Boris Pahor

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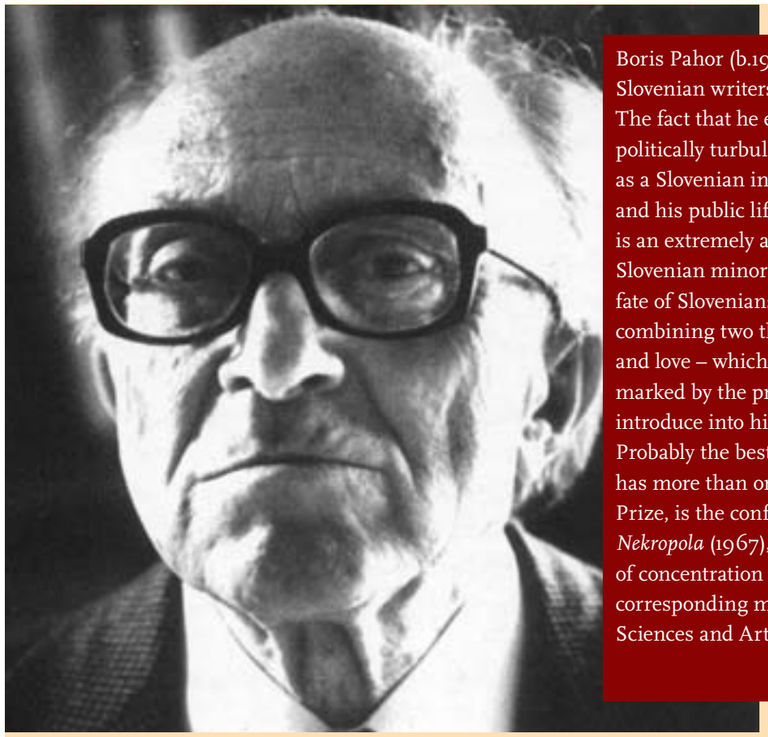
CONTEMPORARY SLOVENIAN NOVEL



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Boris Pahor (b.1913) is one of the most important Slovenian writers living and working in Italy. The fact that he experienced the historically and politically turbulent first half of the previous century as a Slovenian in Italy marked both his writing and his public life. In his prose work Pahor, who is an extremely active and critical member of the Slovenian minority in Trieste, deals chiefly with the fate of Slovenians in the Primorska region, usually combining two themes – resistance against Fascism and love – which, masterfully described and often marked by the proximity of violence and death, introduce into his writing a strong ethical dimension. Probably the best known work of this writer, who has more than once been a candidate for the Nobel Prize, is the confessional and witness-bearing novel *Nekropola* (1967), based on the author's own experience of concentration camps. Since 1993 Pahor has been a corresponding member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

BORIS PAHOR

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Vila na jezeru, Belgrade: Kozmos, 1958
Pelerin parmi les ombres, Paris: Les Editions de la Table Ronde, 1990, 1996, 2005
Pilgrimanto inter ombroj, Klagenfurt: Interkulturo and Hermagoras, 1993
Pilgrim Among the Shadows, New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1995
*Printemps difficile, P*aris: Phèbus, 1995
Kampf mit dem Frühling, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1997
Necropoli, Monfalcone: Consorzio culturale del Monfalconese, 1997, 2005, 2008
La villa sur le lac, Paris: E. Bartillat, 1998
Arrêt sur le Ponte Vecchio, Paris: Des Syrtes, 1999, 2006
Nekropolis, Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2001, 2003
Il rogo nel porto, Rovereto: Nicolodi, 2001, 2004
Jours obscurs, Paris: Phébus, 2001
La villa sul lago, Rovereto: Nicolodi, 2002, 2004
La porte dorée, Paris: Edition du Rocher, 2002, 2003
Dans le labyrinthe, Paris: Phébus, 2003
Nekropolis, Lleida: Pages editors, 2004
Il petalo giallo, Rovereto: Nicolodi, 2004, 2008
Blumen für einen Aussätzigen, Vienna: Kitab, 2004
Die Stadt in der Bucht, Klagenfurt, Vienna: Kitab, 2005
Nekropoli, Sauvo: Mansarda, 2006
Le jardin des plantes, Paris: Edition du Rocher, 2007
Il petalo giallo, Rovereto: Zandonai, 2007
L'appel du navire, Paris: Phébus, 2008
Piazza Oberdan, Vienna: Kitab, 2009
Qui e proibito parlare, Roma: Fazi, 2009

On the Reefs

For Lino Legiša

"Look here!" she cried out.

She was smiling, as only she knew how, with her mouth open, the lips like two pink arches encircling tiny crystal teeth; but the smile was static, innerly surprised and impersonal, as if it weren't hers, really. An innocent, yet borrowed smile. Her mouth looked like a red fruit cut in half, with two rows of unripe, white pips in between.

"Look here, another cave!"

He was by her side this time.

"Where?"

"It's hidden," she said mysteriously, as if a long, long time ago she had blocked that karstic cavern herself.

They were standing on a low slope; there were shrubs of blood-red sumac all around, like calm fires among whitish rocks. The spiky rocks, sticking out of the *terra rosa*, and the red sumacs, the leaves of which borrowed the colour of the soil. Indeed, under a sturdy, square rock, there was a crevice.

"A farmer hauled a rock onto the hole," he said.

She put her palms on the stone, trying to push it away. "Huh, it's heavy." With her arms akimbo she shook her head.

"He closed it with a rock because of the cows," he said. "Because of the heifers."

"Where are the heifers?" And she looked round. "I can't see any heifers!"

"They might break their legs," he said.

He was smiling too, because there was nothing around but the quiet Sunday common, and colours of the coastal autumn. Only silence and the colours and her game he was being caught into, encouraging it by his reserved, almost rational mirth. Why was he being reserved and rational? He didn't know. He didn't understand. Was it her laughter? Her running around? Her jumps over the red shrubs? The bolts of a sixteen-year-old slender girl, whose skirt rustled in the leaves of the carmine sumacs as she leapt over them? It wasn't that. As if there were a border between them, a small, invisible wall all the time; she remained hidden behind the barrier, showing only her face with that impenetrable smile.

"It won't and it won't move," she said. And once more she tried to shift the rock, but she only feigned pushing really hard; there was joy sparkling in her eyes, as he pretended to mock her pretended impotence.

"Wait," he said and knelt down to the rock.

"No, no!"

And she said, scoldingly:

"Easy, dear sir, easy." And with her flat palm she gestured the sign for žslow down', like a gendarme at a cross-roads.

Then she sprawled herself out on the dry grass and put her left ear to the ground.

"I must hear it rumble," she said.

He was looking at her, smiling. She was crouching there on the meadow like a little boy who, in winter, draws together his legs because of the cold sheets. She pulled her thick black hair from under her face and pressed her cheek to the ground.

"Now!" And she waved her right hand like one worker signalling to another.

The rock, with three sharp edges, was perched on the hollow. He turned it round. He shifted the spiky edge by a few inches, by moving away a thick log, and the rock squeaked. Then there was a louder squeaky sound. And finally a hollow roar.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed.

And pressed her ear more firmly to the ground.

"A beautiful roar!"

He was standing above the narrow crevasse. The rock was whirling deep down into the belly of the earth, as if swallowed up by the black throat hungry for centuries, which now eagerly devoured it. Choking on it, yet gorging it up, vomiting, yet receiving it deeper and

deeper into itself. Then there was a shocking thump.

"It hit the bottom!" she shouted out, feverishly pressing her cheek against the ground.

"No," he said.

For the rock had only hit a stone shelf; there was more sound of bellowing, the jaws in the belly of the earth gurgled and grumbled. Then it was like the mooing of an earthquake in the invisible abysses, a monstrous echo murmuring in the dark gullet, trying to climb up.

"Oh, how deep it is," she whispered, and when she looked up at him from the ground without moving her head, charmed fear glimmered in her pupils.

"It will roll down all the way to hell," she said and smiled. "Right down to hell."

One could still hear the rumbling sound; it was growing more distant, like the clattering of stone cart-wheels carrying some secret cargo down into the hollow body of the earth. And all around the meadow peacefully lounged in the autumn sun, setting the sumac leaves on fire, so that the blossoms were the colour of red-hot copper.

She stood up and rearranged her hair, smoothened her skirt.

"This one is the deepest we've ever found," she said.

Then she frowned and pouted:

"The rock hit Lucifer right on the head!"

And she scurried down the gentle slope.

But he didn't run after her; he walked slowly among the shrubs. Like two unruly school-kids, he thought; and they'd been like this all afternoon. And last Sunday as well. And the one before. She by his side, as if he were her older brother, whom they sent to America or Australia as a boy to come back to his family as a man. Of course, she was glad he was back. Happy to have a brother taking her out of town to the meadows every Sunday. And she was also so childishly trusting when they held hands. And tamely absorbed when he gently touched her cheek with his lips. But when, last Sunday, he took her by the hands and carefully and softly pulled her towards him, her body trembled and her eyes opened wide in terror. "No, no," she said hoarsely. And that rasping voice, as if it weren't hers; her hands pushed him away and remained extended before her long after he'd moved away. As if she were defending herself from an apparition.

She was slowly strolling among the copper shrubs. If she didn't like him, why then was she so relaxed about him, so spirited and sweet? So she must like him. And what about a while ago? Earlier on, they gazed at the sea from the top, he slowly put his arm round her waist and - her eyes again opened wide and he immediately let go of her. As if he were growing afraid of her fear. As if somewhere behind her, somewhere next to her a dark abyss suddenly gaped open, like the one on the hill.

"Oooo - ooo!" she yelled.

Once more he was by her side, and she was standing before a long, freshly dug ditch, her arms crossed over her breast.

"Some hole, huh?"

It was a narrow, yet deep, furrow that would become the foundation for a new house, vertically dug into the red soil. A red corridor, a red path across the red sea. And its sides were smooth and without a single stone; nothing but red dough.

"It's six feet deep," she said.

"Yes, and not a pebble in it," she added. "Only fresh red meat."

She smiled, and then shook her head so that her hair fell to one side, and walked down along the ditch. But her steps weren't serious at all. Couldn't be, as her legs were not those of a woman. She was five feet tall, but her legs were the legs of a little girl who until yesterday had played with a rag doll.

Then those legs ran and jumped; the skirt rubbed against the bush, and the leaves of the red sumac shone as if licked by flames.

2

The following Sunday she was again jumping over the shrubs. But he was deep in thought. Something isn't right, he thought. As if he were her guardian, as if he were accompanying his protégée on the walks away from the city bustle every Sunday. As if she spent the week-days in some kind of institution, waiting for the festive day when he would unfailingly come and take her away. When with him, she could laugh and play to her heart's content. Oh no, it's not like this, he rebelled. But whenever he got that angry, a strange feeling crept into him from somewhere: he felt he was being unfair. An indistinct reproach. Which was emanating from her trembling hands pushing him away when he thought he would hold her next to him; from her eyes and her lips, contorted with pain.

She jumped up to pluck a bunch of pine needles from the end of a branch.

"Are you in a good mood?" he asked, dredging up his thoughts.

"Mhm," she mumbled and nodded.

She was panting. On purpose, with great pleasure she panted like this, loudly, with her mouth open, revealing the tiny, pointed teeth. Two rows of stone-pine seeds. And she was again trotting under the trees, kicking cones on her way. One was sent flying into a bush on the right, another into the one on the left, and she walked about as if she were clearing the meadow.

"Shall we sit down?"

"Tired already?" she asked mischievously and stopped.

But she was the first to sit; she wrapped her arms around her knees and stared before her. A shock of black hair hung over her cheek: she looked like a tired vagabond kid who had been playing with his mates in the meadows, and was now resting and plotting new mischief.

Below them was the sea, bright and white, as if its surface were covered with frost. The sun was so white on the sea, all the way to Grado and beyond, to Venice and the Dolomites, one might say. And green in the pine needles above them. Greenish between two pines, greenish through the needles, which looked like verdant and transparent glass threads.

