Milan Kleč

Franjo Frančič

Maja Novak

Andrej Morovič

Suzana Tratnik

Andrej Blatnik

Mojca Kumerdej

Lili Potpara

Polona Glavan

Nejc Gazvoda

CONTEMPORAY SLOVENIAN SHORT STORIES





Photo by MATEJ DRUŽNIK

Milan Kleč (b. 1954) is a poet, playwright and novelist. After a few years of teaching (those children remember him with gratitude) he has survived since 1979 as a freelance writer in his hometown. At the premiere of his first play he wrote: "I am unable to write anything about myself. I resent it. And it's nobody's business. Not even mine." He discovered the world and the way of thinking that engages him in his natural occupation, his ability to put into words what distinguishes man the most: his paradoxical thinking, the uttering of the unspeakable, but not approximate. Kleč is a great storyteller and a chronicler of everyday life which in its banality is far more fantastic than we think. He deals with popular culture, details, eroticism and the new bohemian world. He has written 7 poetry books, 3 plays and 21 novels and books of short stories. In 2007 he won the Prešeren Foundation Award and before that the Župančič Prize (1989) and Jenko Prize (1980).

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Za sve je kriva Marjana Deržaj, Ljubljana: Vodnikova domačija, 1996

Škilan

Yesterday I knew absolutely nothing about Škilan. So I must really have taken something to heart, since I am writing these lines now. I became interested in him by accident, on the bus on my way home. I was very self-absorbed, so I was even more surprised that something had managed to catch my attention. Two passengers sitting in front of me, whom I did not know, talked about certain Škilan, who apparently had an accident while picking bilberries. They laughed out loud, and the one who obviously knew the Skilan case better added that Škilan could only pick bilberries with the help of a ladder. I was not sure weather I had heared him correctly or not, of course I had never checked; the mere thought that apparently somewhere there was a man, as far as I was concerned his name could well be Škilan, and that that man had to pick bilberries with a ladder, was enough for me. I could picture a little man, running around the forest with a ladder, putting it up every bilberry bush, and than climbing up, picking the fruit and scurrying back down, placing the fruit in a little basket. However, one can easily miss a ladder-rung and alas! an accident. I could very well visualize this Škilan, how he reached out for a bilberry, the ladder had swung in the wind, or else the shrub was rather weak; I could see him fall and then crawl home from where he was taken away and than put in plaster. I trusted this Škilan completely, although of course I did not know why. The thing itself was something; I mean, that after a long time I could trust somebody, regardless of weather he had to pick bilberries with a ladder or not. I thought a lot about him. I somehow could not sleep nights, and I did not know why. I got up and smoked. And I kept switching the bed-lamp on and off. I sat for some time, and than I walked. I also looked through the window. I breathed deeply, but not because I felt uneasy. I felt good and I did not mind the slight excitement at all. The weather was also rather warm. I saw the same clouds in the moonlight. I cannot say I thought of anything in particular. I did not feel the least lonely, although I used to in similar situations. It was sometimes very irritating. Also, in the mornings I never changed my routine. Actually, it was not quite like this. I do not know why, but all of a sudden I dug out an old suitcase. I used to travel with it, and every year we must have looked more and more bizarre. I recalled nice moments as I was dusting it. A pleasant old suitcase, and I looked into its empty contents. I, on the contrary, was full. That is why I knew I had to fill it up with something. Although I had no intention of travelling. Slowly I walked around the room, and started filling it up. I found half a loaf of bread, liver pâté, some salami and a few swings of wine. That was enough. I wrapped everything together in a cloth, put it in the suitcase, and when I closed it, it was full. It stood more upright, and than it was dawn. A beautiful morning was to be expected, as I had mentioned before, and a beautiful day. I put on strong shoes, and donned a jacket, although it was not appropriate for the season; underneath I wore my only suit. The white shirt was a little yellow, but I could do nothing about it. I locked the room and soon reached the fields. I really did not know where I was going. I was drawn somewhere, as people will say for the moments when we blindly follow some instinct, and as soon as I thought of this I at the same time knew I was not that kind of a person. Or maybe I was then becoming such a person. I met some children, girls and boys, who were the only people out, and I asked them where Škilan lived. And as children do, they, half seriously, half jokingly pointed their fingers somewhere towards the distance. I walked through many fields, I crossed a river and forests and jumped over a railway. Village passed me by. And one house was rally shifted more into the forest. The house of Škilan? Both together. And I reached that house. A small house. I recalled Škilan picking bilberries. I actually noticed some ladders, one of them was broken, and it could well have been the one that caused the accident. I knocked. At first nobody answered, so I knocked harder, when something moved inside. I heard voice and I remembered he had broken bones and probably had difficulty walking, so I simply walked in and than further into the house. I saw him. He was just getting ready to stand up on crutches. "are you Škilan?" I asked him just to say something. As if I had known I had come to the right place. Just to do something, he nodded. He really was a man one could trust. At first glance. So small, and so warm. "How's it going?" I asked him, just like that. "So-so," he answered. Than we were quiet for some moments, but

Translated by Lili Potpara

not because we were at a loss of words. Škilan sat down with enormous difficulty and asked: "Did you come here to die?" I nodded, wanting to meet his eyes, but he pointed his finger at the room on his left, where I went with my suitcase, and where, at a small table, I have just written this.





Photo by JAKA ADAMIČ

Franjo Frančič (b. 1958) a poet, novelist, playwright and writer for children spent part of his youth in an educational establishment where he learned the profession of galvanizer, but later also finished the Faculty for Social Work. Since the early 1980s he has lived as a freelance writer in Istria. His work includes more than 30 books. The first one was a short stories collection entitled *Egotrip* (1984) that was followed by the well-known novel *Domovina bleda mati* (1986). It was awarded the Zlata ptica prize, which the author refused to accept. His writing tends toward representing real life, openly and directly telling what are usually unspoken themes. The people in his stories usually come from the margins of society with no power to decide even about themselves. In his work for young readers he deals with growing up in an unsuitable environment. His writing has both qualities of verism and lyricism to express dreams in the midst of reality.

FRANÇIČ FRANCIČ

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Patria, madre esangue,
Koper: samozaložba,
1991
Inostranec, Ljubljana:
Radio Slovenija,
Dramatičeskaja
redakcija, 1993
The foreigner: radio
play, Ljubljana: Radio
Slovenija, Drama
Department, 1993

The family: radio play,
Ljubljana: Radio
Slovenija, Drama
Department, 1993
Bježi, anđele, bježi,
Ljubljana: Vodnikova
domačija, Kulturni
vikend djece iz BiH,
1996
Und andere: Erzählungen,
Klagenfurt: Drava, 2003

Heimat, bleiche Mutter,
Klagenfurt: Drava, 2005
Domovina, bleda mati,
Beograd: Balkanski
književni glasnik, 2007
Kucaj, kucaj na nebeska
vrata, Beograd: FJBGKnjiga, 2007
Kurbini sinovi =
Hurensöhne = Sons of
bitches, Koper: Društvo

prijateljev zmernega napredka, Mladinski kulturni center, 2007 Angelo, Bratislava: Filozofska fakulteta, 2007 Istrijske razpravky, Bratislava: Filozofska fakulteta, 2007

V

Sons of bitches

Once a month grandma and I went to have lunch with the aunt in Šiška on bus n° nine, aunt worked in a bank, her husband Janez also worked in a bank, she didn't have children, contrary to her sister, my mother, who produced nine, with three losers, I was the first of the five from the third round. The lunch was always the same, beef soup, salad and mashed potatoes from her garden and a microscopically tiny piece of meat for grandma, rarely also for myself, and if aunt was in a good mood grandma got a glass of wine. But at eleven thirty there was always panic, because aunt became nervous in the fear that we would meet Janez, who was coming from mass after his compulsory visit to the pub in the vicinity of the church, we always had to leave before and sometimes we got tokens for the bus. One day nevertheless we met on the staircase, he didn't even look at us, downstairs I could hear him yell at aunt: those sons of bitches don't come for to my place! p.s. Forty years later aunt asked me to visit her, she waited at the door all sobbing with her chattering denture, she had given a gold ring and a necklace with pearls from Ohrid to her daughter, Janez retreated to the balcony, all fucked and in pieces, in his piss-stained pants he was looking somewhere into emptiness, like a real fucking son of a bitch.

Confidences

I have finished my fifth year of high school, my father is such a cunt, in autumn I met a two years older guy, I dreamt about him, mother is not much better, since I study dancing he noticed me quickly, I have no idea what they do together, he had a girlfriend in his town and I was hurt when he denied everything, this weird coxless pair, when he was supposed to be at the lectures I saw him with a schoolfriend, they were sitting in front of the TV and staring without a word, staring, he was hugging her and looking deep into her eyes, these two weirdos, staring and staring, without a word, now I don't know how I am going to survive, I feel so hurt, staring and staring, without a word, without a word.

Do onto others as you would have them do onto you

My godfather is holding a bottle of wine in his hand and toasting, mum comes almost every night and demands that I drive her around in the old ford escort, the south wind and migration, comas and a remote-controlled pilot, I waited a long time for my hand to become larger than my father's, the rainbow door of the holy never, a hunchbacked grandma and a pram for twins, then I waited for the right moment and knocked him down, children are playing in the city park, in white, pigeons are fighting over crumbs, he was lying on the floor like a son of a bitch when I kicked his head in, and forgive us our sins, I followed the words of Jesus Christ: do onto others as you would have them do onto you, or was it Confucius who said that before him, but then children turn into pigeons and all narrows down to a trade, because it is a bugger if you deny God too much then he IS, because father did this to me so many times, but of course there are no words.

Winter in the Blood

At four am it is dawn and the crazy jay, a needle and rocks in the mouth, at five the broken stalk of a sunflower, you flee to the temporarily liberated area, soldiers of vines and rockets of cypresses piercing the sky, underneath the houses on the saltpans, roofless, swim in the sea, how I planted trees and built the shed without roots, at eight zero zero, obituaries, in the strategic positions always the same sons of bitches, at nine thirteen Leon rolls a joint, cataract above the lump of time, crushing, Jubilo Iwata plays against Jokahama, total nought, light in

August, filigree pavements, where to, dear friend, the CDs are evaporating, the snow is slowly falling, outside the world is melting, into its fucking particles, Sunday afternoon, the winter of summer.

II.

Awakening

The universal wind Shakes the black crown Stars are falling

Josip Osti

At dawn the cascade of light covers the transparent, hanging veil, blind butterflies are hugging the trees, sharp edges of the world, the images are dancing to the song of youth, the song of oblivion, the flag of the sun at half mast, the hand spasmodically feeling and looking for lost mornings, birth is a farewell, the icy fire is going out, morning stars are softly falling into the arms.

Memory as a knife

In the middle of the night I was woken up by a knife in the water, the snakes have left the roof of the house without roots, captured, I eat rocks, words are closed up in books, paintings in museums, drivers in their trucks, the child stretched out with his eyes closed, where are my wings, he was wondering in the dream, the head of a pigeon was lying in the grass lacerated, you die for a moment, it's not even surrender, you are the shadow of a shadow, a rider in the desert and you are both there, strangers without a face, how I despised and hated them, it's branded, there is no forgiveness, you wait for the morning, clouds of leaden images, all the anxiety returns again, the naked, destructive fear, again you creep on the floor and lick the blood of the female who betrayed you, ashy sky, the squeaking of the solitary bird, time is sliding through the slots of memory, this son of a bitch will fuck up my brain again and she will stand there and laugh, laugh.

Journey to the End of the Night

Somewhere in Celine's Journey to the End of the Night there is a passage, I entered unannounced into the flat while the hero was holding my mum's hand, I saw mum through the frost-glass of the living room and a woman who was lying on the sofa, mum was persuading him to join the soldiers on the front, I opened the bathroom door, froze, you will protect your country, won't you, your country is your mother, says mum, the bath was full of blood, slime, pinky flesh with no head, no, no, cries the hero, you are my mum, naturally I didn't open the door, I never asked her, I knew in advance that she had the answer ready, then the hero ended up in the military compartment of the psychiatric clinic, I went there twice, there was this woman who was speaking faster and faster, I'm a murderer, a murderer of children, they took her to the cage and tied her up with leather belts, a baby, who weeps, jeezus!

Carnal cognition

She was a black lady with aristocratic features, she had a son, a blind father and a failed marriage with a sailor, fast food, fast fuck, provided it's a good one, cheap purchase, three times a day she forced me to shower, buy cheap and sell costly, hey zombie don't look back, the ph of my skin was dropping, but fortunately in Lent near the market there was a plastic snack bar with tramps, drunks and gypsies, the superstore offering a large selection of candles, the Sales increasing, she fucked like a machine gun an ordinary one, in chain orgasms she fell into a trance, buy dear lady, great selection sir, I asked her how I should know when she likes it, low prices, special offer, great selection, no fight, just watch my nipples, when they are erect I am willing and ready, dear consumer, to let you know, the carnal cognition, but hell, her nipples were always standing out and erect.

Where do the butterflies hide from the rain?

Like a son of a bitch I was running away all the time, there in the cell it was dark, and Dragica on the other side of the walls, I was running away from everything, from mum, the everdrunk dad, the world and myself, these walls don't exist, you can ignore them, I was really good at running, I was training for a great competition, sweating, just close your eyes, I'll pull you off, come on, imagine it, can you feel my hand, those concrete board-beds and the fourteen holes in the wall of the jail, can you feel it, can you feel it, how you push it into my wet cunt waiting for you, they say, come on beat the outside ones, for us the castle ones, do you like it, tell me, do you like it, come on, push it, ram it up to my throat, I started off like a madman, I was many metres ahead of others, come on, do me harder, jeez, do me to the end, do it, do it, damn, and then, I stopped just before the end, I let everything slip past, did you come, come on, tell me, you bloody bastard, the heavy hand of the teacher knocked out two of my front teeth, was it good, did you like it, I was fourteen and I wasn't growing anymore, you know, when we get out, don't you think that the whole barracks fucked me, I was fourteen and I was the most lonely boy, who was wondering: where do the butterflies hide from the rain?

Who is the Magician?!

