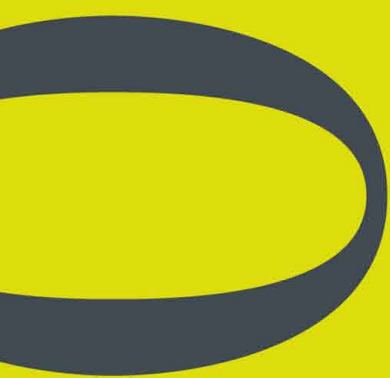




Authors  
from  
Slovenia



*Petra Pogorevc*

## Ten Authors from Slovenia

It came together gradually: in the process of reading, selecting, and copying the excerpts that combined to reflect Slovene literary production in the past two years and to reveal the possibility that, despite sharp contrasts in expression, a common denominator could be found among them. Although the selected authors belong to different generations and the excerpts from their works demonstrate a wide variety of preferences and styles, the astonishingly coherent whole is linked by the dynamic concept of travel that is present in the texts on many levels. First of all, of course, on the geographic level: we meet several of the protagonists in these selected works on their travels. The terminally ill girl in Lisbon, the gifted artist in the middle of London, the emigrant from Litija in H-ville, Arkansas, the medical student in Vienna who, after a seven-year absence, is returning to the place of his birth. We find other recurring motifs in the texts: the confluence of rivers and the bridges that cross over them, the alluring glimmer of the sea and the calming rhythm of train tracks, the highway illuminated at night and polished city boulevards. The same variety can be found among the authors of these texts: we have a novelist who has travelled the world, spending a good part of his life in foreign lands, and a poet who, in his fifties, succeeded in creating a new existence for himself, putting down roots in Slovene soil and creating literature in the Slovene language. The literary work that I have chosen for this selection also travels between different worlds and disciplines. The authors work in many literary genres and the worlds within the chosen works disclose an exciting intersection of references that connect literature to history as well as to other artistic disciplines and to myths. The chosen excerpts often show their authors to us in a different light from the one to which we are accustomed: a leading Slovene theatre critic is introduced to us through his fascinating poetry, a popular actress through a suggestive essay in which she writes about her profession. Both the actual and interdisciplinary travel reveals the selected authors and the protagonists of their works against changing backgrounds of foreign, other, often transitory contexts. These contexts extend beyond fiction and drift into reality itself. We observe the authors and their subjects within the complex richness of worlds that spring up from various temporal and geographic coordinates and can be glimpsed in the surprising crevices between life and art. The ceaseless comings and goings. The path that becomes its own destination.

**Saša Pavček:** *Na odru zvečer* (On Stage in the Evening), Dob pri Domžalah: Miš, 2005  
**Blaž Lukan:** *Neslišnost* (Inaudibility), Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2005  
**Veronika Simoniti:** *Zasukane štorije* (Twisted Stories), Ljubljana: LUD Literatura, 2005  
**Maja Vidmar:** *Prisotnost* (Presence), Ljubljana: Aleph, 2005  
**Evald Flisar:** *Čaj s kraljico* (Tea with the Queen), Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2004  
**Nejc Gazvoda:** *Vevericam nič ne uide* (Nothing Escapes the Squirrels), Novo Mesto: Goga, 2004  
**Milan Vincetič:** *Raster*, Maribor: Litera, 2005  
**Katarina Marinčič:** *O treh* (About the Three), Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2005  
**Josip Osti:** *Rosa Mystica (med belimi in črnimi lilijami)* (Rosa Mystica – between the black and white lilies), Maribor: Litera, 2005  
**Milan Dekleva:** *Zmagoslavje podgan* (The Rats' Triumph), Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2005



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## Saša Pavček

*The most beautiful thing in the world is a human being, a person. A unique and unpredictable person. How magical is the instant when you catch sight of a human being illuminated for a single instant and you know that this moment is unique. This is a human being in the short flare of life. His life. Her life. Here. Now.*

**(Actress)**

Saša Pavček's principal career is as an actress. Since 1985, she has been employed at the Slovene National Theatre in Ljubljana where she has played approximately ninety roles and for which she has received a number of awards, including two Sever Awards and the Prešeren Fund Award. She launched her career as a playwright in 2003 when her first play *Čisti vrelec ljubezni* (The Pure Spring of Love) was staged. Her dramatic debut was translated into English, French, German, Macedonian and Czech. Her comedic monologue *Al' en al' dva* (Either One or Two) was translated into Italian and English and received the international Umberto Saba Literary Award (Trieste Scritture di Frontiera). Her first book, *Na odru zvečer* (On Stage in the Evening) featured both the abovementioned drama and the one-act play *Arija* (Aria, 2005). It was translated into English and French. Pavček then published four essays on the theme of the theatre and the art of acting. She wrote them with a keen awareness of how fragile and irreversible is each instant on the theatrical stage and of how long and complex is the often obscured history of each individual instant. Actress, dramatist and writer meet in her sensitive writing. She shapes her prose with the precise stylisation of various situations that cross-fertilise each other and thus produce her characteristic and multifaceted authorial voice. In addition to a cast of real and fictional characters, there is always the author herself: never in one integral piece but composed of many glimmering flashes, never self-satisfied but woven into the web of relationships found between life and theatre. In her essay *Bela senca* (White Shadow), we have the opportunity to discover the actress in a close backstage symbiosis with her dresser.



## *White Shadow* (excerpt)

---

Behind the stage is a shadow. A gentle pale creature with quick hands and a calmly beating heart. You recognise her by her soft walk, the heel that hovers in the air, her desire to separate sound from silence. Her body is taut like a good hunting animal, her breath shallow and loyal. Boneless hands, careful and attentive, touch me with rapid twinkling fingers. One among them, the middle finger, hides inside a silver thimble. I feel its hardness here and there upon my body as she helps put on my sumptuous stiff costume, as she skilfully clasps at the nape of my neck the tasteless finery that shimmers brightly from a distance but leaves a dirty grey stain on my sweaty skin. The shadow is always a step behind me. She doesn't speak if I don't speak to her. She doesn't move if she doesn't have a reason to do so. Her simultaneous presence and absence is calming, giving a feeling of domesticity and routine, a feeling of a final shelter before the assault, before the descent onto the stage, that crucial arena of success and failure when the actor becomes the black spot at the very centre of the target, all gazes aiming straight at it, arrows poised to plunge into its modest heart, a wounded heart that is held in the palms of the audience's hands, high up, high up, so everyone can see it and judge it. Why must performances be judged as successes or failures only? Is it merely a tribute to this success-obsessed era? What about the elusive truth that varies slightly with each person? The truth of acting resides in the sincerity of the heart. Perhaps it is not a victory over the stage, but a victory over insipid and pleasurable deception. I look into the face of the shadow for an answer that will affirm me, that will motivate me in my eternal search for genuine feeling. I search in the calm tone of her voice, in the incalculable gift of her behaviour that makes the etched doubts leave my anxious body (at least for a moment), a body woven into a thorny wreath of stage fright, unease, fear of performance. But the shadow is silent. Drawn across its face is a thin veil of inexpressive attention that recalls the white mask of a geisha, though one who has forgotten to make the sharp outlines around her eyes and the loquacious cherry red mouth. Her face is vaguely absent and yet her gestures as she dresses my electrified body have the skills of a magus, chasing away the lingering doubts, banishing the anguished feelings of temporary impotence. She snips away uncertainty with a pair of invisible scissors, shreds it into tiny strips of quickly dissipating fear. I watch her undulating fingers as they sew up a hole in the fraying costume, making agile stitches with the needle. With each stitch the size of a poppy seed, she closes a tiny aperture in my anxiety. With each thrust of the needle, there falls – or at least that's how it feels to me – a drop of fresh blood as a demonstration of faith in this ever repeating evening sacrifice. Tiny drops into a red lake give rise to a sprout of hope that, despite its ephemeral quality, the theatre has a sort of stubborn purpose. When this greyish hole of venerable age is sewn closed, a small embossment remains on the surface. She smoothes it

with her shadowy hands, with their damp cushions. Her palms pull open the doors of expectation for the events that will take place on the stage this evening and reveal their beauty.

Now I feverishly move my lips. I mutter inaudible words as a final prayer before battle. The shadow gives the impression that she doesn't notice this ritual but respects it all the same. With the patient gesture of a petrified pantomime, she holds the oversized coat that squeezes my current existence into its dramatic role. A velvet weight lies on me, presses my spine to the floor, and yet the power of the acquired text give strength to my weak spine so that I can suddenly lift my neck straight to the sky. I feel the multiplying power of the words spreading across my body. They press against me, dripping flesh onto my bones, a long chain of verses like armour over my breastplate. Inside a sleeping heart awakens. I must melt this hard phalanx, thaw it, spin a soft web, and use it to enfold the cold hearts of the audience, warm their frozen memories, arouse them from the long slumber of ancient emotion so that my sonorous words and their hot meaning will burn a tiny brand into the skin. I breath deeply before this difficult task. I do not exhale. The expectation is too great. The scent of the shadow's sweet breath remains in my nostrils and I sense her unsaid words hanging on a string in her throat. This is her jewellery, this mysterious necklace. I breath out a short sudden 'thanks' and leave her. I step into the nothingness, struck by a beam of light. I burn in the lights. Wilfully, without self-consciousness, given to myself and to you.