She smiled to herself.

Then she pressed her chin to her knees. As if talking to herself she said:

"Yesterday, in the tram, a school-boy was standing next to the driver, telling him off.

'Why are you going so slowly?' he asked sternly.

'What's the big rush?' said the driver without turning his head.

'Don't want to miss lunch.'

'What's for lunch today?' asked the driver.

'Nothing special,' the kid casually answered, but with a frown.

'And what would you like for lunch?'

'A piece of roast pork that big,' answered the boy, and with his left hand touched the middle of his right arm."

She smiled under the shock of black hair. She said: "Can you imagine? The driver can see the boy's gesture only from the side, can only half-guess it, for he can't turn his head. Just think of it, the traffic is the heaviest there!"

Then she went on.

'And after lunch?' the driver asked.

'After lunch, to the movies,' the youngster seriously replied.

'Not bad,' said the driver just as seriously, and nodded.

'The whole of afternoon in the cinema,' said the school-boy mercilessly.

'Not bad at all,' the driver mumbled seriously, as if speaking to an adult.

'Actually,' said the boy.

'Beg yours?'

'Actually, it would be best to just go to bed immediately after lunch and have before me the movie screen.'

'You're easy to please,' said the driver earnestly, staring at the road before him.

'Actually', continued the boy without smiling.

'Beg yours?'

'Actually, it would be best to just go to bed and have lunch there.'

'Not bad,' said the driver solemnly, still contemplating the road before him.

'And while I was having lunch, the film would be projected on the screen above the bed.'

'You're really easy to please,' said the driver once more.

‘And then keep warm in bed all afternoon, and watch the film till nightfall.’

‘Not bad,’ said the driver with respect, as if speaking to his superior.

And the kid, when they got to a request stop, said coldly:

‘Stop here, I’m getting off.’

And he said ‘farewell’ and got off.

The driver slowly shifted the handle, and the door closed automatically. Then he set the tram in motion. And with his serious eyes he took great care not to overlook a vehicle that might come rushing from around the corner of a side street.”

She raised her head from her knees and threw her hair back.

“Ha, ha, ha,” she laughed and tautened her neck. She was still holding her knees with her hands.

“Can you imagine the driver being so serious?” she asked.

Then she again threw her head back and giggled: “Ha, ha!”

He laughed too. At the school-boy or at her? At both. It must all have been true. And yet, as if she had invented the story of the Triestian urchin. As if she were that youth. As if, by his side, were a sixteen-year-old girl, and at the same time that boy from the tram instead of her. And yet, he thought, she’s unusually, trustingly talkative today. As if the time came she would tell him about her adventures and thoughts.

He put his hand on her shoulder. Then he drew his cheek close to hers.

“You’re that school-boy,” he said.

“No, no, they really talked like that!”

“Yes, indeed,” he said and smiled at her. He thought: Get close to her very gently. He thought: So gently that her eyes won’t fill up with fear.

“Why don’t you believe me?” she scolded him tamely.

“I do believe you,” he whispered.

Then she turned her head and looked straight into his eyes.

He imprinted all his concern into his eyes, forced all promises of subtlety into his look. And yet his gaze was simple. Playful at the same time. There was even a bright flicker of mischief in it. And a lucid grain of joy. A tiny shadow of reproach as well. No, not really reproach, a nuance of appeal, rather.

She watched him in surprise, as if stunned by his look, by the regard she had never seen before. Her yellowish pupils had contracted: she slightly inclined her head to the side, like a child not able to understand the sudden sorrow in an adult.

“Zorica,” he murmured.

She nodded in silence and gave him a questioning look, as if she wanted to help him, but didn’t know how. His eyes had caught and confused her. And in this indistinct confusion, which held her in its grip, she meekly let his lips touch hers. As if it were her duty to patiently bear with his need for her lips which made him so mysteriously sad.

But her lips were the tightly clenched fist of a child. A rebellious knot. He tried to set them apart, then moved away - with his left hand - to shift towards him her slender body; and slowly and gently he tried to press her against him. But there was resignation in his eyes. And a soft request. And doubt and apprehension. And just a flicker of impatience, a tiny bit of haste.

Her eyes still revealed nothing but surprise. But when she felt his chest against hers, her eyes widened. Even before that her body trembled, as if a gale had suddenly blown through the pines and wrinkled the sea.

“No! No!” she screamed.

And rose brusquely.

He put his palms on the ground to push himself up, to placate her.

“No! No!” she shouted again, stretching her arms before her.

So he remained seated, and stared at her, perplexed. And he didn’t know whether to look at her or at the sea down below, behind her back. And he felt ashamed, as if he had tried to molest a child; and in his shame he was vaguely afraid of her outstretched arms. He had only tried to embrace her, he had merely touched her lips. And she, due to his unspeakable sin, stood above him like a judge. A sleep-walker, whom his voice had woken at the edge of a

precipice, and was now staring at him with her mouth almost a grimace. As if he had turned into a monster; and yet she was frowning, waiting for him to become an even more horrible brute.

“Zorica,” he said.

She let her arms drop; then she ran her right palm over her forehead.

“Sit down,” he said softly.

“Yes,” she whispered.

And even more pensively she said very quietly: “I’ll sit down.”

3

She sat down and hugged her knees, but gently, as if afraid to squeeze them. Then she looked at him and smiled shyly.

“It’s all right now,” he said, “isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

And she nodded. She looked straight ahead, as if mesmerised by the glimmering of the sea. But she didn’t see the sea. Neither did she know she was sitting under a pine-tree.

“What happened?” he asked quietly.

She softly shrugged.

“You scared me so.”

“Don’t you like me?” And his voice was merry, to encourage her to speak openly. “Am I ugly? Am I unpleasant?”

“No, you aren’t. But -”

“But?”

“I don’t know.”

She gazed ahead, immobile. Then she lowered her head and put her forehead on her knees.

He kept quiet. He felt like touching her, stroking her. But not now; it would be no good. And yet he felt she was far away from him, enwrapped in a secret she herself wasn’t aware of. As if she weren’t separated from him because of her, because of her feelings, but by some external order.

She was sitting, motionless, arms around her legs, forehead on her knees. Earlier as well she had impulsively resisted his advances, but her reserve dissolved just as quickly and unexpectedly as it had surfaced. And now, as if it upset her deeper, as if a more concealed, a stronger wave of horror disturbed her soul. It must have been because she had given in to the warmth and candour that radiated from his eyes; and then she more strongly felt the power of a hidden law taking possession of her body.

Below them, the sea was a silver plain, and he sat there by her side, frail and helpless; as if inside here there were the hollowness, the numb silence of a karstic cave. And out of his impotence, out of the darkness he spoke up silently, absently, as if talking to himself.

“Has nobody hugged you before?” he said. “Nobody?”

“Somebody has,” she whispered.

“And was it the same as with me?”

“Mhm.”

Then she murmured: “He left me. He said I was making a fool of him.”

“And you loved him?”

“Mhm.”

Then she said: “But I love you much more.”

She was talking into her knees, like a child, when, spanked by its mother, cries its eyes out, but then, a bit rebelliously but consoled, speaks out.

“I love you much more,” she repeated. And grew silent. After a while she said: “If only you hadn’t hugged me like this.”

“Like *this*?” he asked and smiled. “How else could I hug you?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

And said no more. Seemingly relieved. As if there were emptiness inside her, and calmness at the same time. Despondency, yet peace. He looked over the meadow, and it was as

if the pines had come alive again and become familiar, and even the stones scattered among the yellow grass appeared friendly once more. Therefore his voice was almost lively.

"You get possessed by great fear. Like a child who sees a monster in the dark," he said. "What do you fear?"

"I don't know."

"But when you're afraid, when you're terrified, you must feel something, don't you?"

"I don't know." She gently shrugged.

Then she almost immediately added: "It feels like you're about to fall over me."

And: "Oh, not you. Something else. Somebody else. And I feel disgusted and scared."

Then she said angrily and firmly: "I don't know!"

He touched her shoulder.

"Lie down now," he said. "I can't stand watching you like this, crouching down as if you've committed a crime."

She lifted her head, for an instant looked at the brilliant surface of the sea, then lay on her back with her hands under her head. It wasn't that she wanted to obey him, it was if her body had suddenly realised the awkwardness of the crouching position and longed for rest.

He remained seated; with his fingers he was tearing off the scales of a pine-cone, producing gentle cracking sounds. He wasn't looking at her. Not that he didn't want to. He wanted to smile at her, tease her about her black hair. Like an Italian, he would say, as he always did, and about her short nose, pointing upwards. But all he could see from the side were her small sports shoes with thick soles; her crossed ankles. He sensed he had to be careful; and yet he was irrationally happy at the moment. Just like that. Perhaps because she lay calmly, levelled with the meadow. As if the meadow was with her and inside her. And as if the meadow was with him, his guardian.

"I must remind you of somebody if you're afraid of me?" he said.

She didn't reply.

"I surely look like somebody, right?"

"No, you don't."

Then she said: "I don't know."

"But somebody must have offended you once," he said. "Somebody made advances to you."

"No."

"Your brother, your cousin -"

"I have no cousins," she said angrily.

"Then your brother."

"No."

"Some boy or other."

"Nobody."

"And when you were little, when you went to school?"

"No."

"What about earlier, before you went to school?"

"No."

She said no more. The grassland was getting ready for the sunset, ostensibly gathering all the calmness of the passing day for a joint contemplation in silence, in the vivid colours of the setting sun; even the sea had lost the glimmer radiating in all directions: a single bright path led from the sun to the shore.

"When I was little?" she all of a sudden whispered to herself.

He said nothing.

And she suddenly rose as if frightened again, and looked round. Then she straightened her skirt on the knees and with both hands held the hem close to the legs. And she slowly lay down again; her skirt was now deeply caught between her crossed legs.

There was silence above the meadow. The stones never speak, and the pines can talk only when the gale is blowing. Insects? Even they grow silent from time to time, as if intoxicated by stillness. Perhaps, after all, the trees and stones and crickets know that the sea and the sky change, when at nightfall the redness spills round the lowering sun.

She was beside him, but he felt as if he were expecting her to return from somewhere, if she returned. From somewhere far away, like the sunset, at that moment coming from unknown, ancient lands.

Then she whispered again: "When I was little."

And said:

"You lie down, too."

It sounded almost like an order, but not a deliberate one; like an impulsive gesture of self-defence.

He complied and lay down, and she repeated to herself: "When I was little -"

And then, as if saddened, yet threatening:

"I've never told anybody," she said. "Nobody."

He was quiet for a long time.

"Yes," he finally murmured.

"Nobody," she whispered again.

The dry grass rustled; she pulled her hands from under her head, he thought to himself.

But quickly, almost tartly, she spoke up again:

"Yes, little. Six years old. We lived in Škorklja, as we do now, but there were meadows everywhere, back then. We used to play in them all day. No, I didn't at the time; others, girls and boys, who were bigger than me, they did. I was little; others. They would build stone houses, fight with wooden guns and wooden rifles, and I wanted to play with them, but they took no notice of me whatsoever. So I watched them with envy, because they were so big and were lighting fires in the stone huts. The boys had chicken feathers round their heads, like Indians, and I was trotting after them, watching how they fitted arrows into their bows. They had bows made of steel umbrella ribs. But that afternoon they had hidden somewhere, and others searched for them; I was only six and couldn't play with them. So I was alone, and I peeked into an abandoned hut with a fire burning inside, there was smoke coming out between the stones. Four boys came by, one was big and ugly."

She rose quickly and sat down.

