apăreau panouri întunecate cu *Spuneți nu traficului de ființe umane* și cu *SIDA* pe marginea drumurilor pline de gropi.

Copiii rămâneau cu bunicii sau se creșteau între ei. Își auzeau rar mamele la telefonul vecinilor, în apeluri scurte. Apoi, părinții și-au legalizat statutul și și-au luat plozii cu ei. Unii s-au întors. Alții nu. Tinerii au mers la universități bune și au trăit un alt soi de migrație. Au fost oameni care și-au văzut părinții murind pe Skype în timp ce aveau grijă de alți bătrâni, din țări mai bogate.

Oamenii vindeau sau ardeau lucruri făcute migălos cu mâna – covoare, lăicere, prosoape, pături – și cumpărau în loc noutăți – covoare de la fabrici, sintetice, tapete și mușamale.

Încet, încet, lumea s-a acoperit de plastic. De petrol. Inițial, pungile erau rare, așa că le spălam și le foloseam până se rupeau. Mai înve-

leam și-n ziar mâncarea. „Săptămâna” a făcut și-o ediție cu pagină de-nvelit mămliga. Am râs și-așa am făcut. Dar pe urmă totul a fost înghițit de plastic. Fiecare cozonac, fiecare colac, fiecare pomană, oușoarele, brânza, nucile, vișinele, cireșele, roșiile, castraveții, untul – pe care eu îl făceam cu bunica zgâlțâind borcanul cu lapte smântânit – și până și smântâna... Chiar și un hulub am văzut într-o zi gătit de-o sacoșă... Și –, s-a demonstrat! – până și în creierul nostru au intrat particule de microplastic.

Peștii au început să moară de prea puțină apă în verile se- cetoase, iar pădurile, aruncate pe foc în timpul iernilor tot mai blânde ca să stăm noi la sobă – să dispară.

Here is Both Heaven and Hell. Moldova: A century of lived history

Paula Erizanu

Translated from Romanian by Monica Cure

Part Four – Back and forth

In that period, they were cutting down vineyards left and right because Gorbachev was trying to stamp out alcoholism. New truths appeared among the old lies in newspapers. Stop poisoning our lands with chemicals, they wrote.

That's also when they started showing telenovelas on TV. ... People would run home from the fields, they'd lose their shoes on the way, somewhere in the courtyard, just so they'd get there in time to see Jose Armando and Mariana in their big, beautiful, colourful houses, like nothing they'd ever seen here. They had tears streaming down their faces. Their eyes were glued to the screen, but who knows what they were thinking about. For the first time, parents started telling their children they loved them.

The alphabet changed. The borders opened. For the first time since World War II, for two days people could cross the Prut border without papers. They embraced, they cried, they threw flowers in the water from both sides of the river.

We became an independent country. The Empire had fallen.

The lines at the National Library grew longer, with people eager to read books in Latin script. Later, only students and researchers would go there.

Overnight, many lost money they had struggled to save for decades. The factories closed down. Schemers took the lion's share by creating sister companies and robbing the poor people of what they'd worked for their whole lives.

My mother was pregnant with me and she'd get off the tram to throw up under a tree, then get back on.

You couldn't find nappies anywhere, you couldn't find anything. The queues for bread grew.

The war started. The Russians cut off the gas, and then the city people came out to their front lawns to cook around campfires. The country people, same as before, lived off what they grew, and built fires with wood from the forest or corn cobs they'd saved. That's about when I was born. Among the bomb noise you could still hear from thirty kilometres away.

It was Friday evening. It was 1 May and my mother had been on the carousel with my father and their godparents. The doctor had taken her medical booklet to make a copy of it. So she was assigned to the section for women without papers. Men weren't allowed in the maternity ward. My father finally saw me through a rather dirty window. And the doctors were all watching the final episode of *Isaura: The Slave Girl*. Or maybe it was a different show. A trainee delivered me. When the doctor, a blonde woman with a big updo, finally came, she said in Russian, Who do we have here today, a Mariana or a Jose Armando? My mother had plenty of milk and gave some to the other children in the communal ward, under the hostile stares of the mothers without milk.

That's also when kiosks began selling gum, Chupa Chups and Kinder Surprise eggs. Stickers of Madonna in her pointy bra, of Disney's 101 Dalmatians, then of telenovela actress Natalia Oreiro.

The Germans who had left Moldova during World War II came back to their native villages with trucks of *gumanitarka* ⁽¹⁾. We too went to the *gumanitarka* shops, and I thought that's what those stores were called. Clothes made in Syria also appeared, and I had a yellow dress with little roses from there.

In the countryside, the power came on and off every two hours. Salaries were paid months late. Some were paid in sacks of potatoes or sugar.

In the park, we'd get flyers about the end of the world. In villages, people talked openly about God. In cities, about the zodiac. People went to fortune tellers more and more often.

When they could no longer feed their children, people set off. Now it was possible. They'd go at night, stuffed into the back of lorries or hidden in refrigerators. They'd borrow money and pay a fortune to leave.

Women were promised they'd become famous singers and dancers; their passports would be taken away, sometimes their teeth would even be pulled out to make oral sex easier. In Bosnia, a Dutch soldier left behind that famous graffiti: NO TEETH ...? A MUSTACHE ...? SMEL LIKE SHIT ...? BOSNIAN GIRL! It might have been about trafficked Moldovan women, Dad said.

Billboards about AIDS and with dark messages like SAY NO TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING appeared on the side of potholed roads.

Children were raised by grandparents or by each other. They rarely heard their mothers' voices over the neighbours' telephones during short calls. Then parents gained legal status and took their

⁽¹⁾ Humanitarian aid (Russian).

kids with them. Some came back. Others didn't. Young people left for good universities and experienced a different kind of migration. There were people who watched their parents die over Skype while they were caring for other old people in richer countries.

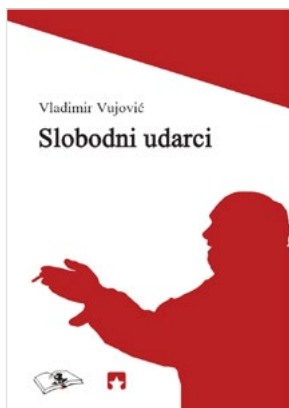
People sold or burned things carefully made by hand – carpets, rugs, towels, blankets – and bought new ones instead: mass-produced synthetic carpets, wallpaper and plastic tablecloths.

Bit by bit, everything became covered in plastic. In petroleum. At first, bags weren't that common, so we'd wash them and reuse them until they broke. Sometimes we'd wrap food in newspapers. Săptămâna even issued a special edition with a page for wrapping mămăliga. We laughed and used it. But afterwards everything was drowned in plastic. Every Easter cake, every braided loaf, every memorial dish, eggs, cheese, walnuts, cherries, sour cherries, tomatoes, cucumbers, the butter I'd make with my grandma by shaking a jar of creamed milk... And cream itself... I even saw a pigeon one day strangled by a plastic bag... And – it's been proven! – we now have microplastics inside our own brains.

