

E U R O P E A N

st^{ories}

European Union
Prize for Literature
Winning authors
2021



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EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

E U R O P E A N

Stories

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Winning authors
2021



FEDERATION OF EUROPEAN PUBLISHERS
FÉDÉRATION DES ÉDITEURS EUROPÉENS



European and
International
Booksellers
Federation



Creative
Europe



Albania
Tom Kuka



Bulgaria
Георги Бърдаров
(Georgi Bardarov)



Czech Republic
Lucie Faulerová



Armenia
Արամ Պաչյան
(Aram Pachyan)



Iceland
Sigrún Pálsdóttir



Latvia
Laura Vinogradova



Malta
Lara Calleja



The Netherlands
Gerda Blee



Portugal
Frederico Pedreira



Serbia
Dejan Tiago
Stanković



Slovenia
Anja Mugerli



Sweden
Maxim Grigoriev



Tunisia
أمين الغزوي
(Amine Al Ghozzi)

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FOREWORD

There are no social distancing measures, no travel restrictions and no masks when it comes to literature. Books give us direct access to the heart and soul of authors and their characters, and allow us to share their stories and their emotions and to travel to different cultures and countries from the comfort of our own homes.

The EU Prize for Literature celebrates and promotes the incredible creativity and diversity that can be found in Europe's contemporary literature scene. Since it began in 2009, the prize has helped emerging European fiction writers to reach wider audiences by supporting the translation and promotion of their works.

In this 2021 EU Prize for Literature winners' anthology, you will discover 13 authors, with 13 different books, in 13 different languages. As a symbol of our attachment to multilingualism, you will see that the anthology includes excerpts from the winning books in original languages and a translation in English or French.

The diversity of European languages is an unrivalled source of richness for Europe, but also a challenge for book translation, with so many different combinations of languages to cover.





That is why the EU's new 'Creative Europe' programme (2021–2027), which supports the European cultural and creative sectors, will provide increased financial support to the book sector in particular, in order to help the whole book value chain – authors, publishers, translators, booksellers, libraries, festivals and book fairs – work together on the translation, promotion and circulation of books. In parallel, the European Commission has engaged in a dialogue with the EU Member States to strengthen the translation sector and improve the coordination of national and European public support for the book sector.

The prize is organised by a consortium representing some of the key operators in the book sector, consisting of the European Writers' Council, the Federation of European Publishers and the European and International Booksellers Federation. I am grateful to them for their commitment to the prize and their support for European Union policies on books and reading.

Finally, but most importantly, I warmly congratulate the 13 laureates. I am confident that their books will find large audiences, both at home and abroad, and I wish each of them a wonderful literary career. I hope that readers will discover new voices and enjoy their journey into the worlds created by our talented laureates.

**Mariya Gabriel,
Commissioner for Innovation,
Research, Culture, Education
and Youth**

NATIONAL JURIES

The participating countries in the 2021 edition of the European Union Prize for Literature are Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Iceland, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden and Tunisia.

ALBANIA

President Ben Andoni (Baftjar Luzati), writer, literary translator

Members

- Petrit Ymery, executive director of Dituria, president of the Association of Albanian Publishers
- Entela Kasi, poet, novelist, translator, essayist, president of PEN Albania
- Evelyne Noygues, literary translator

ARMENIA

President Armen Ohanyan, writer, translator, president of PEN Armenia

Members

- Arevik Ashkharoyan, literary agent, founder of ARI Literary and Talent Agency
- Anahit Avetisyan, translator
- Shakeh Havan, founder of the Artbridge bookshop
- Mkrtich Matevosyan, founder of the non-governmental publishing organisation Actual Art, painter, graphic designer

BULGARIA

President Anzhela Dimcheva, journalist, poet, literary critic, editor, secretary-general of the Bulgarian PEN Centre

Members

- Velizara Dobрева, executive director of Egmont Publishing
- Dimitar Atanasov, managing partner of Bookoholic Ltd
- Darin Tenev, associate professor of literature, director of the Institute for Critical Social Studies at the University of Plovdiv
- Svetlozar Zhelev, former publisher, radio and television editor, lecturer, director of the Bulgarian national book centre

CZECH REPUBLIC

President Pavel Mandys, writer, journalist, book critic, organiser of the Magnesia Litera book award

Members

- Ivana Myšková, writer, cultural journalist
- Petr A. Bílek, professor of modern Czech literature and literary theory
- Vladimír Opatrný, bookseller
- Eva Klíčová, literary critic, journalist, editor

ICELAND

President Tinna Ásgeirsdóttir, translator, project manager for the Icelandic Writers' Union

Members

- Helga Ferdinandsdóttir, editor, copywriter, literary adviser
- Thorgeir Tryggvason, playwright, literary critic, musician, theatre director
- Elín Edda Pálsdóttir, bookstore manager, editor
- Marianna Clara Lúthersdóttir, actress, playwright, translator

LATVIA

President Arno Jundze, writer, cultural journalist, literary critic and theorist

Members

- Renate Punka, translator, managing director of Janis Roze Publishers, president of the Latvian Publishers Association
- Kristine Pikenena, store manager at Janis Roze bookshop
- Inga Bodnarjuka-Mrazauskas, executive manager of the Latvian Literature Platform
- Santa Remere, translator and publicist

MALTA

President

- Leanne Ellul (resigned), writer, professor of Maltese language and literature
- Albert Marshall, theatre and television director, playwright, poet, executive chair of the Arts Council Malta

Members

- Stephen Bonanno, professor of Maltese language and literature
- Clive Perini, book distributor and publisher
- Rachelle Deguara, radio host, book reviewer

National juries

THE NETHERLANDS

President Martijn David, publisher, director of the Dutch Publishing Association

Members

- Iris Meijer, associate professor
- Margot Hélène Dijkgraaf, professor
- Andrea Kluitmann, bookseller

PORTUGAL

President José Manuel Lello, administrator at Livraria Lello and Lello Editores

Members

- José Jorge Letria, poet, writer, playwright, journalist, president of the Portuguese Society of Authors
- João de Melo, writer, former teacher and diplomat
- Isabel Lucas, journalist, literary critic
- David Machado, writer, EUPL 2015 laureate for Portugal

SERBIA

President Nenad Šaponja, poet, essayist, literary critic, owner and editor-in-chief of the AGORA publishing house

Members

- Ivan Bevc, bookshop owner and founder of the Booka publishing house
- Ana Pejović, literary professional, editor, translator
- Bora Babić, editor-in-chief and director at Akademska knjiga, co-founder and vice-president of the UPIS-Association of Serbian Professional Publishers

SLOVENIA

President • Jasmin B. Freljh, writer, EUPL 2016 laureate for Slovenia

Members

- Tina Bilban, literary critic, author, editor, research associate
- Alma Čaušević, executive CEO at Beletrina Academic Press
- Renata Zamida, former managing director of the Slovenian Book Agency
- Ana Geršak, literary critic and editor

SWEDEN

President Ludvig Berggren, writer, translator, literary advisor at the Goethe-Institut Schweden

- Members*
- Elin Sennerö Kaunitz, senior editor for Norstedts
 - Helena Landberg, head of Gamla Stans Bokhandel
 - Annina Rabe, literary critic, lecturer
 - Hanna Nordenhök, novelist, translator and literary critic

TUNISIA

- President*
- Raja Ben Slama, professor at the University of Manouba, psychoanalyst, director-general of the National Library of Tunisia
- Members*
- Kamel Gaha, professor emeritus of French literature, member of the Beit-al-Hikma Academy
 - Jalel El-Gharbi, professor of literature at the University of Manouba
 - Adam Fethi, writer, president of PEN Tunisia

THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is an annual initiative that recognises emerging writers of fiction in Europe and beyond. It is financed by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union, which aims to strengthen Europe's cultural and creative sectors.

In cycles lasting 3 years, the EUPL includes the 41 countries participating in the Creative Europe programme and selects one winning author per country. Its goal is to put the spotlight on the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary fiction, to promote the distribution of literature across the continent and to encourage greater interest in non-national literary works. The prize was launched in 2009, since when it has recognised 148 writers, through 13 editions.

SELECTION PROCESS

The laureates of EUPL 2021 were selected by experienced juries in each of the 13 countries participating in this year's competition. After deciding on a shortlist of two to five books from their country's most promising writers, each jury selected its national winner. The selection process took place between January and May 2021, with the shortlisted candidates announced on 15 April and the final laureates on 18 May. All these emerging talents were selected on the basis of criteria stipulated by the European Commission and fulfil the following requirements.

- The author must be a national or permanent resident of the country participating in the current round.
- They should have published between two and four works of contemporary fiction.
- The author's works should not have been translated into more than four languages.
- The eligible book must be the latest work of the author. It should ideally have been published no more than 18 months before the date of the announcement and/or must still be commercially available in brick-and-mortar bookshops.

PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

JURIES

National juries are composed of a minimum of three and a maximum of five members, selected to reflect the specific characteristics of their countries' publishing industry. Three jury members were appointed by the three partners forming the EUPL Consortium. Additional jury members were selected from a list of prominent national literary personalities in their respective countries. Juries are chaired by a president in charge of delivering reports to the EUPL Consortium. These reports serve to justify the jury's choice and provide relevant information on the winner and their work.

THE CONSORTIUM

The EUPL is organised by a consortium of associations comprising the European Writers' Council (EWC), the Federation of European Publishers (FEP) and the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF), with the support of the European Commission. These three members are jointly responsible for setting up the national juries and for the practical organisation of the award ceremony. They support the laureates in promoting their work across Europe and beyond, online, in bookshops and at book fair events. Along with organising the EUPL award, the EWC, FEP and EIBF each represent their part of the book chain.

ALBANIA



Tom Kuka

**Flama
Calamity**

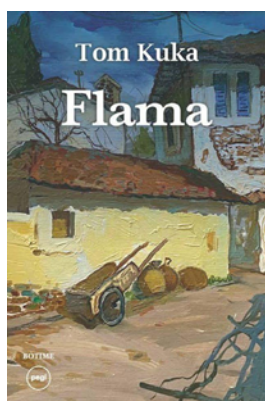
Botime Pegi, Tirana, 2021

Language: Albanian

ISBN: 9789928310590

BIOGRAPHY

Enkël Demi is an Albanian writer and journalist. In November of 2016, he published his first novel under the pseudonym **Tom Kuka**: *Hide mbi kalldrëm (Jujube on Cobblestone)*, a crime novel that takes place in Tirana, Albania, during the 1930s. Two years later, in November 2018, Kuka returned with another novel, *Gurët e vetmisë (Stones of Loneliness)*, a family saga that narrates the ordeal of escaping the land of the ancients, of a population that migrates and leaves its former life far behind. For this novel, he won the national prize for literature in 2019. In November 2019, he published his third novel, *Ora e ligë (Evil Hour)*, in which picking up a sword is punished with an impossible love, and an old man has to challenge his fate and that of an entire village while travelling to the legendary land of the ancients. Kuka won the prize for Artistic Book of the Year in the Cult Academy's cultural awards in 2020. His fourth novel *Flama (Calamity)* was published in March 2021.



SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Flama (Calamity) is a wonderful metaphor for contemporary Albania experiencing a pandemic, and also perhaps for what the author sees as the gluttony of humankind and its desecration of nature and human values. Tom Kuka fills his cart with bodies sick with 'calamity' while someone kills to cover up the sin from which all the horror flows. In a monarchical Tirana of turmoil, filth, cruelty and wickedness, the city's population is dying of calamity – the real monster, sitting cross-legged, shortening lives and extinguishing humanity. In the meantime, a seemingly ordinary crime occurs: a Roma woman who casts fortune with a cup has had her throat cut in one of the poorest parts of the city. The main character, Di Hima, following the footsteps of Doctor Needle (the protagonist of a very well-known Albanian folk tale), is looking for the murderer. He needs to discover the killer and the motives that have driven them to such cruelty. Hima,

the chief investigator of Tirana, was first introduced in the author's debut novel *Jujube on Cobblestone*.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

Following a serious and thorough discussion and exchange of ideas, the Albanian jury considers the novel *Flama (Calamity)* by the author Enkel Demi, alias Tom Kuka, an original and high-quality work absolutely deserving of a place among the best contemporary literature of the continent. The jury appreciated the metaphor used by Kuka, which can also be applied to the current pandemic. Literary elements succeed in properly conveying survival in the face of spiritual, economic and moral devastation, which people often face, including in small countries such as the one in Kuka's book. The novel, which uses surreal elements as a means to convey ideas, manages to point out the beauty and kindness that common people still retain. Moreover, the rich language and use of several registers, the assortment of characters and the way that the book examines, from an anthropological point of view, the Albanian citizen of today make the novel a worthy representative of Albania's contribution to international contemporary literature.

Flama

Tom Kuka



Kurbatka nuk sheh filxhan

Sadija e kishte futur të bijën mes këmbëve dhe po ia qethte flokët e gjatë me gërshtë dhensh. Vajza ulërinte me të madhe, por gruaja as që donte t'ia dinte. Pranë këmbëve të saj rrinte i biri, tashmë kokëzbrazur prej flokëve, dhe luante me dredhkat pis të zeza të së motrës, që kishin rënë në dysheme.

Di Hima ishte dystuar nën caracin e oborrit me putirin e rakisë në dorë. Dielli i binte në sy, ndaj i mbante gjysmë të perënduar. Këmishën e kishte shkopsitur, ngrohtësia e gjoksit prej rrezeve nga jashtë dhe e rakisë nga brenda, i ndillnin gjumë. Për drej, vajza kishte vënë kujën se nuk donte t'i bindej së ëmës.

- Nuk du' ije, s' du'...
 - Rri urtë aty e mos u ni!
 - Po pse mi, pse? Më dhem', po më del gjak prej kaptine...
 - Qepe, t' thashë!
 - O tate, i du' flokët e mia! Thuji k' saj!
- Di Hima çeli sytë. U ngrit disi nga ndenjësja ku qe zhytur.
- Lëre gocën, Sadije! Nuk prishin punë flokët.

- Maj venin tat, ti o burr. Kët punë e di unë. Flokët mushen me morra. Kaptinqeth, po pa morra.
- Po ç'thua, moj dritë, kështu? Nga na dolën morrat? Ti veç me gëlqere nuk i ke larë këta fëmijë.

Djali i vogël kishte marrë në dorë një cullufe të rënë përtokë dhe bëri ta gëlltiste. Di Hima iu afrua dhe ia hoqi nga dora. Ia krisi vajit edhe ai. Dy ulërime përnjëherësh ishin tepër për një njeri që shullëhej në diell prej ditësh.

- Kush ta shtiu në mendje këtë hall, moj grua?
- Vetëm tanët kanë flokë. Të gjithë i kanë bërë naaa, picirrukët...

Sadija vazhdoi me zell edhe më të madh. Dorën e majtë ia peshoi mbi krye që të mos e linte të lëvizte dhe, me dorën tjetër, i kaloi gërshërën e dhenve mbi balluke. Vajza e vogël e kuptoi që e humbi luftën, ndaj nuk briste më, por vetëm dëneste.

- Është flamë, Sadije. Nuk ka kurrfarë lidhje me morrat. Dëgjomë mua...
- Flama ka punën e vet, unë kam timen.

Në çastin kur ajo e kuptoi se e bija e lëshoi fatin në këmbët e së ëmës që e mbanin mbërthyer, ia çliroi shumë shpejt kryet prej flokëve të gjatë, të dredhur e të zinj si pendë korbi. Di Hima këqyri të bijën, që porsa fitoi lirinë nga zgjedha e së ëmës.

- Aaaa, kështu po. Sa e bukur që dukesh! Të ka dalë surrati në selamet! – e vuri në lojë i ati.

Di Hima po qeshte me të madhe, si i ngasur edhe nga dielli që lante kopshtijen me rreze. Vajza i hodhi një vështrim

zhbirues të atit, a thua se s'ishte e sigurt në po e vinte në lojë apo e kishte përnjëmend. Në kokën e saj shquheshin ca rripa flokësh të shkurtër aty-këtu, sikur t'i kishin mbirë dallgët mu në çaçkë. Lotët i qenë përpirë sërish nga sytë, ndërsa me kurrizin e dorës fshiu hundët. E ëma nisi t'ia zhdukte dhe ato gëzhdalla që i kishin mbetur, por kësaj here me një tjetër prerëse, shumë më të imët.

- Sadije, i bërë si gjilpërë me kokë këta fëmijë...

- Qyqa, pse? Për bukuri duken!

- Po, po, e drejtë. Ky me këta veshë të mëdhenj si kërraç, kjo me këta sy të zinj si sumbulla palltoje... mirë shumë duken.

Di Hima buzëqeshte dhe ia përkëdhelte faqen së shoqes me dy gishtërinj të asaj dore të stërmadhe.

- Duhet, se morrat t'pinë gjakun, pranej gjithë notën fmijët shofin ondrra me lugat. Tashi që e kan kokën si tas, ja nrof dilli mo mirë dhe do shofin luledele plot...

- Kush t'i ka thënë këto, moj dritë?

- Nondaja ime, gjet rafmet!

- E po, mirë. Je më e qetë tani që i bëre fëmijët...

- Hë, shpirt, bukur kanë dalë, apo jo? – e mori me të mira Sadija.

- Po, moj po, te koka e qerosit të gjithë janë berberë të zotë.

Edhe Sadija vuri buzën në gaz, pa hequr dorë nga e vetja. Pas vajzës, kapi të birin vetëm nga njëri krah, e ngriti peshë, e uli mbi bar dy hapa më tutje dhe, me një fshesë, hoqi plagët e asaj beteje. I çoi në një kënd e i mblodhi tërë kujdes në një cohë të vjetër.

- S'duhet me t'i mor era flokët e preme, se ja merr menjen fmijve, – mërmëriti sikur të fliste me vete.
- Ou?
- As me i gropos nuk bo, se u dhem kaptina.
- Qysh kur?
- As me i pa tjerët, se i morin m'sysh.
- Pa shiko... po ç'duhet bërë me këta flokë?
- Duhet djeg.

Sakaq, ndezi një shkrepëse dhe u vuri fl Di Himës nuk i shqitej gazi nga buza, tek vështronte të shoqen që u bindej disa rregullave që një Zot e di se ku i kishte dëgjuar. Fëmijët iu gëzuan asaj fl të beftë dhe nisën të brofnin për pjetë.

- Po te berberi, moj grua, si i bëhet që ka një mal me flokë? I merr era, i shkel këmba, i për mjerrin macet në plehra.
- Flokë burrash jon. S'i gje gjo burrat, – vazhdoi Sadija në të vetën.
- Po pse nuk i gjetka gjë burrat, moj zonjzëzë?
- Ku kon men burrat! – i vuri kapak gruaja.

Për shumë gjëra e merrte malli Di Himën, por ai fërkim në tëmtha në floktoret e Vjenës e këpuste krejt. Nuk mund të hynte në Opera me ata flokë që i merrnin për së koti mbi veshë. Zinte një poltronë në një nga ndenjësjet e mjeshtrit në Stephansplatz dhe shkonte ora teksa ai merrej, në krye, me ato favorite disi më të gjata e më pas me mjekrën. I vendoste coha të nxehta në faqe, një krem të bardhë që ia bënte lëkurën si të bebes, mandej e lagte me kolonjën

erëmirë që i varej mbi cipë tri ditë me radhë. Në fund, ia shkruftonte tëmthat dhe atë mend e merrte gjumi.

Kërcitjet e forta në portën e madhe të shtëpisë e nxorën me përdhunë nga nanuritja e kujtimeve. Di Hima u kopsit, hoqi nga fytyra atë këndellje që e pati përfshirë dhe veshi pamjen e tij të zakonit. Dera gjëmonte fort, por pa ngut. E çeli. Para iu zbulua Tom Kuka me shtatin e tij të gjatë e të drejtë. Pezmi i mortit i qe ngjitur në lëkurë qysh kur s'mbahej mend. Nuk e kujtonte më askush pa atë zezonë që e mbështillte. Të qe dimër, do vishte një pallto edhe më skrop. Të qe zheg, sërish do të mbathte atë setër të zezë, këmishë të bardhë, kravatë sterrë.

Tom Kuka e përshëndeti me dorën në zemër. Pas shpinës së tij pushonte karroja e mortit.

- Pse je munduar, Tom? Jemi të gjithë gjallë... Tjetrit nuk i bëri fort përshtypje shpotia e Di Himës.
- Nuk mbledh kufoma pa më thanë kush, ndaj mos ki dert. Tjetër gja m'ka sjellë këtu...

Di Hima i bëri udhë dhe burri u fut brenda në kopshtije. Vuri dorën mbi kapelën strehëgjere si shenjë përshëndetjeje për Sadijen dhe më pas u kthye nga mikpritësi.

- Kurbatka e Bregut të Lumit iku...
- Si iku? Punë e madhe që iku. Udhë e mbarë i qoftë!
- Jo, na la. Shkoi n'atë botë.
- Nuk është as e para, as e fundit. Ti e di më mirë se unë. I vetmi që ka punë në këtë vend, je ti.
- Nuk iku bash si të tanë...

- Po si iku?

- E gjeta me rryl t'prem përtej. E kan heq qafe. M'than ta shtij n'dhe, po kur e gjeta ashtu, thash po t'bzaj. E di që ke met fillikat, po i kan pre rrylin, a merr vesh?

- E marr vesh, Tom, e marr...

Di Hima futi dorën në xhep dhe nxori kutinë e duhanit. E çeli dhe mori dy cigare të bëra gati me kohë. Njërën ia zgjati mysafirrit të përzishëm, por ky nuk e pranoi.

- Unë nuk pi...

- Më doli nga mendja...

Ndezi duhanin dhe lëshoi një shtëllungë tymi. U mendua një dekokë.

- Të vdekurit janë kopicë. Flama po i merr. Pse duhet me i shku nga pas kësaj pune?

- Flama ban t'vetën, po asaj i kan' pre rrylin, a e kupto? Pse duhet me ba robi punën e Flamës?

Di Hima uli kryet për të pleqëruar atë që dëgjoji.

Kurbatka e Bregut të Lumit ishte me nam. S'kishte mbetur burrë pa ia parë ajo filxhanin. Po, se gratë u përvisheshin shpesh burrave në atë qytet. Mbuloheshin kokë e këmbë me ferexhe dhe ia shpinin Kurbatkës filxhanët e kafesë që kishin pirë ata. Ajo i vështronte një copë herë, por nuk e shqephte gojën pa dëgjuar metelikët që tringëllinin në një tabaka sermi.

Veç nga tingëllima që i hynte në vesh, kuptonte sa kishin rënë. Nuk ia hidhte dot kush e të lëshonte para mangët. Mandej, zinte të lexonte lapërdhitë e burrave. Sikur

ndonjërit t'i merrte koka erë të bridhte pas rruspijeve, a të luante kumar, filxhani ia nxirrte të gjitha në dritë të diellit.

Por jo vetëm kaq, Kurbatka gjente ditën kur do na linte shëndenë vjehrra, nëse e reja ishte treguar aq e zonja sa t'i vidhte filxhanin. Gjente në do t'u dilte fati lëneshave, kur do t'u ikte sythi që dilte rrëzë kofshëve sa ua përcëllonte hapin, kaq shumë u digjte.

Gjente shumë gjëra Kurbatka, madje pat nxjerrë në shesh edhe hoxhën që pinte raki fshehtas, edhe kamatarin që shtonte para në fajde. Shumë nuk e donin, të tjerë e urrenin, por që t'ia prisnin grykën... ishte e tepërt.

Di Hima nuk tha asnjë fjalë. E la në këmbë Tom Kukën dhe shkoi të merrte xhaketën.

- C'ka bo vaki, o burrë? – pyeti Sadija e shqetësuar.
- Kanë vrarë Kurbatkën e Bregut të Lumit.
- Qyqa! Kush?
- Prandaj më thirrën, se nuk e dinë kush, – i buzëqeshi.
- Kurrë s'kom shku te ajo! – shtoi e shoqja.
- E di, moj dritë. Ti më do shumë.
- Shumë t'du, – ia ktheu Sadija dhe iu rrëmbushën sytë.

Calamity

Tom Kuka

Translated from Albanian by Barbara Halla

Kurbatka Doesn't Do Coffee Readings

Sadije had shoved her daughter between her legs and was snipping away at the girl's long tresses with a pair of shears meant for goats. The child wailed inconsolably, but the woman paid her no heed. Her son leaned against her hip, his head already bare, and he played with the spoils of his sister's jet-black locks that now littered the floor.

In the garden, Di Hima had made himself comfortable under a nettle tree, a flask of raki in his fist. The sunlight hit his eyes, so he kept his lids partially closed. His shirt was half-open, and the beaming rays above him along with the heat of the raki radiating from within his chest produced a warm sensation that lulled him to sleep. What a shame that the girl had chosen that precise moment to erupt into an ear-splitting wail in defiance of her mother.

- I don't wanna, ma, I don't wanna...

- Shut your mouth and don't make a peep!

- Why are you doing this to me? It hurts, look, there's blood on my head...

- Didn't I tell you to shut it!

- Da, but I like my hair! Tell her, please!

Di Hima opened his eyes. He shook off some of the torpor he had sunk into.

- Leave the girl alone, Sadije! Her hair is not the problem!

- Don't you go getting involved in things that don't concern you. I know what needs to be done. Otherwise, her hair will be infested with lice in no time. Her skull might be bare, but at least it will be free of lice.

- Light of my life, what are you even talking about? Where did this story about lice come from? You've done everything short of washing the kids with lime!

The young boy grabbed a tuft of hair from the floor and tried to swallow it. Rushing to him, Di Hima removed the hair from his son's fist, but the boy started wailing too. The sound of the children's simultaneous cries was rather too much for a man who had spent the past days lazing in the sun.

- Who poisoned your mind with these thoughts, woman?

- Our kids are the only ones around with hair still on their heads. Everyone else has shaved their little ones' scalps bare...

Sadije resumed her massacre with renewed vigour. Using her left hand to pin her daughter's head down to prevent her from wiggling around, she ran the goat shears with the other through her bangs. The little girl understood that the battle was lost, so she had stopped screaming and resigned herself to merely sobbing.

- It's a plague, Sadije, a calamity. It has nothing to do with lice. Listen to me...

- The Calamity does its own thing, I do mine.

Once the woman realized that her daughter had accepted her fate, trapped as she was between her mother's legs, she made swift work of the girl's long raven-black curls. Di Hima stared at his daughter who had just escaped her mother's clutches.

- Aaa, now that's more like it. You look so pretty! Where had that face been hiding! – her father teased her.

Di Hima was laughing heartily, invigorated perhaps by the sunlight that bathed his garden. The girl threw her father a

searching stare, as if she wasn't quite sure whether his remark was meant to be a taunt, or if his words were serious. Strips of short hair marred her exposed head here and there, as if waves had emerged from underneath her scalp. Her eyelids had dammed her tears for the moment, while she wiped her runny nose with the back of her hand. Her mother began to snip away those few shreds of hair that still remained, although this time she used a finer pair of scissors.

- Sadije, you've made our kids look like sewing needles...

- Lord, why? They look great!

- Yes, of course, you're right. This one over here, ears as big as a donkey, and the girl with those black eyes, barely bigger than coat buttons...they sure look great.

Di Hima smiled and caressed his wife's cheek with two fingers of his oversized hand.

- I had to. Those fleas would suck them dry otherwise. And the kids would see nothing but nightmares filled with ghosts all night long. Now that their heads are smooth like shiny bowls, the sun will warm them all the better and their dreams will be filled with daisies instead...

- Who told you this, light of my life?

- My granny, may her soul find peace!

- Well, sure. I'm sure you're feeling better now that you've made our kids look like...

- Say, don't they look good, right? – Sadije asked, trying to make peace.

- Yes, of course they do. Everyone's a skilled barber when it comes to shaving the hair all off.

Sadije laughed at this, though she conceded nothing. Once she was done with her daughter, she grabbed her son and lifted him from his armpits, and laid him on the grass a few steps

away, before proceeding to clean the debris of her previous battle. She swept every lock of hair into one corner and gathered them carefully inside a tattered piece of clothing.

- Shouldn't leave any lock to the wind, or the children will lose their wits, she murmured almost to herself.

- Really?

- Shouldn't bury it either, that's how they get headaches.

- Since when?

- Others shouldn't see it, or they'll be cursed.

- Would you look at that... and what should you do with hair?

- Burn it, of course.

Meanwhile, she lit a match and set the whole packet ablaze. Di Hima couldn't stop smiling as he watched his wife obey some precepts that she'd picked up from Lord knows where. The children rejoiced at the sight of the sudden flame and leapt to their feet.

- And what about the barbershop, woman? How do they manage with all those mountains of hair that accumulate over there? Wouldn't the hair risk being swept away by the wind, trodden under people's feet, or dragged by cats to the garbage bins?

- Man's hair. There is nothing to it, Sadije continued her spiel.

- What do you mean, there's nothing to men's hair, ma'am?

- Because men are brainless! the woman exclaimed, settling the matter.

There were many things that Di Hima missed, but it was the memory of having his head rubbed in the barbershops of Vienna that truly brought him to his knees. He couldn't enter the Opera with his hair sticking everywhere above his ears. So, before a visit, he would take a seat in one of the chairs

of a master barber in Stephansplatz and spend an hour like so, with the barber above him, first taking care of his rather long sideburns and then his beard. He would put hot towels on his cheeks, a white cream that made his skin as smooth as a baby's, and then spruce him up with a fragrant cologne that lingered on his skin for three days straight. Finally, the barber would massage his temples, making Di Hima almost fall asleep on the spot.

The harsh sound of someone banging on the big door of the house dragged him violently away from the cradling reverie of his memories. Di Hima buttoned himself up, wiped from his face the sense of candour that had enveloped him and put on his usual demeanour. The knock was vigorous, but unhurried. He opened the door. Tom Kuka stood before him, all tall and straight. The desolation of death had embedded itself into the visitor's skin since time immemorial. No one could recall a time when he hadn't been surrounded by this black shroud. During winter, he wore a raven-black jacket. Now that it was summer, here he was again: the same dark jacket, a white shirt, and a jet-black necktie.

Tom Kuka greeted him with his hand on his heart. Behind him, the death carriage stood waiting.

- Why'd you tire yourself by coming all the way here, Tom? We're all still alive..

The man seemed unperturbed by Di Hima's jab.

- I don't collect corpses without being asked to, so no need to fret. Something else has brought me here...

Di Hima stepped aside and the man entered the garden. Tom brought his hand to his wide-brimmed hat to salute Sadije and then turned towards his host.

- Kurbatka of the River Bank is gone...

- Gone? Who cares if she's gone. Safe travels for her!

- No, she has left this world. For the other.

- She isn't the first, and certainly won't be the last. You know that better than I do. The only one who still has a job in this place is you.

- She didn't leave like the rest...

- How did it happen?

- I found her with her throat sliced open. Someone got rid of her. I was told to bury her, but when I found her like that, I figured I'd inform you. I know you're all alone now, but they cut her throat, do you get it?

- I do, Tom, I do...

Di Hima shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out his tobacco box. He opened it and took two cigarettes that had been rolled a while back. He extended one to the eternally mournful guest, but the latter refused.

- I don't smoke...

- It skipped my mind...

Di Hima lit his cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke. He thought for a second.

- The dead are piling up. The Calamity is taking them away. Why should I care about this affair?

- The Calamity is one thing, but someone cut her throat, do you get it? Why should a human being do the work for the Calamity?

Di Hima dropped his head to contemplate what he had just heard.

Kurbatka of the River Bank was infamous. There was no man left around whose coffee cup she hadn't read. Yes, because women in this city would often leave no stone unturned to find out what their men were up to. They would cover them-

selves from head to toe with a veil and bring Kurbatka the coffee cups that the men had drunk from. She would stare at the cups for a spell, but wouldn't open her mouth without first hearing the din of metal chime on the silver tray. The sound alone was enough for her to understand how many her guest had dropped. No one could fool her or give her less than what she was owed. It was then and only then that she would begin to unravel men's dirty tricks. And if any man had lost his marbles and decided to chase after some whore's tail, or gamble, the coffee cup would lay everything bare for the world to see.

But that wasn't all Kurbatka had to offer; she could tell you the day your mother-in-law was ready to kick the bucket, if the wife had been cunning enough to steal her cup. She could tell spinsters if luck was coming their way, or when the blister that had formed inside their inner thigh and made every step sting, was ready to erupt.

Many were the things that Kurbatka had been able to uncover; in fact, she was the one who unmasked the story about the imam who drank raki in secret, and about the loan shark who inflated his interest rates. Many didn't like her, there were a great deal who hated her, but to go as far as slashing her throat... that was excessive.

Di Hima didn't say a word. He left Tom Kuka standing in the yard and went to grab his coat.

- What is the matter, husband? – Sadije asked, worried.

- Someone murdered Kurbatka of the River Bank.

- *Qyqa!* Who?

- That's why they called on me, they don't know who did it, - he smiled at her.

- I've never been to see her! – his wife added.

- I know, my love. You love me too much.

- A lot, - Sadije replied, her eyes welling up with tears.

ARMENIA

Արամ Պաչյան
(Aram Pachyan)

P/F
P/F

Edge Publishing House, Yerevan,
2020

Language: Armenian
ISBN: 9789939924427

BIOGRAPHY

Aram Pachyan is an Armenian author, a member of the independence/post-post-Soviet literary generation, who has won several national prizes, including the prestigious Presidential Prize for Literature. His first novel, *Goodbye, Bird*, became a national bestseller in 2012 and is still at the top of the bestsellers' lists for Armenian literature. He held the Fall Residency of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa (Des Moines, United States) in 2018, and was writer in residence at Villa Waldberta (Munich, Germany) in 2019. In 2017, the play *I Am a Vegetarian*, based on his novel *Goodbye, Bird* was staged and in 2015 a musical piece called *Pachyan Fragments*, written by composer Aram Hovhannisyan, was performed in the United States, based on Pachyan's novel called *P/F* (unpublished at the time). In addition to



Goodbye, Bird, Pachyan has also authored two short story collections, *Robinson* and *Ocean*. *Robinson* was published in Ukraine and in the United Kingdom. The collection *Ocean* contains short stories and essays, including works on art, music, memory and the author's reading experience. His latest novel, *P/F*, was published in 2020. The book represents a search for a new fiction language and means of expression, a new style of fragmentary storytelling.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

P/F is a fragmentary, experimental novel, with modulations characteristic of Zen Buddhist koans. Old and new Yerevan, the River Getar, the vanished tram and the lonely man who tries to find himself in the city of his fading memories – they all meet in this novel.

All of the book's fragments are linked to one another, but they can be read in any order and the reader is free to choose. After the first reading, the book requires another read, and many more if the reader wishes to appreciate it fully. *P/F* is a novel with a new approach to life and to finding answers to many questions. The protagonist of the novel, nicknamed 'P/F', appears in different parts of the novel and in different situations as Sev, Phil, Aram... He finishes his book of memories with a monologue dedicated to the River Getar, a symbol of life. The author dedicated the book to all his Zen Buddhism tutors.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

Aram Pachyan is an emerging writer of the independence generation, highly praised by readers, critics and the literary community of Armenia. The jury regards his work as the best representation of Armenian contemporary literature and hopes that receiving the European Union Prize for Literature will motivate not only him but all writers of his generation to aim for international recognition. The novel *P/F* leads the reader into the inner world of a city dweller who is struggling to accept the way his hometown has changed since his childhood. The changes are symbolic

of his personal growth and the fast pace of our life. The novel is rich with Buddhist references and stunning sketches of relationships between a father and son, a couple in love and, most importantly, the author and the city. Some of Pachyan's other works have been published in Europe, and the reviews prove their translatability and the appeal of his writing to foreign readers.