"Ugly and sturdy. They weren't our local boys, and I was afraid of them, but they just chatted away and laughed. They were Americans, chasing our boys, the Indians. Then one kicked the wall, and the hut collapsed onto the fire burning inside. And the brown tin, which the roof was made of, was squashed by the stones. The boys just laughed, and I hated them for having ruined the hut of our boys. There, next to it, was another stone house. And then the boys saw me, and laughed, and that ugly big one grinned and charged and wouldn't let me go. I wanted to cry, but he was grinning and pulling my hand. Then I screamed, but I was in that other hut on the floor, and he was pressing me down to the ground; he lay on top of me, and was angry all the time. Others were standing by the door. They were roaring with laughter, encouraging him, but he was mad because I wasn't lying still and was beating him."

She smoothened the skirt at her knees, and again impulsively pressed it closer to her legs.

Her voice was still trembling, but more trustingly, more reconciled she said:

"Then I was sick. I was in bed, but nobody knew why there was a blood stain on the sheet. The doctor came as well, but he didn't see it, he didn't ask me anything, just listened with his ear on my chest. Perhaps they thought I fell over again, like that day when I climbed on the iron handle by the tram tracks, walked down the wide rail and fell. It hurt between my legs, but there was no blood then, when I fell on that rail."

Blood was now in the sky in wide patterns, rising over the pines like a burning arch. The sea must be exactly the same, down there, he thought; as if salt were burning in its depths, and the underwater flames reddened all the fish and thrown them up on the surface. But he couldn't see it, the sea, for he was lying on his back. In the scarlet blaze she, for a moment, unexpectedly, appeared to him an adult, an almost aged being. And yet, a reserved, new wave of relaxedness was emanating from her. Irrational joy. A breath of freshness, which would bridge over the bloody sunset and bring about the birth of new things. To the living, a red sunset can easily seem to be the glow of dawn.

He sat down.

Now they were next to each other again. Their eyes weren't meeting, they stared straight ahead, as if their thoughts and images were united in the colour of the sky. Perhaps he was supposed to say something unusual, he thought, something that would destroy everything evil and bring forth a promise of spring. Not just a promise, spring itself, its swelling buds and blossoms spreading all the way down the hill to the sea. And just because that certainty was endlessly growing inside him, he was at a loss for words.

And she said: "Now you'll find me ugly."

"Oh, my child," he said and took her hand.

"Yes, I know!"

"No!" he said. "No!"

And went quiet for a while.

"Now I can finally give you a proper hug!"

She flinched.

"We must go," she decided in an instant, embarrassed.

"Yes," he said, "it's late."

Then he smiled.

"I didn't mean to hug you now, this moment!" he said. "But now you know why you're afraid of me, and you won't be so afraid any more."

"I don't know," she said shyly.

She took her hand out of his, and rose.

"Let's go," she said humbly, but in embarrassment merely shifted on the spot, as if she were restless for not being alone, for not being able to rush away from him.

The evening was turning into violet stripes, the resplendent curtain was slowly growing darker at the edges; only low down on the horizon the sea was still burning, touched by the dissolving lump of thick red lead.

But now, as they were rushing down the dirt-road, her body once more acquired the suppleness of a girl jumping over the shrubs and kicking pine-cones.

"You really think," she said, "that was the reason?"

"Sure."

"Oh," she whispered, but it sounded as if she were relieved.

Then she asked:

"I'll really be the same for you as before?"

"I'll like you even better," he said.

And so, without slowing down his walk, he brought his face close to hers and touched her temple. Just like that, by the way, in between fast steps, without stopping.

4

Then it was Wednesday and her anniversary; her seventeenth birthday. So they met although it wasn't Sunday.

"I've got just two hours," she said merrily.

"I also have to go to the office at three."

"I know."

"I know you know!"

So they took a tram to Barkovlje, and a bus to Miramare.

It was low tide, so the reefs were bare. Not those reefs which always looked faded violet and grey, not those which were under the road, a chain of pyramids and spiked large blocks. No. The ones further down, which remained underwater at high tide, and were therefore blackish and dirty when the sea receded. Square, flat heads. Bald heads, with wreathes of brownish-black hair. The sea-weeds, lacy like oak leaves, but not green, covered in slimy, dark mud.

"I want to find a starfish," she said.

"Not here."

"Where?"

"In the port of St. Croce."

"It's too far," she feigned offence.

"We'll go looking for starfish on Sunday," he said solemnly.

"Really?"

"Really."

"But I want a whole starfish, not one with an arm broken off!"

"You'll get a whole one."

"I want a big one!"

"We'll find a big one."

She was jumping from rock to rock, and on every one she made a new demand. And the rocks were large, with countless holes. Faintly green rocks; the holes in them incredible lacy carvings. As if a net had been placed over stone, and the sea water had eaten through it, producing a pattern of lacy tissue.

Then there was a handful of sea water in a hole in the reef; and a square stone covered in thick, long beard of sea moss, right beside the water. She stopped.

"An old velvet cushion!" she said.

When they reached a wide whitish reef, which like a mighty lump was perched on top of the others, she commanded: "Let's sit." And she climbed up and sat down, her feet dangling. With her flattened palm she motioned him to sit beside her.

"We'll have to go back soon," she said, and pouted playfully.

"It's as warm as in summer," he said from the reef.

"Mhm." And she nodded.

She stared at the water.

A moment later she said:

"I'd like to have a snorkel and that box for breathing under water."

"And?"

"I'd walk along the sea floor, watching what colour are the algae and what colour are the fish, when the sea shines through the green liquid. And what the fish do, how they swim through the mysterious cavities among the reefs."

The sun was sending its wide silver trail along the vast sea right to her reef, to her feet, dangling from it. Then, silently, she said:

"You really think it was because of that?"

"Definitely," he said and smiled.

"Oh, you," she whispered and gazed at the sea at her feet. "Why don't you find out if I'm still afraid of you? Try!"

"You might be," he said gently. "But not so much any more."

"Try, please, try!"

He put his palms on her hips; his eyes looked at her merrily and trustingly.

"And if you push me away?" he said teasingly.

"I don't want to push you away," she said and briskly shook her head. "Oh, do try."

When he hugged her lightly, her slender body shivered like a captured mackerel, then went rigid and even her tiny breasts felt like the bosom of a numb statue; but she didn't push him away.

"Oh, you," she sighed, calmed.

Then she leant over and kissed his wrist.

A bit later she quickly rose and straightened herself. She jumped from the reef to the next. And onto another.

"You hugged me!" she shouted.

And, from yet another reef:

"I'm not afraid of you any more! You hugged me!"

And the sea behind her moved towards Duino, sending its silvery trail all along the sea right to the reef, where she laughed like an unreasonable child.

(1946)

Translated by Lili Potpara

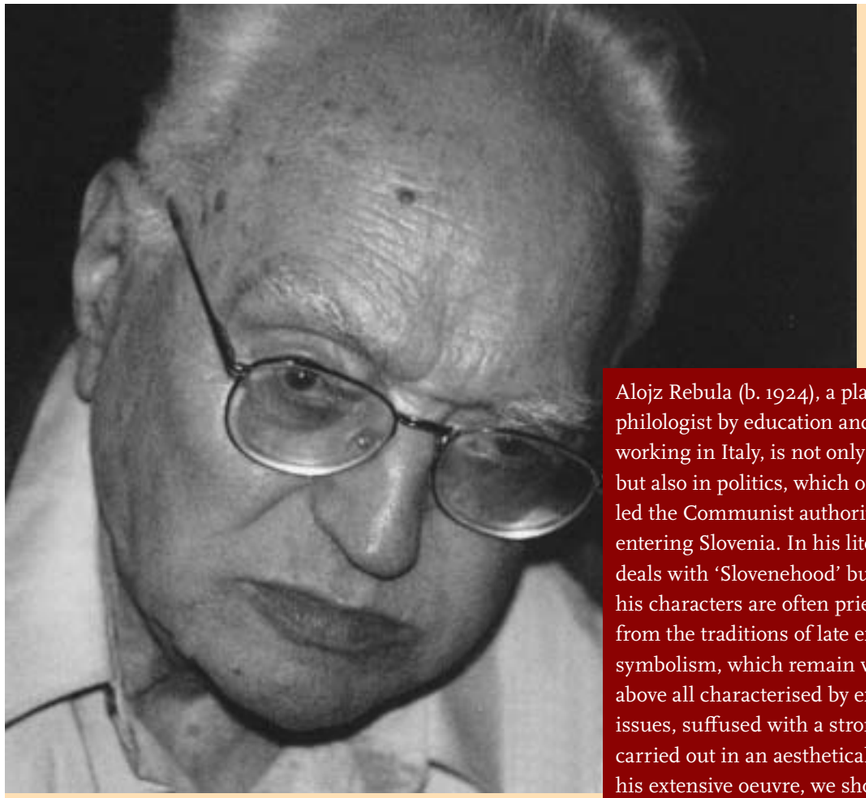

Photo by Matej Družnik

Alojz Rebula (b. 1924), a playwright and essayist, philologist by education and Slovenian writer living and working in Italy, is not only active in the literary field but also in politics, which on a number of occasions led the Communist authorities to ban him from entering Slovenia. In his literature, Rebula chiefly deals with 'Slovenehood' but also with Christianity – his characters are often priests. His writing, derived from the traditions of late expressionism and the later symbolism, which remain visible in his work, is thus above all characterised by existential and spiritual issues, suffused with a strong ethical awareness and carried out in an aesthetically perfected form. From his extensive oeuvre, we should at least single out a few of the novels which have received awards at home and abroad: *Nokturno za Primorsko* (2004), *Jutranjice za Slovenijo* (2000) and *V Sibilinem vetru* (1968). Since 1993, Rebula has been a corresponding member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

ALOJZ REBULA

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Sjene koje plešu, Zagreb: Globus, 1981
Credo, Gorizia: La comunita di "Comunione e liberazione", 1989
Il vento della Sibilla, Trieste: EstLibris, 1992
Demain, le Jourdain, Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1997
Abschied im Wermutjahr, Klagenfurt/Wien/ Laibach:Hermagoras/ Celovec/ Dunaj/ Ljubljana: Mohorjeva, 1998
Carteggio scazonte, Trieste: Provincia, 2001
La peonia del Carso, Ronchi dei Legionari: Consorzio culturale del Monfalconese, 2005
Nocturno für das Küstenland, Klagenfurt, Wien: Kitab, 2007

The Hour of Calling

(Story from the collection *Vinograd rimske cesarice*)

It was hard for him to travel at that hour. Not because of his illness, which thanks to his greater sensitivity became more pronounced at night, but because of the long row of empty compartments with glimmering lights and because of the isolation that the peasants from Notranjska left behind them as they descended one after another into the night... He was alone now, busy with the memory of their burly figures, placid and powerful in their light-coloured leather jackets, and with the smell of brandy that they had offered in serious silence. In the midst of the desolation exuded by the empty train carriage remained the thought of these solemn loggers and amazement at the tranquillity of their simple lives, until the hollow rumble of the rail track wiped out any sensual associations and he was alone again, lying uncomfortably on a bench, with a feeling of stinging emptiness on the right side of his chest, exhausted yet awake and suffering, in a fiery dialogue with himself.

There was no one else left in the carriage.

He was travelling alone.

And his life was now truly solitary.

He was overcome by sadness, a soft need for tears, for unrestrained hopelessness. He knew that he had remained a child, that in spite of having experienced university and starvation he had never grown up. He admitted this without bitterness as he saw his only purpose, his only mission in the very fact that he would remain a child forever, carrying his naked heart in his hands in the midst of the calculation, logic and politics of adults. And it was this child in him that was crying now. The child's voice, calling for the mother that was perhaps at that very moment lying awake in the house in the middle of the plateau, thinking of him, filled him helplessly. All he wanted was his mother, the only one who did not betray.

He got up with a stirring of distaste and went into the corridor.

Perhaps the only reason he felt so removed from the truth of daylight, without any proper measure for the overwhelming pain, was that it was night. But was not his mission merely to listen faithfully to his inner child, not to give in to its tantrums, to its emotional intemperance? Was he not certain that it was only by restraining the child inside him that he would with time achieve the proportion of settled manhood he longed for in spite of everything? In his work, too, he recognised the need for the laws that had to clearly separate an artist's vision from worthless hysteria, from pathos and pretence. He was searching for truth, simplicity and authenticity. In his work he strove to grant words the sanctity they deserved. But for that he had to do violence against his inner child and keep tearing from his own heart the share it had unjustly appropriated. That day, too, that evening, he had to recognise another authority over his heart, a belief in renunciation, which often made him reject the offspring of his own inspiration because of the need for something truer.