Fish started dying because water dried up in drought-stricken summers, and the forests, whose wood was thrown on the fire during winters increasingly too mild to sit by the stove, started disappearing.

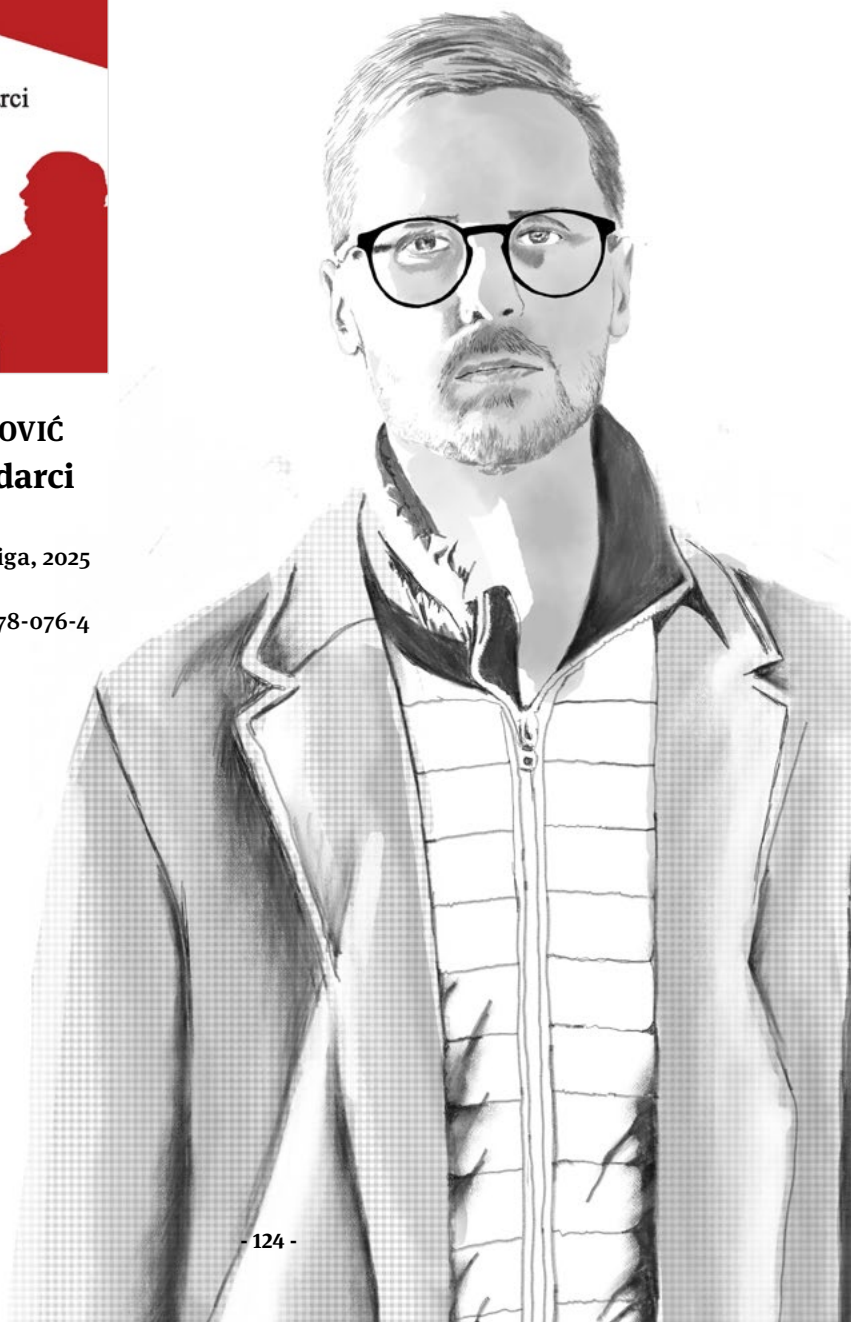
SPECIAL
MENTION

MONTENEGRO



Vladimir VUJOVIĆ
Slobodni udarci
Free Kicks

Partizanska knjiga, 2025
Serbian
ISBN: 978-86-7378-076-4



BIOGRAPHY

Vladimir Vujović (b.1991, Bar) writes novels and short stories. He graduated from the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade and completed his specialization at the Military Medical Academy. He has published the novels *Silencio* (2017), *Burning the Joshua Tree* (2021), and *Conversations with the Witch* (2025). The novel *Conversations with the Witch* was shortlisted for the NIN Award for Best Novel of the Year for 2025 as well as for the Belgrade Winner Award. His short story 'Intervention' earned him the first prize at the Podgorica Art Festival in 2018. He is also the recipient of the 2025 Đura Đukanov Award for his short story collection *Free Kicks*.

SYNOPSIS

The stories of Vladimir Vujović stand out for their stylistic and linguistic consistency, as well as for the coherence and balance of the text as a whole. His prose reveals a refined sense of form and rhythm, where each sentence contributes to a carefully structured narrative flow. The collection is characterized by a broad spectrum of themes realized within global settings, yet it occasionally resonates with motifs and atmospheres from the author's local milieu. Vujović's poetics creatively draw on the tradition of the American

short story while embracing elements of magical realism. His narratives are skilfully crafted, full of unexpected turns that both challenge and reward the reader's expectations. Vujović's short stories are characterized by stylistic consistency, dynamic rhythm, as well as precision. The structure of these stories lies in creating an atmosphere of tension and a narrative rich in unexpected twists from the opening sentences, where themes like death, greed, identity or apocalypse gain universal depth through global and local motifs.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Vladimir Vujović's ability to construct complex characters and to infuse the narrative with lyrical and existential depth affirms his distinguished position within contemporary literature. The author succeeds in creating a layered and suspenseful prose that is at once philosophical, ironic, and emotionally intense, employing satire and irony to comment on the academic world, social norms, and technological phenomena, while also bridging the real and the fantastic.

Slobodni udarci

Vladimir Vujović



Stao je pred njega i samo počeo da priča. Bez prekida, plašio se da napravi i najmanju pauzu, jedva je stizao da uhvati vazduh. Ispričao je sve, od prve noći sve do leta i zgarišta u čijem je središtu izgubio svest. Stara Luda je žmurio ali znao je da ga sluša. Kada je završio, ovaj je otvorio oči i prvi put ga pogledao. Bio je star, stvarno je bio mnogo star, bore oko njegovih očiju bile su bezbrojne i duboke; i bio je lud, van svake sumnje, u tim sivim očima nije se moglo pročitati ništa ovozemaljsko.

„Postoji li taj tepih stvarno?“, pitao ga je.

„Naravno da postoji“, odgovorio je, malo uvređeno.

„Postoji, da, da, svakako da postoji. Ali to ne znači da je stvaran.“

Nije razumeo tada i nikada neće razumeti šta je Stara Luda u tom trenutku hteo da mu kaže, pripisao je to njegovoj iščašenosti koja je bila dostižna jedino ako se i sam nađe s one strane razuma.

