

## PRESENTATION AT FRANKFURT BOOKFAIR 2004

Selection by Stritar Award winner Lucija Stepančič

### REASONING:

There are still at least three criteria for this year's selection. It is above all high quality current production of established authors, and artistically established and recognised poetry. Only those who have already been presented at the book fair in the last two years, and all first authors, have been excluded. The list is inevitably subjective, so I have not even attempted to base it on awards: among the chosen titles these are more by chance than rule. The selection, which was made by a single assessor, is probably different from the work of a multi-member jury. The increased risk of partiality should be balanced by a list that is not a matter of compromise but retains the direct vitality of a reader's experience. I hope, therefore, that the enthusiasm will be infectious.



MARJAN STROJAN  
(1949)

is a poet and translator of English and American poetry (selection from *The Canterbury Tales*, selected works of Robert Frost, *Beowulf*, which won the Sovre Award 1996, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which won the same prize this year) His poetic opus extends to four collections: the most recent *Dan, ko me ljubiš 2003* continues the poetry of *Parnikov v dežju (1999)*, for which he received the Veronika Award, and builds on the author's characteristic contrast between epic and lyrical. While the epic part of the opus is characterised by wide and almost fabulous flourishes, a delicacy of mind, masterly, fairly scenographic setting of significant classical and often monumental scenes, and a baroque sense of mathematics, his lyrics are bound to rhythmic, even rhymed form. Only from the standpoint of the whole is the lyrical subject also evident: its 'surplus' is a playful, intellectual, and even surprising nature, and in this sense delicate simplicity. Scientific events are equated with speculations and visions, so that on the level of personal mythology it is linked fleetingly and dispositionally with the super-personal and barely perceived. As such, the poet, free from care, can be prodigal with luxurious images, or surrender to observation of a single wave. And it remains recognisable but unpredictable. In short: ungraspable.

*My moment dawns*

*I push the door and almost invisible enter*

*the hall. A philosophy professor who is no more  
nods to me, a little further on sits my professor  
of literature who is no more. Now I remember  
that I too am no more. I disappear  
in an instant, but slowly, into the dark, as scenes  
fade in old films.*

## The Blue Glass Book

I bought a book  
made of blue glass.  
In it were houses  
and hills and bridges,  
there were meadows  
and peach trees, there were  
ships and miracles, and when  
you hold it up to the light,  
there were shooting stars in it.

There was summer in there  
and in it - there was I,  
much as I would like  
myself to be. There was  
day and night, there was  
winter and sun - not only  
whenever they come,  
but rather whenever  
they ought to be there.

Then it disappeared  
altogether. I no longer  
know where they sell them.  
But so much at least is left  
in no doubt: somewhere  
in this world I am waiting  
for me - that through winter  
and sun, through night and  
summer I may come to a book shop  
and find myself there.

*Translated by Alasdair MacKinnon*

## A SUDDEN DEATH DELAYED

I was trying to do three things at once. To read the time away, to smoke less, to ride somewhere far away. The blue lights were coming on in the first class carriage. The red Chinese lantern sank into the poplars. Awkwardly, into my pleasant compartment a poet was trying to get, whose book I had just put down. It was lying spread open on a pull-out table like a dead bird on a deserted beach, its lines shyly facing the board under the window, meaning the world. In it were bridges with canals silently rising and falling, there were tufts of highway grass and waterway traffic signs shooting up. ‚Stai caminar fin Trieste?‘ barked a young man in army fatigues, proceeding onwards, or rather backwards (considering the direction of the journey).

He was looking older than his picture and as if out of touch with his comings and goings. He must have had a suitcase, which now, having found himself a place to sit, he was eager to return to and bring in, when he saw the book. ‚Stai aspettar fin Torino?‘ barked another young man, who could not get on ast the poet (nor back, considering the direction of the journey). ‚Entra! Entra!‘ He inspected his own face on the covers, some twenty, thirty years younger, cut out and blown up from the photograph, showing him, in a circle of the unknown, standing in front of Louvain University. He mumbled an apology, nibbling (characteristically) the corners of his moustache, slowly closing the sliding door to shut himself off from me, or rather, to shut me in-from him. I did not recognise him immediately.

I felt I had seen him before, that having found a vacant seat in my compartment, he was only gone to come back with his said an elderly blonde to her younger companion wriggling herself through the door, sitting down opposite her, staring at the book. „Non si tormenti, la prego; quando ha saputo che era sposata?“ It was lying there, facing its windowpane negative. Where there had been crows, the young night was by now setting in, turned upon itself, flying away on the reflection of the covers, illustrating the glass with the ornaments of an evening. Portogruaro, it was an international train, calling at all stations. I saw him again in the morning, leaving the train as if descending into someone's embrace.

By then of course I had no doubt who he was. I too would not care to share a compartment with a stranger who knew so much about me, and carried an image of my younger self round the world with him. I watched him disappear among the platform crowd into a neon mist at the exit. I wondered what he was doing now in Milan. „Molto gentile“ repeated a woman behind me whom I was trying to help from the train with her bags. Not really looking for him I stared down the far end of the platform, then returned to my own world. Skimming through life on the inside slip of the cover, I noticed he had died five years ago. I remembered a poem of his, describing his own death, and how young I was when I first read it. It described the pre-war oarsmen and the steamers at Vevey. For the first time, that night, I was only a step away from immortality.

*Translated by Alasdair MacKinnon*

UROŠ ZUPAN  
(1963)



JOŽE SUHADOLNIK

is the author of six collections of poetry and two of essays, and has also published a book of his own selected poems and a translation of Yehudi Amichai. His poetry speaks with exceptional intensity and, at the same time, establishes an enigmatic multiplicity of layers. The freedom of wide, open verses is also typical of his collection (2002), where the poet's savageness is united with the attributes of an observer, and somewhere in the background the »signs of divine numerology« are grasped in themselves. The vitality of this poetic expression is established by its speed, which already borders on abandonment, but also enables a coexistence of slowness, of the past and forgotten. Immortality constantly changes its mask, sometimes appearing with sensory perception, at other times extended through generic memory, sometimes the image is depicted in stone, and then, without warning, erupts with irrevocably strong cyclic repetition, with the authority of the seasons. Zupan's poetry drinks from everything on which it alights, it never stands still or buys time, and is probably irresistibly attractive for exactly that reason.

*I once thought that at this time poems  
would simply strike.*

*Like some kind of natural process, a winter sleep, hibernation,  
no expectations, and language that fuelled the  
sun and air and is already now pure burnt out and statuette, would explode sorrow.*

## ISLAND (Published in Orient Express)

### The sea and the horizon fight all day.

The smells of eucalyptus, sage, rosemary  
are mute witnesses, colours of an atmospheric geometry  
which begins  
where the water first  
comes to know its death.

As night falls  
the rivals tire out.  
And the silence remains among the trees,  
is built only from the sea.

### Valium

The world's in slow motion, in tune with the morning steps.  
Sluggishly it adheres to my soles. I'm sitting in a room,  
the sun's rays magnifying its space. I slept through  
last night in an avalanche of silence. I'd put my skull at  
the bedside, my life out of my mind. Dark  
hollow figures came knocking at my door.  
Self-love thawed like spring  
snow. I wouldn't let them in. I kept my skin on.  
Out there, New York is growing like a cancer cell.  
It writhes like an electric centipede, curving up  
its tail as if a frightened scorpion. But I am  
tucked up inside myself, safe. No longer fighting  
the air somebody had smuggled out of  
the haunted house. I am seated in my breath.  
Nobody gets killed by the sky. A flower  
sprouting in crazed blood kills. A razor blade  
kneaded into the daily bread by the hollow  
figures kills. God is forever counting out  
his rhyme, murmuring in his sleep ... first,  
second, first, second ... I sit to his right.  
I sit to his left. I sit inside his  
head. Nothing can reach me. First,

second, first, second ... Hands are aflutter in  
mid-air like false angel's wings, yet the body  
stays faithful to its shadow. A child's  
woken up from a bad dream, walked the distance  
to his parents bedroom and got  
into their bed. Nothing can reach me.  
Hell's visitation is put off. The world  
shines like gold shrouded in black.