I looked so long for the temporarily liberated area - in the pharaonic mornings I dream of page boys, the white fur of the morning cuts into the glass of time - and it was close by inside me, softly the senses are awakening, what's been decided will have to be done again, the time is crashing and forgetting the minor prophets, the flakes of hope are getting lost in the lava of reality, the judgments you pronounced in the petty wars are losing importance, there is so much of this kind to do between birth and death, seeming victories, bent over the clods of the ground, the seventh day of solitude, the birds are heading south, the jug is empty, the images are counted out, on the dead boat, in the toiling for a new empty day, horses ride on the walls of memory, the indefinable knocks gently, the miracle is in growing, in the stars, in the moment, which flees before you can catch it, you scream: who is the magician?!

Loneliness

Burnt grasses, a landscape foreign and deaf, memories like dried flowers of oblivion, the winter is coming with a tired face, wrong words about power and truth, about small wars and escape, about long nights, when they settle down in the roofs of houses, about a house without roots, about fled dreams and the sharpness of loneliness, about life, which has slipped past, love is or it isn't, your death is born with your birth, the fire goes out in the eyes of the night, the heart is a lonely hunter, loneliness, silent and white like a transparent veil, loneliness as sharp as a knife, naked, radiant and gentle.

Mirrors

I gather them, these sheets, in the crushing time, I don't have masks any more, all the letters have been sent, the way I was building the shed, the way I was waiting for the sunny daughter, the mornings are sloughing into evenings, hope without dreams, the way I was running away before a winter in the blood, wrapped in a daze, there is no sun left in the hands, no moon in the hair, sometimes the scars smart, just enough for me to catch breath, the poor say the rich are happy, the rich claim the poor are happy, both say that God is happy, what's happening with him, is he tired? One am, the sharp edges of the disappearing world in the dark, I run naked into the landscape, green how I hate you green.

New Age and Reality

You choose a tree, approach it and greet it, you ask it for permission to come closer and enjoy its shadow and protection, you sit with it and keep it company, you can imagine your body similar to the trunk of the tree, your legs turning into roots,

They are getting heavier and go deep into the ground, and your arms are like branches, you indulge in the peace and fill up with the energy of the tree, slowly you start to become aware of your body, you stretch and open your eyes, thank the tree for its kindness and support, but then some cunt comes and cuts down the tree and three more that you had planted, you approach him, you don't ask for permission to come closer and be in his company, you imagine your arm heavy, you concentrate the whole weight of the tree into the punch, you cut him down with the first well aimed blow, you cannot really do more for the protection of our planet.

Issa

A morning in spring, you and the butterfly go hunting, the silence of the moon, the rainbow of the night and the call of a jay, the ground is breathing, the sea is sleeping, the miracle of birth, white childhood like a knife, like a cry in the night, an exhausted face, the evening a treasure, my child is sleeping, in the centrifugal dance of the masks, the glow of parting.

Succession

I buried a boat in the ground, sprinkled soil into the boat, I planted a tree in the clearing, there is wind in the sail, seed in the wind, life in the seed, in the morning the blossoms of the waves, a quay in the dreams, there is charm in the time, power in charm, in the ground a white, white night.

Translated by Teja Pribac-Brooks



Law of the University of Ljubljana but being unable to find employment in the legal profession in the next two years she started to work as a self-employed translator and writer. In 1990 she spent a year as a secretary and translator at a building site in Mafraq, Jordan, and later worked as a journalist for the daily paper Slovenec. In 1995 she acquired the status of an independent writer. She has published 10 books so far and translated about 50. Novak has been nominated for several important literary awards (Kresnik, 1996, Večernica, 1999 and 2000) and was awarded the Prešeren Foundation Award in 1997. She translates from English, Italian, French and Serbian. "Maja Novak deftly and with an abundance of humour takes advantage of various metafictional forms: "quotation-mania", eruptions of reality into fiction, "misunderstandings", imitation, parody, the interweaving of narrative instances, combinations of the elated and vulgar, meta-narrative commentaries and so on. Her outstanding quality is her refined sense for the grotesque, but nevertheless her strictly logical narrative and persiflage of genre patterns."

Maja Novak (b. 1960) graduated from the Faculty of

Photo by Branimir Nešović

MAJA NOVAK

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Murha aluevesilla, Helsinki: WSOY, 1999 Mačja kuga, Beograd: Clio, 2002



The Tomcat (fragment)

Even as a little girl I had a clear notion that a grown-up, mature person could only have one goal in life: to be reincarnated after death as a tomcat.

Yet many are called, but few are chosen. That is good. After all, not all of us can be tomcats; what on earth would we eat if there were no cows and no pigs? And no fish, but those I don't count. The ones in my cans are dead. Very much so. Dead for a long, long time.

Therefore it doesn't suffice to know what pays when one is good and quiet but one also needs to make a little effort. Just a tiny one, mind you. Therein lay the mistake which hindered my transformation into a tomcat for quite a few years. It was not the lack of trying. I tried; indeed, I tried too hard. Healthy cats sleep soundly at least sixteen hours a day. Scientists have not as yet discovered to what they owe this envious ability. When a tomcat is awake, he whiles away this time napping; I, though, was a hyperactive child; so very hyperactive, in fact, that my first encounter with the outside world was simultaneously an encounter with authorities.

A policeman demanded to know who the hell tied a beer bottle to the tail of a service dog. "In broad daylight!" complained my mother later on, "And in the middle of the road!" "And on a Labrador, too!" further defined the whereabouts of the bottle my father, speaking with an admiration he was unable to conceal no matter how hard he tried.

The Labrador stuck in my memory since the story was all about me and the naming of the dog only gave it additional charm. Otherwise, up to this day I'm unable to tell the difference between a greyhound and a German shepherd. A dog is a dog. The policeman's dog was first and foremost a dog in my eyes - as soon as I saw it I knew I loathed it deeply. It smelled different from a cat and that is all one needs to know.

While the parents of other three-year-olds were losing their nerve because their kids were madly afraid of dogs, my father and mother were losing theirs because I wouldn't even as much as consider fearing them.

The anxiety of my folks was such that I was infected by it as well. Whenever with my mom's nail-clippers I'd transformed a pure-breed's tail into a tricoloured cocarde, I was afterwards deeply distressed. I kept asking myself why I dared to get close to the mutts while my buddies were expected to run away screaming right under the wheels of a truck; and I shuddered at the thought that I was not normal.

Until I've met Donovan.

Donovan was a Persian cat of an aunt of my father's who inherited us after her death. He was the same colour as my best white mohair sweater after I'd (not quite accidentally) smeared it with apricot ice cream, and as hairy as my sweater had been before I creatively altered its appearance.

Are you getting the impression I'm heaping up pronouns? I love pronouns. Me. My. Mine. Meow.

Donovan was a normal enough cat. For a regular cat, possesion is something enduring. After he buys or inherits or is given custody of his people or wins them in gambling - or perhaps they are given to him as a present - he acknowledges them with a crocodile yawn and then forgets all about them. Later on, he takes them off the shelf only when he needs them; beyond that, he doesn't waste his time with them. It is important to keep in mind that a cat is awake only eight hours a day and that he mainly spends this time napping. And his memory is not brilliant. Therefore he is, day by day, forced to do in those scanty few hours everything that the majority of us won't experience in all of the statistically adjudged seventy-eight years of our life. Can you imagine a cat saying: "I won't make love today since I've already done it last year and therefore know how it's done?" Certainly not. A cat is born anew every morning and is delighted about it. Experiences need to be relived again and again, whereas people are fixed stars on a cat's horizon (they read each book only once and tend to tolerate the same child for about twenty years), therefore they are considered to be boring.

Donovan walked through people.

Not close to them but literally through them. I didn't believe it until I saw it with my own

eyes. And then no one believed me. I realized only later that the reason I was able to see it was because I, likewise, was born to be a tomcat. Here is what happened. My mother was walking through our house with a comb and a brush in her hand. "Donnie, Donnie!" she was calling, wanting to comb him. Donovan was approaching her in the same straight line she was moving along. But he was not thinking about her or about the combing. He was thinking about a sparrow perched outside on a forsythia branch, and was anxious to find out what a sparrow with no head would look like. Donovan was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he stepped right through my mother's leg (not between her legs, which would be quite unremarkable) - he stepped through her body as if she weren't there. As if, assisted by some sorcery, he transported himself to the other side of her swollen leg, swaddled for her varicose veins. And no one but I noticed anything. Donovan didn't notice anything because he was lost in his thoughts, and my mother didn't notice anything because she was a mere human, therefore hopelessly dumb.

But after I saw Donovan with my mom I also saw Donovan with a dog.

Donovan was a pleasure to behold. He weighted eleven kilos. His grumpy face hung under his nape which was sinewy and muscular like a bull's. When he was in his amorous state, the whole house smelled of an expensive French perfume, slightly warmed up. If he chose to hit a closed door with his big haunches, he'd open it by sheer impact. But of course he would never consider doing such a thing. Instead, whenever he found himself facing a door that was only slightly ajar instead of waiting wide open respectfully for him, he sat and waited quietly for someone to come by and push it open enough for his meter long silky whiskers to pass through unimpeded. He was not fussing. He never complained. He was never offended. He just sat and waited, patiently. The last time I saw him he'd been sitting and waiting for four hours. After I'd pushed the door open he sprung up and walked through as if in a hurry.

But in spite of Donovan's virility it remained undisputable that the dog we're speaking about was at least four times bigger than him. Donovan was striding down our street deep in thought. He paused a few times, licking his upper lip, pleased with himself: the street smelled of him, therefore it was, by international law, his domain. On it, however, the dog had the audacity to appear. Donovan blocked his way. The dog snarled: how dare you, little twerp, to tell me where to walk? And he lowered his head.

People said that meant attack. Contrary to their belief, the dog and Donovan knew exactly what it was all about. It was high drama, a display of mocking: shall I lower my head, o tiny one, to see you better? Donovan dropped into a crouch. On the asphalt there was glued a vertical projection of a cat about half a meter in lenght, half a meter in width and one millimeter high. Donovan crouched and waited to see what the canine idiot would do next. The canine idiot allowed himself one joke too many and, like all authors of insipid jokes, accompanied it with roaring laughter.

How pathetic! How utterly immoderate! We, tomcats, are just discussing whether that crazy Spanish cat who had one ear missing because he got mixed up in territorial disputes between local cats and a barbarous stray, had anything else on his mind but his sweetheart's eyes when he wrote "green, I love you green"; this being such a self-evident statement as if a human would say about his favorite female: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; coral is far more red than her lips' red; if snow is white, then why her breasts are dun ..."

Do you think I'm getting entangled? For God's sake, we, tomcats, don't chase mice in straight lines! What I'm trying to say is that our breed is at least discussing why literary statements about green eyes function even if they do seem trite; whereas the dogs still consider it the best entertainment to hit another dog on his butt with a leather belt because he's climbed a mountain he'd never climbed before ... Unbelievable. As if not all places were the same. Either they smell of you or they don't. That is all one needs to know.

At any rate, the dog laughed at Donovan and people, gathering around to watch (my mother's sweaty hand hysterically clutching mine), said he snarled. Donovan inched forward without actually moving a muscle, and he hissed like a snake. They said the dog barked. In truth he was uttering something that would, if translated from animal into human language, sound approximately like: "Suck your prick, you fucking motherfucker!" Which, in spite of an obvious pleonasm, can be considered quite smart, coming from a dog. Donovan took a step backwards. People said it meant surrender. But in truth he gave a speech - a heroic speech that went like this: "Achilles' cursed anger sing, o goddess, that son of Peleus, which started a myriad sufferings for the Achaeans." Such speeches surely sound better when delivered from a certain distance.

The dog said, quoting Milosevic: "I can't hear you!" and he bared his teeth.

People said: "He's going to kill him!" By this, most meant the dog, but a few enlightened ones (not including my mother) meant the cat.

Donovan unglued himself from the ground and, as if by magic, changed dimensions. What used to be a projection of a tomcat measuring half a meter by half a meter by one millimeter, became an arrow, reaching from here to eternity. The dog's muzzle gaped. From surprise. "He's going to do him in!" screamed enthusiastically the audience, which consisted of ninety percent humans and five cats. The cats were sharpening their claws in utter boredom since the dog and Donovan were not a part of their story.

The cat flew through bared, dripping dog's jaws (the maneuver familiar to us from the story about my mother's legs) and landed in the dog's eye. The dog was left with one, and Donovan with a smudge on his silver-blue claws. In an instant the number of dogs on Donovan's street decreased considerably. Before, there used to be one smirking dog (or barking, depending on your point of view), and then there were none. The dog that was no longer wailed heartbreakingly.

My father, from whom I've inherited my true understanding of karma and reincarnation, said admiringly: "Jeeesus!" My mother attempted to drag me away. My father tried to pat Donovan.

Donovan looked at him scornfully: "Why dost thou disturb me, o unworthy human, in my moment of hero's sad and bitter victory?"

Pa retracted his hands, bowing slightly.

Donovan looked at his claws and gave the signal of disgust measuring five on his seismological scale.

Donovan's seismological scale applies to measurements of the quality of cat food, but is used occasionally to express deeper feelings and moral judgements about the world he condescends to dwell in.

Four paws, deliberately shaken one after another, signify the highest level of alert, but can translate quite easily into human language. The signal simply means: yes, it's true that I've caught this myself but it does not even cross my mind that I should actually eat it.

And after I'd seen Donovan disposing of the dog with one swipe of paw, I ceased being ashamed of the fact that I was not afraid of them. Some of us simply aren't and my father approves and says: "Jeeesus!" Thus he's lovingly addresing Donovan who is a tomcat. But I, also, am not afraid of dogs. When I'm not afraid of dogs, my mother bursts into tears, saying to my father: "She's just like your aunt who's left us this damned cat and whose own fault it was that she died; what on earth was she thinking, swimming in the cold, cold Bohinj Lake at her time of month!" But my father laughs at my mother and rubs my head as he'd rub Donovan's if the tomcat would let him. Whenever I act like a tomcat my father praises me as he'd praise the tomcat. On the basis of these two premises, major and minor, we can therefore easily deduce the following syllogism: my father loves me because I am a tomcat.

Donovan's revelation had yet another positive aspect: it helped me to overcome my self-consciousness about being short.