Many times I have wanted to ask her if my coldness before I step on the stage hurts her feelings. My brief words of gratitude before I descend to the illuminated platform are said in such an absent way, as if I were asking her to leave me alone. I must continue on my own and each time I am like a frightened and sickly child who goes from her arms. Unskilled and alone I walk toward the light on the stage. It blinds me, bewitches me, making me drown in the funnel of light that drugs and inspires me. I forget everything that I've learned and I live for the instant of connection with the magnificent text that now seems to lie before me. Like a young girl, I run and skip over the hopscotch squares, solving the riddle of an emotionally acted image, laughing, bells ringing, nimble, free...

Somewhere far away, behind me, in the depths of the stage, the shadow – abandoned, forgotten, unneeded – smiles to herself. That is my dresser. Though she is not mine and I am not hers; thousands of unsaid words lie between us. Our distances are unbridgeable. A labyrinth of paths runs between us, marked by the prohibition of my bothersome babble, my pointless chatter when what is needed is calm and concentrated solitude. The dresser is sparing with her words. I don't know if she is that way by nature, but thoughts are torn from her monosyllabically, in short bursts

and inward smiles. Though not always. When the trampled actor's self-confidence needs a bandage, she lets out a stream of mild sentences and they roll down the slope of broken self-confidence. They collect in the well of the emptied soul of the stage player, their sweet sounds caress the powdered skin of their pride, wondrous words – 'how beautifully they received you' – glue themselves onto disfigured egos that have migrated into the shards of a broken mirror. During the worst storms of uncertainty, when the actor's talent is corroded by the rust of creative impotence and tormented by the bestial doubts and painful knowledge of unworthiness, the blessed shadow reaches for the most powerful of lies: 'You can play any role!' These sly words work like an anaesthetic. With unbelievable rapidity, these lovely cliché plaudits dry up tears of self-pity and fill at least for a moment the never full beggar's sack of praise and admiration. That is also why I say she's 'mine'.

*Translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak*





## Blaž Lukan

*What I am pulses gently, making me a part of the universe,  
to be shattered to smithereens one day, but in my gut something  
can't quite believe this, and gropes for images, letters, looks,  
to scrape off time the skin of whatever it holds important.*

**(Systole and Diastole)**

Blaž Lukan is a dramaturge, theatre critic and journalist on the culture desk of *Delo*, the largest circulation Slovene daily newspaper. He graduated from the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Ljubljana, where he earned his PhD with the dissertation *Dramaturgija in gledališče* (Dramaturgy and the Theatre). He was the artistic director of Glej, an experimental theatre in Ljubljana from 1985 to 1988, and of the Slovene People's Theatre in Celje from 1989 to 1993. He has published theatre criticism, poetry, fiction, radio plays, stage adaptations of literary works, and plays (*Mrtvi*, The Dead, 1999). His first poetic works were published in 1974 in *Dialogi* and later he published poems in local and international literary reviews. He has published seven collections of poetry: *Pesem in pesmi* (Poem and Poems, 1977), *Rana v krvi* (Wound in the Blood, a poetic and graphic dossier made in collaboration with the painter Janez Matelič, 1983), *Bohinjska Bela* (1984), *Kolumbija / praefatio* (visual poetry, 1984), *V tihem teku* (In the Quiet Flow, 1993), *Tkanja* (Weaving, 2002) and *Neslišnost* (Inaudibility, 2005). His most recent poetic collection includes a series of sonnet-like lyrical confession, captured in proscribed formulas of two quatrains and two tercets. However, more than by external formal method, these poems are connected by the author's agile and flexible thoughts that are often integrated into a classical dramatic arc. Each poem contains its own cosmos, springing from arrested and isolated moments and growing into a unique combination of images and scenes born as much from the poet's internal life as from literature, film, visual arts and other references. The first person subject that is glimpsed in the world of these poems is phantom-like and evasive, without axis or centre, unanchored, and yet with a keen awareness of its own fragility.

## *Apparitions on the Boulevard of Crime*

---

Who sees who now: I seem to see myself,  
walking down the *boulevard du crime*, not  
now, but years ago, aimless and withdrawn,  
real only in the reflections of shop windows,

but even this me can see someone walking  
down the boulevard of crime, drifting from  
corner to corner, on the lookout for pursuers,  
then ducking into a cellar on Rue de la Folie,

where what's real is rats squeaking and footfalls  
through the floor, but even then I see someone  
floundering in mud in the *boulevard du crime*,

with a bloodied hand and a poked-out left eye,  
drowning in a dirty puddle, and seeing at the last  
the face on its surface as real for the first time.

## *A Child's Vision of the Future*

---

Occasionally I am still overcome by a child's sense of the future: all the doors wide-open, into huge airy rooms, which in fact are me, many different images poured in, events, people (unknown, changed, made anew, dead), everything painted as if in festive time, every

thing in expectation and I am flooded by a gentle tremor, and life seems about to bristle. Then I become calm, look at what's about me & say to myself: there is no other future but what I see around me, even if someone were to ring me right now, the earth begin shaking or

everything go dark in front of my eyes, but everything still is here and is not empty, is not feeble, but is in feverish expectation of time to pass, for this minute to go by, (precisely this minute to pass, since seconds hardly

matter), and in calmness an image composes itself, substituting the child's. There's nothing that couldn't be here anyway & from this moment all future moments separate & only the children's rooms seem ever more tightly shut.

## *On The Way*

---

Your face's face is staring at me unflinchingly. I'm not that old  
and yet I feel I have bark beneath my skin, I cannot pronounce  
your name unless my lips are tight shut, but you nonetheless  
know me. Night resounds with calls to forget, under wheels

the road moves with dark speed, sounds smash against windscreens  
as if to drown out forbidden love, and between each face there's light  
that glows into the unattainable, far-flung world, where at this winter  
hour only Calvino's solitary traveller can roam – for, like the cold,

oblivion escapes from consciousness, and memory is reliable life.  
A palm strokes my face with gentleness, loosened from your hand,  
I can feel halfway in this infinite ride a skin taking me in, unwrapping

its body as cellophane from a present, or some long-lost poem, set here  
at this beginning, a face from your face watching me, until it dies away,  
blinded by the strength of its headlamps, ominously heading me down.

*Translated by Ana Jelnikar & Stephen Watts*



## Veronika Simoniti

*“Stories contain so many possible twists and turns, but only one twist and turn really interests me: why, out of all the thousands of twists and turns, precisely this twist, precisely this turn. Let’s say you tell me what your three favourite things are and I tell you why I think – though I have known you all of two weeks – it is so. Each thing has a hidden story behind it.”*

**(Garda Stories)**

Veronika Simoniti is a graduate in romance languages, a translator and a writer. She works as an Italian language lecturer for the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of Arts of Ljubljana University. As a writer, she has published mostly fairytales and short stories. In 2001, she won first prize in an anonymous contest for the best short story sponsored by the *Literatura* monthly magazine. In 2005, she published her first collection of short stories *Zasukane štorije* (Twisted Stories). There are twenty stories in the collection that are characterized by the concept of twistedness. The stories have a short, open, anecdotal structure that contains unexpected jumps, twists and resolutions. Internal tension emerges from the deliberate construction of the narrative, the economic presentation of key moments, and the intentionally spare drawing of the characters. These stories are submerged in a contemporary world that is never exactly what we first think it is, as it constantly reflects and refracts art, history and myth. The protagonists are idiosyncratic urban characters who are defined as much by concrete events and everyday reality as they are by desire, nostalgia, and longing. We recognize these characters from our own travels and movements in space and time. The experiential worlds are fragile and fluid and resonate on many levels. The author’s style is specific and unique, incorporating the innovative use of archaic expressions, challenging narrative hooks, and tactical oscillations between different narrative levels. The author links all of these elements into an enviably effortless narrative style making Simoniti’s debut collection one of the most promising first books of the year.

## *Portugal* (excerpt)

---

It is Time. When I last saw grandma, I didn't know that it *is* time. I departed in fury, flailing. In the same way I had always solved crossword puzzles in the kitchen. Substance, six letters. M-A-T-T-E-R.

When the bus arrives in Arande de Duero, I ask where the train station is because I prefer trains. The train station is not far and I buy a ticket for Mirando do Douro, the first city in Portugal, so I won't have to pay much for the international connection. I am going where the Duero River becomes the Douro River, where the sunny E flows into the melancholy O. Do the Portuguese yearn in the same way Slovenes do? Our dark green longing and their crimson *saudade*. Melancholy Portuguese nasal sounds. French nasals are refined and superior, Polish ones resigned to their fate. But the Portuguese are sublime melancholics. They are the only ones I want to hear. Then I can go home.

A man at the abandoned railway station watches me curiously, though not intrusively. He looks at my shaved head. It is really something extraordinary in a country where hot-blooded women dance flamenco, passionately flinging long black curls over their shoulders. I shaved precisely because I didn't want to have any trouble with excited men overwhelmed by their hormones. I want to be as unattractive as possible. The game of flirtation is irrevocably over for me. I am not interested. Over. I no longer wear my tribal jewellery. I am like some kind of Buddhist monk with a military backpack and wide pants. Take me as a sexless creature, a neuter travelling to the end of the day.