Why then this despair, if others had rejected them? Others, who were not their suffering fathers, but editors, dialecticians with no talent for matters of the heart, the critics of piety, schematic and proper in their knowledge about literature, so polished in front of the impropriety of the truth?

He took a few steps down the corridor.

The stars above the outline of the mountains to the north, the fleetingly rare lights of settlements, then again countryside, the soft undulation of bare soil in the darkness. And the railway sleepers, which in the reflection of the light bulbs in the corridor swiftly went by one after the other, as if flying off into emptiness.

Ljubljana – Trieste. And the border between them.

A hundred kilometres, two boundary stones between which his path had run out. For three years now he had been travelling between them, silent and unknown to all but customs officers, resigned to the narrowness of his world, between Ljubljana that had marked him, made him aware and restricted him at the same time and then returned him, marked, to Trieste, and Trieste where there was no belief, where there was no passion in the careful, sly eyes beneath low foreheads, but which was home.

He returned to his compartment where, upon seeing the familiar outline of a hill by the track, he realised that he was arriving. His briefcase lay on the bench, he had rested his head on it when lying down. He no longer felt the pain in his chest, in fact he felt nothing apart from a slight dizziness, apart from feelings of helplessness and desolation.

He picked up the briefcase.

He gently touched a bundle of papers through the leather, "*The Golden Boat*". This slim book, about which he had dreamt as about a wife that would be given to him and that would reward him for all his faithful expectation, would not be published. The tale about his deepest hours, when he alone in the midst of his tumble-down home or in the room at college, squeezed between two beds, accompanied by the sound of cheerful obscenities spoken by his colleagues in the corridor, fought with the angel of recognition, with the sense of all visible things, with the sense of the Kras and Europe, would not see the light of day. He did not want it because of fame. That was foreign to him, that Slovene fame that had so often been bypassed by the truth. The acknowledgement of people unknown to him would have meant more, as would meeting the unimportant and the genuine people reading his book, its verses. Not the recognition of the publisher and special agencies dealing with talent, but of those who would embrace him speechlessly and bestow on him a single kiss on the forehead. That short book was all he had hoped to receive from Ljubljana, in addition to a grant. The whole of his youth gravitated towards it, the metropolis, from which he, with the humble heart of one from this side of the border who was destined to consume the inferior bread of a minority, expected understanding, noble far-sightedness and benevolent supremacy. He wanted this from Ljubljana: from the nightmares on the periphery he was drawn to the calming seriousness of its streets, to the sunny and safe peace of Slovene classicism, to the warm heart of the nation, which should feel the most remote and painful pulse of his veins in Monte Ermada, Trieste. He had hoped it would grant him that book, so that he too would feel it, this godmother of hours that did not refuse even Ivan Cankar the sufferer...

As soon he stepped off the train at that provincial station, he felt that he had stepped onto different ground, into a familiar but still newly discovered south. The mildness of the air was new, that caressing tepidness, filled with gentle stimuli, which had since his childhood been awakening in him something that went beyond his body and his yearnings. The dizziness had passed too. He did not leave until an elegant Italian with a red cap sang out "*Pronti!*", put a whistle to his mouth, waited and blew into it. He then with a dancing step turned towards the head of the train and calmly signalled to the train driver. He liked this mechanical festivity as the Ljubljana train went into motion again and the train steps started moving behind the hissing outbursts of the steam above the engine. That ended one of the many journeys to the north, to the Ljubljana he could not hate because it had marked him.

He paused until the last carriage slid in a much lighter motion across a point and carried with it towards Villa Opicina the hint of new junctions, the sea and Trieste, squeezed beneath a plateau a few kilometres further south.

The night was alone above the station again, soft and resounding with the loud noise of the spray of the fountain among the evergreens, above the officials on duty, who silently and doggedly played cards in the station office. He walked through the station building, narrow with pillars and arches, stocky Austrian architecture built solidly out of stone, then he walked through the sleeping town of Sežana until he turned into isolation behind a hill, with a few remote lights from the village of Tomaj in front of him.

The white karst road with rows of pine trees on the bends, the Plough, hanging in a homely fashion with its six stars on the right and with an angry dispute between two dogs somewhere near Šmarje. Who was it that walked on this road and called it sister? His steps resounded joyously in the night, his heart had forgotten and bloomed in a rainbow of dreams, without bitterness and reproach. The soil spoke to him with memories, with male, mournful, pre-death songs of the pine trees in the northerly *burja* wind, with rock-tombstones and rock-guards on the common, with the scentless eglantine at the end of the graveyard. And the junipers said a few words, as did the oak beside the pond and the walnut tree, planted as a symbol of bitterness and fertility at the beginning of the village. The road and the Plough spoke, the latter positioned there in the middle of that regular enormity as a sign of restlessness and unanswerable question to the traveller, who was returning, ill, to his mother. His narrower motherland was calling to him in breathless address and he speeded up so as not to be late with the answer at the hour of his calling.

Again, he was sitting next to an oil lamp, alone in the presence of a mouse that came every night to scratch beneath the cupboard. He wanted to write to them to leave him alone, that he was not a banker. But the pencil was starting to feel very heavy in his weary hand and the orderly vision fragmented into notes, torn out aching limbs, in the end into bare titles, a collection of the titles of – poems.

He was demanding too much of the moment.

He knew he would not be allowed to reach an age when he could afford patience, when he would be at considered ease with himself and learn the wisdom of waiting, postponing and persistent returning from the other side.

Now he wanted to work out of sheer revolt, not for Ljubljana, but for himself and for that urgency within him. Consciously he wanted to dig his way to that state of honesty where an artist is working without any expectations, resigned to the fact that his work will never leave the desk. He barely believed in this work of his, although it was drawing on that reserve of strength he needed for healing, although from childhood onwards it had robbed him of the possibility of untroubled perception and a frank, direct approach to others. This disbelief comforted him in a special way, as it let him know that he did not belong among those that had advantage over him, among the talented and the dilettantes. They alone had the belief. Many things were clear to them, they knew how to copy out and smooth things, they knew how to reliably ascertain their growth. But those others, creative types, were desolate in themselves, banished by mature people of sound mind with death and rage in their souls.

Why did he feel sad now?

Did he not know all this?

There was no alarm clock in the kitchen and it was only because of the increasing clarity in him, from the freer gliding of pencil on paper that he recognised the hours of the night. He knew that towards the morning, at the end of the long tension and just before nervous exhaustion, he had to search for that sweetness hidden in the night when dreams become material and harmonious and finally filled with truth. He had started out of rebellion, but now words flowed smoothly, propelled by their own freedom, every thought split into unfathomed shoots he was unable to pick up as he went along, and the rhyme was not a prerequisite but a spontaneous principle of music, which gives words a new dimension.

He wrote about the new man, about thirst for salvation, about dead times and about her, the unknown one.

Because she, too, remained a dream. A sleeping woman whose young head child-like on the pillow he, returning from work late in the night, would kiss, saying: "I kiss you who are the only one who loves in me that which will be your suffering and my mission."

He picked up the sheets from the table and put them in the briefcase, between the folder that kept the manuscript of *The Golden Boat* and the tablets. Out of the briefcase he took his university grade booklet with incomplete semesters, lost himself in the professors' instructions, then looked for his own photograph from three years ago and the date of enrolment. He found a folded application for acceptance to the halls of residence, crumpled it and threw it towards the cooker.

He did not read the labels on the tablets. He just put the two packets on the table, turned off the light and went upstairs, then came back to check the front door. Before locking it, he stepped onto the threshold and saw the first light above the flat roof of the barn and looked towards the first quarter of the moon, which hung so pale among the wires of the leafless trellis.

Translated by Maja Visenjak-Limon

Florjan Lipuš (b. 1937), who lives and works in Austria, is considered the most important Slovenian writer in Carinthia. Before becoming a teacher, he studied various subjects and worked in different professions. He was the founder and for many years the editor of the main Slovenian Carinthian literary review *Mladje*. His oeuvre includes plays, numerous short stories and novels. The novel *Zmote dijaka Tjaža* (1972) is regarded as his key work. In his writing Lipuš mainly deals critically with issues facing "Slovenehood" in Carinthia, which is under constant threat, often drawing from personal experience. He shows an interest in aesthetic innovation, while his writing is extremely original in terms of its language and style, thus transcending the borders of his immediate surroundings, assuring him a privileged position in the literary scene in Slovenia. Since 1985, Lipuš has been a corresponding member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

FLORJAN LIPUŠ

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Der Zögling Tjaž, Residenz Verlag: Salzburg-Wien, 1981
Der Zögling Tjaž, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1984
L'éleve Tjaž, Gallimard: Paris, 1987
Die Verweigerung der Wehmut, Residenz Verlag: Salzburg-Wien, 1989
Der Zögling Tjaž, Wieser: Klagenfurt-Salzburg, 1997
Die Beseitigung meines Dorfes, Wieser: Klagenfurt, 1997
Die Verweigerung der Wehmut, Wieser: Klagenfurt, 1997
Verdächtiger Umgang mit der Chaos, Wieser: Klagenfurt-Salzburg, 1997
Herzflecken, Wieser: Klagenfurt, 1999/2000
Die Beseitigung meines Dorfes, Residenz: St. Pölten-Salzburg, 2005
Boštjans Flug, Wieser: Klagenfurt, 2005

From the novel *Boštjanov let*

That morning, he had set off from home to take some sustenance to his father at a remote forest clearing because on Sunday night, when the father returned to his logger's cabin, he had taken with him only freshly sharpened tools and a small amount of food. Every midweek, Boštjan would carry provisions to him and that day, too, when he left home, he was loaded with food and other things, when the road unexpectedly gripped him, stopped him, pinned him to the gravel, confirming his mother's passing away; the ground froze to the soles of his feet and he had no strength left in his legs, no steps left below his feet. A black blur descended over his eyes, blinding him for a moment, but in this darkness, beneath the blur, there shone an image of his mother. Her dying lasted a long time, it kept re-starting from the end, slowly they were administering death to her, but it was not yet over when he dragged himself into the house.

Boštjan, suddenly forced to stop, fenced in on the spot, who had since his grandmother's death been acquainted with the rattle of death's tools, acquainted with the accompanying signs of dying and a living witness to death's departure, on that fatal night when all the dishes fell from the kitchen cupboard and the eating utensils rattled onto the floor, realised what his mother was letting him know, offering him signs, delayed together with those who are outside time; telling him from afar that her hour had come as he stepped onto that road, loaded with food. It felt as if again he was being addressed by some being, although there was not a living soul anywhere near, just as he had been many times before, but then he had been too enclosed in his silence, withdrawn too deep to respond. Then, he did not intend to challenge fears, was not ready for anything like that, he had a veil over his eyes and too much fright in his blood. But this time Boštjan stopped on the spot and listened as things unravelled, as things appeared out of nothing and disappeared in a flash. It became clear to him, suddenly he could see, the veil had lifted, that it was his mother explaining something to him. He saw her among the huts, with a local woman, with two other women on a bunk-bed and in formation between the huts. Before that she could not reveal herself, until the last moment she kept her news to herself, as times were such that she could not extract it from herself. The uncertainty of whether she would manage to avoid the horror of the gas chamber or not was responsible for her delay until the last minute. Even in the gas chamber, below the shower heads, where she finally found herself among other women, crammed into a mass, she lay low, and the field of the women's arms economically raised above their heads disturbed her, the sudden nature of that crowd dejected her. Some arms stuck up by themselves, some held onto each other, those that extended straight up held those that were weak, stopping them from falling. In this floating, undulating field of hands and fingers, hundreds of lives were weakening, drawing to an end. With them, she had many times carried out tasks related to death, since Ugav had come, messing around the house, but always with a hint of hope, that a miracle would happen and that life would remain, albeit only suspended on a thread. Even below those shower heads she, an optimist behind rose-tinted spectacles, the naïvely seduced young girl from the mountains, still hoping for hills and valleys, did not believe that miracles had run out, that in all that crush in a constricted field there was no room for a miracle. Even below the shower heads she resisted the word, she kept the news to herself, denied what was happening, frightened that if she confirmed it, she would hasten, propel it, that by naming it she would bring it onto herself, lay it over her companions. It was not excluded that just that one time the oft-promised water would spray from those shower heads, just for once, which would wash away the dirt, wash the lice out of their hair, sooth the itching, alleviate the scabs, infections, pus-filled wounds, the cold and the hunger. When the shower heads beneath the ceiling then performed their task and she was transformed, when the bodies squeezed in that chamber sank a little lower and the raised hands had driven away the waves and lay all over; when the standing bodies fully dissolved into death, smoothed out in their suffering, and their mass lowered itself merely by the knee joint, leaning sideways only slightly, still upright; when the squeezed bodies, those by the door, were the first to fall into the open, the

crazy news left her body of its own accord, flew from the gas chamber and towards home, reaching Boštjan in the middle of the road with food in his rucksack, ready for his father.