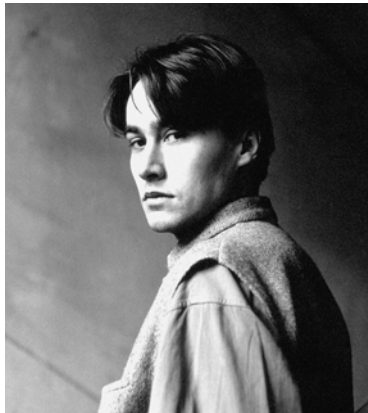
## HÖLDERLIN TOWER

34 Chengdujska St., flat no. five,  
first floor, three flights up,  
straight on and you walk into  
a big brass plate, the biggest in all Fužine if not  
in all Ljubljana – worthy of a poet. It was put onto  
the door by my father. It says ZUPAN on it.  
This is my Hölderlin tower.  
It wasn't given to me by a carpenter,  
for whom, by way of thanks, I should conjure up gods,  
rather, it was rented out to me by Ljubljana City-Centre  
Council, but the intention was exactly the same.  
This is where I now pass most of my time. I lie about, sleep,  
wait for Nataša, fiddle with the remote control button and  
wait for football to come up on some channel.  
Marjan Rožanc would say: mass of the twentieth century.  
I move about the stove. Make risotto, pasta, soups.  
Bake miracles in the oven. Season salads.  
Rocket salad is a must. I dip bread into olive  
oil. Eat the Mediterranean. When Nataša comes  
home, she eats the Mediterranean too. But the thing I like  
most is to be a stow-away on a ship  
bound for childhood. Then I write it all down.  
Some read it and put it aside with disgust.  
Others read it and fall in love with what they've read.  
These I prefer. There's no need for me to go anywhere.  
I rotate an invisible globe, sticking in  
the pennants of past and future expeditions.  
In the evenings I lock the mouths of books to stop  
them quarelling. Outside flows the River Ljubljanica, thinking

itself to be the Neckar. But the only river to be the Neckar is the River Trboveljščica. I walk along the Ljubljanica. I go rollerskating. Every time less cautiously. I have already begun jumping the curbs. So far with no consequences. With all due respect to greatness, instead of babbling away ceaselessly: "Palaksh, Palaksh", I shout on the pitch at the top of my voice: "Pass the ball, don't play selfish. Defend." People call me on the telephone, rousing me from my poetic trance, asking: "Mr Zupan, have you possibly read my poems? What do you make of them?" I no longer know how to talk myself out of it. I would like to stop this heavy work. I don't feel at home in a field of lost souls. Nobody ever comes to visit. The poetic energies of this place could make people overly happy and that frightens them. God knows what my neighbours suspect me of. Money laundering. Arms trafficking. White slave-trading. Selling dreams. Hagglng with words that can heal the worst of wounds. My photograph is published in newspapers. The other day I spoke, in carefully chosen words, in well weighed and elaborate sentences, on the main news of a private TV station. And yet again people thought: "This guy, this guy must be rich." I don't watch myself on television. The camera makes me too fat. I used to yearn for the attention of the gloss and glitter. I longed for an unknown beauty to tug at my sleeve and say: "I've been searching for you for ages, you are even more handsome than on the photographs, is it really you?" Today I enjoy living undercover. Reading theological treatises in conjunction with sports pages. Half an hour of *Grace and Gravity* followed by half an hour of *World Soccer*. The order is not important and the effects are already surprisingly visible.

*Translated from the Slovene by Ana Jelnikar*

ALEŠ ŠTEGER  
(1973)



JOŽE SUHADOLNIK

poet, travel writer, editor of the book collection *Koda* at Študentska založba, is also the initiator of ‚honey days of poetry and wine‘. In his third collection *Protuberance* (2002) he confronts definitive depression, the end of all illusions, even the most poetic. The descent is extremely courageous, the poetry making sovereign, although the pressure of the glass bell does not for a moment let up. Šteger’s poetry circles in orbit, in infinite distance from himself, where it is eternally in movement around its own axis, but covered with creative aspects in such an unquiet void. The changeable names for, as it seems, ever one and the same stubborn damnation, are expressed in the most varied languages, from scientific to course rural. Scientific (he tends most to borrow from medicine and astronomy) metaphors are thus only apparently cold; in their technical eloquence is hidden a vulnerability which the covert coding in the sterile expression of contemporary diagnostics, only awaits its own bloody moment of reality.

*Somewhere must remain the possibility of a return in years,  
Self-erasure from the trodden path,  
Adjustments of direction, a fresh start,  
And you, abandoned monotones of sad tracks, turned back,  
Only you are silent in just abandoned space and time.  
You rest your head on the crumbling window. You close your eyes.*

## Garden, Full of Flowers

That people are ocean, she said,  
lifting another spoon of caviar  
to her small Finnish mouth.  
That jealousy is the illusion  
two people can ever really possess  
each other, and that she feels none of this,  
not alone with her husband,  
not alone with her lovers,  
never, never, not even once, unless  
perhaps those white nights,  
when they held her, but also sweat can hold,  
not withstanding disrespect,  
when the body of her husband's mistress  
is no more beautiful than her own.  
That love comes from possessing  
none of it, she said, taking the salmon  
into her small Finnish mouth. None  
of it can ever be possessed, she said,  
enjoying the touches from those long  
since buried inside. And that she can  
never understand how anyone with eyes  
to see would ever choose one flower  
over a garden full of flowers.

*Translated by Peter Richards and the author*

## Close Your Eyes

Close your eyes and see a poem.  
Drained out from it, you desire in secret the solidity of all things.  
It reminds you of a white room recently painted,  
of the windows and doors summer forgot to shut.  
But these also fail to suggest forms of the physical world.  
There is no place to enter the poem.  
It exists only in a gaseous state.  
People floating inside it, the metaphors  
that hang on its walls, might possibly allow  
for a galactic breeze to churn into something else.  
Two naked clouds might began to make love.  
Might ventilate stars into a cloud  
of slaughtered boar, of grey smoke,  
of father smoking and watching from the poem's  
darkened corner. Probably he authored every poem.  
You can't see him in the shadow unless by himself  
he appears silently behind you, playfully closing your eyes,  
asking: Who am I? Won't you kill me? Aren't you mine?

*Translated by Peter Richards and the author*

## The Wall

No day can pass without you thinking  
I too was erected just outside the world.  
That your position was taken. That you are illicit.

No morning can pass without you taking an oath,  
today I tear down the wall and no evening can pass  
until I come home destroyed. Resistance is pointless.

You don't even know the luxury of an enemy.  
Soft like the hours, the bricks move by themselves.  
You reach to touch one, but look how it moves.

Although there is no other side, no other place,  
you arrive nowhere and with nothing holding you there.  
You have no wall and a place that finally ends.

Your wall is nowhere never and no one is your wall.