The regional train follows the happy Duero River like a man entranced by a woman. The Duero will flow and change into another current, one that claims to be the melancholy Duoro River. I started smoking again. I stopped ten years ago. Now at the age of thirty, I light a Dukada, passionately, as if I am a character in a black-and-white film. The Duero is greenish brown. Perhaps Portugal will be as black as the end of the day.

I take a drag on my second Dukada in the corridor of the dirty train. A young man steps from the neighbouring car. He looks nice. When he speaks to me, I let him know that I don't understand Spanish very well. We communicate a little in English, a little in his language. Donde? Portugal. Ah, Portugal. Porqué? Big question. I could tell him. I'll never see him again. It's nothing to be ashamed of. He'll never see me again, at least never again in my life.

A customs official comes into the train at the border and carelessly glances at documents. He pauses with me, reaching for my Slovene passport. He's never seen one before. He looks at it inside and outside and smiles. I smile back, pretending. The train is pulling me into the country of Portugal. I am here, almost at the end of my day. Dusk is falling and no one knows where I am, except perhaps grandma.



In Mirando do Douro, I get off and buy another ticket. I must change trains just as I must pretend. I am a train-changer. I am a trans-former though I don't know what I'm becoming, what form I will take. The Douro River is not black, but maybe that's only an apparition. Maybe it is black but my human eyes still see brownish-green. Or greenish-brown. What's the difference?

Yes, directly to Lisbon. Porto will wait. It's another place. At least that is what I understood from Tabucchi's *Requiem*. Though now, now it seems to me that one cannot make a mistake understanding... that it's okay to understand in one's own way. There were times when I was full of doubts and uncertainties. Now there is only one big uncertainty.

Vineyards, oaks, red soil, boring white villages with closed shutters. It's because of them, because of them that I came, because of the closed shutters. So that I could peek through the slats of the most closed Mediterranean country – mediterranean, middle of the earth – the place where we are all born. Shutters that hide a secret. Grandma is already late and I will be early for the one big uncertainty that the closed shutters protect from the strong sun. When day departs, the people open them and inhale the fresh night.

Coimbra. Two women in the corridor chat in an incomprehensible language. Then one gets off the train and the one who remains is bored. She has her hair twisted in a knot. She looks around for someone to talk to. When she sees me, she waves with her tissue, which means it is hot. I nod and she says something to me. I shrug my shoulders, which means I can't understand. Foreigner? Yes, foreigner. Lisbon? Yes, Lisbon. In truth, they are not so closed. They are as small and as dark, the Portuguese, as little devils.

They spoke to me very seriously. Well, we've done all the tests now. The results have come from the oncologist. It is better before, it is better after, what is most dreadful is the particular moment when you are about to know what will happen to you now. That moment is dreadful and then it fades away. Only afterwards do things become clear and you know what you have to do. Without fury and by no means flailing.

We arrive in Lisbon. I find a restaurant nearby. I order tripe and a glass of honeyed wine. I've always preferred red but now I spurn the port wine that is too sweet for what I am experiencing. I watch the sea from the terrace of the restaurant, from the citadel of Lisbon. What could a person want of it?

I want to go on the city tram. I sit on the wooden bench and a man with a shabby attaché case under his arm reminds me of Mr. Pereira. Never before would Pereira have thought about death.

Above Portugal, in Galicia, there is a promontory that is called Finisterre. End of the earth, end of the world. It should be unique but in fact there is another Finisterre in France. Which one is the right one?

I walk the streets of Lisbon and I am not afraid of the drug dealers. Now that my head is shaved, I look like some kind of addict and as I stroll – leisurely, in no hurry – the streets that rise toward the sun, they offer me their goods. Once my heart would have pounded at their approach, but now nothing. They can do nothing to me. I am marked for a different fate. It is like the night when I told him that I was sick and I immediately understood that he wasn't going to stay with me and I walked alone across the whole city in the darkness. I wasn't afraid of criminals because the wound was already too deep for anyone to even think of attacking me. They would see right away that I was not the right sort of victim. I, who was once more afraid than anyone to walk alone in the city at night.

Metastasis is visible in the right hemisphere of the brain and on the surface of the left wing of the lung, near the heart, said the man in white. Once my heart beat strongly there, but no longer. The doctor closed his folder, my chart, as if to say, this case is closed.

The sea air is pleasantly warm and dry. People seem relaxed. They're not loud. Everything is so natural. That's why I came. The sun is gold like the wine and they are selling lottery tickets at the Largo da Estrela.

Yes, this case is closed. I am in Lisbon. It is my *finis terrae*. The tripe in sauce was excellent, perhaps a bit strong for the stomach, but excellent. In the café where locals gather, the yellow wine runs smoothly down my throat and into the left ventricle of my lung. The sea in the distance looks dark brown, almost black. The boats sail out into the open sea, bidding farewell to the melancholy, nasal honking of the city. Dusk falls. All that is left for me to do is find accommodations for the night.

*Translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak*



## Maja Vidmar

*Sleepless, I am  
learning, learning  
to embrace it  
so that one day we will ride  
the tiger into the valley.*

*(To my Daughter)*

Maja Vidmar studied Slovene and comparative literature at the Faculty of Arts of Ljubljana University. Today she lives in Ljubljana and works as a writer. She first appeared as a poet in the 1980s when her debut collection *Razdalje telesa* (Distances of the Body, 1984) was published. This was followed by the collections *Način vezave* (Ways of Binding, 1988), *Ob vznožju* (At the Foothills, 1998) and *Prisotnost* (Presence, 2005) for which she won the Jenko Poetry Award and the Prešeren Fund Award. Her work has appeared in many anthologies of poetry and has been translated into numerous languages. She won the German Hubert-Burda-Stiftung award for her collection *Leibhaftige Gedichte* (Droschel, Graz, 1999). A collection of her poems was published in Croatian with the title *Akt* (Meander, Zagreb, 1999). Her distinctive poetic voice is emphatically personal and ascetic. The central theme she explores in her work is love. In her last collection, the space of love expands: it is no longer only the erotic relationship between man and woman that she wrote about so suggestively in her first collection (and led to her characterization as an erotic poet), but also the fundamental emotions that determine the relationship of each individual existence to the external world. In terms of form, Vidmar's poems are generally short, economical and symbolically loaded. They are crafted with a keen sense of the rhythm of free verse, which at times is based on the repetition of words and syntactic parallelisms. More often, however, she makes use of a radical reduction and condensation of poetic expression. The trademark of her poetry is the strong poetic charge that has an explosive effect.

## *The House*

---

With father's milk  
I drank  
the solid architecture  
of the house,  
and yet in these rooms  
every evening  
I covered up my head.  
There was no doubt:  
out in the open they would  
have come, those who are not,  
they would have devoured me.

It is hard  
with a house in your head.  
In the evening I sit  
at the back door  
crying out for them,  
those who are not.

## *The Means*

---

Use ordinary words  
and worn-out metaphors  
the way I do.

Use betrayed loves  
and bloody, limp hands  
the way I do.

Use hopeless flights  
of tired pigeons  
and this burnished stone,  
about the only thing above water,  
the way I do.

Use numb legs  
on your way into the water,  
and the fear there is no way out  
the way I do.

Use my imminent death  
the way I  
use it:  
just to hear our whispers  
to each other,  
preferably in ordinary words.

## *Presence*

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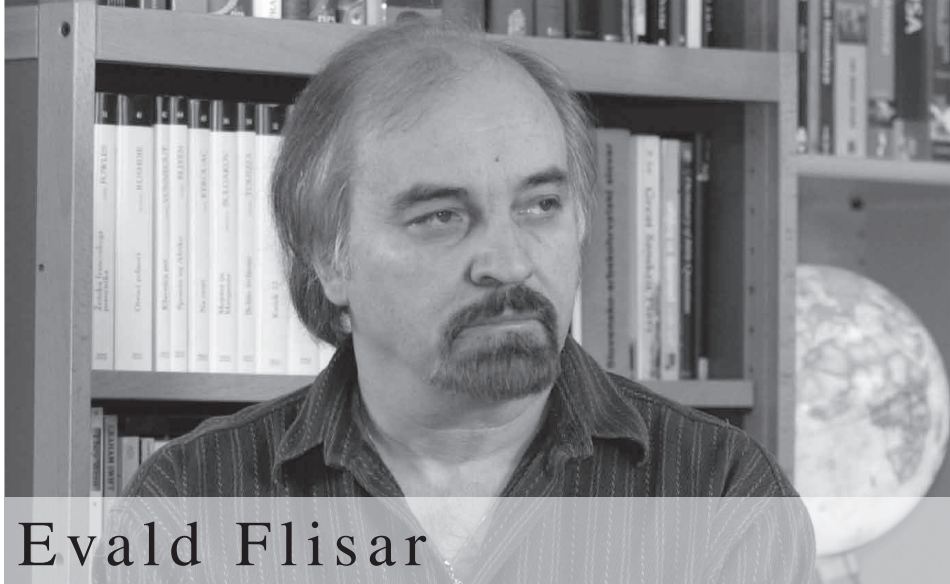
When they cut it down  
the pine tree stands.