P/F

Արամ Պաշյան



Իմ ներսում ես ոչ ծով ունեմ, ոչ օվկիանոս, անծիր տարածությունների համար փակ եմ, երկնքում ու տիեզերքում լինելու ոչ հավես ունեմ, ոչ հավակնություն, ես սիրում եմ հողին կանգնած երկնքին նայել, սիրում եմ աստղերին դիտել մեր տան կտուրից, թող բոլորը մնան իրենց տեղում, երկինքը երկինք, հողը՝ հող: Իմ ներսում ես ոչ ծով ունեմ, ոչ օվկիանոս, վաղուց հերիք է, իմ ազատությունից հոգնել եմ, հոգնել եմ սրճարաններից, ակումբներից, փափկաթոռներից, մեղրածոր թխվածքներից, աղի ձողիկներից ու ջերքիներից, անիմաստ տվայտանքներից, ու ճիգով ծիծաղելուց: հերիք եղավ՝ ինձ դեմքս պատռող եզրեր են պետք, իրար մոտ գտնվող ափեր, ինձ ճեղք է պետք, կացնի դիպուկ հարված, սելավ է պետք, ավերակներ, զարնան ցեխ, ճիւղ, բախում սլացող ձյունախառն քարեր, նեղ բացվածք, որի մոտ կարող եմ գալ, կարող եմ առանձնանալ, մի քանի ժամ նստել, ուղղակի նայել, երկար նայել ու տեսնել երկու ափերը բաժանող եռքի դիմակահանդեսը: Իմ ներսում ոչ ծով ունեմ ոչ օվկիանոս, բայց գտել եմ իմ գալու տեղը, իմ սևեռումը, որ ծղլացող առու է, գետնի վրա դոնդողող խաղողի շիրա, ժամանակին եղել է՝ կա, հունը բետոնով ու երկաթներով կալանել, փոխել են, նեղացած հոսում է քաղաքի ընդերքում, թավալ է գալիս, խաշվում, լուռ զլզլում: Ես գտել եմ նրան օրվա վերջում գալիս եմ, խանջանի վրա դեռ պահպանված երակի մոտ, մեքենաս կայանում եմ բազալտապատ քարե պատնեշի դիմաց, իջնում եմ, կանգնում պատնեշի շուրթին ու ցած նայում: գետառը հոսում է, կցկցված գալարներով, այնքան է նեղացել, որ բռունս հանգիստ կտեղավորվի, վտիտ թևի բարակություն է, դեռահասի գունատ

կուրծք, գալիս է դանդաղ, ասես մեկը դավադրաբար բռնել է ոտքը, քաշում է մազերից, լեզվի մեջ կեռեր է խրել, չի թողնում ապրի: Էս ոչ եփրատն է, ոչ տիգրիսը, ոչ սենն է, ոչ թեմզան, ոչ դունայն է, ոչ էլ պոն: գետառը օվկիանոսի դուստր, հադեսի աշխարհում հոտող ստիքսի հետ արյունակցական կապ չունի, չեն երդվել աստվածները ջրերի վրա, նրա մասին բարձրագույն ապքեր չկան, չկան գրքեր ու փառաբանումներ, նա բոլոր հնարավոր թեմաներից դուրս է, մոլորակի առանցքից շեղված, աստղերի համար արկղի հատակին ընկած ժանգոտ մեխ, նրա մասին աշխարհը չգիտի, նա չունի վենետիկյան վարպետների հրաշագործ կամուրջներից, որոնց վրա սիրահարները լեզուներն են մարզում, նա չունի կամուրջ, որտեղից կարելի է թոչել ու մեռնել, նրա մեջ խեղդվելը գրեթե անհնար է, նրան ոչ ոք չի սիրում, նրա անունը զզվելի է, ոչ ոք նրա պատմությունը գրի չի առնում, ոչ ոք նրա մասին օրենք չի ընդունում, նրա համար հանրահավաքներ չեն անում, բնապահպաններին կես ժամով բերման չեն ենթարկում, նրան չեն հիշում, ոչ ոք անունը լսելիս ուրախությունից չի գժվում, աչքերում առվույտներ չեն ցույցում, նրա ջրերի հոտով չեն արբենում, հասած եղեգները չեն ծխում, տարօրինակ սնկերի վրա աճած ծաղիկները, փթած ուրցն ու դաղձը չեն քաղում, թրիքից համտեսող բնդիոնների տզտզոցներից չեն հիպնոսանում, ափին չեն մերկանում ու արևի տակ չեն ճեմում, ոչ մեկ նրա հետ չի լուսանկարվում, լուսանկարը չի հանում, շրջանակի մեջ չի առնում, չի կախում մահճակալի գլխավերևում, նրա շրջակայքում երգեցիկ թռչուններ, փափկամազիկ գազաններ, ժպտացող թիթեռներ չկան: ոչ ոք նրա ջրով իր նորածնին չի մկրտում, քաղցկեղով հիվանդ երեխային ջրից չի խմացնում. քունածը, ինչ անենք, որ հիսուսը ուրիշ գետ էր ընտրել. ես տեսնում եմ նրան հենց գետառի ջրերի մեջ, մեզի վտակների, կլունձների, տիղմի, զարհուրանքի, վախի, սատկած կիսահավի աչքերում ապրելու կարոտի, կարտոֆիլի կլեպների, ծլլակախ ապահովիչների, ասեղների, քարաքոսի, կաշաղակների թավ ծերտի, էծի կճղակի, սանրի արանքներում խրված զզվելի մազերի, գարշահոտի, առնետի նեխած աղիքի,

քուրջուփալասի, դիրտ օճառաջրի, կոշիկի, աղբամուղերի հորձանուտի, ոչխարի ու նապաստակի քերթված մորթիների, օղու, գարեջրի կոտրտված շշերի, յուղի ու ներկի տարաների, մեքենաների ռետինե ակերի, սոնիների, անասնական բառաչունների, փսխուքի, դալարիքի, ջեմի, զուգարանի թղթերի, ջրերի բաշին պոպոճիկներ բռնած շեռումեռի, քիմիական թթուների, տերևի կույտի, թաղումից հետո շպրտված ծաղիկների, օձի պես գալարվող կանացի շարֆի, քարերին խփվող սև-սպիտակ լուսանկարի, խաղալիքների, բազալտների արանքներից դուրս պրծած բոցենիների, օդապարիկի պես ուռած փորոտիքի, դղումի ցողունի, տառապանքի, վիզը կտրած գառան լերդի մեջ եմ տեսնում հիսուսին: գետառում նա կա, ապրում է, անելիք ունի, որովհետև իմ քաղաքի կեղտանուն գետի մեջ կյանքի սկզբնադրում է բողբոջում, սրտխփում է դրախտի հնարավորությունը, երազանքի նոր մեղեդին: հիսուսին երկար տարիներ գործազրկություն չի սպառնա, աշխատանք կա սիրտդ որքան ուզի: որովհետև գետառն է արատի ու մոռացության վերջին ամբարը, հոգեվարքի մեջ հևող պառավ, անատան 30.000 դրամանոց լքված թոշակառու, մինչև վերջ անառակատան լորձունքի մեջ թպրտող աներես պոռնիկաձագ, մաղձի դամբարան, բոլոր հնարավոր խորշերով հազար անգամ կոխված, բոլորը ինչ ունեն՝ չաղել են մեջդ, ոչ ոք չի խղճում, ոչ ոքի մեղքը չես գալիս, ոչ ոք չի մաքրում բիբո, զարշանքի մեջ թառանջող ծիլեր, բոլորը իրենց են մաքրում, իրենց ունեցած-չունեցածը, իրենց ստամոքսն ու միզապարկն են դատարկում, իրենց ավելն ու պակասը, իրենց անցյալը, իրենց ներկան ու ապագան, իրենց հյուծն ու պտղաջուրն են լցնում մեջդ, իրենց վերջույթները, իրենց բանանի կեսը, իրենց սառած սուրճը, իրենց բորբոս կապած հացն են տալիս քեզ: քանի անգամ եմ կողքովդ անցնելիս ձեռքիս ընկածը գցել մեջդ, կրծած խնձոր, փալինք, շինարարական աղբ, դավլոյի սատկած շանը, որ բերեցինք ու հանձնեցինք հոսքիդ: քանի անգամ եմ թքել մեջդ, զզվանքով ծամածոել բերանս, քանի անգամ եմ ընկերներիս մոտ սսել, որ ատում եմ քեզ, որ դու աշխարհի ամենատափակ

գետն ես, աշխարհի ամենաանհիմաստ ներկայությունը, ու ամեն անգամ, նույնիսկ առանց առիթի, քո հանդեպ չարությունք ու քո գորշությունից վրեժով լցված՝ ուզել եմ մորթել քեզ, բնաջնջել, հիմա եկել եմ անառակ որդու պես նստել կողոսկրիդ ու քո պղտոր ջրերի մեջ եմ տեսնում փրկությունս, քո նսեմության մեջ եմ գտնում խաղաղությունս, քո պղծության մեջ դեռ քլթքլթում է կյանքի ավիշը. դու չունես ոչ բարոյականություն, ոչ մեղք, դու ոչ աստված ես, ոչ մարդ, դու ինձ քո գիրկն ես առնում, ես գոռում եմ, թքում ջրերիդ մեջ, դու հոսում ես, ես քրֆում եմ, դու հոսում ես, ես մեծ քարեր եմ շլմփացնում: երեսս, թիկունքս, ձեռքերս ու ոտքերս արյուննլվա անելով սղրում եմ ցած, ընկնում կեղտիդ մեջ, մսեղ արմատ եմ քաշում, ծիծաղելով մտրակում ջրերդ, չես նեղանում, հոսում ես, հոսում տանում ծիծաղը, քրտինքը արտասուքը, կիսատությունը, արյունը, աղը, ժահը: հենց գետառի մեջ կսկսվի հավերժական կեղտի հալոցքը, նրա վերջնական ավարտը, գետառը չի կանգնելու, գետառը հոսելու է քառասուն աղբյուրներից հուզված, քաղաքի հարավ-արևմուտքով. հոսելու է՝ հունը փակեն, չփակեն հոսելու է, ուղեծիրը փոխեն, չփոխեն, հոսելու է գետառը քերթելու է առնետագույն բազալտների ողնաշարը, թնդունով տապալելու է արգելքները, պայթելու է՝ քաղաքին վերադարձնելով իր ողջ սերը:

P/F

Aram Pachyan

Translated from Armenian by Nazareth Seferian

Within me I have neither a sea, nor an ocean, and I am closed to boundless expanses, I have neither the inclination nor the ambition to be in the sky or space. I love to watch the sky as I stand on the ground, I love to watch the stars from the roof of our house. Everyone should stay in their place, the sky should be the sky and the ground should be the ground. Within me I have neither a sea, nor an ocean, enough already, I am tired of my freedom, tired of cafés, clubs, soft chairs, honey-drenched pastries, salt sticks and jerky, meaningless troubles, and forced laughter. Enough! I need edges that will tear through my face, river banks that are located near each other, I need a crack, the sharp blow of an axe, a torrent, ruins, spring-time mud, a piece of turf, the collision of snowy rocks, a narrow opening that I can approach, isolating myself, sitting for a few hours, simply looking, continuing to look and see the masquerade of the eruption separating the two shores. Within me I have neither a sea, nor an ocean, but I have found the place I must come to, my focus, which is a bubbling creek, a wobble of grape molasses along the ground, which existed in the past and still does, its course arrested by concrete and iron, then modified, flowing in a narrow line through the bowels of the city, writhing, boiling, silently bubbling. I have found it and I come to it at the end of the day, at its vein that still exists on Khanjyan Street, I park my car in front of the basalt stone block, step outside, stand at the edge of the block and look below. The Getar flows, its coils wrapped tightly, it has grown so narrow that it would fit comfortably in my fist; it is like a thin forearm, the pale breast of an adolescent.

It flows slowly, as if someone had conspiratorially grabbed its leg, pulled at its hair, driven hooks into its tongue, not allowing it to live. This is not the Euphrates, nor the Tigris, the Seine, the Thames, the Danube, nor the Po. The Getar has no bloodline in common with the daughter of the ocean, the Styx that flows in the land of Hades. The gods have not taken any oaths on its waters. There are no emphatic proverbs about it, no books or odes. It is left out of all possible discussions, it is off the planet's axis. The world does not know about it, it does not have the wondrous bridges crafted by the masters of Venice, where lovers exercise their tongues. One does not die from it, nor does one live for it. It is impossible to drown in it. Nobody loves it, its name is disgusting. Nobody writes its story, nobody adopts a law about it, nobody stages a protest for it, environmental activists are not arrested for its sake. Nobody forgets it because nobody remembers it. Nobody goes mad with joy upon hearing its name. Its waters do not inebriate anyone with their smell, no mature reeds stick out of it, nobody picks the flowers growing on strange mushrooms, nor the rotten thyme and wild mint, nobody is mesmerized by the buzzing of the bugs tasting dung. Nobody undresses by its banks or walks beneath its sun, nobody takes a picture with it, printing and framing the photograph, hanging it above their beds. There are no melodious birds, fuzzy creatures, or smiling butterflies around it. Nobody baptises their newborn with its waters, nor gives their cancer-inflicted child its waters to drink. So what if Jesus chose another river? I see him right there in the Getar's waters, it is in those whirlpools of urine, those clumps, slime, terror, fear, the longing for life in the eyes of a dead half chicken, potato peelings, flaccid condoms, needles, rock moss, abundant magpie droppings, goat hooves, disgusting strands of hair stuck between the teeth of a comb, that stench, the rotting guts of a rat, threadbare rags, filthy soap water, shoes, sewage pipe spillage, mutilat-

ed lamb and rabbit skins, broken vodka and beer bottles, oil and paint cans, rubber car tyres, axles, animal bleating, vomit, greenery, jam, toilet paper, all the piss and shit that hung from the waters like snot, the chemical acids, piles of leaves, flowers cast away after a funeral, the lady's scarf slithering like a snake, the black-and-white photograph rubbing against a rock, toys, the phlox flowers peeping out of cracks in the basalt, the abdomen bloated like a hot-air balloon, the pumpkin stem, the suffering, the coagulated blood of the slaughtered sheep that I see Jesus. He is there in the Getar, alive, he has things to do, because that filth-ridden river in my city is teeming with the genesis of life, the heartbeat of a promised paradise, the dream of a new melody. Jesus is spared the threat of unemployment for many years to come, there is as much work to do as one's heart desires. Because it is the Getar that is the final reservoir of abundance and oblivion, the hag wheezing in agony, the toothless abandoned pensioner who makes only 30,000 drams, that shameless whore child fluttering in the spittle of the brothel, the tomb of rancour. Fucked a thousand times through every hole possible. Everyone has emptied whatever they could into you. Nobody feels sorry for you, nobody pities you, nobody cleans your pupils, the sprout that moans in that execration. They only clean themselves and whatever they have or have not, they vacate their stomachs and bladders, their what-have-you's, their past, present and future, they fill you with their juices and fluids, their limbs, they offer you their half bananas, their cold coffees, their mouldy bread. How often have I passed by you and thrown into you whatever I no longer wanted to hold in my hand, a chewed apple, snot, construction waste, Davo's dead dog, which we brought and handed over to your currents. How many times have I spat into you, scowling at you with disgust! How many times have I told my friends that I hate you, that you are the shallowest river in the world, the most

meaningless of presences on the planet! And each time I am filled with unjustifiable anger at you and seek vengeance for your greyness, and I want to slaughter you, annihilate you. And now I come to you like the prodigal son, sitting on your rib seeing my salvation in your murky waters, my peace in your obscurity, the lymph of life still gurgles in your grime. You have neither morals nor sins. You are neither god nor human. You take me into your fold, I scream, spit in your waters, and yet you keep flowing. I swear at you and yet you keep flowing, I dump large stones on your wounds and yet you keep flowing. I slip and fall, my face, back, arms, and legs awash with blood, dropping into your filth, you keep flowing, I pull out a fleshy root and flail your waters with it as I laugh, but you keep flowing and flowing, taking my laughter, sweat, tears, my incompleteness, pain, ecstasy, suffering, madness, blood, salt, and stink. The Getar will not stop, the Getar will flow with the emotion of forty springs, flowing along the southwest of the city. Whether or not they cut off its course, it will flow. Whether or not they change its direction. The Getar will flow and scrape off the basalt spines, crushing any obstacles, erupting to return to the city all its love.

BULGARIA

Георги Бърдаров
(Georgi Bardarov)

Absolvo Te *Absolvo Te*

Musagena, Sofia, 2020
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BIOGRAPHY

Georgi Bardarov is a Bulgarian scientist and writer. He is Associate Professor of Ethno-religious Conflicts and Demography and Vice-Dean of the Geology and Geography Department at Sofia University. He founded and co-hosts the most successful course on the art of public speaking and oratory in Bulgaria. He is also part of the creative team of the publishing and production company Musagena. In 2015, Bardarov won the first intellectual reality TV show for writers in Bulgaria, called *The Manuscript*, which resulted in the publication of his debut novel, *Аз още броя дните* (*I Am Still Counting the Days*). The book is based on a true love story between a Bosnian Muslim and a Christian Serb amid the siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian war. It was

the winner of the PEN Club Award and was also nominated for novel of the year in Bulgaria. In 2020, Bardarov published his second novel, *Absolvo Te*. The book, inspired by two true stories, explores the abyss between two nations with common origins that have been waging fratricidal war for decades.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

The novel *Absolvo Te* deals with four plot lines that examine philosophical questions relating to crime, punishment and forgiveness from different points of view. There are two space–time continuums in the novel: the first relates to the Holocaust and the horrors of Nazi Germany’s concentration camps, the second to the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1970s and 1980s. Each storyline has several subplots incorporating minor characters while also following the life of the main character, Max, over a period of 60 years. The author uses the devices of ‘story in story’, ‘retrospection’, ‘visualisation’ and ‘journey as suffering’. In the novel, a psychological anti-logic penetrates the depths of the human soul, where good and evil live simultaneously, while the thirst for revenge fights against the sudden epiphany that forgiveness is a possible way out. This is a novel of hyperrealism – the events are so dramatic that they go beyond normal notions of what constitutes realism in fiction. The unifying theme is the internal conviction with which each of the characters defends themselves. The main message is about forgiveness, but the reader is left with a sense of historical

pessimism. The novel offers a new perspective on the traditional reading of key historical events.

♥ JURY’S REPORT

In the 6 months since its publication, *Absolvo Te* has enjoyed an excellent reception in Bulgaria, and has been a bestseller both in brick-and-mortar bookshops and online. The novel focuses on important historical issues in Europe that are still relevant today: social and ethnic separation, religious and political opposition and the rise of nationalism and other extreme ideologies. The development of the plot is intense, the author’s style is captivating and he holds the reader’s attention through clashes between strong characters and well-delivered humanist messages. Georgi Bardarov is a talented narrator who foregrounds the ideas of tolerance and forgiveness, making us empathise with the characters and deepening our understanding of the events of the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Reading this novel ennobles the reader and makes them more tolerant. We believe that if *Absolvo Te* were to be translated into other languages, it would have a strong impact on a multinational Europe that fights for equality between religions, cultures and nations, and to overcome military conflict in the world. In this book, Bardarov shows real progress in the writer’s craft. That is why the Bulgarian jury considers him the undisputed winner of its nomination for the European Union Prize for Literature.

Absolvo Te

Георги Бърдаров



Absolvo te'!

Войната винаги се завръща, рано или късно, но винаги!

Ако спасиш един живот, ти си спасил целия свят, но ако погубиш един живот, нима не си убил целия свят? Гледаш го, смее се човекът, мисли се за важен. Един премерен, точен, с всичка сила ритник е достатъчен да свали нахилената маска от лицето му. Да изквичи като заклана кокошка, да те погледне отдолу нагоре неразбиращо като хванато в капан животно. Тогава е време за втория ритник. Също добре премерен, в главата. Отхвърча назад, очилата се чупят, размазват се грим и сополи, текват сълзи и кръв. После още два мощни ритника в торса. От повече няма нужда. Свършен е, дори да го сглобят в болницата, си го прекършил, завинаги ще носи печата на страха в себе си. Господи, толкова е лесно. Гледаш, някаква старица си върви по улицата, дъвче студената закуска с изкуственото си чене, впила се в живота, сякаш ще векува. Не ѝ трябва много. Просто здрав тупаник в чутурата е достатъчен. После се отдалечаваш на безопасно разстояние и гледаш как около бездиханното тяло се струпват загрижените хори, които след пет минути ще я забравят, ще бият бира и ще гледат мача, както забравяме всички уроци на живота, мислейки само за себе си! А ти си свирукаш и про-

дължаваш пътя си, защото те очаква вкусна вечеря и интересен мач по телевизията. Толкова е лесно. Тича си някакво момченце по улицата, ближе сладоледа, цели с прашка уличните котки и гълъби, мисли се за голямо и всесилно. Прицелваш се внимателно, пъхаш патрон в цевта. Патрон, произведен от няколко сплави, минал през ръцете на десетима обикновени роби на системата. Един отлива метала, друг по цял ден върти ръчката на машината за валцуване, трети го прибира от поточната линия, заедно с още хиляди подобни куршуми, предназначени да сеят смърт, четвърти, най-вероятно жени, раждали и давали живот, го редят в картонени кутии, в мрачните, недокосвани никога от слънце, пълни с прах и плъхове цехове на някоя голяма оръжейна компания, после кисел чичка, над петдесетте, с хемороиди, разведен и самотен, който от сутринта си мечтае само за чекия и хладна бира, го разпраща до магазините на десетки градове, откъдето десетки нечувстващи нищо мъже ще си го купят, ще го заредят в цевта на пушките си и ще сеят смърт със същото безразличие, с което оправят вечер жените си. Та така, пъхнал си го в цевта и се прицелваш в челото на нищо неподозиращото безгрижно момченце, което в тоя момент се е прицелило в някое нищо неподозиращо кълвящо трохички врабче. Леко дърпаш спусъка, толкова е лесно. Куршумът оставя кръгъл черен отвор с червеникави краища в челцето на момчето, което се свлича в прахта на улицата, докато врабчето отлита към синьото небе, а ти отиваш да пиеш бира в някой пъб и да гледаш вечното дерби „Барселона“ - „Реал“. Толкова е лесно да унищожиш едно човешко същество. Толкова е лесно да разрушиш един свят. Често няма нужда от ритници и куршуми, достатъчно е да кажеш само няколко думи, да го унижиш. Толкова е лесно... И толкова е трудно, безкрайно трудно да спа-

сиш един човек, един живот, един микросвят, който за милиардите маймуноподобни по тази планета не значи нищо, но за теб е повече от всичко. За теб е целият свят!

Ако можеш някой ден, Господи, да ни простиш...

Животът ухае на лавандула

4 февруари 1973 г.

„При израелски удари в ивицата Газа са загинали десет палестинци, предадоха световните информационни агенции. Сред жертвите са както бойци на ХАМАС, така и цивилни. Загинали са и четиресет и пет годишна жена и дваайсетгодишната ѝ дъщеря. Поредните нападения са отговор на палестински атентат срещу училищен автобус, извършен по-рано тази седмица, при който бяха ранени двама души.

Жестоко убийство разтресе Чикаго. Мъж нахлу в малка квартална градинка, разстреля двама човека, а с нож довърши още трима, между които две млади жени, едната бременна в деветия месец. Жертвите на жестокото престъпление са приятели, които всяка неделя имали традиция да се събират в градинката да пият бира. За нападателя се знае, че бил техен съсед. Финансови затруднения и опасения да загуби дома си засега са предполагаемите мотиви на нападателя.

И една малко странна новина: В Япония в малката префектура Мияги, в североизточните части на страната мъж на шейсет години се самоуби ритуално пред входа на училището, в което работел като портиер от близо четирийсет години, след като публично бил обвинен от директора че вече е само в тежест и ненужен на училището.

Днес времето ще бъде дъждовно през целия ден, с очаквани прекъсвания, разкъсване на облачността и слаби ветрове от северозапад в следобедните часове. Температурите...“

– Ейляф, Ейляф, спри това радио, взимай сандвичите и тръгвайте, брат ти ще изпусне училищния автобус, а ти ще закъснееш за работа! Чуваш ли ме, Ейляф, минава осем!

Младежът, който дъвчеше закуската си в малката кухничка, се пресегна, спря радиото, скочи и в движение довърши чашата с мляко.

* * *

Часовникът тихо иззвъня. 6:06! На светецкия дисплей светеше и датата 06.02.1973. Мъжът в леглото потърка очи. Не беше мигвал денонощия наред. Надигна се, спусна косматите си крака на пода и потърси чехлите. Заслуша се във равномерното ѝ дишане от другата половина на леглото. Беше задрямала преди не повече от половин час. През спуснатите пердета се процеждаше предутринната светлина. Мъжът стана и тихо излезе. Отиде в тъмната кухничка. Напипа шнура на котлончето и го включи в контакта. Постави джезвето, наля вода, сипа две лъжици кафе и зачака. По обгорялото му от слънцето лице личаха дълбоко всечени бръчки. Отнесе се. Чу свистенето в последния момент. Дръпна джезвето. Опари се. Изруга тихо. Беше късно: кафето вече съскаше по нагорещения до червено котлон. Разнесе се миризмата на прегоряло жито. Мъжът изключи котлона. Пресипа кафето в метално канче и отиде в банята. Постави канчето на ръждясал поцинкован бойлер, опрян

до мивката. Напълни метална паничка с вода, сложи я под мръсното напукано огледало на нивото на очите му. Насапуниса брадясалата си четина и бавно започна да дращи по нея със ухабената от дългото ползване самобръсначка. Оставяше дълги розови ивици по лицето, като скиор поправящ пъртина сред потъналата в сняг планина. Спомни си единствения път, когато видя сняг, бяха на север със Себиха, малко след като се ожениха. По лицето му премина тик, бръсначката го посрещна напречно. Изохка. Тънка алена струя набразди девствения бял сняг. Облегна се на мивката и се погледна в огледалото. Остана повече от минутка така, без да мърда. Кръвта се стичаше по брадичката и гръкляна му. Една капка се отцеди и капна в оцърбената мивка. Над тоалетната чиния имаше парче вестник. Взе го, забърса кръвта, отпи от кафето и поднови ритуала. Топваше самобръсначката в металната паничка, отпиваше от кафето и продължаваше със следващата бразда. Очите му се отразяваха в огледалото дълбоки и черни, като маслини. Приключи, избърса се в жълтата грапава кърпа, която висеше от задната страна на изгнилата врата. Върна се в стаичката. Тя беше вече будна. Надигна се леко.

– Тръгваш ли?

– Да, време е.

Надигна се още малко, протегна бялата си костелива ръка и я положи върху рамото му:

– Страх ме е, Набил. Много ме е страх!

– Всичко ще бъде наред, ще видиш – на свой ред положи той косматата си длан върху нейната.

– Много ме е страх, Набил, много...

Влага изби в очите ѝ, но тя се овладя и не заплака.

– Всичко ще се оправи, Себиха, обещавам ти, всичко ще бъде наред. Аз ще се погрижа!

Стана, прегърна я леко, целуна я по челото и с бързи крачки напусна стаята, апартамента, блокчето...

Отвън го блъсна с хладината си февруарското утро. До тях имаше строеж и вятърът завихряше строителни боклуци, откъснати найлони, сивкава прах и пепел от един варел, на който пазачите цяла нощ се бяха грели и варили чай. Пепел! Миризмата, с която бе просмукан целият му живот. Раздрънканата сетра се зададе в далечината, където хоризонтът порозовяваше от набиращото скорост слънце. Стигна до спирката и с мъчител-но скърцане отвори врати. Набил седна на последната седалка. Имаше още неколцина сънени нещастници в ранното февруарско утро. Погълнати от своите си мисли, всеки гледаше през покритите със слой черна пепел прозорци на сетрата. Набил Назер, трийсет и три годишният учител по история и география от училището в Джейда, Палестина, бе сам.

Абсолютно сам.

С аромат на цъфнала вишна

15 ноември 1944 г.

Влакът потегли с мъчително свистене по релсите. Остър звук, болезнен за сетивата. След стотина метра спря. Една огромна въздишка отекна във вагона. Всъщност десетки въздишки, слели се в една, пълна с някаква отчаяна надежда. Но след няколко минути влакът тръгна отново, а скоро набра скорост и потъна в хармонично,

равномерно тракане. Мъжете и жените вътре се притискаха един до друг. Нямаха друга възможност. В този конски вагон бяха натъпкани десетки, мъже, жени и деца. Млади, стари, грозни, красиви, слаби, дебели, с очила и без очила, с мустаци и без мустаци, с едно единствено общо нещо помежду им – страхът! Чудовищният, нечовешки страх.

През процеците на дъските на вагона се просмукваше лепкавият, примесен с влага ноемврийски студ. Мъжът успя с малко бутане и хитрост да се докопа до процеците на вратите, отделящи вагона от външния свят. Тук студът бе по-силен, вятърът по-остър и пронизващ, но влизаше въздух. Гаден, ноемврийски, но все пак беше въздухът на свободния свят. Мъжът надничаше с едно око през процеците. В мрака отвън прелитаха разрушени къщи, дървета, пътища, мостове, рекички... Тук там се виждаха и светлини. През белезникавите облаци по небето изплува нащърбения сърп на луната.

Мъжът до него, слаб, висок, с очила и редичка брада, го побутна по рамото:

– Папироса?

– Имаш ли?

– Да, скътал съм няколко, докато ме претърсвах, забравиха кепето.

Смъкна кепето си и от подплатата му измъкна две навити на ръка цигари, подаде му едната, извади и кибрит. Мъжете около тях, притиснати един в друг, ги погледнаха сърдито. Някои изсумтяха нещо.

– Кибрит?

– Имам, някак си се е опазил от влагата...

Мъжът се извъртя навътре към вагона, прикри се с пеша на самото, запали едната цигара и му я подаде, после другата и се обърна отново към процепите и света отвън.

– Как мислиш, накъде ни водят?

– Най-вероятно Аушвиц...

– Чувал съм различни неща за там. Някои казват, че е просто трудов лагер, бачкаш и чакаш края на войната.

– Забрави!

– Защо?

– Ти видял ли си някой, който да се е върнал оттам?

– Не!

– Няма връщане от там.

– Чувал съм, че изгарят хора в газови камери. Не могат да изгорят толкова много хора. Нали? Това са глупости!

– Не знам, ще видим... Не искам да гадая.

– Теодор! – подаде мъжът ръка.

– Макс. Макс Шевченко.

– Музикант съм, музикант от Загреб. Свирия на цигулка във филхармонията. Свирех, де... А ти?

– Аз съм от Украйна, но израснах в Чехословакия. Студент и баскетболист.

– Играеш ли?

– Да, играех, преди войната, в Дукла Прага. Бях много добър, най-голямата надежда на чешкия баскетбол, мечтаех за Олимпиада, но всичко отиде...

– Мислиш ли, че някога...

– Дори не го и споменавай. Нищо не мисля, не искам да мисля, не мога да мисля.

– Страх ли те е?

Цигарите им угаснаха в удивителен синхрон, в една и съща секунда. Преминаваха през някакъв тъмен, притихнал в ужаса на войната град. Нищо не издаваше да има живот в него. И все пак зад стените на тези къщи със сигурност имаше хора. Уплашени, изтощени от войната, гладни, но все пак свободни.

Страх ли? Дали го беше страх? Ооо, да! Толкова много го беше страх, че можеше да се закълне как го усеща физически да го сграбчва за гърлото и притиска отляво.

Absolvo Te

Georgi Bardarov

Translated from Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

Absolvo Te!

War always returns, sooner or later, but always!

If you save a life, you have saved the whole world, but if you stamp out a life, have you then killed the whole world? You look at him, the guy's laughing, thinks himself important. A measured, accurate kick at full force is enough to tear the grinning mask off his face. So he squeals like a pig chased for slaughter, so he looks up at you from below with the incomprehension of an animal caught in a trap. That's the time for the second kick. Equally measured to the head. Flies backwards, glasses broken, smeared make-up and snot, tears and blood flow. Then two powerful kicks to the torso. You don't need any more. He's finished, even if they put him back together in the hospital, you've snapped him in two, he'll always bear the stamp of fear within himself. Lord, it's so easy. You look, some old woman is walking the street, chewing a cold snack with her false teeth, sunk into life, as though she'll live a hundred years. She doesn't need much. Just a hefty punch to the noggin is enough. Then you retreat to a safe distance and watch how around her lifeless body, concerned folk crowd around her, who will forget her, drink beer and watch a match, as we forget all lessons in life, thinking only of ourselves. And you're whistling and you continue on your way, because a tasty supper and interesting match on the TV is awaiting you. It's so easy. Some young boy is running in the street,

licking an ice cream, aiming his catapult at street cats and pigeons, he thinks himself great and mighty. You aim carefully, stick a bullet into the chamber. A bullet, produced from several alloys, passed through the hands of a dozen ordinary slaves of the system. One pours out the metal, another turns the handle of the rolling machine, a third picks it off the production line along with thousands more identical bullets, destined to sow death, a fourth lot, most probably women, who've given birth and life, arrange it into cardboard boxes, into the dark warehouses of some vast arms company, never touched by the sun, full of dust and rats, thereafter a sour duffer, over fifty, with piles, divorced and lonely, who from the morning has been dreaming of a wank and a cold beer, dispatches it to shops in dozens of towns, from where dozens of men who feel nothing will buy it, will load it into their guns and will sow death with the same indifference with which they service their wives at night. So that's the way, you've popped it into the chamber and you aim at the forehead of the carefree boy who suspects nothing and who at this instant has taken aim at some sparrow, who's pecking at crumbs, suspecting nothing. You lightly squeeze the trigger, it's that easy. The bullet leaves a round black hole in the reddening margin of the boy's forehead, he's collapsed in the street dust, while the sparrow has flown off into the blue sky and you go to drink beer in some pub and watch the never ending Derby – Barcelona-Real. It's so easy to destroy a human existence. It's so easy to destroy a world. Often there's no need for kicks and bullets, it's enough to say just a few words, to destroy it. It's so easy.

And it's so difficult, endlessly difficult, to save one guy, one life, one microcosm, which for the billions of ape-looka-

likes on this planet means nothing, but for you is more than anything. For you it's the whole world!

If some day, Lord God, you can forgive us...

Life smells of lavender

Fourth of February 1973

“Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip have left tens of Palestinians dead, world news agencies have announced. Among the victims were civilians as well as Hamas fighters. A forty-five-year-old woman has died, and her twelve-year-old daughter. The latest attacks are in answer to a Palestinian attack on a school bus, carried out earlier this week, in which two people were wounded.

A savage murder has shocked Chicago. A man burst into a small neighbourhood garden, shot two guys, and with a knife finished off another three, amongst whom were two young women, one nine months pregnant. The victims of the savage crime were friends, who every Sunday kept a tradition to meet up in the garden and drink beer. What's known about the attacker is that he was their neighbour. Financial difficulties and the threat of losing his home are the attacker's supposed motives.

In Miyagi, Japan, a township in the northeast region of the country, a sixty-year-old man carried out a ritualistic suicide in front of the school where he had worked as a doorman for forty years, after the director publicly shamed him as being an unnecessary burden on the school. Today the weather will be rainy throughout the whole day, with expected breaks in the clouds and light winds from the north-west in the afternoon. The temperatures...”

“Eliav, Eliav, stop that radio, take the sandwiches and get going, your brother will miss the school bus and you’ll be late for work! Are you listening to me, Eliav, it’s past eight!”

The youth, who was munching his breakfast in the small kitchen, stretched, stopped the radio, jumped up and drank the glass of milk on the move.

* * *

The alarm clock quietly rang. 6.06! On the flashing display the date 06.02.1973 was also lit. The man in the bed rubbed his eyes. He hadn’t slept for twenty four hours. He got up, dropping his hairy feet to the floor, seeking his slippers. He listened to her measured breathing from the other half of the bed. She’d dozed off not more than half an hour earlier. The pre-dawn light seeped through the closed curtains. The man stood up and quietly left. He went to the dark kitchen. He felt for the hotplate cable and plugged it in. He put the coffee pot on, poured the water, put in two spoonfuls of coffee and waited. Deep carved furrows stood out on his sun-tanned face. He lost himself. He heard the whistling at the last moment. He pulled at the coffee pot. He burnt himself. He swore softly. It was too late: the coffee was now seething on the now red hotplate. Spreading the smell of burnt wheat. The man switched off the hotplate. He poured the coffee into a metal jug and went to the bathroom. He put the jug on the rusty galvanized boiler, leaning against the basin. He filled a metal bowl with water, put it under the dirty cracked mirror, level with his eyes. He soaped his bristly stubble and began to slowly scrape it with a razor, worn out from long use. He left long pink stripes on his face, like a skier making tracks on the snow-covered

mountain. He remembered the only time, when he'd seen snow, he was up in the north with Sebiha, not long after they'd married. His face twitched, the razor countered. He yelped. A thin scarlet runnel cut across the virgin white snow. He leant on the basin and looked into the mirror. He stayed like this for more than a minute, without moving. The blood ran down his chin and throat. One drop escaped and dripped into the cracked basin. Above the toilet there was a scrap of newspaper. He took it, wiped the blood, sipped his coffee and restarted the ritual. He dipped the razor into the metal bowl, drank up the coffee and continued with the next scrape. In the mirror, eyes were reflected, deep and black as olives. He finished, wiped himself with the yellow rough towel, which hung from the back of the rotting door. He returned to the bedroom. She was now awake. She lifted herself a little.

“Are you off?”

“Yes, it's time.”

She lifted herself up a little more, stretched out a white bony arm and put it round his shoulder. “I'm scared, Nabil. I'm really scared!”

“Everything will be OK, you'll see.” In turn, he put his hairy hand over hers.

“I'm really scared, Nabil, really...”

Moisture invaded her eyes, but she controlled herself and didn't cry.

“Everything will be sorted out, Sebiha, I promise you, everything will be OK. I'll take care!”

He stood up, embraced her lightly, kissed her forehead and with quick steps, left the room, the flat, the block...

Outside, the February morning buffeted him with its cold. There was a building site close by them and the wind blew up, building rubbish, scraps of plastic, grey dust and ash from a bin, at which the watchmen had warmed themselves and boiled up tea all through the night. Ash! The smell, with which his whole life had been sucked out. A rattling bus appeared in the distance, where the horizon grew rosy from the quickening sun. It reached the stop and with a painful screech the doors opened. Nabil sat on the last seat. There were a few more sleepy wretches on this early February morning. Sunk in their own thoughts, each looked out of the bus windows, covered in a film of black soot. Nabil Nazer, thirty-three-year-old teacher of history and geography at the Jeddah school, Palestine, was alone.

Absolutely alone.

With the scent of blossoming cherries

Fifteenth of November 1944

The train pulled out with a painful screeching on the rails. A sharp noise, hurtful to the senses. After a hundred metres it stopped. A huge sigh flowed out in the wagon. Actually dozens of sighs, converging into one, full of some desperate hope. But in a few minutes the train started off again and quickly gained speed and sank into a harmonic, measured clattering. Dozens of men, women and children were crammed into this cattle wagon, jammed against each other. They had no other choice. Young, old ugly, beautiful, thin, fat, with and without spectacles, with and without moustaches with one single thing in common between them – fear! Monstrous inhuman fear.

Through the gaps in the wagon slats seeped the sticky November cold, mixed with damp. The man succeeded with a little pushing and cunning to make it to the gaps in the doors separating the wagon from the outside world. Here the cold was stronger, the wind sharper and more penetrating, but air was coming in. Horrible, ominous, but nevertheless the air of the free world. The man peered with one eye through the gaps. In the dark outside demolished houses flew by, trees, roads, bridges, rivers. Here and there were lights too. Through the off-white clouds in the sky the ragged sickle of the moon was swimming.