*Translated by Peter Richards and the author*

**BRANE MOZETIČ**  
(1958)



DIANA ANDELIČ

is a poet, prose writer and editor of the literary collections Aleph (Centre for Slovene Literature) and Lambda (Škuc), translator from French (Rimbaud, Genet, Foucault, Maalouf and Brossard), and best established as an author of homo-erotic literature. His opus extends to ten poetry collections, two novels and a collection of short prose. *Banalije*(2003), for which he received the Jenko Award last year, continues the urban gay theme, sharpened by increasingly anguished self-questioning. The typical unease in confronting oneself, on the other hand, also reveals a protective hardness of apparent self-sufficiency and impenetrable reality. Introversion and extraversion alternate as visions without gravity or significance, and they also erase the boundaries between dreams, mediality, memory, desire and event. While the daily scene continues undisturbed with voices and steps, the boundary between reality and simulation is increasingly blurred. The author's (homo)erotica, though, remains full-bloodedly physical, and in the context of psychosis resounds as only another in an ever longer series of different insomnias.

THE NIGHTS ARE LONG AND BRING NO SLEEP. I LIE IN THE DARK,  
*I listen to every sound when steps are heard,*  
*I become nervous about whether the scraping of the lock will follow.*  
*Then the dark dies down, images are ranged, and again new*  
*noises. So the whole night passes, brief scenes of fearful*  
*dreams, so that I feel my skin, my body, which awaits you.*

from **BANALITIES** by Brane Mozetič

They wouldn't give anything to help me survive. No faith nor a hope to repent, beg, be redeemed. No love to scatter about. So I'd go on crashing into things, begging for attention, tenderness, arms to embrace me. They didn't give me old traditions, customs, all the days alike and I don't anticipate any specifically. They gave me the ability to experience pain at the turn of a page, to deal with it at the same time. With clenched lips. They gave a rude preciseness which blows up every so often, causing me to topple down. They gave me a world in which I'm staggering and which I can't feel. I can only see a crowd of people who've put on t-shirts that say: I'm nobody. Who are you? We meet in the street, at work, the cinema, in bars. We talk, ask, answer. And it hurts us. But we don't know any better.

Can you hear it, Dave, that noise outside. Maybe  
it's a burglar. Or a bomb. Come on, wake up  
Dave, maybe another war has broken out and we'll have  
to go into the basement again. You know nothing about this.  
How many hours, days, to be spent in darkness.  
Or is it only a fire? Has the neighbour fallen out of bed?  
Anything is possible. You keep sleeping, not saying  
anything. Wake up Dave, so I won't be alone when  
the end of the world comes. You're a pile of meat, Dave, who has  
rolled around with everyone. Nothing gets you.  
You won't even know when your flesh  
starts to rot. It'll be horrible in the basement  
and I'll have to throw you out to the dogs.  
Then all the night clubs will be safe from you. Dave,  
you say nothing. Can you hear me, do you ever listen?  
Another noise. I think there won't be  
a war. Perhaps it's only our world crashing down  
in pieces in the middle of the night when decent people  
are asleep, like you, Dave, and I eavesdrop on noises  
and am afraid.

Love Ana, Ljubljana is a nightmare. The first thought that comes to your mind is to cut your wrists, to tie a noose, or to leap from a building. You'd have to be constantly drunk or stoned to take it. Friends aren't friends, acquaintances aren't acquaintances, lovers aren't lovers, a mother isn't a mother, a father isn't a father, a wife isn't a wife, the ground isn't the ground, all hovers in the never ending emptiness, hallucinations, ghosts, freaks, water isn't water and air isn't air, fire isn't fire. Love Ana, your city is the end of the world without any form of hope, there's vegetating, there is torment, there is a pinching in your stomach, a concentration of all the negative forces doing everything in their power to make an idiot out of you, an invalid. Ljubljana, the sweet sounding snake that wraps itself around your body, softly, with feeling, so you run out of air and can't get rid of her, always follows you, slithers after you so colourful and un-dangerous. Disappear, plunge into the swamp, return to the mud, save us.

*Translated by Elizabeta Žargi and Timothy Liu*

CVETKA LIPUŠ  
(1966)



TOMI LOMBAR

has enriched Slovene poetry with a really special and exceptionally rare spirituality. In her four poetry collections there is a wonderful increase of inner life, an intimate strategy of memory, expectation, inference, which under the author's microscope gain the dimensions of metaphysical items. The poetic »gardening the landscape of I« is surprising because of something else: it renounces entirely emotional and value judgement, which applies in particular to the most recent collection *Spregatev milosti* (2003). The poetically fresh, open view of the world is reminiscent both of the free spirited nature of a child and the impartial curiosity of a researcher. The gravity of her poetry is not drawn from tragic fissure but extends still deeper, to the roots, where living is still not burdened with its own uncertainties, and certainly cannot wonder at itself. Thanks to this, it is thus possible in the most self-evident circumstances to alight on the liberating power of a pre-comprehensional grasp of the world.

*Nothing changed, only harmonious caution  
is known: day is enveloped in last night's empty  
comprehension, so no incautious word is hurled  
to fall still barefoot on the sham of »all will be different  
tomorrow«. Order is no longer felled when the questioning  
spark bursts in midst the nest of safety.*

## Schiffahrt

1

Bei Windstille gestellte Fragen sind Segel,  
die auf Himmelsveränderung warten. Leicht wiegen  
sie sich in der Illusion, es könne sie neuerlich in unversehrte  
Wortschätze verschlagen. Doch die Erwartung  
zerschellt am Gerede. Zermalmte Hoffnungen sind  
Federdecken für Körper, die sich wie Züge auf Nebengleisen  
dem Klang der Stille ergeben. Kühle, die stete Mitreisende,  
flieht Knochen zu Zöpfen, damit sie sich beim letzten  
Entblößen zu blendendem Weiß auskämmen,  
zum Lichtfächer für die Faust der Finsternis.

2

Geübtes Perlenklauben überstandener Fahrten und Reisen.  
Die Anordnung, Abecedarium der Erfahrung, befriedet die Angst,  
so daß sie, wenn du die Tür sperrangelweit öffnest zum Sturmloch  
zur nächsten Unternehmung, gestäubt, doch stumm durch die  
Diele schlendert. Sie spielt nicht die alte Leier von jenen, deren Geist  
ins Unbekannte auslief, von jenen, die den Anker einbüßten.  
Sie dreht nicht die Gebetsmühle des Bereuens, deren Knarren  
das Stimmen der Sehnsuchtssaiten übertönen soll. Beim diesmaligen Überschreiten  
der Schwelle sehen wir uns, zwei gute Bekannte,  
nicht in die Augen. Du und ich wissen, daß dieses Körperkleid  
zu groß ist für das, was von dir geblieben ist.

3

Nachtflut füllt die Gehsteige, gluckert  
in den Straßengullis, umklammert die Knöchel.  
Bevor sie bis ans Herz steigt, trittst du ins  
erleuchtete Haus, in Konversationsnischen.  
Lampen gefüllt mit Heiterkeitsöl. Dunkle Kommode  
gebändigd in milchigen Spitzennetzen.  
Klangtapisserie aus Gläsern, Porzellan und  
Besteck. Dargebotener Blick: zwei Sammetblumenköpfchen,  
auf Wärme wartend. Doch ein eisiges Tuch, dir verordnet  
nach Vorschriften, die seit jeher gelten,  
bedeckt deinen Mund. Keine Stimme, keine  
Bewegung. Deine Zunge: eine Raupe kühler Gemeinplätze.

4

Der Kahn gleitet durch Einschnitte im Zeitenstoff.  
Im Offenen, wenn es nachtet, fällt der Anker  
in die Zukunft. Die Verbindung zum Anfang spannt sich,  
sie ist ein Tau, fest gemacht ans Einst, das einschneidet  
ins Gewebe. In der Mitte des Knäuels die Schicksalsspinnerin,  
die letzte Schicht, dein Tag. Zieh, flüsterst du  
und bindest dir die Nabelschnur fest.