It doesn't even consider  
that it could, with its ripped-out  
muddy root, flee  
down the street.

When they cut it down  
it is most fully tree.

*Translated by Ana Jelnikar and Kelly Lenox Allan*





## Evald Flisar

*“Not perhaps in the way we are moved by the perfection of the masters, but more deeply, as by a direct message from one human being to another. The message of your paintings is: suffering is not an individual problem, it is our common fate. You must never forget that, even though it’s only the first and perhaps a very small step on the path to immortality.”*

*(Tea with the Queen)*

Evald Flisar is a novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist, and editor of the oldest Slovene literary journal *Sodobnost*. He studied comparative literature at the University of Ljubljana and then English literature in London where he spent seventeen years of his life, editing (among other things) an encyclopaedia of science and writing radio plays for the BBC. From 1995 to 2002, Flisar was president of the Slovene Writers’ Association. His work has been translated into twenty-four languages. His best known novel is *Čarovnikov vajenec* (The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, 1986), now in its sixth edition. He is the author of three books regarded as the best travelogues in the Slovene language: *Tisoč in ena pot* (One Thousand and One Journeys), *Južno od severa* (South of North) and *Popotnik v kraljestvu senc* (Travels in Shadowlands) for which he won the Prešeren Fund Award. He has written six other novels, two collections of short stories, and twelve plays. All of the plays have been staged in Slovenia and many of them abroad as well. A selection of seven of Flisar’s stage plays (*Collected Plays*, 1) has been published by Texture Press in New York. The rich biography of the author who has travelled in over eighty countries is reflected in his novel *Čaj s kraljico* (Tea with the Queen), in which he sends a young talented painter on the journey of life. At the end of the sixties, Vili Vaupotič travels to London, determined to succeed as an artist. However, along the way he gains insights that enable him to choose higher values than mere success. Skilfully woven into the matrix of a bildungsroman are elements of a love story, adventure yarn, and even a crime novel. The book is given additional weight by its committed reflection on art and its meaning and status in contemporary society.

## *Tea with the Queen* (excerpt)

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Only after I had already given up and turned to leave did I catch sight of him, galloping towards me on the paved riverside path. “S-s-sorry, s-s-sorry,” drizzled out of him. The fear that he had disappointed me gave his face the look of an ill-grown potato.

“Glad to see you,” I said. He trembled with relief, and I knew I had a friend for life. “Th-th-there,” he pointed, pulling me after him. Two hundred meters lower down the river, a little boat swayed at the foot of some steps that led to the water. It almost made me laugh. Jimmy, I wanted to say, what do you intend to carry in that dinghy? A chihuahua?

Fortunately, it only seemed small from a distance. When we reached it, I quickly discovered that it had everything a boat needed: two benches, two oars, a little motor with a rudder, enough room for the two of us and for everything I had brought with me, including the easel. The only thing missing was a wooden frame on which to stretch the canvas. I had completely forgotten about that, but Jimmy said without hesitation: “I kn-kn-know wh-wh-where.”

He untied the boat, pushed off with an oar, started the motor, and off we went, speeding upstream. It took a riverside carpenter in Brentford no more than ten minutes to knock together a frame. He nailed on the first canvas and gave me a bag of nails and a hammer for any others, all for free. (“M-m-mother’s c-c-cousin,” Jimmy explained as we carried the frame back to the boat.) The weather was made for painting: soft light, individual heavy clouds that floated leisurely across the city, covering and uncovering the sun in a dramatic succession of darkening and illumination, the freshness of the water, and the air that lent a sharp outline to everything. No wind, smooth surface of the river, barely perceptible swaying: bliss.

Jimmy, I said, since we happen to be in Brentford, we’ll start right here, where the young Julius Caesar and his legionnaires forded the Thames in the year 54 BC. And before you could say Jack Robinson, quick brushstrokes of coloured oil paints on the canvas began to give birth to something that Jimmy took in with an ever increasing astonishment: the lines of Roman soldiers in helmets and plumes, some up to their necks in water, some up to their mouths, wading across the Thames with their spears and swords and shields raised high above their heads, and somewhat lower the cavalry swimming across to the northern shore on the backs of horses, and seated upon the first horse, the young Caesar, slightly raised in the saddle with his feet in the stirrups, his head turned haughtily back in a half-commanding and half-inspiring attitude, the sword in his left hand aggressively pointed towards the shore where a tattered mob of British defenders was already starting to flee. Everything glowed in the sharp rays that penetrated the clouds, the composition of light sparkling on the helmets and the shields and the golden tip of Caesar’s sword.

“Ooooooh,” Jimmy sighed, “oooooh.”

I wanted to warn him not to use up his astonishment during the first brushstrokes – he would need some for what was to come – but I was already too absorbed in my vision to open my mouth. When his astonishment should have culminated (when the Romans had crossed the river, and the Tower Bridge appeared, built more than fifteen centuries later, and in front of it and to the left the dome of Saint Paul’s Cathedral), Jimmy was already exhausted from amazement and could only react with an empty stare and a barely audible whistle from his gaping mouth.

We will call this picture *Synchronicity*, I said. Actually *Synchronicity I*, because there will be more of them. With a few more strokes of the brush, Jimmy, we will transform two thousand years of history into a single instant! *A wanderer is man from his birth. / He was born on a ship / On the breast of the river of Time; / Brimming with wonder and joy / He spreads out his arms to the light, / Rivets his gaze on the banks of the stream.*

“M-m-matthew Arn-n-nold,” Jimmy guessed. “w-w-we h-h-have him in sch-sch-school.”

Well, I thought, how nice to be united not only by art but also by the words of an old-fashioned poet.

During the next two days, we traversed the Thames in our boat. We searched for motifs for *Synchronicity*, stopping wherever something worthy of my brush was offered up to our hungry eyes, most often below and behind the bridges. I painted as if I were sentenced to death and only the strokes of the brush could lengthen my exhausted, dehydrated life. Jimmy, far from getting fed up with it, became as obsessed as I. He concentrated on making sure that the boat wouldn’t rock while I painted, that we didn’t get stranded on the gravel when the tide receded, that we didn’t bump into another vessel, that he didn’t hit me in the leg with an oar when he had to row.

A splendid boy!

The canvases, which we carefully transferred from the boat each day when the sun began to sink and locked into a disused boat shed to dry, soon became a public secret. Some members of the club wanted to see them, but we declined all requests. They would be exhibited when the series was finished and the canvases dry, we said. Even Mrs. Hudson’s wish for a quick peek was turned down. I said I was superstitious: if someone were to see the paintings before my vision had been completed, the magic would disappear. “Artists,” she sighed and gave up.

Jimmy dismissed his mother with the same excuse. This melancholy and extremely beautiful lady with smooth hair came one evening to look at what we were doing. Actually it was only because of her good graces that

I came by the boat, and it was she who had given Jimmy the (only) key to the boat shed, so I was prepared to comply with her desire to view the paintings. But Jimmy (using my arguments) insisted that no, and because I never wanted to give the impression that he wasn't my equal, I took his side. That pleased her even more than if she had been allowed to see the canvases. She invited us for a drink at the nearest pub; we didn't want to go to the club.

"Jimmy has completely changed," she said. Her eyes were on me all the time; they wandered over my features, regarding me with warmth and forbearance, but at the same time slyly and curiously, in fear that she might stumble on the shadow of something false or calculating. "Never before has he been so enthusiastic about something. Or in such a good mood. He never liked Matthew Arnold, now he recites his poetry daily. And each day, there are more words he can say without mistakes. As if something had opened up in him, something new. As if he had begun to believe in himself. And all because of you."

I waved with my hand and winked at Jimmy. Why not, I said, there's nothing wrong with him. I'm the one who ought to be grateful to him. And to you. Without the boat, and without Jimmy, I would never have had the chance to paint the bridges between the past and the present. What Jimmy and I are doing is actually a philosophical venture: we are exposing the lie of time, we are mocking its passage, celebrating the omnipresence of God.

"Are you a believer?" asked the beautiful and melancholy lady who was filling me with the desire to paint her (maybe as the Madonna with Jimmy Jesus in her arms). I answered that I believed in the innocence and purity of natural beauty, in the ecstasy of the spirit, and in the peaceful harmony of the soul, all of which were reliable attributes of God: when I paint, my hand holds the brush and God holds my hand.

"And who holds God's hand?" she smiled warmly.

"My vision," I said, smiling back.

*Translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak*



## Nejc Gazvoda

*Before I say anything more, there's something I want you to do: take a breath and scream. Scream until there is no air left inside of you and the only thing that comes out is a final rasping sound. Well, that rasping sound is the voice of my generation, the generation at the end of a scream. Everything happens while exhaling, while screaming, and then we disappear with the last hoarse rattle. We are so unimportant that nobody even hears us.*

**(Seventyfive)**

Nejc Gazvoda shot into the Slovene literary orbit in 2004. A nineteen-year-old high school student, he wrote and published his first collection of short stories *Vevericam nič ne uide* (Nothing Escapes the Squirrels) and won the Fabula Award for best short story collection and the Golden Bird Award for literature. After this successful literary debut, he enrolled at the film studies and direction department at Academy of Dramatic Arts in Ljubljana and published his first novel *Camera Obscura* in 2006. The protagonists of his short stories are young people born in the twilight of the eighties. Despite advances in technology and globalisation, these characters are lulled in the melancholy peace of the hills of the Dolenjska region. Despite their drab and depressing everyday life, they are attracted by the danger of marginal and borderline experiences. We meet these characters in the space between childhood and adulthood, in the most sensitive period of maturation when they must locate themselves in a world of shifting values and detach themselves from the protective figures of their parents. Their manner of reasoning and how they experience their environment make them foreign, different and particular, but above all it makes them susceptible to the thrilling and the inexplicable. In terms of content, the thirteen stories that comprise the author's first collection reflect the generational signs and theme of growing up. Formally, they are characterised by polished language and unpredictable structure. The writing with which Nejc Gazvoda drew attention to himself reveals a keen eye. He is a gifted chronicler of the destinies of adolescents who also reflect, during their voyage into themselves, the condition of the wider time and world.

## *Nothing Escapes the Squirrels* (excerpt)

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“You’re fucking crazy,” he said, poking me in the head with his finger.

Outside the squirrels climbed up and down the pine trees and shook their tails. Franci said that they come to look at him through the bathroom window, to watch how he gets dressed, to laugh at his little dick. That’s why he always closes the curtains and turns toward the wall just in case.

I had been cold on our evening walk yesterday because we’d gone out so late. Majda held my hand so I wouldn’t be scared. Because of me, we walked far away from the road. Each time I thought I heard the sound of a car, I started to scream and Majda hugged me and I felt better.

I played chess with Franci all day. There were no black figures so we divided up the whites. Franci sat with his back to the window. “Squirrels,” he said. I understood him and he smiled widely. A stream of saliva fell from the corner of his mouth on to the rook.

I moved my bed. I thought someone was sleeping in it so I pushed it into the corner. There are ghosts in my room. I know that because Majda told me that there were people in the room before me who had died. But they can’t be completely dead. Maybe you can’t touch them. Or maybe they are properly dead but just like to look at me. Some smile at me, some watch me quietly. Their eyes are mirrors. I see my face when I look at them. I see the enormous scar that trawls across my forehead. When I wake up at night, they are lying very close to me. I watch them and I watch and I can’t fall asleep. They even drink the juice from the stewed fruit that is left for me in the morning. Or they throw dead flies into it and they kick with their little legs and drown. But I drink it anyway, and then I feel sick.

“You’re fucking crazy,” he said and kept on poking me.

Majda cried in the doctor’s office. I watched her through the crack in the door. She talked on the telephone. Her cigarette slowly burned down in the ashtray. I didn’t hear her because I was also crying. Not from sadness but from happiness. Don’t get me wrong – I was worried because she was crying, but I was also happy that no one ever called me so I didn’t have to suffer because of other people. I never cry anymore because of the ugly world outside.

Only Franci sometimes cries because of the squirrels. In the middle of one of our games of chess, huge teardrops began to fall from his eyes onto the chess board and he cried like a little child, so much that it tore at my heart and the guard closed himself into his office and turned up the music. That time I sneaked out and pulled the rotting body of a squirrel out from under a small pile of stones, the body that I had found sometime before under a tree, and I brought it in to show Franci. He stopped crying and smiled faintly. I always told him the same story: how I fought with the squirrel, that it had red eyes, that lasers shot out of them. He liked



the ending best – how I tricked the squirrel by attaching a mirror to my butt which reflected the lasers and then I sat on him. He laughed and then slowly calmed down. Then I carried the body back.

Two days ago, I scratched off the last piece of wallpaper and there was only yellowed plaster left. When I started doing that, Majda got angry, but when she saw I wasn't going to stop she asked the management and they said I could tear it until the end. I sat cross-legged on the floor and shredded big pieces into little pieces and flicked them and they spun to down the ground.

Sundays are nicest. That's when Ralf works. He's lazy and he doesn't pay attention to us. His cigarette glows in the guardroom and he watches porn. His stomach hangs over his belt and his hotdog fingers scratch at his nose. I slip past him easily and set out for the beach. When the sun begins to sink into the sea, I kick stones into the water. Boats sway in the distance. I jump with my feet together across a wooden pier, sometimes twenty times or more. The pier groans and squeaks lightly. The waves murmurs under the rotting wood. The pine forest is a distance away, higher up. Walking between the trees calms me. The needles quietly pop as I step over them. Every so often a fairy comes out from behind a tree. They look like normal girls, only they have almost transparent skirts and dress all in white. They never speak, only laugh, soft and naughty. I like them because they're so different. Some are small and fat with thick black hair. Some have long light hair and giraffish necks. Others are pale redheads covered with freckles. As I walk, they amble past me and laugh just because they like to laugh. I know I'm not supposed to touch them. And I don't want to either. If I did, they would turn to dust.

“You're fucking crazy.”

Katja is in another ward but sometimes I see her at lunch. She sits with a bunch of her friends and they quietly talk among themselves. It seems to me that Katja's not listening to the others, because she always has her head inclined and stares dreamily somewhere into her plate of rice. Her hair is cut on the short side and she always eats her stewed fruit with the help of her long fingers, dipping them into the bowl, pulling out the cherry or the apricot, carrying it to her mouth. Before she bites into it, she looks at me and smiles and the juice dribbles down her chin. She blushes and turns away.

“You're fucking craaaaaazy!!!!” He started to beat me around the head with the palm of his hand.

Mama ran to my brother and slapped his face. The little guy didn't even wince. He just jumped away and grinned and ran with his crooked legs to the other side of the room and started to kick the wall with the tips of his tennis shoes.

“Every day is worse. You’d think that elementary school would bring him to his senses. But he’s even worse than he was in nursery school.” Mama shook her head and sat on the table. Her cheeks were red and I smelled her sweat, tiny drops of which gathered under her nose. She was wearing a thin purple blouse and fat spilled out from the gaps between the buttons. She panted slightly and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

“Under your nose,” I said and gestured to where she should wipe. She didn’t hear me. She stared out the window. My brother was still kicking the wall, only now he was chanting the word fuck to the rhythm of his kicking.

“Majda said that you tore the wallpaper,” Mama finally said, still staring through the window.

“Why’d you do that?”

“It had cars drawn on it,” I answered.

“It did not. They were trucks,” she corrected me.

“Same thing,” I answered.

She breathed out and sat up a little bit straighter. I knew she didn’t miss me. She still loved me but she was under terrible pressure and she didn’t have any money or time. My brother had turned into some demented creature that just gave her more trouble. She visited me once a week and didn’t have anything to say. She stayed a half hour and we stared at the television set the whole time. In between, I answered her trivial and boring questions with monosyllables. Come to think of it, that’s what we did when I was home as well.

“What do you want for your birthday?”

I didn’t want anything special. Franci made me a drawing with him and a bunch of squirrel heads. I hung it above my bed. Madja came to wish me a happy birthday when I was half asleep. She wanted to sit on the edge of the bed but I said she couldn’t because somebody was already sleeping there. So she just carefully leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. Then she slowly left the room, her clogs sticking to the soles of her feet. Before she closed the door, I called out to her. She turned around and looked at me with opaque eyes.

“Why do you cry when you talk on the telephone?” I asked her.

“I’ll tell you some other time,” she answered.

Mama kept looking at me questioningly. Even my brother stopped kicking the wall and listened. I shrugged.

“A gun,” I said at last.

*Translated by Erica Johnson Debelyak*



## Milan Vincetič

*The size of the universe  
corresponds to the size  
of your shoes.*

*(Sputnik)*

Milan Vincetič is a poet, writer and journalist. He graduated with a degree in Slovene studies from the Faculty of Arts of Ljubljana University. He lives and works in Prekmurje. His prose works include collections of short stories *Za svetlimi obzorji* (Beyond Bright Horizons, co-author, 1988), *Ptičje mleko* (Bird's Milk, 1995), *Obrekovanje Kreča* (Badmouthing Kreč, 1995), *Srebrni breg* (Silver Shore, 1995, co-author), *Parnik v ajdi* (A Steamboat in the Buckwheat, 1999), *Žensko sedlo* (A Woman's Saddle, 2002), the novella *Nebo nad Ženavljami* (The Sky Above Ženavlje, 1992), and the novel *Goreči sneg* (Burning Snow, 1998). He has published ten collections of poetry: *Kot slutnja radovedno* (Curious like a Premonition, co-author, 1981), *Zanna* (1983), *Arka* (1987), *Finska* (1988), *Tajmir* (1991), *Divan* (1993), *Tanin* (1998), *Balta* (2001), *Lakmus* (2003), and *Raster* (2005). He received the Prešeren Fund Award for the collection *Lakmus*. He also writes radio plays, book reviews and essays. Some of his prose work has been translated into Hungarian and his poetry into French, Dutch, Finnish, Serbo-Croat, Macedonian and Hungarian. Vincetič plans his poetry collections like a careful architect. It is his view that a book must have a firm structure, a calm interior, and a solid roof. The architecture of *Raster* is constructed with a strict symmetry: sandwiched between two enclosing poems *Po materi* (According to Mother) and *Po očetu* (According to Father) are seven unlinked cycles of seven poems, each with seventeen lines. He describes this collection as having two different lights: if the first half is bright, that light begins to dim in the middle section, and in the end it darkens completely and only a concealed and meshed light remains. The expression of the poems is dense, the language polished, the meaning widely spaced. At times the poems recall children's nursery rhymes and counting songs, and at others times incantational patterns. They are full of sensuous images, playful turns and lucid associations.