The man next to him, thin, tall, with glasses and sparse beard, nudged his shoulder.

“Cigarette?”

“Have you got any?”

“Yes, I squirreled a few away, while they were searching me, they forgot the cap.”

He slipped off his cap and from the lining drew out two roll-ups, gave him one, took out a match. The men around them, squashed up against each other, vast angry glances. One grunted something.

“Match?”

“Got one, somehow kept from the damp...”

The man turned into the wagon’s interior, used the tails of his jacket as cover, lit one cigarette and handed it over, then the other one and turned back again to the gap and the world outside.

“What do you think, where are they taking us?”

“Auschwitz, most likely...”

“I’ve heard different things about there. Some say it’s just a labour camp, you work and wait for the end of the war.”

“Forget it!”

“Why?”

“Have you seen anyone who’s come back from there?”

“No!”

“There’s no coming back from there.”

“I’ve heard they cremate folk in gas chambers. They can’t cremate so many people. Right? That’s nonsense.”

“I don’t know, we’ll see... I don’t want to guess.”

“Theodore!” The man held out his hand.

“Max. Max Shevchenko.”

“I’m a musician, a musician from Zagreb. I play violin in the philharmonic. Well I used to play... and you?”

“I’m from the Ukraine, but I grew up in Czechoslovakia. I was a student and basketball player.”

“Do you play?”

“Yes, I played before the war for Dukla Prague. I was very good, the greatest hope in Czech basketball, I dreamed of the Olympics, but everything went...”

“Do you think that sometime...”

“Don’t even mention it... I don’t think anything, I don’t want to think. I can’t think.”

“Are you afraid?”

Their cigarettes went out in amazing synchronicity in one and the same second. They passed through some dark city, fallen quiet to the horror of the war. Nothing betrayed the presence of any life. And even so the walls of these houses surely contained people. Frightened, exhausted by the war, hungry, but free nevertheless.

Afraid? Was he afraid? O-o-o yes! He was so very scared that he could take an oath on how he could feel fear grab his throat and squeeze from the left.

CZECH REPUBLIC



Lucie Faulerová

Smrtholka **Deathmaiden**

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BIOGRAPHY

Lucie Faulerová, born in 1989, is a writer, editor and aspiring screenwriter. She graduated in Czech studies from the Palacký University in Olomouc. She attracted the attention of readers and critics with her debut novel, *Lapači prachu* (*Dust Catchers*), which was nominated for the 2017 Magnesia Litera Award for prose and the Jiří Orten Award for authors up to 30 years old. The book was published in Spanish in 2020, and a German translation will

be published soon. With the prominent Czech conceptual artist Kateřina Šedá, Lucie co-authored the book *BRNOX – Průvodce brněnským Bronxem* (*BRNOX – A guide to Brno's Bronx*), about a socially disadvantaged area of Brno. It won the 2016 Magnesia Litera Award for journalism. In 2020, Faulerová published her new novel *Smrtholka* (*Deathmaiden*), a family mosaic about three siblings and the desire to live your own life in spite of darkness. The book is currently being translated into Spanish and has been nominated for the 2021 Magnesia Litera Award for prose. In 2020, she participated in the Czech Center New York programme Stories in Times of Corona, contributing with the short story 'Objects in Mirror Are Closer than They Appear'.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

A woman in her 20s has to cope with a family tragedy that almost destroys her. How can she survive after her sister commits suicide? This poetic literary work wraps a traumatic theme in gentle humour. A train rolls on. Inside, alone in the compartment, a young woman is sitting, wounded in body and soul. She is looking at the landscape outside the window, thinking about her family, reminiscing about cheerful moments spent with her late sister. Why did she do

it? No one knows. Marie, the protagonist of the novel, blames herself for her sister's death. Tormenting thoughts. The wheels spin, the train rattles and sighs, the landscape passes. Marie, the traveller, thinks about all possible methods of suicide, but also about how to cope with life and its tragedies, how to live well in spite of every injury. Could some New Age spirituality perhaps be of any help? As the story goes on, a chain of suicide attempts unwinds, with Marie always hesitant enough to survive.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

This story of facing death with both fear and fascination is framed by a railway trip that functions both literally and figuratively. The female protagonist, Marie (sometimes spelled 'Máry', which refers

to traditional Czech funeral ceremonies), is affected by a series of emotionally powerful experiences: a pagan ritual to chase away the winter, platonic love affairs, an encounter with a suicide in the subway and self-harming practices. Continual self-destructive acts damage not only her body but also her pronunciation, which adds black comedy as the narrative unfurls. Despite the bitter theme, Lucie Faulerová's literary work is full of subtle humour and irony, and the rhythm of her language and the extraordinary purity of her style make this novel a pleasant read. The jury appreciated the brilliantly written and non-linear narrative of the novel, which suggests a musical composition, the sensitive use of dark humour amid the heroine's painful experiences and the courage of the young writer in presenting a demanding text with sombre and sometimes even morbid motifs.



Smrtholka

Lucie Faulerová



Jede, jede vlak, letí jako pták. Kola se mu roztáčí, až přechází zrak. Kola se mu roztáčí, až přechází zrak.

Š-š-š-š-š-húú.

Sleduju pole a louky a lesy a nebe, anebo pole a louky a lesy a nebe sledují mě, stejně jako je to s tou propastí, do který nahlížíte tak dlouho, až nahlídne ona do vás, nebo nějak podobně to je, a o tom já můžu vyprávět, o tom vám třeba teď a tady můžu vyprávět, zatímco mi všechno ubíhá za oknama a zatímco já se ani nepohnu, a čas — ten mi jde na ruku, za oknama lítaj roky, ale tady uvnitř všechno čeká se mnou.

Uháníme rychlejc než řeka, ta, do který nevstoupím dvakrát, třikrát, stokrát, prostě ne!, v dálce v tý řece zahlídnu plavat Moranu. Smrt plave po vodě, nový léto k nám jede. Sahám si do kapsy, jeden kámen tam vždycky mám schovaný. Ze zvyku.

Jenže řeka už za oknem není.

Místo řeky jsme my dvě, Madlenka a já, pouštíme draka, kterej letí, letí, letí nad kukuřičným polem, a to pole je plný Madlenčina smíchu, když si vyvlíká z prstů provázek, jako by ho podávala větru.

Tadam tadam.

Místo draka tátova tvář, ve který se vyměnilo během chvíle čtvero ročních období. Chce promluvit, ale místo toho je jeho pusa čím dál tenčí čára. Ruskej zpěv se line kostelem—

Tadam tadam.

Z táty je košatej strom a pode mnou praská jeho větev, padám a za mnou se sypou zralý meruňky. Karamel štěká. Něco tu křupne, větev to není. Moje ruka ve srandovním úhlu. Kořeny tlačí do zad. Karamelův čumák na mém čele. Adam křičí: „Máňo!“

Tadam tadam.

Plná tělocvična lidí ohnutých do pozice velblouda. „Dýchejte mělce, ať se vám nezatočí hlava,“ slyším instruktorku a pozoruju vzhůru nohama všechny, jak jsou vzhůru nohama. „Dýchejte měl—“ slyším vzhůru nohama. Dokud nezadržím dech.

Tadam tadam.

Matčina záda mezi futry, nohy se sotva mihnou na prahu, když potichu proklouzne z domu. Ze schovky v předsíni naslouchám zaklapnutí zámku a pozoruju kliku, jak se vrací do vodorovný polohy, když ji matka opatrně, potichounku, po-ma-loun-ku z druhý strany pouští.

Tadam tadam.

Madlenčina ruka je pistole, kterou si drží u spánku a mačká spoušť.

Tadam tadam.

A voda, ta voda! Voda ledová...

Tadam. Tátova tvář. Madlenčin smích. Olíznout nos. Dýchejte měl—. Mačká spoušť. Po-ma-loun-. Adam. Křičí. Máňo!

Hrk-hrk.

No a pak — ty. Otevíráš mi dveře.

Tadamtadam. Tadamtadam.

* * *

Tý holky, co si lehla na koleje metra, si prej nikdo nevším. Prej slezla dolů po schůdkách, těsně u tlamy tunelu, těsně před tou černou dírou — prostě slezla dolů, lehla si na záda kolmo na koleje a zátylkem se položila na jejich hranu. A pak čekala. Čekala na metro C, Letňany—Háje.

A tahle holka mi teď leží v hlavě, přesně kolmo, přesně na hraně. Vidím ji, jak stojí v podzemce, možná pár minut, možná hodiny, a s každým dalším vozem, co zastaví, se v masách vystupujících ztrácí z mého dohledu, rozpouští se a mizí, a zase se vynořuje, a když se prostor kolem ní vylidní — ona tu stojí stejně jako před chvílí, jako by se přes ni jen prohnala vlna, co sotva olízne břeh a zase se stahuje zpátky. A potom, po nějaký době, o který rozhodne ona, pomalu přejde k betonovému okraji, sleze schůdky, raz, dva, tři, a uloží se na koleje, kolmo, zátylkem na kolejnici — na její temeno, protože přesně tak se tý hraně říká.

Myslím na to, jestli má otevřený oči.

Myslím na to, jestli má strach.

Myslím na to, jestli cejtí úlevu.

Myslím na tu holku a na hlavu, co se jí bez povšimnutí oddělila od těla, když čekala na metro C, Letňany—Háje.

Tadam.

Když jsem byla malá, chtěla jsem bejt kouzelnice. Ještě teď občas chci. Ale hlavně jsem to chtěla, když jsem byla malá. Nahrávala jsem si na videokazety z televize seriál s Davidem Copperfieldem, přetáčela si nejlepší scény a trénovala s ním před obrazovkou. A taky občas v telce dávali, ve Zlatý mříži nebo nějakým jiným estrádním pořadu, českýho iluzionistu Kožíška. Ten mě ale nebral tolik jako Copperfield. Taky jsem teda koukala na reprízy pořadu Možná přijde i kouzelník... a čekala jsem až do konce. Adam, můj brácha, se mi za to strašně smál. A přitom to byl on, kdo mě naočkoval, že se na to mám koukat, protože přece přijde kouzelník.

Tehdy mi přišlo trochu divný, že čarujou vždycky pouze chlapi, který u sebe mívají ženský jen jako podržtašky a krufprdelky v roli asistentek, co jim podávaly nástroje a u toho se zářivě usmívaly, nebo v roli figurantek, co zalezly do rakve a u toho se zářivě usmívaly, nechaly se rozpůlit a zase slepit, nebo zavřít do skříně, zmizely a pak se zase objevily. Teda nepřišlo mi to divný v tom smyslu, že jako genderově fašistický, sexistický nebo tak něco, prostě jen divný, a proto mě o to víc lákalo stát se první kouzelnicí na světě, co navíc nepotřebuje nikoho, kdo se bude zářivě usmívat, podávat věci, co si můžu podat sama, a dělat mi pokusného králíka. Chtěla jsem to zvládnout úplně bez nikoho. Internet tenkrát nebyl, u nás v Mršíně nebyl ještě dlouho potom, co už jinde byl, takže jsem pořád chodila do knihovny, do naší malé obecní knihovny, kde byl hrozně malej výběr všech knížek, natož pak těch, kde by byly návody na kouzelnický triky. Taková tam byla jen jedna, ode mě už úplně ulistovaná a vykouzlená, jak jsem si ji jednu dobu pořád tahala domů a listovala v ní a listovala a kouzlila a kouzlila. Triky v tý knížce byly ale spíš pro mrňata, naučila jsem se je všechny, asistentka ani figurantka k nim nebyla potřeba. Jenže ty kouzla! Mohla jsem čarovat jen s kartama a mincema a šát-

kama a krabičkou od sirek. Předváděla jsem to celý rodině i sousedům, Voráčkovi v hospodě, v nemocnici doktorkám, ve škole spolužákům, i učitelce, když měla dozor na chodbě, ukazovala jsem to všem pořád dokola, jenže brzo nás to všechny taky přestalo bavit.

Chtěla jsem se naučit větší kouzla, ze kterých budou lidi šíleně překvapení, ne jen jako, abych jako nebyla smutná, ale překvapení jako doopravdicky, a přitom by si říkali: Jak to? Jak to udělala? a nahlas by mi říkali: Jak to? Jaks to udělala? A já bych se jen tajemně usmívala tím tajemným úsměvem, kterej jsem trénovala před zrcadlem, možná bych i supertajemně nadzdvihla jedno obočí, ale neprozradila bych laur nic. Jenže nebylo odkud se tyhle kouzla naučit. Pořád jsem u naší knihovnice somrovala, ať objedná nějakou čarodějnickou knihu, ale ona pořídila maximálně Harryho Pottera a kámen mudrců, vůbec nepochopila, co po ní chci. Až mě táta vzal do města, mě i Madlu i Adama. Bylo mi tenkrát osm, Madle šest a Adamovi patnáct. Adamovi koupil další díl Dračího doupěte i s příručkou pro Pána jeskyní, Madle lepoporelo s říkankama a mně kouzelnickou knihu. Byly na ní trpytky a kluk s čepicí — podobnou, co měl asi v Bradavicích ten Harry Potter, a já se konečně naučila víc triků.

Ale stejně jsem si nejvíc přála naučit se jedno jediný kouzlo, který v té knize nebylo, který nebylo v žádný knize, kterýma jsem kdy listovala. Je to asi jasný, ne? Co byste se vy jako první chtěli naučit, kdybyste si přáli bejt kouzelníci? Já chtěla zmizet. No jo, ale proč já chtěla zmizet! Zajímalo mě totiž, když ti kouzelníci mizeli — anebo klidně i ty jejich asistentky, když mizely — co se s nima jako stalo. Jestli se nějak rozpustili do prostoru, nebo jestli jsou jen jinde — a v tom případě kde, kam se to poděli a jak to tam vypadá. Znají to tam? Mizí třeba domů, rovnou si opláchnou nádobí, co nestihli před vystoupením, a pak se vrátí? Nebo mizí na

hezký místo? Pláň, les, poušť, pláž? Nebo je to nějaký nemísto, jiná dimenze? Místo jen pro kouzelníky? Mizí jen jejich tělo, nebo i duše? Ovládají to, nebo to neřídí?

Chtěla jsem se ztratit. Prozkoumat, kam se mizí. A pak se zase vrátit. Vrátit.

Tadam.

Sleduju se v odrazu okna ve vlaku. A zároveň se sleduju v odrazu okna v Adamově pokoji, Adamova hlava je v tom odrazu dva metry za mojí hlavou. Bulím, protože jsem se dozvěděla, že žádný takový místo prej není. A že jsem mrně, když věřím na kouzla, protože všechny kouzla jsou jenom jako, néasi!

Deathmaiden

Lucie Faulerová

Translated from Czech by Alex Zucker

See the little choo-choo chugging down the track. Hear the whistle, toot toot toot, as it goes down and back. Hear the whistle, toot toot toot, as it goes down and back.

Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-ooo.

I watch the fields and meadows and woods and sky, or the fields and meadows and woods and sky are watching me, just like if you gaze too long into the abyss it gazes into you, or something like that, and I could tell you all about it, I could tell you about it right now even, while it's passing by the windows and I don't have to move an inch—time here dances to my tune. Outside the windows the years go flying by, but here inside, everything waits along with me.

We barrel along, faster than the river, the river I can't step into twice, three times, a hundred times, no! I see an effigy of Morana, goddess of death and winter, floating downstream in the distance, a new summer is headed our way. I reach into my pocket where I always keep a stone tucked away. Out of habit.

But the river isn't outside the window anymore.

Now, instead, it's the two of us, me and Madlenka, flying a kite. Up, up, up it goes, flying over the cornfield, and the field is full of Madlenka's laughter as she lets out the string from her fingers, feeding it to the wind.

Ta-dum ta-dum.

Now, instead of a kite, my dad's face, which in the space of a moment changes into the four seasons. He tries to speak, but the line of his mouth just keeps getting thinner. A Russian melody wafts through the church—

Ta-dum ta-dum.

My dad turns into a leafy tree, and underneath me the branch breaks and I fall, ripe apricots tumbling down around me. Karamel barks. Something cracks and it isn't a branch. My arm at a funny angle. Roots digging into my back. Karamel's snout on my forehead. Adam screams: "Máry!"

Ta-dum ta-dum.

A gym full of people bent into camel pose. "Breathe shallowly so you don't get dizzy," I hear the instructor say, watching everyone upside down from upside down. "Breathe shal—" I hear upside down. Then start holding my breath.

Ta-dum ta-dum.

My mother's back in the doorframe, feet barely grazing the threshold as she quietly slips out of the house. From my hiding place in the entryway I hear the click of the lock and watch the door handle return to a horizontal position as my mother carefully, quietly, ev-er so slow-ly closes it from the other side.

Ta-dum ta-dum.

Madlenka's hand is a gun, which she holds to her temple, and she pulls the trigger.

Ta-dum ta-dum.

And the water, the water! The icy water...

Ta-dum. My dad's face. Madlenka's laughter. Licking my nose. Breathe shal—. Pulling the trigger. Ev-er so slow-. Adam. Screaming. Máry!

Clack-clack.

And then—you. Opening the door for me.

Ta-dum ta-dum. Ta-dum ta-dum.

* * *

They say nobody noticed the girl lying on the underground tracks. They say she walked down the stairs right at the mouth of the tunnel, in front of the big black hole—just walked right down and lay on her back across the tracks with her neck on the rails. And waited. For the C line, Letňany—Háje.

And now that girl's in my head, lying perfectly perpendicular across the tracks, neck on the rails. I see her standing on the platform, maybe a few minutes, maybe hours, and every time a train pulls into the station she dissolves into the exiting crowd, disappearing from view, then reemerging again, and when the space around her empties—there she is, standing the same way she was a moment before, as if washed over by a wave, barely licking the shore and receding back into the sea. Then, after some length of time that she decides, she walks slowly to the edge of the platform, descends the stairs, one, two, three, and lies down, perpendicular across the tracks, neck on the rails—like a sleeper, holding the rails in place.

I wonder if her eyes are open.

I wonder if she's scared.

I wonder if she feels relieved.

I wonder about the girl and the head that detached from her body unnoticed as she waited for line C of the Prague underground, Letňany—Háje.

Ta-dum.

When I was little, I wanted to be a magician. Occasionally I still do. But mostly it was just when I was little. I used to videotape David Copperfield's show on TV, then rewind it to the best scenes and practice along with him, standing in front of the screen. I also used to watch the Czech illusionist Kožíšek perform sometimes on The Golden Cage or some other variety show. But I never got into him the way I got into Copperfield. I even watched reruns of *Maybe a Magician Will Drop By*, every episode, all the way to the end. No magician ever showed up. It was just a stupid line. Adam, my brother, made fun of me. And meanwhile he was the one who told me to watch, since it said there'd be a magician.

Even back then I thought it was weird that only men did tricks and the women were just there as underlings and ass-shakers, handing the men their props and smiling radiantly, or playing the mock victim, climbing into the coffin with a radiant smile to be sawed in half and glued back together again, or locked in a closet to disappear, then reappear—it's magic! To be clear, I didn't find it weird in a fascist sexist gender way, just a regular kind of weird, which only made me want to be the world's first woman magician even more, and I wouldn't need an assistant to smile radiantly or hand me props or use me as a guinea pig. I could do it all on my own. Back then, there was no Internet yet, and the town where I lived took a long time to get it even after they already had it everywhere else, so I would go to our local library, which was so little they didn't have much of a

selection of any books, never mind books of magic tricks. But there was one that I used to check out and take home with me, and I flipped through it so many times practicing the tricks that I flipped it to death and practically wore the magic right out of it. The tricks in it were mostly for little kids. I learned them all, no need for any assistant or helper. All I could do, of course, was sleight of hand with cards and coins and scarves and a matchbox. I performed the tricks for my family, the neighbours, Mr. Voráček down at the pub, the doctors at the hospital, my classmates at school, even the teacher, when it was her turn to be hallway monitor. I did tricks for everyone, over and over again, but pretty soon we all got tired of it.

I wanted to learn bigger tricks so people would be crazy amazed, not just to make me happy, but so they would be amazed for real, and say to themselves: Wait, how did she do that? And then say out loud to me: Wait, how did you do that? And I would just smile that mysterious smile I practiced in front of the mirror, and maybe super-mysteriously raise an eyebrow, but I wouldn't give away nada. The only problem was, there was nowhere to learn those tricks. I kept bugging the librarian to order a book of witchcraft, but the closest she ever came was Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. She didn't have a clue. Then one day my dad took me and Madla and Adam into the city. I was eight, Madla was six, and Adam was fifteen. Adam got the latest version of Dragon's Den and the Dungeon Master's Guide with it, Madla got a book of nursery rhymes, and I got a magic book. It had glitter on it and a picture of a boy in a hat—probably like the one Harry Potter wore at Hogwarts—and finally I learned some new tricks.

But still, the one trick I wanted to learn the most wasn't in there. Or in any other book I'd seen. You can probably guess,

right? Tell me, if you were going to be a magician, what's the first thing you'd want to learn? I wanted to know how to disappear. OK, sure, but why? Because whenever I saw a magician, or their female assistant, disappear, I wanted to know what happened to them. Did they just, like, dissolve into space, or did they actually go someplace else? And if they did, where did they go and what did it look like? Was it someplace they knew? Did they go back home, quick wash the dishes they didn't have time for before the show, and then come back? Or did they go someplace nice? Like the plains or the woods or a desert or a beach? Or was it not a place at all, like maybe another dimension, a place just for magicians? Was it just their bodies that disappeared, or their souls too? Was it up to them, or was it out of their control?

I wanted to vanish. To explore whatever place it was they disappeared to. And then come back again. Come back.

Ta-dum.

I watch myself reflected in the window of the train. And at the same time I watch myself reflected in the window of Adam's room, with Adam's head reflected six feet behind me. I'm bawling because I just found out there is no such place. And I'm a little baby if I believe in magic, since all magic is just make-believe, duh!

Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-sh-sh.

ICELAND

Sigrún Pálsdóttir *Delluferðin* *Runaround*

Forlagið útgáfa (JPV), Reykjavík,
2019

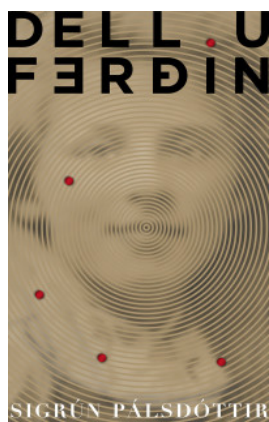
Language: Icelandic
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BIOGRAPHY

Sigrún Pálsdóttir is a writer and historian. Born in Reykjavík in 1967, she completed a PhD on the history of ideas at the University of Oxford in 2001, after which she was a research fellow and lecturer at the University of Iceland. She worked as the editor of *Saga*, the principal peer-reviewed journal for Icelandic history, from 2008 to 2016, and she has been a freelance writer since 2007. She first came to prominence as a writer of historical biographies. Her debut in 2010 was the acclaimed *Þóra biskups* (*Thora: A Bishop's Daughter*), followed by *Ferðasaga* (*Uncertain Seas*) in 2010, the story of a young couple and their three children who were killed while sailing from New York to Iceland aboard a ship torpedoed by a German submarine in 1944. Her first novel, *Kompa* (*That Little Dark Room*), was released

in 2016 and her second, *Delluferðin*, in late 2019. Pálsdóttir's biographies have been nominated for the Icelandic Literary Prize, the Women's Literature Prize and the DV Cultural Prize for Literature. Her book *Ferðasaga* was chosen as the best biography of 2013 by booksellers in Iceland. *Kompa*, her debut novel, was nominated for the Icelandic Women's Literature Prize in 2016





and in 2019 was published in the US by Open Letter (University of Rochester's literary translation press) under the title *History. A Mess.*

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Delluferðin (*Runaround*, 2019) is a tragicomic tale about the preservation of a cultural treasure in 19th century Iceland and New York. The protagonist is a girl, Sigurlína Brandsdóttir, who looks after the family home for her father and brother in Reykjavík at the end of the 19th century. Her father is in charge of an archaeological museum located in the Parliament House and, in addition to taking care of their home, Sigurlína is her father's right hand in his work.

Through a series of coincidences, she finds herself escaping to New York, where adventures await – adventures so extraordinary that the story might be said to switch genres, from historical novel to crime fiction.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

Runaround is written by an author with a clear artistic vision and a strong command of form and style. The novel is by no means a traditional coming-of-age story; rather, it mercilessly twists and turns every convention. The narrative is concise and free of verbosity. Subtle suggestions excite in the reader a desire to keep up with the story as it steams ahead, providing surprises at every turn and finally overturning any expectations of a traditional ending. The story also explores how the cultural identity of a nation is being shaped, a nation that, at the turn of the 20th century, was one of Europe's poorest and least developed. How do events acquire historical significance? How are cultural values created? Many aspects come into play: the nation's heritage and the shaky foundations on which the historical perspective of each society is built, but also class divisions, the roles of women in society, Iceland's position in the world, the situation of foreign labourers in New York at the end of the 19th century and, last but not least, the narrative form. *Runaround* is a work of fiction that is both original and modern, but at the same time extremely accessible and entertaining.

Delluferðin

Sigrún Pálsdóttir



Burgdorf. Riverside Drive

Bestiary. Yfir hundrað dýramyndir á ensku skinnhandriti frá miðri 12. öld. Hann tekur bókina varlega úr pakknum, og af öryggi fagmannsins, en innra með honum bærisk spennan og eftirvænting sem hann fær aldrei nóg af. Það er drifkraftur hljóðrar og einmanalegrar tilveru hins þýskættaða Franz W. Hoffmann, eiganda stærsta bóka- og handritasafns á Nýja Englandi, eins ríkasta meðlims hins auðuga samfélags á Manhattan. Fræðimaður á sviði evrópskrar miðaldasögu þótt ástríða hans hafi í seinni tíð beinst meira að þörfinni fyrir að komast yfir gamlar bækur og handrit sem geyma þá sögu en að sögunni sjálfri. Hoffmann leggur handritið á stórt borð fyrir miðju herbergisins. Nei, annars, þessi vistarvera er fremur salur, kannski hundrað fermetrar, og tvær hæðir með pallinum sem liggur meðfram veggjunum fjórum og sums staðar inn í skúmaskot þar sem líka leynast bækur, bækur sem enginn hefur lengur tölu á nema þær voldugu aðfangaskrár sem hann heldur og liggja innbundnar á borðinu sem hann stendur við á meðan hann virðir fyrir sér fenginn. Það er komið fram yfir miðnætti en hér inni er nánast enginn munur á nóttu og degi; þetta er gluggalaust gímald, hvelving smágerðra lágmynda og flúrs kringum fresku í loftinu sem sækir innblástur í germanska goðafræði. Og

þarna dvelur Hoffmann átján tíma á sólarhring og nærir sína göfugu brjálsemi á milli þess sem hann strýkur þessu safni sínu, meðalmaður á hæð, nokkuð stórgerður en granvaxinn, næstum því horaður, gráleitt hárið greitt þunnt aftur í hnakka og skeggið í sama lit, bæði gróft og þykkt svo það þekur öll svipbrigði neðan við mjótt og bogið nefið. Augun eru ljós og standa innarlega eins og þau hafi séð allt sem þau vilja líta. Hoffmann er sjötugur.

Í forstofunni framan við bókasalinn standa nokkrir mannhæðaháir grískir guðir úr marmara og þaðan liggur kalksteinsstiginn upp á aðra hæð hússins. Þar eru ótal vistarverur en í einni þeirra býr Hermine, rúmföst móðir Hoffmanns. Hún er á tíræðisaldri og hefur nú legið í þessari himnasæng í meira en ár, með reglulegum tilfærslum reyndar. Í herberginu eru tveir gólfsíðir gluggar sitthvorum megin við stórt eldstæði með íburðarmikilli steinungjörð. Allt er hér í anda Lúðvíks sextánda nema kannski Kaspar vitringur, mannhæðarhár og skorinn í tré með gyltingu í treyju sinni. Hann er márískur, kemur úr miðaldaklaustri í Baden Baden og hefur fylgt fjölskyldu Hermine um langan aldur. Og nú stendur hann í horninu við hliðina á rúminu hennar, vakir yfir henni á milli heimsókna tveggja þjóna hússins og læknis sem vitjar gömlu konunnar einu sinni í viku. Hoffmann sest líka alltaf hjá móður sinni fyrir svefninn, en í kvöld gleymdi hann sér yfir nýja handritinu svo Hermine lognaðist út af ein eftir að stúlkan hafði sinnt henni samkvæmt venju.

Þetta er þá allt og sumt sem gengur á í þessu rúmlega fimmtíu herbergja húsi sem stendur við ána Hudson, langt frá stórhýsum hinna auðugu borgarbúa. Hoffmann lét reisa húsið skömmu eftir að faðir hans lést, og nefndi eftir fæðingarbæ hans, en staðsetningin varð eins konar yfirlýsing um afstöðu hans til þess samfélags sem hann vissulega til-

heyrði, hópi hinna ofurríku sem byggt höfðu hallir sínar við breiðgötur austan megin við Central Park af taumlau-sum hégóma og mikillæti. Við þetta fólk hafði hann ekki lengur nein samskipti og flestir þeir sem Hermine hafði kynnst eftir komuna til New York frá Þýskalandi ásamt eiginmanni sínum, stálframleiðandanum Hoffmann eldri, um miðbik aldarinnar, voru nú dauðir. En afkomendur þeirra voru nú orðnir margfalt ríkari en forfeðurnir og lífsstíll þeirra í samræmi við auðinn. Ekki síst þeirra nýju meðlima sem bæst höfðu í hópinn við kynslóðaskil.

Auðsöfnun í þessari miklu fjármálamiðstöð sem New Yorkborg er bæði nærir og reiðir sig á nýja tegund lifnaðarhátta sem síaukin verksmiðjuframleiðsla gerir mögulega. Öll eru þessi ósköp knúin áfram af gífurlegri fólksfjölgun; þjóðflutningum. Síðan Hoffmann-fjölskyldan settist að á Manhattan hefur íbúafjöldi svæðisins nærri því þrefaldast. Á venjulegum degi stíga meira en sjö þúsund aðkomumenn á land á Ellis Island, nærri strandlengju New Jersey, inn í nýbyggða landamærabygginguna. Skipin fylla höfnina, önnur nálgast land. Eitt þeirra hefur lent í stormi úti fyrir ströndum Nova Scotia og ferðast nú upp úr tíu metra djúpum öldudalnum og þaðan aftur niður. Buchanan, níu þúsund tonna gufuskip frá Glasgow. Skipið hefur siglt í rúma sjö daga með um eitt þúsund farþega innanborðs, fólk af ólíkum þjóðum, sem nú veltist um í vistarverum sínum; inni í setustofum fyrsta farrýmis, inni í þröngum svefnrýmum neðanþilja. Og á öðru farrými, í fjögurra manna káetu, liggur ung kona og er þungt haldin. Hún liggur í efri koju og heldur dauðahaldi í rimla.

Þetta er Sigurlína, langt að komin. Hún hefur verið um það bil fjórar vikur á ferð frá því hún lagði af stað frá Reykjavík, morguninn eftir grímudansleikinn. Það örlagaríka samkvæmi. Og allt hafði það gerst á ógnarhraða eftir að

hún fann sendibréf eitt á skrifborði föður síns: Þaut aftur upp til sín, rótaði þar í dóti og drasli, horfði píreygð út um herbergisgluggann sinn, út í myrkrið sem var flæðarmálið og hrópaði upp yfir sig „James!“ og aftur það nafn örlítið lægra þegar hún dró fram koffortið sitt og setti þar næstum því allt sem hún átti; föt, nokkrar bækur, tvær enskar skáldsögur, ljósmyndir, dálítið af hannyrðum og kistilinn sinn með peningum, sendibréfum og nælunni gömlu á botninum, fjandans nælunni sem hún sat uppi með og varð að koma fyrir einhvers staðar, helst að láta hverfa, fela í fjörunni, kasta í sjóinn, já, kasta í sjóinn, þvílík hugmynd, svo hún byrjaði að hafa sig til, fara í ferðafötin, röndótta kjólinn sem hún keypti í fyrra og svarta jakkann sem hún hafði saumað sér og hafði ekki enn notað og var búin að hneppa að sér þegar hún hné niður á rúmgaflinn buguð af hamslausum hugsunum sínum og geggjuðum ákvörðunum, hreyfingunum sem þær ákvarðanir útheimtu en herti upp hugann og sneri sér við til að ná í myndina af móður sinni sem hékk á veggnum og hún setti í kjöltu sína þegar klukkan niðri í stofu sló fjögur en þá lagðist hún aftur en sleppti ekki myndinni heldur hafði hana á brjóstinu og höndina þar ofan á þangað til hún vaknaði við umgang niðri, bróður sinn að fara á fætur og út úr húsi með hurðaskelli svo hún hrökk upp og byrjaði að hafa sig til í annað sinn, ringluð en ákveðin, og setti myndina af móður sinni ofan í koffortið og lokaði áður en hún ýtti því út úr herberginu og að stiganum, örlítið fram af pallinum en þó aðeins of langt svo kistan steiptist með látum niður snarbrattan stigann og skall í trégólfid með svo miklum hvelli að hún æpti upp yfir sig og fór inn á skrifstofu föður síns og út í glugga til að athuga hvort lætin hefðu nokkuð vakið bæjarbúa en þegar hún sá enga hreyfingu í næstu húsum settist hún við skrifborðið og skrifaði föður sínum lítið bréf, lagði það ofan á trékassa sem stóð á borðplötuhorninu, og fór að því búnu

inn í búr og tók til nesti; tvær sneiðar af saltkjöti, hálfan kepp af lifrarpylsu, heila jólaköku, örlítinn ostbita og allt brauðið sem eftir var þegar klukkan sló átta, og þá vissi hún að nú væri stundin runnin upp svo hún fór út fyrir og kallaði á tvo drengi sem stóðu aðgerðarlausir neðar í götunni og bað þá um að hjálpa sér með farangurinn niður á Geirsbryggju þar sem bátur lagði að en sá sem reri – hún kannaðist ekki við hann – spurði einskis þegar hún bað hann um að ferja sig út í höfnina þar sem James, sauðaskipið, lá við akkeri með skipstjóran upp á þiljum hristandi höfuðið og segjast ekki hafa neitt pláss fyrir kvenmann á sínu skipi og Sigurlínu niðri í bátinum að heimta að fá að klifra um borð og gera grein fyrir erindi sínu til Skotlands og hinum stutta aðdraganda ferðarinnar, og af þvítíkum ákafa og örvæntingu að kapteinninn gat ekki fallist á annað en að hleypa henni um borð og hlusta þar á flókna og óskiljanlegu sögu þessarar ungu og smágerðu konu með peningaseðla í annarri hendinni sem endaði með því að skipstjórinn féllst á að skrá hana á skipið og vísaði henni á ofurlitla káetu við hlið sinnar eigin með þeim orðum að hún yrði að gera sér það að góðu, það væri annaðhvort þessi gluggalaus kompa eða lestin full af sauðfé og hrossum, og þegar Sigurlína skreið inn fyrir var koffortíð hennar híft upp í skipið en í landi var sagan um þessa skyndilegu brottför dóttur hans Brands Jónssonar um það bil að leggja af stað í ferð sína um bæinn, frá fjöruborðinu þar sem sést hafði til hennar fara með farangurinn og þaðan inn eftir götum bæjarins þar sem fólk horfði spyrjandi út í loftið eða greip andann á lofti, fullvisst um að eitthvað hlyti að hafa komið upp á og töldu hana varla örugga um borð í þessu skipi sem þá var um það bil að létta akkerum sínum og taka stefnuna í átt suður undan vaxandi norðanvindi, hefja sjö daga siglingu sína til Skotlands með Sigurlínu húkandi í þessari agnarsmáu kytru, að lesa Scott og Dickens

og svo aftur Scott, sofna við jarmið í kindunum, hneggið í hestunum, vakna upp um nætur, líða einkennilega og illa og hugsa: „Hvað hef ég gert?“, borða svo ost, lifrarpylsu, brauð, jólaköku og saltkjöt og drekka kaffið sem matsveininn færði henni einu sinni á dag, og voru það nánast einu samskipti hennar við áhöfnina því hún hætti sér varla út fyrir dyr utan nokkur skipti þegar hún staulaðist upp á dekk en þá var þunga loftið í káetunni, sem var frekar geymsla en eiginleg káeta, að gera út af við hana svo hún varð næstum því ringluð við að anda að sér sjávarloftinu við borðstokkinn og átti erfitt með að taka undir kveðju skipstjórans sem horfði á hana þannig að hún hugsaði með sér að kannski hefði hún misst vitið en hann kvaddi hana þó þannig við komuna til Leith að hún steig keik upp í vagninn áleiðis til Edinborgar, og þóttist góð þegar hún hafði rétt eklinum fyrir utan stöðina tveggja ára gamalt umslag með heimilisfangi Páls og Kristínar og brunaði af stað inn þröngar götur borgarinnar í átt að húsinu sem leit auðvitað allt öðruvísi út en hún hafði gert sér í hugarlund, og var reyndar ekki heimili þeirra lengur samkvæmt ungrúnni sem kom til dyra og benti neðar í götuna þar sem önnur kona benti ofar í götuna og þar fram eftir götunum þar til vagninn var kominn í allt aðra götu, að fremur hrörlegu húsi þar sem enginn kom til dyra fyrr en Sigurlína hafði gengið baka til, niður stiga og bankað þar á svarta hurð sem opnaðist hægt og rólega eftir að hún hafði látið höggin dynja á henni í geðshræringu þeirrar sem vafrar ein um í myrkri í ókunnu landi og þá var eins og hún brotnaði saman við að sjá íslenskan vin sinn, tók ekki eftir ástandi hans, hversu veikburða hann var, tók ekki eftir því fyrr en hún var komin inn fyrir og hafði heyrt sorgarsögu mannsins um hvernig kona hans, hún Kristín, hefði hlaupist á brott með enskum manni og héldi nú til í London að hann best vissi, hann hefði ekki heyrt af henni í marga mánuði,

hefði í raun verið hér að mestu einn og það mátti lesa úr augum hans hversu glaður hann var að sjá samlanda sinn eftir alla þessa einveru, það var eins og hann hresstist allur við þegar hann hafði lokið við sögu sína og áttað sig á því að hann væri ekki lengur einn, hann stökk á fætur og lagaði kaffi og þótti nokkuð til um áætlun ungu vinkonu sinnar, og já, auðvitað ætlaði hann að hjálpa henni með allt það sem þurfti til að komast um borð í Buchanan frá Glasgow til New York eftir um það bil viku.