„Vidiš, ovaj kamen na kojem sedim. On, na neki način, postoji. Ali ako bih ja zaista poverovao da je stvaran, ako bih prihvatio tu mogućnost, onda više ne bih mogao da sedim na njemu, ako bih sedeo na njemu sa idejom da je stvaran, kamen bi postao živ i isuviše opasan.“

Onda je rekao još neke stvari koje je on razumeo i Stara Luda je počeo da se smeje, dugo i neprilagođeno, i to je bio znak da je razgovor gotov.

*

Drugov otac, koji je takođe bio odsutan, negde s puškom, kao i njegov otac, imao je radionicu. Tu je našao omanji kanister s gorivom koji je ukrao kada je pala noć.

Tepih je izvukao iz kuće i vukao ga je što je dalje mogao od kuće, sve dok je imao snage. Zaustavio se na jednoj utrini. Kuće su i dalje bile blizu, nije se mnogo udaljio. Da je razmišljao, ništa od ovoga ne bi uradio. Zato je bilo veoma važno, u tim trenucima, dok je sakupljao suve grane i lišće, da ne razmišlja. Napravio je lomaču, trudio se da bude što šira, a zatim je štrcnuo malo tečnosti iz kanistera po njoj. Prebacio je presavijeni tepih preko lomače i ostatak sadržaja iz kanistera posuo po njemu. Šibicom koju je ukrao iz kuće upalio je lomaču. Plamen ga je iznenadio, buknuo je žestoko i osetio je toplinu kako mu se razliva po licu i očima, napravio je korak unazad. Tepih se nije bunio. Izneo ga je iz kuće pre vremena njegovog uobičajenog noćnog buđenja i nijednom nije pokazao znake otpora, kao da je od početka znao šta mu se sprema. U visokoj i širokoj vatri prihvatao je mirno svoju sudbinu.

Bila je prevelika, vatra. Ubrzo je čuo glasove. Nije imalo smisla bežati. Napravio je još nekoliko koraka unazad dok su se ženski glasovi približavali. Onda ih je video, širile su ruke i vikale, kao da izgovaraju neke vradžbine upućene vatri, ali nisu smele da se približe. Začuo se i drugi zvuk, motorno vozilo koje je nadglasilo žene i jurilo pravo ka njima. Svetla dva fara velikog vojnog džipa sudarila su se sa svetlom vatre a on i dalje nije razmišljao, jer da je sada stao da razmišlja, sve bi se raspalo u besmislu, taj prizor morao je samo da se odvija i dalje, bez tumačenja, džip iz kojeg

izleću muškarci sa puškama, žene koje se hvataju za glavu i za vazduh iznad ka kojem su letele varnice iz plamena, on koji stoji u senci i trudi se da bude neprimetan. Nije mogao da razmišlja i nije mogao da se pomeri, čak ni kada je među muškarcima iz džipa prepoznao Drugovog oca a onda i svog oca. Ovaj je prišao najbliže vatri i mogao je da prepozna šta u njoj sagoreva, poneka zelena šara i dalje se mogla nazreti pre nego što bi je progutalo ništavilo. U njegovim očima video je bes i poniženje i tugu kakvu nikada ranije nije video a onda je otac okrenuo glavu od vatre i pogledom pretraživao utrinu sve dok nije video njega, njegovog sina koji je pokušavao da bude senka.

„Ti. Ti”, izgovorio je dovoljno glasno da ga on čuje i onda je krenuo prema njemu, bacio je pušku na zemlju, stiskao je pesnice i u dva koraka bio bi tu, ali onda se kroz noć prolomio još jedan zvuk, najglasniji, poništio je i cvrčanje vatre i glasove žena i zvuk džipa, bio je to smeh, ludački, histeričan, toliko glasan da se više nije mogao nazvati ni smehom, verovatno bi se morala izmisliti nova reč za to što su tada začuli. Svi su se okrenuli prema izvoru tog novog prodornog zvuka i ugledali su Staru Ludu, on se smejaio i skakao oko vatre, prolazio štapom kroz jezičke plamena. Plesao je, smejući se neprekidno.

I otac je zastao i okrenuo se prema Staroj Ludi. Kao da je zaboravio na sina, sada je svu svoju pažnju usmerio ka smehu i uputio se ka njemu, jednako odlučno kako je i malopre koračao, prišao mu je i pesnicom koja je odavno bila pobeležila od stiskanja zadao udarac kojim je na kratko okončao smeh. Stara Luda je pao na zemlju. Na trenutak je sve bilo tiho, žene su se umirile, neko od muškaraca je ugasio motor i čulo se samo pucketanje vatre, dok se smeh nije vratio. Bio je tiši, isprekidan, ali jednako neobjašnjiv i uznemirujuć. Otac je uzeo štap koji je Ludi ispao i stao njima da ga udara. Po glavi, rukama, leđima. Smeh je ponovo stao i

više se nije vraćao, ali otac nije stajao. Fijukanje štapa seklo je noć sve dok se štap nije slomio, ali je otac nastavio, nogama je udarao Staru Ludu u stomak i grudi, gazio mu glavu, vojnički đon zabijao se u čelo, nos i bradu i svaki pokret bio je praćen sve tišim jaukom i pucanjem kostiju, kože i mišića. Jedino svetlo sada je dolazilo od plamena i nije bilo dovoljno da se jasno vidi šta ti udarci čine, ali silina kojom su zadavani i zvuci koji su ih pratili terali su na razmišljanje.

I počeo je da razmišlja.

Free Kicks

Vladimir Vujović

Translated from Serbian by Marko Stanojkovski

He stepped in front of him and started speaking without stopping, afraid of even the smallest pause, barely managing to catch his breath. He recounted everything, from the first night to the flight and the fire at the centre of which he had lost consciousness. The Old Fool's eyes were closed, but the boy knew he was listening to him. When he finished, the Old Fool opened his eyes and looked at him for the first time. He was old, very old indeed; the wrinkles around his eyes were colourless and deep. He was also insane, beyond any question; nothing of this world could be seen in those grey eyes.

'Does that carpet really exist?' the Old Fool asked him.

'Of course it does,' he replied, a little offended.

'It exists, yes, yes, it surely does. But it doesn't mean that it's real.'

The boy didn't understand – and never will – what the Old Fool wanted to tell him in that moment; he attributed it to the man's craziness, which would be comprehensible only if he himself were to cross to the other side of reason.

'You see this rock I'm sitting on. In a way, it exists. But if I were to believe that it was indeed real, if I were to accept that possibility, then I would no longer be able to sit on it; if I were to sit on it with the idea that it was real, the rock would come alive and be too dangerous.'

The Old Fool went on to say a few more things the boy understood, then started laughing, lengthily and unsuitably, which signalled that the conversation was over.

★

His Friend's father, who, like his own father, went somewhere with a rifle during the night, had a workshop. There, he found a small canister of fuel, which he stole when night fell.