The realization that I was smaller than my peers came simultaneously with remembering snatches of conversation whispered in my presence. So emphatically were they whispered as if my parents wanted me especially to commit them to my memory, and they were whispered so often that I had no choice but doing so, although in those days my main interest was in finding out how many paw-swings it took Donovan to wipe a blackbird out of existence.

"Just like your bloody aunt, she is ... One meter forty, when she grew up. No wonder it killed her while she was taking a swim. And at her time of month too! And in the cold, cold

Bohinj Lake! Don't tell me that was accidental. The woman was fed up with herself ..."

Says my mother to my father. In a way which leaves it unclear whether she worries about my short legs or relishes the fact that they are the fault of somebody else. E.g. my aunt who'd died almost a year before I was born.

Unusually enough, my father's already home. For they've closed all the pubs on Donovan's street. He's brought his drinking buddies along. That gives him courage. There's strenght in numbers. On one of my mothers there are three of his almost sane drinking pals who admire my father since twenty years ago he'd almost graduated from some kind of university. My father is sooo very smart. Too bad he is manic-depressive and has Korzak's syndrome.

Tonight, though, my father has guts. On one of my mothers who is giving him hell there are three drinking buddies around! Plus I and Donovan who, my father rightfully supposes, are rooting for him. On the other hand, I and the cat rightfully suppose that he shall be reasonable, give a bored yawn and stride right through my mother's leg (not between both of them, that much is self-evident) into the safety of bed. The stage is wholly prepared for my father's victorious exit; thus acting, he would preserve some meager remnant of his dignity. At least that's what Donovan would do in his place, exiting out of an embarrassing situation.

No shit. People always have to spoil everything. The woman fusses. Still, she puts on the table an unopened bottle of schnaps. Therefore my father's friends cease to be reasonable and start grinning stupidly. Donovan winks at me to let me know that one can't really rely on human race, then lends me his apricot fur to lean my head on while listening to what follows. What follows is beyond my understanding, but when I ask Donovan to clarify he merely shakes his head and says:

"When you grow up, you'll understand."

In the meantime, my father and the rest of Korzak brothers embark on a detailed conversation concerning my body.

"Poison comes in small bottles."

Says one of them, making a gesture as if getting poison inside himself. I am puzzled. If I were to poison myself, I'd stuff arsenic or whatever down my throat, not inside the fly of my pants.

My father is smiling inanely. My mother stares at the thing she would be frying in the pan if it hadn't got burned long ago.

"The most important thing about legs," says a buddy, safely anchored to a glass full of schnaps, "is that they reach to the ground."

"Or up to the ..." adds the next Korzak brother meaningfully, and giggles.

"Or around," says enigmatically the third and, thank God, the last one. His not so crystal clear comment is met with peals of laughter. My mother swings the charred pan as if she intended to throw it at somebody's head. By now, any reasonable cat would have had enough. Not the Korzak brothers, however, who, at a certain point in their lives, had almost graduated from an university.

Next they take up art history. This at least I am able to follow thanks to piles of leather-bound books with reproductions of apparently important paintings, dating from my father's student days. But for some reason I still have the impression that they are talking about me.

"Toulouse-Lautrec," says my father with the voice of a conoisseur.

"And what an artist he was!" says Korzak number two who at least has an idea of who my father is talking about.

"All those whores he's painted," adds Korzak number three who has a telepathic agreement with the number two.

"In spite of ..." says my dad, pointing to his trousers which measure about one meter eighty in lenght and are observed by Donovan with that characteristically curved corner of his black elastic lip. Like a small cynical lion. I deduce that he has no opinion about my father's statement, but it bothers him greatly that the trousers stink.

Translated by Author and Sonja Kravanja



AUTOPORTRAIT

Andrej Morovič (b. 1960) after a baccalaureate spent 15 years abroad (Italy, France, Australia, West Berlin, USA, Great Britain, Spain, North Africa). Since 1993 he has mostly lived and worked in Ljubljana. Since 2007 he has been living in a converted military truck. Morovič is a writer, filmmaker, photographer, journalist, founder of the Gromki Theatre and one of the leading figures in the Metelkova mesto autonomous cultural centre in Ljubljana, organiser and/or participant in numerous international festivals. He was awarded for the best first book and won the Zlata ptica Award. Morovič has written nine books of short stories and novels. In Germany he published a novel entitled *Die Herrscherin*, co-written with Uwe Hassler. He often writes about those on society's margins and rebels in the urban environment.

ANDREJ MOROVIČ

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Olujna vremena, Ljubljana: Vodnikova domačija, Kulturni vikend djece iz BiH, 1996

Mr. President

He spent his childhood on a US military base in southern Germany. Puberty caught him red-handed in Keflavik, Iceland. He was an exemplary pupil; number one disc-jockey on the school radio and President Supreme of the student body. One day in the break between algebra and biology he rather absent-mindedly followed two freshmen, catching a snippet of their conversation, uttered with great awe:

"Did you hear what President Clarke said yesterday?"

That was him, the man we all are terribly proud of.

I met Vince fleetingly in Berlin, where he was engaged in a mighty successful love safari. With a munificent smile, eyelashes knowingly pinched, he was firmly but gently flogging hordes of potential sweethearts. A pro! In a moment of lull he felt for my hand and grafted a few scribbled ciphers which were supposed to represent his New York address.

Months later, behind nine mountains and one large puddle, I called him, thinking he could maybe help me out. A wash of strange noises answered: his electromagnetic secretary, of course. Confused, I chirped Hi, I'm here, do you by chance know where I could find a flat... er, and maybe we could meet sometime...?

My take-off in NYC wasn't exactly glorious. I cringed in a boring, out-of-the-way hotel, feeling like a starveling forged into the ground, mere inches away from a platter overburdened with drool-enticing comestibles. I was encircled by a deep dyke brimming with stifling inner silence.

I had already given up hope when Vince finally returned my call and proposed a rendezvous.

As usual, the Path train mysteriously came to a halt half-way under the bed of the Hudson river.

Full of expectations I awaited him on the corner of Greenwich Avenue and West Fourth Street. Amidst the bustle still alien to me, my thin patience was quickly worn out. I sucked nervously on a cigarette stub, repeatedly glanced at the wrist watch, which I don't own and felt like a fool. Eventually he did arrive, with a selection of squires. I was promptly assigned a place in the entourage heading towards Uncle Charlie's. A large bar it was, packed with people and the like. From the corners huge, coarse grained video monitors supervised & agitated the scene. It was happy hour, I was glad to notice. A bottle of Rolling Rock - the beer of the natives, was rammed into my hand. As far as I could see, men only. Vince was playing with his husband. Every once in a while he vaguely directed half a sentence in my direction. John was coming and going ad infinitum, he was so busy. I shifted uncertainly from one foot to another and seeded hollow glances. Quite a few marriage candidates fluttered by, examined my accessories and moved on. It occured to me I might be in a slightly wrong location.

The stream of events rippled past vivaciously. Indeed - I hadn't yet collected myself before the evening was already old and tired and me inundated with alcohol. We stood on a catwalk. Through the cab door swinging shut Vince managed to squirt Nice meeting you, hope to see you again. That was that.

I moved to the Lower East Side. We became nearly neighbours. He lived on Fifth Street in a ruin even worse then mine. We met often. Usually we would go to The Bar, a dingy gay hole where his friend Tom tended to the customers.

Vince fled to NYC from a grimly conservative university campus somewhere in Michigan, after he, during a stay in London, irrefutably realised his heart was beating for men. The plantation of skyscrapers swallowed him indifferently, like hundreds of thousands of others. With years he learned to loathe it: the filth, the violence and simple, cruel rules enforced upon nearly everybody. The universal dictate of an ideal man, who had to be tall, beefy and piercingly extrovert, of which he wasn't the first nor the second, smarted him. He decided to emigrate to Berlin, where the love market was riper for a few cycles and where craving



deviated from form to content. To get there, he worked in two restaurants, but somehow - as if bewitched - his sweat besprinkled wage steadily evaporated from the bowels of his frightened purse into the wild turmoil outside.

Meanwhile he also got robbed twice.

His baptism took place when two friends of his happened to drop by. They soon ran out of refreshments (alcoholic beverages), so he rushed to the nearest store for more. Upon coming back he was attacked by a gang of knife-yielding urchins right in front of his house. They forced him to empty his pockets. He extracted two crumpled notes, enragedly hissing Is that what you want, two dollars, two whole dollars!? while Sharon leaning over the window shelf screamed Oh My god, Vince, shall I call the police?

His confirmation befell him after he and Tracy had dined at the restaurant 103. Vince wasn't hungry and so asked the waiter to change the status of his burrito from stay to take away. He swerved into his dark street. With the corner of an eye he perceived two shadows sitting on the stairway. When he turned the key, something violently pushed him inside. His vocal chords automatically produced:

"What's going on?"

"You know what's going on, it's a hold-up!"

All of the sudden there was a barrel of a gun in front of his nose. He nearly fainted. He saw a tight fist, white knuckles, the face of a thirteen-year old, in his eyes the distinct imprint of crack. They shoved him into a space between the outer and inner door. The latter was unlocked, but he refrained from bragging about that. Five hundred dollars were lying on the kitchen table in his apartment. They belonged to Geena, who just then was staying with him (God only knows why).

"Give us all your money!"

"Forgive me, for I don't have a penny. You chose a bad area for robbing, no one has any money around here."

"No shit, hand over the money!"

"I swear I haven't a corroded farthing, all I can offer you is this burrito."

He sensed the delinquents were nervous, thought they must be absolute begg-inners and decided to talk his way out of the predicament. He adopted a call-me-buddy attitude:

"Oh yes, me too, I know how it is to be without money."

"Whaaat, without money, look at these shoes, how much do you think they cost and this jacket, have a good look, I'll show you without money!"

"So I should be mugging you and not vice versa."

"You'll take us to your place and show us what you have!"

Five hundred dollars.

"Honestly, you won't find anything at all, I'm dead broke. I'm three-and-a-half months behind with the rent. I bet my crazed landlord who lives above me, is at this very moment standing in front of my door, ready to start yet another slanging match, just like he does every evening."

"OK, what shall we do with him?"

"I don't know, I guess we'll have to shoot him dead."

A thought raced through Vince's head My God, this is where life ends.

"Do you know what a bullet hole looks like?"

Vince, interestedly:

"No, I don't, what does one look like?"

"It's rather round and there's lots of blood pouring outta it."

"We gotta shoot him, he saw our faces, otherwise he'll run to the police."

"Why should I do a thing like that? I'm too busy! Yes, I am utterly poor but at least I do try to scratch together a little something. Besides you haven't taken anything from me. I wouldnever go to the police, not even in a dream."

"When do you get off work tomorrow?"

"Two o'clock."

"Fine, we know some people in the neighbourhood. Tomorrow they'll be cruising around



here. If they see some cops, we'll know who to thank. Then you're done for."

"Normally, we shoot people who don't give us any money, but we'll make an exception here, because we like you."

"Oh thank you, how nice of you."

"Yeah, and we can give you a few tips on how to behave in the future if you don't want to get mugged again."

"Och, puh-LEASE do."

"Well, before you put your key in the door make sure there are no shady individuals around."

"Och, shady individuals of your kind?"

"You got it, and we gotta go now. Take care. Bye-bye."

Long after this incident Vince was gluttonized by the World in which such and similar lamebrained miscreants could extinguish a life at whim.

He invited me to eat at his place. He made tacos, goes without saying. He was crazy about Mexican food. Hot peppers number nine were his favourites. He was the one who showed me San Loco, a small feeding stall on First Avenue which so many times soothed my infrastructure, heavily battered from alcohol and long nights, with a first aid in exchange for a modest monetary compensation.

Vince opened a gaudy box, extracted crunchy tortillas and small paper bags containing all the instant ingredients needed. Mix it together, heat it up and ole!, it's done. As soon as he turned on the stove the wall behind it was flooded with brigades of temporarily homeless cockroaches. And me with my maniacal hang-up about clean and healthy food. I pretended not to notice anything, keeping the arias of horror and comments to myself. Politely I swallowed the amount which, the weed that I am, narrowly missed offending the cook. Nonetheless, I couldn't manage to erase completely the hue of disgust from my face. My stomach meditated what percentage of vermin's semen & excrements it may have the honour to welcome and started the countdown before armies of resplendent cucarachas, would spill out if its velvety inside in search of new breeding grounds.

Vince's father served the needs of the US navy. When he retired, his wife and he obeyed the call of their native soil, the city of Derry which British occupiers decorated with the prefix London. Every Christmas Vince visited them, eager for the treats his mother was going to cook for him, just like in the good old days. This was the axis around which his private Earth revolved. Only allusions to the Marriage, bethrothal at least, hanging low above the horizon marred the warm picture of a nostalgic round-trip to the womb. During one of those solemnities, between glasses of brandy, his father vocalised the delicate question: You don't like women very much, do you, Vince? Relieved that the pregnant clouds had released their heavy water, Vince declared his NO. His father was struck by a vaguely suspected thunderbolt from the blue. In despair he lifted his arms of sorrow towards the sky, expecting the wrath of divine rage and, exercising restraint, pleaded But what do you like then!?

A few weeks later his parents called him up, quite tipsy they were, and stuttered into the phone We just wanted to tell you that we love you! This slammed the lid down on the matter, which was never to be mentioned again.

Vince had his final coming out when four of his cousins paid him a surprise visit. I joined them in a bar which they already had considerably dried out with their Irish determination. Vince seized my forearm and introduced me This is Savo, believe it or not, he is not gay, actually, it is quite incredible how female citizens flock around him. We all, at least the two of us, were quite happy with that statement. Afterwards, in drunken stupor, we hugged and liked each other continually and very much.

Next Christmas Vince won't have to hide anymore. With four initiated relatives he will set on an expedition through the local pubs, which for such a long time were closed to him. Victoriously, but without arrogance he is destined to deflorate them all. And the anthracite dome of heavenly catholic lies will spring another tiny rift.

"Uncle Jim thinks Vince is justifiably absent, but don't you worry, I'm going to take great care to steer you properly."