Og sú ferð hafði gengið eins og í sögu þar til nú. Þær liggja fjórar í kojum sínum og nú getur Sigurlína ekki meira. Hún þarf út á dekk. Gangurinn fyrir framan káetuna er fullur af farþegum svo hún ætlar upp hinum megin en þá er hún komin inn á gang sem hún hefur ekki farið áður. Hún fálmar í myrkrinu þar til hún kemur að stiga en þar fyrir ofan er hún villt. Hún er lengi á göngu á göngum, fer annan stiga og einn til viðbótar þar til hún finnur leið út á háþiljur. Fyrst vill hurðin ekki opnast en er svo skyndilega rifin upp og um leið fellur Sigurlína fram fyrir sig og sjórfir hana alla með miklum krafti. Hún liggur hálf í dyrunum og ætlar að rísa á fætur þegar önnur aldan skellur á skipið svo hún er aftur komin niður, er á kafi og rennur eftir þilfarinu með skrokknunum niður í öldudalinn en nær að grípa í rekkverkið áður en hún fer fram af og niður á dekkið. Hún nær að koma sér aftur upp á pallinn, og þegar skipið heldur upp úr aftur liggur hún á maganum með pilsíð út um allt, og horfir yfir skipið, á farþegana sem kúra þar saman í einum hnapp og gleypa sjó, halda sér í stólpa og staura, hvaðeina sem heldur þeim um borð. Þegar skipið réttir úr sér á ný sleppir hún takinu eitt augnablik, stingur annarri hendinni ofan í utanávasann á rennblautu pilsinu. Hún þreifir eftir því sem hún má ekki týna, með aðra höndina smáa og snjóhvíta kreppta um staurinn á stiga-

handriðinu, þéttir takið þegar skipið þeytist upp með öldunni eina ferðina enn og finnur þá loksins það sem hún leitar að. Það er sendibréf stílað á Brand Jónsson, director of The Antiquarian Collection, og dagsett snemma hausts þetta ár. Bréf í umslagi með nafni og heimilisfangi sendanda skrifað á flipann sem lokar því aftur: dr. Franz W. Hoffmann. Burgdorf. Riverside Drive. New York City.

Runaround

Sigrún Pálsdóttir

Translated from Icelandic by Lytton Smith

Burgdorf. Riverside Drive

A bestiary. A book of beasts in a vellum-skin manuscript; English, from the mid-12th century. He takes the treasure from its wrapping carefully, with an expert's fastidiousness. A sense of anticipation thrums within him, a tension of which he never tires, the force behind his silent, lonely existence. He is the German-born Franz W. Hoffmann, owner of the largest rare book and manuscript collection in New England, one of the richest figures in all of Manhattan's wealthiest communities. A scholar of medieval Europe, his recent passion has tended more towards the urge to acquire old books and manuscripts rather than focusing on the history they contain. Hoffmann sets the manuscript on a large table in the centre of the room. No, not quite that: this room is more like a hall, perhaps a hundred square meters, two levels, with a platform that runs around all four walls and in places recesses into dark corners where books hide, countless but carefully catalogued in impressive leather volumes, which are lying on the table with his latest catch: The bestiary. It's past midnight but almost impossible to tell the difference between night and day; this is a windowless expanse; its vaulted bas-relief ceiling has finely wrought imagery with embellishments around a fresco on the ceiling that draws inspiration from Germanic mythology. Here is where Hoffmann holes up eighteen hours a day, indulging his noble obsession, fostering his gentle madness while

fondly caressing his collection. He's of average height, with coarse features, slender, skinny, even. His thin grey hair is combed back to his neck, his beard the same colour, rough and thick and hiding all the expressions his face might make beneath its bony, curved nose. The bright eyes are set deep as though they have seen everything they would wish to see. Hoffmann is seventy.

In the entryway to the library stand several Greek gods of average height made of marble; a limestone staircase leads from there to the building's second floor which hosts countless living quarters, in one of which them lives Hermine, Hoffmann's bedridden mother. She is one hundred and has been lying in this canopy bed for more than a year, being shifted regularly, as needs must. Her room has two floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of a large fireplace with ornate stonework. Everything here is in the style of Louis XVI except for perhaps Caspar the Magi, of average height and carved from poplar with gilding on his jacket. He is Moorish, from a medieval monastery in Baden Baden, and has followed Hermine's family about for a long time. These days he stands in the corner beside her bed, watching over her when she's not being visited by the two house servants or doctor who calls to see the old woman weekly. Hoffmann habitually visits his mother before going to bed, but tonight he forgot about her amid his interest in the new manuscript. So Hermine fell asleep on her own after one of the maids had seen to her as usual.

Those are the happenings in the fifty-room house by the Hudson River, far from the city mansions of the wealthy Manhattanites. Hoffmann had this house built shortly after his father died, naming it after his father's hometown, its location a kind of declaration of his disdain towards the affluent community to which he certainly belonged, those

uber-wealthy men who had built palaces on the wide streets running down Central Park's east side, their vanity and arrogance unbridled. He no longer had anything to do with these people; most of the people Hermine had met after arriving in New York from Germany in the middle of the century with her husband, the steel producer Hoffmann the Elder, were now dead. But their descendants had become many times richer than their ancestors and lived surrounded by wealth. Especially the new members who had joined the group with the rising generation.

The accumulation of wealth in this great financial centre that is New York City both feeds and is founded on a new kind of lifestyle which ever-increasing factory production makes possible—all of it driven by an enormous population increase: migration. Since the time the Hoffmann family settled on Manhattan, the area's population has nearly tripled. On a normal day more than 7,000 newcomers land on Ellis Island, off the coast of New Jersey, and enter the newly-built immigration station. Ships clog the harbour; others make for port. One of them has landed up in a storm off the coast of Nova Scotia and right now is heading back up out of a ten-meter-deep wave trough only to fall down again. The Buchanan, a nine-thousand-ton steamship from Glasgow. The ship's been sailing for more than a week, with about a thousand passengers on board, people from sundry nations who are tossing about in their living quarters, inside the first-class lounge, inside the narrow sleeping berths of the lower decks. And in second class, in a four-person cabin, a young woman lies, seriously ill. She lies there in the upper bunk and holds onto the rail with a death grip.

This is Sigurlína and she is a long way from home. She's been traveling for about four weeks since leaving Reykjavík the morning after the costume ball. That fateful event. And it

all happened at an alarming speed, precipitated by the letter she found on her father's desk: she dashed up to her room, rooted about in stuff and clutter, peered out of her bedroom window into the darkness at the water's edge, shouted to herself "James!" then said the name again, quieter, as she pulled out her trunk and set almost everything she owned inside: clothes, a few books, two English novels, photographs, a little bit of needlework and her small wooden chest with her money, some letters and, at the bottom, the old brooch, the damnable brooch she is stuck with and desperately needs to get rid of, preferably to make disappear, to bury on the beach, to throw into the sea, yes, throw it in the sea, what an idea, so she started to get ready, to put on her travel clothes, the striped dress she'd bought last year and the black jacket she had sewn and not yet used and which she buttoned up as she knelt down at one end of the room, bent over by her uncontrollable thoughts and irrational decisions, movements those decisions necessitated but which hardened her mind as she turned back to get the picture of her mother that was hanging on the wall and she put in her lap when the clock down in the living room struck four a.m. and she lay back down but did not let go of the picture, setting it on her breast with her hands clasped on top of it and she suddenly woke to a commotion downstairs, her brother getting up and going out of the house with a slam of the door so she jumped to her feet and started to get on with things for the second time, confused but resolute, placing the picture of her mother inside the trunk and closing it before pushing it out of the room and onto the landing at the top of the stairs, a small landing and she pushed it too far out causing the trunk to topple and launch down the steep stairs and hit the wooden floor with such a bang that she cried out and ran into her father's study so she could look out the window and see if the noise had woken the townspeople but when she saw no movement in

the next house she sat down at the desk and wrote her father a short letter, setting it on top of a wooden box that stood at one corner of the desk, then going into a the pantry to prepare provisions—two slices of salted meat, some liver sausage, a whole Christmas cake, a morsel of cheese and all the remaining bread when the clock struck eight and she knew that now the time had come so she went out and called two boys who were loafing about in the street and asked them to help her with her luggage down to the pier where a boat was docked but the rower – she did not recognize him – didn't ask any questions when she asked him to ferry her out to the harbour where the James, a livestock ship, lay at anchor with the ship's captain up on the upper deck shaking his head and claiming to have no room for a woman on his ship and Sigurlína down in the boat insisting on being allowed to climb aboard to explain her mission to Scotland and the impromptu preparation for her the voyage, and she kept on with such zeal and despair that the captain could not help but let her aboard, could not help but listen to the delicate little woman tell her complex, incomprehensible story standing there with in one hand the banknotes which sealed it for the captain, who agreed to let her embark and who guided her to a shoebox cabin next to his own, saying that she would have to make do, either this windowless closet or the hold full of sheep and horses, but while Sigurlína was clambering in and her trunk was being hoisted aboard, the story of the sudden departure of Brand Jónsson's daughter was just setting sail on its own journey around town, departing the shoreline and traveling along the town's streets where people looked ponderingly into the air or gave a sharp intake of breath, certain something was afoot, judging her not at all safe on board this ship which was about to haul anchor and set its prow to the south, spurred by a gathering north wind to commence its seven-day voyage to Scotland with Sigurlí-

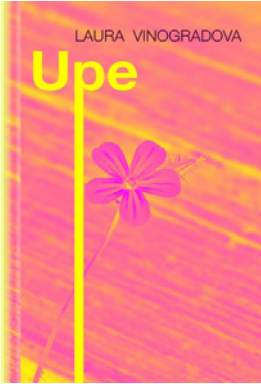
na cramped in a tiny teapot of a room reading Scott and Dickens then Scott again, falling asleep to the sheep's bleats, the horses' neighs, waking up in the night, feeling peculiar and poorly and wondering, "What have I done?," then eating her cheese, her liver sausage, her bread, her Christmas cake and her salted meat and drinking the coffee the cabin boy brought her once a day and that was almost her sole contact with the crew because she hardly set foot outside her door except a few occasions she staggered outside but the air inside the cabin was so close—the space was more like a storage closet than a real cabin—that being outside it left her almost confused breathing the sea air up on deck so she had a hard time accepting the captain's greeting as he looked at her as though he thought that maybe she had lost her mind but he still bid her farewell when they made port in Leith and she held her head high as she climbed up onto the carriage to head to Edinburgh and she thought she was all set when outside the station she handed the driver a two-year-old envelope with Páll and Kristín's address and set off along the narrow streets of the city towards the house, which of course looked very different from what she had imagined, and what's more it was in fact no longer their home according to the young lady who came to the door and directed her further down the street where another woman sent her further up the street and so on and so forth until the carriage reached a completely different place, a crumbling house where no one came to the door until Sigurlína had walked back around, down some stairs, and knocked on a black door that opened slowly after she had let blows rain on it with all the emotion of someone wandering alone in the dark in a strange country and seeing her Icelandic friend it was as though she broke down, so she did not notice his appearance, how wretched he looked, did not notice it until she had come in and had heard the man's sad story about

how his wife, Kristín, had run off with an Englishman and was as far as he knew lodging in London though he had not heard news of her for many months, he had mostly been all alone here and you could read in his eyes how happy he was to see his fellow Icelander after all this isolation, it was as if coming to the end of his tale and realizing he was no longer alone refreshed him, he jumped to his feet and made coffee and was rather impressed by his young friend's plan, and, yes, of course, he was going to help her with everything she needed to get on board the Buchanan departing from Glasgow to New York in about a week.

And that journey unfolded according to plan up to the present moment: There are four occupied bunks in the cabin and Sigurlína is at the end of her rope. She needs to get out. The corridor in front of the cabin is full of passengers so she heads up the other way, but finds herself in a corridor down which she has not walked before. She fumbles about in the dark until she comes to the stairs, but going up she loses her bearings. She walks along the passages this way and that for a long time, goes up one flight of stairs and then another until she finds her way out to the upper deck. At first the door will not budge and then it's suddenly torn open and instantaneously Sigurlína falls forward and the sea barrages all over her with great force. She lies there, half inside the doorway, and is just getting to her feet when another wave crashes against the ship and knocks her back down again, she's submerged, she scrambles across the deck with her body hunkered low in the wave trough and manages to grab the railing before she's swept overboard, down to the deck. With effort, she finds the floor again, and when the ship rights itself, she lies on her stomach with her skirt all over, and she looks over the ship, at the passengers huddling together in a single knot, swallowing the sea, holding on to

posts and poles, whatever keeps them from getting washed overboard. When the ship straightens out once more, she lets go for a moment, slips a hand into the outer pocket of her soaking wet skirt. She feels for the thing she must not lose, one small, snow-white hand clasped around the hand-rail pole, tightening her grip when the ship explodes with the waves once again and then she finally finds what she is looking for. A letter addressed to Brandur Jónsson, director of The Antiquarian Collection, and dated early autumn this year. A letter in an envelope which has the sender's name and address written on the flap: Dr. Franz W. Hoffmann. Burgdorf. Riverside Drive. New York City.

LATVIA



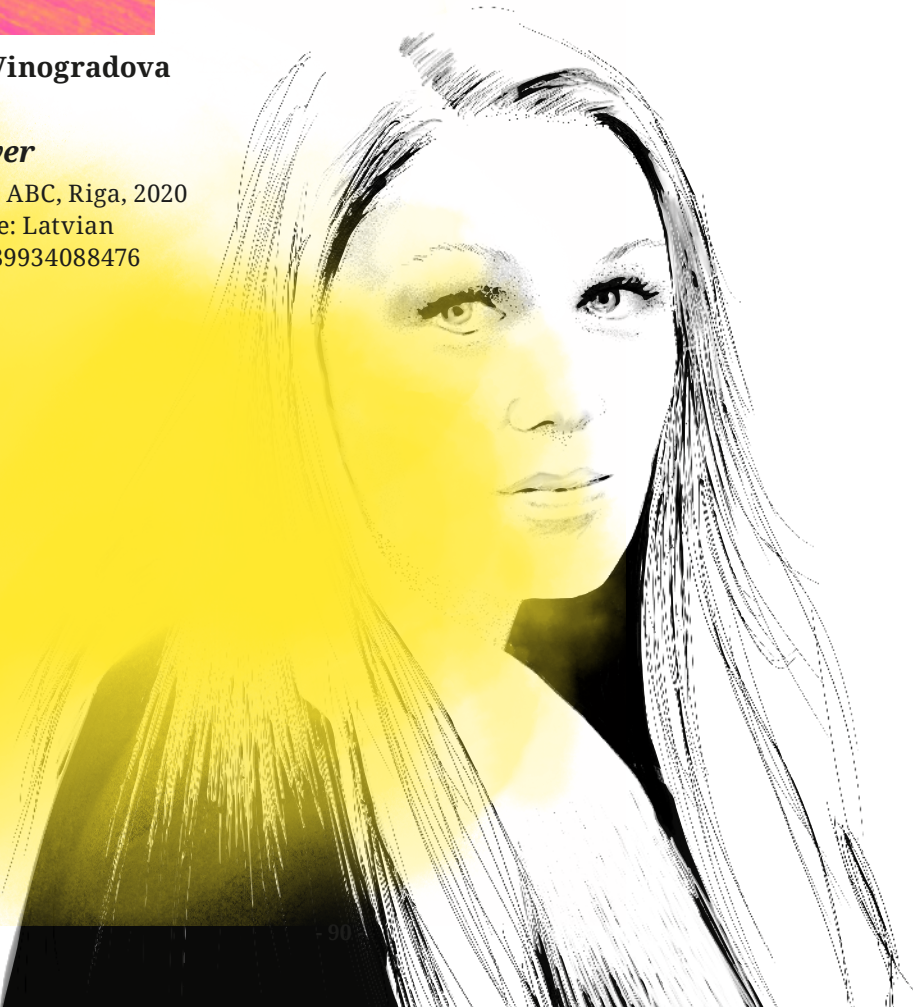
Laura Vinogradova

Upe
The River

Zvaizgne ABC, Riga, 2020
Language: Latvian
ISBN: 9789934088476

BIOGRAPHY

Laura Vinogradova, born in 1984, is a Latvian writer of children and adult literature. She studied business management at Riga Technical University and did not start writing until she was 30. Her first published book was a story for children, *Snīpulītis*



no Snīpuļciema (*Baby Long Nose from the Long Nose Village*, 2017), followed immediately by two collections of short stories: *izelpas* (*exhalations*, 2018) and *Lāču kalns* (*Bear Hill*, 2018). In 2019, she published a book for children in two volumes, called *Mežpasakas* (*Tales of the Forest*). Her latest book, *Upe* (*The River*, 2020), has been shortlisted for the Annual Latvian Literature Award. She currently lives in Riga and works at the Museum of Literature and Music.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

The life of Rute is prosperous, but it is filled with an emptiness made more and more intolerable by memories of her harsh childhood, longing for a long-lost sister, painful thoughts about a mother in prison and an inability to open up to the people closest to her, her husband included. Rute never knew her father, but when he dies leaving her an inheritance of a country house by the river, she escapes – escapes from the city, from people, from herself. She needs not only to escape, but to try and learn to live with the pain caused by her sister's disappearance – a pain that she has lived with for 10 years. Staying at her father's country house on the riverbank, she gets to know her neighbours, but, most of all, she gets to know the river... a river that becomes her symbolic sister.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

To the jury, *The River* by Laura Vinogradova is a fine combination of the great writing tradition of many Latvian women writers and of a deep and very personal exploration of serious topics that almost all women face in their daily lives. Vinogradova's work is based on a proper and thorough understanding of composition and structure, and on a great ability to express, in rather spare prose, eternal emotions and longings for nature, for history, for human relationships. Vinogradova entered the Latvian literary scene in 2017. In 2018, her first collection of stories, *izelpas* (*exhalations*), gained the attention of critics and readers, and the publication of her novel *The River* in 2020 has brought her a nomination in the Best Prose Book category for the Annual Latvian Literature Award 2020. The publishers describe the book as very touching, emotionally rich and of high literary quality, while the Annual Latvian Literature Award jury describes *The River* as 'a microworld... a present into which the long shadows of the past stretch', a psychological and melancholic story about loneliness and longing, a mosaic of lost moments coloured with hope for the future'.

Upe

Laura Vinogradova



Pirms

Dinai patīk pie Rutes. Tāds siltums viņas mājā. Tāds, kuram nav ne jausmas par vēju ārā. Ieejot māsas dzīvoklī, Dina uzreiz novelk zābakus, zeķes un basām kājām ilgi stāv un sildās. Rutei ir siltās grīdas, Rutei ir viss.

– Ko tu dari? – Rute smejas.

– Ārā esi bijusi?

– Nē, es strādāju. Kas tur ir?

– Vējš, mazo māsiņ, vējš.

– Te arī. – Rute atkal smejas un pūš Dinai virsū elpu.

Pēc tam viņas dzer kafiju. Rute pasūta picu. Dinas skatiens klīst pa virtuvi. Tas badīgi ķer visu skaisto, jo pie Rutes ir skaisti. Silti un skaisti. Dažreiz Dinai gribas to Rutei pārnest. Pārnest, ka viņa ir izrāvusies. Pārnest, ka Stefans viņu ir izrāvis. Jo Dina netiek prom. Netiek prom no aukstuma. No vientulības. Un dažreiz Dinai liekas, ka viņa nemaz nedrīkst tikt prom. Nedrīkst izrauties. Nepienākas izrauties. Tad viņa dusmojas uz Ruti. Jo arī Rute nedrīkstēja dzīvot šeit. Nedrīkstēja iepazīt siltas grīdas un mīlumu. Nedrīkstēja apkarināt visus plauktus ar gaismas virteņu bumbām.

Rutei uz palodzes burkā aug tējas sēne. Kad Dina to pamana, viņa aizrijas ar kafiju un smieklos klepo.

– Kas tas tāds? – Dina rāda ar pirkstu.

– Tējas sēne, – Rute skaidro.

– Kāpēc ap burku aplīmētas mežģīnes? – Dina atkal smejas.

Rute mazliet uzmet lūpu un neatbild.

– Tā man kaut ko atgādina. – Dina kļūst domīga un vairs nesmejas.

– Tējas sēni? – Rutes balss ir pilna ar sarkasmu.

Bet Dina šūpo galvu. Atved picu. Abas ēd taukainiem pirkstiem un par sēni aizmirst.

– Nāksi pavadīt? – Dina jautā Rutei, bet māsa purina galvu.

– Gribu vēl patulkot.

Viņas cieši apskaujas, Rute vēl pамет Dinai gaisa buču, un durvis aizveras.

Pēc tam viss notiek pārāk ātri, lai saprastu. Pārāk ātri, lai kliegtu. Pārāk stipri, lai pretotos. Dina izkāpj no 6. tramvaja Mārkalnes ielas pieturā un dodas uz mājām. Iela, pa kuru viņa iet, ir klusa un tukša. Ielas malās stāv dažas aukstas automašīnas un sarkans mikroautobuss. Bezsniega janvāris ir vēja pilns, un Dina iebāž galvu dziļāk šallē. Tas ir tāds īss mirklis – no mikroautobusa izlec trīs vīrieši, sagrābj Dinu un uzmauc viņai galvā maisu. Kā tādu nedzīvu lelli paceļ un iemet mikroautobusa aizmugurē. Neviena kļiedziens. Nevienas kustības. Dina sastingst un ļaujas, jo kādā dzīves brīdī ir pārtraukusi pretoties.

Viņa klusi guļ mašīnas aizmugurē un mēģina domāt. Vai viņai sāpēs? Vai viņa izdzīvos? Vai tas būs ātri? Bet viņa nevar padomāt. Tas sasodītais prāts ir ieslodzīts maisā. Viss ir ieslodzīts, arī bailes. Dina tās nejūt. Tas, ko viņa jūt, ir slapjas un aukstas bikses viņai cieši klāt. Apčurājusies. Mikroautobuss, šķiet, ir izbraucis no Rīgas, jo tagad ceļš ir taisns, līgans un viņi brauc ātri. Dina guļ savās čurās, sarāvusies kamoliņā, ar maisu galvā. Pēkšņi Dina atceras, ko viņai atgādināja Rutes tējas sēne.

Dina toreiz bija varbūt desmit gadus veca. Vienā dienā māte, neko nejautādama, viņu un māsū aizveda dzīvot pie Aigara. Nē, mājās mēs neatgriezīsimies, viņa paskaidroja meitenēm un vairs par šo jautājumu nerunāja. Māte mīlēja Aigaru tikpat ļoti, cik pirms tam mīlēja Vladimīru, vēl pirms tam Igoru un kaut kad pa starpu arī Jāni. Aigars nebija slikts, viņš meitenes lika mierā. Viņš nekad ar māsām nerunāja, un arī viņas ātri vien iemācījās nerunāt. Meiteņu runāšana un smiešanās nozīmēja zilu aci viņu mātei. Māte mīlēja Aigaru arī ar zilu aci, tāpēc māsas nesatraucās.

Pašā sākumā māsām nebija savas istabas, tāpēc viņas gulēja kopā ar māti un Aigaru. Aiz skapja viņām paklāja vatētu segu un iedeva mazu naktslampiņu. Tomēr tur bija tumšs. Katru nakti Dinai bija jādzird mātes elsošana, krākšana un Aigara vaidēšana. Jau pirmajā naktī Dina un Rute savu "gultu" piečurāja. Dinai bija kauns to teikt mātei, bet viņa saņēmas un pateica. Viņām iedeva tīru palagu, bet nākamajā naktī un arī aiznākamajā notika tas pats. Dina pamodās uz slapjas vatētās segas, un uz palaga bija liels, dzeltens pleķis. Viņa uzvilka džinsus un gāja uz skolu, bet ap kājām visu dienu juta to drēgnumu. Mātei viņas vairs neko neteica, jo tik daudz tīru palagu jau nebija. Un māte bija aizņemta, patiešām. Aigars gribēja ar viņu visu laiku būt kopā. Viņam nepatika, ja māte gribēja paspēlēties ar Dinu un Ruti.

Aiz skapja māsas nodzīvoja vairākus mēnešus. Katru nakti viņas čurāja. Dažreiz nevarēja saprast, vai apčurājusies ir Dina vai Rute, vai varbūt abas. Viņas pētīja pleķus uz palagiem, lai to saprastu, bet kāda tam vairs nozīme? Tāpat palagi bija mitri. Tāpat smirdēja. Tāpat tajos bija jāguļ atkal. Pa dienu Dina atsedza palagu un cerēja, ka tas reiz beigsies, ka viss izzūs un viņa vairs nečurās. Bet čurāja. Un arī Rute čurāja.

Tad viņas tika pie savas istabas un pārvācoties māte pirmo reizi ienāca viņu Aizskapijā. Ieraudzīja piečurātos palagus. Vatētā sega, uz kuras māsas gulēja, bija sākusi pelēt. Māte klusēja, un arī meitenes klusēja. Par čurām jau nerunā.

Savā istabā bija labāk. Viņām bija pašām savas gultas un tika iedotas plēves, ko palikt zem palagiem. Pirmās dienas Dinai gulta bija sausa. Viņa bija priecīga, jo domāja, ka ir uzvarējusi čurāšanu. Rutei gan gulta vienurīt atkal bija slapja, bet māsa vēl maza. Māsa vēl neprata.

Kādā naktī Dina pamodās un gribēja uz tualeti. Bet tualete bija ārā un, ejot uz to, bija jātiek garām Aigara istabai. Ja nu viņa Aigaru pamodina un viņš sadusmojas? Ja nu spārda māti? Jo Aigars tā dara, kad kļūst dusmīgs. Tādos dusmu brīžos izskatījās, ka māte viņu tomēr nemīl, bet tas nebija tiesa. Mīlēja. Paraudāja, sasmērēja uzsistos zilumus un mīlēja atkal.

Dina domāja un izdomāja. Uz galda bija palikusi burka, kurā bija ūdens otu mazgāšanai. Viņa pačurās tur. Meitene pietupās, palika burku zem sevis un mēģināja tumsā tajā trāpīt. Viņa piečurāja burku pavisam pilnu, mazliet siltas čuras notecēja arī gar rokām. Bet tas nekas, Dina bija priecīga, ka tik labi izdomājusi. Gulta paliks sausa, un viņa neies uz skolu smirdoša. Viņa paslepus sanesa istabā vēl dažas burkas, ko atrada sētā. Piečurāja arī tās. Kad beidzās burkas, Dina iečurāja vāzē, kura stāvēja meiteņu istabā, jo Aigaram vāzes

nepatika. Kad vairs nebija, kur čurāt, viņa piečurāja bļodiņu, kas palikta zem puķu poda.

Retu reizi Dina nesa savus traukus iztukšot. Tiešām retu reizi. Tāpēc piečurātie trauki kļuva tumši, pilni duļķēm. Tie izskatījās kā tējas sēnes. Tagad Dina atceras.

Mikroautobuss apstājas. Dinu izrauj ārā, un viņa cauri maisam sajūt mitro jūras gaisu. To viņa atceras, jo Vladimirs, kuru māte mīlēja, dzīvoja pie jūras. Tāpēc jūras gaiss ir mazliet arī viņas bērnības gaiss. No bērnības jau arī cilvēks sākas. Viņa ievēl dziļi sevī mitro gaisu un izgaršo to. Un sajūt asu sāpi pakausī. Tad ir tumsa.

The River

Laura Vinogradova

Translated from Latvian by Kaija Straumanis

Before

Dina likes Rute's place. There's a warmth to it. The kind of warmth that is oblivious to the wind outside. As soon as she steps into her sister's apartment, Dina takes off her boots and socks and stands for some time, barefoot, soaking up the warmth. Rute has heated floors; Rute has everything.

– What are you doing? Rute laughs.

– Have you been outside?

– No, I've been working. What is it?

– The wind, little sister, the wind.

– There's wind here, too. Rute laughs again and blows into Dina's face.

Then they drink coffee. Rute orders a pizza. Dina's eyes wander around the kitchen. They hungrily take in every beautiful detail, because Rute's place is beautiful. Warm and beautiful. Sometimes Dina wants to call her out on it. Tell her she's spoiled. Tell her Stefans has spoiled her. Because Dina can't escape. She can't escape the cold. The loneliness. And sometimes she feels like she can't even try. Can't be free. Doesn't deserve to be free. And then she gets angry with Rute. Because Rute shouldn't be living in an apartment like this. Shouldn't have heated floors or love. Shouldn't be stringing fairy lights from all the shelves.

Rute has a jar of kombucha fermenting on the windowsill. When Dina sees it, she chokes on her coffee and laughs through wheezes.

– What’s that? she points to the jar.

– Kombucha, Rute says.

– Why is there lace over the top of it? Dina laughs again.

Rute pouts and says nothing.

– It reminds me of something. Dina grows thoughtful and stops laughing.

– Kombucha? Rute’s voice drips with sarcasm.

But Dina shakes her head. The pizza is delivered. The sisters eat, their fingers greasy, and forget about the kombucha.

– Walk me out? Dina asks, but Rute shakes her head.

– I want to translate a bit more.

They hug each other tightly; Rute blows Dina a kiss, and the door closes behind her.

After that, everything happens too quickly to make sense of it. Too quickly to scream. Too forcefully to fight back. Dina gets off the No. 6 tram at the Märkalne stop and heads for home. The street she’s walking down is quiet and empty. A few cold cars and a red minivan are parked along the side of the street. It’s a snowless, windy January, and Dina retreats deeper into her scarf. It happens in a second: three men jump out of the van, grab Dina, and pull a bag over her head. They lift her like a ragdoll and toss her into the back of the van. No screams. No movement. Dina freezes and gives in because at some point in her life she stopped fighting back.

She lies silent in the back of the van and tries to think. Is she hurt? Will she survive this? Will it happen quickly? But she can't think clearly. Her goddamn mind is trapped in this bag. Everything is trapped, even her fear. Dina doesn't feel afraid. What she feels is her pants, wet and cold, plastered to her skin. She's pissed herself. They seem to have left Riga because the van is driving straight, smooth, and fast. Dina is curled up into a ball, lying in her own urine, with a bag over her head. Suddenly, she remembers what Rute's kombucha reminded her of.

At the time, Dina would have been around ten years old. One day their mother, without a word, had taken her and Rute to live with Aigars. No, we're not going back home, she had told the girls, and they never brought it up again. Their mother loved Aigars just as much as she'd loved Vladimir before him, and Igor before him, and Jānis somewhere in between. Aigars wasn't bad, he left the girls alone. He never spoke to them, and the girls quickly learned to remain silent. If the girls talked or laughed, it meant a black eye for their mother. Their mother loved Aigars even with a black eye, so the girls weren't worried.

The sisters didn't have their own room at first, instead sharing a room with their mother and Aigars. They were set up on the floor behind the wardrobe, with a quilt to sleep on and a small night light. But it was still dark. Each night, Dina had to listen to their mother's panting and snoring, and Aigars's moaning. Dina and Rute wet their "bed" on the very first night. Dina had been embarrassed to tell their mother, but she worked up the courage and finally did. The girls were given a clean sheet, but the same thing happened the next night and the night after that. Dina woke up on a quilt that was wet and a sheet with a large yellow stain on it. She

pulled on her jeans and went to school, but she could feel that damp cold on her legs the entire day. She didn't say anything to their mother because they didn't have that many clean sheets. And their mother was busy. Aigars wanted to spend every second with her. He didn't like it when she wanted to play with Dina and Rute.

The girls spent several months sleeping behind the wardrobe. They wet the bed every night. Sometimes they couldn't tell if it had been only Dina, or only Rute, or both of them. They'd study the stains on the sheets, trying to make sense of it, but what did it matter? Either way, the bed was wet. Either way, it stank. Either way, they had to sleep there again. Every morning Dina would pull back the sheet and hope it would be the last time, that everything would dry out and she wouldn't wet the bed anymore. But she did. And so did Rute.

Then they got their own room, and in the process of moving them their mother entered their space for the first time. She saw the piss-stained sheets. The cotton quilt they used as a mattress had started to grow mouldy. Their mother said nothing and neither did the girls. Urine isn't something you talk about.

Having their own room was better. They had their own beds and were given special mattress covers to go under the sheets. Dina's bed stayed dry the first few days. She was happy because she thought she'd conquered bed-wetting. There was one morning when Rute's bed was wet, but she was still little. She couldn't hold it in.

One night Dina woke up needing to pee. But the toilet was outside, and it she'd have to go by Aigars's room to get to. What if she woke him and he got angry? What if he took it

out on their mother? Because he did that when he got angry. The times he got angry like that it seemed that their mother didn't love him after all, but that wasn't true. She did love him. She'd cry, rub ointment on her bruises, and go on loving him.

Dina got an idea. On the table was a jar of water used for rinsing paint brushes. She'd pee in that jar. She squatted, positioned the jar under herself, and tried to aim in the dark. She filled it completely, a bit of warm urine dripped onto her hands. But Dina was pleased with her solution. Her bed would stay dry, and she wouldn't go to school reeking. She secretly stashed a few more jars in their room that she'd found in the courtyard. She filled those, too. When she ran out of jars, she peed into a vase that was in the girls' room because Aigars didn't like vases. And when she ran out of places to pee, she peed in the bowl that sat under the flowerpot.

On rare occasions she would take the jars out to empty them. Very rarely. And so, the urine-filled jars would turn dark, cloudy. They looked like jars of kombucha. Now she remembers.

The van stops. Dina is dragged outside and through the bag she can feel the damp sea air. She recognizes it because Vladimir, whom her mother had loved, had lived by the sea. The sea air makes up a bit of her childhood air. We all start at childhood. She takes a deep breath of the damp air and savors it. And there's a sharp pain on the back of her head. Then darkness.



Lara Calleja
Kissirtu kullimkien
You've Destroyed Everything

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2020

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BIOGRAPHY

Lara Calleja, born in 1988, was raised in Marsaskala, a once quaint seaside village in Malta that is now overshadowed by apartment blocks. Having graduated with honours in Near Eastern studies in 2010, Calleja worked for several years in tourism. Her debut novel, *Lucy Min?*, was published in 2016 and shortlisted for Malta's National Book Prize. Calleja then worked as a part-time librarian for 6 years, finding an outlet for her love of books. She loved organising yearly literary events and she managed to upgrade the collection of the very small library that employed her, leading to an increase in readership at a time when use of Malta's public libraries was diminishing. Having continued to write during this time, in January 2020, Lara left her full-time job in Tourism

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to start her career as a freelance writer and translator. In the following months, she published her second book, *Kissirtu Kullimkien (You've Destroyed Everything)*, which won her the National Book Prize for best emerging author. In the summer of 2020, Lara was commissioned to write her first-ever theatrical script. Her play *Taralalla* will be staged at Valletta's art hub Spazju Kreattiv in October 2021.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

You've Destroyed Everything presents a series of short stories, focusing on typical local characters who are woven into a narrative that goes to the very heart of Malta's political issues. The narrator changes with each story: an unrequited lover, a cat who has lost its owner, a nostalgic old woman who has an unusual friendly relationship with a bus driver, and a traumatised migrant who recounts the harshness of his home country, his traumas and the hostility he has experienced since arriving on the island. The tone changes, reflecting the changes in the stories and characters. Some stories are kind and sad, others harsh but hopeful, and some simply tell tales of helplessness. Political themes emerge naturally from the context of the characters' experiences, i.e., political issues such as over-construction are strongly

affecting people's daily lives in Malta. *You've Destroyed Everything's* last story ends on a hopeful note, as the narrator – a young aspiring farmer – gazes at the sky and sees in it a comforting reminder that things will inevitably change.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

Lara Calleja's collection of short stories, *You've Destroyed Everything*, is a work of ecofiction that applies ecocriticism to the Maltese sociocultural context. Ecofiction is a relatively new genre on the Maltese literary scene and the jury was pleased to acknowledge a young emerging writer who has come forward with a pioneering work in this genre. Calleja identifies spaces, nooks and crannies known and seen by many, but whose stories have remained untold. Some of these stories – those of multitudes who have come and gone – are buried under rubble, towers and new developments that have no connection with the past. These are some of the tensions that inspire Calleja's insightful writing. Calleja invites the reader on a trip where the ordinary, almost mundane – as if a neighbour were narrating their day-to-day life, their anguish and frustration – is imbued with meaning and transformed into something verging on the sublime. Lara's major themes are the fragility of nature and human relationships. Yet, despite the bitter nature of the subject matter, the reading experience remains fascinating and enthralling. This is mainly because of the author's ability to master the potential that the narrative

genre has to offer. Private and public spaces are transformed into landscapes of the inner self. Characters live and negotiate relationships in a world of magical realism, imbued with an aura of poetic fantasy. Calleja's keen perception and ability to write about the human experience with empathy and grace, in a subtle way, renders the stories timeless. The author is among the most promising voices in contemporary Maltese literature. Although it is evident that her literary skills will develop still further in the years to come, Calleja's thematic concerns, imaginative use of language and highly original treatment of her subject matter have earned her the appreciation of the jury, which considers her a literary genius in the making.