Immer schneller würgt der Tag die Nacht, frißt die Nacht den Tag.  
Das Heute driftet ins Gestern, das Morgen bringt keine Erwartungen  
mehr. Immer flinker schält dich die Zeit zum Nichts,  
bleichen Erfolge zum Aquarell, wirbelt das Gespräch,  
Phrasenpuzzle, im Alltagsstrom, werden Fragen übersehen  
wie kleingedruckte Anmerkungen  
am Fuß der Lektüre. Immer verschlissener das aus Jahren  
gewebte Gewand, immer lockerer die Scheinknoten,  
auf der Illusionenauktion fallen die Preise. Verborgene  
Wünsche: eine geleerte Kammer, nur hier und dort noch  
ein Korn für die nächste Ernte. Wenn du den letzten ausgesprochen  
hast, wächst es dich zu bis zum Vergessen.

**EVALD FLISAR**  
(1945)



IGOR MODIČ

is a writer, dramatist, travel writer and editor of the literary review *Sodobnost*. He was president of the Slovene Writers Association from 1995 to 2002. His opus is rich and varied, translated into many languages and awarded on a number of occasions. He has twice received the award of the Prešeren Fund (for the collection *Popotnik v kraljestvu senc* and the play *Jutri bo lepše*) and the Grum Award twice (for the plays *Kaj pa Leonardo?* and *Nora Nora*). The novel *Ljubezni tri in ena smrt* confirms his shift from that literary-travel writing currents that brought him fame and signify a unique epilogue to his travelling quest. The mature reckoning with his own youthful image, and even his established authorial persona, does not stop on the level of conceptual premises. The uncompromising inner battle is rewarded with a real explosion of relaxed imagination, with an originality that also charmed in the slightly earlier novel *Velika žival samote* (2001). Except that this path goes still further and from grotesque premises unfurls a unique tragic-comicality. The novel *Ljubezni tri in ena smrt* makes the Slovenes one of the (few) nations with an autochthonous variant of black humour.

*Mama's hands shot into the air by themselves, and her palms landed with a crack on Peter's cheeks. It was the first time that she'd hit anyone, and the strangeness of the change that had befallen her filled us with a feeling that the last chance was lost of happiness and peace in the house, which father had bought for the purpose of us becoming a loving family in it. Thank you, Mama, said Peter quietly. A mother who dares strike her twenty-five year old son is certainly a successful mother, a real pillar of the family. Oh God, panted Mother and collapsed on the couch, what's happening to us?*

## Shorthand novels

### Good soldier Schweik

When I think of the fate of my uncle, Jaroslav Schweik, I can't escape a certain feeling of sorrow. Not because he was the favourite toy of the Great Cosmic Joker, but because of the circumstances which prevented him from avoiding what he called "the rapacious embrace of history". His aims were peace, love and gentle tolerance for all living beings – everything of which history usually robs us. "If I saw history riding towards me I would force it off the road and into the ditch," was his prophetic response to the taunts of his colleagues, who kept asking him when he would become a "historical figure" and so fulfil his mother's greatest desire.

As a city bus driver he was hardly in the best position to achieve historical significance; he would have to enter politics, the way into which had for some time been discreetly paved for him by his mother, my grandma. But he was not in the least impressed by her efforts to move him from a seat in the bus to a seat in parliament. "Not for me, politics," he told her once a year around Christmas. "Have you forgotten Lenin's words?" she would berate him. "The world is divided into those who do, and those to whom it is done."

Jaroslav Schweik became entangled in the undergrowth of our family tree more or less accidentally, thanks to my grandma's indiscretion during her visit to Prague. This was not in itself scandalous, but the trip (which was organised by the women's branch of the Socialist Workers Union) lasted only two days! On top of which my grandma was married, and already a mother of a three-year old boy who later became my father. But it was the time of

hippies and of free love, so no one made too much fuss, except my grandfather, of course. But he, too, was eventually pacified by God knows what devious means. As soon as my grandma realised that her first-born would not amount to anything much, she placed her dreams of success squarely on the shoulders of the "Czech bastard", as her second son was affectionately called by my grandfather until his death. Uncle Schweik soon realised that he could bear this burden only one way – by remaining "ordinary, completely ordinary". But this was easier said than done. Bearing the surname of one of the most memorable characters in twentieth-century fiction was no help at all. To make matters worse, he had been given the forename of Schweik's creator! (All thanks to my grandmother's belief that this would make his quest for "historical greatness" easier!)

And because it never rains but it pours, he was plagued by such rotten luck that there was hardly a step he made which wasn't the first step towards some kind of catastrophe – a definite proof, according to some in our family, that God likes to punish those who try hardest to live by his rules.

Uncle Schweik could not understand why we made such a fuss about what he saw as nothing more than the usual ups-and-downs of an ordinary man's progress

through life. To him, everything that crossed his path was merely “another of those things”, as he was wont to brush aside even the most shocking occurrence. His equanimity in the face of disaster startled most people who witnessed it. Once, when he was getting out of his car and opened the door into the path of a passing lorry, with the door promptly shorn off and dragged fifty yards down the road, his main concern was for the safety of the lorry driver.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked him at least a dozen times, and would have repeated the question a dozen times more if the lorry driver hadn’t surrendered to a fit of rage and plunged his fist into the middle of uncle Schweik’s face. “He had every right to do so,” was the explanation my uncle gave to the police when they asked him if he would press charges. (In spite of the fact that he needed seven stitches and had to put up with loud ringing noises in his left ear for more than a year!)

Many of his disasters became popular talking points at dinner parties throughout the country. No wonder he was eventually offered television appearances in popular TV shows. He accepted the invitations as a matter of course, but turned out to be a great disappointment. Not only did he fail to register (let alone react to) the mocking tone of the presenters, thus depriving audiences of the amusement they had been led to expect, he even refused to admit that the long list of calamities read out to him in any way set him apart from anyone in the audience!

In every show his reply was the same: “We are sent to this world to practise patience and calm, and so prepare for the next one, which will not be as kind to us as the one we are so eager to denigrate.”

Once again the presenters would confront him with the most notorious examples of his accident-proness: how in the space of a single day he managed to, 1. put out his back by bending down to pick up a pencil, 2. blow up his gas boiler by connecting the wires which made it overheat, and 3. flood his bathroom (not to mention the downstairs flat) by forgetting to close the tap.

And how on earth did he manage to trap in the bus door – by closing it too early – more passengers a week than other drivers did in a year? Not to mention the model ship he had been building inside a bottle over a period of years, only to have it turned to jelly by accidentally filling the bottle with acid. And what about the number of times he had been thrown off his feet by trying to repair an iron without first unplugging it?

“Well,” uncle Schweik always replied without getting upset, “I never bother about things like that. In fact, I never bother much about anything. If I did, I would quickly become dangerous to others. I am not bothered about being dangerous to myself. I became a bus driver because I enjoy getting people to their destinations. Historically, this is not very significant, but I derive just enough pleasure from it to call myself happy”

Were there women in uncle Schweik’s life? Nobody knows. There were rumours

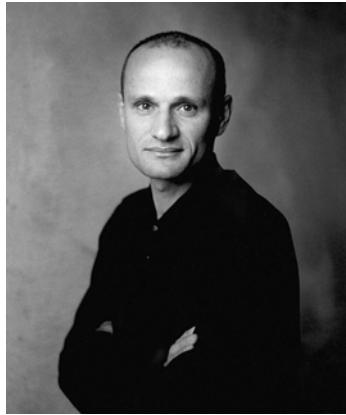
about his entanglements with various ladies, but never a shred of evidence that he as much as brushed against one accidentally, let alone made an effort to secure her favours. But thoughts of marriage must have been on his mind at least some of the time; once, applying for a loan at a bank, he was overheard answering the clerk's routine question, "Are you married?", with a deeply felt, "I would like to be, but I've never been asked, and as for asking myself, I'm too shy."