He dragged the carpet out of the house, dragging it as far as he could, for as long as he had the strength. He stopped at a meadow. The houses were still close; he hadn't got very far. Had he been thinking, he wouldn't be doing any of this. Thus, in those moments when he gathered dry branches and leaves, it was very important not to think. He made a pyre, making sure it was as wide as possible, then squirted a bit of liquid from the canister onto it. He threw the rolled carpet over the pyre and spilled the rest of the can's contents on it. He used a matchstick he had stolen from his house to light the pyre. The flame surprised him; it erupted fiercely, and he felt the warmth spill over his face and eyes. He took a step back. The carpet didn't fight it. He had taken it out of the house before the time of its usual nightly waking, and it hadn't shown any sign of resistance, as if it knew what was coming from the beginning. It was calmly coming to terms with its fate in the broad wall of flames.

The fire was too big. He soon heard voices. There was no point in running. He took a few more steps back as the female voices became closer. Then he saw them; arms spread wide, they were shouting as if uttering incantations at the fire but didn't dare to approach it. Soon, another sound could be heard: a motor vehicle. It drowned out the women's voices, heading straight towards them. The glare of the big military jeep's two headlights intersected with the light from

the fire. He still wasn't thinking, for if he were to start thinking now, everything would fall apart into meaninglessness. That scene had to keep unfolding, without interpretation: armed men rushing out of the car, women holding their heads and gasping for air, sparks from the fire flying, and he, standing in the shadows, trying not to be noticed. He couldn't think, and he couldn't move, not even when he recognised his Friend's father among the men from the jeep, and then his own father, too. The latter came closer to the fire than anyone else had, and he was able to recognise what was burning in it, as an occasional green shape could still be seen before being swallowed by nothingness. In his eyes, the boy saw anger, and humiliation, and sorrow, the likes of which he had never seen before; then his father turned his head away from the fire and scanned the meadow until he saw him, his own son, who was trying to be a shadow.

'You. You,' he said loudly enough for the latter to hear him, then he went towards him, dropping his rifle on the ground and clenching his fists, and he would have reached the boy in two strides if it hadn't been for another sound that suddenly rang out through the night, the loudest one, which drowned out the fizzling of the fire, the women's voices and the sound of the jeep. It was laughter, maniacal, hysterical and so loud that it could no longer even be called laughter; one would probably need to come up with a new word to describe what was heard at that moment. Everyone turned towards the source of this new piercing sound and saw the Old Fool, who was laughing and jumping around the fire, moving his stick through the flames. He laughed relentlessly as he danced.

His father stopped, too, and turned towards the Old Fool. As if forgetting his son, he now turned his full attention to the laughter and went towards the man, striding as decisively as he had a few mo-

ments earlier. He approached the Old Fool and punched him with a fist that had long turned pale from being clenched, temporarily stopping the laughter. The Old Fool fell on the ground. For a moment, everything was silent; the women went still, one of the men turned off the engine, and only the crackling of the fire could be heard, until the laughter returned. It was quieter and intermittent, but equally inexplicable and disturbing. The father picked up the stick the Old Fool had dropped and started hitting him with it. He struck him over his head, hands, back... The laughter stopped again and didn't return, but the father didn't stop. The swooshing of the stick cut the night until the stick broke, but the father continued, kicking the Old Fool in the stomach and the chest, stomping on his head, the soles of his military boots digging into his forehead, nose and chin; every movement was accompanied by increasingly quiet moaning, as well as the cracking of bones, skin and muscles. Now, there was no light except from the flames, and one could no longer see the effects of those kicks, but the force with which they were delivered, as well as the sounds which accompanied them, made one think.

And he started thinking.

NORTH MACEDONIA



Ivan SHOPOV

Зентрифуга
Zentrifuge

Begemot, 2024

Macedonian

ISBN: 978-608-5064-00-7

BIOGRAPHY

Ivan Shopov (b. 1987, Skopje) is a distinct voice in contemporary Macedonian fiction. He is the author of three acclaimed short story collections: *Alphabet and Stray Notes* (2010, 'Novite!' award for best debut prose); *Skopje: The Lost Shoes of the City* (2020); and his most recent work, *Zentrifuge* (2024). He has also published a collection of surrealist prose poetry and a volume of satirical mock-journalism. Equally active as a translator, Shopov has introduced Macedonian readers to works by M. Krleža, M. Thien, A. Bierce, M. Nussbaum, and numerous regional authors. Beyond his writing, he is a dedicated promoter of literary culture. He has worked as an editor, organised the 'Another Story' festival, and co-founded the 'Bukva' cultural hub and the 'KC 750' mobile centre in Skopje.

SYNOPSIS

Zentrifuge is a literary triptych that spins the world on its head, acting as a machine that separates the heavy from the light, only to mix them up again in a dizzying new configuration. A key impulse in *Zentrifuge* is the parody and remaking of Zen stories. As in Zen, Shopov's prose radiates condensed energy and philosophical depth; it is elliptical, intuitive, and epiphanic. Yet unlike traditional Zen parables, these stories deliberately resist

didacticism and the authority of fixed interpretation. Their final conceptual turn is marked by bold reinterpretation and playful subversion, resulting in a heightened sense of humour, irony and ludic freedom. With a style that echoes the absurdity of Daniil Kharmis, the urban magic of Italo Calvino, and the grotesque minimalism of István Örkény and Sławomir Mrożek, *Zentrifuge* explores the thin, porous line between the mundane and the miraculous, suggesting that reality, in essence, is nothing more than a collective story we agree not to debunk.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Often paradoxical and grotesque, absurd and bizarre, Shopov's narratives challenge the rational logic of everyday reality. They perform sudden, lightning-like leaps into the realms of the fantastic and the surreal, into a world where the familiar laws we rely on are fractured, suspended, or entirely abolished. Meaning is not delivered directly but revealed intuitively and retrospectively, through the reader's engagement.



Зентрифуга

Иван Шопов



ПРЕСЕЛБА

Летото во градот е лепливо: капките пот на храброто момче што решило да прошета на пладне паѓаат на плочникот, каде што рој муви кружат околу згмечена кајсија. Пред момчето се испречува висок маж со сламен шешир на главата и кожен елек врз голото тело. На раскопаното парче на тротоарот, од кое се извадени плочките, се гледа слој од натапкан песок. Во него, мажот со врвот на едниот чевел исцртува неправилен круг. Го погледнува момчето во очи луто и заповеднички, со испружен показалец, му дава знак да влезе во кругот. Тоа се колеба, несигурно во одлуките што во неговата глава се менуваат молскавично: час сака послушно да влезе во кругот, час да го заобиколи чудакот кому сонцето му удрило в глава и мирно да си замине.

Додека се колеба, сладоледот му се топи во рака и капе на тротоарот, малку понастрана од смачканата кајсија, па дел од мувите се пренасочуваат кон чоколадните капки. Мажот значајно се накашлува и не ја повлекува испружената рака со долгиот показалец. Момчето полека се покорува и зачекорува кон исцртаниот круг.

Една старица излегува на терасата на вториот кат од зградата на спротивната страна на улицата.