Kissirtu kullimkien

Lara Calleja



Rozi tax-Xgħajra

Rozi

Rozi ftit kienu jafuha nies. Rari harġet mir-rahāl hlief għal xi tiegħ jew festin tal-familja. Li toħroġ 'il bogħod minn rahālha għal Rozi kienet xi haġa kbira. Kienet tħoss diqa enormi, qisu xi hadd ċaħhadha minn element bażiku ta' ħajjitha, u għal dawk il-ftit sigħat li kienet tqatta' 'l bogħod mix-Xgħajra, Rozi kienet itteftef fil-lipsa u tħossha kemxejn aġitata, b'genn inkallat biex in-neputi Liam jegħja jixrob u jfittex iwassalha lura d-dar. Ir-rahāl tax-Xgħajra Rozi kienet tħobbu wisq. Xi trid iktar? Kwiet, baħar li kwazi dejjem imqalleb biex jiffriskalek il-pulmun, knisja ħelwa u żgħira u l-istess erba' wcuħ, li forsi sindikajri xi naqa kemm, imma wara kollox kulhadd sindikajr, hemm min b'ħanġra u hemm minn b'sikta. Finalment Rozi tberikhom għal ġieħ kemm-il darba sabithom fil-bżonn u r-residenti tal-villagġ tagħha kienu raġuni ohra kbira għalfejn Rozi qatt ma kienet toħlomha li titlaq minn hemm. Tiftakarha kuljum meta missierha tah attack ikrah f'qalbu. X'kienet tagħmel mingħajrhom li kieku f'dik il-ġimgħa ma ħadux paċenzja biha? Iwassluha Mater Dei, isajrulha, u jitingħulha lil Ġovanna, il-qattusa ndannata u nofs grazzja li żżomm f'darha Rozi.

Ix-Xgħajra villaġġ żgħir u ftit huma n-nies li jgħixu hemmhekk matul is-sena kollha. Hafna kienu jiġu għal sitt xhur biss, igawdu x-xatt kwiet. Fix-xitwa, il-maltempati u l-irwiefen hemmhekk huma xi haġa fenomenali; ir-riħ tisthajlu xi kelb irrabjat qiegħed iħuf wara t-twieqi ta' darek, u l-baħar jogħla s-sulari sakemm fl-aħħar jispiċċa jitfarrak waħdu mal-blat xierref. B'hekk hafna jiddeċiedu li fl-istaġuni iktar keshin idabbbru rashom lura lej' darhom f'Haż-Żabbar.

Imma Rożi, sajf u xitwa hemm. Dejjem. Għalkemm ma kinitx toqgħod fejn il-baħar, kienet ixxomm dik ir-riħa ta' ilma mielaħ minn kullimkien. Magħmul minn diversi nizliet paralleli, li kollha jagħtu għax-xatt, il-baħar fix-Xgħajra tarah, tħossu fi mnifsejk ma' kull kantuniera.

Imma mhux din l-aħħar sena. Minn meta waqqgħu d-dar ta' hdejha, u dik li tmiss mal-parapett ta' wara—hekk, kollha f'daqqa—Rożi ma tafx x'laqatha. Flok riħa ta' melħ ma' kullimkien, hemm riħa ta' terrapien u ġir. Flok hsejjes tal-bejta għasafar fir-rebbiegħa jhaxwxu xi mkien mas-siġra tal-laring fil-ġnien, hemm hoss ta' jigger li jtaqqablek il-voglia li tgħix il-ġurnata. Flok jilqgħek ir-raxx sabiħ tal-baħar dejjem imċaqlaq tax-Xgħajra hekk kif tiftaħ l-antiporta (li issa qed tkun rament miftuħa), tilmhek daħna bajda ta' trab tat-tfarrik ta' ġebel, li tidhollok f'għajnejk.

Il-qattusa Ġovanna wkoll qisha mhix f'postha. Qabel bilkemm kont taraha ġewwa. Dejjem moħbija xi mkien fis-siġra tal-laring—daqqa rieqda hemm, daqqa tiżvoga difrejha ma' zkukitha, u daqqa biex mingħaliha ha tħebb għal xi għasfur tal-bejt. Imma issa Ġovanna dejjem rieqda fuq is-siġġu ta' ġewwa, u bilkemm titħarrek hliet meta tisma' ċ-ċekċik tal-ikel. Donnha saret iktar fessuda wkoll. Sforz id-dwejjaq ta' dak li qiegħed jiġri madwarha forsi—jew

abbli qed tixjiej u timmansa, taħseb Roži. Jew sforz it-tnejn insomma. Min jaf.

Taħdita tal-istess erba' wcuħ—

“Xi ġmiel Mari, rajthom t’hemm isfel?”

“Xiex?”

“Tellgħu blokka. Ta’ fuq nett jaraw il-baħar.”

“Ija mela. It-tifla ta’ Marju xtraw wieħed. Ma ħaduhx daqshekk ta. Mitejn elf. Bil-madum u l-kmamar tal-banju.”

“Il-Marija Madunna. Id-dar tagħna qrib l-għaxart elef konna xtrajnieha tletin sena ilu. U tara l-baħar.”

“Ijwa Tes ħi, imma għaż-żminijiet t’issa mitejn ċucata ħaduh.”

“Ija vera, forsi. Sbieħ ħafna insomma. Ghidilha r-risq ħija.”

“Qed itellgħu ta, mhux ħazin. Issa anke ta’ Roži qed iwaqqgħu.”

“Ija?”

“Mela.”

“U Roži? Ili ma naraha kos.”

“E, Roži l-Imgieret ħija. Kienet ilha bilkemm tista’ timxi miskina, imma qatt ma tħajret iddabbar rasha mix-Xgħajra dik. Dejjem hawn taraha. Itteftef xi ħobza fuq il-banketta. Ħa ngħidlek, aħjar Alla joħodni milli nispiċċa f’dik l-imniefaħ dar tax-xjuħ. Ommi kienet hemm, Alla jaħfrilha. Qisha dar tal-imgienen ħi mhux dar tal-anzjani. Jittrattawk qisek tifla ta’ sitt snin, u bilkemm iħalluk toħroġ.”

“Miskina Rozi. U d-dar min hadha allura?” “Huha hi għandikun. Dik għandha huha xi għoxrin sena iżgħar minnha u ha d-dar f’idejh u waqqagħha. Qed jistennew il-permess għal sular ieħor, qalli Twanny.”

“Issa ngħid lit-tifla ta’ oħt Joe, għax dik kienet qiegħda titħajjar tixtri flett lejn dawn in-naħat.”

Govanna

Għadni qiegħda nħuf fiż-żibel li donnu dal-aħħar qed jizdied fl-inħawi, bit-tama li nsib xi sidra ta’ tigieġa bħall-aħħar darba. Imma minflok kelli nerga’ nqatta’ lsieni ma’ haġa tonda li kellha xi fdalijiet ta’ xi tip ta’ ħuta. Hemm tfajla ġieli tiġi ttini xi haġa tal-ikel, imma mill-bqija rrid infendi għal rasi biex immantni ruhi. Minn għajnejja l-ħin kollu ħierġa żlieġa u ġieli juġġħuni u ma nkunx nista’ niftaħhom sew. Dal-aħħar ukoll l-għasafar bilkemm għadni nismagħhom. Eħħħ. Dak iż-żmien tas-siġra kollha blalen orangjo, u l-ikel dejjem lest u s-sodda dejjem sħuna, spiċċa. Dik ix-xwejha tal-ġersi kulur is-sema u għajnejn kulur il-ħamrija, għebet bla ma biss qaltli ċaw jew avżatni li f’daqqa waħda ha nispiċċa bla saqaf fuq rasi.

Jien naħseb hadha miegħu xi mkien dak ir-raġel ikrah li darba fost l-oħrajn lestieli platt bl-ikel favorit tiegħi. Jien għedt da’ kemm ha naqla’ ikel illum? U sa anke ħariġli l-plattina fil-parapett tan-naħa l-oħra li qatt ma kienet tħallini noħroġ fih dik il-mara tal-ġersi kulur is-sema. U jien u niekol bil-qalb, ir-raġel ikrah bi qmis kulur il-plattina għalaq il-bieb minn fejn kont ħriġt b’sabta, u bqajt maħsuda nħares lejha jgħaġġel ’il bogħod sakemm ma deherx aktar. Stennejt lilu jew lill-mara tal-ġersi b’kulur is-sema biex jerġgħu jfegġu halli jifthuli l-bieb. Wara tlett ijiem nistenna,

iċċaqlaqt minn hemm, u bdejt inħuf għal rasi, bit-tama li l-mara ta' għajnejha kulur il-ħamrija terġa' tiġi lura, u tif-taħli l-bieb għal ġewwa.

Imma meta għadda naqa żmien u rajt qisu annimal ikrah u enormi jiddevora lid-dar fejn darba kont ngħix, sa anke rajtu jqaċċat lis-siġra kollha blalen orangjo minn gheruqha; qtajt jiesi għalkollox u dakinhar u anke l-għada marli l-aptit għalkollox li niekol jew niċċaqlaq.

Meta tkun trid tmut fix-xjuħija, il-ġisem iċedi u jħallik tmut.

Dakinhar li nbiegħ l-ewwel flett fejn darba kienu jimirħu omm, missier, ħut Rożi u l-qattusa Ġovanna, Rożi ħadet l-aħħar nifs imqanzaħ f'waħda mir-ringieli sodod bojod u minsijin tal-Imgieret.

Rożi kienet ilha titlob lill-Bambin tal-Ħniena Divina biex johodha miegħu u jeħlisha mit-torment ta' din il-ħajja ġdida li qatt ma basret se tiġi imposta fuqha proprju fl-aħħar żmien ta' ħajjitha. Ġieli kienet taħseb f'Ġovanna. Fit-tliet darbiet li ġie jżurha ħuha ż-żgħir, qatt ma rnexxielha tohodlu minn rasu x'kien għamel biha. Imma ħarstu kien idawwarha n-naħa l-oħra u Rożi fehmet li bħalma rema lilha f'dan l-isptar ikrah fejn qatt ħadd ma jiġi jżurha, ma kienx ħa jiddejjaq jarmi lil Ġovanna wkoll.

Hawnhekk fl-Imgieret ma kienx postha, kienet tgħid Rożi bejnha u bejn ruħha. Vera li meta kienet tgħix f'darha x-Xgħajra bilkemm kienet tiflaħ timxi, imma mill-bqija kienet tħossha tarmi s-saħħa. Ġara mbagħad imma li bil-bini u l-istorbju u kulma kien hemm madwarha, ħuha ż-żgħir fl-aħħar irnexxielu jikkonvinciħa li aħjar tingabar xi mkien fejn jistgħu jieħdu ħsiebha. Xi mkien sabiħ fejn

hemm hafna sigar u kwiet. U lil Ġovanna johdilha ħsiebha hu. Thabbilx rasek, kien jghidilha. Waqgħet fin-nassa. Pu!

Hekk kif Rozi kienet fis-sodda fl-aħħar ftit sigħat ta' hajjitha, in-ners semgħetha tgedwed u tghid hafna affarijiet. In-ners thassritha waħedha u qabdet sigġu u poggiet hdejha. Fl-esperjenza tagħha kienet taf li dawn huma sinjali li jimmarkaw l-aħħar ftit sigħat ta' persuna qiegħda tmut.

“Miskina, waħedha ħallewha u qgħadt hdejha jien. Imma kellha tbissima kbira fuq wiċċha u bdiet tgħajjat lil xi ħadd Ġovanna biex tinzel mis-siġra ħa tagħmlilha l-ikel. Qabbditni l-bard kif bdiet titbissem u taqleb għajnejha fl-istess ħin. Imbagħad qabditli idi u staqsietni jekk irridx melħ mal-brodu. Komplejt magħha u għedtilha iva u mellistilha rasha. Staqsietni jekk hix qiegħda x-Xgħajra u kont naf li kienet thobbu hafna hemmhekk, taf int kibret hemm u kulħadd jafha mid-dehra. U jien għedtilha iva, ix-Xgħajra qiegħda, u Ġovanna qiegħda hawn hdejja. Wiċċha sserja f'daqqa u staqsietni jekk Ġovanna ħafritilhiex. Ma nafx min hi di' Ġovanna jien, imma għedtilha iva mela ħafritlek.”

Reġgħet tbissmet Rozi u baqgħet b'ħalqha kemxejn imċarrat hekk. U n-nifs beda jbatti bil-mod ma' kull minuta sa ma ħadet l-aħħar nifs.

Forsi wara m'hemm xejn, hemm baħħ, kif jghidu hafna. Imma ddecidejt li nemmen li Rozi wara mewtha marret lura f'darha x-Xgħajra, fir-riħa tal-laring, mal-ħoss tant għal qalbha tar-riħ isabtilha mal-antiporta u ma' Ġovanna riegħda fuq is-siġġu tal-kċina.

You've Destroyed Everything

Lara Calleja

Translated from Maltese by Clare Vassallo

Rozi from Xgħajra

Rozi

Not many people knew Rozi. She very rarely left her village, and then only for some wedding or family party. Spending time away was a big deal for Rozi. It distressed her, made her feel as though some basic right in her life was being denied, and the few hours that Rozi was away from Xgħajra were usually spent with her fiddling with her dress and battling feelings of anxiety as she waited with increased desperation, for her nephew, Liam, to decide he'd had enough to drink and get round to driving her back home. She loved that little village of Xgħajra so very much. What else could one desire? Tranquillity, the sea, which was always just restless enough to freshen your lungs, a pretty little church, and the same bunch of people who were, perhaps, a little nosey but, then again, most people are a little bit curious - it's just that some express it at the tops of their voices while others do it in whispers. Most of all, Rozi blessed them for their help and for the kindness shown to her whenever she was in need. Those villagers were in fact another important reason why Rozi would never dream of moving away from there. She always remembered the day her father suffered a massive heart attack. How would she have coped if they hadn't patiently helped her out? They drove her to Mater Dei Hospital, cooked for her, and fed Giovanna, the crazy clumsy cat that lived with Rozi in her house.

Xgħajra is a small village and very few people live there all year round. Most people only come for six months of the year to make the most of the peaceful seashore. In winter the storms and gale force winds are extraordinary: the wind can sound like an angry wild dog on the prowl outside your window, and the waves rise as high as buildings until they finally smash and disintegrate against the sharp rocks. This is why most people decide to return to their homes in Haż-Żabbar for the colder months.

But not Roži – she spends all her summers and winters there. Always. And although she does not live quite at the water's edge she can smell the spray of salty water from everywhere. The village, made up as it is of a few parallel hills which all converge down at the shore, means that sea in Xgħajra is visible from all around and can be felt nice and fresh in your lungs from every corner.

But not this last year. Ever since the house next door to hers, together with the one which came right up to wall surrounding her backyard, were pulled down – just like that, both at the same time – Roži doesn't know what's hit her. Instead of the scent of sea-spray in the air, there's dust from rubble and lime. Instead of the rustling sounds in spring from birds' nests in the orange tree in the garden, there's the excruciating sound of a digger that destroys your very will to survive the day. Instead of the welcome spray from the choppy sea hitting you when you open the front door (which she rarely keeps on the latch anymore), a white cloud of fine dust greets you, and enters your eyes.

Giovanna the cat also feels uneasy. She barely used to spend time indoors before. She was always tucked away somewhere in the orange tree – sometimes fast asleep on a branch, sometimes sharpening her nails against the trunk, and sometimes actually believing she might catch a sparrow. But now Giovanna is always fast asleep on a chair inside the house, and she barely bothers to move except when she hears

the rattling sounds of her food being prepared. She seems to have become more affectionate, too. Possibly due to boredom caused by what's going on around her – or perhaps because she's getting older and meeker, thinks Rozi. Or maybe a bit of both. Who knows.

Conversation between the same few people ...

“How beautiful Mari, have you seen the ones over there?”

“What?”

“A block has gone up. There are sea views from the top ones.”

“Yes, of course! Mario's daughter bought one of them. It wasn't too expensive, you know. Two hundred thousand. That's with floor tiles and bathrooms included.”

“Madonna! Our house only cost eleven thousand about thirty years ago. And we can see the sea.”

“O yes, Tessie hun, but for these days they got it for a song.”

“Yes, well, maybe. They're quite lovely really. Wish her luck, will you?”

“There's quite a few new buildings coming up now, you know. And even Rozi's house has just been pulled down.”

“Really?”

“Yes, for sure.”

“And Rozi? In fact I haven't seen her in ages.”

“Well, Rozi's at the Imgieret Home now. She could barely walk anymore, poor thing, but you know, she never wanted to leave Xghajra. You'd always see her around. Sitting on a bench and snacking on a piece of bread. Let me tell you, I'd prefer God to take me a little earlier than ending up at that

awful old people's home. My mother was there, God rest her soul. It's more like a madhouse than an old people's home. They treat everyone like little children and hardly ever let you out."

"Poor Rozi. So who's taken her house then?"

"Her brother, I think. She's got a brother who's about twenty years younger and he's taken over the house and had it pulled down. They're just waiting now for new permits to be able to add an extra floor, that's what Twanny said."

"OK, well I'll tell Joe's sister's daughter about it. She's thinking of buying a flat around here."

Giovanna

I'm still hunting for food in the rubbish which really seems to have increased around here recently. I was hoping to find some chicken breast like last time, but instead I ended up cutting my tongue again on a round thing which had the remains of some kind of fish on it. A young girl comes to feed me sometimes, but mostly I have to fend for myself. My eyes are constantly watering and blurry and they sometimes hurt so I can't open them properly. I hardly hear the birds any more, either. Ahhh ... those days in that tree of orange balls, food always ready and waiting, and a warm bed for the night have well and truly gone. That old woman in a sweater the colour of the sky and eyes the colour of soil has disappeared without even saying goodbye or warning me that I was about to find myself without a roof over my head.

I think that horrible man must have taken her away with him. He once prepared a plate of my favourite food. I wondered to myself how much food I would be given that day. He even brought the plate out into the backyard where the woman in the sky blue top never allowed me to go. As I was

digging into it, the ugly man in a shirt the colour of my plate slammed the door. I was stunned as I watched him scurry away until I couldn't see him anymore. I waited for him or the woman in the sky blue top to hurry back and open the door for me. After three days of waiting, I moved on from there and began to hunt for my food, always in the hope that the woman in the sky blue top would return, open the door and let me in.

But when some time passed and this monstrous animal turned up and devoured the house where I once lived, even pulling up the tree with the orange balls from its roots, I realized it was all over and that day, and the next – I completely lost my will to eat or even to move.

When you want to die in old age, the body gives in and allows you to die

Rozi took her final rasping breath on one of those white forgotten beds in rows at the Imgieret Home precisely on the day that the first flat, built where once Rozi's mother, father, siblings and Giovanna the cat lived, was sold.

Rozi had for some time now been praying to Jesus of the Divine Mercy to take her with him and release her from the torment of this new life which she never imagined would be imposed upon her precisely at the end. She often thought of Giovanna. During those three visits of her brother she never managed to prise out of him what exactly he'd done with her. He just looked away, and Rozi understood that just as he'd dumped her in this ugly home where no one ever visited her, he wouldn't have been at all bothered to throw Giovanna out, either.

This Imgieret place just wasn't for her, she'd tell herself repeatedly. It's true that when she was still at her house in Xgħajra she could barely walk, but she felt strong and healthy

in every other way. What happened was, with the building works and the constant noise and everything going on around her, her younger brother managed to convince her that it would be in her best interest to move some place where she could be taken care of. Somewhere beautiful full of trees and tranquility. And he would take care of Giovanna himself. Don't worry, he'd tell her. She fell right into the trap. Pu!

As she was lying in her bed in those last hours of life a nurse overheard her mumbling. The nurse pitied her there, all alone, she pulled up a chair and sat beside her. She'd had enough experience to recognize the signs of a person dying.

"Poor thing, they left her all alone so I stayed with her. But she had a big smile on her face as she called out to someone, Giovanna, to get down from the tree so she could feed her. It gave me the shivers to watch her smile and roll her eyes at the same time. Then she grabbed my hand and asked whether I wanted salt in my broth. I went along with it and said yes as I stroked her hair. She asked me whether she was in Xghajra and, because I know that she loved it very much over there, you know she was brought up there and everyone there seems to know her, so I said yes. You're in Xghajra, and Giovanna is here next to me. Her face got all serious suddenly and she asked whether Giovanna had forgiven her. I don't know who this Giovanna is, but I said yes of course, she has forgiven you."

Rozi smiled once more and remained that way with her mouth open wide across her face. Her breathing got shallower and slower with each minute that passed until she took her final breath.

Perhaps there's nothing after this, an emptiness, as many claim. But I decided to believe that after her death, Rozi returned to her house in Xghajra, to be surrounded by the scent of oranges, to be within the sound of the wind which she loved and which would sometimes slam her door shut, and with Giovanna fast asleep on one of the kitchen chairs.

THE NETHERLANDS



Gerda Blees

Wij zijn licht
We Are Light

Uitgeverij Podium,
Amsterdam, 2020

Language: Dutch

ISBN: 9789057590009

BIOGRAPHY

Gerda Blees, born in 1985, made her literary debut in 2017 with the short story collection *Aan doodgaan dachten we niet (We Didn't Think About Dying)*. Her first volume of poetry, *Dwaallichten (Wandering Lights)*, appeared the following year. *We Are Light* is her first novel and received unanimous rave reviews from the Dutch press. It was awarded the Dutch Booksellers' Award for 2021 and has been nominated for the prestigious Libris Literature Prize.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Four members of a commune stop eating because they have decided that, from now on, they want to live on light and air. The characters in Gerda Blees' novel each have their own reasons for this extreme decision, which ends up costing the protagonist, Elisabeth, her life. This magnificent story is loosely based on true events. Each of the 25 chapters opens with the words 'We are ...' and is told by a different narrator, including Elisabeth's parents and siblings, her neighbours, her sister's lawyer, the night, the daily bread, the scent of an orange, dementia, doubt and Elisabeth's own body. Each narrator has a unique and distinct voice and makes an essential contribution to the novel's complex tapestry.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

We Are Light is an original, moving and rich novel that deserves a large international readership. It is a very special debut novel, with no fewer than 25 narrators, some of them quite bizarre, such as the smell of an orange or the main character's dead body. Gerda Blees pulls it off brilliantly: the body of Elisabeth tells us how much it yearned for attention and the touch of loving hands; we find out from the daily bread that Muriel has a hard time resisting its lure; the pen tells us that members of the commune used him to write letters to parents whom they were no longer speaking to. Even the story itself appears as one of the narrators. It tells us that the author did not want to provide an explanation for her characters' unstable lives: 'She wants to leave the mystery, that is Elisabeth, intact, because according to her that's what real life is like too – other people, especially the dead, are mysteries that can't be solved, no matter how frustrating that might be.'

Gerda Blees is a compelling storyteller who writes with forensic precision – and with great humour. *We Are Light* is gripping from the first page to the last. It's a moving novel, but at the same time there is enough light and air.

Wij zijn licht

Gerda Blees



1

Wij zijn de nacht. Wij brengen duisternis en dronkenschap, kattengevechten, slaap en slapeloosheid, seks en sterfgevallen. Wie in alle rust wil sterven, zonder al te veel gedoe en drama, zal dat bij voorkeur doen in ons, de nacht, terwijl de aankomende nabestaanden slapen. Zo zien wij in dit land nachtelijks vele kanker-, hart- en longpatiënten en uitgeleefde oude mensen bijna ongemerkt hun laatste adem uitblazen. Maar ook de minder vredige vormen van sterven zijn ons niet vreemd. Vechtpartijen, auto-ongelukken, moord en doodslag. De gruwelijkheden waarvan wij getuige zijn geweest, u wilt het niet weten, ook niet als u graag naar horrorfilms kijkt en een sterkte maag heeft. En wij willen er niet over praten. Er zijn interessantere manieren waarop mensen kunnen overlijden, zoals de vrouw die op dit moment onze aandacht heeft, bij wie de herkenbare elementen van het vredig sterven samenvallen met verontrustende afwijkende omstandigheden.

Het herkenbare: een woonkamer met meubels uit de jaren negentig met smakeloze decoratie aan de wanden – grote gekleurde vlinders van metaal, oude muziekinstrumenten in verschillende formaten –, en in die kamer een slapende

vrouw met slierterige grijze haren, zo mager en verzwakt dat haar hart het elk moment kan begeven, met naast zich een familielid, haar zus, naar de vorm van het gezicht te oordelen, die met beide handen haar handen omklemmt, alsof ze zo probeert de bijna dode in het leven te houden.

Het afwijkende: al het andere, maar vooral het feit dat de zussen op luchtbedden midden in de kamer liggen, en de aanblik van de rest van het gezelschap, een man van middelbare leeftijd en een wat jongere vrouw, die vanaf de rode bank zitten toe te kijken. Allebei hebben ze bijna net zo weinig vlees op de botten als de stervende; hun wangen zijn ingevallen, hun ogen liggen diep in hun kassen. Hoewel ze niet op het punt lijken te staan te sterven, zien we hun skelet al door hun huid heen schemeren. En aan de manier waarop ze ademen, alsof ze bang zijn te veel zuurstof in één keer binnen te krijgen, is te zien dat ze dan wel niet dood zijn, maar evenmin met volle overtuiging leven. Misschien zitten ze daarom met de ramen dicht in de bedompte warmte van de voorbije zomerdag, en hebben ze het licht uit gelaten, zodat alleen een streep oranje licht van een lantaarnpaal voor het raam tussen de gordijnen door de kamer binnenvalt, schuin over de luchtbedden van de twee liggende vrouwen.

Die luchtbedden zijn ons hier al vaker opgevallen. Normaal gesproken zijn het er vier, waarop de stervende, haar zus en de twee anderen naast elkaar op de grond liggen te slapen. Verder gebeurt er meestal weinig. Het zijn geen nachtbrakers, behalve de vrouw op de bank, die vaak met wijd open ogen naar het plafond ligt te staren, terwijl haar maag onder de fleecedeken borrelende en zuigende geluiden maakt. Af en toe trekt er een grimas over haar gezicht. Ze balt haar vuisten. Ze bijt op haar knokkels. Ze sabbelt op haar onderlip. Soms valt ze na een paar uur toch nog in slaap, maar vaak kruipt ze ook geruisloos onder haar deken

vandaan en sluipt naar de wc om wat water uit het kraantje te drinken, en dat herhaalt zich ongeveer om het uur.

Ze wekt de indruk dat ze honger heeft, maar nooit hebben we haar kunnen betrappen op een nachtelijk tripje naar de koelkast, zoals zoveel anderen die de slaap niet kunnen vatten door de borrelende leegte in hun maag. In de drie jaar dat we haar zo hebben meegemaakt, hebben we haar maar één keer in de keuken gezien. Eerst was ze een tijdlang voor de slowjuicer blijven staan, die ze over de zijkant aaide alsof het een lief zacht huisdier was, en daarna was ze op haar knieën voor de koelkast gaan zitten, met haar voorhoofd tegen de deur. Meer dan een uur zat ze daar, zonder te bewegen. Toen legde ze haar hand op de hendel. We zagen hoe de spieren en pezen van haar hand zich spanden, terwijl ze met al haar kracht kneep. Haar elleboog bewoog een klein stukje omhoog, en ze liet los. Ze stond op. Wankelde. Greep het aanrechtblad. Boog voorover, het hoofd tussen de knieën. Richtte zich weer op, nu langzamer. Zette een stapje. Haar ogen dwaalden door het kleurloze donker en bleven rusten op een appel die in de fruitschaal op het aanrecht lag. Ze liep ernaartoe, maar pakte hem niet op. Ze boog voorover, bracht haar neus er heel dichtbij, en bleef naar de appel staan kijken.

Als wij hadden kunnen spreken hadden we haar toegevoegd: 'Eet dan, vrouw, eet! Niemand houdt je tegen.' Maar ze at niet. Toen het haar gelukt was zich van de appel los te maken en terug te sluipen naar de woonkamer, trof ze daar de oudste van de vier, degene die nu op sterven ligt, wakker aan, met opengesperde ogen. Geschrokken bleef ze staan, gevangen in de blik van haar huisgenoot, een blik die niets uitdrukte: geen herkenning, geen afkeuring, geen geruststelling. Niets. En op dezelfde expressieloze manier sloten de kijkende ogen zich. Onze hongerige vriendin liet

haar schouders zakken, kwam langzaam in beweging en ging weer op haar luchtbed liggen, wachtend tot het daglicht kwam.

Als nacht van de wereld zijn wij niet snel van ons stuk gebracht, maar opvallend vinden we het wel, dat mensen in een land als dit vrijwillig honger lijden, met het voedsel letterlijk binnen handbereik. Alsof ze willen protesteren tegen de overvloed die hun gegeven is.

En nu is de dood achter de honger aangekomen, niet voor onze chronisch slapeloze, maar voor haar huisgenoot.

‘Ze is weg,’ zegt de zus, die zonder de handen van de dode los te laten rechtop op haar luchtbed is gaan zitten. ‘Ik voelde haar overgaan. Heel vloeiend ging het. Wat mooi. Wat bijzonder. Vinden jullie niet?’

Met onderzoekende ogen kijkt ze naar de andere twee, die nu nog voorzichtiger ademen dan daarnet. ‘Zagen jullie dat? Zagen jullie hoe rustig ze werd toen ik haar handen vastpakte? Eindelijk kon ze zich overgeven. Heeft ze zich overgegeven. Mooi toch, dat ze zo gegaan is? Dat we niet hebben geprobeerd haar tegen te houden? Toch? Petrus? Muriel?’

Petrus en Muriël verroeren zich niet. Hun gezicht blijft strak, terwijl hun ogen alle kanten op schieten, zoekend naar iets wat in het schemerdonker niet te vinden is. Uiteindelijk zegt Muriël: ‘Mooi, ja.’

‘En jij, Petrus? Hoe voelt het voor jou? Wil je daar iets over delen?’

Petrus sluit zijn ogen en schudt zijn hoofd, alsof hij wordt geplaagd door een insect dat hij niet durft weg te slaan. Zijn voorhoofd glimt van het zweet.

‘Geeft niet,’ zegt de zus. ‘Het is ook niet niks om je op zo’n intens moment meteen helemaal open te stellen voor alles wat je voelt. Het is niet niks, dat begrijp ik heel goed.’

Zonder iets te zeggen staat Petrus op van de bank, doet de achterdeur open en loopt de tuin in.

‘Oké, Petrus,’ zegt de zus, en tegen Muriël: ‘Het is oké. Hij zit even in de weerstand. Geeft niet. Dat komt allemaal later wel. Elisabeth is nu het belangrijkste. Kun jij mij de telefoon geven? En het nummer van de huisarts? Het lijkt me beter dat ik nu even bij haar blijf. Ik denk dat dat prettig voor haar is.’

Muriël staat op, loopt naar een rugtas in een hoek van de kamer, pakt er een mobiele telefoon uit en geeft hem aan de zus. ‘Het nummer moet ik even opzoeken.’ Ze gaat aan tafel zitten en opent de laptop.

‘Lief van je Muriël,’ zegt de zus. ‘Heel lief. Wat fijn dat we samen zijn. Dat we allemaal samen waren bij Elisabeth. Dat moet ze gevoeld hebben. Dat voelt ze. Want ik voel zelf wel dat ze nog in deze kamer is. Jij niet?’

‘Wat zeg je,’ zegt Muriël op vlakke toon.

‘Dat ze nog bij ons is. Elisabeth. Ik voel haar aanwezigheid eigenlijk nog heel sterk. Maar ik ben natuurlijk ook haar zus.’

Muriël knijpt haar ogen dicht en fronst haar voorhoofd. Dan spert ze haar ogen open. Het blauw-witte licht van de laptop maakt haar gezicht nog spookachtiger dan het al was. ‘Ja,’ zegt ze, ‘ja, ik voel haar ook, ja.’ Ze knikt even naar het lichaam van Elisabeth en kijkt dan weer op het scherm. ‘s Avonds en ’s nachts belt u de huisartsenpost, staat hier.’ En ze begint getallen op te sommen die de zus intoetst op de mobiele telefoon.

‘Ja, hallo. Met Melodie van Hellingen. Ik bel over mijn zus.’

Vanaf hier versnellen we een beetje, analoog aan de ervaring van iedereen die weleens een hele nacht wakker is gebleven, dat de tijd eerst langzaam ging maar dat het toen plotseling ochtend was.

Er ontspint zich een discussie met de receptioniste van de huisartsenpost, want de receptioniste zegt dat ze de waarnemend huisarts zal sturen, maar het lijkt Melodie beter als hun eigen huisarts naar de dode komt kijken, omdat het toch een bijzonder geval was, haar zus, qua medisch verleden, maar ook vanwege de emotionele band, en als hun eigen huisarts echt niet kan, is het wel belangrijk dat de waarnemend arts het dossier goed doorleest, en aan de andere kant van de lijn zien we de receptioniste met haar ogen rollen, waarna ze op uiterst vriendelijke toon aan Melodie vraagt of ze kort zou kunnen vertellen hoe haar zus precies is overleden, en Melodie vertelt dat het allemaal heel mooi was, omdat Elisabeth zich eindelijk had kunnen overgeven, want het leven was voor haar een hele strijd geweest, en terwijl de receptioniste ‘hm, hm’ en ‘ja’ zegt, werpt ze een blik op de geboortedatum van de patiënt en typt iets in over een onduidelijk verhaal, en ‘mogelijk suïcide?’ en dan zegt ze tegen Melodie dat er helaas toch echt een waarnemer zal moeten komen, die geen toegang heeft tot het dossier, maar dat ze kunnen rekenen op zijn professionaliteit, en al met al vindt Melodie het een kille gang van zaken, een onpersoonlijk systeem, dat regels boven mensen stelt, maar de receptioniste heeft geen tijd om Melodie te laten uitpraten, er staan nog meer binnenkomende telefoontjes te knippen, dus zegt ze vriendelijk maar resoluut gedag, verbreekt de verbinding en voltooit haar aantekeningen voor de arts die het lichaam van Elisabeth van Hellingen zal komen schouwen.

We Are Light

Gerda Blees

Translated from Dutch by Michele Hutchison

1

We are the night. We bring darkness, drunkenness, cat fights, sleep, sleeplessness, sex and death. People wanting to die in peace, without fuss or ado, often choose to do so in our – the night’s – company, while the about-to-be-bereaved slumber on. In this country, many cancer patients, people with heart and lung disease, and the exhausted elderly, breathe their last breath, almost unnoticed, at night. But we are no strangers to less peaceful ways of dying: fights, traffic accidents, murder and manslaughter. You wouldn’t want to know about the awful things we’ve witnessed, not even if you like horror films and have a strong stomach, and we don’t want to talk about it either. There are more interesting ways for people to die, like the woman who has our attention at the present moment. In her case, the recognizable elements of a peaceful death coincide with disturbingly abnormal circumstances.

Recognizable: a sitting room with 1990s furniture, tasteless ornaments on the wall – large colourful metal butterflies, old musical instruments of varying sizes – and in this room, a sleeping woman with wispy grey hair, so thin and weak that her heart could give out at any moment. Next to her a relative, her sister judging from the shape of her

face, clasping both hands in her own as though she's trying to keep this near-dead human alive.

Abnormal: everything else, but particularly the fact that the sisters are lying on inflatable beds in the middle of the room, and the presence of the other people: a middle-aged man and a somewhat younger woman, watching from a red sofa. They have almost as little flesh on their bones as the dying woman; their cheeks have caved in, their eyes are sunk deep in their sockets. Although they don't appear to be on the brink of death, we can see their skeletons jutting through their skin. And the way they are breathing, as though they are afraid of taking in too much oxygen at once, tells us that they may not be dead, but they are not entirely alive either. Maybe that's why they are sitting there with the windows closed, in the stuffy heat of the past summer's day, and they haven't switched on the lights so that only a thin orange beam from a street light in front of the window falls through the curtains into the room, cutting diagonally across the beds of the two recumbent women.

We've seen these airbeds here before. Usually there are four of them. The dying woman, her sister, and the two other people all sleep next to each other on the floor on them. Not much else happens. They're no night owls, aside from the woman on the sofa, who often lies staring up at the ceiling, eyes wide open, her stomach making rumbling, churning noises beneath her fleece blanket. From time to time, a grimace appears on her face. She balls her fists. She bites her knuckles. She sucks on her bottom lip. Sometimes she falls asleep after a couple of hours anyway, but often she crawls out quietly from under her blanket and creeps to the toilet to drink some water from the tap, repeating this every hour or so.

We get the impression she's hungry, but we've never been able to catch her taking a nocturnal trip to the fridge, unlike a lot of people who can't sleep due to the gurgling emptiness in their bellies. In the three years we've seen her like this, we've only seen her in the kitchen once. She stood in front of the slow juicer for a long time, stroking its side as though it were a gentle, sweet pet, and then she kneeled at the fridge, pressing her forehead to its door. She sat there for more than an hour without moving. Then she rested her fingers on the handle. We saw the muscles and tendons of her hand tense as she squeezed with all her might. Her elbow lifted slightly, and she let go. She stood up. Faltered. Grabbed the worktop. Leaned forward, head between her knees. Straightened up again, slower now. She took a step. Her eyes roved around the colourless darkness and then paused at an apple in the fruit bowl on the counter. She went over to it but didn't pick it up. She leaned forward, brought her nose right up to it and stared at the apple.

If we'd have been able to speak we would have shouted at her, 'Eat then, woman, eat! Nobody's stopping you.' But she didn't eat. When she managed to pry herself away from the apple and tiptoe back to the sitting room, she came upon the oldest of the four, the dying one, awake, eyes open. She stood there, startled, caught in her housemate's gaze, a gaze that was expressionless: neither recognition, nor disapproval, nor reassurance. Nothing. And in the same expressionless manner, the staring eyes closed again. Our hungry friend let her shoulders sink, slowly continued on her way, and laid back down on her airbed, waiting for day to break.