His grandmother had been with him ever since they had taken and buried her according to all the rules. But she refused to obey those few people that came to her funeral, did not fall for the priest's comforting words, did not much care about the way things should be, did not much like such homelessness. She had nowhere sensible to fly to as no-one was waiting for her anywhere, no-one had become close to her, only Boštjan missed her and so she slipped into the convenient mist, covering the evening star that hung there from the South's tail, just about to turn into the morning star. Grandmother, who had had no problems tackling a snake, who had with the ease of a young woman played with death; grandmother, who died with the adroitness of an experienced woman, as her soul was barely hanging on to her anyway and it was a miracle that even before, when she was still in the habit of going to church, the beatting on her chest had not blown her soul away, that it had not been frightened out of the body by the loud murmur of the prayer and the singing – grandmother died easily, exhaling, but mother inhaled death, sucked it in, died laboriously; and now she could not find paradise, so she was wandering through time around the wide world. And even when Ugav passes away in his warm bed and for the last time looks at the gorgeous little lake in front of his house, Boštjan's homeless mother will still be wandering in foreign lands. When Ugav goes to his dear ones in the sky and basks in the paradise sun, those that were gassed en mass will still not find a way to paradise and even if they did, they would stand in front of the door for a long time before it was proven that they were worthy of it. Grandmother stayed in the place where she was safe, at home so to speak, from where she occasionally flew off into the distance, high above, with her companions, travelling aimlesssly extremely far away and eternally further, circling the borders of the blue expanse, but at night she always steered low down, sometimes as far as the ground that was trying to pull her under, where she was spread transparently thin, undulating loosely. Grandmother tied everything that she had collected into a bundle, the very same one with which she had come to the house when young; what she had brought with her, she also took away, bundled with what she had collected, including instructions, but mother was weakend by lightness, remained empty-handed, things halted for her on her transition yonder, she could find nothing tangible, no support, nothing to take with her on her journey, everything unusual flew over her, lay criss-crossed in front of her; and then with a hiss the incinerator devoured her, light and enobled by gas. Grandmother was shilly-shallying, putting off her goodbyes, staying around and flying from one room to another, but mother, dishevelled, persecuted, pushed around, breathless, went with no hesitation, just like that. She was made red-hot, melted, turned to ashes and scattered to the wind.

Translated by Maja Visenjak-Limon

Mate Dolenc (b. 1945) is a writer of satirical and fantastic novels and short stories, as well as a deep-sea diver and fisherman. A real blockbuster in Slovenia was his travel journal in the form of short stories describing his experiences of different seas all around the world, although most of all his beloved Adriatic – a sea dotted with a thousand islands or, as he calls it, 'the constellation of the Adriatic' (1998).

An Adriatic archipelago is also the setting of his novel *Morje v času mrka* (The Sea at the Time of the Eclipse, 2000): The Dalmatian island Biševo, with a blue cave basking in emerald light, part miracle, part real. Old Sebald's story is both miraculous and real: Diving in the unfathomable Depth and Distance of the sea, time and love. The sea, which forever keeps changing and remains the same, is like time, which flies and stands still; and both are like love, which calls from the past and kindles the flames of the present: Ivana comes to settle on the island, a girl who rejuvenates Sebald's old age and lets herself be transformed into a mermaid, a seal from the enchanting blue cave. Will the old man manage to catch his fish at the time of the eclipse? Will he be able to return alive from the depths? Will he know how to sail into death with love?

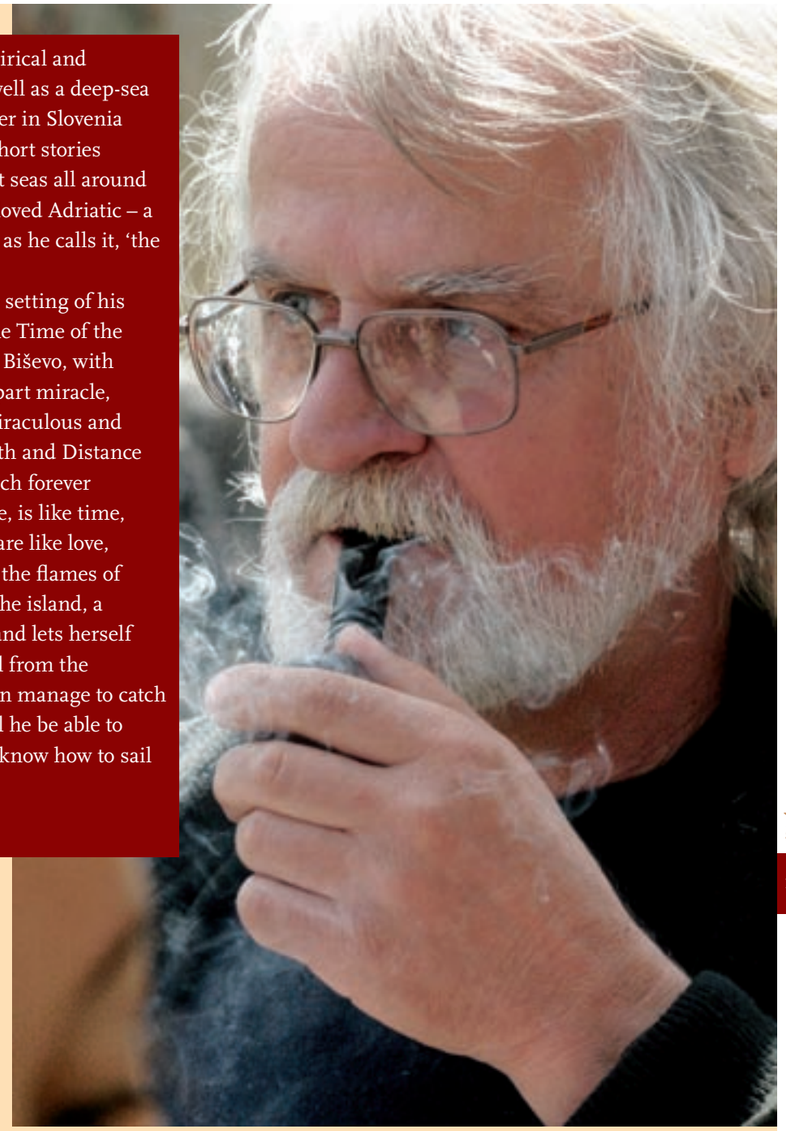

Photo by Igor Modic

MATE DOLENC

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Upír z Gorjancü, Prague: Melantrich, 1988

Pas s Atlantide, Zagreb: Fabra, 1997

Pomrćina mora, Zagreb: Profil internacional, 2004

From the novel *Morje v času mrka*

"Miloš's dead." The news made the rounds of the island, traveling from hilltop to hilltop, from valley to valley, from headland to headland, from kitchen to kitchen, from boat to boat, from ear to ear, from heart to heart. Death on the island. For someone, the sea had died. For someone, sunrise had been extinguished, and he had been engulfed by sundown. For someone, the vineyards had perished, and all the fish. For someone, the island had died; for everyone else, a part of the island. For Miloš, Dina had died; for Dina, Miloš. The island's phones kept ringing, those with cords and those without, CB stations and cell phones competed with calls shouted from one hilltop to the next; only a few years earlier such shouts had been the only means of long-distance communication, and women in particular had unusually strong voices which carried, cutting a gash through the air for miles, like sharp wire. Many of them still pass on messages in this fashion today. The tidings of the death came quickly, one hour after the arrival of the regular ferry. Every piece of information always spreads around the island like wildfire, leaping from tree to tree, from rock to rock, from vale to vale, flowing over saddles and ridges, reaching the remotest and loneliest of houses in the shortest possible time. Also, the bell in the head of the white woman on top of the island, next to Miloš's house, tolled. Miloš's son-in-law, who had caught the early morning ferry to the island and gone in search of Miloš when he had failed to return home by nine a.m., pulled on its thick rope. Dina's wails were incorporated into the bell's tolls. Foka immediately took the ferry back to the big island to fetch the doctor and the priest. The former is here called dotur, the latter fra.

Several men went to get Miloš. Because of the steep incline in the road they could not transport him any other way than on Kenja's back. Also picigamorti came back with him, the black bream, his first companions. They were carefully stored in the icebox.
The kitchen was cleared and tidied up, the table pushed to the side, the couch placed in the center and Miloš laid on it, the shutters closed, and the candles lit. Night fell inside the house, while outdoors daylight shone bright. A day without a cloud, without a breeze; a day when the sea lay unruffled in the archipelago, calm enough for Frazy Grant to run from island to island—and not only her, everyone.

One hour later Foka made the return trip on the ferry, with many other people also on board: Both of Miloš's daughters, his relatives, the dotur and the fra. Fra Jozo. Rumor had it that he had painted his church with the money made for him by the Ukrainian girls he peddled to the tourists. Nobody mentioned that now, and nobody laughed. By noon, Miloš's death was known in Australia and in California, also in San Pedro. Invisible bottles with messages flew through the air, not by sea.

Sebald delayed his departure for the hill until the evening. Fiamengo did not come along, his back was acting up too badly. Miloš would come down eventually, when the white pasara boat went for him. Fiamengo would pay his respects then.
Ivana did come. Like a small brown goat she skipped ahead of Sebald up the steep path so that he could barely keep up with her. On the top, near the copper vitriol solution tank, where only a few days ago—now already once upon a time—she had painted the island in the snow, she waited up for him. Tesa was also there, her nose to the ground, her tail down. She knew full well that this day and this walk were not like any ordinary day, any ordinary walk. They proceeded at a slower pace. A few others caught up with them. Also two of the Daltons. One had to remain in the tavern, since the tourists had not registered the death which had come to the island, and continued to call for their red wine and water bevandas, lobsters and beer.