One way or another, things remained vague in this area of uncle Schweik's life. No one in the family, or outside it, felt inclined to hire a detective to find out what he was up to, and so the subject eventually faded from our conversations.

In any case we were never short of gossip material: quite unexpectedly, and to everybody's amazement, uncle Schweik was offered a part-time job with the National Broadcasting Corporation. No doubt a few crucial doors had been knocked at by my grandma, who may have hoped that her son would work his way up to the position of Director General, from where he could enter politics as effortlessly as if walking through revolving doors. After all he had appeared in enough TV shows for his calm and relaxed approach to be widely known, so it was – according to grandma – hardly surprising that the Corporation's health unit hired him to compose an anti-stress advice brochure which would tell overworked managers, producers and others how to relax.

Uncle Schweik found the request reasonable and hardly beyond his competence. And so eventually a glossy 80-page booklet was published, paid for by the licence fee, in which harrassed executives were instructed to "always ensure that they sit on the cheeks of their bottoms", and to unwind by staring at a picture of the Alps, dreaming of hiking through green Alpine valleys with their favourite aunt, or, if that didn't work, take up origami. The booklet included a 21-stage diagram of how to make an origami bird; and it was this particular part of the brochure that made uncle Schweik, perhaps for the first time in his life, unashamedly proud. Failing everything, harrassed executives were advised to dab their heads with lavender or sandalwood.

DUŠAN ŠAROTAR  
(1968)



JOŽE SUHADOLNIK

already established his original and recognisable poetics with the novel *Potapljanje na dah* (1998). The lonely figure of the mysterious stranger also represents a constant around whom events soon ramify. The astonishing relatedness among his figures is confronted with the same astonishing differences in the topography of individual stories. Šarotar's poetic is based on paradoxes, and his aesthetic style is charged with imagination. So it is also possible that, with the development of the story, its inaccessibility reduces nothing. Quite the reverse, the mystery potentiates instead of resolving, while yearning for the distance matures into pain. We are dealing here with prose enveloped in its inner world, in apparent self-sufficiency of imagination, while the author plays with the reader's horizons of expectation. Disorientation is similar to enticement, and the whole is submerged in an intensive, appreciable atmosphere. Šarotar's prose goes beyond all the attributes of poetry, and adds something to them of its own.

*He always found an isolated light, which shone like a beacon and offered an invisible hand to the morrow, then he left it, without ever knowing the name of the friendly owner, but he felt that they're close, that they sip the same dream, will even perhaps remain on the same page of the book, believing that night dwellers read similar books, serious and adventurous, and they live in related worlds, far from noise and haste, safely wrapped in solitude.*

## THE RETURN

### 2.

Daylight was quickly away. The doors of an enormous castle hall were slowly shutting, the flickering flame of the only chandelier on the horizon, which up to that moment had been caressing the grey walls with warmth, was sinking into the night. The line beneath the firmament flared up for a moment and glistened like a drawn sword. And the walls of darkness surrounded them. They were caught high up in the air, bottoms, they were sliding on a woollen coat of the clouds. The plane tilted somewhat to its portside and lost some altitude. The white signal light blinking on the large icy wing now suddenly flashed on the windowpane. The nose leveled off again and the fuselage comfortably readjusted to its horizontal position, in equilibrium.

The mild, almost watery coffee in the plastic cup, that revealing its sugar – covered bottom calmed down the circles had subsided. Herman began to feel rather at ease; now that the plane was gliding silently, he unfastened his seat belt, the small light above his seat warning passengers to fasten their seat belts was switched off. He made himself comfortable and turned on the reading light. The sweet dark liquid in front of him had already grown cold. He did not remember how long was it that it had been resting on the narrow folding table for he had been keeping his face pressed against the window all the time and gazing outside, into the night that locked them into a castle without walls or foundations. He was searching for stars, at least something that he could interpret as an exit and a consolation that they were not trapped and locked in an immense hall. He stared motionless over the wing that shook slightly in the icy air masses, into the dying sun, as though he could follow it and spot once again, his island in the distance. He knew that now he would feel even more uncomfortable up here. In complete darkness, high above everything that belonged in his world.

He sensed his body slowly beginning to grow rigid, as if he were sitting on a large vice that every hour clamped onto his joints. The worst affected were the legs. Even though passengers are proverbially comfortable, after a few hours of continuous sitting they mutate into an instrument of torture with the help of which the most unbelievable confessions were extorted obtained in times past. Herman would also give away many a thing now, if only he could stretch his feet, get up; what would he give now to be able to get out for a moment on some small distant airfield, with a grass runway, and a large corrugated iron hangar full with gliders, torn parachutes under the roof, and a small snack bar on the terrace. He would sit in the shade, drink a beer, and watch engine – powered white planes touching down on the grass, like huge dragonflies. He wished to ignore this modern traveling

torture for the masses, together with the other four hundred passengers in the Boeing on its way to the unfinished skies. He felt a pain at the small of his back, and his neck was quite stiff from watching through the window.

All was black outside. He found no stars. There were no lights deep down, they were flying high above the seas, far away from any inhabited shores.

The bald – headed man in the seat next to his, sporting a gold watch and an elegant silk suit, as if he had just left a diplomatic gathering, again gulped down a mysterious yellowish liquid, perhaps for the tenth time since they were airborne. At first he had considered his neighbour's behavior irritating; with extreme caution and as unobtrusively as possible he cast an occasional glance over his shoulder at the magic leather bag where the gentleman kept his test tubes and small bottles filled with varicoloured powders. From time to time for the periods which he was not able to establish a rhythm, his neighbour took a small case from beneath the seat, cautiously placed it on his knees, fiddled around with the combination lock, and carefully opened it. The small bottles always rattled in spite of all the cautiousness, and in doing so drew Herman's attention; he would then spontaneously withdraw his head from the window and look in the direction of the stranger sitting at his side. They had not exchanged a single word yet, and the language he spoke was also a mystery to him, as he merely heard a few of his words uttered in German, words addressed to the flight attendants, even though the rest of the passengers did try to speak in broken English. Then he took one of the small bottles containing a powder and poured a small quantity onto a plastic spoon and hastily swallowed it, and again he locked his case. Immediately afterwards he rose from his seat, woke up his neighbor to the left – the one who was sitting first in the row and desperately trying to keep his eyes shut as if he feared the sight of the crowded plane and resolutely went up the flight of stairs to the bar in the business class, where liquor from the duty – free shop was sold.

Herman immediately took advantage of his neighbour's absence and shifted his feet into the vacant space. He stretched out. At once he felt a lot better. He persevered with his feet stretched and his arms spread across two seats until the bald fellow returned with a fresh bottle of expensive wine, or was it a drink to aid digestion, on which he would focus until the time came to open his alchemical case again. Herman kept asking himself why all of this was necessary, surely there must have been a better reason for it than mere indigestion.

He was thirsty and he would likewise welcome something to drink at the moment, his mouth was dry and he was perspiring even though he had a sensation of coldness. He became sick at the thought of a drink that would surely feel good in his mouth, but would then flow into his tense and inflated belly that felt like a compressed bag in a deep – freezer. The flight attendant, tall and swarthy, with huge red lips and long, smooth black hair that covered her bony cheeks; and a smile that was built – in somewhere in the middle of the face, had just passed his

row. He wanted to order something, no matter what, but she was gone before he even managed to give a sign that he was alive. She was always in a hurry, routinely and courteously, as a model walking on a catwalk through a jungle of hungry stares, so that you don't actually see a thing, you end up taking only what offered to you, ready rapped. He looked upwards, toward the buttons above the seat; on one of them a silhouette of a slim figure was drawn, wearing a peaked cap, he hadn't seen this model before, he would merely have to rise and press the call button, there would be a short ring and the good angel in a green uniform with an eternally relaxed face would in an instant be at his service. However, what was there to say, there was absolutely nothing that he desired more than broad daylight outside, and to see the sun high above the icy clouds, and for the flight to be a calm one, and to be over already half an hour ago, only that, and to ...