As the earth's night, we are not easily unsettled, but this we do find remarkable – that people in a country such as this would voluntarily suffer from hunger, with food literal-

ly within hand's reach. As though wanting to protest against the abundance given to them.

And now death has arrived in hunger's wake, not for our chronic insomniac, but for her housemate.

'She's gone,' says the sister, sitting upright on her airbed now, still clutching the dead woman's hands. 'I felt her pass... it was so smooth, so beautiful. Really special, don't you think?'

She looks at the other two, her eyes enquiring. They are breathing even more cautiously than earlier. 'Did you see that? Did you see how calm she became when I took her hands? She could finally let go... let herself go. Beautiful that it happened like that, right? That we didn't try to hold her back. Right? Petrus? Muriel?'

Petrus and Muriel don't move a muscle. Their faces are still drawn as their eyes dart around, searching for something they can't find in the shadowy darkness. Finally Muriel says, 'Beautiful, yes.'

'What about you, Petrus? What are you feeling now? Anything to share?'

Petrus closes his eyes and shakes his head as though plagued by an insect that he daren't slap away. His forehead is shiny with sweat.

'Never mind,' the sister says. 'It's difficult to truly open up to everything you're feeling at such an intense moment. It's difficult, I understand that, really I do.'

Without saying anything, Petrus gets up from the sofa, opens the back door and goes into the garden.

‘Alright, Petrus,’ the sister says, and to Muriel: ‘It’s OK. Just denial. Doesn’t matter. It’ll all come later. Elisabeth is the most important person now. Can you pass me the phone? And the GP’s number? I think it’s better if I stay with her a while. I think she’d appreciate that.’

Muriel gets up, goes to a rucksack in the corner of the room, takes out a mobile phone and gives it to the sister. ‘Just have to look up the number.’ She sits down at the table and opens a laptop.

‘That’s kind of you, Muriel,’ the sister says. ‘Very kind. It’s lovely that we’re together, that we were all together with Elisabeth. She must have felt it. She is feeling it. Because I can sense she’s still in the room. Can’t you?’

‘Huh,’ Muriel says in a flat tone.

‘That she’s still with us: Elisabeth. Actually I can feel her presence quite strongly. But of course I am her sister.’

Muriel squeezes her eyes shut and frowns. Then she opens her eyes. The blue-white light of the laptop makes her face appear even more ghostly. ‘Yes,’ she says, ‘yes, I can feel her too, yes.’ She nods at Elisabeth’s body and looks at the screen again. ‘It says here to call the out-of-hours service at night.’ She begins to read out numbers and the sister types them into the mobile phone.

‘Yes, hello. Melodie van Hellingen speaking. I’m calling about my sister.’

From here we fast-forward a bit, analogous to the experience of anyone who has stayed awake all night – at first the time goes slowly but then it is suddenly morning.

A discussion unfolds with the out-of-hours’ receptionist. The receptionist says she’ll send the duty doctor, but Mel-

odie thinks it would be better if her own GP came to certify the death because this was an unusual case, her sister, in terms of her medical file, but also because of the emotional bond, and if their own GP really can't come, it's important that the duty doctor reads the whole case file, and on the other end of the line, we see the receptionist roll her eyes and then ask Melodie in an extremely friendly tone whether she can briefly tell her how exactly her sister died, and Melodie says it was all very beautiful because Elisabeth was able to let go at last, because life had been a battle for her, and as the receptionist says, 'hm, hm,' and 'yes,' she glances at the patient's date of birth and types up something about a muddled story and 'possible suicide?' and then she says to Melodie that unfortunately the duty doctor will have to come and he won't have access to the medical file, but that she can count on his professionalism, and all in all Melodie finds this a cold way of going about things, an impersonal system in which rules matter more than people, but the receptionist doesn't have time to hear Melodie out, the lights are flashing for other incoming calls, so she says goodbye in a firm but friendly voice, hangs up and completes her notes for the doctor who will come to examine Elisabeth van Hellingen's body.

PORTUGAL

BIOGRAPHY

Frederico Pedreira was born in 1983. He has published six books of poetry, two novels, a collection of short stories and a book of essays. After pursuing a master's degree at Royal Holloway, University of London, where he wrote extensively on Joyce, Beckett and John Cassavetes, Pedreira returned to Portugal to become a journalist, translator and bookseller. Since then, he has lived in Italy and France, won an academic scholarship and did a PhD in literary theory at the University of Lisbon. In 2016, a book based on his dissertation was awarded the INCM/Vasco Graça Moura Prize for best essay in humanities. Throughout the years, his books have been acclaimed by the Portuguese press. He has recently finished writing a long essay dealing with the notions of intimacy and theatricality in poetry and the visual arts, drawing on a long and often overlooked tradition of Portuguese poets of the second half of the 20th century and beyond. Pedreira has translated collections of poetry by W. B. Yeats and Louise Glück, books of essays by Chesterton and Orwell, and novels by Dickens, Swift, Wells, Hardy, Banville and Woolf. His interests include philosophy of language, literary criticism, perception, scepticism, the philosophers Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, and the art critic Michael Fried.



Frederico Pedreira

A Lição do Sonâmbulo *The Sleepwalker's Lesson*

Companhia das Ilhas, Lajes do Pico,
2020

Language: Portuguese
ISBN: 9789899007079

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

A boy obsessed with losing weight spends his endless summer holidays at his grandparents' home – the iconic 'green house' where his father and six uncles once lived, leaving behind a treasure of objects and memories. With his brother, he incessantly watches a videotape of the 1990 European Cup Final between AC Milan and SL Benfica while, unnoticed, the family dog suffers an epileptic attack. In the hot summer nights, the boy gazes, dreaming, at 1980s posters advertising tobacco brands and

of famous racing drivers like Fittipaldi and Prost. There is an immense library in the green house, once the property of his great-grandfather, who in his lifetime became somewhat close to the famous Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa. Abandoning his obsession with football, the boy focuses on the dusty spines of endless rows of books, questioning the choices of his ancestor, whom he saw only once or twice when he was in a state of decrepitude. A journey of self-discovery begins, starting with the boy's cherished travels with his mother – to the United States, Tunisia and Brazil – and ending with a conflicted period of existential self-doubt in the stuffy room of a college dormitory. The boy becomes a young adult who – surrounded by not so sane aspiring students from all over the world – feels he shouldn't have left his country and comes to loathe the idea of being a 'citizen of the world'. However, there is a new friend and a new family waiting for him. Will that be enough to make sense of his past and its link to his chosen future?

♥ JURY'S REPORT

The jury considers Frederico Pedreira one of the most original authors of his generation, and with *The Sleepwalker's Lesson*, he continues his exploration of language and narrative techniques. Pedreira's novel stands out for the quality of its writing and for the way in which the author uses fiction as a tool for autobiographical writing. With language marked by restraint, the book is thus on the borderline between fiction and autobiography, a game that the author plays wisely, romanticising his formative years in Lisbon. The novel is set during the childhood of the protagonist/author,

in a house that is at the centre of his family life. It is from their relationship with his childhood that other moments of the protagonist's life emerge. It is not a childhood marked by tragic, disruptive, anomalous events; rather, the author gazes rather into his past in a rather poetic manner, illuminating and often casting a shadow over an age that is so often romanticised, whether in terms of innocence or trauma. Pedreira avoids this temptation. The author recreates his past, lingering on details and sensations in sentences that often stretch out, playing with the perception of time and without any kind of mimicry of famous works on similar subjects. It is a book with plots, streams of consciousness and interpersonal relationships that combine modernity with a classical tone, not conforming to the usual narrative formulas.



A Lição do Sonâmbulo

Frederico Pedreira



LINGUAGEM

Não me recordo de ter sido verdadeiramente infeliz em casa dos meus avós. Julgo que essas temporadas da infância e do início da adolescência não seriam susceptíveis de infelicidade, até porque era quase sempre Verão e eu era então muito novo. Sendo a família do lado do meu pai numerosa, era raro, para não dizer inédito, o dia em que eu lá estivesse, nesses abençoados três meses de férias, e não visse a casa cheia de rostos conhecidos, presenças transitórias que cumprimentavam o meu avô, sentado na poltrona que desde sempre designara para si do lado esquerdo da sala, junto a uma das muitas estantes de livros que lá havia, e a minha avó, sempre numa azáfama, tanto no quarto dos brinquedos a passar a ferro como a deslizar entre a cozinha e a sala de jantar, de manhã e ao início da tarde, a esfregar a alcatifa verde já nessa altura muito coçada, ou então a cirandar com talheres e copos de um vidro com uma tonalidade opaca cor-de-laranja. Nesses meses, eu vivia satisfeito, e digo-o sem as habituais reticências a que tantas vezes nos obriga o cinismo da idade adulta, e uma parte substancial dessa satisfação era resultante de um acesso quase ilimitado durante o dia ao quintal da casa dos meus avós, onde passava horas intermináveis a jogar futebol, a correr ou a praticar umas

lutas com o meu irmão que deviam às mais rudes noções do karaté, do sumo e da luta livre.

Nas tardes tórridas desses verões no quintal da casa de Benfica, no Bairro de Santa Cruz, era habitual tanto eu como os meus primos (ainda em número reduzido nessa época) azucrinarmos a cabeça da minha avó (era a palavra que ela usava, no seu desespero contido face ao nosso zero em comportamento) com as sucessivas garrafas de água que despejávamos sobre as cabeças uns dos outros para nos refrescarmos, uma tarefa cuja realização se impunha como bastante inútil no momento em que eu e o meu irmão, na altura bastante gordos, nos púnhamos a correr no quintal, à torreira do sol (como o pai gostava de dizer, sacudindo as palavras para o ar num tom que tanto tinha de perplexo como de irritado), sempre com o inabalável objectivo de perdermos peso. Note-se, porém, que as nossas corridas no quintal não primavam pela diversão ou por algo que não desembocasse directamente na mais pura obsessão; é que não corríamos pelo quintal, antes ficávamos no mesmo sítio e corríamos a uma velocidade que, sem ser moderada, nos deixava a malha das t-shirts encharcada passados breves minutos. Isto diante do olhar desistente e saturado da minha avó, que, temendo que apanhássemos uma congestão ou uma insolação, não deixava de vigiar-nos junto à soleira da porta da cozinha que dava para o quintal, tirando de vez em quando os óculos para nos mostrar que o seu desespero era sério, consciente de que dos seus olhos vítreos rolavam plúmbeas lágrimas que lhe abriam sulcos acinzentados nas faces. Tudo isto aconteceu muito antes do advento dos telemóveis, um engenho que teria facilitado muito as tentativas de apressada comunicação da minha avó com o meu pai nessas férias de Verão, e bem sei que teria igualmente poupado as muitas frases balbuciadas quando telefonava para o es-

critório e tinha de passar pelo filtro infalível da voz arrastada e bonacheirona do Sr. Prates, que muito gostava de dar a conhecer à senhora o seu imenso gosto por voltar a falar com ela, embora nas férias de Verão falassem praticamente todos os dias, e de lhe perguntar por todos os membros da família O., que não eram poucos, mesmo já nessa altura, antes de esgotar a minha avó pelo cansaço da simpatia, obrigando-a a balbuciar um derradeiro e vencido “obrigado” antes de passar a chamada para o ouvido invariavelmente ocupado do pai, já com outro telefone, o da sua secretária, preso no garrote da mão suada.

O escritório do meu avô era uma fonte de mistérios e de pequenas surpresas aos meus olhos de criança excessivamente curiosa. Não sei, de facto, se a curiosidade é passível de ser excessiva, deixando de ser uma benfazeja qualidade para se transformar num terrível estorvo durante a vida adulta. De qualquer modo, olhando para trás, eu nem era capaz de atribuir um nome ao estado de encantamento embrutecido em que não raras vezes me achava mergulhado, de dar um nome à minha débil e bajuladora curiosidade, de tal forma eu a sentia em mim como o mais natural dos reflexos, principalmente em certas manhãs e em certos fins de tarde das férias de Verão, quando, saindo o meu avô para ir comprar o jornal (o Diário de Notícias — nunca o vi a comprar outro) ou o pão para o pequeno-almoço dele e da minha avó ou para o lanche dos primos, dos tios e das tias que apareciam lá em casa com a naturalidade de uma esperada lufada de ar fresco, dizia eu que essa curiosidade vinha à tona sobretudo nas ocasiões em que o escritório do meu avô ficava temporariamente desabitado (o “castelo”, conforme era prática comum chamar a esse espaço no meio da família, do mesmo modo que designavam a cadeira acolchoada e já muito coçada como o “trono” do meu avô) e

eu procurava destramente tornar os meus passos mais leves do que o ar (lembrava-me sempre da recomendação dos “pezinhos de lã” que ouvira nos meus primeiros anos de escolaridade e que nessa altura já eram o começo da minha primeira miragem privada), esforçava-me inutilmente por abrir em silêncio o trinco da porta, que fazia ranger a sua lingueta metálica, e sem fechar a porta atrás de mim (nunca teria ousado fazê-lo, nessa idade ou noutra) tentava uns curtos passos no interior encerado do escritório e ficava embasbacado a olhar em redor. A minha surpresa não se prendia com um ou outro objecto novo que eu nunca tivesse visto pousado à beira de uma das estantes ou no meio da doída profusão de papéis, jornais antigos e bugigangas várias que ocupavam por inteiro a superfície da mesa de trabalho do meu avô. Talvez fosse o cheiro intenso que irrompia pelas minhas narinas e que na altura me parecia uma bizarra mistura, tanto repelente como cativante, de óleo, gasolina, sebo e canela, enovelando-se na camada espessa de pó que quase proibia a entrada ao meu irmão, então gravemente asmático, e cobria as fotografias toscamente penduradas em duas paredes, nas quais conspiravam em silêncio os rostos ora baços ora reluzentes de netos e netas, filhos e filhas, cobrindo também os livros de engenharia e de mecânica, intermináveis colecções de obras que tanto tinham de eruditas como de manual de instruções, no meio das quais havia um ou outro intruso em forma de livro com ambições estritamente literárias.

Era assim, o escritório do meu avô, mutável à menor tentativa de descrição, pois tudo o que aí eu pudesse encontrar era sujeito às deficiências do espírito algo indolente, embora inclinado para a tal curiosidade, que então se formava em mim, cheio de um repositório de pequenas e flagrantes ignorâncias, de estéreis desvios do olhar que turvavam irreme-

dia-velmente a minha percepção da realidade. Uma vez, cheguei a escrever num tom afectado e presumidamente original que o escritório do meu avô parecia ter sido regado com gasolina, e, na verdade, até hoje não se tornou excessivo o meu arrependimento por tê-lo descrito com essas palavras comandas pela pressa do coração.

Por vezes, encontrando-se o meu irmão ausente da casa de Benfica por alguma razão (sendo mais velho, arranjava — ou arranjavam por ele — outros modos de justificar a deliciosa inutilidade das horas de Verão), eu jantava com os meus avós na sala (quando havia mais gente, pelo menos cinco parentes em casa, era obrigatório ocuparmos a mesa de mogno da sala de jantar), com o som alto da televisão e os sucessivos flashes da telenovela mesmo à nossa frente, e quando passavam alguns minutos do término do episódio diário eu subia as escadas para me ir deitar. Geralmente, não precisava de me despedir da minha avó, pois sabia que, pelas onze, onze e meia da noite, seria a vez de ela se ir deitar, o que nunca acontecia sem que viesse primeiro dar um jeito à aspereza dos lençóis da minha cama ou sem dizer algumas palavras de circunstância, não necessariamente dirigidas a mim (embora ela julgasse que só a santinha sobre a estante do corredor conseguia ouvi-la), que eu tomava como um sinal infalível de que havia chegado a hora de eu lhe fazer um pouco de companhia às escuras no quarto de casal, com a minha avó já deitada e a sua mão enrugada que eu embrulhava na minha, ao mesmo tempo que ela deixava escorrer numa voz casquinada os últimos queixumes do dia, tão naturais para a azáfama em que rodavam por vezes perras as suas horas diurnas, antes de me mandar para a cama, pois sabia que a qualquer momento seria a vez de o meu avô subir as escadas e preparar-se para se deitar. Quando o avô subia essas malfadadas escadas em que anos antes

o pai dele, mais um espectro do que outra coisa, tantas vezes tropeçara até à queda final (pois só muito mais tarde é que um dos meus tios teve a óbvia ideia de colocar um corrimão), na maior parte das vezes passava já da meia-noite, e à medida que fui crescendo, andando à boleia de uma pretensa maturidade que tanto o pai como o meu irmão procuravam inculcar em mim à força de uma máscara de masculinidade que se servia de molhos picantes e de valentes goladas de água das pedras e de sumo de tomate, de Verão para Verão foi-se-me tornando familiar a mancha agigantada que a sombra do meu avô dese-nhava na parede que flanqueava o meu quarto e só terminava no grande clarão da luz eléctrica que brotava do escritório dele assim que levava o dedo certo ao interruptor.

The Sleepwalker's Lesson

Frederico Pedreira

Translated from Portuguese by Rui Vitorino Azevedo

LANGUAGE

I don't recall having been truly unhappy in my grandparents' house. I suppose those sojourns during my childhood and early adolescence weren't susceptible to unhappiness, especially since it was almost always summer, and I was so young back then. As my father's side of the family is large, there was hardly a day, or should I say, it was unheard of not to see the house full of familiar faces during those three blessed months of holidays. The transient visitors would greet my grandfather, sitting in the armchair that he had designated as his own on the left side of the living room, next to one of the many bookcases there, and my grandmother bustling about, either ironing in the toy room as if sliding between the kitchen and the dining room, in the morning and early afternoon, scrubbing the green carpet that was already quite shabby at the time, or sifting with cutlery and glass cups that had an opaque orange hue. I lived satisfied during those months, and I say this without the habitual reluctance that so often forces upon us the cynicism of adult age, and a substantial part of that satisfaction was the result of an almost unlimited access to the backyard of my grandparents' house, where I would spend countless hours playing football, running or practising some fighting

moves with my brother that were nothing more than mere notions of karate, sumo and wrestling.

In the scorching afternoons of those summers in the backyard of the house in Benfica, in the Santa Cruz neighbourhood, it was common for me and my cousins (still a small number at the time) to pester my grandmother's head (that is the word she would use in her restrained despair towards our shameful behaviour) with our bottles of water that we would repeatedly spill on each other's heads to cool off. This was an almost impossible task that proved to be quite useless when my brother and I, at the time quite fat, would start running around in the backyard, under the blazing sun (as my father liked to say, agitating words into the air in a tone that was just as much bewildered as it was annoyed), always with the unflinching goal of losing weight. Note, however, that our running in the backyard did not stand out for being fun or for something that did not directly lead to the purest obsession; it's that we didn't run around the backyard, rather we would stay in one spot and run at a speed that couldn't be called a moderate pace but would leave the fabric of our t-shirts drenched after a few minutes. We did this before the resigned and displeased gaze of my grandmother, fearful that he would get really congested or suffer a heat stroke. She'd keep an eye on us from the kitchen door sill leading into the backyard, taking her glasses off from time to time to show us that her despair was serious, conscious of the leaden tears that opened greyish grooves on her face as they rolled from her glassy eyes. All of this happened long before the advent of mobile phones, a device that would have greatly facilitated the rushed attempts of communication between my grandmother and my father during those summer holidays, and I am well aware that it would have equally spared the many babbling phrases when she called

the office and had to go through the infallible filter of the slurred and easy-going voice of Mr. Prates, who really enjoyed letting the lady know that it was an immense pleasure to speak to her again, even though during the summer holidays they spoke practically every day, and after asking her about all of the O. family members, who were quite a few even back then, before exhausting my grandmother beyond the fatigue of kindness, forcing her to mumble a final and defeated “thank you” before the call was put through to the invariably busy ear of my father, already on another phone, the one on his desk, stuck to the garrotte of his sweaty hand.

My grandfather's office was a source of mysteries and small surprises to the eyes of an excessively curious child. I don't know for a fact if curiosity is susceptible to being excessive, ceasing to be a beneficent quality to transform itself into a terrible nuisance in adult life. In any manner, looking back, I couldn't even ascribe a noun to the state of besotted enchantment which I often found myself immersed in, to give a noun to my feeble and grovelling curiosity, to such an extent that I felt it in me as the most natural of reflexes, particularly on certain mornings and certain late afternoons during those summer holidays, when, my grandfather left to go buy the newspaper (the *Diário de Notícias* — I never saw him buy a different one) or the bread for his and my grandmother's breakfast or for my cousins' afternoon snack, from the uncles and aunts that would show up at the house with the naturalness of an expected breath of fresh air. I was saying that that curiosity would come out especially on those occasions in which my grandfather's study was temporarily uninhabited (the “castle”, as that space was commonly called within the family, in the same way that they designated the cushioned and very worn chair as my grandfather's “throne”) and I cunningly looked for ways to

make my footsteps lighter than air (it always reminded me of the suggestion of “tiptoeing around” that I had heard in my first years of schooling and which at that time already marked the beginning of my first private mirage). I would make useless efforts to open the door lock in silence, which made its metallic latch squeak, and without closing the door behind me (I would never have dared to do it, at that age or any other) I would attempt to take short steps inside that closed study and I would be dumbfounded as I looked around. My astonishment was not related to one or two new objects that I had never seen placed on the edge of one of the bookcases or in the middle of the insane proliferation of papers, old newspapers and several trinkets that occupied the entire surface of my grandfather’s work desk. Perhaps it was the intense scent that burst into my nostrils and which at the time seemed to be a bizarre mixture of oil, gasoline, tallow and cinnamon, both repellent and captivating, rolling into the thick layer of dust that almost prohibited my brother from entering, as he suffered from severe asthma back then, and covered the photographs coarsely hanging on two walls, in which the matte or glossy faces of grandchildren and children conspired in silence, also covering the books on engineering and mechanics, an endless collection of works that served as being both erudite and as instruction manuals, in the middle of which there were one or two intruders in the form of a book that had strictly literary ambitions.

This was my grandfather’s study, mutable at the slightest attempt at description, since everything that I could find there was subject to the failures of a somewhat indolent spirit, although inclined towards such curiosity, which was taking shape in me, full of a repository of a small and blatant ignorance, of futile deviations of a gaze that irremedia-

bly clouded my perception of reality. Once, I actually wrote in a presumably original and affected tone that my grandfather's study seemed to be doused with gasoline, and, in fact, until today my regret has not become excessive for having described it with those words commanded by the haste of the heart.

Occasionally, when my brother found himself absent from the house in Benfica for some reason (being older, he would always find — or they would find for him — other ways of justifying the delicious uselessness of the summer hours), I would have dinner with my grandparents in the living room (when there were more people, at least five relatives at home, it was mandatory to occupy the mahogany table in the dining room), with the high volume of the television and the successive flashes of the soap opera right in front of us, and a few minutes after the daily episode had finished I would go up the stairs to go to bed. Generally, I wouldn't have to say goodnight to my grandmother, because I knew that, around eleven, eleven thirty, it would be her turn to go to bed, which never happened without her first coming to fix the rough and prickly sheets on my bed or without her saying a few chance words, not necessarily addressed to me (although she assumed that only the little saint on the bookshelf in the corridor could hear her). This I took as an infallible sign that the time had come for me to keep her company in the dark of the master bedroom, with my grandmother already lying down and her wrinkled hand wrapped up in mine, at the same time that she would let the last grumbles of the day flow from a snickering voice, so natural for the bustle that sometimes made the passing of the hours arduous, before sending me off to bed, for she knew that at any moment it would be my grandfather's turn to climb the stairs and get ready for bed. When grandfather

climbed those wretched stairs on which in previous years his father, more of a spectre than anything else, had so often tripped over until his final fall (for it was only much later that one of my uncles had the obvious idea of putting in a railing), most of the time it was already after midnight, and as I got older, letting myself be taken on an alleged maturity that both my father and brother tried to instil in me by force of a mask of masculinity that helped itself to spicy sauces and gulped down sparkling water and tomato juice, from summer to summer I became familiarized with that gigantic stain that my grandfather's shadow drew on the wall that flanked my room and only ended in the big flash of the electric light that sprouted from his study as soon as he put the right finger on the light switch.

SERBIA

BIOGRAPHY

Dejan Tiago Stanković, born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1965, is a writer and literary translator of the Serbian and the Portuguese languages. In 1991, after graduating in architecture in Belgrade, he moved to London out of mere desire to experience the world. Living as an illegal immigrant



Dejan Tiago Stanković

Zamalek

Zamalek

Laguna, Belgrade, 2020

Language: Serbian

ISBN: 9788652136254

for six years, he soon discovered he did not want to be an architect and could not stay in England because of its long winter nights in the North. Due to historical circumstances, he moved to Portugal instead of going back home and was granted Portuguese citizenship. Today, he lives between Belgrade and Lisbon. He learned the art of writing from the best Serbian and Portuguese authors, translating works from José Saramago, Ivo Andrić, Miloš Crnjanski, Dragoslav Mihailović and Fernando Pessoa. After opening a literary blog in his forties – only when

he was sure he had something to say – he published his first book of short stories in 2012, *Odakle sam bila više nisam i druge lisabonske priče* (*Where I Was From, and Other Lisbon Stories*), and in 2015 the novel *Estoril, ratni roman* (*Estoril, War Novel*). *Estoril* received awards in both Serbia and Great Britain, and was translated into several languages. His latest and second novel *Zamalek* (2020) is a patchwork of his experiences and of stories he heard during his long stays in Cairo, Egypt. In less than a year, it has already been published in six editions in Serbia alone.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Zamalek is a novel that, at first, seems like a travelogue full of descriptions of strange customs, a lexicon of exotic terms or some twisted Baedeker or travel guidebook about Egypt. Little by little, from newly discovered aspects of Egyptian history and description of its inhabitants' mentality, a story begins to emerge – the story of Kismet. In the heart of Cairo, on an island in the middle of the Nile, for decades there was an antique shop full of all kinds of treasures, like Ali Baba's cave. The shop, the most famous in that part of the world, was run by Kosta, a renowned Egyptologist, and his daughter Arna, until Kismet, owing to some of Kosta's mysterious sins, decided otherwise. This story, which mixes the earthly and the afterlife, could not happen anywhere else but in Cairo: that desert megalopolis, its quiet neighbourhood Zamalek, its people, its customs,

the heat of the city, the dust that is constantly falling and the Nile flowing like life. These are all as important to the novel as the characters of Costa the antiquarian and narrator Arna.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

Zamalek by Dejan Tiago Stanković is a book of skilful linguistic imagination. Its plot takes place in Cairo, and its characters bear the weight of different national destinies that shaped the 20th century, and which deeply concern the Serbian reader. Although at first it may resemble a travelogue or the study of a particular culture, by skilfully complicating and deepening the relations between the characters, this novel, quite in line with the famous *Alexandria Quartet* by Lawrence Durrell, is an extremely convincing literary story. *Zamalek* is a novel that metaphorically tells us about those times when it seems that history has gone backwards, when the freedoms we thought we had gained must be fought for again, about the fight against entropy and the magical attraction of the Orient, on whose fluid borders Serbia has often found itself. It is a masterfully narrated novel that, having won over the Serbian audience, will surely get under the skin of readers all over Europe.

Zamalek

Dejan Tiago Stanković



Plavi kliker

Kada se već Herodot pozabavio egipatskim podnebljem, neće biti neprimereno da i mi otvorimo tom temom, izuzetno značajnom za potpuno razumevanje ove priče. Pogodilo se da baš negde pred naše preseljenje u Egipat u šarenim magazinima širom sveta bude objavljena fotografija u koloru - portret Zemlje viđene iz svemira, lep na oko, kao naručen za naslovnu stranicu udžbenika geografije. Nazvali su ga poetičnim imenom *Plavi kliker*.

Sa udaljenosti od 45.000 kilometara, iz kapsule Apola 17 na putu ka Mesecu, Zemljina kugla se sagledava skoro kao pun krug koji sija osunčan pred pozadinom od mrklog svemira. Posmatrana otuda naša Planeta je plavičasta, modra od mora i bela od oblačnosti, oivičena tankim staklastim prstenom atmosfere, kao prozirnom aurom od koje Zemlja liči na klikere staklenice iz mog detinjstva.

Na fotografiji slikanoj iz donjeg rakursa kada se vasijski brod nalazio visoko na nebu iznad Južnog pola, u prvom planu bi se video Antarktiki da se u trenutku fotografisanja nije krio pod neprovidnom belom kapom od oblaka. Malo poviše, između dva okeana - levo je Atlantski, desno Indijski - jasno se raspoznaje čitava obalna crta Afrike ka severu, sve do Arabije i Sredozemlja.

Širom Zemljinog neba, i nad morem i nad kopnom, razbacane su mnogobrojne bele mrlje oblačnosti u vidu kovitlaca, tufni i pramenova nalik šarama zarobljenim u staklu klikera. Njih ima svuda osim iznad severnog dela afričkog kontinenta gde, nad povelikim prostranstvom riđe boje nema ni oblaka, ni na ovoj slici, ni na jednoj drugoj, jer se nad Saharom nikad ne naoblači i kiša, pravi pljusak da natopi zemlju, poslednji put je pao davno pre prvih piramida, verovatno krajem poslednjeg ledenog doba. To znači da je nad Saharom nebo neprekidno vedro, u najmanju ruku, već desetak hiljada godina, stalno isto - nad glavom danju Sunce i noću zvezde, a pod nogama najsuvlja od svih pustinja na Zemlji, u kojoj je vode manje nego na površini Meseca.

Kismet

قِسْمَة

Kismet je na arapskom usud, sudbina, udes, kob, dakle, ono što je svakom čoveku pisano, unapred predodređeno i neizbežno i s čim se unapred treba pomiriti.

Verovanje da je sudbina u Božjim rukama suštinski je deo islama. Dok je čedo još u svojoj majci, jedan Božji anđeo po Alahovom diktatu zapisuje pol deteta, dužinu života, i sreću koja će ga pratiti, pa taj zapis, kome se niti šta može dodati, niti oduzeti, ostaje heruvimima na čuvanje dok se ne ostvari volja Božja - tako, rečeno mi je, piše u Kuranu, nisam čitala.

Kismet je simbol čitav jednog fatalističkog odnos prema životu, prema radu, prema vremenu, istoriji, sopstvenoj i tuđoj odgovornosti.

Šta smo mi na ovom svetu? Koliko šanse imamo protiv sudbine? Da ste me pitali dok sam bila mlada nasmejala bih

se, dok danas mislim da ne bi bilo istina reći da nemamo nikakvog uticaja na sopstvenu sudbinu, ali zapravo retko kad život teče onako kako smo zamislili nego najčešće na kraju bude kako je suđeno i, napokon, naša volja ne bude presudna. To vam govorim danas, s punih 75 godina.

Noć je bila vrela

Kada me je sudbina jedne vrele noći u leto 1972 dovela u Egipat, imala sam 34 godine.

U to doba preporučivano je da se pred put u Egipat u Institutu za tropske bolesti prime neophodne vakcine, jer ipak je to Afrika. Pred polazak smo od prijatelja na poklon dobili knjige o drevnom Egiptu, o istoriji i o umetnosti, ali i jednu brošuru s instrukcijama za preživljavanje.

Upozoravali su nas da se pazimo zaraze, da peremo ruke, da ne pijemo neprokuvanu vodu, da se nipošto ne kupamo u Nilu, jer to je gadna, štokava reka, da se čuvamo toplotnog udara i sunčanice, jer se od toga umire, da preskačemo lokve na ulici, jer je stajaća voda leglo infekcije, da ne ulazimo u grobnice i podzemne lagume, jer tamo vrebaju praistorijski mikroorganizmi, smrtonosne bakterije i gljivice, i dovoljno je udahnuti taj vazduh neprovetren od antike da čovek, povrh svega zapadnjak, nastrada. I svi su ponavljali kako je u Egiptu oduvek sve drugačije nego na drugim mestima, ali koliko god da su me unapred upozoravali, opet me je te noći iznenadila vrelina koja me je zapahnula iz mraka na izlasku iz aviona - silazila sam niza stepenice vodeći tri malene, a naleti suvog vetra toplijeg od krvi, pokušavali su da mi otmu maramu s ramena i razbarušivali su mi kosu.

Aleks je bio doputovao pre mene, u izvidnicu, i kad se uverio da je sve kako treba, došli smo i nas četiri, ćerke i ja. Sačekao

nas je već na pisti, nisam mu se tamo nadala, a s njim je stajao uniformisani brkat muškarac. Dok smo se nas dvoje pozdravljali, a nismo se bili videli par meseci, on je, sav uozbiljen i s pištoljem oko pasa, skretao pogled u stranu kao da se stidi što je svedok tako strasnom grljenju i ljubljenju. Aleks ga je predstavio: Inspektor taj i taj iz policije.

Preko brisanog prostora vetar je gukao kovitlace prašine po tlu. Inspektor nas je odveo do terminala, on nam je pomogao da kroz pasošku kontrolu prođemo preko reda, kroz aerodromsku zgradu je koračao ispred nas i teatralno, da se vidi kako se trudi, razmicao glasnu i uzburkanu gungulu koja se gurala i laktala, on nas je doveo do američke limuzine koja nas je čekala ispred terminala za dolazak. Policajac je angažovao i nosače da nam pomognu oko prtljaga i, na kraju, pošto je proverio da li je sve u redu i zatvorio prtljažnik, svakom od njih je dao po novčić. Aleks je policajcu na rastanku u ruku tutnuo novčanicu, a ovaj je proverio koliko je dobio, brk mu se nasmešio, pa je zadovoljan svotom salutirao.

Aleksu je bilo jasno koliko sam radoznala:

Nemoj da se iščuđavaš, nije korupcija, to je bakšiš, čovek mi je učinio uslugu, sleđuje mu poštena nagrada. Tako se ovde radi, naučićeš se, lekcija broj jedan u Kairu jeste da dobar bakšiš otvara mnoga vrata.

Put od aerodroma do grada vodio je kroz pustinju. U automobilu, devojčice, tek probuđene posle višesatnog leta, uzbuđene od puta i od sreće što vide oca, bile su nemirne i brbljive, pa nas dvoje nismo mogli da razgovaramo, dok se nisu malo smirile. Ušli smo u grad, put je vodio između nizova nelepih, bezličnih zgrada boje pustinje i prašine, a ja sam osetila da je Aleksa strah da mi se ne dopada i prva sam ga upitala:

I? Kako ti se čini ovde?

Ne znam šta bih ti rekao. Čudna zemlja. Ne možeš biti ravnodušan. Meni nije dosad nije loše, a kad se naviknemo biće, inšala, još bolje.

Nasmejalo me to njegovo inšala, tada sam ga prvi put čula.

Inšala

إنشاء الله

Nezavisno od svog obrazovanja, vere i kaste, Egipćanin će pri svakom spomenu budućnosti uvek dodati jedno *inšala*. Ako Bog da. Alah na arapskom, i muslimanima i hrišćanima, znači Bog i tim ponavljanjem Njegovog imena kad god im se ukaže prilika oni i sami sebe i jedni druge podsećaju na ono šta ne valja smetnuti s uma - da smo nemoćni pred sudbinom i da prečesto nije onako kako je rečeno već kako je suđeno. Jer poslednja reč je ipak uvek Njegova.

Navrati popodne.

Inšala znači da hoće, ako se zvezde ne sklope drugačije.

Hoćemo li u Operu u petak?

Inšala znači da ćete ići, u slučaju da drugačije ne odluči usud.

Trebalo mi je prilično vremena da prokljuvim da *inšala* zapravo znači *da*, ali jedno *da* s neznatnom rezervom, nešto kao - *Ja sam za i što se mene tiče odgovor je da, samo još treba da vidimo šta će Bog konačno odlučiti po tom pitanju*. Jače i uverljivije obećanje od *inšala* od Egipćanina nije moguće iznuditi ni pod mukama.

Da li će danas doći da poprave lift?

Prijavljen je kvar, doći će, inšala.

Ali unutra je zarobljena neka žena

Izbaviće je, inšala, majstori.

Zamalek

Dejan Tiago Stanković

Translated from Serbian by Chloé Billon

La Bille bleue

Puisque Hérodote a déjà traité du climat égyptien, il ne sera pas déplacé que nous ouvrons nous aussi sur ce thème, d'une importance fondamentale pour bien comprendre cette histoire. Le hasard voulut que, juste avant notre déménagement en Égypte, les magazines sur papier glacé du monde entier publient une photo en couleurs – un portrait de la Terre vue de l'espace, tout à fait ravissant, comme réalisé sur commande pour la couverture d'un manuel de géographie. Il reçut le nom poétique de *Bille bleue*.

À une distance de 45 000 kilomètres, depuis la mission Apollo 17 en route pour la Lune, le globe terrestre apparaît comme un cercle presque parfait, qui resplendit, ensoleillé, sur fond d'univers ténébreux. Vue d'en haut, notre planète est bleuâtre, bleue de mer et blanche de nuages, ourlée par le mince anneau vitreux de l'atmosphère, telle une aura transparente qui confère à la Terre l'aspect des billes en verre de mon enfance.

Sur cette photographie, prise en contre-plongée quand la navette spatiale se trouvait haut dans le ciel au-dessus du pôle Sud, on discerne au premier plan l'Antarctique qui, au moment du cliché, ne se cachait pas sous un impénétrable manteau blanc de nuages. Un peu au-dessus, entre deux océans – à gauche l'Atlantique, à droite l'Indien – on dis-

tingue nettement toute la ligne de côte de l'Afrique, vers le nord, jusqu'à l'Arabie et la Méditerranée.