– Мали, немој! – извикнува со рапав и силен глас, но веќе е предоцна.

БАЗЕН

Опуштени и испружени во лежалките, некои благо подисправени, во полулежечка положба, со пијачки во рацете, гостите се преправаат дека не го забележуваат момчето што се залетува да скокне во базенот. Некои од нив се погледнуваат под око, со едвај исцртана насмевка.

Момчето се залетува и главечки скокнува во празниот базен. Се слуша едно „туп“ и тоа останува да лежи неподвижно на дното од базенот, без да испушти глас. Мала црвена дамка се забележува на неговата глава. Потоа се претвора во локва што постепено се шири и станува сè поголема.

Гостите и понатаму лежат спокојно во лежалките покрај базенот, си ги пијат пијачките и нарачуваат нови. Никој не се свртува кон базенот дури ни кога тој е сосема исполнет со крв.

Крвта полека почнува да се прелева и стасува речиси до лежалките на гостите, кои, полека, без никаква видлива вознемиреност, ги допиваат пијачките, се пакуваат и се подготвуваат да си заминат.

Неколку часа подоцна, крвта се лее по улиците како река, достигнува до колената на минувачите што се затекнале на тротоарите, а оние што останале дома веќе размислуваат да се искачат на горните катови или покривите на куќите.

Никој нема идеја како да ја запре крвавата поплава што започна од базенот.

Во една споредна уличка, целосно поплавена, момчето што се фрли во празниот базен, насмеано, плива во сопствената крв.

КРИГЛА ПИВО

Еден ден на Нан-ин, јапонскиот учител по зен од периодот Меиџи, му дошол на посета некој универзитетски професор што сакал кај него да се подраспраша за зенот.

Нан-ин го послужил со пиво. Преполнувајќи му ја криглата на гостинот, продолжил да налева. Професорот гледал како пивото се прелива и се наведнал над криглата, па со устата и јазикот лакомо сркал од пивото што претекува.

– Полна е. Во неа веќе нема место! – рекол учителот по зен, очекувајќи универзитетскиот професор самиот да го сфати тоа.

– Само ти точи – одговорил професорот и продолжил да пие од пивото.

БЕГАЈЌИ ОД ТИГАР

Еден човек, поминувајќи низ поле, наишол на тигар. Почнал да бега, а тигарот јурнал по него. Доаѓајќи до еден амбис, човекот се фатил за корен од дива лоза и тргнал да се спушта надолу. Тигарот го душкал одозгора. Тресејќи се, тој погледнал надолу каде што, на дното, друг тигар чекал да го изеде. Само лозата го држела. Две глувчиња, едно бело и едно црно, малку по малку почнале да ја грицкаат лозата. Тогаш човекот забележал сочна јаготка покрај себе. Држејќи се за лозата со едната рака, со другата ја скинал јаготката.

– Ова е најслатката јаготка што некогаш сум ја пробал – помислил. – Но повеќе ќе се радував на кременадла од тигар.

НАЈВРЕДНОТО НЕШТО ВО СВЕТОТ

Еден ученик го прашал Созан, кинескиот учител по зен:

– Кое е највредното нешто на светот?

Учителот одговорил:

– Главата на мртва мачка.

– А зошто главата на мртва мачка е највредното нешто на светот? – прашал ученикот.

Созан одговорил:

– Затоа што никој не може да ѝ ја одреди цената.

Тогаш ученикот се просветлил, му ја исекол главата на учителот и рекол:

– Мјау.

ДАМКА

Со бели ракавици на рацете, истражувачот ги прелистуваше старите весници во Државниот архив. Задлабочен во содржината на статијата што ја читаше, дури подоцна ја забележа дамката од чоколадно млеко врз лицето на диктаторот. Се обиде да се насмевне, но трагите од слаткиот пијалак нималку не го омекнуваа ликот на злосторникот.

Го преплаши неодговорноста на посетителот или вработениот што ги прелистувал вредните документи, покрај себе ставајќи течноста што може да ги уништи. Со години продолжи да доаѓа во архивот барем трипати неделно, и покрај тоа што трудот за кој истражуваше веќе одамна беше завршен.

Со внимателен, полупараноичен поглед ги набљудуваше вработените и ги демнеше посетителите. Беше убеден дека оној што ќе дојде да ги разлистува старите документи носејќи чоколадно млеко со себе е следниот безмилосен диктатор.

РЕДИЦА

Старата телефонска говорница покрај поштата не работи со години, но тоа не го спречува мажот секој ден да влегува во кабината и да зборува во слушалката со часови. Поради досада или поради нешто друго, решавам да се пошегувам со него и застапувам пред говорницата како да чекам ред. Тој престанува да зборува, се свртува кон мене и ме погледнува луто. Се правам дека не ги забележувам лутината и острината

на погледот, па со прашални гестови се обидувам да дознам уште колку ќе трае неговиот разговор.

– Па не гледаш ли дека говорницата не работи? Будало една! – ми одговара бесно и помислувам дека идејата да се шегувам со него на тој начин не беше баш најдобра.

Се свртувам да си одам, но забележувам дека зад мене стои уште еден човек, по него млада девојка, зад неа дете за кое би се рекло дека нема ниту седум години, маж, па по него уште еден...

Ми се чини дека сега веќе нема назад.

МИСИЈА

Редарот во киносалата ми впери во лицето силен сноп светлина од батериската ламба. И покрај тоа што се намуртив и подзамижав, не забележав извинувачки тон во неговите зборови: – Местово не е ваше! – Погледнав внимателно во бројот на седиштето и редот пред да седнам, но допуштив дека е можно да сум згрешил. Го извадив билетот од џебот за да проверам дали се наоѓам на своето место, а уште пред да стигнам да прочитам што било, ми пријде девојка во докторски бел мантил, грабнувајќи ми го билетот од рацете: – Станувајте! Местово не е ваше! – Збунет, се исправив, неспремен за нејзиниот следен потег: – И јакнава не е ваша! – рече и почна да ми ја соблекува. Со хируршки нож ми ја распори блузата на неколку места и таа само се лизна на подот. Разголен, почувствував бодеж од пендрек во грбот, лутиот полицаец врескаше: – Градов не е твој! – Парталава бабичка со изглед на бездомничка викаше: – И овие не се твои – додека ми ги тегнеше патиките од стапалата.

– Косата не е твоја – рече мажот од редот пред мене.

– Очите не се твои – додаде докторката и се обиде да ми стави превез врз нив, но ѝ ги оттурнав рацете.

– Кожата не е твоја – рече редарот и заедно со докторката, бабичката бездомничка и неколку полицајци ме изнесоа од киносалата.

– Планетава не е твоја! – рекоа во еден глас, ми натнаа космонаутски скафандер и ме лансираа некаде високо.

Лебдам во бескрајниот простор без да знам на каква мисија сум испратен и се прашувам: добар ли беше филмот? Пропуштам ли нешто или можам да бидам сосема спокоен?