MOJCA KUMERDEJ  
(1964)



JOŽE SUHADOLNIK

stormed into another book soon after publication of her first (*Krst pod Triglavom*, 2002) and hit the black. In the middle of the flood of text, which is drawn on an indifferent, formless and aimless urban existence, her writing in *Fragmi* (2003) prides itself on a precise quest. Immediately below the everyday surface, and only a fraction below the threshold of awareness, she discovers an exiting impulse, a tiny, visually imperceptible psychic arrhythmia, undisturbing oddity, a caprice that the environment generally does not notice: but which nevertheless represents a solid basis for inevitable ruin. The blind spot of contemporary man is the brief, small interspace where monsters are born. Cruel and unjust fate has appointed for this opportunity a calm, methodical and even flirtatious technical image. In the new circumstances, it is already possible too die or kill with just one click. Physical death equals death of the spirit and both are quite cynically trendy.

*On days when I can't get you out of my head even for an instant, I go to the basement. I lock the door and dress myself in a pure white frock. I wash my hands, open the freezer, push my hands towards the bottom and take out a pigeon, blackbird, mouse or sparrow. I shout the corpse into the microwave and wait for it to thaw. Then I take surgeon's gloves ... I take a scalpel ... I cut ... and I think of you ...*

## Under the surface

That summer the little one was four and a half years old. It was a very hot summer, such as I would be delighted about once, like the summers before the little one was born which we used to spend on the Adriatic, alone. But with her arrival some kind of family vacations started, with our friends and their children. The couple we spent July with three years ago also had a child, who was no longer that. She was fifteen years old, tall and slim, even a little taller than I was and with skin so perfect like only some teenagers can have. You think I haven't noticed how she stretched her young, long and not entirely developed body like a puma, how she purred and pouted her lips whenever you asked her something and -seemingly without interest but in fact completely in love – she talked to you? About what, I was thinking, when I watched you from a distance so that I couldn't hear words and saw only body language which was unambiguous and clear: we like each other very much. I knew you wouldn't dare do anything, she was only fifteen, she was the daughter of our friends, only a decade older than your daughter. But as I was watching this creature, a growing woman whom you would surely touch in a few years, three perhaps, and in different circumstances and wouldn't just stick to the foolish conversations with her – whatever can you talk about with a teenager as long as the conversation is not an excuse to be with her, exactly the way and the amount of time the rules of decency allow -, I was discovering more and more the little one in her.

It was probably fate – that I got up that July noon and went from the beach to the house above it. I don't remember exactly what I was doing then, probably nothing special, except going out onto the terrace a few times and watching you talking to a fifteen-year-old girl while playing with the little one. The next time I looked you and your sea princess were building sand castles. You were alone, after our friends also the girl had moved from the beach to the shadow.

When I looked through the window the last time, I saw your sunburnt body, lying under the sunshade. The little one was playing on the sand next to you. The tide started to move the inflatable plastic dolphin you had left on the sand by the sea. The little one noticed that. When the sea ran all over the dolphin and the first stronger wave started carrying it away, she ran after it. I stepped onto the terrace and at that moment wished for exactly what started to happen. You were still sleeping, the little one was walking after the dolphin, trying to grab it, but it was evading her more and more. I knew: one scream, one strong scream would have woken you up, you'd have jumped after the little one, grabbed her and torn her from the foam, which was bubbling on her body. At that moment I saw a chance for things to be the way they used to. Me and you, alone, and no one to measure the rhythm of our hours, days, nights, our years in the future. It seemed as though everything around me had stopped, the sounds disappeared and the light was blindingly white. With eyes slightly open I was watching the scene, and it seems to

me I didn't feel anything. No pain, no fear, I was only watching what I thought as it went along. The little one clung to the dolphin's handle fins but then a big wave tore the inflated animal away from her so that she helplessly let go. I saw her little hands trying to hang on to it and then she was drawn into the depth... I didn't watch anymore. I turned round and went into the house, poured myself a glass of cognac and fell onto the bed. I shut my eyes, and the world in front of me and behind me darkened. I fell into a sleep without sleep. And when, after a while, I felt a hand and saw the watery eyes of our friend, I knew it had happened. That the story was over. The little one – she hugged me and squeezed me tight. The little one is gone, the woman burst into tears. I got up, dizzy from the cognac and probably a weird sleep, and saw you sitting in the armchair of the living room, wrapped up in a white cover, squeezing the little inflatable dolphin. Our friend was sitting next to you, on the sofa beside his fifteen-year-old daughter, who saw death for the first time in her life. There were some more people in the house, then policemen and the coroner came. The girl had found her. When she returned to the beach after lunch, she saw the little one's body on the surface, with her face turned towards the seabed. As if mad, you presumably jumped into the sea and tried to revive your sea princess who had already swum away to different seas, oceans, rivers and lakes. Yes, it seems to me that although we had buried her body, she somehow spread into the waters of the Earth. I sometimes even feel that I remember her meeting my eyes, seeing I was watching everything but didn't help at the moment she was trying to hang on to the dolphin with all her might. That I just let her die.

Not that I didn't feel bad after her death; after all, she was my daughter as well. But in those few months I felt bad because of you, reproaching yourself with her death, because you, as it sometimes happens, fell asleep on the beach for half an hour at the wrong time. And you felt guilty because of me as well, the mother of your child whom you didn't protect against death. I was loving, very loving and understanding towards you, I was persuading you, consoling you that it was an accident, that it wasn't your fault that this happened. It seems to me as if her death became your final commitment to me, although at the same time I know that what you feel for me isn't as much love as the feeling of guilt.

Once, for a moment, I think, you doubted me and asked: You loved her, too, didn't you? Of course, I replied, she was our child. I remember your look, as if you weren't satisfied with the answer and wanted to hear more...

And I hugged you, snuggled up to you and started slowly and gently to make love to you. It was Sunday morning and nothing could interrupt us.

You have changed with the little one's death, you're more vulnerable and soft and don't flirt with other women and girls so much anymore. When you carefully mention to me that we should have another, second child, I sadly turn away and say: you know that I can't, it's too painful. You caress me and let me know with a kiss that you understand. But you don't. You will never find out the truth that I don't

like swimming because I feel that as soon as I would sink into the water, I would feel her soft hair on my skin, her little arms would cling on to me and drag me into the depths.

Sometimes I dream about her being taken away by the sea on her dolphin and I run after her, then about her and the dolphin grasping me and dragging me to the seabed. I always wake up in terrifying pain from such dreams, clinching me in a rigid spasm, while I can hardly breathe and my heart pounds, not only as one but beside my own I can hear another, smaller heart, beating quicker. I never wake you up. I wait until it goes away, go to the bathroom and take a shower. Then I come back, lie down next to you and kiss you with immense love and tightly squeeze myself to you.