Tous les cieux terrestres, au-dessus des mers comme des continents, sont parsemés des multiples taches blanches des nuages, tourbillons, touffes et mèches semblables aux motifs prisonniers du verre des billes. Il y en a partout, sauf au-dessus de la partie nord du continent africain où, sur une vaste étendue de couleur rousse, pas le moindre nuage en vue, pas plus sur cette photo que sur aucune autre, car au-dessus du Sahara jamais le ciel ne se couvre, jamais il ne pleut, la dernière bonne averse, de celles qui détrempent la terre, est tombée bien avant les premières pyramides, probablement vers la fin de la dernière période glaciaire. Ce qui signifie qu'au-dessus du Sahara, le ciel est constamment bleu, et ce depuis, au bas mot, une dizaine de milliers d'années déjà, toujours identique – le jour le soleil, la nuit les étoiles au-dessus de la tête, et sous les pieds, la terre la plus sèche de tous les déserts du monde, qui renferme moins d'eau que la surface de la Lune.

Kismet

قِسْمَةٌ

En arabe, le kismet signifie le destin, la destinée, le sort, la fortune, ce qui, donc, est réservé à chaque homme, prédéterminé et inévitable, et à quoi il faut se résigner à l'avance.

Cette croyance que notre destin est entre les mains de Dieu fait partie intégrante de l'islam. Alors que l'embryon est encore dans le ventre de sa mère, un ange de Dieu inscrit, sous la dictée d'Allah, le sexe de l'enfant, la durée de sa vie, ses heurs et ses malheurs, et cette inscription, à laquelle on ne peut rien ajouter ni retirer, reste sous la garde des anges

jusqu'à ce que la volonté de Dieu soit faite – c'est ce qui est écrit, m'a-t-on dit, dans le Coran, je ne l'ai pas lu.

Le kismet est le symbole de tout un rapport fataliste à la vie, au travail, au temps, à l'histoire, à la responsabilité, de soi et des autres.

Que sommes-nous en ce monde? Quelles sont nos chances face au destin? Si vous m'aviez posé la question quand j'étais jeune, j'aurais ri, tandis qu'aujourd'hui, si je pense qu'il serait faux de dire que nous n'avons pas la moindre influence sur notre propre destinée, il est rare que la vie se déroule comme nous l'avions imaginé, le plus souvent, au final, les choses se passent comme c'était écrit, et notre volonté, en définitive, ne joue pas un rôle décisif. Je vous dis ça aujourd'hui, à 75 ans révolus.

La nuit était torride

Quand le destin, par une nuit torride de l'été 1972, m'a amenée en Égypte, j'avais 34 ans.

À cette époque, on recommandait avant un voyage en Égypte de se faire vacciner à l'Institut des maladies tropicales, après tout, c'était quand même l'Afrique. Avant le départ, nos amis nous avaient offert des livres sur l'Égypte ancienne, sur l'histoire et l'art, mais également une brochure avec des consignes de survie.

On nous avait prévenus de faire attention aux maladies, de bien nous laver les mains, de ne boire que de l'eau bouillie, de ne surtout pas nous baigner dans le Nil, une rivière sale et répugnante, de nous garder du coup de chaleur et de l'insolation, car on pouvait en mourir, d'enjamber les flaques dans la rue, car l'eau stagnante était un nid d'in-

fections, de ne pas entrer dans les tombeaux et les galeries souterraines, qui grouillaient de micro-organismes préhistoriques, de bactéries mortelles et de miasmes, et qu'une inspiration de cet air renfermé depuis l'Antiquité suffisait à vous tuer un homme, surtout un Occidental. Et tous nous répétaient qu'en Égypte, tout était différent depuis la nuit des temps, mais malgré ces avertissements, cette nuit-là, j'ai été surprise par la touffeur qui m'a assailli depuis les ténèbres, à la sortie de l'avion. Je descendais l'escalier suivie de mes trois petites, et les bourrasques d'un vent sec plus chaud que le sang tentaient de m'arracher mon foulard des épaules et m'ébouriffaient les cheveux.

Alex était parti avant, en éclaireur, et une fois qu'il s'était assuré que tout était en ordre, nous l'avions rejoint toutes les quatre, nos filles et moi. Il nous attendait déjà sur la piste, je n'avais pas espéré le voir là, aux côtés d'un homme moustachu en uniforme. Pendant nos retrouvailles, et ça faisait quelques mois que nous ne nous étions pas vus, l'homme a, solennel et un pistolet à la ceinture, détourné le regard, comme s'il avait honte d'être le témoin d'embrassades et de baisers si passionnés. Alex l'a présenté: l'inspecteur Untel, de la police.

Dans l'étendue déserte, le vent chassait des tourbillons de poussière sur le sol. L'inspecteur nous a accompagnés au terminal, nous a fait couper la file pour le contrôle des passeports, nous a ouvert la voie dans le bâtiment de l'aéroport en écartant théâtralement, pour bien montrer comme il se donnait du mal, la foule bruyante et agitée qui se pressait et se bousculait, et nous a emmenés à une limousine américaine qui nous attendait devant le terminal des arrivées. Le policier avait même engagé des porteurs pour nos bagages et, à la fin, après avoir vérifié que tout était en ordre et refermé le coffre, il leur a donné à chacun une pièce. Avant de

partir, Alex a fourré un billet dans la main du policier, qui a vérifié combien il avait reçu, sa moustache a souri et, satisfait du montant, il nous a fait un salut militaire.

Alex a bien vu que j'étais intriguée :

Ne t'étonne pas, ce n'est pas de la corruption, c'est un bakchich, le type m'a rendu un service, il mérite une récompense honnête. C'est comme ça que ça marche, ici, tu apprendras, la leçon de survie numéro un au Caire, c'est qu'un bon bakchich ouvre beaucoup de portes.

La route de l'aéroport à la ville traversait le désert. Dans la voiture, nos petites filles, tout juste réveillées après plusieurs heures de vol, surexcitées par le voyage et par la joie de revoir leur père, étaient agitées et volubiles, et nous n'avons pas pu discuter avant qu'elles ne se soient un peu calmées. Nous sommes entrés dans la ville, la route passait entre des rangées de bâtiments impersonnels et sans charme, couleur désert et poussière, j'ai senti qu'Alex avait peur que ça ne me plaise pas, et je lui ai demandé la première :

Alors ? Tu te plais ici ?

Je ne sais pas trop quoi te dire. C'est un pays étrange. Impossible d'y rester indifférent. Pour l'instant, je ne m'y suis encore jamais senti mal, et une fois qu'on s'y sera habitués, ça sera, Inch Allah, encore mieux.

Son Inch Allah m'a fait rire, c'était la première fois que j'entendais cette expression.

Inch Allah

إنشاء الله

Quelle que soit son éducation, sa religion et sa caste, un Égyptien, à la moindre mention de l'avenir, ajoute toujours un *Inch Allah*. Si Dieu le veut. En arabe, Allah signifie Dieu, pour les musulmans comme pour les chrétiens, et en répétant son nom dès que l'occasion se présente, ils se rappellent à eux-mêmes et les uns les autres ce qu'il ne faut jamais perdre de vue – que nous sommes impuissants face au destin, et que bien souvent, les choses ne se déroulent pas comme prévu, mais comme c'était écrit. Car c'est Lui, en définitive, qui a le dernier mot.

Passe nous voir cet après-midi.

Inch Allah signifie que la personne viendra, si les étoiles ne s'alignent pas autrement.

On va à l'opéra vendredi?

Inch Allah signifie que vous irez, à moins que le destin n'en décide autrement.

Il me fallut un certain temps pour comprendre qu'*Inch Allah* signifiait en réalité *oui*, mais un *oui* avec une réserve inconnue, quelque chose du genre – *Je suis pour, et en ce qui me concerne, la réponse est oui, reste à voir quelle sera la décision définitive de Dieu à ce sujet*. Même sous la torture, vous n'arracherez pas à un Égyptien de promesse plus forte et plus convaincante qu'*Inch Allah*.

Est-ce qu'ils vont venir réparer l'ascenseur aujourd'hui ?

La panne est signalée, ils vont venir, Inch Allah.

Mais il y a une femme coincée à l'intérieur !

Les réparateurs vont la tirer de là, Inch Allah.

SLOVENIA

BIOGRAPHY

Anja Mugerli, born in 1984, is a Slovenian writer. She graduated with a degree in Slovenian Studies and has a Master's in performance studies and creative writing. Her debut, the short prose collection *Zeleni fotelj* (*Green Armchair*), was published in 2015 and in 2017, her first novel, entitled *Spovin*, was nominated for the Novel of the Year Award in Slovenia. Her writing is subtle, with great psychological insight into the protagonists of her stories. Recently, the film rights to her first novel were sold and she was featured at the 2019 First Novel Festival in Kiel, Germany. She also writes plays, two of which have won awards at an international competition in Italy. She lives in Nova Gorica, on the border of Slovenia and Italy. She is fluent in English, Spanish and Italian.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

The seven short stories in *Bee Family* are linked by rituals, ancient customs and traditions of Slovenian culture, which are transposed into a different context or a contemporary setting, where they take on a new role and shape. The theme of family is in the foreground: we read about an unrealised family, a family brought together and separated by



Anja Mugerli
Čebelja družina
Bee Family

Cankarjeva založba, Ljubljana, 2020
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the circumstances of life, a family that could become real in another setting. All the stories are set in the present, with the exception of the title story, which is set at a specific historical time, and yet they seem timeless because of the presence of ritual and their atmosphere. The author's virtuoso use of language entangles us in a world we do not know, although we live in it. In reading these stories, we constantly cross borders – linguistic, cultural, political, geographical – as well as those between reality and the unconscious.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

Bee Family, the third book by Anja Mugerli, written in timeless, gentle prose, has two centres: family, and the rituals and ancient customs characteristic of Slovenian folklore. By weaving them together and placing them in unfamiliar contexts, the author gives them an air of darkness. The collection points to the coexistence of two opposing, even antagonistic, worlds: the old world, recreated in the revival of half-forgotten rituals, and the new world, manifested in new power relations and attitudes towards the past and tradition. Misunderstanding takes place not between different generations but in the intimate circle of family and partnership, where those who are close suddenly become strangers or appear in a new, unexpected light. The purpose of customs should be to bring people together, to build and strengthen bonds, to deepen a community's sense of belonging, but this often proves unsuccessful in *Bee Family*. The stories are characterised not so much by open endings, or the lack of endings, but by a willingness to confront the fact that some relationships are impossible to

pin down because so much has been experienced by the participants – usually a couple – that the unspoken takes on a life of its own and cannot be expressed other than through ambivalent gestures. The stories record the moment of recognition, the reversal, that turns established patterns (custom as a sequence of codes) on their head and pushes them into a space of newly discovered ambiguity. Ambivalence, the unspoken, is the basis of *Bee Family*. 'In a family of bees, there can only be one queen bee,' writes Mugerli, and indeed a quiet conflict of different perspectives seems to run through the book, while the stories do not tend towards their reconciliation but are content to let them coexist.



Čebelja družina

Anja Mugerli



Jabolkosnedka

Po stopnišču se kotalijo predmeti. Eno izmed jabolk obstane tik pred mojim pragom. Bosa stopim na hodnik in na stopnicah zagledam zelo staro žensko, s hrbtom sloni na umazani steni in plitvo diha. Na moje vprašanje, ali je v redu, me le prebode s temnim pogledom. V spominu brskam med obrazi sosed in jo skušam uvrstiti v pravo stanovanje, a neuspešno. Nerodno jo poprimem pod roko in ji pomagam na noge. Peljem jo v svoje stanovanje in posedem na stol, v katerega sem še pred minuto strmela, kot da bom samo s pogledom dosegla, da se bo na njem materializiralo točno določeno človeško bitje. Zdaj pa na njem sedi starka. Zemljevid gub mehča njen pogled in temna koža na obrazu priča o življenju na soncu in vetru. Vrnem se na hodnik, kjer po stopnicah pobere raztresene stvari. Čisto na vrh vrečke položim obtolčena jabolka.

»Gniti bodo začela,« reče z globokim, rahlo hrapavim glasom.

»Boste kozarec vode?«

S pogledom mi sledi v kuhinjo, kjer na štedilniku stojita krožnika, pokrita s pokrovkama. »Jabolko bi.«

Lično pogrnjeno mizo podrem kot hišico iz kart. Namesto zloščenege pribora in kristalnih kozarcev na prt položim krožnik, nož in rdeče jabolko. V nosnice mi sili vonj ugaslih sveč. Pomislim, da bi prižgala luč na stropu, saj starka najverjetneje ne vidi prav dobro, a nato si premislim in pustim prižgano le malo svetilko na omari. Sedem ji nasproti. Senci, ki padata na steno, me spomnita na sence v šotoru ciganke, h kateri sem kot dekle prišla po odgovore o svojem očetu, na žensko z barvno ruto na glavi, ki je na mizo med naju položila svoje roke in zahtevala, naj ji v desno položim denar, v levo pa svojo dlan. Starka reže jabolko na krhle in drugega za drugim poje in jaz napol pričakujem, da mi bo s pomočjo jabolka odgovorila na vsa vprašanja, ki so se mi porodila v zadnjih dveh urah. A zgodi se samo to, da iz vrečke vzame novo jabolko in ga začne jesti, vmes pa se ustavi le toliko, da me vpraša, ali bi ga morda želela tudi jaz. Sediva za mizo in jeva sočne, blede rumene krhle, rjave na mestih, kjer so na jabolku zaradi padca nastale udrtine.

»Upam, da nisem komu zasedla mesta.«

Kdor je šou, je zgubu stou, se domislim fraze iz otroštva. Zgoščenska se je že zdavnaj odvirtela, hrana je mrzla, v zraku visi kiselkasto-sladki vonj po jabolkih. »Danes imava obletnico. Matevž se je najbrž zadržal na vajah, kot po navadi. Dirigent je. Vodi simfonični orkester. Čez tri mesece se bova poročila – upam ...« Zasmem se svoji besedi. »Veliko potuje,« dodam, kot bi hotela razložiti.

»Tudi moj mož je veliko potoval, v beznice vseh vrst. Nekoč sem ga zaklenila ven iz stanovanja. Zaleglo je za nekaj mesecev, potem se je vrnil na stara pota.«

Njena kratka zgodba me čisto razoroži in iznenada se zavem svojih bosih nog in neudobnosti oprijete obleke. Starka s pogledom roma od mojih čevljev s peto, ki pozabljeni ležijo na

tleh, do skladovnice knjig in slovarjev na pisalni mizi, ki mi služi kot delovni prostor.

»Ko ni popival, sva to vedno počela,« s pogledom obstane na meni, »sedela takole za mizo in jedla jabolka. Oba sva bila jabolkosneda. Ko sva enkrat začela, nisva mogla nehati. Bilo je kot katarza. Zadnji košček je zmeraj prihranil zame. Po tistem je bilo nekaj časa vse v redu, le da to ni bilo res.«

S težavo se postavi na noge. Vztrajam, da ji nesem vrečko. S počasnimi koraki se prebija po stopnicah, vse do zadnjega, petega nadstropja, do vrat, navpično nad mojimi, poleg vhoda na strešno teraso, in si na kratko zaželiva lahko noč.

Ponoči me prebudi Matevževo odklepanje vhodnih vrat. Prižgem lučko na nočni omarici in sedem. Mimogrede si slečem spodnjice in jih zatlačim pod blazino. Matevž vstopi in se začne takoj opravičevati, ljubica, sem te prebudil, oprost mi, vaje so se spet zavlekle ... Opravičila dežujejo po spalnici tako kot oblačila, ki jih slači. Hodim za njim in pobiram pulover, srajco, hlače, dišeče po mešanici znoja, parfuma in tobaka. »... ne razume, da hočem popolnost ... Mozarta preprosto ne moreš igrati samo napol ... imel kaj besede, bi se on že zdavnaj pobral!« Skozi šumenje vode lovim delčke njegovih stavkov in jih skušam zlepiti v celoto. Je spet jezen na violončelista ali govori morda o koncertnem mojstru, s katerim sta si ves čas v laseh?

»Zamenjati bi ga moral, to drži kot pribito.« Pred mano obstane popolnoma gol in z mokrimi lasmi. Želim mu povedati o svojem dnevu, o urah, ki sem jih preživela ob tekstu, ki ga prevajam, o tem, kako sem ga čakala, tako kot že tolikokrat prej, in kako me je kljub temu, da se je njegovo zamujanje spremenilo v stalnico, vmes zaskrbelo. Hočem mu povedati o nenavadnem srečanju na stopnišču, in to z enako vnemo in lahkotnostjo, s kakršno mi on vsak dan pripoveduje o svojih

stvareh. A besede se mi zataknejo v grlu, kot bi jih tam ustavil košček pojedenega jabolka, in še preden trenutek mine, me Matevž poleže na posteljo in mi dvigne spalno srajco. Z jezikom potuje po mojem telesu, skoraj se že prepustim, potem pa mokra konica njegovega jezika ošvrkne moj popek in iz mojega trebuha izgine vsa mehkoča. Jabolkosnedka. Šele ko se ustavi in me začudeno pogleda, se zavem, da sem besedo res izgovorila. Umaknem se na vrh postelje, čisto do vzglavja.

»Čakala sem te.«

Svetlomodri pogled je mrzel kot severno morje. »Saj sem rekel, da mi je žal – ali nisem?« Ravna črta njegovih ustnic se ukrivi in tam se pojavi šegav, neiskren nasmeh. »Odkupil se ti bom.« Njegov poljub na moj vrat je hlasten in moker.

»Če se hočeš odkupiti, si vzemi ta vikend prosto. Pojdiva nekam.« Besede, ki so v mojih mislih slišati kot zahteva, na glas zazvenijo kot moledovanje.

»Saj veš, da imamo vaje. Koncert je čez štirinajst dni.«

»Pripravljeni ste, slišala sem vas. Samo še detajli.«

»Samo še detajli?« Odmakne se. »To si rekla, kot da ne bi bilo pomembno.«

Nekaj trdega se odkotali z njegovega jezika in me udari v obraz. »Seveda je. Nisem tako mislila.«

Objamem ga, ga poljubim, potem med njegove ustnice potisnem svoj jezik. Z enim gibom mi dvigne spalno srajco in leže name. Med sunki se mi zdi, da slišim, kako si mrmra Mozarta.

V obredih, ki označujejo prehod iz enega življenjskega cikla v drugega, je najbolje vidno, kako se – na eni strani z očišče-

njem, na drugi pa s ponavljanjem – reducira sij nečistosti, ki obdaja bitje v nastajanju in spreminjanju ...¹

Prevedeni odlomek me spomni na obred, ki sem ga imela v otroštvu. Potem ko sva z mamo ostali sami, sva še kakšno leto živeli v stanovanju, polnem očetovih stvari in njegovega vonja, dokler mami nekega dne ni bilo dovolj in je vse skupaj zapakirala v škatle in jih odnesla neznano kam. Ni me vprašala, ali hočem kaj njegovega za spomin, a tega niti nisem hotela. Nisem potrebovala njegovih predmetov, da bi čutila njegovo prisotnost, saj oče zame še zdaleč ni bil spomin. Z mano je bil, ko sem se zjutraj zbudila, popoldne, ko sem odhajala iz šole, in zvečer, ko sem šla spat. Še najbolj pa je bil prisoten, medtem ko sva z mamo jedli za kuhinjsko mizo. Oddala je vse njegove stvari, ni pa se domislila, da bi se znebila tretjega stola v kuhinji. Tako sem med vsakim obrokom strmela v prazni stol in se v mislih pogovarjala z očetom, kot da je zares tam. To sem potrebovala enako kot hrano na svojem krožniku, a še bolj kot to so mi bili pomembni njegovi odgovori, kajti čisto zares sem ga lahko slišala. Stanovanje, v katero sva se naposled preselili, je bilo manjše, z le eno spalnico, ki sem jo dobila jaz, medtem ko si je mama vsak večer raztegnila kavč v dnevni sobi. V kuhinji sta bila samo dva stola. Oče mi ni nikoli več odgovoril, kot bi bil užaljen, da v najinem novem stanovanju ni več prostora zanj, a morda je šlo le za to, da sem tisti prazni stol prerasla. Zdaj pa se mi že nekaj časa zdi, kot da se je prekleti stol vrnil. Matevževe obljube se nalagajo druga na drugo kot jabolčni olupki na kompost, le da jih je že toliko, da se bojim, da se ne bodo nikoli razgradili, temveč bodo kmalu prekrili ves vrt. Vse pogosteje se zalotim, kako mu hočem nekaj reči, a ne najdem pravih besed. Namesto da

¹ Povzeto po Cazeneuve: *Sociologija obreda* v prevodu Nede Pagon.

bi se z njim pogovorila, se vse bolj poglobljam v tekst pred sabo, o katerem razmišljam, tudi ko nisem za svojo delovno mizo. V mislih se selim v druge čase, vidim kresove, s pomočjo katerih naj bi sonce ohranilo svojo moč, in ljudi v maskah, ki poplesujejo sredi gozda. Včasih se zavem šele po tem, ko se znajdem na napačni ulici, in sem ter tja se zgodi, da Matevž presenečeno dvigne pogled, ko stopim v prostor, kot da bi pozabil, da sem še vedno tu.

Bee Family

Anja Mugerli

Translated from Slovenian by Alenka Blake and Jason Blake

Apple Tooth

Grocery items are rolling down the staircase. An apple stops right in front of my doorstep. I go barefoot into the hall and on the stairs I see a very old woman who is breathing shallowly, her back against the dirty wall. She answers my question about whether she's alright with a piercing dark look. I search my memory for neighbours' faces, trying to place her in the right apartment but I can't. Clumsily I hold her under the arm and help her to her feet. I guide her into my apartment and sit her on the chair that just a minute ago I was staring at, as if my gazing would make a particular human being materialize on it. Now an old lady is sitting there. A map of wrinkles softens her face and its darkened skin bespeaks a life spent in the sun and wind. I go back into the hall and pick up the scattered things from the stairs. I put the bruised apples right at the top of the bag.

"They will rot," she says in a deep, slightly raspy voice.

"Would you like a glass of water?"

Her eyes follow me into the kitchen, where two plates with lids over them stand waiting. "I would like an apple."

I rearrange the neatly set table like it's a house of cards. Instead of polished cutlery and crystal glasses I place a plate, a knife and a red apple on the tablecloth. The smell of burnt-out candles penetrates my nostrils. I consider turning on the

ceiling light, since the old lady probably can't see too well, but I change my mind and leave only the little light on the cupboard on. I sit down opposite her. The shadows falling against the wall remind me of the shadows in the tent of a gypsy woman, the one I went to as a girl to seek answers about my father, a woman with a colourful headscarf who laid her hands on the table between us and demanded that I slip money into her right hand and a palm into her left. The old lady is cutting apple slices and eating them one after another and I am half expecting that, with the aid of the apple, she'll be able to answer all the questions that have arisen over these past two years. But all she does is takes another apple from the bag and starts to eat it, pausing only to ask if I'd like some too. We sit at the table and eat juicy, pale yellow slices with occasional brown bruises.

"I hope I haven't taken someone else's place."

I remember a phrase from childhood: *use it or lose it*. The CD ended some time ago, the food has gone cold, and the sour-sweet scent of apples hangs in the air. "Today's our anniversary. Matevž is probably delayed at rehearsal. He's a conductor. He conducts a symphony orchestra. We're getting married in three months – I hope..." I smile at what I've said. "He travels a lot," I add, as if I'm explaining.

"My husband also used to travel a lot, to all sorts of dives. Once I locked him out of the apartment. That worked for a few months, but then he went back to his old ways."

Her little tale disarms me completely and suddenly I'm aware of my bare feet and of how uncomfortable my tight dress is. The old lady's gaze roams from my stilettos, which are lying forgotten on the floor, to the pile of books and dictionaries on my desk that doubles as my office.

“When he wasn’t drinking, we did this all the time,” she says, her eyes resting on me. “We’d sit like this at the table and eat apples. We were both apple toothths. Once we got started, we couldn’t stop. It was like a catharsis. He always saved the last slice for me. After that, for a while everything was fine, just that it wasn’t truthful.”

She labours to get to her feet. I insist on carrying her bag. We trudge slowly up the stairs, all the way to the top, to the fifth floor, to the door that’s directly above mine, next to the rooftop terrace, and we quickly wish each other good night.

At night I’m woken up by Matevž unlocking the door. I turn on the light on my bedside table and sit up. I absently slip off my underwear and tuck it under the pillow. Matevž enters and immediately starts apologising, “Did I wake you honey, Honey? Sorry, rehearsal took longer than...” Apologies rain over the bedroom like the clothes he’s shedding. I walk behind him and pick up his pullover, shirt, trousers that smell of sweat, perfume and tobacco. “... he doesn’t understand that I want perfection... You simply cannot play Mozart half-heartedly... If I had any say in it, he’d be long gone!” Through the splashing in the shower, I catch snippets of his sentences and try to paste them into a whole. Is he angry with the cellist again or is he talking about the concertmaster he’s always locking horns with?

“I should have replaced him, that’s for sure.” He stands in front of me, completely naked and with wet hair. I want to tell him about my day, the hours spent with the text I’m translating, about how I was waiting for him, just as I have so many times before and about how even though his lateness has become the norm, I was worried. I want to tell him about my unusual encounter on the stairs, with the same enthusiasm and buoyancy he has when telling me about his goings-on.

But the words stick in my throat, as if blocked by a slice of apple, and before the right moment has passed Matevž lays me down on the bed and lifts up my nightie. His tongue traverses my body, I almost yield to the desire, but suddenly the wet tip of his tongue flicks my belly button and all softness escapes my tummy. Apple tooth. It is only when he stops and looks at me surprised that I realize I'm saying the words out loud. I move upwards in the bed, to the very top.

“I was waiting for you.”

His light blue gaze is as cold as the North Sea. “I said I'm sorry – didn't I?” The straight line of his lips bends into a facetious, insincere smile. “I will make it up to you.” His kiss on my neck is greedy and moist.

“If you want to make it up to me, take the weekend off. Let's go somewhere.” In my mind these words sound like a demand. Out loud they sound like pleading.

“You know we still have to rehearse. The concert's in fourteen days.”

“I've heard you play, you're ready. The rest is just details.”

“*Just details?*” He shifts away. “You say that like it's not important.”

Something hard rolls from his tongue and hits me in the face. “Of course it is. I didn't mean it like that.”

I hug him, kiss him, then push my tongue between his lips. In one move he lifts my nightie and lies down on me. In between thrusts it seems like I can hear him humming Mozart to himself.

In rites, which mark the transition from one cycle of life to another, it is most visible how – on the one hand, through pu-

rification, on the other through repetition – the luminance of impurity, which surrounds a being that is forming and changing, is reduced...⁽¹⁾

The translated excerpt reminds me of a rite I had in my childhood. After my mother and I were left all alone, we'd been living for about a year in the apartment that was still filled with my father's things and his scent until one day my mother had had enough and packed everything into boxes, taking them who knows where. She didn't ask me whether I wanted to keep anything of his as a souvenir, but in any case I didn't. I didn't need his things to feel his presence since my father was far from a memory for me. He was with me when I woke up in the morning, in the afternoon when I was coming back from school, and in the evening when I went to bed. He was even more present when my mother and I were eating at the kitchen table. She'd dispensed with all his things but did not think of getting rid of the third chair in the kitchen. And so I would gaze into an empty chair during each meal, having conversations in my mind with my father as if he were actually there. I needed this as much as I needed the food on my plate, but more important still were his answers, for I could actually hear him. The apartment we finally moved into was smaller, with only one bedroom, which was mine. My mother pulled out the sofa bed in the living room every evening. There were only two chairs in the kitchen. My father never again answered. It was as if he was offended that there was no longer room for him in our new apartment, or maybe it was only that I'd outgrown that empty chair. But for a while now I've felt as if that damned chair has come back. Matvež's promises pile up like pieces of apple peel in the compost, but there are so many peels I'm

⁽¹⁾ Cazeneuve: Sociology of Rites

afraid they'll never decompose and soon they'll take over the whole garden. More and more I realize I want to tell him something but I can't find the right words. Instead of talking to him I bury myself more and more in the text in front of me, thinking about it even when I'm away from my desk. In my thoughts I move to different pasts, I see ritual bonfires meant to help the sun preserve its strength, and masked people dancing in the middle of the forest. Sometimes I don't realize where I am until I see I've taken a wrong turn, and now and again it happens that Matevž looks up in surprise when I enter a room, as if he's forgotten I'm still here.

SWEDEN



Maxim Grigoriev

Europa
Europe

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BIOGRAPHY

Maxim Grigoriev, born in 1980, is an author, critic and translator from Russian into Swedish. He was born in Moscow, Russia, where he grew up until he moved to Sweden as a teenager. He made his debut with a collection of short stories, *Städer (Cities)*, which was awarded the esteemed Borås Tidning Prize for debut authors. In 2016, he published his first novel, *Nu (Now)*. He regularly writes for the Swedish magazine *Axess* and for *Svenska Dagbladet*, the second largest newspaper in Sweden. Grigoriev has also translated Russian authors such as Olga Slavnikova and Venedikt Yerofeyev into Swedish. He has previously lived in Berlin and Porto but currently resides in Paris with his wife and their two children.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

When Nikita was 14 years old, he escaped from Moscow to Paris. Now he is a middle-aged man, overweight and exhausted. On the balcony of a stranger's apartment in Nice, he stands looking out over the winter sea. Nina was his only friend. In the emigrant's pessimistic consciousness, the timelines intertwine. The city becomes a mere memory. The romantic dream of a cosmopolitan Europe slowly falls

apart, while the city of his childhood, Moscow, becomes increasingly attractive and shimmering. Maxim Grigoriev's *Europe* is a new kind of novel about exile, a reckoning with nostalgia and homesickness. It is also a hate-filled hymn to the centuries-long history of Russian emigration, with the misanthropic graphomaniac, philosopher and failed terrorist Nina at its centre.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

In his novel *Europe*, Maxim Grigoriev sheds light on contemporary migration experiences, as well as on exile as a classical narrative motif. He delineates with great psychological and philosophical depth the lives of exiled Russians in Paris, unravelling well-known depictions of exile through a finely balanced prose and an ambitious literary construction. *Europe* is by no means a tribute to a continent; rather, it is a candid reckoning. With his third book, Grigoriev has taken a considerable step forward as an author and has brought something fresh and singular to Swedish literature. The portrait of the novel's main character, Nina, is striking and unforgettable.

Europa

Maxim Grigoriev



I

Jag vet inte. Nu, trots regnet, står de sju fönstren uppslagna. En däven lukt slog emot mig när jag låste upp ytterdörren: en söt blandning av möbellack och blött virke, damm och mögel.

Det var ljus i hallen. Jag stängde den metallförstärkta dörren bakom mig och lade ifrån mig nycklarna på en smal byrå, bredvid en bunt brev och reklamblad. Ljuset kom strömmande genom glasrutorna på en dubbeldörr rakt framför entrén. Bakom dörrarna syntes ett rymligt rum med högt i tak och tre valvfönster. Fiskparkettens trianglar pekade ut mot strandpromenaden och havet. Kvällsolens gyllene parallelogram genomträngde det svävande dammet och skars av precis innan de nådde den motstående väggen. Mot väggen stod ett mörkt vitrinskåp. Mellan bokhyllan och fönstren fanns ett runt bord, också det i mörknat ekvirke, med tillhörande fyra stolar inskjutna under bordsskivan och en grön lampa i mitten. I övrigt var rummet tomt, och i de spröjsade rutorna lyste ett plågsamt azurblått intet.

Deux pièces, hade advokaten sagt. Jag lade ifrån mig attachéväska på bordet och gick tillbaka till hallen. Den torra parketten kved under varje fotsteg. Till höger om entrédörren, eller till vänster när man kom in, låg köket. En

liten korridor, med ytterligare två dörrar, vek av åt andra hållet.

I det andra, mindre rummet var fönsterluckorna igenskjutna. Det var ett hörnrum som också det vette mot strandpromenaden samt mot stentrappan utefter husets kortsida. Samma diagonala solstrimmor, men strimlade i punkter, löpte över golvet mot en stor gammal dubbelsäng, som om de strök över den. I hörnet mellan fönstren stod en stol; vid sängen: en byrå med en vit spetsduk. Det fanns ett gammaldags klädskap i ljust lackerat trä, kanske teak. Vid sängens fotände låg en uppsättning prydligt hopvikta sänglakan, av plastförpackningen under dem att döma hämtade från en kemtvätt, vända diagonalt mot sängens rektangulära ruta, också de i samma vinkel som parketten och ljusstrålarna.

Jag tittade på sängen en kort stund, kände med handen på det tjocka vita bomullsöverkastet och gick sedan tillbaka till hallen.

När jag öppnade dörren mittemot sovrummet slog en frän och fuktig kyla emot mig tillsammans med en kvävande odör. Jag tog ett steg tillbaka.

Det var mörkt därinne.

Jag slog på ljusbrytaren, men ingenting hände. Jag plockade fram mobilen, lyste framför mig och genomfors av en rysning. I det kalla konstljuset, som träffade det bortre hörnet, framträdde ett badrum med väggar flagnade och deformerade under vita och grågröna mögelbölder. I hörnen och runt badkaret spred sig svartmögel. En vit byrå intill handfatet hade grånat under ett tunt lager av dammliknande mögelstråk. Spegelns övre del hade drabbats av kristallformationer som liknade grågrönt salt. Det smala fönstret mot ett ljuslöst luftschakt stod öppet.

Jag blev täppt i näsan och kände hur ögonen tårades och hal-sen blev torr.

Jag stängde dörren och hostade i ärmen; gick tillbaka till vardagsrummet och öppnade ett av dubbelfönstren.

De franska fönstren ledde ut till en smal men riktig balkong. Jag tog steget ut, lutade mig mot räcket och drog in den fukti-ga, vidöppna havsluften. Med händerna mot balkongräcket, ljummet av kvällssolen, såg jag rakt ut över havet. Nere på den tomma Quai des États-Unis åkte en bil, och en man kor-sade bilvägen på diagonalen. En klarinettspelare höll på att packa ihop. Det var kväll i Nice, men fortfarande ljus; solen höll på att gå ner över flygplatsens avlägsna torn.

Balkongen var tom, med undantag för ett litet runt metall-bord. I en vit crème fraîche-burk, fylld med jord, stod en före detta rosmarinplanta.

Jag gick in igen och öppnade alla de sju fönstren: med be-hagliga, gamla låsmekanismer, tunga beslag och handtag i vitmålad gjutjärn. Det blev ännu ljusare i rummen. På fönst-terglasen syntes dammspår efter flera års regn.

Jag gick tillbaka till hallen och tittade in i badrummet. Till vänster om dörren stod ett gjutet badkar, med smidesfötter i form av lejonassar. Själva badkaret verkade ha skonats, men när jag lyste över det såg jag att väggen ovanför täcktes av en målning som föreställde en palm i olika nyanser av mörkgrönt. En stor mögelfläck, i konturerna av en luftbal-long, hade lagt sig över palmen.

Jag stängde dörren, kände efter att den gick igen ordentligt, och återvände till det stora rummet. Jag stod, rådvill i mit-ten av rummet, och såg på havet.

Fjärran inom mig, bortom min inre himmelsrand, kom en tyst våg av sorg svallande, och ebbade ut.

Jag vände mig om och tittade på vitrinskåpet, på rader av gula och grågula bokryggar bakom det gamla glaset som här och där förvrängde innanmätet.

Jag stod och betraktade dem, utan att tänka på någonting, med händerna i byxfickorna.

Plötsligt försvann ljusstrimmorna, som om någon hade dragit ner ljuset med en dimmer. Jag vände mig om mot fönstren. Solljuset återkom efter en kort stund, liksom en flyktingberöring av ett barns fingrar, och försvann därefter för gott. Det drog kyligt från gatan.

Jag gick till köket. Också i det avstängda kylskåpet hade det bildats svartmögel, men ingenting ruttnade; det enda som fanns kvar var en halvtom flaska ukrainskt dessertvin i dörrhyllan. Jag gick till hallen igen, och identifierade genast ett svart elskåp med uråldriga säkringar. När jag samlat mod och dragit upp strömbrytaren – den bjöd lite motstånd, som en gammal mekanisk leksak som måste vevas upp – hördes kylskåpets yrvakna brummande från köket och i den redan ljusa salongen lyste den gröna runda bibliotekslampan.

Jag hällde upp vinet och gick tillbaka till vardagsrummet, drog ut stolen närmast fönstret, slog mig ner med ryggen mot havet och tittade ner i bordet.

Framför mig stod vitrinskåpet, fyllt med vita, beigea och grå bokryggar.

En frisk, kylig vind blåste då och då in från de öppna fönstren och strök mig över nacken.

Jag satt en stund, med händerna på bordsytan och det lilla glaset framför mig.

Rummet höll på att fyllas av hav och bensin, höstlov och kyla.

Jag gick ut på balkongen igen och vände ansiktet mot den mjuka havsbrisen. Den slog emot kinderna, vidrörde läpparna. Den lena höstvindpusten strök mig över ansiktet och den mjuka, rena kylan fyllde lungorna.

Jag såg ut över havet och molnen, slöt ögonen, tittade ut igen.

Det var den fjortonde november.

Det höll på att dra ihop sig till regn.

Europe

Maxim Grigoriev

Translated from Swedish by Ida Hattemer-Higgins

I

I don't know. Now, despite the rain, the seven windows are open. A stale smell hit me as I unlocked the door: a sweet mixture of furniture polish, wet wood, dust, and mould.