This gave my internal monologue an immense boost:

"You cretin, always looking for some adventure, now you're about to leave your virginal membrane right here. Why didn't you stay in your Montenegrine hamlet, tend to them sheep and wait for your father to select an honorable bride for you!"

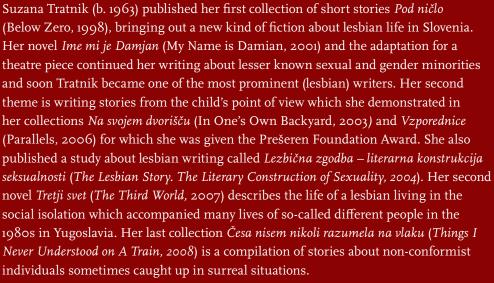
I felt leather suspenders, soaking wet, the icy cream of steaming lusty stamina and so many heebie-jeebies. I bit my tongue so as not to shriek. I tore myself out of the embrace and stumbled over fleshy and moaning shadows towards a fissure of light which betrayed the escape door. I closed it conscientiously and clipped a long bridal train of murmuring disapproval. The blast of music nearly blew me back into the pleasure pantry. I bent forward, closed my mouth and waded towards the densest crush of people - a fusion of lonely souls, each of them busy executing its own figures of purification. I found Vince entangled in a knot of extremities, not all of them his own, and plunged without hesitation into one hell of a sexy dance.

Translated by Gerald Hansen 3rd and the Author





Photo by NADA ŽGANK



SUZANA TRATIK

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Unterm Strich, Wien: Milena Verlag, 2002 Mein Name ist Damian, Wien: Milena Verlag, 2005 Jmenuju se Damián, Praha: One Woman Press, 2005 Ime mi je Damjan, Beograd: Deve, 2005

Animal Kingdom¹

A tall girl with a pony-tail stood at the door. From her thin frame hung a coat, which, though three sizes too large, appeared brand new.

"Don't you remember me anymore?" she said, smiling at the five-year-old child who had opened the door.

The girl, a distant village relative, had spent a few weeks in town with the child's family. That was four months ago, during the summer.

"I remember you," the child said decisively. "So, why have you come here now?"

"Not to borrow salt, that's for sure."

She pushed the child away softly and entered the house. She let out a sigh of relief as she placed her suitcase on the kitchen floor and sat down.

Her relatives thought of her as stupid, like all tall peasants. Perhaps this was because she was most comfortable outdoors, in nature. On her last visit, she'd been most happy going out with the five year old child to the abandoned cemetery at the end of the street. She taught the child how to do a handstand, a bridge and a forward somersault. She'd celebrated her fifteenth birthday during her holiday. On that day, she had managed to get a few cigarettes from some kids and then she and the child went to the cemetery, hid behind a large tombstone and smoked them. She kissed the child for her birthday. She told the child that it befit the occasion to do so. When they were already extremely intoxicated from inhaling the blue-grey cigarette smoke, she began sucking on the child's lips, as though making-out with the taste of tobacco was the best thing in the world. And it was.

It was almost winter now, an odd time to visit since there was little to do in the town during the cold season. And not wanting the added expense of heating the extra room, her town relatives did not usually welcome people at this time of year.

"I came so that we could go to Zagreb," Marja, as though conspiring, said to the child. The child had heard talk of someone being driven to Zagreb, but had not expected to be taken along on such a trip.

"They will! Of course they'll take you!" Marja convinced the child. "Do you even know where we're going? To the zoo!"

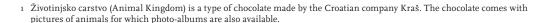
How about that!! The Zagreb Zoo. Animal Kingdom! Just like on the Kraš candy bar wrappers. But in real life. The excitement was almost too much to handle.

The traffic in Zagreb was too much to handle as well. Or so it seemed to the child's father, who nonetheless skilfully steered the new Zastava 101 and took great effort not to let the taxi in front of them leave his sight. When they'd arrived at the Zagreb railway station which was the only location familiar to them, the child's mother had walked over to the nearest taxi driver and asked for directions. Now he was leading them, free of charge. Even though Marja got car sick, the child was happy and thought it exceptional that her parents would make such a great effort to get to the zoo.

When they came to the entrance, the father and mother took Marja and the child by the hands and rushed them off to see the caged animals. They spent most of the time at the lion's cage. There was a bench nearby, a quiet corner for tired and fed up parents to drown their marriage. The child's parents sat there. Meanwhile, Marja stood at the lion cage for a long time, moving only her eyes, which shot back and forth from the lion to the lioness.

"Which do you like more, the one with the mane or the one with the big belly?" asked the child, who then, not waiting for an answer, ran to the monkey cage.

Marja pulled a white handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped her eyes. She looked at the child's parents, now flapping their hands as though angrily discussing something. The child walked away from the monkey cage towards them, still excited by those incredible animals, that she'd seen before only on the candy wrappers and on television. Marja was happy to be





at some distance from the arguing couple. The father looked angry; the mother was saying they would take out a loan to build an extension on the house and that was that. The mother glanced at her child. "Children do grow up quickly," she sighed.

"Some grow up more slowly – thank goodness," the father said sharply, and stepped towards the lion's cage. The mother, keeping her eyes on the father's back, grabbed the child by the elbow and planted her on her lap. She glanced at her gold-plated watch, a wedding present she once considered precious. For some reason, unknown to the child, the zoo trip would soon be ending.

The father did not speak a word as he drove through Zagreb. He navigated without difficulty, even though he did not follow any taxis this time. The women sat in the back, impatiently looking at their tiny watches. The car stopped on a quiet street outside the city centre. The mother gave the father some reconciling pats on the shoulder; she had just realized that they still had twenty more minutes left. When they explained to the child that she would be staying with the father while Marja and the mother ran an errand, Marja started to cry. The father immediately stepped out of the car and lit a cigarette. The mother caressed her child and said to Marja in a serious tone: "You have the money? Show me! Let me see! Don't give them anything up front, understand? Better yet, I'll wait in the hall with the money and pay them when they've done the job."

While the mother and Marja set off into some remote street behind the Nivea Cream factory, the child tried to engage the father in conversation. Now back in the car, the father remained silent, half-hunched on the steering wheel, goggling glassy-eyed into the rearview mirror, as though he himself had gone off with the women to who-knows-where. Then the child began to question whether Marja would be coming to visit them next summer for another fabulous town holiday. The father let out a sigh and somewhat unhappily added that in the future, that girl would have to be much more careful in choosing her friends. That was when the child understood that this entire trip actually had something to do with those kids who had given Marja the cigarettes on her birthday, something to do with smoking and with their tobacco-stained kiss at the old cemetery. Then the child too, began to pat the father's shoulder and refrained from asking any further questions about the animal kingdom in the zoo.

They left for home in the late hours of the night. The mother led Marja by the arm from the street behind the Nivea Cream factory. Before laying her down on the backseat, the mother and father covered it with a blanket, just in case. Marja was completely silent. When the child's mother assured her that no one in her village need ever know the reason for the trip to Zagreb, she nodded sleepily. During the drive home, the child firmly held onto Marja's red-hot hand. When finally overtaken by sleep, the child watched herself in a dream playing hide and seek among the old tombstones with a village friend. It was a summer made for handstands on soft grass. After having properly done a backward somersault the child, who was now an almost-six-year-old girl, grabbed onto a weather-beaten cross and read the name on the cold slate of a tombstone. She woke with a shock. Meanwhile, the child's parents, who were worried about Marja's blood on the blanket, were having an argument that seem to escalate from the present situation to the stated of their marriage. The child spent a long time kissing Marja's ice-cold hand, suddenly overcome with the feeling that a very quiet summer was awaiting, without words, glances into rear-view mirrors, somersaults and without any kisses among the tombstones.

Translated by Elizabeta Žargi and Beth Adler

Reckless Boy

Vera and I are sitting in front of a village bar not far from Ljubljana. It's Saturday afternoon. I am wearing shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt. We are drinking mineral water. It's June and it's hot. This was about four years ago.

Some men are sitting at the next table. Boys. They are loud and they are drunk. Their table is full of empty beer and wine bottles. The waitress doesn't take the empty bottles away; she doesn't touch the boys' trophies.

I smoke and talk with Vera. I don't look at the men and their trophies. Nor does Vera. We do not talk about them, we do not even mention them, they aren't even there.

Then the youngest one, probably about seventeen and a half, starts making his way to the bathroom. He sways, he grabs onto to chairs, tables, the fence for support. He leans onto the back of my chair. I do not look, I do not turn around.

"Hey, kid!"

This is the voice of the oldest of the men at the table, around thirty-eight years old. He has the longest line of empty bottles in front of him. So this probably isn't the only longest thing he has. Kid is the name of the seventeen-and-a-half-year-old, who is leaning against my chair. Vera and I become quiet. We do not look at anyone, not even at each other.

"What?" asks Kid behind my back.

"Apologise," orders Longest, "you bumped into her chair. You're not supposed to do that."

"Oh, yeah," says Kid, "sorry."

He puts his hand on my shoulder. I still do not turn around. I'm looking at Vera.

"It's ok," I say, "everything is ok."

I say this to Longest, as I know that Kid doesn't count for anything.

"Sorry," repeats Kid.

He is breathing down my neck.

"Not to her, to him," Longest raises his voice. "Apologise to him."

And Kid apologises again, to him – Vera.

"It's ok," says Vera.

She also says this to Longest at the table. The both of us say again and again that everything is ok, because we don't want trouble and we want this all to be over with.

"Sorry, man," says Kid to Vera.

He's leaning over me now, I'm afraid he'll fall on me, break his stupid head and spray me with blood. Then they'll be apologising for the next hundred years.

"Sorry for bumping into your woman, man," says Kid and finally staggers to the bathroom.

I feel relieved – he hasn't fallen asleep behind me.

"It's allright," says Vera.

We pay and get up. The table of trophies looks at us without saying a word. We say goodbye to them. Goodbye, they reply in unison.

We walk back to Ljubljana. It is a very hot day.

Translated by Elizabeta Žargi and Kelly Lenox Allan







Photo by Tone Stojko

Andrej Blatnik (b. 1963) works as an editor and teaches creative writing. So far he has published three novels, Plamenice in solze (Torches and Tears, 1987), Tao ljubezni (Closer to Love, 1996) and Spremeni me (Change Me, 2008), and four collections of short stories, the latest one being *Zakon želje* (Law of Desire, 2000). He has also published three non-fiction books. A short movie was made after one of his stories and another one was adapted to become a TV drama. He has written five radio dramas and translated several books from English, including Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and The Sheltering Sky by Paul Bowles. He has won some major Slovenian literary awards (Zlata ptica; Award of the City of Ljubljana; Prešeren Foundation Award). Andrej Blatnik has read his fiction all over the world. He was a participant in the International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa and a visiting writer at the International Writers Centre at the Old Dominion University in Virginia. He has received various fellowships, including Fulbright, the Austrian KulturKontakt fellowship, and a grant from the Japanese government. He enjoys travelling, always on a shoestring. "Blatnik's craftsmanship and modern flair direct our attention repeatedly to what is small, strange and essential in the world around us." (Publishers Weekly, October 12, 1998)

ANDREJ BLATNIK

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Cambios de piel, Madrid: Ediciones Libertarias / Prodhufi, 1997 Promjene koža, Zagreb: Durieux, 1998 Tao ljubavi, Zagreb: Meandar, 1998 Skinswaps, Evanston:
Northwestern University
Press, 1998
Tao lasky, Bratislava: F.R.
& G., 2000
Papirnati labirinti, Zagreb:
Hena-Com, 2001

Das Gesetz der Leere,
Vienna: Folio, 2001
Bör, Budapest: Jak, 2002
Promene kužy, Olomouc:
Periplum, 2002
Zakon želje, Zagreb:
Meandar, 2002

Zákon touhy, Olomouc:
Periplum, 2004
Der Tag, an dem Tito starb,
Vienna: Folio, 2005
La Loi du Desir, Paris:
AlterEdit, 2005
Zakonot na zelbata, Skopje:
Magor, 2005

Electric Guitar

Hidden in the dusk, the boy tries over and over to pick out that miserable tune on the accordion. He can't do it. Not a single note forms a harmony with its predecessor; his fingers on the buttons sometimes reach too low, then too high, and every time the bellows bleat out a jarring discord. The boy is not very musical, but he knows enough to realize that his goal - to play the simple air correctly - is becoming increasingly unattainable with every passing moment, just as the time when his father will return, and demand to be played to, is drawing inexorably nearer.

The night descends upon him like a damp cloth. The dense clusters of music printed on the sheet first begin to blend, then disappear altogether in the dark. The boy does not turn on the light since the dark brings relief; it is awful to watch one's fingers stumbling over one another in helpless confusion on the keys.

Now he can only hear them. He does not hear the awkward elusive melody, only his own fingers refusing obedience. And he knows that once again he won't be able to make his father see that it's not his fault, it's his fingers that are to blame. The more he'll explain how hard he's tried to unravel the mystery of this tune, the more entangled he'll get and the clearer it'll become that in actual fact he still doesn't know for certain what some of the symbols on the music sheets mean and that every now and then he leaves out a couple. His father will hear him out patiently, as he always does, while at the same time he'll already be pulling the belt out of his pants. And then he'll say: Go on, son, play it again.

And the boy will play it again and the tune will be even more jagged as his fingers leave sweat marks on the keys, making them slippery. And the father will listen and stroke his leather belt, and then he'll say: Son, put away the accordion.

The boy thinks about what is to come and tears well up in his eyes. The worst part is that he loves music. When he lies in bed at night, he shuts his eyes tight and imagines himself as that boy in a white tuxedo and bow tie he'd seen on television, standing center stage in a concert hall, holding a violin in his hand and taking a bow while the audience applauded enthusiastically. His reality is different: His only audience is his father, and he doesn't clap for joy.

The boy knows what is wrong, he knows why he can't find the right notes. He's under the spell of the electric guitar. It's everywhere. It's got all the right sounds and won't let his accordion have a single one of them. It's gone to his head and filled it with a white buzz that doesn't allow any rivals near. That's why his quaking tones can't flow together into a melody. They're not allowed to by the electric guitar. The one that always finds the way. He saw that on television too. He saw how it had all started. Somewhere far away, somewhere in Africa, the devil played the guitar and cast such a spell on it that nobody but its owner could play it. Everyone else was struck by a bolt. Burned to ashes. Made them be no more. And that's why guitars are so dangerous. And the electric guitar, the most powerful of them all, is the most dangerous. If you're not the right person for it, that is.