*Translate Laura Cuder Turk*

FERI LAINŠČEK  
(1959)



JOŽE SUHADOLNIK

is the author of fifteen novels, some of which have become both popular successes and influential cult novels. Both certainly apply to his work *Namesto koga roža cveti*, for which he received the prestigious Krestnik Award in 1992, and under the title *Halgato* was also filmed. The novel *Ki jo je megla prinesla* achieved similar success, and in 1996 won the award of the Prešeren Fund, and was also later filmed with the title *Mokuš*. He received the Večernica Award for the collection of fairytales *Mislíce*. Lainšček's narrative magic is drawn from deep archetypal layers, which are further strengthened by the intensive genius loci: Prekmurje, which marks the majority of his works, thus showing its poetic potential. *Ločil bom peno od valov* (2003), Lainšček's most recent work, which brought him a nomination for the Kresnik Award, once again established all the enumerated properties. In the novel, the title of which suggests Old Testament force, there is also space enough for immensity and for animism which, in the words of the protagonist's son, only people by rivers can recognise and understand.

*It seemed that the Mura, at least now when nothing molested it, lived entirely its own, other river-life, which was not made up of tiny and imperceptibly human moments but had pulsed in it for centuries. Very easy, so that hardened in its eternity it offended no-one by day and had now merely peacefully soothed, or at least healed its wounds and perhaps even planned concealment.*

## SATURDAY

This afternoon Elica went to Sóbota only for the third time in her life, although the town was less than an hour's walk away. It was a dark and rainy day so that Main Street was one long puddle and Elica and Ivan had to leave the light carriage at the vicarage by the Catholic Church. Sticky mud was already spread all over the paths among houses, water in ditches rose so much that some wooden footbridges were already submerged. All this, most likely announcing long and wet autumn, was the reason that the Pannonian town seemed like a big drowsy village, where geese and hens, moving slowly from backyards and pecking in the grass which wasn't mowed down. For the shopkeepers this was, of course, the day when hardly anyone went shopping, so they were gloomily standing under the eaves or looking out of the shop-windows like motionless apparitions, praying for the weather to get better.

Almost all the tables in the café of the new hotel called Dobray on Main Square were taken, probably because of this sleepy day as well. This was the meeting place of the rich Hungarian and Jewish merchants, senior clerks, land owners, lawyers and doctors, but only by coincidence travellers and retailers, driven up by business from the four corners of the earth, students, playing fine gentlemen, returning from Kőszeg, Szopron and Győr, went astray here. Beside some ladies sat as well, who with their shoes and perms let the others know that they were being replaced by the servants in their houses, while they rather chat about love novels and listen to piano music.

Elica sat on the edge of an upholstered chair and didn't dare touch the back of the chair with her back. She felt like everyone had noticed her ragged shoes and her one-piece dress and that they are only waiting for her to make a treacherous awkwardness so they can send her away. She was sorry for following him like a sheep without asking what he intended to show her, but she was even angrier for not having foreseen something like this and making an excuse. Namely, the fact was that she completely involuntarily found herself in noble saloons and was looking more and more like a grey mouse, which came out of its hole in the wrong place and now in distress cannot find her way back.

"Can we go now?" she whispered at last.

"We're going to treat ourselves with two decilitres of hot wine with cinnamon, aren't we," shrugged Ivan, who most likely felt her chilling around her heart. "We have to wait to the minute we have our tailor's appointment," he pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the silver dial. "Namely, I had asked him to make an appointment at such hour when he will really be able to take time for us."

"Why do we have to go to the tailor's?" she was even more uncomfortable.

"To take your measurements," he smiled. "And to show you his models which you might like," he explained. "But besides this," he winked at her, "when the tailor has the measurement, you can order there and don't have to stand in line for every little thing."

"You're going to have a dress made for me?" she finally understood and was left breathless. "You have brought me here for this and haven't said a word?" she was seized by joy she couldn't hide. "Well, I could just smile and smile," she admitted and covered her face, which really smiled like a Gypsy to white bread, with her palm.

"You need clothes and other feminine things," he held her palm across the table and drew it to him. "We have to provide you a lot of things so that you won't be embarrassed when we go someplace," he whispered.

She grasped his big palm, which was now not only a safety net but an opened hand, generously offering something she didn't dare dream about before. She gazed at his motionless face wondering how he could do this as if it was natural. Without being aware if this, she was slowly becoming a part of his plan he never talked about much but rather surprised her with his acts. But he surprisingly never let her feel that she should be grateful or that she owed him anything.

"As a matter of fact, what does being a gentleman mean other than clothes?" he continued the thought she couldn't follow for a long moment. "And those few fine words which can be learned," he added. "Behind this stands all that human vanity which doesn't have the courage to admit that everyone prefer their own to anyone else's."

"It never seemed so simple to me," she pulled back.

"It isn't," he listened to her. "But we're newcomers and what do we care about their poor relations," he whispered again. "Everything we're going to need here we're going to buy after all," he explained excitedly. "Short reckonings are still the legitimation that opens all the earthly doors."

"Don't hold it against me," she interrupted him. "But I don't understand what you think and what you are going to do," she admitted. "You can't just forget that I've been barefooted until now," she added after some time. "You can't just buy me shoes I've seen from afar and hope I could wear them like these women here."

He tightened his lips and looked by. It seemed as if she said something he didn't like or even get on his nerves. But most likely he secretly admitted to himself that it was inexorably true and had to take it into consideration. And it was certainly better to face it now when the tailor hasn't taken her measurements yet, than to regret it later. This is why she didn't want to conceal her distress and would rather turn these words, which were as heavy as stone. But in the meantime his face softened again and his blue eyes were as pure as water. He leant over the table and whispered: "Not only shoes, we're going to buy a house."

"A house!?" she uttered.

"Yes," he affirmed with a voice one couldn't object to. "Such with a drawing room, a balcony and a glass veranda."

"Here?" she asked fearfully.

"Here or somewhere around here," he was determined. "I haven't meant to tell

you yet because I haven't found one I could show you," he explained. "Now I see that it's better if you knew."

She gazed at the waiter's white palms, which put a pot with mulled wine in front of her and she seemed later to be drunk just from the aromatic vapours. Guests at the café of the Dobray hotel were suddenly so loud that she couldn't hear herself. She listened to the dominoes tumble down, to the cards for preference being dealt and to tapping of billiard balls, but she just couldn't hear what was screaming inside her. She got the feeling that the only thing sitting at a glazed carved table was her sneaky body and her soul was lifted out of it by a strong whirlpool and scrambled her like it would scramble eggs. Of course, Ivan had said something to her that she hadn't expected and she must be very happy now. Certainly she was afraid of the announced change of dwelling and of new beginning with people she didn't even know. But why didn't she feel this joy and fear now but everything inside her became hollow and filled with the unbearable noise of the town, entertaining itself with chats and games? Was she really drunk from the warmed and aromatic air or was she feeling sick because of the events, which took turns as if an irrepressible river was piling them up?

"Let's drink," said Ivan from afar. "Let's drink to us."

"To us," she held her pot with hot wine with both palms and carried it towards him. "And to wild ducks," she breathed before she took a sip.

"To ducks?" he was astonished.

"Yes, to ducks," she nodded. "To those wild ducks from my first reader, which fly, fly and never fly away," she smiled thoughtfully.

"Well!?" he said as if he wanted to say: you're really confused.

She put the pot back to the table and wondered how should she explain this to him. There were ducks, which just got scared, lifted above the horizon and stopped in flight – just like it sometimes seems that even the birds not drawn stop for a moment. Even as a child she felt that the draftsman deliberately captured them in such moment. This is most likely why they stuck in her memory like a picture, carrying a hidden message. But this was a disclosure she could hardly utter with words. So she rather rose, leant over the table and kissed him on his soft lips, opened with surprise and sweet of the cinnamon wine.