It was bright in the hall. I closed the steel-reinforced door behind me and put the keys down on a narrow bureau next to a stack of letters and junk mail. The light came streaming through the glass windows of a double door directly in front of the entry. Behind these doors was a spacious room with high ceilings and three arched windows. The triangles of the herringbone parquet pointed out towards the promenade and the sea. The golden parallelograms of evening sunlight penetrated the floating dust, and came to a stop just before they touched the opposite wall. Against this wall was a dark cabinet with glass doors. Between the bookshelf and the windows a round table of dark oak stood, with a matching set of four chairs inserted beneath it and a green lamp in the middle. Otherwise, the room was empty. In the window-panes, a painful, azure-blue nothingness burned.

Deux pièces, the lawyer had said. I left my attaché bag on the table and went back out to the hall. The dried-out parquet creaked at each step. To the right of the front door, or to the left when you entered, was the kitchen. A small corridor, with two more doors, turned off in the other direction.

In the other room, a smaller one, the shutters of the windows were closed. It was a corner room, likewise facing out toward the beach promenade on the front, and to the stone stairs that ran along the short side of the house on the side. The same diagonal streaks of sun, but cut up into dots, ran across the floor and bisected a large old double bed, as if to strike it out. In the corner between the windows there was a chair; by the bed: a chest of drawers with a white lace cover and an old-fashioned wardrobe in light lacquered wood, maybe teak. At the foot of the bed, a set of neatly folded sheets, to judge by the plastic packaging under them apparently taken from a dry cleaner, were laid out at a diagonal to the bed's rectangle, at the same diagonal as the parquet and the rays of light.

I looked at the bed for a moment, felt the thick white cotton bedspread with my hand, and then went back out into the hall.

When I opened the door opposite the bedroom, a damp coldness struck me, along with a suffocating odour. I took a step back.

It was dark inside.

I turned on the light switch, but nothing happened. I picked up my phone, and shone it in front of me. I jerked with a shudder. In the cold artificial light hitting the far corner was a bathroom with walls flaked and deformed under white and grey-green boils of mould. In the corners and around the bathtub, black mould spread. A white dresser next to the sink had turned grey under a thin layer of dust-like mould. The upper part of the mirror had been struck by crystal formations that resembled grey-green salt. The narrow window on a lightless air shaft stood open.

I got a stuffy nose, felt my eyes water and my throat turn dry.

I closed the door and coughed into my sleeve; went back to the living room and opened one of the double windows.

The French windows led out to a balcony, narrow but real. I stepped out, leaned against the railing and breathed in the wet, wide-open sea air. With my hands on the balcony railing, warm from the evening sun, I looked straight out to sea. Down on the empty Quai des États-Unis, a car was moving. A man crossed the road at a diagonal. A clarinet player was packing up. It was evening in Nice, but still light; the sun was setting over the airport's distant control tower.

The balcony was empty, except for a small, round metal table. In a white crème-fraîche jar, filled with dirt, stood what had once been a former rosemary plant.

I went back inside and opened all seven windows: their locking mechanisms were old and pleasant, heavy fittings and handles made of white-painted cast-iron. The rooms became even brighter. Grime marks from years of rain were visible on the window-panes.

I went back to the hall and looked into the bathroom. To the left of the door was a clawfoot cast-iron bathtub. The tub itself seemed to have been spared, but when I shone a light over it, I saw that the wall above was covered by a painting depicting a palm tree in shades of deep green. A large patch of mould, with the contours of a hot air balloon, had settled over the palm.

I closed the door, listened for the click of it shutting completely, and returned to the main room. I stood perplexed in the middle of the room, looking out toward the sea.

Far away inside me, beyond my inner horizon, a wave of noiseless sadness rose up, then ebbed out.

I turned and looked at the cabinet, at the rows of yellow and yellow-grey spines behind the old glass that here and there warped the interior.

I stood looking at them, without thinking about anything, my hands in my pockets.

Suddenly the strips of light disappeared, as if someone had turned the lights down with a dimmer. I turned to the windows. The sunlight returned after a short while, like the ambling touch of a child's fingers, and then disappeared for good. Coolness blew from the street.

I went to the kitchen. Black mould had also formed in the closed refrigerator, but there was nothing inside to rot; the only thing left was a half-empty bottle of Ukrainian dessert wine on the shelf of the door. I went to the hall again, and immediately identified a black electrical cabinet with ancient fuses. I gathered my courage and pulled the switch – it offered little resistance, like an old mechanical toy that needs cranking – and the dizzy hum of the refrigerator could be heard from the kitchen. In the already bright living room, the green shade of the library lamp shone.

I poured the wine and went back to the living room, pulled out the chair nearest the window, sat down with my back to the ocean and looked down at the table.

In front of me was the display cabinet, filled with white, beige, and grey spines of books.

A fresh, cool breeze blew in now and then from the open windows, brushing the back of my neck.

I sat for a while, my hands on the surface of the table and on the small glass in front of me.

The room was filling up with the scent of sea and gasoline, with autumn leaves and cold.

I went out on the balcony again and turned my face to the soft ocean wind. It hit my cheeks, and touched my lips. The soft autumn breeze brushed my face and the soft clean cold filled my lungs.

I looked out over the sea and the clouds, closed my eyes, looked out again.

It was the fourteenth of November.

The rain was just getting started.

TUNISIA

BIOGRAPHY

Amine Ben Aissa, born in 1980, better known by the pen name **Amine Al Ghozzi**, is a Tunisian-French writer who writes in both standard Arabic and Tunisian Arabic dialect. He graduated from the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis and was an associate professor of history and geography at various middle and high schools in Tunisia. He is now enrolled



in a Master's degree programme at the Sorbonne in France. Al Ghozzi's first novel, *Devil's Shadow Behind my Picture*, was published in 2013. The book tackled social and political issues in Tunisia, covering subjects including illegal immigration, emotional and sexual relationships, harassment and rape, the relationship between citizens and the police, journalistic practices and censorship. Al Ghozzi has also written and directed two short films, which were produced by the Tunisian Federation of Amateur Filmmakers, *The Blackboard* in 2004 and *Crossed Lives* in 2005. In addition, he has written several poems in Arabic and in Tunisian dialects, including the lyrics of the famous song *Kelmti Horra* (*My word is free*). He currently lives with his wife, his daughter and his son in Orléans, in the region of Centre-Val de Loire in France.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Zindali is a type of prison folk music in Tunisia. It expresses the prisoners' pain and their longing for freedom. In the novel, it's a title, a metaphor, an opening, a renewed question about the Tunisian Revolution: did it succeed? After weeks of confrontation between police forces and Tunisians, President Ben Ali suddenly chose to withdraw



أمين الغزي

Amine Al Ghazzi

زندالي ليلة ١٤ جانفي ٢٠١١

*Zindali, the Night
of 14 January 2011*

Editions Zayneb, Tunis, 2020

Language: Arabic

ISBN: 9789938390582

and flee Tunisia on the evening of 14 January 2011. The police forces, which had always been omnipresent, disappeared. The country was handed over to a caretaker government that was confused, facing a growing popular uprising with participants expressing themselves recklessly and freely. The novel deals with these political events outside the framework of the official actors. It sheds light on the stories of 16 characters who meet on street corners and behind closed doors in the coastal city of Sousse on the day that Ben Ali left. News is flowing about the continuous looting of shops and about the need to protect neighbourhoods and cities from rioters, therefore the inhabitants and shop and café

owners have an unprecedented role: fighting an invisible danger from an unknown source. Groups are formed and cigarettes, wine and stories merrily distributed in a popular odyssey.

♥ JURY'S REPORT

The novel *Zindali, the Night of 14 January 2011* revolves around the night of 14 January, following the departure of President Ben Ali after several weeks of insurrection. It is original in its narrative construction, describing with great poetry and humour 16 scenes that took place during that long night. Off the beaten track, it encounters a plurality of points of view and shows both the anguish of a police officer's wife and the fervour of the revolutionaries who have formed committees to watch over their neighbourhoods. It is a multi-voiced fiction bringing together political, social and psychological dimensions and intertwining reality with imagination and dream. The novel's originality also stems from its style, its different uses of language and the richness of its discoveries. The writer adopts a mixture of Tunisian dialect and fus'ha (standard Arabic), developing an experimental language that uses phonetic transcription of dialogue and rhythms, and breaks the monologue between two or more characters.

Zindali, the Night of 14 January 2011

Amine Al Ghozzi

Translated from Arabic by Rached Khalifa

A military coup without military men

Mohamed Ghannouchi clasped a tiny pile of papers with shaking hands, like someone catching a fish for the first time. He talked to the camera with wide-open eyes and in a voice as tremulous and faint as a moribund campfire.

On his left, like an old cupboard, stood the Speaker of the House of Representatives (next President of the Republic), Foued Mebazzaa. On his right and slightly inclined was the Chairman of the Council of Advisors (former Interior Minister), Abdallah Kallel.

They faced the camera in a line, wearing stylish suits, neckties and prescriptive glasses, their eyes shifting relentlessly around the presidential office, to express in icy words their constitutional testimonies of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's abdication of power.

At a time when all international news agencies were reporting the general's abdication, and after two hours or so of his withdrawal from power, the national TV channel was still broadcasting the event with the same boredom with which it had celebrated the anniversary of his coup d'état:

Tara Tara (music).

Pictures of mogra and jasmine blossoms, a frozen smile of a swarthy man with a thick black moustache, wearing on his head a *chechia* and traditional apparel. *Tara Tara* (music). You also see a bird's eye view of Tunisian hotels, houses. A herd of frightened gazelles running across the Sahara. A jazz track by Fawzi Chekili. A traditional birdcage. A snapshot of Sidi Bou Said marina. *Tatatataa* (song) "We are generosity / We are magnanimity" by Slah Mesbah, then there was the speech of the new president (who remained in office for a few hours only).

At the background was the emblem of the Republic with its three symbols:

- The Ship, symbol of freedom, keeling through a lacquered wall, in a palace besieged by sea humidity and popular adversity.
- The Scales, symbol of justice, bearing two empty panniers on an unseen mule.
- The Lion, symbol of order, with burly legs, fighting emptiness with his unsheathed sword and hiding his tail behind the new president's head.

The camera zoomed in on Mohamed Ghannouchi when he announced he was taking over the presidency. Then the camera retreated when the man pledged to respect the constitution and implement the wished-for reforms—and only Allah grants success.

The presenter, with a faint smile on his face, commented with drastic brevity that the decision was historic and fulfilled the wishes of Tunisian people.

On the national TV channel the thing looked like a military coup without military men. The body language of those

non-military men expressed clearly their unwillingness to accept this mission:

- Mr. Mebazzaa's hands tied in front of his paunch, like someone who has just embarked on prayer.
- Kallel's arms wrapped behind his back, like someone still adamant about offering candies to a girlfriend who hasn't shown up.
- Ghannouchi's right hand time and again sneaked to the microphone stick, like someone dreading impending dizziness.

After 8 p.m. on January 14th, 2011, Tunisia appeared officially in the grip of an improvised coup.

In a scene in which the country, the whole country, was forced to choose between prestigiousness offering things with trembling hands and foolishness expressing itself in delinquency and freedom, the masses chose to walk down the road of freedom with foolish fervour.

Before Del Bosque's laughter

The voices blasted with cheers of *Allah Akbar* in Hmaida's café after the news had been confirmed. The arms shot up in the air.

Mr. Youssef kowtowed amid chairs and cigarette butts, like a football player scoring in the last minute. When he sprang up he overturned a table with his back. He barked at the regulars who were still hanging about:

- Hurrah! Long live Tunisia, Long live the people.
- Take care of yourself Mr. Youssef.

He walked to them and kissed each one in turn and then trudged out of the café with his trousers barely fastened to his waist, his voice echoing faintly across the neighbourhood.

Some people followed him, chanting slogans as entangled as a yarn ball. Then, suddenly, they discovered amid their frenzy that the man was going home. He looked at them and gestured with his right hand that he was going to follow the news on foreign TV channels. There was also the internet.

- My daughter has been following the news since day one. The youth have won, guys, the youth have won.

His followers then halted a few steps away from the narrow lane leading to his house. They exchanged perplexed glances in the middle of a road as empty as a bamboo flute, then bifurcated into two groups of two people. They had two choices:

Either follow the revolution on TV, as Mr. Youssef did, or join the revolutionaries downtown. They were themselves a motley of haters and looters.

* * *

Hajj Hmaida, the café owner, quickly locked the door and admonished the lingering customers about the curfew, security, and the looters scattered all over the country.

He customarily sits in a corner in the café and lays his silver-headed hookah on his right and the glass of distilled mint next to the TV remote control on the stool on his left. He addresses his employees (his son manages the night shift and his son-in-law the morning one) with laconic words, and then resumes sending dull bubbly sounds from his hookah.

Mr. Hmaida was like Del Bosque, the former manager of the Spanish football team, who, before that night, could monitor everything around just through eye movements:

Who's paid his drinks and who hasn't, who's lost a card game and who's won, which football match can attract the biggest number of customers, who's left for prayer, who's come in drunk straight from the bar, who discusses politics in the café, and who's ordered a drink before the kick-off of the game and who hasn't.

He had never put on news channels before that day. He was happy with the eight o'clock bulletin, after which he switched to a sports or music channel while the hookah spout stuck to his lips and his eyes roamed with his head in calculations of expenses, profits and consumptions.

That evening he moved his chair. He drew closer to the TV. His head, sheathed in a brown hood, covered one-third of the screen during the speech.

When the chants flared up and Mr. Youssef walked out, followed by people who enraptured to his rapture, Del Bosque couldn't find the remote control because of intense emotions, so he lunged towards the TV set and, with his index finger, switched it off by hitting one of the buttons on its flank, killing the sound that was causing all the trouble.

In the café remained only those who were exposed to gunshot later, when they mounted guard at the nearby cross-roads:

Uncle Mohamed, Hamza, Abdelwahid Makni, the manager of the adjacent cyber club, and his friend Fawzi.

Hajj Hmaida slouched across the café aisles like a massive tortoise, threatening the lingering customers that he would

call the police if they refused to go home in respect of the curfew.

Fawzi said:

- But there is no police anymore, Hajj Hmada. It's gone.

With his neck craning towards the café owner and his glasses reflecting the blue light of the neon bulbs dangling from the ceiling, Abdelwahid shouted:

- O Hajj, please put the telly on. The country is on fire, O Hajj.

Uncle Mohamed pounded the table with his fist, the thud sounded like a stone rolling down the wall of the old medina. He laughed and coughed, his facial wrinkles charting lines and dunes shifting in between his large mouth and sunken green eyes. He then screamed at the waiter, unheeding the manager's threats:

- Hisham, bring us tea. We want to celebrate the event.

He ordered another drink for all customers, which brought the owner to silence.

He didn't go back to his hookah. He moved around in slow steps, dimming the lights. After that, he switched on the TV. He changed the channel. He put on the Qatari news channel Al Jazeera and covered half of the screen with his massive head.

With his mouth pursed, he was astonished at everything said about the flight of Ben Ali and all the fire and fury that set the country ablaze. He managed to repress an inner feeling of rapture the origin of which he couldn't locate, so much so he didn't hear the customers seated behind shouting at him to move slightly aside.

They inched their way towards him and clustered around the TV screen, each one of them throwing in comments and interpretations. Only Uncle Mohamed's voice caught the attention, his forefinger was pecking nervously at the image of Ben Ali on TV.

Hmaida pushed Uncle Mohamed away from the screen. As the old man tottered, he caught him and lifted him like a cotton sack and burst into laughter.

Everyone saw Bulky Hajj Haida Del Bosque laugh. His laughter echoed rough and raucous.

Fireballs

Nawfel waited for a speech in support of the chief commander of the armed forces. He shut the door after the last customer. They had left after they heard the news and the declaration of the state of extreme emergency.

He bought two packets of Cristal cigarettes in one go at Rahman's, the nut vendor next to him. He gulped down what remained of the coffee and asked Ali Dow to turn off the lights before taking a seat beside him. Which Ali did. He then bent over the keyboard and hammered the keys with anxious fingers, browsing pages in search of that particular thing—the military communiqué declaring Statement Number One.

Nawfel was sure that a real general was going to show up, wearing a green suit and a cap studded with glittery signs, a general with a cold heart but a warm voice, who would deliver his speech from some place, expressing his unflinching support of the revolution and his readiness to crush its enemies under the wheel of history—a history that preferred to move forward in one big leap.

The news—the rumours—the reactions were falling from all directions like fireballs, stuffing more and more news, similar ones like twins, into the luxury realm of expression and sensation. Flanking Nawfel, Ali was watching the news flow on the screen. Two heads sprouting from the same neck, shrouded in a veil of smoke billowing from smouldering cigarettes:

- Ben Ali's plane is now heading towards Malta.
- Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's plane has headed to France.
- All Trabelsi family members have been arrested in Tunis Carthage Airport?
- Slim Chiboub sneaked into the Libyan soil.
- A video entitled: *What Made Ben Ali Flee From Tunisia*. Thousands of people in front of the Ministry of Interior chanting in unison *Dégage ! Share. Share.*
- Trabelsi and Ben Ali family members trying to escape from Tunisia by all possible means and the army is foiling their plans.
- A video: Tunisian policemen brutally beating up a protester in the epic demonstration in front of the Interior Ministry.
- A video: This evening in Nabeul, huge crowds stormed into supermarkets and police forces opened random fire.
- Al Jazeera Channel: Gunshots heard in the precincts of the Presidential Palace and news of clashes between security forces and the army.
- Masked groups on rooftops and others looting supermarkets and shops.

- In spite of the curfew, homes were sacked and pillaged.
- Looting and burglary in Sousse town centre, supermarkets, shops, police stations.
- Gunfire continues after Ben Ali's flight. What's the matter?
- In the capital suburbs local groups began to form to protect facilities and shops.
- Listen to this letter sent to a friend: Do not trust anyone except the army. If you hear slogans like *Allah Akbar* or such-like chants, do not go out. If you see a Clio Symbol car, step aside. They are our soldiers, and you cannot stand a chance fighting them with your primitive weapons.

* * *

Nawfel carried on scrolling down the news lines. His facial expressions concealed under his cap, his unshaven face, and the way he sucked on his cigarette and etched with fidgety hands abstract images in the floating smoke, all expressed his strong belief that the army had turned against Ben Ali on the twelfth.

- Do you remember? Surely, it's the army. They forced him to give a speech on the thirteenth and then coerced him into flight on the fourteenth. The army actually seized power, but some people were against it. Ben Ali family have been arrested. Surely, there will be retaliation. And Statement Number One will be declared to end everything. There is no doubt about that.

The ogre is out of his cave

They were in the cybershop when news of President Ben Ali's escape went viral.

Nawfel jumped off his chair screaming:

- *Allah Akbar!* O God, Praise to You O God! Long Live Tunisia!

Ali's head peered from behind the computer screen and stared at Nawfel with quizzing eyes:

- What's going on?

- Ben Ali's fled the country. The news is on Al Jazeera Channel.

- Are you sure?

- Positive. Hey, it's Al Jazeera, Ali, Al Jazeera Channel!

They immediately thought of going to Bab Bhar, to the heart of town. They searched for online invitations to gather and celebrate, to carry white and red flags and sing freedom and peace.

But there was nothing. Like scores of other people, they wanted to spend the night outside. They wanted a celebration that would make them forget the horrors of the past:

The dark nights, the footage and images of martyrs with yawning mouths, blasted heads, and mangled bodies laid pell-mell on metal hospital beds.

Nawfel shouldn't have clung so vehemently to the idea — the rule — the role of the army, and that night shouldn't have ushered in a season of collective delirium that ended up with a bullet shattering his leg.

No one was able to celebrate Ben Ali's abdication of power. No flags were waved that night. And no colourful fireworks adorned the sky of a homeland whose people found themselves suddenly overwhelmed by freedom and emancipation.

The entire country swiftly shifted from a state of emergency guarded by Zine El Abidine's police to another state of emergency the army wanted to monitor with the help of the Tunisian people, who turned into a surrogate police force which was, at one point, omnipresent like God, and then all of a sudden melted away like ice.

Groups of people stood up to dance on the ruins of an agonising system and protect neighbourhoods assaulted by the fear of the unknown, deploying all means at hand:

Rocks, clubs, daggers, yells, songs, phones, numbers, and patriotism.

No idea could possibly absorb or organise what had happened.

An ogre, with his gouged eye, had left his cave to follow the great tumult without guidance, unaware the hubbub was throbbing out of his guts.

الليالي السوداء. فيديوهات وصور الشهداء بأفواههم المفتوحة، رؤوسهم المفلوكة، أجسادهم المسجاة دون اعتناء فوق الأسرة الحديدية للمستشفيات.

لم يكن لنوفل أن يتشبث بشدة في فكرة-حكم-دور الجيش، ولم يكن لتلك الليلة أن تعلن إفتتاح مواسم الهذيان الجماعي وتنتهي برصاصة أودت بساقه.

لم يتسن لأحد الاحتفال بحدث تخلي بن علي عن الحكم. لم ترفع أعلام في تلك الليلة، ولم تزيّن الشماريخ الملونة سماء وطن أحس أهله في لحظة مباغته بالحرية والانعتاق.

مرّت كل البلاد بسرعة من حالة طوارئ حاول أن يحميها بوليس زين العابدين إلى حالة طوارئ ثانية أراد حمايتها الجيش، ونفذها بالتعاون مع الشعب التونسي، الذي اشتغل شرطة بدل شرطة كانت حاضرة كوجه الله في كل مكان ثم اختفت فجأة كحبة ملح.

وقفت المجموعات الشعبوية للرقص على أنقاض نظام يلفظ أنفاسه الأخيرة، لحماية أحياء هاجمها الخوف من المجهول، بكل الوسائل:

بالحجارة، الهراوات، الخناجر، الحناجر، الأغاني، الهواتف، العدد، الوطنية.

لا فكرة استطاعت استيعاب أو تنظيم ما وقع.

غادر مارد عينه المسلموية، كهفه متبعا دون هدى، هديرا ضخما، دون أن يدرك بأن مصدر ذلك الهدير لم يكن سوى صدره.

- إلقاء القبض على كل العائلة الطرابلسية في مطار تونس قرطاج؟
- سليم شيبوب يتسأل هاربا إلى التراب الليبي.
- فيديو بعنوان: هذا ما جعل بن علي يهرب من تونس. الآلاف أمام مقر وزارة الداخلية يهتفون بصوت واحد ديغالا.ج. أنشر. أنشر.
- عناصر من الطرابلسية ومن عائلة بن علي تسعى إلى الهرب من تونس بكل طرق والجيش يحاول إغلاق السبل أمامهم.
- فيديو: الشرطة التونسية تنهال بالضرب على أحد المتظاهرين في ملحمة قدام مقر الداخلية.
- فيديو: نابل هذا المساء اقتحام المغازات الكبرى من طرف أعداد كبيرة من الناس، والأمن يطلق النار بعشوائية.
- قناة الجزيرة: سماع إطلاق نار في محيط القصر الرئاسي وأبناء عن مواجهات بين الأمن والجيش.
- مجموعات ملثمة فوق سطوح المباني، ومجموعات تواصل هجومها على المغازات والمحلات.
- رغم إعلان حظر التجول، منازل تتعرض للتكسير والنهب.
- أحداث نهب ووسطو في قلب مدينة سوسة، المغازات الكبرى، المحلات، مقرات أمنية.
- أصوات طلق النار تتواصل، بعد هروب بن علي. ماذا هناك؟
- في أحياء العاصمة بدأت تتشكل مجموعات محلية لحماية المنشآت والمحلات.
- استمعوا إلى هذه الرسالة التي أرسلت لصديق: لا تتقوا في أحد ماعدا الجيش. إذا استمعتم لأصوات من نوع الله أكبر أو شيء من هذا القبيل لا تخرجوا في الطريق. إذا رأيتم سيارة سيارا كليبو سيمبول ابتعدوا عن الطريق، إنهم جيوشنا ولن تستطيعوا صدهم بأسلحتكم البدائية.

لم يتوقف نوفل عن استعراض صفوف الجمل الإخبارية. كان في ملامحه المختفية تحت قبعة رأس، وذقن دون حلاقة، بهز نفسا من سيجارة إلى فمه، يرسم بحركات يديه المتشنجة لوحات تجريدية من دخان، مؤكدا بأن الجيش انقلب على بن علي منذ يوم انشاء.

- تذكر؟ الجيش أكيد، أجبره على إلقاء خطاب يوم ثلاثاش، ودفعه إلى الرحيل يوم اربعطاش. الجيش تسلّم الحكم فعلا، لكن هناك من يرفض ذلك، وعائلة بن علي ألقى عليها القبض، أكيد سيردون الفعل. وسيأتى البيان رقم واحد لينهي كل شيء. أكيد.

مارد يغادر كهفه

- كانا في محل الأترانت لما راج خبر هروب الرئيس بن علي.
- قفزنوفل من على كرسيه مكبرا:
- الله أكبر، يا ربّي يا ربّي لك الحمد. يا ربّي تحيي تونس.
- انحنى علي برأسه من وراء شاشة الكمبيوتر و نظر إلى نوفل متسائلا:
- ماذا يحدث؟
- بن علي طار. الخبر على قناة الجزيرة.
- متأكد؟
- اي نعم. الجزيرة يا علي الجزيرة.
- فكّرا في الخروج مباشرة إلى باب بحر، قلب المدينة. بحثا في الأخبار، عبر النّت، عن دعوة للتجمّع والاحتفال، عن الخروج بأعلام حمراء وبيضاء تنشد الحرية والسلام.
- دون جدوى. كانا مستعدّين، مثل الكثيرين، للسهر خارج المنازل والحوانيت. كانا ينتظران احتفالا ينسيهما كل ما سبق:

لم يتبقي في المقهى سوى المجموعة التي تعرّضت لاحقا لإطلاق النار بعد أن شرعت في حماية مفترقات الطرق المجاورة:

عمّ محمّد. حمزة. عبد الواحد المكني، متعهّد محلّ نادي الانترنت المجاور وصديقه فوزي. تحرك الحاج قلحا بين جنبات المكان كسلحفاة مائيّة ضخمة، هدّد مهاتفة الأمنيين وبفضح أمر رؤاد المقهى الراضين العودة إلى ديارهم. تكلم فوزي:

- لم يعد هناك أمن يا حاج. انتهى.

ردّد عبد الواحد، مشرّئاً بعنقه ناحية صاحب المقهى، و نظاراته تعكس ضوء مصابيح النيون الأزرق المعلّقة في السقف:

- يا حاج أعد تشغيل التلفزة يعشك. البلاد شعلت يا حاج.

طرق عمّ محمّد الطاولة بقبضة متببسة كقطعة حجرية سقطت من سور المدينة العتيقة. لم ينقطع عن الضحك والسعال وتجاويد وجهه ترسم كئيباً وخطوطاً متحركة بين فمه العريض وعينيه الخضراوين الغائرتين. نادى على العامل دون اكترأ بتهديدات الفاتق الناطق في المحلّ:

- الشاي يا هشام، نريد أن نحتفل بهذه المناسبة.

طلب كلّ الجالسين مشروباً ثانياً. أجبر صاحب المحلّ على الضمت.

لم يعد إلى نارحيلته، تحرك ببطء إلى الأضواء ليقلّل من نورها. ثمّ أعاد النور إلى التلفاز. غيرَ القناة، وضع الجزيرة القطرية للأخبار، وأخفى نصف الشاشة برأسه الضخم.

كان مندهشاً بنم مغلق أمام كلّ ما كان يقال عن هروب بن علي، وعن قبّة النار التي اشتعلت في البلاد. استطاع كتم غبطة داخلية لا يعرف مصدرها حتّى أنّه لم يتفطن إلى أصوات الجالسين خلفه، مطالبين إياه بالابتعاد قليلاً. تقدّموا نحوه، تحلقوا حول التلفزة، كلّ يدلو بدلوه. لم يتفطن إلا لصوت عمّ محمّد وسبّابته وهي تتوجّه للشاشة لتنقر صورة بن علي بعصبية.

دفع احميده عمّ محمّد ليعبده عن التلفاز ولمّا كاد العجوز يسقط، شدّه اليه وهزّه كقفّة من القطن وهو يضحك. الجميع رأى الحاج احميده ديلبوسكي الضخم، يضحك. كانت ضحكته مجلجلة بغلظة.

كرات من لهب

انتظر نوفل خطاباً موالياً لقائد القوّات المسلّحة. أفلل الباب وراء آخر الحرفاء الذين اختفوا إثر سماع الخبر، وإعلان حالة الطوارئ القصوى.

اشترى علبتي سجائر كريستال دفعة واحدة من رحمان الحماص المجاور. أفرغ ما تبقى من القهوة في بطنه. طلب من علي الدوّ أن يطفئ النور قبل أن ينتقل للجلوس إلى جانبه، ففعل. انحنى على لوحة المفاتيح يطرقها بأصابع متشجّعة، مواصلاً بحثه بين الصفحات الرقمية عن ضالّته، عن الخطاب العسكري. البيان رقم واحد. اعتقد نوفل بصدق بأنّ - جنرالاً حقيقياً، سيظهر، بيّرة خضراء وقبّعة مزروعة علامات لمأعة. جنرال بقلب حاف وصوت دافئ، سيتكلّم من مكان ما ليعلن مساندته الا مشروطة للثورة ويلقي بأعدائها تحت عجلة تاريخ قرّر التقدّم بشخرة واحدة.

كانت الأخبار - الشائعات - ردود الفعل - تسقط من كلّ صوب، ككرات من لهب، فتحشر بين أخريات، أحيات، توائم متشابهات في قصر العبارة والإثارة. وكان علي إلى جانب نوفل يراقب تسلسلها الواحدة وراء الأخرى على شاشة الكمبيوتر. كانا كرأسين مزروعين في عنق واحد، وراء ستارة الدخان المنبثقة من السجائر:

- تتجّه طائرة بن علي الآن نحو مالطا.

- أتجهت طائرة زين العابدين بن علي نحو فرنسا.

وفي مشهد أجرت فيه البلاد، كل البلاد، على الاختيار بين هيبة تقدّم بأباد مرتبكة وبين حمق يعبر عن نفسه بطيش وحرية اختارت الجماهير شقّ طريق الحرية بحمق وحماس.

قبل أن يضحك ديلبوسكي

رفعت الأيدي ارتفعت أصوات التكبير والتهليل في مقهى احميده بعد أن تأكد الخبر نهائياً.
خرّ سي يوسف ساجدا بين أسفل الكراسي وأعقاب السجائر كلاعب كرة سجّل هدفا في الدقيقة الأخيرة.
قام فأسقط طاولة بظهوره. صاح فيما تبقى من الجالسين:
- حاااااي تحيا تونس، يحيا الشعب.
- سايس روحك سي يوسف.
تقدّم نحوهم وذهب لتقبيلهم واحدا واحدا ثمّ تدرج خارجا، مخترقا بصوته التّحيف فضاء الحيّ وسرواله متشبّث بالكاد في حوضه.
اتّبعه البعض في مسيرته بشعارات وأناشيد متداخلة تداخل خيوط كرة من صوف. تفتّنا في حماسهم بأنّ الرّجل يسلك طريق منزله. نظر نحوهم مشيرا بذراعه اليمنى، معلنا أنّه سيواصل متابعة ما يحدث في البلاد عبر التلفرات الأجنبية، هناك أيضا النت.
- ابنتي تتابع ما يحدث منذ اليوم الأوّل. لقد انتصر الشباب يا جماعة، لقد انتصر الشباب.
توقّف أتباعه على بعد خطوات من الشارع الضيّق المؤدي إلى منزله. تبادلوا نظرات حيرى في قلب طريق فارغ كناية أجوف، ثمّ انقسموا إلى مجموعتين تتكوّن كلّ واحدة من نفرين، كان أمامهم خيارين:
إمّا متابعة الثورة عبر التلفاز كما فعل سي يوسف، أو الالتحاق بصقوف الثوار في قلب المدينة، وقد اختلطوا بدورهم بألوان من الغاضبين، وأصناف من المهاجمين للمحلّات.

سارع الحاج احميده صاحب المقهى إلى إقفال باب المحلّ. ذكر بقيّة الجالسين بحظر التجول بالأمن وبالناهبين المنتشرين في أرجاء البلاد.
كان في العادة يجلس في زاوية من المقهى. يضع نارجيلته برأسها الضيّ على يمينه، كأس النعناع المقطّر، إلى جانب آلة التحكم في التلفاز فوق الطابوري على يساره. يشير إلى عامله (يؤمن ابنه حصّة المساء، في حين يشتغل زوج ابنته في المقهى صباحا) بكلمات مقتضبة ثمّ يعود لصنع الطقطقة الرّتيبة بنارجيلته.
كان الحاج احميده شبيه ديلبوسكي، المدرب السابق لمنتخب اسبانيا لكرة القدم، قادرا قبل تلك الليلة، على متابعة كلّ شيء بحركة عينيه:
من دفع مَن ما استهلك ومن لم يدفع، من انهزم في لعب الورق ومن انتصر، ماهي المقابلة الكروية القادرة على جمع أكثر عدد من الحرفاء، من خرج للصلاة، من عاد من الحانة سكرانا ومن بقي في المقهى متحدّثا في السياسة، من طلب مشروبا قبل انطلاق المباراة المتلفزة ومن رفض.
لم يتعوّد على تشغيل محطات تلفزيّة إخبارية قبل ذلك اليوم. كان يكتفي بأخبار الساعة الثامنة في كلّ مساء، ثمّ يعود لمحطّة غنائيّة أو رياضيّة، وفم النارجيلة لا يفارق شفّتيه، وعيناه ترافق ذهنه في عمليّات حسابيّة عن المصاريف والمراييح ومشاريب الحرفاء.
ترزح عن كرسيّه في ذلك المساء. اقترب من جهاز التلفاز. غطّى برأسه الضخم المحشوّ في بوني قطنيّة، ثلث الشاشة، وقت الخطاب.
لمّا علت الصيحات وخرج سي يوسف يتبعه بعض المنحازين لفرحته، لم يجد ديلبوسكي آلة التحكم في التلفاز من شدّة الانفعال فانتقل لينقضّ بسبابته على أحد الأزرار المزروعة في خاصرة الجهاز ليغلق التلفاز نهائيا ويكتم الصوت المتسبّب في تواصل ذلك الهيجان.

زندالي

ليلة ١٤ جانفي ٢٠١١

أمين الغزّي



انقلاب عسكري بلا عسكر

أمسك محمد الغنوشي مجموعة صغيرة من الأوراق بيدتين مرتعشتين كمن اصطاد سمكة لأول مرة. تكلم متوجهاً إلى الكاميرا بعينين واسعتين، بلغة مطبوخة بارتباك فوق خشب نديّ. وقف على يساره، كخزانة عريقة، رئيس مجلس النواب (رئيس الجمهورية المقبل) فؤاد المبرّع. انتصب على يمينه بانحناءة طفيفة رئيس مجلس المستشارين (وزير الداخلية الأسبق) « عبد الله القلال ». اصطفوا في مواجهة الكاميرا، بربدالتهم الأثيقة، بربطات أعناقهم، بنظاراتهم، بنظراتهم المنتقلة دون هوادة في فضاء المكتب الرئاسي لينقلوا برود نحاسي، شهادتهم الدستورية على انسحاب زين العابدين بن علي من الحكم. في الوقت الذي تداولت فيه معظم وكالات الأنباء العالمية خبر تخلي الجتزال، وبعد ما يزيد عن الساعتين من تداول خبر تخليه كانت المحطة التلفزيونية تقدم للحدث بنفس الرتبة التي كانت تحيي بها ذكرى إنقلابه: تارا تارا (موسيقى).

صور لمشموم فلّ وأخر لياسمين وابتسامة محنطة لرجل أسمر بشارب أسود عريض يلبس شاشية ولباسا تقليديا تارا تارا (موسيقى) ترى أيضا لقطات فضائية لنزل تونس، لمنازلها. قطع غزلان يجري بفزع في صحرائها منذ سنين. مقطوعة جاز لفوزي الشكيلي. قفص تقليدي. صورة للميناء السياحي لسيدي بوسعيد. تاتا تاتا تاتا! (أغنية) أحنا الجود أحنا الكرم لصلاح مصباح، ثمّ خطاب الرئيس الجديد (الذي لم يبق في مكانه سوى سويحات).

وشعار الجمهورية برموزه الثلاث في خلفيّة الصورة:

- السّيفينة رمز الحرية، تسبح على حائط أملس، في قصر تحاصره رطوبة البحر ومعاداة الناس.
 - الميزان رمز العدالة، يتدلّى بكيسين فارغين على ظهر حمار لا مرئي.
 - الأسد رمز النظام بساقيه الغليظتين، يحارب الفراغ بسيفه المسلول ويخفي ذيله خلف رأس الرئيس الجديد.
- اقتربت الكاميرا بزوم نحو محمد الغنوشي حين أعلن أنه يتولّى رئاسة الجمهورية. ابتعدت الكاميرا بزوم حين تعهد الرجل باحترام الدستور والقيام بالإصلاحات المرجوة، والله وليّ التوفيق.
- علق المذيع بنصف ابتسامه وباقتضاب شديد مشيرا بأنّ ذلك كان قرارا تاريخيا يستجيب لرغبة الشعب التونسي. كان الأمر، في المحطة التلفزيونية الوطنية، شبيها بانقلاب عسكريّ دون عسكر، وكان غير العسكريين هؤلاء يؤكّدون بحركات أيديهم، عدم استعدادهم المهنيّ لتقبّل هذه المهمة:
- كفي السيد المبرّع ومشودتان أمام كرشه كمن أقبل توّا لصلاة.
 - ذراعي القلال وراء ظهره كمن يتشبّث بإهداء الحلوى لحيبة لم تأت.
 - يد الغنوشي اليمنى تنسلّ لشّد عصا المصدق كمن يطلب الاحتماء من دوخة مقبلة.
- بدت تونس بعد السّاعة الثامنة مساء من ليلة ١٤ جانفي ٢٠١١، رسميا تحت طائلة انقلاب مرتجل.

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