Zentrifuge

Ivan Shopov

Translated from Macedonian by Christina E. Kramer

MOVING

Summer in the city is sticky: the drops of sweat beading on the brave lad who decided to go for a walk at noon fall on the pavement where a swarm of flies are circling a crushed apricot. The boy's path is blocked by a tall man wearing a straw hat and a leather vest over his bare chest. On a dug-up part of the pavement where stones have been removed, a layer of pounded sand is visible. There, in the sand, the man draws an irregular circle with the tip of one shoe. He looks the boy in the eye, angrily and threateningly, and, with his finger extended, signals to the boy to step into the circle. The boy wavers, unsure in his decisions, which change like lightning in his head: a part of him wants to obey and enter the circle; a part wants to get around this weirdo who's been hit in the head by the sun and move peacefully past him.

While he's hesitating, the ice cream in his hand melts and drips on the sidewalk, a bit to the side of the smashed apricot, and some of the flies redirect themselves to the drips of chocolate. The man coughs meaningfully and does not withdraw his extended hand with its long index finger. The boy slowly submits and starts to step towards the drawn circle.

An old woman comes out on her second-floor balcony of the building on the opposite side of the street.

'Hey, you there, young boy! Don't!' she cries out in a rough, powerful voice, but it is already too late.

POOL

Relaxed, stretched out on lounge chairs, some slightly upright in a half-prone position, with drinks in their hands, the guests were pretending not to notice the boy racing to jump into the pool. Some of them glanced at each other with a bare hint of a smile.

The boy is racing and jumps headfirst into the empty pool. There's a thud and then he is lying motionless on the bottom of the pool, not making a sound. A small red spot is noticeable on his head. It turns into a puddle that slowly spreads, becoming larger and larger.

The guests continue to lie quietly on their lounge chairs by the pool, sip their drinks, and order new ones. No one turns to the pool, not even when it is completely full of blood.

The blood slowly begins to lap over the edge and almost reaches the lounge chairs, where the guests, with no apparent concern, finish their drinks, pack up and prepare to leave.

Several hours later, blood is pouring down the streets like a river, it reaches the knees of the pedestrians who happen to be on the sidewalks, while those at home are already considering heading to the upper floors or the roofs of their houses.

No one has any idea how to stop the bloody flood that began in the pool.

On a small side street, completely flooded, the boy who threw himself into the pool is laughing, swimming in his own blood.

BEER MUG

One day a university professor came to see Nan-in, a Japanese Zen teacher from the Meiji period, to question him about Zen.

Nan-in served him beer. As he filled his guest's mug, he kept pouring. The professor watched as the beer overflowed and spilled from the mug, and his mouth and tongue greedily slurped up the flowing beer.

'It's full. There is no more space!' said the Zen teacher, expecting the university professor to grasp this himself.

'Just keep pouring,' answered the professor as he continued to drink the beer.

FLEEING A TIGER

A man crossing a field came upon a tiger. He began to run, but the tiger came storming after him. Reaching the edge of an abyss, the man grabbed hold of the root of a wild vine and lowered himself over. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, at the bottom of the pit, another tiger was waiting to devour him. But the vine held firm. Two mice, one white and one black, began little by little to gnaw at the vine. The man noticed a plump strawberry beside him. Holding tight to the rope with one hand, with the other he plucked the strawberry.

'This is the sweetest strawberry I have ever tasted,' he thought. 'But I would have been happier with tiger cutlet.'

THE MOST VALUABLE THING IN THE WORLD

A student asked Sozan, the Chinese Zen teacher: 'What is the most valuable thing in the world?'

The teacher answered: 'The head of a dead cat.'

'But why is the head of a dead cat the most valuable thing in the world?' the student asked.

Sozan answered: 'Because no one can determine its value.'

The student was enlightened, and he cut off his teacher's head and said: 'Miaow.'

SPOT

With white gloves on his hands, the researcher leafed through old newspapers in the State Archives. Engrossed in the contents of the article he was reading, it was only later that he noticed the spot of chocolate milk on the dictator's face. He tried to smile, but the traces of the sweet beverage did nothing to soften the face of that criminal.

He was shocked by the irresponsibility of a visitor or employee who had leafed through these valuable documents and set them alongside a liquid, risking their destruction. For years he continued to come to the archive at least three times a week, even though the work he had been researching had long since been finished.

With an attentive, semi-paranoid look he observed the employees and lurked among the visitors. He was convinced that the person who would come to leaf through these old documents carrying chocolate milk with him was the next ruthless dictator.

THE QUEUE

The old telephone booth by the post office hasn't worked for years, but that doesn't stop the man who goes into the cabin every day and talks into the receiver for hours. Either out of boredom or something else, I decide to play a joke on him, and I stand in front of the phone booth as if I'm waiting my turn. He stops talking, turns to me and gives me an angry look. I pretend not to notice the anger

and sharpness of his gaze, and with questioning gestures I try to determine how much longer his conversation is going to last.

‘Hey, don’t you see that the phone in the booth doesn’t work? You idiot!’ he tells me furiously, and I decide my idea of teasing him in this way wasn’t exactly a good idea.

I turn to go, but I notice that behind me is standing another man, and behind him a young girl, behind her a child, who, I would guess, isn’t even seven years old, then a man, and behind him another.

It seems that now there is no turning back.

MISSION

The guard in the movie theatre pointed the strong beam of the flashlight in my face. As I grimaced and blinked, I didn’t notice the apologetic tone of his words: ‘This isn’t your seat!’ I had looked carefully at the number of the seat and the row before sitting down, but I accepted that I might have made a mistake. I took my ticket from my pocket to check whether I was in my own seat, but before I could read what was there, a young woman in a white lab coat came up and snatched the ticket from my hands. ‘Get up! This isn’t your seat!’ Confused, I straightened up, unprepared for her next move. ‘This jacket isn’t yours either!’ she said and began pulling it off me. With a scalpel she slashed my shirt in a few places, and it slipped to the floor. Stripped, I felt the stab of a truncheon in my back, the angry police officer shouting: ‘This is not your city!’ The ragged granny who looked homeless screamed: ‘Those aren’t yours either,’ and she yanked my sneakers from my feet.

‘That hair isn’t yours,’ said the man in the row in front of me.

‘Those aren’t your eyes,’ added the doctor as she tried to put a veil over them, but I pushed her hands away.

‘That skin isn’t yours,’ said the guard, and with the doctor, the old homeless lady and several police officers, he carried me from the theatre.

‘This planet isn’t yours!’ they said in one voice, as they put me in a cosmonaut suit and launched me high up somewhere.

I am floating in endless space without knowing what sort of mission I’ve been sent on and I ask myself: Was the movie any good? Am I missing something or can I be totally calm?

SWEDEN



Frans WACHTMEISTER

Förlorad mark

Lost Ground

Ellerströms, 2025

Swedish

ISBN: 978-91-7247-764-3

BIOGRAPHY

Frans Wachtmeister (b. 1993, Skåne) has lived in Tokyo for the past ten years, where he studied art history and Japanese. His debut novel *Territoriella Anspråk* came out in 2023, for which he was nominated for several literary prizes as well as awarded the Lily and Tage Fridh's scholarship. *Lost Ground* is his second novel.