The boy thinks: If I had an electric guitar, a real one, then I could do it. He'd be the right person for it and he could play it without a miss, and his father would not take the belt out of his pants, but would open his arms and lift him up and tell him how proud he was of him and the audience would clap their hands and he would adjust his bow tie, press the violin against his white tux and leave the stage and go back to his room where the two toys would be waiting for him, the toys on which the dust settles relentlessly during the hours when he so desperately tries to find the right line over the black and white keys. And then he would put the violin away and play with them, the teddy bear on which his mother had pinned the note



(

saying she was leaving but that she would come get him real soon, right away, and that she loved him, and the Barbie doll his little sister had left behind even though it was the one she talked to more than to anything else. And other toys, many other toys he does not have now.

The boy knows it's a fantasy. All his reveries during which the hours with the accordion pass are empty. The only thing real is the squealing box in his hands and the sheet on the music stand from which he can not make out the melody. And the electric guitar in his head. Which can play all the melodies and knows all the ways.

The boy wonders: How did his father guess the electric guitar was so dangerous? How did he know not to get him one when he asked for it? How did he know it would spew fire if it came into the hands of the boy? His father told him that this accordion was the very same one he himself had played, and his father and grandfather before him, and that there'd be no guitar in his house. He meant in his room, because they live in a room, not a house, but the boy understood anyway. And marveled. True, his father knows about music, he's forever bringing him new sheets of music and placing them on top of the ones the boy has looked at to exhaustion. But how could he also know the secret of the electric guitar, which is hidden to all and has only been revealed to the boy? Every time the boy told his friends how the electric guitar could bring back the dead and shake up the living so that not a trace of life remained in their bodies, they'd giggle and wink at one another, and then when he fell silent and turned away they whispered behind his back that he was a bit touched. Yes, he heard it quite distinctly: A bit touched. But he was never touched by anyone or anything except when his father touched him too hard, far too hard. He knew what the phrase meant: They thought he was a bit off. That there was something wrong with him. He clenched his fists and kept silent. And thought to himself: If I had an electric guitar I'd show them. They think an electric guitar's just a thing those who know how can make produce sounds. And that these sounds are no more than that: Just sounds. What do they know! They don't know that the electric guitar has a will of its own, a life of its own, and that you have to be careful around it. Very careful.

The boy glances at the accordion in his hands, the cold, dead object which wheezes shapeless noises. He feels like flinging it on the ground and jumping up and down on it. Possibly, just possibly that might give it some pep. But no matter what, it would never become an electric guitar. Just as he - the boy knows - will never become that boy in the white tuxedo with the bow tie, on the concert hall stage, holding a violin in his hand and bowing while the audience claps effusively. And just as his father's belt will never become his mother's tarragon cake which she used to bake every Sunday when his father still let her out of the house to buy the groceries.

Over and over the boy grapples with the same shaky tune. He can't do it, he just can't do it. The keys evade him and the boy knows he won't make it. Somewhere in the corner, in the corner of the room, in the corner of his head, in the corner of the universe, there lurks the electric guitar.

Electricity gives power to all things, it's no wonder the boy can't manage without it. There's no music any more without electric power. It's no wonder his tunes are all squashed up and his fingers stumble over each other. I need an electric guitar, thinks the boy. Or at least electricity. It gives power to things.

Worriedly, the boy listens for sounds from the stairwell. For the time being he can't hear his father's heavy footfalls, but they will come before long. The boy knows that his father is seething with a rage he can barely control, and has been for a long time. The boy feels bad about it because he knows that his father loves him, and he has some idea how disappointed his father must be when he listens time and again to the boy hopelessly chasing after the melody. The boy remembers how often his father used to take him with him when he left

home, and how they'd walk along the streets for hours on end and do nothing else, and how good it felt when his father put his arm around his shoulders. Except that one day when they came home his mother and his little sister were gone, and only the teddy bear and the Barbie doll remained. And the note that Mommy would come get him real soon. But she didn't. Not then and not later, though he waited.

His father explained to him that his mother and sister had left because women had no sense of duty, and that now they'd have to cope on their own, but the boy nevertheless felt that they could have stayed on where they were and needn't have moved to another town, where his father enrolled him in a different school and where they had a different name on the door and his father called him a different name which he didn't like half as much as the one before, though he'd already forgotten what that was. Where they used to live before, the apartment was bigger and the people were nicer. They'd often ask about his mother, about where she was, and they'd send their regards. Now there were no regards and nobody so much as knew that he'd ever even had a mother.

It occurs to the boy that the melody is unable to find its way out of the accordion. No, it won't work without power. He'll have to help the tune, it can't feel well, trapped in the choking bellows, it must want out, thinks the boy. Yes, electricity; the tune can't get out without power.

The boy finds the extension cord in the cupboard where his father keeps his tools. He turns over the accordion in his hands for a long time, unable to find an appropriate socket. First he blames it on the darkness, but finally it dawns on him that he's gone about it all wrong: It's the cord that needs to be changed to match the accordion, not the other way around. Using the knife he keeps under the pillow in case the dark man returns who used to bend over him at night and breathe hot air on him until he screamed and screamed and screamed, he cuts the cord on the end which doesn't plug into the wall, and strips apart every separate wire. Then, by touch alone, he attaches the individual wires to the frame of the accordion, until he feels they are all connected to something and that his work is done.

As he pushes the plug into the wall outlet, he hears a noise on the stairs. It's his father returning. He'll stumble on every step, then he'll be ever so long inserting the key in the lock, and the key will, as always, get stuck; then he'll get the door unlocked somehow, open it, and enter. The boy knows what lies in store for him, and it paralyzes him; he forgets about the accordion, about the sheet music spread out on the stand, about the instant soup he was supposed to be stirring into boiling water this moment because his father wants to eat when he comes home.

He squeezes into the gap between the wall and the closet, where he usually keeps his accordion, and hopes it will just go away, as it sometimes does, he hopes his father won't find the strength to listen to him play, that he'll just stagger over to bed and fall asleep without even kicking his shoes off. Then all the boy will have to do is cautiously remove them for him.

His father enters the room. He mutters indistinctly into his chin. He walks into the table, kicks over a chair with a crash. The boy presses further into the cranny, such a narrow space that his father, so he hopes, won't be able to follow. Because if he does follow, then, the boy knows, it's going to be bad, then it will be unending.

Although the room is filled with darkness, the father spots the accordion on the ground. He grumbles something sharply and bends over to pick it up, but as he takes hold of it he shudders, starts shaking, throws his head back, does a little offbeat dance of an unusual rhythm, and this goes on and on. Then the accordion slips from his fingers, and when it hits the ground the bellows emit a muffled moan, while the father collapses on the floor. He drools.



The boy waits. It's an ugly sight, gross, but he's seen it before. The boy reasons that his father didn't make it to bed this time. That's happened before too; he doesn't always make it. And so he doesn't need to take his shoes off either since there's no bed linen to get dirty.

The father does not move for a long time. The boy contemplates his next step. Usually, his father groans after a while, murmurs, yells. But nothing this time. Nothing. He lies motionless, still. The boy begins to realize it's different this time. And he doesn't know what to do.

At last he creeps out of his hiding place, unplugs the cord and puts it away, back into the cupboard. His father is always telling him to put things away; if you don't, you get covered with grime and dust, you need to put things away, be neat and tidy, scrub the dirt and dust off your body. And he scrubs the dust off the boy's body for a long, long time until the boy shivers under the spray of cold water since all the warm water has long been used up, and then his father picks him up and carries him to bed and draws his hand over his eyelids so that they close and then the boy can feel his father looking at him for a long, long time, and the boy knows that his father wishes him a good night and sweet dreams, and no dark man or hot breath on his cheek.

The boy looks at his father for a long, long time, but still the father does not budge. The boy thinks. He can't stay like this forever, he thinks. Finally he takes the keys out of his father's breast pocket. Although it sometimes takes his father a long time to locate the lock, he is always quick to put the keys carefully away. Always. The boy had already tried to open the door when he was home alone, to open the door and go to Africa to get the guitar, but he never once could find the keys. And the windows were so high up he got dizzy when he looked through them, there was a bottomless abyss beneath them.

The boy stands on the staircase and hesitates. His heart sinks because it is very dark already, and even if it were daylight, he does not know the way. There's not a single way he knows, because his father always accompanies him whenever he needs to go out, to go to school. But the boy knows he has no choice. There's only one option: He must find his mother. He'll ask on the corner if somebody knows her. He remembers her name, he's repeated it to himself over and over since she left, leaving behind that note. Somebody's bound to know her. If not on this corner, then on the next one or on the one after that; there is always at least one more corner. Sooner or later he'll find her. He knows: He must. He must find his mother. She'll know what to do next, she'll explain what happened. And maybe, just maybe she'll let him talk her into buying him an electric guitar.

Translated by Tamara Soban





Photo by Jože Suhadolnik

Mojca Kumerdej (b. 1964) graduated with a degree in Philosophy and Sociology of Culture in Ljubljana. She is a writer, philosopher and freelance dance and performance critic and cultural chronicler. After the publication of her first novel *Krst nad Triglavom* (Baptism above Triglav, 2001) she published a short-story book called *Fragma* (2003). In her stories immediately under the everyday surface, and only just below the threshold of awareness, there exists an exciting 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 in which monsters are born. Her short stories have been translated into several languages and included in Slovenian and foreign language anthologies.

MOJCA KUMERDEJ

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Fragma, Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2008

The Pines

"Nothing to be done, this is the only way I can be back in hospital in case of emergency in less than an hour," his wife, one of the few surgeons at the provincial clinic, where men ruled and competition was strong, adamantly faced him with the fact without a possibility of appeal every year, now the eighth in a row. He was deeply displeased at the very thought of spending yet another summer at the three-story Pension right on the lake, with a spacious garden and beach surrounded by a fence preventing access of uninvited guests. And he was intensely bothered by something else: not far from the villa, a fifteen-minute walk away from the edge of the quiet and tidy resort there was a wild beach, which was not only a refuge for the nudists, but also – as he had heard – for the men who made his stomach turn. He had had no idea about it until some five years previously he complained to a group of friends that he was once more bound for a summer in the penal colony by the boring stinky pond, and somebody, signalling meaningful expressions, said that the place was a well-known gathering place for fags. And not only for those who can be recognised from afar by their disgusting gesticulation and wagging of worn-out behinds; no, the place was allegedly also frequented by respected gentlemen while their wives dozed on the long chairs or tended to their children.

"I didn't know, I really didn't know," he said awkwardly. He was greatly embarrassed and mad at his wife who forcibly dragged him to that darn Pension Blauer Enzian, the owner of which, the obese hypochondriac Brigitte - besides having buried her husband and inherited the huge villa by the lake with a view of the Karavanke Mountains – did nothing else in her life but studying her ailments and profusely fleecing tourists. Her health slightly improved only during the summer season – especially in those three weeks that he, in sedated rhythm, spent behind the chicken wire – when she went to great lengths analysing her diagnoses, flattered his wife with special free treats – this, esteemed Frau Doctor, is of course on the house – and discussed with her and two other hags the ineffectiveness of surgeons, sloppiness of internists and laziness of the medical staff. The first woman, whose husband autistically gulped down beer for two weeks every season, worked in the Cabinet of the President of the Republic, and the second, divorced, owned a health shop, which – in addition to ecologically produced foods – sold any old shit that a perverted mind could think of, anything from amulets for protecting the aura and energy jewellery to tools for exorcism and neutralisation of evil forces. He never understood his wife. She publicly advocated science and official medicine, but when her girlfriend, a witch with a pendulum, confirmed her suspicions that her colleague and competitor for the position of head of the gastroenterological clinic tried to thwart her with black magic, they set down to work and poured hot wax on a twenty-one-Euro voodoo doll, dripped on it milk and honey and then, with destructive thoughts aimed at his wife's rival, maliciously burnt it. To him, employed in the pharmaceutical field, even the ointments made of mare's and goat's milk seemed like total idiotism and marketing humbug, let alone the lunatic voodoo operations performed by his wife every time when things at the clinic went amiss. The quartet of snobbish hags was thus completed, and his wife - the state-of-the-art medical expert - was its queen. He, an analyst in a pharmaceutical company, was of no interest to the females, except for small favours. Every day they sent him off to fetch the tabloid press, and then for the next few hours with unstoppable gusto slandered people, especially those they either knew or knew someone who knew them, which made it possible to accompany the short items of news and photographs with yet unpublished juicy bits of gossip.

Thus, for a fifth summer, he felt trapped in the midst of the middle aged women, who – with their thick feet – lay about the best part of the private beach, and not far from, as he had heard, the invisible group of men, who supposedly could look quite normal, but who clandestinely disappeared into the pine forest on the western shore, where – purportedly – many queer things were going on. In the past years he sometimes even swam in that direction, he really wanted to find out who those darn faggots were, making it out among the pines by the lake. His curiosity was further tickled by an event that had occurred three years previously, when a drowned – and as it later turned up – naked and strangled body of

something to chatter about for the entire second half of their holiday, and later discussed the topic several times over the phone. He was only watching them from afar, from the lake; an adept swimmer, he swam long distances and – as if by the way – looked towards where men of various ages, including young boys, sunbathed on the shore. Yes, very young boys, he thought for a first time that summer, the same age as his son who'd recently turned sixteen. A few months before he wondered why – apart from the bespectacled skinny nerd of his classmate – no girls were phoning up his son, and why he never mentioned any girlfriend, let alone introduce her to his father. He wouldn't have minded, it seemed quite natural that his son should have a girlfriend at the end of the second year of college, just as he himself had at the secondary school of economics. It was a normal, teenage love, with awkward casual sex, hanging out together, going to the movies, cycling and skiing, until it ended, not particularly tragically, after less than a year. But not his son. Only school, sport, computers and music, everything with his classmates and male friends, but no girlfriend.