## *Male*

---

What are you  
when you're not my sister  
by your nails  
by your bows  
or skin  
what, when it knocks  
what doesn't knock  
what, when it cuts  
what doesn't cut  
or reaches  
what doesn't reach  
what, when I'm not  
the good brother  
who plays  
with your sister  
so you'll be  
stepmothers to each other  
by sin.

## *Female*

---

If there is one  
there should be enough of him  
for a lake  
and down below for  
a contrabassoon  
if there is one  
there should across the chest be  
enough of him for a cathedral  
and dozens of plains  
if there is one  
and if there is no other way  
there should round the body  
and round the waist  
and round the neck  
be enough of him to embrace  
as a suitor  
of course

## *Alone*

---

Well it has grown  
from the ground  
from the allseeing  
and the allpeaceful  
from the timbered  
and the chiselled  
from the small  
and the little  
quite simply  
from yours  
up to mine  
from the present  
into the previous  
so that your white  
isn't mine  
although we're watched  
by the same snow

*Translated by Evald Flisar*





## Katarina Marinčič

*“Do you know,” she said to him, with the satisfaction of someone who has found the piece to a jigsaw puzzle (and here it must be said that she never enjoyed the solving of jigsaw puzzles), “do you know that Dolly Parton has a song that suits your story well? About a fateful redhead? The title is Jolene. Do you know it?”*

*(Zlatko from Litija)*

The writer Katarina Marinčič received a PhD in French Literature (Balzac) at the Faculty of Arts at Ljubljana University where she now works as an assistant professor of eighteenth and nineteenth-century French literature. She is the author of the novels *Tereza* (1989), *Rožni vrt* (Rose Garden, 1992) and *Prikrita harmonija* (Hidden Harmony, 2001) for which she received the Kresnik Award (given by *Delo*, the main Slovene newspaper). The book *O treh* (About the Three, 2005) contains three novellas that take place in different historical periods and, with the exception of a few episodes, not in Slovenia. The main characters of the three novellas are the Etruscan Vel Matuna, who we meet after his convalescence from a serious illness, the Belgian botanical draughtsman Pierre-Joseph Redouté, who, while absorbed in the drawing of flowers, is enveloped by the outbreak of the French Revolution, and the Slovene immigrant, Zlatko, who travels to America in the 1950s for an eye operation, falls in love, and settles there. Although these are three distinct destinies, the author unobtrusively links them: all three exceptional and unique protagonists share liminal experiences. A similar atmosphere and sensuous impressions characterize the three novellas. The attentive reader will also perceive strategically repeated images and sounds in phrases and sentences. The writing of Katarina Marinčič lures us with its ambiguous, slightly open and partially unsaid quality. In the background of all three stories is the mysterious narrator, in the foreground the question of what is actually true. Marinčič's writing is at once intoxicating and sensitive, the language harmonious and the style polished. She has a keen ear for the details that create the atmosphere of a book and characterize its protagonists.

## *Zlatko from Litija (excerpt)*

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### VI.

In truth, it was probably all very simple. Zlatko from Litija had fallen into bad company and Jenny Harrison could not save him. Even if she understood why he closed up to her, she could still not open him because he hadn't been raised for love. He was blind and did not see what she was offering him. The black-haired Maddy would admire his crooked teeth. The immense Mrs. Harrison would patch his chequered shirts. Jenny would fluff up his pillows for the rest of his life.... But no, he rejected all of that. He was pulled from the warmth of a woman's embrace into the warmth of the herd. And one night the herd turned against him. They pressured, put him to the test, and he failed. He was shamed to death.

Or perhaps (one night) something happened to him that gave him a deathly fright. He squatted in the packed mud with a slippery bloody rock in his hand. A dog barked and his comrades fled. Zlatko didn't move. He weighed the rock in his hand, smelled the summer night, and tried to look at the place where Dan Brown lay, where the blood ran like silver marmalade through his woolly hair.

At the thought of hair and marmalade, Zlatko almost threw up. He heard voices.

"What did I do? What am I doing?" he shuddered. "They're going to get me! I'm going to be punished!"

He ran and spent the night cowering between the farm machines, trembling as if from fever. Toward dawn, he realized that only one way out was left to him.

He could think of no other way. In his soul he did not accept the wideness of the world. In the land of his birth, he would certainly be hunted down and almost certainly captured.

(No, that is not cynicism, she thought on the airplane. If Zlatko had let himself live, the reproach of his consciousness would have found him in whatever world. But fear always comes first.)

They took him down when he was still warm and laid him under the willow tree. Jenny did not fall upon his body. She looked steeply down at him: he seemed to be far below her, as if on a sidewalk below a skyscraper. Her mother held her by the shoulders and shook her.

"They're guilty for everything," Jenny repeated.

Mrs. Harrison decided it would be best if Jenny went back to Chicago.

It may have been that the story was more complicated. Maybe Fred Gerald Jenkins had not been mistaken about the redhead after all.

One evening in the tavern, Zlatko had picked up a hint. Zlatko was a bit slow in the picking up of hints even if they were broad ones. But the boys counted too much on his poor eyesight. What he didn't see, he perceived with his skin and with his ears: winks, grimaces, tittering, the name of Jenny Harrison. Then he watched and then he saw. He distanced himself from the group and

ordered a double bourbon. He leaned on the bar, stared for a long time, stared darkly out from under his bushy eyebrows through his thick glasses. His lips were puffy from the whiskey which he wasn't used to. His head emptied slowly and slowly something boiling flowed into it, began to prickle him in his chest and stomach. It was worse than the worst of pains. He stepped into a ray of moonlight on the way home. Everything was silver and the bushes filled with mysterious murmurs. Zlatko felt the urge to roar.

"Is it true?" his voice rattled as he stepped into the room above the garage. "Were you really with all of them?"

Jolene clipped her nails. She laughed. She wasn't so newly in love with him that she feared his sadness. If anything, she was afraid of his anger. She had also grown weary of him that evening, at first just a little bit but then ever more. She answered that she wasn't with *all* of them. Then she pouted.

"My love," she said to him, "my dreamer. What did you think? That I was an innocent lamb? If that were so, we wouldn't have found each other. The innocent don't go together..."

He told her she was filthy. She threw it back in his teeth. She reminded him that he had enjoyed certain things the other night that a girl could only learn with practice. He rushed out of the room above the garage, ran down the stairs, disappeared. Jolene stepped to the window. She looked around the yard, drumming her fingers against the window pane, drummed like a telegraph machine, tk tk tk tk tk tk tk. Her diaphragm trembled from boredom and impatience. Her thoughts didn't want to stop and when they did stop, she couldn't stand still: everything she remembered was repulsive.

What could bring her calm this night? Zlatko would return from the fields. They would argue, he would hit her, then they would make love. Her thoughts would expand. She would make a bed with her sweet humility and her placid female devotion.

It all worked out differently. When she was summoned at dawn to the hanged man, her agitation burst from her. She screamed and pounded. She bit her cousin in the upper arm. She broke the dishes in her mother's kitchen. Calm arrived later, oh yes, a good deal later, on the frozen wind off the great lake.

And Zlatko?

It made him sick because suddenly he saw all of his happiness in a cyclamen rosy neon light. He ran and cried as if he were barking. Only once before in his life had he cried like that (and he didn't even remember it clearly, he only remembered the feeling of horrible disappointment). It was at boarding school: all day he had looked forward to his shower in the evening, then the water was cold because he was the last one. The soap was as hard as a stone. He wept. The broken tiles wiggled beneath his feet.

Zlatko was utterly calm before he hung himself. He could not be otherwise. Otherwise he would not have succeeded.

Maybe Zlatko is not the main protagonist of this story. Maybe the story

really revolves around Jenny and the blacks. When Zlatko joined the boys in the tavern, he had no idea what had happened to someone whom Jenny had loved as a young girl. Because no one told him that. They were silent about Jenny and even she only told him (all pale she was, with dead white lips) that he would lose her if he fell into bad company. Zlatko made an understandable but fatal mistake: he was proud of her girlish jealousy. One day, he returned from the fields, took a shower behind the garage, and ran up the stairs all sweet smelling and cold. In the room above the garage, he found instead of a lover a woman with her bags packed, her eyes shining like ice cubes.

“You were with that red-necked Donaldson last night,” Jenny hissed.

Zlatko smiled like an idiot.