SYNOPSIS

Life has stalled for the main character in Frans Wachtmeister's latest novel. His Japanese girlfriend has left him and when he eventually loses his job as a headhunter, he's prepared to face the final curtain. Along with a failing sculptor of Buddha's, he leads a life in the shadowy outskirts of Tokyo and alternates between accepting and fighting his fate. His Japan shrinks, turns hostile and eventually drives him to make a final, desperate attempt to regain his lost favor. With a cynical view of both Asia and his home continent of Europe, Frans Wachtmeister writes about identity, regret and guilt from a European point of view, whilst presenting a theory on the geography of love in the age of globalisation.

REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Lost Ground portrays a social, geographic and moral existential liminal space. Through a precise use of language and a keen eye for relationships, power and hierarchies, Frans Wachtmeister writes himself into the proud and honourable European tradition of literary cynicism. His scepticism is equally aimed at the mirror's reflection as it is aimed at the identity, success and belonging that permeates life in a globalised world. Wachtmeister does not want our sympathies but demands our attention. He challenges, bothers and clarifies. The result is a novel which is everything but uplifting and still makes us laugh out loud.



Förlorad mark

Frans Wachtmeister



Sista dagen på arbetsåret. Semesterförväntningarna gick nästan att ta på i tunnelbanan. Själv hade jag ont i magen. När jag bytte linje fick jag göra våld på mig för att inte vända och åka hem igen.

Vid Shibuya Station trycktes jag våldsamt in i vagnen. Trots de stundande helgledigheterna var det lika trångt som vanligt. Skolorna hade fortfarande öppet och flera skolflickor i uniform stod utspridda i vagnen, två av dem intill mig, med sina ännu ej utslagna kroppar tätt tryckta mot min. Det var outhärdligt.

Tunnelbanevagnen var full av reklam. Fram tills igår hade de annonserat om en förestående utställning med buddhaskulpturer, vilket hade varit trevligt att titta på under pendlingstimmarna, men under natten hade skyltningen ersatts med reklam för hårborttagning. Den nya aktören förde en aggressiv kampanj för sin helkroppsbehandling och besudlade både taket och väggarna med affischer på en androidliknande modell av obestämbar etnicitet och ben som var absolut hårfria. *En ny kropp för en ny tid*. Skolflickorna beundrade henne hänfört.

I rulltrappan upp från perrongen sprang jag på Yoko från motivationskursen. Vi bodde alltså längs samma tåglinje. Vi slog följe mot kontoret och småpratade så som jag tror är brukligt kollegor emellan. Min anmärkning att man hade bytt en slätrakad Buddha mot en slätrakad kvinna verkade roa henne oerhört. Årets sista dag var *casual Friday*, Yoko bar jeans och svarta Nikes. Inte riktigt rätt på Ways, men hon skulle snart lära sig. Vårt samtal ledde naturligt in

på planerna inför nyårshelgen. Yoko skulle till Niseko för att åka skidor. Redan samma kväll gick flyget från Haneda. Jag sade att det lät trevligt, och funderade på vad jag skulle svara om hon frågade vad jag skulle hitta på. Det gjorde hon inte. Däremot ruvade hon på andra frågor.

– Jag förstår att det kanske är lite ofint att fråga, viska-de Yoko när vi trängde in oss i hissen till kontoret, men jag hörde att du skulle bli uppsagd. Och att det var därför du var med på kursen. Är det sant?

Hissdörrarna stängdes. Det var då fan. Först Genzo, och nu Yoko. Kände hela firman till att jag höll på att få sparken? Mina usla resultat hade nog inte undgått någon, sådana var offentliga handlingar på Ways Recruiting, men att jag skulle bli uppsagd, det var väl ändå konfidentiellt?

– Jag har fått en andra chans, svarade jag precis som jag hade svarat Genzo.

– Det går säkert bra. Det går väl upp och ned för alla i det här yrket, tröstade Yoko, antagligen för att lugna sig själv.

I själva verket hade jag inga ursäkter. Företaget visade bättre resultat än någonsin, hade hon inte märkt det? Personliga rekord sprängdes varje dag, champagne delades ut till höger och vänster av en salig Travolta. AI-revolutionen stod för dörren, och den låga yenen hade lett till ett enormt uppsving för den japanska exportsektorn, där våra bästa kunder råkade befinna sig. Ways formligen tröskade in pengar. Det var i princip bara jag som inte hade sålt någonting det senaste kvartalet.

Hissen accelererade i det inglasade schaktet. Ett lätt tryck över maggropen. Mild yrsel igen. Människorna nere på entréplan blev mindre och mindre och försvann bakom ett myller av järnbalkar. Jag svalde saliv och trevade efter träräcket. Detta rännande upp och ned skulle ta död på mig en vacker dag.

– Det löser sig. I Japan kan man ändå inte bara sparka folk hur som helst. Jag har jobbat på advokatkontor.

Ahh, oskyldiga barn. Så mycket hon hade kvar att lära. Ways förfogade över en hel arsenal med vapen de kunde ta till om det behövdes. Vad de brukade göra när de vanliga påtryckningsmetoderna inte fungerade avstod jag dock från att berätta. Det var trots allt bara Yokos andra vecka.

Innanför entrédörrarna skildes vi åt. För att vara vårt första möte var Yokos farväl mycket ömt. Jag måste ha gjort ett skakigt intryck, för hon verkade tro att jag inte skulle komma tillbaka efter semestern (för övrigt en helt befogad misstanke, vore det inte för problematiken kring mitt visum).

Vilken rättfram och ambitiös tjej ändå, sade jag mig när jag gick mot mitt skrivbord. Sådana karaktärsdrag belönades rikligt på Ways Recruiting. Hennes karriär skulle bli raketsnabb. Och så kvickt och oförfväget hon hade närmat sig mig. En riktig säljare. Som nyanställd sökte hon säkert en mentorsfigur bland oss äldre. Kanske till och med mer än så. Sexuellt umgänge mellan de anställda hörde absolut inte till ovanligheterna på Ways Recruiting. Japanskorna i administrationen var mer eller mindre till för det. Väl vid mitt skrivbord kontemplerade jag möjligheten att inleda ett sådant förhållande med Yoko. Erfaren–oerfaren, äldre–yngre, utlänning–japanska; maktstrukturen var definitivt till min fördel. Jag såg framför mig spontana avsugningar i städskrubben, förtrollade taxiresor efter jobbet till nattöppna Ducasse eller Nobu i Akasaka. Sedan erinrade jag mig var jag befann mig. Tre månader kvar. Klockan tickade. Tick tack, tick tack. Jag hade ingen tid för relationer.

Men kanske desto mer avgörande; jag hade ingen lust.