That summer, as they lounged on the beach, he started to watch his son more closely.

a young Turk was pulled out of the lake; the murderer was never found, and the women had

That summer, as they lounged on the beach, he started to watch his son more closely. That he consorted mostly with the witch's son and not her plump daughter, who on the beach shyly wrapped herself in bath-robes, towels and long-sleeved shirts, came as no surprise. And the relationship between the two boys, after a close examination, didn't seem suspicious. But his son's walk, the way he conspicuously threw his legs forward, didn't appear natural and normal. He was wiggling his pelvis much too dynamically, and it was definitely time he cut off that raven pony-tail. And his suspicions were further confirmed when new guests arrived.

Frau Brigitte generously informed her little club of all the details – as she firmly believed - concerning the well-known anchor of TV programmes on family matters and her husband, a surgeon at the Vienna neurology clinic. His wife didn't find the neurosurgeon particularly interesting, most probably because she didn't want any competition in the medical field, but also because she knew that she could get ample information on the Viennese neurology from the unstoppable mouth of the TV anchor. So, the women pulled over another long chair under the parasols, and a few hours after the new guests' arrival they initiated the anchor into their club; he noticed that his wife was on several occasions overshadowed by the new member. The neurosurgeon brought them cold drinks at foreseeable intervals, commented on some item of news or other, and in every way acted like a polished gentleman, while - as he noticed – he more and more frequently glanced in the direction of the deckchairs where his and the witch's sons were playing cards with another youngster. Doctor Heino was a tall, greyhaired gentleman around fifty years of age, who came to breakfasts in long white trousers, cream-coloured shirt and matching moccasins. The cream moccasins and the golden ring with a ruby on his right hand were the first alarming signs that Doctor Heino might be one of those who in the afternoons disappeared from the fenced-in plots, allegedly to stretch themselves or fetch newspapers, but in fact trotted off to the Pines, as the infamous forest was called. The surgeon was polite to him, every morning at breakfast he greeted him kindly, and during the day they exchanged some refined phrases on the beach. Before he went to sleep at night he always wondered how it could be that the TV anchor had no idea that her husband, who was getting into bed, handsome and freshly showered in his silk striped pyjamas, had during the day been sticking his cock into male bums a few hundred metres from the Blauer Enzian villa. He was disgusted by the mere though of a sexual act between two men, and was more and more convinced that Doctor Heino was meaningfully peeking towards where he was reading his paper and his son and friends were playing cards and listening to music.

That Friday at breakfast, while he was pouring his coffee at the counter, he noticed that Heino approached their table and, seemingly casually, made a remark to his son, who first laughed widely and then said something in reply. He couldn't hear what they were talking about, and was irritated he had not been at the table; probably the dirty bastard took advantage of his absence to charm the inexperienced youngster with his lewd humour. During the day he never let Heino out of his sight. He watched his every move and monitored his flattering servility towards the women's club, and duly noticed that Heino bought two drinks for the boys and for himself. Understandably he declined the glass offered with Heino's piercing

look, then hurried to the villa and ordered two spritzers. Out of breath he gulped down the first one, and with the second rushed back to the beach lest the paedophiliac pervert should do something untoward during his absence. Doctor Heino, who was lounging in the long chair and casually flipping through a novel, stared at him in surprise as he arrived. Then things started happening with unstoppable speed. The kids put down their cd-players, the witch's son took his surfboard and dashed to the lake, his son and the third boy disappeared towards the forest, and half a minute later Doctor Heino headed in the same direction. He knocked back the second spritzer, shouted to his wife that he'd go take some exercise, and was off after Heino. You queer bastard, I'm going to get you, he kept thinking to himself while nearing the pine forest, first time on foot. After ten odd minutes he noticed a first couple under the path, a man and a woman sunbathing naked on the grass, then he saw some more nudists of both sexes, and the further he went, the fewer women there were. When he realised that he'd lost any track of his son, his friend and the neurosurgeon, he heard unambiguous gasping in the direction he'd come from. He hastened his pace, and as he could not go back now, headlessly and afraid he stepped right into the heart of the Sodom of the Austrian Riviera, until - off the footpath now - he almost stumbled over two heated male bodies. Leaning against a pine tree he saw a scene which totally mortified him. For the first time he saw two men wiggling like two mad vipers, intertwining their limbs in a taut, hissing rhythm. His mind was blank, he simply watched with a lump in his throat and cold sweat on his forehead. He embraced the tree-trunk and wished he had never ventured into the dusky Pines, and yet he wanted the act in front of him to last forever. He felt the heat radiating from his stomach, his palms clutching the bark started to sweat and his body tightened up. He heard the crackling of branches from behind. He didn't turn round; he leaned against the tree in submission, and when a strong hand touched his neck and slid down his naked chest, with a ruby glistening in the late-afternoon sun, for a moment he closed his eyes.

"I thought you'd make the first move," gently said a male voice. "I saw how you watched me all the time, during breakfast, on the beach, and when I offered you a drink ..." he caressed him with words and down his chest, pressing his pelvis against his behind. Intense heat rushed through his body. He wanted to grab the hand, wiggle out of the embrace and run, but couldn't move.

"Where's my son?" he managed to say, while he stood caught between the pine and the stiff male body.

"I'm sure he's having fun somewhere."

"I thought you were ..."

"Watching your son?" he smiled gently, then stroked his bum and turned him round. "Oh no, your son is still almost a child, and besides he doesn't seem to be of our kind," he whispered, licked his neck, kissed him strongly and sank into his body.

Translated by Lili Potpara



Photo by Aleksander Lilik

Lili Potpara (b. 1965) graduated in English Translation Workshop from the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana where she lives as a freelance translator and short-story writer. She has translated a number of Slovenian writers into English. Her translations of fiction into Slovenian include Liz Jensen, Alexander McCall Smith, Cormac McCarthy and David Benioff. Ms Potpara's collection of short stories Zgodbe na dušek (Bottoms-Up Stories) won the Best Literary Debut prize in Slovenia in 2002 and was reprinted in 2004. Her second book of short prose entitled *Prosim*, preberi (Please Read It) came out in December 2006. Lili Potpara's short stories in translation have been included in foreign anthologies and magazines. Her writing tries from various angles – to penetrate the eternal mystery of interpersonal relations through everyday, often trivial experiences. Rather than managing to unveil any universal truths or offer any viable solutions, she instead creates tense emotional atmospheres which are the result of mistrust, jealousy, loss, broken relationships and general alienation, and often remain unresolved.





The Mobile Phone

Srečko received the mobile phone as a birthday gift from his colleagues at work. Not that anybody particularly wanted to call him, but it was a round anniversary, they put the money together and had the Ericsson nicely wrapped up along with a bottle of Tramini.

Srečko didn't want a mobile phone; had he wanted one, he would already have bought it. But now he had the Ericsson. He selected the socket where he would plug in the charger; he carefully read the instructions and put them in a special folder. He filed away the folder in a special box on the top shelf on the left, where he kept other instructions for use and warranty documents.

For Srečko kept his affairs in perfect order. Every object had its own special place, carefully and logically assigned. When filling out the tax return Srečko never fumbled helplessly among the papers, when making goulash his right hand automatically found the lid for the cooking pot.

A week had passed since his birthday; Srečko was drinking coffee on the balcony (from a tiny cup with a silver edge that had remained from his mother's set). Everything was just as it was supposed to be, he had brought some apples and lettuce from the market. After lunch left over from the previous day Srečko carefully washed the plate and cutlery, made his coffee and sipped it on the balcony. It was Saturday; after the coffee he planned to climb up the Šmarna Gora hill, as he was used to doing on Saturdays.

In mid-sip the mobile rang. At first Srečko didn't know where the piercing sound was coming from (he had set the ringing tone to the sound of an antique phone the previous day); in the whole week the gadget rang only twice, from one office to another, more to the amusement of the people who had bought the telephone than to Srečko's, and each time the sound was different.

The mobile was ringing in the kitchen, on the counter next to the radio set. That was all right, because it was there that Srečko decided to keep the device when he was at home.

Slowly he got up and went into the kitchen. He was slightly upset at the intrusion: he expected no telephone call, nor did he want one now, in the middle of having coffee.

He picked up the set and brought it closer to his eyes. Inspected the number. It wasn't one of the three numbers from the phone book, it started with o1, and wasn't the number of his office. Anyway, it was Saturday, and in his office nobody worked on Saturdays. He hesitated for a moment; his first impulse was not to answer the call at all, but at the same time he became just a touch curious and slightly afraid that the thing might stop ringing before he managed to reply.

He pressed the green key.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hello! Jože, why don't you pick up the phone? It's been ringing for ages!"

The woman's voice sounded joyous that the long ringing turned into an inquiring word.

"Excuse me, I'm not Jože, this must be a wrong number."

"Oh, what ... well, I'm sorry to have bothered you. Good-bye."

And the machine went silent again. For a few moments Srečko kept staring at the display, reading the question whether he wanted to save the new number or not. Finally he pressed *No*, put the phone down on the counter to the left of the radio, and went back to his – by then slightly cold – coffee. He was turning the cup between his fingers, but cold coffee was not exactly his cup of tea, so he poured it down the kitchen sink, deliberated whether to make a fresh pot, decided against it, washed the cup and went into the bedroom to change.

He was putting on his tracksuit when he heard the ringing from the kitchen once more.

It wasn't yet irritation he felt, but was definitely close to it. Srečko didn't like to be interrupted during his routines; his life was carefully planned and arranged, every thing had its own place and was done at its own time.

The number displayed was the same as before.

"Hello?" he said into the microphone, perhaps a bit too loudly.

"Oh, Jože, look, just before I got the wrong number and spoke to some man. Listen..."

"Excuse me, madam," Srečko cut in, "wrong number again. I'm not Jože."

"Oh my, who are you then? I'm sorry, my name's Fani."

Srečko was feverishly wondering whether to reveal his name to that woman Fani, or else tell her it was none of her business and to stop calling him on the Saturday afternoon when he was already running late for his Šmarna Gora climb.

"My name's Srečko and this is my number," he finally said.

"Oh, Srečko, I'm glad to have ..., I mean, I'm sorry again. Good-bye."

And then silence, and the sound signalling a disconnected line. Srečko was holding the phone in his hand, noticed he hadn't tucked the T-shirt into the tracksuit trousers, put the phone neatly down where it belonged and dressed properly. I could switch the phone off, he thought, exactly, I'm going to switch it off and leave right now. Just as he reached for the mobile, it rang again. He answered straight away, after all he was holding the phone in his hand, and anyway – he knew who was at the other end of the line without having to look at the number on the display.

"Madame ..." he began, but was cut short.

"Jože, oh my God, I keep reaching a man called Srečko ..."

"Excuse me, Fani, it's me again, Srečko..."

"Again? What's going on? Why do you keep answering the phone? And where is Jože?" Srečko nervously smiled to himself; the whole affair was irritating as he was losing precious time, but it was also new. Now, after a long time, Srečko's Saturday was unfolding differently. He wanted to say something, he wanted – at least he thought he did – to say something humorous, he took a deep breath, but then realised that Fani had already disappeared from the line.

In the end he switched the phone off and quickly drove to the foot of Šmarna Gora, he took the shortest and fastest path up the hill as time was running out. On top he ordered a herb tea and a pretzel, there was some wind, but not too much, he gazed down into the valley and caught himself looking towards the Moste suburb where – judging by the first digits of the telephone number – Fani lived.

Srečko reconnected the phone in the evening, took a long shower, switched on the TV set on the commercial channel and waited for the quiz.

Something was different that evening. Srečko was slightly excited, during the ads he got up from the sofa several times and walked into the kitchen; he was pouring himself glass after glass of water, washed an apple, and every time stopped by the telephone for a few moments.

The device remained irrevocably silent throughout the evening.

It was mute the following day, too, and for the most part of Monday. On Sunday Srečko decided he would carry the phone in his breast pocket that could be buttoned up. He cycled to Zalog, as he did every Sunday if it didn't rain or snow.

The telephone was persistently silent.

At work on Monday, Srečko was absent-minded, which exasperated him. He was proud of his order, of his quiet, sober prudence, of the reputation that nothing could throw him off balance.

In the afternoon he had to admit to himself that he was nervous. He forgot to take the paper out of the mail-box, and after lunch had to put on his shoes again to fetch the daily. Then he leafed through the paper and stared at Ericsson's display for long minutes at a time, but the phone didn't ring. In the meantime he changed the ringing tone to some popular tune, which – he believed – he would be able to hear better from a greater distance.

In the evening he hesitated; was he to switch the phone off when he went into the shower? Or was he to leave it switched on in the kitchen? The idea of taking the phone with him into the shower seemed a bit absurd, but when the tension of indecision became unbearable, he took the device into the bathroom, showered quickly and – as he later scolded himself – superficially, but the phone never rang.

It did ring, however, just before Srečko habitually went early to bed. It was Janez from work, he called for no special reason, he said, just because he knew that Srečko now had a

P

mobile phone. Srečko kept the conversation short and immediately switched off the phone, after saying good-bye to Janez. The call upset him much more than he was willing to admit, even to himself. He slept badly.

On Tuesday Srečko felt strong pressure in his temples; he excused himself from work claiming he had a bad headache, and for the first time in the fifteen years he'd been with the firm he went home as early as twelve o'clock.

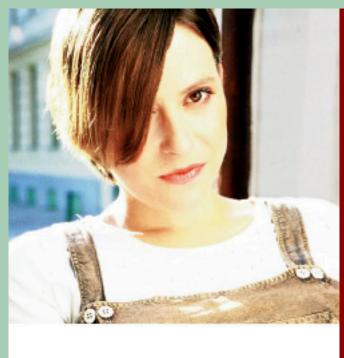
At one he made himself some coffee, but didn't feel like drinking it; it was way too early for his afternoon coffee, which was due at 16.30 after lunch, on the balcony or at the kitchen table if there was snow, rain or strong wind.

At two o'clock Srečko washed his hands with liquid soap, made himself an early lunch, ate it, washed up, dried the dishes and put them away, pulled the phone out of the breast pocket and sat down on the sofa. He turned down the radio, and neatly – according to the instructions – executed a series of commands until he heard the ringing sound at the other end.