“Are you mad?” he would ask.

(This is Litija courtship. He used to sit on a bench sometimes and listen from behind the garden fence how some admirer would drool over his sister Danica: “Are you mad, Dani? Are you mad? Don’t be mad, Dani. Are you really mad at me?”...)

That’s when Jenny told him what they had done to her boyfriend when she was still half a child.

“But Jenny,” said Zlatko. “I didn’t know that. How could I know that?”

Jenny narrated it with all its disgust and horror. Zlatko felt sick. At a certain moment, he felt that it really would be best if the girl just left, since he would never again be able to eat or drink, never again be able to hold a woman.

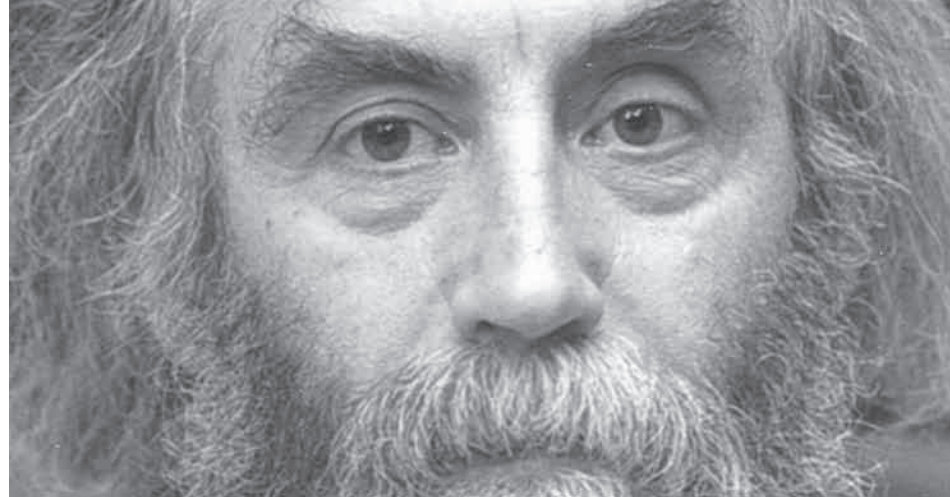
“It doesn’t matter whether you knew or not. You knew what they were like. I swore I wouldn’t mix with that kind. And I won’t, Zlatko. You just stay here. Everyone likes you. And I’ll go back to Chicago.”

Zlatko, whose sick feeling had passed, begged her not to leave him. He begged her as if he were begging for his life. And in truth, he was begging her for his life. That was *her* fatal error, the one that *she* did not comprehend.

Or she did understand it and pursued the grim business all the same. She was one of those who always bring misfortune: a beauty whose eyeballs freeze up time and again at the sight of blood and destruction. She had resigned herself to it but had never grown used to it, and the lines around her mouth grew bitter. She hated and scorned God.

She vowed that she wouldn’t be with his kind. Or maybe she vowed to get her revenge. And the blue-eyed Zlatko from Litija was the little lamb that Jolene came to slaughter in the place where a similar cruelty had been done to her. Not only had she not defended him. She had even encouraged him to join the Ku Klux Klan. She watched him dangling from the tree with a cold look of victory. *Southern trees bear strange fruits*. Now that she had hung a nice white Christian boy, she could return to Chicago and find peace in the arms of Daniel Brown.

*Translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak*



## Josip Osti

*... Everywhere*

*I search for a poem ... Examining the pages  
of old books and new. And I find now a brown hair,  
now one that's grey. And some hidden paper currency  
from a defunct country, stamped with the smile  
of its omnipotent, dead leader.*

***(Everywhere I Search for a Poem)***

Josip Osti is a poet, short story writer, essayist, columnist and translator. In his native Sarajevo, he worked as a cultural editor on the student publication *Naši dani*, an editor at the Veselin Masleša publishing house, the director of the Sarajevo Days of Poetry festival, and president of the Literary Translators' Union of Bosnia Herzegovina. His extensive opus created in the "language of memories," as he calls the Bosnian language of Croatian provenance, includes eighteen collections of poetry, five prose works, thirteen collections of essays and journalistic pieces. Approximately thirty translations of his work appear in Slovene, Czech, English, Polish, Italian, Turkish, Bulgarian and Macedonian. He has been the recipient of numerous prizes, among them a Župančič honourable mention (1985), the Golden Bird Award (1992), the Vilenica International Literature Award (1994), the Veronika Award (1995), the Župančič Award (2000) and the international "Scrittura di Frontiera" Award (Trieste, 2005). After he had already created an impressive opus of poetry in his mother tongue, Osti, who has lived and worked in Slovenia for fifteen years (in both Ljubljana and the Karst village of Tomaj), began to write in Slovene. He has thus far written three successful collections in his adopted tongue: *Kraški narcis* (Karst Narcissus, 1999), *Veronikin prt* (Veronika's Tablecloth, 2002), and *Rosa Mystica* (2005). If his early poetic expression was built on the connection between the rhythm and lexicon of the Bosnian language and tradition, his more recent poetry is softer, gentler and more intimate, distanced from war and destruction, illuminated by a newly confirmed meaning of existence. Osti's poems emerge in his Tomaj garden, among the fragrant metaphor of man's coexistence with nature, and tell us that there is no life without the shadow of death. And yet, that is the reason that life is so incalculably valuable.

## *It Happened in Broad Daylight*

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It happened in broad daylight. We were sat  
on the bench under a flowering apple tree, looking  
out across the kaleidoscope of the garden in Tomaj.  
Its shape shifted everytime we blinked  
and a new blossom would open.  
White, yellow, violet, blue, red ...  
Suddenly it creaked, or it whinnied quietly  
in the language of trees, and the ancient fig tree  
with its huge crown, whose wide leaves  
for years and years had hid the shame  
of the overgrown corner behind it, began bending  
towards the floor in front of our eyes. Slowly it  
was falling. Its leaves rustled more and more  
loudly. Or maybe, it was calling for help,  
for it seemed an invisible hand of the wind  
was pushing it into a deep abyss, though  
there was no wind this summer afternoon  
and everything around, as in a colour print,  
was quiet and still. ... It happened in  
broad daylight. A large old fig-tree in the garden  
fell over and remained lying in the grass,  
as though sleeping, dead tired, and in its dreams  
it ground its teeth from time to time or spoke  
unintellible words. We were sitting on the bench  
under a flowering apple tree and we too gazed,  
quietly still. And stayed so a long time.

We didn't know what to say nor  
how to help the tree, which had collapsed  
in front of our eyes. Fig-tree with its head  
on the floor, turned up by the roots, seeming  
as if it wanted to live its post-mortem life  
with its crown in the earth, its roots in the sky.  
I don't know what you were thinking then,  
but I couldn't help but feel that we too,  
sooner or later, might collapse in just such  
a way, in front of each other, or – if we're  
as close as now – simply  
lean against each other for ever.

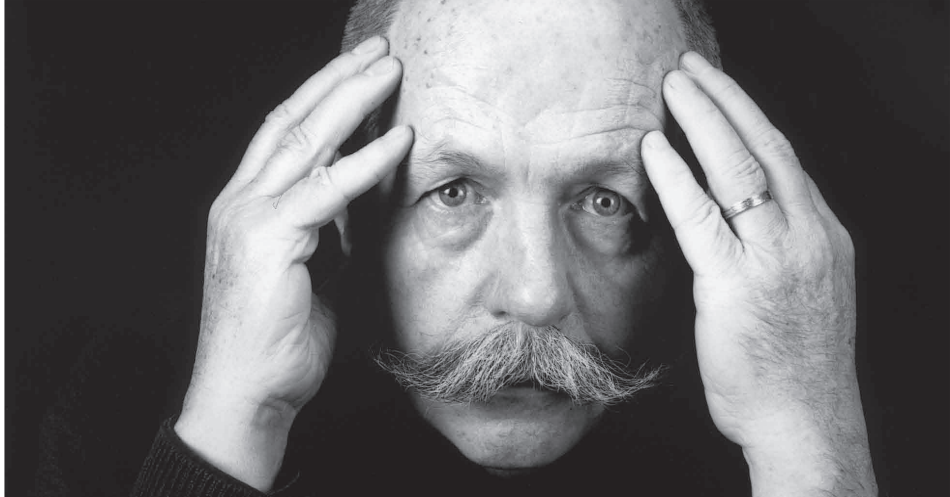
## *The Window Was Blind*

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The window was blind. Beautiful from the outside of our old home. With a stone frame and a jutting roof of rock. Filled in long ago from inside. A trace of its interior eyelid was hidden behind the old wardrobe with the clothes and shoes of those long dead. The window was blind ... until not long ago. As I opened it once more, its wonderful arch opened itself to an even more beautiful view. As if someone long blind recovering his sight saw what he had long forgotten. Blossoming pear tree. A vineyard. Young vines which are like soldiers in green uniforms made to stand in line before a first victory or a final defeat. Above them the red roof and chimney out of which mysterious fire-letters rise to the skies. Signs of life mixing with the secret signs of clouds which constantly change their shapes. There children recognize sheep, and old men wolves ... The window was blind ... Until not long ago. Into the room again comes the soft light of the sun. Turning everything golden. Our bed and the books on the shelf by its side. The iron window-crosses too. Our life become bearable, a pleasurable prison. Yes. Beautiful, even after it begins to be hugged by the dark ... your golden face still shines. With the light of unsuspected memory it drives dusk away, snowing on the pages of my unwritten book.