Translated by Tamara M. Soban

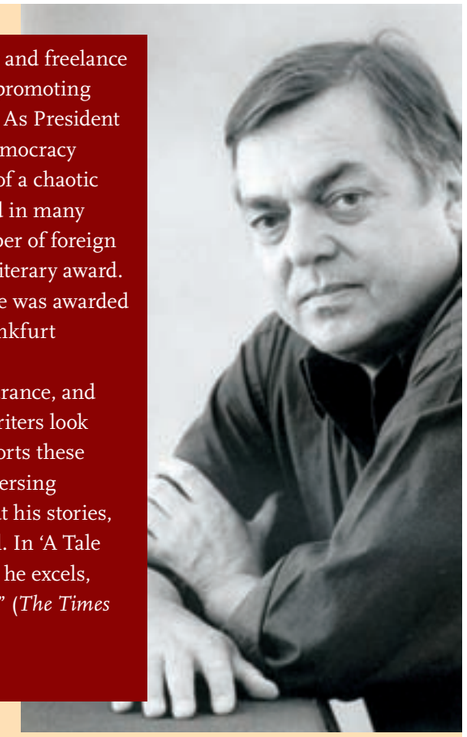

Photo by T. Pinter

Drago Jančar (b. 1948) studied law and has worked as a journalist, editor and freelance writer. During the time of the communist regime he was sentenced for promoting 'enemy propaganda.' In 1985, he stayed in the USA as a Fulbright fellow. As President of the Slovenian P.E.N. Centre (1987-91) he was engaged in the rise of democracy in Slovenia and Yugoslavia. He has been described as "the seismologist of a chaotic history". His novels and short stories have been translated and published in many European languages and, in the USA, his dramas have also seen a number of foreign productions. In 1993, he won the Prešeren Prize, the highest Slovenian literary award. In 1994 in Arnsberg he won the European Short Story Award; in 2003 he was awarded the Herder Prize for literature; and the Jean Améry Preis for Essays, Frankfurt Bookfair 2007.

"Jančar writes powerful, complex stories with an unostentatious assurance, and has a gravity which makes the tricks of more self-consciously modern writers look cheap [...] Whether they are psychological studies or parables, Jančar reports these episodes with a fine structural balance and, though at times clearly conversing with his literary antecedents, he wears his reading lightly [...] Throughout his stories, Jančar examines the nature of witness, personal, historical and authorial. In 'A Tale About Eyes', an extraordinary documentary mystery of the type at which he excels, he notes that one of his characters 'is a writer, and his truth is different'." (*The Times Literary Supplement*)

DRAGO JANČAR

NOVELS IN TRANSLATION

Galijot, Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1980
Galernik, Moscow: Raduga, 1982
Galiot, Skopje: Makedonska knjiga, 1984
A gályarab, Budapest: Eurpa, 1985
Kaškjin, Alma Ata: Žazuši, 1987
Polarna svjetlost, Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske, Zagreb 1987
Galernik, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawnyczy, 1988
Galejník, Prague: Odeon, 1990
Galernik, Minsk: Mastackaja literatura, 1990
Nordlicht, Klagenfurt - Salzburg: Wieser Verlag, 1990
Severnoe sijanie, Moscow: Raduga, 1990
Der Galeot, Klagenfurt/Salzburg: Wieser Verlag, 1991
Noorderlicht, Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1994
De galeislaaf, Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1995
Luzifers Lächeln, Klagenfurt/Salzburg: Wieser Verlag, 1995
Drwiace dadze, Warsaw: Niezalezna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1997
Kaján vágyak, Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1997
Mocking Desire, Evanston: Nortwestern University Press, 1998
Chtíč chtíc nechtíc, Praga: Volvox Globator, 1999
Rauschen im Kopf, Wien: Zsolnay Verlag, 1999
Zujanje u glavi, Zagreb: Durieux, 2000
Polárna žiara, Bratislava: Kalligram, 2001
Zájgas a fejben, Pecs: Jelenkor Kiado, 2001
Northern Lights, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001
El deseo burlon, Madrid: Metafora ediciones, 2002
Rauschen im Kopf, München: dtv, 2003
Zvjantež v glavata, Sofija: Stigmati, 2003
Kateřina, páv a jezuit, Prague: Paseka, 2003
Der Galeot, Wien: Folio Verlag, 2004
Katarina, paun i jezuita, Zagreb: Profil, 2004
Aurore boréale, Paris: L'Esprit des péninsules, 2005
Katarina, el paó i el jesuita, Lleida: Pages editors, 2005
Katarina, a páva és a jezsuita, Pecs: Jelenkor, 2006
Il Ronzio, Udine: Forum Editrice, 2007
Katharina, der Pfau und der Jesuit, Wien: Folio, 2007
Der Wandler der Welt, Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 2007
Stavitel, Bratislava: Slovart 2007
Aurora boreale, Milano: Bompiani, 2007

The Nameless Tree

Had archivist Lipnik stumbled on the Australian emigrants' material a decade earlier, he could hardly have been bored by it. Had it happened before the Big Bang, with its collapse of the old regime and the subsequent years-long disintegration of a large country once named Yugoslavia, Tito's Yugoslavia, in the agony of the Balkan wars, his hands would have trembled. At least when handling the papers containing the political emigrants' speeches. There had been a time when this was explosive material, such typescripts, brochures or books leading to interrogations and arrests, the penal code including a terrible article titled Enemy Propaganda. But in the spring of 2000, the portfolio which had come his way was merely boring. In a few years, all that had become as irrelevant as medieval tithe records. Once he would have been upset, now he was bored. No one was interested any longer in what political emigrants in Australia or Argentina had to say, still less in how those who had once listened to Christmas chimes in the heart of snowy hills and dales now spent their Christmasses under the scorching Australian sun. Ah, the sun, he thought, the summer sun. Summer was coming, soon he would set off with Marijana for Dugi Otok again, the stony Adriatic island where they spent every summer holiday. Now it was high spring, a cherry-tree was blooming in the archives courtyard under his window, its white blossoms quivering in the wind. He thought of Marijana, of her white breasts about to turn brown at the seaside, and his archivist's and man's soul quivered at the thought like the cherry blossoms under the window. Why so mawkish all of a sudden? he wondered. So many years of living together, and here he was, still trembling at the thought of Marijana, of Dugi Otok, of the spring wind swaying the boughs in the cherry-tree. He gazed long at the white tree and blossoms settling all over the courtyard in the wind's gusts.

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Having pushed the Australian papers around a while longer, he was about to stash the whole parcel away in the "Australian fund" and to mark it with numbers and a note of its origin, according to the archival provenance principle, when his eye fell on a folder bearing an English caption, Women in My Life. He leafed through it, stopping to gaze at the host of photographs carefully pasted onto the sheets and followed by short typed notes, occasionally even whole pages or chapters, all written in English. He skimmed the beginning and end of the folder but could not find the author's name. The pictures of the young women were accompanied by their first names, no last names except for an occasional initial: Anna M. The names and pictures were complemented by years, sometimes with the season thrown in: summer 1942, Marika 1947; Lily, 1964 (spring). Or with a place name, apparently the place of the meeting: Gianna, Trieste 1943.

The archivist's first thought was that the text somehow failed to fit in with the material which he was sorting on the desk.

It was written in English, although it had arrived in the parcel of the Slovene Society from Australia. Its contents, moreover, seemed completely unrelated at first sight to the Australian fund. But the two problems were soon solved by routine speed reading. The author was evidently Slovene, since the first girls who had posed for the pictures or given them away had Slovene names: Dora, Zofi, Vanda, Slavica. The background showed familiar views of Ljubljana from the 1930s: the Tivoli Park promenade, the Ilirija swimming-pool, or the Gorenjska region with its rocky peaks on the horizon. This meant that the author was Slovene, possibly a member of the Australian society, most likely an emigrant – perhaps a political one, although the contents evidently had little to do with politics. After many years of emigration, he was bound to feel more at home in English than in Slovene. Besides, he was bequeathing his notes to his two grandsons – as the introduction put it, *"so they will know what their grandfather had lived to tell"*. The dedication had been, evidently at some later time, crossed out with a ball-point pen.

He began to read. More with the hopes of being able to identify the author at some point than with interest in all those women he described. Still, he had to admit that the thing was intriguing after all. A long-time archivist, he had grown used to practically anything, but what he was reading now was no political speech or patriotic recital.

Then he came across a passage which stopped him short. Among the women described he glimpsed a name which sent a slight quiver through his hands and shook the sheet which bore the name: Zala. Schoolteacher Zala D. And for a fleeting moment he was uncertain whether he was a child or an old man, in another town or here, the walls around him spun, the cherry-tree outside the window turned into a white cloud, time and space crumbling like characters on a virus-struck computer. An attack of vertigo made him clutch at the desk. When it passed, he knew that he had not been upset by the almost pornographic material but by the woman's name which had found its way into this account of a young man's erotic adventures. A hunch told him that it might be her, Zala the young schoolteacher, not just any Zala but the one he had known and admired and secretly loved in his childhood with all the strength of a child's soul, not only the soul but also the body. He read the passage:

"Ah, ain't it great!" Zala exclaimed in her Maribor dialect. I was quite overwhelmed by her cry. Too much so, in fact. Moving under the fleshly embrace of her body, I felt that I soon couldn't hold back any longer. She noticed what was happening to me and stopped riding, but did not raise herself off my cock, which was stuck in her. She just stopped and stroked my face with a tender, almost motherly gesture. Then, poised above me, she slowly unbuttoned her blouse. She took off her bra as well. Her breasts touched my face. This did nothing to calm me down, especially as she began – at first slowly, then ever faster – to ride again, as if she was sitting astride a white Lipizzaner horse rather than me, a young and green clerk. At this point I couldn't hold back my desire any longer. "I'm coming," I whispered. In a trice she dismounted, took my trembling cock in her hand, and then gave me a long, gentle all-over massage. For all my embarrassment, it felt like heaven. She was smiling. "Oh, you impatient man, you," she said. "You didn't wait for me." She remained lying next to me a little longer, then rose, brought a towel and wiped down my sweaty body, rubbed me down all over, quite vigorously, which made me feel even hotter. Tossing the towel on the chair, she took off her skirt, which she had simply pulled up to her hips when we first found ourselves on the bed. Now she lay down next to me stark naked. At her touch, my strength soon came flooding back.

Lipnik took off his steamy glasses. While he was wiping them, he saw with a clouded gaze the cherry-tree branches still moving, the leaves trembling, the blossoms floating down on the courtyard pavement. The ground was all covered in white. Usually, even on the previous morning, he would have thought: what a pity someone will sweep all this away. Trample down the tender blossoms first, too. Now he thought nothing of the kind, the white was dancing before his eyes, he wondered: What is all this now? Where did it come from? But even before he began to puzzle out this professional question, the thought flashed into his mind that he had stumbled into the role of a voyeur. He did not know who had written this, when, or where, or who she was, it was a scene which somehow made him lose himself, as if he, too, had been drained of his strength by the irresistible physicality, by the lust of this woman who could not stop herself, he admitted to himself that he could not stop reading, why pretend to myself, I can't stop reading, and with this realisation his strength quickly flooded back. The writing continued:

At her touch, my strength soon came flooding back. She began to stroke me and to touch herself too, on the breasts and between the legs. I had never seen a woman masturbate before. She was touching me and herself, herself more and more, and then she began to give little indistinct cries I don't quite remember. But it sounded like: "Ah, that's great ... That's good ... See what's happening ... How big it's growing ... Now we'll do something for me, too ... Put it here ..." She opened her thighs and again I slid into the playful woman who was playing, but was not quite herself ... This time she moved more slowly, until she began moaning: "Yes ... yes ... I'm real close now, too ..."; she was panting, squeezing me ever tighter with her legs

and arms, and at last she reached her heaven joyously, loudly, her juices spilling down on me. I couldn't hold back and finished once again, this time in her. Afterwards we rested, eating apples. I was thinking that I'd had women before, but never experienced anything like this. And in the middle of the war, too.

In the middle of the war? It took a while for archivist Janez Lipnik to hear the question in his head: In the middle of the war? The archives expert was ferreting in his head. The voyeur long held the expert off, leave me alone, he said, they're eating apples now – in the middle of war or peace, what's the difference? Then he read that the chronicler of the mighty intercourse could not go home in the middle of the night, so the party continued. It was because of the curfew, if he cycled down the road, he could be stopped by an Italian patrol, or not even stopped but simply shot down, often they fired without warning. He could be blasted by Italians, who fired in their fear of the partisans at anything that moved, or zapped by an ambush of partisans, who often fired at anything that moved down the road since they never moved there themselves, it was only the occupiers or their flunkies who used it. At last Janez Lipnik understood the question echoed by the archivist in his head: In the middle of the war? And another question, echoed with a dark foreboding by his inner child, the boy whom Lipnik had almost forgotten over the years, the little Janez: Is this her? Zala?