"Hello?" the known female voice replied. "Who's there?" it enquired. Srečko felt massive relief and, just before he spoke, discreetly cleared his throat into his free palm.

Translated by the Author





Polona Glavan (b. 1974) graduated in Comparative Literature and English from the University of Ljubljana. Although having written for all her conscious life, she published her first short story in 1994. Her stories have won several awards in competitions, and appeared in two national anthologies. They have been published in most Slovenian literary magazines as well as in English, German, Czech, Dutch, Italian, Hungarian and Croatian. Her first novel *Noč v Evropi* (A Night in Europe, 2001) was shortlisted for the Kresnik Award and for best Slovenian novel of the year. Her short story collection Gverilci (Guerillas, 2004) was awarded the Zlata ptica prize. She works as a translator for the Secretariat General of the Government of the Republic of Slovenian and also translates short stories and novels from English. The short stories of Polona Glavan are distinctively social, focusing on everyday problems of contemporary society such as unemployment, domestic violence, loneliness and dysfunctional families.

Photo by Klemen Prepeluh



BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Noc v Evropě, Prague: Fra, 2007

The Unusual Identity of Nina B. (fragment)

Nina was born to a nation of somehow undefined origins. The prevalent opinion is that the Slovenians made their way to the heart of Europe as part of a great Slavic tribe; they rode the wave of mass migrations out from behind the Carpathians, say those in favour of the theory, and stubbornly dug themselves in between the strict Germans, the wrangling Romans and the hot-blooded Huns, like a wedge, say the defenders of the obstinate Slavic genes, poetically patting their chests, like driving a wedge, being the avant-garde, don't you know? The other faction claims all this is nothing but a Slavophile conspiracy; no way, they say, had the Slovenians ever had anything to do with those primitive Russians and their equally dubious offshoots, this nation is indigenous, they say, having lived there practically since the time when embryonic forms of its present-day neighbours were still crawling out of the North and Adriatic Seas, persisting in its essence even when encircled with threat to the infinite degree, ad infinitum; this unbreakable nation lived there proudly offering polite yet constant resistance; like a rock, say those in favour of the prehistoric essence, wiping away the tear to which they have been moved, like a rock, a stone, a bone, don't you know? One way or another, Nina's nation had stuck to the same patch of land for a millennium or so, occasionally switching political masters, picking up bits and pieces from the neighbours in the process and ultimately transforming into a fairly coherent union of individuals not, for the most part, concerned about where they had come from as long as they were not forced to go somewhere else.

Nina grew up in a family considered functional, unconflicted and rather typical by local standards. Her father liked to stress that he was a true Slovenian. He knew the family tree back five generations off by heart and never forgot to add that blood should not be tainted, no sir! The poor fellow never found out about a certain Romanian sheep merchant who had appeared about a century earlier and introduced a genetic anomaly into the family via his great-grandmother without leaving a single lamb in return. Just to be on the safe side, Nina's father upgraded his tribal allegiance by means of patterns of behaviour that were strictly typical: owning one's Own House (two rooms per inhabitant, twelve years of bank loans, four years without holidays or free weekends, stomach ulcer), the emotional attitude towards the Car (for which, unlike his wife and children, He Alone had scrimped and saved, and which He Alone was allowed to drive) and the non-intervention policy vis-à-vis the Neighbours (also known as Manners in the collective consciousness). Nina's mother, a nice lady with a fulltime job in education, a perm and a critical attitude towards her own maternal hips, fostered a belief that the orderliness of her home was a reflection of her personality. Visitors hurrying to take their shoes off before going further than the front door (massive oak, orange glass) were promptly enjoined oh, please, don't bother, while at the same time being supplied with slippers folded in a neat pile. Well, yes, Kristina, but you know we will since your flat is so neat and tidy, the visitors would chant in unison following the protocol implemented in practically every Own House raised on loans and ulcers. Saturday mornings in Nina's house were the time designated for the Big Clean following the invariable sequence of Shelves - tables/ sinks – floor (hoover) – floor (mop). Father, ascribing himself the status of head of the family although taking his wife's right to vote for granted, seized the opportunity and dashed off to the garden, this continued with a pint in a nearby hostelry which accommodated a vintage selection of local pater familiases who swore, under the eye of as yet unmarried waitresses, that a woman must be in control of the house, don't you agree, love? Nina and her younger sister (a creature with a turned-up freckled nose and a prominent note of panic in her voice – the latter not a distinguishing feature of Slovenians but an individual character trait) had more or less limited duties, comprising especially Good Behaviour in front of visitors and Diligent Studies, for which they were rewarded with the biggest banknote in circulation at the end of the school year and the advice to Invest it wisely (the banknote, not the acquired knowledge).

Every summer the family spent a fortnight at the seaside, a couple of hundred kilometres south of their permanent residence. They stayed in a caravan owned by Nina's father's company, situated in a campsite pleasantly shaded by high pine trees and only a few hundred yards from the nearest beach. The shore was nothing to write home about, more or less rocky

and dotted with sea urchins, so you tore your feet to pieces before you could take a swim. The beach was littered with sunburnt bodies, old newspapers and cigarette butts, with a brown slimy 'thing' of indeterminate origin constantly floating in the water and diplomatically avoided by the bathers. The local store would run out of milk at nine thirty; plasters and sunburn cream were only available in the nearest big town. Waiters on the concrete terraces would sit in the shade pensively blowing cigarette smoke towards the horizon and occasionally glancing at the guests fidgeting at the plastic tables and sending longing looks in their direction. But never mind, the sea was Ours. *Ours.* Rare were the opportunities in a Slovenian's life when this word would sound more festive than it did over the plate of polluted sardines and a glass of warm beer with a view of the extravagantly-coloured sun sinking into Kvarner Bay. It felt as if the notion of possession was their own invention, kept for the moments of existential perfection crammed into the confines of the family holiday budget. Nina and her sister were still too young for ramifications of this kind and were therefore fairly happy as long as the sun shone and they could negotiate a third scoop of ice-cream after dinner.

The best thing about the seaside, however, was German tourists. They had shiny cars and backs peeled to the bone, they always acted as if embarrassed and spoke strange words like *Entschuldigensiebitte* in a low voice. Nina and her sister would secretly watch them through the rear window of the caravan, quickly ducking out of sight as soon as one of them looked their way. They couldn't connect the Germans taught at school (merciless, consistently mean, child eaters etc.) with the Germans seen through the blue plastic windowpane (living models of patience and forbearance, although the sea wasn't Theirs but merely Cheap). In her own mind, Nina came to the conclusion that the seaside tended to turn things upside down – ice-cream and watermelon were your unquestioned right, you could stay up long after nine, father's wallet was full of the Biggest Banknotes in Circulation – so it was no wonder that even Germans suddenly became kind of conciliatory and *Ja, bitte*. She found a quiet moment to explain her findings to her mother, but the latter only sighed *Oh, if only our caravan were as tidy as theirs*, and turned a page in her detective story.

There was another kind of people besides German tourists. These were the Locals. They mostly had dark hair and a tan Nina's mother could only dream of. They talked loud, looked you straight in the eye and kept starting conversations with Nina's father. Nina's father always found an excuse, and then commented sotto voce that on holiday, at least, a person should be able to get some Peace. The Local children looked more grown-up than other children. They weren't afraid of anything. They never apologised to anyone. If they saw you watching them, they said Stop yer starin', ye idiot. They would dive from the highest rocks, going down five, ten metres. Nina was too shy to go near them. Her father could thus read his newspaper in Peace without having to inculcate the belief (adapted to Nina's age) that Different Cultures should be appreciated but don't forget, they are Different Cultures.

Such was Nina's first encounter with identity issues, far before she even knew what the word meant. Graphically (and adapted to Nina's age) it could be laid out as follows:

GERMAN TOURISTS	US	Locals
red	in-between	brown
polite	in-between	impolite
quiet	in-between	loud
Culture	5	Different Culture

In general, one could say that identity is like an obscure body part: as long as it's OK you won't notice it's there. Nina, too, for a few years continued to grow up peacefully without being disturbed by anything other than occasional parental warnings that Education is what separates us from savages and that it is, after all, not completely irrelevant what the Neighbours think about you (*let's not go into details, that's simply The Way Things Are*). Then she reached the age when the personal automatically becomes political and, to give her a

truly good reason for that, History leapt to her aid. This was when her nation, encouraged by the different shades of revolution running through the lousy head of Europe like a finetoothed comb, decided once and for all that it had enough of political masters. In the space of a night (part of which Nina spent in the arms of a certain Damijan with whom she very nearly went All The Way in a room in an acquaintance's house – the parents of the Acquaintance were away at Our seaside at the time) the nation declared independence, hoisted a flag and published dozens of slogans about a Small Nation which had finally joined the Big Nations. The following morning Nina woke up in the midst of the fireworks of patriotic passions which, having simmered for centuries under the lid of forced silence, rushed to define a Slovenian based on a whole gamut of nothing but noble characteristics, from constructive defiance via righteousness to fortitude and goodness without limit, but especially Pride, the one overarching trait, which, if you chose to believe the most zealous rhetoricians, was genetically encoded in every Slovenian embryo. And above all, everybody stressed at the end, Slovenians are not a Balkan nation. Of course, Nina couldn't help feeling flattered to be a member of the nation that was out-Gandhiing Gandhi, being the only one to get the Ten Commandments right, and especially not being Balkan. Although she had some time ago spotted the difference between Truth and Manners and did not agree with the theory that some rules had to be observed simply because that was The Way Things Were, even though they limited people often than not, an identity of this kind was easy to put on and comfortable to wear.

That summer, Nina and her parents - permission for a first holiday with her friends having been promptly denied for an indefinite period - spent their usual few weeks on the coast of the sea which could tentatively be called Ours for the last time. The nation a couple of hundred kilometres further south also jumped onto the same revolutionary train, declared independence in the course of the same night, hoisted a flag and published slogans practically identical to those resounding throughout Slovenia. It was only thanks to the paranoia of the international public and its Certain interests that the holiday plans of family B. did not require passports and pocketfuls of convertible currency changed to the local one at favourable street rates. The young Croatians, with whom Nina lay on the beach by day and shared a bottle of vodka in out-of-the-way corners by night, defined themselves and their forefathers on practically the same principles as the Slovenians - yes, they were defiant, just, stout-hearted and good, of course they had pride and were, above all, not Balkan. After a few mouthfuls, Nina felt as if they were all brothers and sisters, members of a chosen tribe unparalleled in the world. In a few days she started dating an interesting guy from Osijek with outstanding green eyes, quite mature patterns of behaviour and a general air of being Really OK. One night they got stuck on a rocky beach and really did go All The Way. Nina kept quiet about it being her first time, and he never found out. (Nina fostered nostalgic thoughts about that night for years and more than once, almost started a letter which began You know, Tomislav, but it never got past the thinking stage.) Perhaps she should have thought it somehow unusual that he wasn't one of Her Own Kind (as the first is still The First) – well, at this point, years of paternal efforts on the subject of Blood went down the drain. Anyway, this was a special summer remembered as such even by those more experienced, and most of Nina's schoolmates would probably have done the same if they came upon somebody Really OK.

The autumn which followed brought a sobering time both for Nina (more school, more Saturday cleaning, more of being single again) and for the Slovenians, who had to find out where they were heading after a euphoric start. It suddenly turned out that the outside world was not remotely interested in Slovenian defiance, goodness and fortitude, that there was no particular confidence in Slovenian honesty and that pride of a similar, if not better, quality could also be found elsewhere. The outside world did not even bother to look Slovenia up on the map. All at once, independence and sovereignty (let alone heroic history) were no longer mentioned. They were replaced by notions such as Recognition, Development, Integration and, in particular, Europe, which became synonymous with all things good and noble, thus providing a market niche for every Slovenian who felt like pursuing a political career. To some it was more progressive, hard-working and just; to others more moral and Christian;

to yet others more healthy and ecological. Whichever way you looked at it, Europe was More. It was like the tail of a gullible puppy dog, close as you get, you could never quite catch it. Fortunately there were other nations sharing a similar fate, lumped together under the name Easterners, whom Slovenians derided with a wickedness that could be exercised only by someone who had previously been in the same position. However, the lowest rank of all was still naturally reserved for the Balkans, the bloody events unfolding in its bosom making it even more reactionary, even more primitive, even more unhealthy. Being branded as Balkan left you with no option but to stand in the corner and flog yourself long and hard. That, at least, is what it looked like from Nina's seventeen-year-old perspective, which (like most perspectives at that age) was still too inexperienced and, hence, insensitive to shades of grey to face serious problems in placing the golden mean. This was more or less In-Between. Neithernor. Neither fish nor flesh, as Nina's uncle, who had seen the world and had got cirrhosis of the liver from the power of understanding, would melancholically sigh over a glass of brandy. A Slovenian could identify himself only by standing beside somebody else, carefully avoiding stepping on his toes, and thrusting his chest out. Standing by himself, he just wasn't there at all. He was like a factory product with no flaws or distinguishing features. Replaceable. Discreet, minimalistic, so to speak. Put plainly, Small – an expression increasingly popular among politicians still fresh from wagging their Prides, Honours and Glories.

When the long-anticipated day finally broke when Nina could take a peek over the border of her country freely, with her own passport and without parental supervision, she approached Europe with all due humility and respect. She was prepared to use the polite form of address on any of its citizens, even if it was a snotty child playing in a sandbox. She was prepared to apologise if people should cover their eyes in horror at the mention of her origins. Nothing of the kind ever happened. In Rome, already, where she spent her first night ever in a hostel, she was approached by an eloquent French guy who showed a vivid interest in her origins, life and such. She spent half the night explaining where Slovenia is, what it looks like and so on while the French guy kept nodding keenly, contributing an occasional remark in a fragile English and staring intensely below her neckline where, it seemed, he eagerly wished to place his hand. Nina didn't fancy the idea, but the ice was broken nevertheless. With every day that passed, it only got better. Nina chatted with Germans, cracked jokes with Italians, exchanged toasts with Scandinavians, conducted lengthy discussions with English people, shared compartments and seats with Dutch, Spanish, Irish people. Almost everybody said she was the first Slovenian they had ever met, and nobody thought that made her any different. Underneath their different shades of skin and differently formed accents they were the same. Their wishes and goals were the same, they were worried about the same things. No one had a clear idea what they would do after finishing their studies, they all saw their future as somewhat uncertain and they all spent their evenings counting their small change and hoping it would buy another beer.