*Translated by Ana Jelnikar & Stephen Watts*





## Milan Dekleva

*I don't know. The professor who sits there by the window is right. A person smells of his childhood for his whole life. Blessed are those who have a sweet smelling childhood, theirs will be an earthly kingdom. Mine was a hundred times flayed, a hundred times tanned, and yet...And yet I remember the apricot blossoms above the Krka River. I went down and ate them, ate the blossoms, because they lent a sweet smell to my throat and to my will. I have to ask him about it. I'm obsessed with unheimlich. How that word sounds, like a razor in a madman's hands!*

### **(The Rats' Triumph)**

Milan Dekleva is a poet, writer and essayist. After completing his education at the electro-technical vocational high school, he dedicated himself to a life of teaching and creating literature. He worked as a cultural editor and journalist, while remaining active in sports and playing the piano. Dekleva has worked in all literary genres: he has written poetry, plays, short stories, novels, essays and television scripts as well as poems, plays and fairytales for children and adolescents. He has received many awards for his extensive opus, which includes seventeen collections, seventeen dramatic texts (for adults and children), two books of essays, three novels and one collection of short stories. These awards include the Prešeren Fund Award (for the poetry collection *Zapriseženi prah* – The Commitment of Dust – 1987), the Jenko Award (for the poetry collection *Panični človek* – Panic Stricken Man – 1990), the Župančič Award (for the poetry collection *Šepavi soneti* – Limping Sonnets – 1995), the Veronika Award (for the poetry collection *V živi zob* – In Living Tooth – 2003), and the Rožanc Award (for his book of essays *Gnezda in katedrale* – Nests and Cathedrals – 1997). This year he received the highest national recognition: the Prešeren Award for lifetime achievement in literature. He also received the Kresnik Award (given by *Delo* newspaper) for his novel *Zmagoslavje podgan* (The Rats' Triumph, 2005). Dekleva's novels are biographical, often reflecting a recognizable cultural and historical context and using characters based on actual artists, philosophers and academics. The correspondence and expressionist texts of Slavko Grum (1909-1949 whose most important literary achievement was the play *Dogodek v mestu Goga* – Event in the Town of Goga – 1930) served as the inspiration for *The Rat's Triumph*. In this work, Dekleva creates the image of the lover, doctor and writer, Slavko Grom, on the axis of Vienna, Ljubljana and Zagorje, in the midst of the hot and decadent decade during which the key problems of the previous century exploded.

## *Dead Stories*

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A vicious hangover, a huge judgemental hangover. Through the window of the carriage, I watch the confluence of the Ljublanica and Sava Rivers. How softly the rivers flow into each other! What different characters! The Sava hard as Carniola, resolute in its waves, the Ljublanica carrying the secrets of the Karst, the mystique of the swamps. How will we flow together, little Tulip? The train whistled, puffing across the water, the green willows soothing the defiant agitation in my skull. I thought about last night's symposium that ended with us grunting around a table at Činkole's and then dozing like logs at Črt's apartment on Krek Square. The evil that is made by the people of Goga and their cold God overcame me and made me tremble and sweat so much that if I had a razor I would have open my veins. That's how disgusted I was with myself. How I longed for dawn to come!

I reached into my pocket for a handkerchief to wipe my forehead. In the other corner of the train car, diagonal from me, sat a charming young woman dressed fashionably, corset pulled tight, bosom emphasised, wide décolleté, skirt slit at the side and revealing a glimmer of her calf like a taut little bell – spring is here! If only there was not this cursed confusion in my mind, twisting and pounding my thoughts. *We'll go, the two of us, to the biggest oak tree at the end of the Dobre njive and we'll sit Turkish style, our legs wrapped around each other's backs, chirping like crickets, the music washing away all our resentment, we will crush our long separation, break it into pieces, sweeten our very cores with newly discovered love, again and again.* The young woman in the corner licked her lips and bit her tongue and looked at my pants with wide eyes. I crossed my legs. She might come to the wrong conclusions. What would she dream that I had been dreaming?

The train turned, following the meandering of the river. The wheels squealed against the metal rails and a swarm of sparks flew past my window. We are going to bury my father and the two of us will rake up our passion, *are angels envious? If they haven't been until now, our embrace will make them so.* A ruby-glowing necklace of hot stains hung by the high pines at the edge of the Ljubljana basin, *the beating hearts of pure people who don't want to cooperate in the destruction of the world, the huge hearts of brides, the cloddish hearts of warriors, the tiny hearts of children, the hairy cylindrical hearts of caterpillars, the shooting hearts of stones,* it seemed quite horrible to me because the hearts had mouths, *they sang with hissing voices that recalled the conversation of dolphins,* the young woman stood up and stretched like a cat, adjusting her stockings at her upper thighs, watching me, blinking with her long curled upper lashes. *I am coming home and the world closes before me like the backs of the hills above the river.*

I closed my eyes, *light and lighter still, pure hearts sucking me through*

*the window, I fly through the air, swirling like the winged fruit of a maple tree, a light slanting through the pines, the dreams of strangers woven into a glittering dew-covered spider web, still cold, still dried out, I am still rising and behind the hearts is an eye, bigger than a zeppelin, more gentle than a cirrostratus cloud, the pleasant eye of your divine love. Little one, I fly toward with you with vertiginous speed, the eyeball swims in tears at the mere touch of air, I slip, the eye can no longer hold me, a tear of love hangs for an instant at the lid's edge, then it falls, it becomes heavier and heavier during the fall,* my head bobbed on my shoulder. It wavered in sleep and struck the glass window. I violently righted myself. The train pulled into Litija station. I stood up, took my suitcase from the shelf, and stepped through the door of the carriage. The young woman who had been watching me before stared through the window. I said goodbye to her and walked through the narrow corridor to the exit. The car stank of baked peppers and human perspiration. The train stopped suddenly, causing me to strike my shoulder against the doorframe. Then the heavy door opened and I stepped down on to the gravel platform. I was the only passenger to get off. A large family clambered on to the train. A middle-aged woman stood in the door of the train while her husband helped the children to climb the steep steps. Three heavy suitcases remained behind him. He lifted them with difficulty and leaned them against the edge of the car. The woman pulled them along the floor and into the train, taking care that she didn't drag them over the little feet of the children. When the man wiped his sweaty brow and got on the train himself, only the train dispatcher remained on the gravel. He looked several times to the left and to the right. He blew on his whistle and lifted his round signal paddle. The train conductor leaned out the window and waved. The train let out steam and the levers of the locomotive lurched into motion with difficulty and then the wheels suddenly turned and the levers fell into emptiness, tottering drunkenly, and ascending anew until at last the wheels caught the rhythm and the train accelerated out of the station.

Time stood still. *Return is apparition*, my body stepped toward the river, across the bridge and into the motionless town, *the movement of a recluse doesn't disturb the emptiness*. I went past the church and turned right. I decided that I would go to martno along the narrow streets that run beside the confluence. The earth gave off a subdued fragrance, voluptuous with May flowers. I was surprised by the palette of scents that I had lost the habit of in the big city. There it smelled of man's labours and beguiling pleasures, and here of envy and slander. How good was the honeyed blossoming of nettles, hemlock and cattails. I went past the ramshackle fences, the trellises of climbing apricots and indigenous vines, the piles of crowing manure, the brick granaries. A native in a

foreign land, a foreigner in my native land, *the village mutt suffering from mionecrosis*, the town and peasant houses were long gone. Through time I had watched the grey facades of these martno homes, *it is done, it has happened*.

My throat tightened at the sight of the crumbling woodpecker façade in which my father had consumed his life. As if sleepwalking, I staggered through the puddles to the arched entryway; at the same moment, my mother stepped through the door, strong, tall in her sorrow and loss, *the absent ones give her strength*. She lifted her arms as if she wanted to embrace me and let them fall again. We expected you last night, she said, and you... The silence fell like a frozen log on the ground between us and began to grow. I asked Josipina, I rasped and then was silent. *Cocoons of disgust* appeared in mother's eyes. I know, she nodded, she told me. She stepped toward me, embraced me, and then gently pushed me from her, and looked at me with her tight lips and marble eyes. Who are you, Slavko, she whispered, your father suffered, if our doctor were here, he raved feverishly, he would save me. He saved himself, I croaked bitterly, his last breath saved him. How are Marija and Olga? Darkness sagged around her neck and shoulders. Well, she nodded, they're well. They're in the house, with father. Keep me company, not him.

The sky fell down on me. A dizzy spell took my strength away and I dropped my suitcase in the mud where it opened. The wind ruffled through the manuscript notebooks, the pages banging emptily against each other like the doors of an abandoned hovel. I picked up my stethoscope and pressed it against the open notebooks. I listened for a long while. Dead stories, I said, that is what has accumulated these seven years.

*Translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak*

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