To arrive at the truth about Zala, he had to identify the unknown writer of the erotic memoirs. Pulling himself together, he began to re-read passages from the text. But all his persistence and precision met with little success. At first he named the anonymous author, the meticulous chronicler of all his experiences with all the women who had passed through his life – or, rather, bed –, The Pervert, duly writing it down on the portfolio with the notes. A closer reading, however, revealed the chronicler of the erotic adventures as fully human, indeed, as interested in much more than merely the bodies of his women, so Lipnik kept track of him for a while under the name of Casanova. But the unknown erotomaniac had neither the literary nor the political gifts of his great predecessor. In fact, he had not been interested in politics at all. He had been forced to dabble in it, like everyone drawn into the maelstrom of World War II and Slovene civil war. It was simply that he had a somewhat uncommon human and male heart which trembled at the approach of a female, and a devil inside which egged him on until he had stirred up her heart as well, until he had, as the phrase goes, conquered it. Lipnik might have called him The Conqueror, but the word tasted too strongly of the conquistadors, of the ravaged towns and burnt landscapes of women's souls. This man, however, had kept falling in love, he had not been infatuated with the female sex at large but smitten with each woman separately, anew. Moreover, he did not leave behind tears and emotional debris if he could help it, but friendly farewells, sympathetic letters, photos and amiable memories. Thus Lipnik blotted out the word Pervert on the portfolio, crossed out Casanova, and simply wrote: Lover. As an afterthought, he added the word Great.

6

This title had certainly been well earned by the writer of the bulky memoirs, if only because of the striking number of the conquests described, about four hundred by Lipnik's rough estimate. For Slovene circumstances at least, the figure was astounding, particularly as the writer had spent most of his – admittedly long – life operating among members of a minor European nation, which had not only fewer soldiers, mathematicians, and shoemakers than larger ones, but fewer women as well. Later, it is true, his list, carefully documented and fully equipped with data and photos, had expanded to include Italians, Germans, Australians, Frenchwomen, also seven Thai women, two Vietnamese, and even one Serbian. But the fact that most of the women described were Slovene took no lustre away from his feat. The history of the little Slovene nation had seen few exceptional people transcending European standards – a handful of famous grammarians, bee-keepers and alpinists, preciously few statesmen and generals, an occasional architect or logarithm inventor, one cardinal and one saint, while the inventor of the ship's propeller, appropriated by the Slovenes, had actually been a Czech. According to historians, the history of the Slovene people had been above all the history of a struggle for cultural and social survival. The chief object was to survive, which left little time or will for great achievements. Least of all in the field to which this man, certainly an exceptional one in his way, had devoted his life. Among the Slovenes, woman was a highly respected and revered personage – and not only the mother, with her saintly dimensions and with the most stirring pages of older national literature devoted to her. Not only the mother nor only the wife, who took care of her spouse and house, but also the maiden, as the folk song goes: *While our Slovene race, Dwells in its native place, Ever shall prized be Slovenia's maids.* That was why the unknown writer deserved the epithet Great. The word Lover belonged there simply because it described his activity. Lipnik would have preferred to put down The Great Inventor or The Great Statesman instead, but this particular case did not allow it.

What bewildered archivist Janez Lipnik the most was the fact that the author had originally meant to bequeath his rich memoirs to his two grandsons, dedicating the work to them. Why should anyone want to bequeath such a thing to the poor children? Others hand down to posterity histories of their heroic deeds, medals and inventions; this man must have thought that the bibliography of descriptions featuring his conquests was rich enough to make any man proud, including his grandsons. But then he had changed his mind:

Who have I written all this for? Myself, maybe? I've changed my mind about my grandsons, it might not be best for them after all, getting to know their kind old grandpa from this side. Anyway: I've done it. After all, there are few lives as rich as mine.

That was true. But it was also the only explanation. Yet he must have wished that someone would read his notes. No one writes memoirs wishing that they might never be read, that was what Lipnik, after long years of experience in the archives, knew very well. Now, however, the notes had landed in the hands of someone not interested in the vast quantities of thighs, wet crotches, heated bellies, hairy patches, warmings and coolings, thrustings and lickings, nor in all those pictures: overwhelmed with such numbers, who could pause at each of the women with their myriad professions and inclinations, aristocrats and workers, prigs and nymphomaniacs and lesbians, married women and widows, childish innocents and lustful wenches?

The memoir writer might not have been too pleased to know that his reader in the State Archives was interested in one single woman, and not even in her because of her prodigious sexual skills or appetites, but because she had opened in his soul an abyss, a memory in whose depths he longed to tread. It was this memory that tugged at Lipnik, it was what he longed to enter, to sink in, all the way to the bottom.

The vast majority of the women who had passed through The Great Lover's life had given him their photos, which he had carefully pasted in the typescript. The first of them was Zala, according to the caption under the picture: Zala, a schoolteacher from Dobrava, my first real woman.

Translated by Nada Grošelj

Marko Sosič (b. 1958) is a director and writer. He graduated in directing from the Zagreb Drama and Film Academy. Sosič has directed in various theatres in Slovenia and Italy, as well as directed television plays. He has written several radio plays which were recorded for the Slovenian Radio station in Trieste. In the late 1980s he began publishing short prose pieces in *Sodobnost* and *Mladje*. Between 1991 and 1994 he was the artistic director of the Slovenian National Theatre in Nova Gorica and again between 1999 and 2003 and now holds the same position at the Permanent Slovenian Theatre in Trieste.

Sosič's published works include the collection of novelettes *Rosa na steklu*, the autobiographical theatre chronicle *Tisoč dni, dvesto noči*, the short novel *Balerina, Balerina*, which was shortlisted for the Kresnik Prize, and the novel *Tito, amor mijo*. The last novel was nominated for the Prešeren Fund Award and again shortlisted for the Kresnik Prize. He received the Mayday Award for the film *Pomladni posmehi*, a recognition at a presentation of the Zagreb Film Academy in Munich for his short film *Hod*, two Golden Wand Awards for his direction of plays for children, the Resurrection Award for his short novel *Balerina, Balerina*, which also received a special Umberto Saba recognition and the first Città di Salò 2005 Award. In addition, in 2007 this novel was put forward by the Slovenian Pen Club for the international *Strega europeo* Award.

Sosič's prose is strongly defined by a sense of time and place and the people that inhabit it. This happens on two levels: the objective, which can be verified (i.e. the 1960s), and the subjective level, which is woven into the sensitive lyrical material by the narrator's imagination (in *Tito, amor mijo*).

The themes explored by Sosič and the lyrical elements in his prose are unusual in Slovenian literature, as is his language which serves as the means by which he "gets inside his characters". It is the dialect elements that, alongside his images and metaphors, enrich modern Slovenian prose, giving it a stamp of uniqueness.

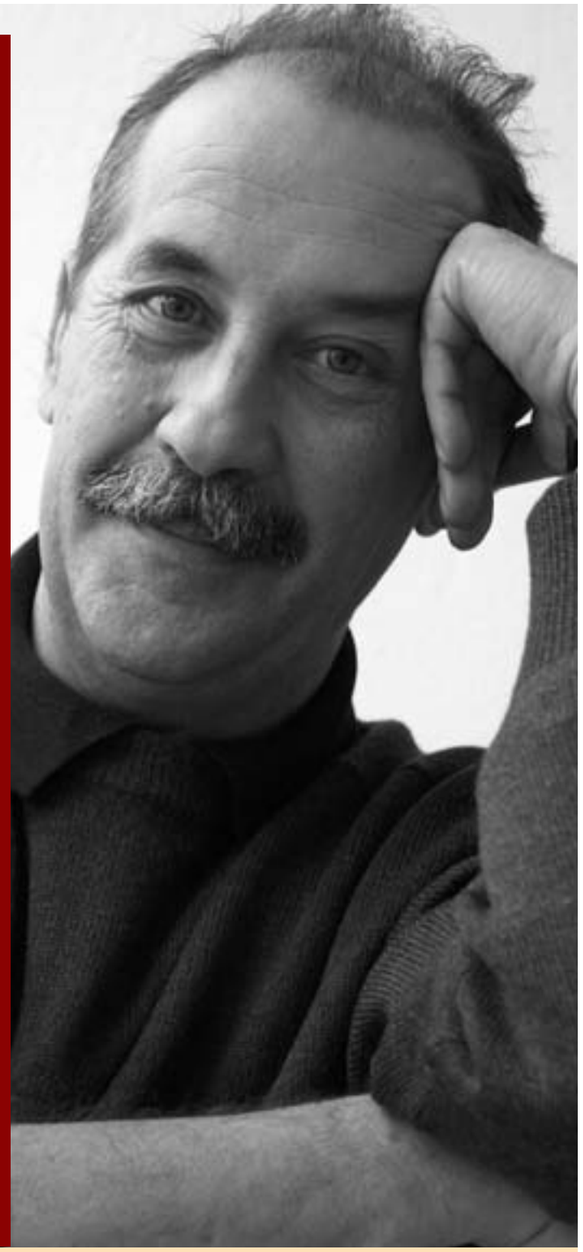

Photo by Agnese Divo

MARKO SOSIČ

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Ballerina, ballerina: romanzo breve, Empoli: Ibiscos, 2005

Elizabeta is coming towards me. Just like before. I know it's like always when Karlo brings me to her house when mama is tired and crying in the pantry with the door closed. Elizabeta is coming towards me. She's walking along a narrow path covered with little stones. I'm standing on the stones and holding a bag in my right hand. I can feel the small stones under my toes, I can feel them through the soles of my shoes. I know I'm wearing slippers with a bow, because my toes hurt less if I wear slippers with a bow, just like Aunt Lucija did when she was run over by a car. Mama says that she's in heaven, too. I can see her up there in the clouds, in her slippers with a bow. I don't know if her toes hurt, too, up there in heaven. Mama says that it's nice in heaven, that we are happy if we go to heaven. Mama's always saying that as we're standing by the window. She says we'll all go there, to heaven, even Karlo, if he buys some paint and paints the door white.

I look at Elizabeta. I think she's mama because she is like mama. Even her hair, eyes, nose and mouth are the same. And she walks like mama and laughs like mama, only her voice is different. Come, Ballerina, she says, taking my bag in one hand and leading me by the other along the narrow path towards her house.

I can feel the stones, every one of them. Elizabeta says that there are as many little stones on the path as there are drops of rain in the worst possible downpour. Oh, so many little stones, she says, as we walk towards her house. She always says this when I visit her and we walk along the path. Then she says, laughing: Mrs Sprigge knew how many there are, she counted them all before they took her home. Elizabeta says they took her to England.

I know who Mrs Sprigge is. As mama and I stand by the window, looking towards Angel Mountain, she tells me how she and Elizabeta came to Trieste, no older than little girls, and they washed and ironed and cleaned in other people's houses. Mama says that Elizabeta talks nice, that I can learn a lot from her because she has read many books and that was why she got a job with Mrs Sprigge, who came from England and was married to a rich gentleman. Mama says that at first Elizabeta looked after the plants in the greenhouse, weeding them, and then she started cooking and cleaning and ironing. Josipina, too, learnt how to iron from Elizabeta, mama says, and if she didn't have to hide from Giacomino she could be the best ironing woman in Trieste, mama says.

Elizabeta is still holding my hand. The path covered with little stones is very long because the garden is very big and the trees are big and the house in which Mrs Sprigge used to live is also big. Aunt Elizabeta's house is small, there at the end of the path covered in little stones that Mrs Sprigge counted before they took her back to England. Mama says that Mrs Sprigge left that little house to Aunt Elizabeta until she dies, that now the little house belongs to Elizabeta and only to her until it is time for her to go to heaven, mama says.