MARKO URŠIČ  
(1951)



Is professor of the philosophy of nature and logic at the Faculty of Philosophy in Ljubljana, and is also well known as an essayist (*Matrice logosa*, 1987 and *Gnostični eseji*, 1994). He edited the journal *Poligrafi* for seven years, and his opus also includes two novels, *Razpoke* (1985) and *Romanje za Animo* (1988). The first part of *Filozofskih pogovorov in samogovov* entitled *Pomlad* introduces a cycle of seasons, in which through discussions in a friendly circle, the wider question is raised of the possibilities of philosophic existence. The traditional dominant position of mature philosophy is confronted with a radical diversity of views, both with the touchstone of reality that he demands of a young student, and the calm, balanced artistic sensibility of a woman's point of view, with a strange neighbour providing special point of reference. Four thinkers, who measure quotations from the best known philosophers, thus thoroughly stir even the calmest philosophic waters; though philosophy is not just presented but constantly confronted with its extreme achievements. Its inspirational possibilities and also limitations are in play, which open the observer's eyes to unexpected solutions.

*The clock struck one. The single sound cut into the space more than the previous twelve strokes. The master steps to the balcony door and opens it on it's hinges, so that the cool of the night from the garden embraces him.*

*There are no angels anywhere! ... Always just time, which flies by day and halts by night! .. And when does the time of comprehension come? ... Does it come in death? Or never?*

## Platonopolis (a fragment from *Four Seasons, Spring*)

*The bell of Saint Stephen strikes half twelve: its deep sound undulates the space, spilling through the Venice labyrinth. A waiter approaches Bruno and John, asking for new orders. Master shakes his head and pays for cappuccinos. There are more people now in the square; boys are playing football in front of a Renaissance palace. Piazza is full of their voices. Pigeons stroll undistracted, but a tourist passing by, all burdened with cameras, gives an angry look to the little rascals.*

*Bruno.* There are some Tintoretto's paintings in this church, in *Chiesa San Stefano*, among them a less known masterpiece *Jesus Praying in the Garden*, a variant of the famous painting we're going to see in *Scuola Grande di San Rocco* – and the church space is interesting too, very old, Gothic. We could go and see it, but we have to wait for Mary so that we don't get lost.

*John.* We're in no hurry, it is beautiful here.

*Bruno.* I'm glad you like this square ... You know, a few years ago, some five or seven years ago – they fade away too quickly anyway – there was a great exhibition of the Renaissance architecture, not far from here, in *Palazzo Grassi*.

*John.* An exhibition of architecture in a palace?

*Bruno.* Yes, they exhibited many preserved wooden models of the Renaissance architectural masterpieces; some were already worm-eaten, restored and protected, for example a model of the Brunelleschi's Florentine dome, as well as models of unbuilt buildings, such as unused varieties of S. Peter's basilica in Vatican. I have a copy of the catalogue at home, I'll show it to you ... well, beside those models you could also find a lot of drawings, designs, books, building tools, and some pictures as well, among which I particularly remember a panoramic painting – you'll see it in the catalogue – that was magically illuminated in the dark room, it looked like a window into virtual reality, that work of an unknown artist from central Italy, from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century; its title *Architectural Perspective* was probably added later. This almost unknown Renaissance painting, kept by an American gallery, drew me irresistibly and it evoked in me a feeling of nostalgia. In an almost perfect Euclidean perspective it depicts the "ideal city", more real than the reality itself, illuminated with the omnipresent, otherworldly light; this city is like an architectural "world of ideas", imbued with mellow, greenish-grey yellow pastel light, structured as a network of sharp Euclidean straight lines, running into a focal point, in the zero point of the perspective far beyond the barely recognizable horizon, much further than the tower on the city wall, itself made smaller by the distance, visible only under an arch of triumph standing in the foreground of this Renaissance stage, classical and surrealistic as well. The focus, the metaphor of the spectator, a metaphor of my gaze on the pictorial surface, is defined in the painting's perspective by the Golden Section of the vertical symmetrical axis, which in front of me as the spectator,

perfectly mirrors both, though non-identical hemispheres of the ideal city, this forgotten – and now again revealed to the gaze, reawakened in memory – harmony of proportions and Platonic forms, present in the Greek colonnade, marble staircases, pilasters made from bluish chalcedony obelisk of red granite with acanthus capitals, on top of which stand allegorical figures embodying with their flapping draperies the human virtues, surveying the geometric perfection of the Renaissance *piazza*. The marveling eye is caught for a moment by a round fountain in the middle of the polygonal crown of the contrasting pavement, only to rise with the water jet, rising refreshed into the heights and at the same time losing itself into the depth of the space beyond the flat staircase all the way to the aforementioned arc of triumph, decorated with reliefs, witnesses of the glorious past of the *polis*. On the left and on the right side of the *piazza*, there rise almost symmetrical, patrician sublime palaces, temples of thisworldly wealth and power, and the gaze is finally – both disunited and unified – captured by two main building masterpieces of the city (actually it returns to them, since it noticed them at the very beginning, when this divinely proportioned vista opened up before them), by the two buildings setting and keeping the vulnerable balance between the city hemispheres to the left and to the right of the focus, running under the central arc of triumph: it's the circular arena on the left, reminiscent of the Colosseum in Rome, and the octagonal temple on the right, wrapped partly in light and partly in dark marble, reminiscent of the Baptistery in Florence. At the top, above the arc of triumph, the arena and the temple, in the mellow pastel emptiness of the sky, there float patches of clouds as shredded memories of the past rain, perhaps even storms, of overcome chaotic times, which now, during the reign of reason, no longer endanger the Platonic beauty of this Renaissance city, this hypnotically real “utopia”.

*John*. And the people? Are there any people in the painting?

*Bruno smiles sadly*. There are a few, but they are minute and unimportant, almost lost in the grandeur of buildings, the stone giants, among the embodied Platonic ideas, among which little human figures stumble like awkward ants, molded from the waste of the celestials, like annoying vermin, for which there is obviously no room in the ideal space of eternal beauty...

*John, disappointedly*. O, I do not like this! Venice is much more beautiful than this “ideal city”, because you cannot imagine it without people... Anyway, Venice cannot count for the geometrically ideal city, since it is situated in the marine lagoons, which weren't outlined with a ruler, not even with a pair of compasses. I think not even Florence is perfect, because, in view of the perfection of geometrical proportions, people appear smaller; quite on the contrary, it is perfect because they appear bigger and more sublime under its palaces! How can the depicted city you described count as a Renaissance city, when it ignores human beings? Isn't it true that for all Renaissance geniuses, Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, Tintoretto – man is in the foreground?

*Bruno.* I agree. And I must say that I was less enthusiastic about the painting of the ideal city than about the masterpieces of great Renaissance painters – it also made me think that the depicted *Platonopolis* isn't a human dwelling; rather, it is supposed to be a timeless world of ideas, frozen in eternity; I also agree that the beauty which lacks the presence of man, as perfect as it may be, cannot be a typical Renaissance beauty. But the painting moved me with its illustrative quality, through which it depicts the sublimity and perfection of geometric structures in view of the imperfect, minute and transitory human body. I found it closer to the present-day worldview than, for example, Leonardo's drawing of Man, *Anthropos*, outlining with its proportions and the geometry of the circle and square, perhaps even defining them; closer even than the marvelous images of Raphael's manlike angels, whose heavenly wings are embedded directly in their earthly shoulders. The knowledge of human imperfection is undoubtedly woeful – however, is not the task of philosophy just in its becoming aware of human transience, which should be transcended in spiritual eternity? Do you follow?

*John.* Yes... but I thought: what about the focus – have we forgotten all about it? Since the focus of the Renaissance perspective is supposedly that of man, you said so yourself... and may the people on the stage of the ideal city be as small as small can be, it is still the *human being* as the spectator who sees before his very eyes the architectural perspective with minute little figures in it! Is this not the very argument for human grandeur? ...

*Translated by Janko Lozar*