This was the turning point in the identity of Nina B. When she returned home, her perspective had been turned upside down. As happens when people and things change too slowly for it to be identified as change at all, she needed a month away to find out what had become different over all these years. Slovenians suddenly seemed strict, pernickety and scared in some way. They cleaned their Own Houses more than they really thought necessary. They developed their Manners beyond any level of utility. Their Europe was a mirage, a projection with no substance. Its good side had been that it was perfect. Its bad side was that it did not exist. Especially interesting, however, was the observation of how Slovenians had taken on board their Smallness. What had first felt like a curse actually sounded like an excuse. Yes, we would, said politicians, business people and artists, yes we would, but what can we do, Small as we are? Hearing this, Nina always remembered how great it had felt to be called Slovenian, precisely because she had been the only one around. There were plenty of German, Italian and French people, but Slovenians were rare enough to be collected like Roman coins or misprinted stamps. So, one inspired summer night, Nina decided to define her identity definitively on the concept of Rarity.



Nejc Gazvoda (b. 1985) debuted with a collection of short stories Vevericam nič ne uide (Nothing Escapes the Squirrels, 2004), which was nominated for the best literary debut and awarded by Fabula 2005 for best short fiction and the Zlata Ptica Award. He has been studying to become a film director. His novels are Camera Obscura (2006; shortlisted for the Kresnik Award) and Sanjajo tisti, ki preveč spijo (Dreams are for those who sleep too much, 2007; longlisted for Kresnik). His latest book is a collection of short stories called Fasunga (2008). The protagonists of his short stories are often young people born in the twilight of the 1980s. Despite globalisation, these characters are lulled into depressing everyday life and attracted by the danger of thrilling and inexplicable experiences. Their ways of reasoning and how they experience their environment make them foreign, different and particular. Formally, they are characterised by polished language and an unpredictable structure.

Photo by Boštjan Pucelj

NEJC GAZVODA

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Veverkám nic neuteče, Brno: Porta Balkanica, 2007

Summer Couple 2006

We've been together for five years, but it seems she's been crapping on my life forever. The only thing that changes is her arse getting bigger. We've lived in a small apartment in a Godforsaken part of Ljubljana for three years now and there's no sign of us going anywhere. Not that we're in any particular hurry. I've still got to write my degree paper, she's still got a year or so left. Sometimes we go to the cinema. Soon she'll be so fat that we'll have to get an extra ticket. When we go to sleep she tries to lay her repugnantly corpulent arm across my chest but I push it aside with disgust. Usually she gets up before me and I watch how she looks round the apartment for her knickers and bra because she always sleeps naked. Supposedly helps prevent rheumatism, or something like that. And she knows that because she reads dumb women's magazines, like the rest of her fucking family. Her old man read President Drnovšek's new age column and then the book. Then he came down with cancer and told the doctor he'd deal with it "just like the President", special diet and all. Now he's practically in a liquid state somewhere in the oncology institute and they're just waiting to pour him like mush into the grave. But he still wants to eat only raw food, even though it's too heavy to go through the tube.

When she finally locates her knickers and bra she drags them on in front of me, which doesn't do anything for me at all because I've seen it so many times. Especially because her newly acquired blubber lives a life of its own and sniggers diabolically at my soft prick, which will never again stand up proudly because of her. Usually I drink before we have sex, as she she can never be as ugly as I can be drunk. But then I've only got a semi-hard on and for an hour I force myself to pound away, deluding myself at the same time that maybe she's getting something out of it. In any case we don't talk, so that out of stubborness neither of us says that we're no longer up to it and that we'd rather just go to sleep. I should have known she'd turn into such a freak when I first saw her mother. Her gigantic tits hung down to her navel so that it looked as if she had two great tumours on her gut. She minced around on those short legs of hers, bringing food to the table, while I talked to her obnoxious old man, who was still at that time in a solid state. Well, talking is a bit too strong an expression. Our conversation went something like this:

HER OLD MAN: How are things at university?

ME: Cool.

HER OLD MAN: When are you going to graduate?

ME: Soon.

HER OLD MAN: When are you two going to have kids?

ME: Soon.

Of course I was lying. Graduating appealed to me about as much as having kids, but I didn't want to annoy him - our apartment was actually his. And when we first went to her parents' place I still sort of fond of her in a way. Until I realised that there was a hole in her head, no, a gaping chasm, through which her brain cells were leaking away. She was taken in by every bit of propaganda, taken in by every fucking new age guru selling talismans and diet tea. Her favourite book was The Da Vinci Code, her favourite film Titanic and her favourite singer Robbie Williams. My dear girl friend was the embodiment of pop cliché. If only she at least looked a little like one of those tarty singers whose posters we have on the bedroom wall and which I tear down every time we have even the slightest row. She still has that secondary school plagiarist syndrome, which in her case is obviously never going to end, only become more sophisticated. She used to put the posters up as she got her hands on them, now she's more selective. She's careful not to put together those whose colours clash and makes sure that there's no Eminem left, as he's not been cool since eighth grade, although in seventh grade he was the bees knees. Like she's never going to get out of her fucking teenage obsessions. At least if she looked like a teenager, with pert breasts and thin thighs and a total lack of self-confidence so I could do what I wanted with her. But no, she's an independent

woman. She goes for natural juice and Sachertorte with that former school friend of hers, Alenka, to trendy cafés, where they flick through trashy magazines; then on to Zara, where they giggle naively at the assistants, who always bring them clothes one size smaller than they need then act surprised – that it can't be true, that they both have such lovely figures. But Alenka is like a tractor with massive wheels, everything on her shakes and soon some eager maths student will write his degree paper on the forces unleashed by her blubber. Sometimes she comes round to ours and the two of them sit drinking coffee at the table and dragging on their Kim Menthols while they rescue our relationship. Using the questionnaires in Cosmopolitan, of course.

And so one evening, when I was watching TV and hoping that she would sleep over at Alenka's, she brought home some trashy mag and proudly showed me the middle spread. At first I hadn't a clue what I was looking at. They were photographs of couples cuddling or kissing, while across the top of the page luxuriated the headline "Summer Couple 2006". And then I saw it. In the very bottom row there was our pic from five years ago, before we'd seriously started going out together. She was still thin, I still had all my hair, and we were on the beach on the island of Pag, from where our summer romance grew into this catastrophe.

"I entered us and we've got to the last round", she said happily, flopping down next to me on the sofa and starting to kiss me. I pushed her away and carried on watching TV. I don't know what she expected. That I'd jump for joy. But evidently my indifference didn't bother her. She sat there beside me gawping at the magazine as if she'd had a revelation.

Next day she told me that they'd called her from the editorial office. That we had to write why we thought we were the right ones for Summer Couple 2006. At first I thought I'd totally lose it, but I was bored, so I sat down at the computer and wrote:

"We are a young student couple whose wonderful romance began at the seaside. A blissful wave of love brought her to my arms and from that time on we are inseparable. I like to wake up beside her and play with her glossy hair and caress her heavenly body. Every day we spend together is like a holiday, every minute a blessing. But that is not enough for us. We need your affirmation, dear readers amd editors. Only then will our love get the real impetus and strength that it needs to survive all of life's trials and tribulations."

I thought for a while and added:

"For her father is dying in hospital and it breaks my heart when I watch her cry in my arms every evening. Please help us so that our relationship survives this test."

I sent the email without asking her and then went to bed. Next morning she told me she was going to stay with her mother because her father's condition was much worse and she needed comforting.

Two days later there was a ring at the door. I was in the middle of working on my degree paper, so I was feeling pretty grumpy. Alenka stood at the door with tears in her eyes. She threw herself at me, almost breaking my neck.

"I read your letter in the magazine... so sad, but wonderful..." she sobbed, vibrating like an old generator. I invited her in and made her a coffee. She rambled on about how she'd always wanted exactly the kind of love that we shared.

"Spiced up by cancer?" I asked.

She didn't know what to say to that, so she just shook her head. Underneath all the blubber she was actually a bit of alright, with her long black hair in a pony tail and daring clothes that revealed her ample cleavage. I moved a little closer to her and pretended I was about to burst into tears. I grimaced as I do when I'm trying to shit. She fell for it and threw herself into my arms, I started stoking her back and within minutes I was fucking her like crazy on the sofa, so that the walls shook with her shrieks.

"You're a wonderful guy," she said. "She's lucky to have you."

The next day an email arrived. We were through to the final. The last three couples. I

went to the shop and bought the magazine. There was a picture of us inside, yet another one from that wretched holiday on Pag (how many did she send, for fuck's sake?), and our letter. We were evidently the favourites, as the literary masterpieces of the other couples paled into insignificance beside my heart-rending gem.

And then it struck me. I knew exactly what I wanted.

I saw the whole of Slovenia howling over our fate, grannies and grandchildren sociably hugging over the love story of the century, me becoming the adviser and spiritual leader of all the broken hearts in the country. It opened up the possibility of becoming precisely what I most despised.

The email requested that we send more photographs and another short composition. I skimmed through all of our albums and chose three photos – one of us moving into the flat, in which we looked at least partly happy. Another one was of me and her father when he was already ill: thin and pale and leaning slightly against me. The third I took with my mobile phone. I sat on the bed and took a snap of myself holding her favourite cuddly toy, the dog Fico. I combed my hair so that I looked as much like my photograph from Pag as possible. Then I wrote a longer composition in which I gave a detailed description of our eternal love, our eternal suffering, our exceptional struggles and her courageous father's battle with a treacherous illness, into which I wove references to God, Jesus, that friend of Africans in need Tomo Križnar, the animal saviour Milena Močivnik, and of course the alpha and omega of spirituality in Slovenia, President Drnovšek.

When my girlfried returned home she had two pieces of news. Her father had died. And – we'd won. She brandished the magazine in the air and dived into my arms and cried a bit, then rubbed against my prick a little. And for the first time in ages I felt a need. An urge. We fucked like never before, in every possible position. The whole time the magazine, open at the middle page, bounced up and down in rhythm, and our photos and my composition about our love stared out at me. It excited me so much that for the first time in a long time I shot my wad inside her.

The next day they came from the magazine. When we answered the door there was an unpleasant silence. They mooched around the flat, took a few photos of us, then left. They didn't know what to do, how to write the article, explained the journalist, a skinny young piece of ass who evidently slept on a sunbed. That it wasn't right how we'd screwed them over. So I recommended an alternative version. That we were like this because life had been rough on us. That she had put weight on, I'd lost my hair. But in spite of everything our love had survived. The journalist agreed.

We had to wait a whole two weeks for our story to appear. It was on the middle page again, with huge photos. The headline screamed tragedy and tears, spiced up with eternal love. In one photo we were both sobbing, in the other embracing. The article was full of heart-rending moments from our life together (fabricated by me). I read it out loud to her while she gently jerked me off. It turned into the sex of our lives. Then we fell asleep and when she laid her corpulent arm across my chest I merely smiled and gently stroked her hair.

Next morning I let her cut the articles out and stick them above the bed, alongside all the other posters. When she asked me whether she should tear them down I smiled and said:

"No. There's no need."

Translated by David Limon



The Center for Slovenian Literature is a nongovernmental organization dedicated to literary and publishing activities. It was founded to contribute to the international promotion of Slovenian literature, and began operating in 1999.

The Center is dedicated to attracting support for, and encouraging work in, the following areas:

- making quality translations of contemporary and classic Slovenian literature possible,
- drawing the attention of international publishers to the rich, albeit not very well-known, heritage of Slovenian literature,
- presenting relevant information to the interested public in the international context.

In this way the Center responds to the needs which other institutions in this field are either unable or unwilling to meet. While the Center's primary task is to address an international audience, it is no less committed to informing the Slovenian public about important international literary trends, authors, and publishing events. It is open to collaboration with other local and international institutions and individuals working toward similar goals.

The Center finances its activities with funds raised both locally and internationally. Its priorities include, but are not limited to, creating computer-assisted databases of translations and translators; providing information to chosen target-audiences; presenting selected works and authors abroad; enabling, coordinating and promoting international collaboration; integrating into existing international programs and networks with similar aims; and developing a creative approach to the promotion of Slovenian literature.

<u>ECENTER FOR SLOVENIAN LITERATURE</u> MIEMIBIER OF LAF (Literature Across Frontiers): www.lit-across-frontiers.org

The Center for Slovenian Literature supplies information on contemporary Slovenian literature to its foreign partners through mail and contacts at various fairs. It sponsors translations and translators' visits to literary events and residencies. It supplies translators with books and literary magazines; occasionally, it provides them with grants for translations given by the Slovenian Ministry of Culture.

The Center for Slovenian Literature is the publisher of the *Aleph* book series, which includes new Slovenian literary works as well as translations of contemporary world literature. While the Slovenian authors are supported by the Slovenian Ministry of Culture, the majority of translations are published with the help of foreign translation/publication grants. Over hundred titles have been published in the series, some bilingual.



THE TRUBAR FOUNDATION

is a joint venture of Slovene Writers' Association (www.drustvo-dsp.si), Slovenian PEN and the Center for Slovenian Literature. The financial means for its activities are provided by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia and by other sources. The aim of the Trubar Foundation is to subsidy publications of Slovenian literature in translation.

Foreign publishers can apply for subsidies to publish Slovenian authors in their native languages. The Trubar Foundation contributes up to 50% of printing costs (see the form at: www.ljudmila.org/litcenter). It does not subsidy translation; translators can apply for translation grants directly to the Slovenian Ministry of Culture (www.gov.si/mk).

Published by Center for Slovenian Literature. Editor-in-chief: Brane Mozetič. Executive editor Jana Putrle Srdić. Design: HandBag. Printed by Littera picta. Ljubljana, August 2008. Supported by Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia.

Center for Slovenian Literature Metelkova 6 SI-1000 Ljubljana Slovenia

Phone +386 40 20 66 31 Fax +386 1 505 1674

E-mail litcenter@mail.ljudmila.org
Web www.ljudmila.org/litcenter