Resten av förmiddagen tillbringade jag i ett alltmer uppgivet tillstånd. Min inkorg var full av svarsmail från ett massutskick som jag hade gjort under gårdagskvällen, där jag informerat fyratusen

abonnenter om den förträffliga tjänsten på Masuda Steel. I min iver att få gå hem hade jag dock glömt att klicka bort utländska nationaliteter från mottagarlistan (seniorerna hade jag dock sett till att exkludera den här gången), och nittio procent av svaren hade kommit från arbetslösa indier. Den ekonomiska tillväxten till trots verkade Gandhis och curryns rike hysa rentav oändliga volymer av icke-anställningsbara ingenjörer som drömde om en framtid utomlands. Deras utsikter såg dystra ut. I varje fall i Japan. Här var indierna nästan mindre gångbara än seniorerna. De senare talade åtminstone japanska.

Eftermiddagen blev något bättre. De flesta av mina kollegor gick hem tidigt, och jag fick gjort lite saker inför långhelgen. En rekryterare måste alltid tänka på morgondagen, och helger var till för att sourca. Jag förberedde mig med tidsinställda massutskick och annonser, och fick iväg ett hundratal personliga meddelanden till olika kontakter på LinkedIn.

Precis när jag skulle gå hem ringde Tanaka. Han ville veta hur det hade gått med Masuda Steel. Det hade inte förflutit mer än tjugofyra timmar sedan vi hade talats vid senast. Mannen var verkligen desperat. Han stal tjugo minuter av min tid och beklagade sig över hur diskriminerad han blev av alla arbetsgivare och rekryterare där ute. Enligt god sed lovade jag att lägga in ett gott ord för honom hos Masuda Steel. Som om det skulle hjälpa. Lilla jag skulle inte kunna ändra tingens ordning.

Lost Ground

Frans Wachtmeister

Translated from Swedish by Elizabeth Clark Wessel

The last work day of the year. The holiday excitement was almost palpable on the underground. As for me, my stomach hurt. When I changed trains, it took every bit of my will not to turn back and head home again.

At Shibuya, I was shoved violently into the carriage. Despite the approaching holidays, it was as crowded as always. Schools were still open, and several schoolgirls in uniform were scattered throughout the carriage, two standing right next to me, their undeveloped bodies pressed tightly against mine. It was unbearable.

The carriage was plastered in advertisements. Up until yesterday, they'd all been about an upcoming exhibition of Buddha sculptures, and pleasant to look at during my commute, but during the night those signs had been replaced with hair-removal ads. This new advertiser was running an aggressive campaign for a full-body treatment and had covered both ceiling and walls with posters of an android-like model of indeterminate ethnicity whose legs were completely hairless. *A new body for a new age.* The schoolgirls stared at her raptly.

On the up escalator from the platform, I bumped into Yoko from the sales course. We lived along the same train line. We walked together to the office making small talk, as I suppose one does with one's colleagues. My observation that they had replaced a smooth-shaven Buddha with a smooth-shaven woman seemed to amuse her enormously. The last day of the year was a casual Friday. Yoko was wearing jeans and black Nikes. Not quite right for Ways, but

she'd learn soon enough. Our conversation naturally led to our plans for the New Year holiday. Yoko was going to Niseko to ski. She was flying there this evening from Haneda. I told her it sounded like fun, and tried to figure out what to say if asked what my plans were. But she didn't. She was brooding over other issues.

'I'm sorry if this is rude to ask,' Yoko whispered as we squeezed into the lift to the office, 'but I heard you were getting laid off. And that's why you're taking the course. Is that true?'

The lift doors closed. Well, that was it then. First Genzo and now Yoko. Did the whole company know I was on the verge of being fired? My horrible stats had probably not escaped notice – they were available to anyone working at Ways Recruiting – but surely getting laid off was supposed to be confidential?

'They gave me a second chance,' I told her, as I had Genzo.

'I'm sure things will work out. There must be a lot of ups and downs in this business,' she said to me consolingly, maybe more to reassure herself.

In reality, I had no excuses. The company was doing better than ever; she must have noticed. Personal records were being broken every day, champagne corks being popped right and left by a delighted Travolta. The AI revolution was around the corner, and a weak yen had led to a massive boom in the Japanese export sector, which was where our best customers happened to be. Ways was literally raking in the cash. I was basically the only one who hadn't made a sale in the last quarter.

The lift accelerated up the glass shaft. The pit of my stomach dropped. Mildly dizzy again. People on the ground floor grew smaller and disappeared behind a swarm of steel beams. I swallowed hard

and reached for the wooden handrail. All this rushing around would kill me one of these days.

‘It’ll be fine. In Japan you can’t just fire people like that. I used to work in a law office.’

Such an innocent child. She had so much to learn. Ways had a whole arsenal of weapons at their disposal if necessary. I didn’t tell her how they could push you out if the usual methods didn’t work. After all, it was only Yoko’s second week.

We parted at the entrance door. For a first meeting, Yoko’s goodbye was very warm. I must have made a poor impression, because she didn’t seem to believe I’d be back after the holidays (which, incidentally, would have been a perfectly reasonable assumption if it weren’t for my visa issues).

A very straightforward and ambitious girl, I noted to myself as I made my way to my desk. Both qualities were highly valued at Ways Recruiting. Her career was going to take off like a rocket. Look at how quickly and boldly she’d approached me. A real salesperson. She was probably looking for a mentor among us more experienced employees. Maybe even something more than that. It wasn’t uncommon for Ways employees to have sexual relationships. The Japanese women in admin were more or less in favour of it. When I got to my desk I began to contemplate getting into a relationship with Yoko. Experienced–inexperienced, older–younger, foreigner–Japanese; the power dynamic would definitely be to my advantage. I pictured myself receiving spontaneous blow jobs in the cleaning cupboard, magical taxi journeys after work to late-night Ducasse or Nobu in Akasaka. Then I remembered where I was. Three months left. The clock was ticking. Tick-tock, tick-tock. I didn’t have time for a relationship. But more importantly, I didn’t feel like having one.

I spent the rest of my morning becoming increasingly despondent. My inbox was overflowing with replies to a mass email I'd sent out the night before, in which I'd informed four thousand subscribers about the excellent job opening at Masuda Steel. In my haste to get home, however, I'd forgotten to deselect foreign nationalities from the recipient list (though I had excluded older people this time), and ninety per cent of the replies were from unemployed Indians. Despite its economic growth, the land of Gandhi and curry seemed to consist of an endless supply of unemployed engineers dreaming of a future abroad. Their prospects were bleak. At least in Japan. Indians were almost less viable here than older people. At least the latter spoke Japanese.

The afternoon was a little better. Most of my colleagues headed home early, and I was able to get a few things done before the long weekend. A recruiter always has to be thinking ahead, and weekends are for sourcing. I prepped by scheduling some mass emails and ads, and sent about a hundred personal messages to my contacts on LinkedIn.

As I was about to go home, Tanaka called. He wanted to know how it had gone with Masuda Steel. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since we'd last spoken. The man was truly desperate. He wasted twenty minutes of my time complaining about being discriminated against by every employer and recruiter out there. As a common courtesy, I promised to put in a good word for him. As if that would help. I had no control over how things worked.

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