I look at the tall trees. Elizabeta says that they are poplars and spruces. I look at the wooden benches dotted around among the flower beds, where Mrs Sprigge and her husband used to sit, says Elizabeta, and I walk on the little stones towards the little house at the end of the path. Elizabeta says that I will see squirrels and woodpeckers, those yellow ones, Elizabeta says. She is telling me that squirrels aren't afraid of anyone, that they come every year at the same time and take walnuts from your hand. Like this, says Elizabeta, you stretch your hand, open it and put a nice, fat walnut on it, and a squirrel comes hopping along, looks at you, takes the nut, looks at you again and then climbs into one of the spruces.

Mama says that Elizabeta always had it very good at Mrs Sprigge's. When Mrs Sprigge had guests, Elizabeta cooked for them, when cleaning had to be done she cleaned, when the garden needed watering she watered it, when in the winter the heater in the greenhouse had to be turned on she turned it on, when Mrs Sprigge called her in the middle of the night using a special electric bell installed in the little house at the end of the path covered with little stones Elizabeta went and told her nice stories, if Mrs Sprigge felt lonely or scared in the big house after her husband Mr Sprigge died, immediately after the dog called Havy.

Elizabeta is still holding me by the hand. Now we are climbing the stairs to her house, hers until she dies. I look back. I always look back. I know. Havy always used to come up the stairs when I was at Elizabeta's and mama said: She doesn't speak. She just stands on tiptoes, singing. They say it happens to children sometimes. The dog came running with his big

mouth and licked me and I laughed because it tickled. And then Elizabeta always closed the door on the veranda and said that Havy had to stay outside. Mama says that Elizabeta can speak English because Havy always understood her when she told him to seet daun or kam hir. Mama says that Elizabeta even used to pick up his poo around the garden and put it in the dustbin behind her house. Mama says that Elizabeta is alone now, that Mrs Sprigge went back to England after she had counted all the stones in the garden, that her big house and garden are being sold, that Elizabeta only looks after the flower beds and the greenhouse now because she wants to. Elizabeta says that the garden has to look nice, without weeds and that the path with little stones always has to be raked. Mama says that Elizabeta has been in that little house for thirty years and more and that she is used to it and that that is right.

It's raining. I'm sitting next to the bed and I can see the window. Outside is the garden, big, with big trees, squirrels, flower beds and benches on which Mrs Sprigge used to sit. I don't know why Karlo has brought me to Elizabeta. In the past, often, now, today when it is raining and Elizabeta says that it will be winter soon, that it is very cold already and I must wear stockings, as mama says. Elizabeta says that I will stay here while mama has a break. You'll have a good time here, Ballerina, you'll see. You know that you always have a good time with me, says Elizabeta. I know, she also has the drops in the old refrigerator given to her by Mrs Sprigge after she bought a new one. I can see her opening the fridge and taking out the bottle of drops. Then I know that I'll be looking through the window and I won't know where the garden is, where the trees with squirrels are and where the benches on which Mrs Sprigge used to sit are. Elizabeta says I should leaf through magazines. She's like mama. I'm holding a magazine on my lap and leafing through, Elizabeta is standing behind me. Like mama. And she's talking. She says: Oooooh, look at that, how beautiful she is... and she points to a young lady in a long skirt. I think it's Greta Garbo. Elizabeta says it's Gina Lollobrigida and that the man next to her is a film actor and that he is very handsome, she says...

And then I'm still here, at Elizabeta's. Elizabeta also says that time flies. She says nothing about the moon, Elizabeta, she says nothing about Vietnam like the postman, we don't stand by the window, looking towards Angel Mountain that my mama loves so much. Elizabeta says that it's as peaceful here as it is where angels are and that she will be happy if her life ends like this some time and she goes to heaven to Aunt Lucija and Uncle Felix.

I open my eyes. My room at Elizabeta's is as blue as my mama. I have wet myself. I know. I'm cold. Elizabeta washes me. There are no steps, no hall, just the veranda and then the garden with the tall trees. I can see it, through the window, as she is washing me in the bathroom. Then she combs my hair, sits on the edge of the bath, puts her hands in her lap and says: Ooooh, how beautiful she is, our Ballerina.

I'm looking at myself in the mirror in front of the veranda, a narrow mirror in the middle of the coat rack. I can see that Elizabeta has dressed me in a brown skirt with buttons and a thick top. Then I see a face that I know is mine. Elizabeta says that I always laugh when I'm standing in front of that mirror. She says I'm happy because I'm laughing and I think that it's true what Elizabeta says, as there is also the field in that mirror, and the potatoes that need digging so that the soil can rest and smell nice, as mama says, but she is not there. And I look at the field and I think that it smells nice because it will be dug up. I see mama bending over the field to give it a drop of perfume on which it says Mennen and which is aftershave, mama says, but it's like perfume. Then Elizabeta says it's draughty, that she will close the veranda door. And I'm no longer there in the mirror. Her scarf with red flowers and her coat are hanging on the rack and below the mirror there is an umbrella, a big black umbrella. I know papa has an umbrella like that and Karlo sometimes takes it when there is a storm. I think Karlo has come to take me home, that mama has had her break. I can't see him. All I can see is me, the coat, the flowery scarf and the umbrella. Elizabeta says I'm beautiful. Then she says that if I'm good she will tell me a nice story in the evening, like the ones she used to tell Mrs Sprigge when she was scared of the big house and felt lonely. Elizabeta makes my breakfast as always when a new day starts. Then she will go in the garden and plant tulips. Elizabeta says that tulips have to be planted before the winter, that they do better that way. Then she will

cook my lunch, give me a magazine and in the early evening we will go to the greenhouse to talk to the flowers, she'll say. It's nice when Elizabeta talks to the flowers. I think that I'm in that big valley and that Ivan is with me, telling me the names of trees, that we are walking in the tall grass, catching crickets and that mama is singing.

We're in the garden now. Elizabeta is bent over, pushing tulip bulbs into the soil. I can see her back, her hair in the bun on her head, just like mama's. Above me are trees, poplars and spruces, and the sun. Autumnal, says Elizabeta, breathing with difficulty, as she is pushing tulip bulbs into the soil. Then she turns towards me. Her face is red and sweaty and she is smiling. Mrs Sprigge loved tulips, she says, and turns back to the soil. Then she moves to where there are no tulip bulbs yet. Elizabeta says that there are nearly three thousand of them, and each year she buys a few more because some dry up and don't flower, even when you plant them with all your love. And then they need watering, even in the autumn, says Elizabeta.

Afterwards, we sit on the bench where Mrs Sprigge used to sit, alone or with her husband. We look at the closed windows of the big house in which Mrs Sprigge used to live, we look at the flower beds with the newly planted tulip bulbs, we look at the trees. It's windy. Elizabeta says it's blowing from the south because sirens from ships can be heard. She says that the gentleman Mrs Sprigge was married to had many ships that sailed all over the world. Oh dear, how many times he used to say that we would take a boat far away, to Australia, says Elizabeta and smiles at me. I can see her face. It's very close. I can see her eyes, they're green. Mama says that Elizabeta has such green eyes, like a river in the sun. I can see her eyes fill with tears. Mama says that Elizabeta's eyes are like a river after rain when there are tears in them.

Now I know as I look at her face, Elizabeta, I know I'm standing by the window with my mama. It is evening and together we are looking at the garden, towards the field and the cherry tree and mama says: Mrs Sprigge knew that they loved each other, Elizabeta and her husband, she knew that Elizabeta often cried because of it, and she used to comfort her, she was always comforting Elizabeta. Then he died and Mrs Sprigge started counting the little stones in the garden and then they came from England to get her. Poor Elizabeta, poor Mrs Sprigge.

Now I see Elizabeta again. She is walking among the flower beds, examining them. I'm sitting on the bench. Elizabeta is walking towards the house. She comes to a large, green bush. I can't see her anymore. I'm sitting on the bench and I can't see her.

Elizabeta says it will soon be evening and that we have to measure the temperature in the greenhouse. She says I've been very good, so far, and that later she would tell me a nice story. Later, she says, when it's evening.

I'm wearing a top like in the morning, like I've always worn since the beginning, and it is autumn and Elizabeta and I are going to the greenhouse. Nearby, a few metres from her house, says Elizabeta. She is wearing a coat, too. She says it will be a harsh winter and plants must be prepared for it.

Three steps down. It's quiet. The sky has cleared and through the glass of the greenhouse I can see stars. At the end of the aisle dividing the greenhouse into two equal parts, there is a thermometer and here, near the door, a heater. I watch. Elizabeta is telling me the names of plants. On the right, there are geraniums, she says, because Mrs Strigge loved very much to see them on her terrace. Then Elizabeta says nothing. She looks at the thermometer, walks among the plants, whispering something. I can't understand what she is saying. Now Elizabeta is like Karlo when he talks to Uncle Feliks and I can't understand him. Then she looks up. Look at the clouds, she says, can you see? They're bringing winter. Then she's silent again. I'm standing by the door, looking into the greenhouse and Elizabeta in it. Suddenly she stops, looks at me and says: Look, Ballerina, come closer, look! I think that Elizabeta wants to show me a squirrel I have already seen once before. It stopped, looked at me, took the nut, looked at me again and climbed into a spruce. Then I go closer. I look at her and see only a small part of her face. Everything is green. I can see Elizabeta covered with greenery. I can see her eyes, they're green. I come to her, my ears are whistling, loudly, so loudly. I

want to sing with my mama. I stand on my tiptoes. Elizabeta says: Look! And she shows me a ray of light on a geranium leaf. It's reflecting from the glass on the roof, she tells me. Like a ray from heaven, she says and turns away. Let's go, she says, it'll soon be dark and I have to tell you a story. I look at her leaving the greenhouse and suddenly I don't see her anymore. I step on tiptoes, look at the sky through the glass and I don't sing. You do that, you look, says Elizabeta. I can hear her like I always do when I stay in the greenhouse and evening is near.

Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon

Feri Lainšček (b. 1959) is a writer and screenwriter who lives and works in Murska Sobota. His bibliography comprises more than 100 books, many of which have been translated into foreign languages. Feri Lainšček is one of the most highly esteemed and widely read Slovenian authors. He has received many awards for his work. In 1995 his novel *Ki jo je megla prinesla* was awarded the Prešeren Fund Award. He twice received a Kresnik, an award for the best Slovenian novel: in 1992 for *Namesto koga roža cveti* and in 2007 for *Muriša*. In 2001 his book of fairytales *Mislice* won the Večernica award for the best Slovenian youth literary work. Feri Lainšček's works have been adapted for the screen more often than the works of any other Slovenian author. The movie *Petelinji zajtrk* is based on his novel and won several awards at the Festival of Slovenian Film 2007 and has been a resounding hit in Slovenian cinemas.

Nedotakljivi (The Untouchables), a novel written by Feri Lainšček, speaks of four generations of Roma people on their life journeys from horse thieves to stone grinders, smugglers and eventually, in the last generation, drug addicts. The foreword to the book is a mythical story about the three nails Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross with. Four nails were forged by a Gypsy blacksmith after every other blacksmith had refused to make them. Hence the curse upon Roma people – their eternal wandering all over the world, haunted by the fourth remaining nail, always reminding them of the evil deed they had carried out.

"The novel bares before us the dimension of the spiritual and physical reality that is right next to us, yet the writer knows when to let silence do the talking and leave the secret of the 'Gypsy soul' to the Romany themselves." (*Mladina*)

Photo by Neca Falk

FERI LAINŠČEK

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Halgato: Lacki roma - statt zu leben, Klagenfurt: Hermagora, 1994
Akit a köd hozott, Budapest: Seneca, 1996
Umjesto koga ruža cvjeta, Zagreb: Durieux, 1998
Argo nagycirkusz, Lendva: Studio Artis, 1999
Pojep na dejdekovem biciklini, Murska Sobota: Franc-Franc, 2001
Der Trick mit dem Strick, Klagenfurt: Hermagoras, 2001
Instead of whom does the flower bloom, Ljubljana: Slovene Writers' Association, 2002
Koju je magla donijela, Zagreb: Naklada Mlinarec & Plavić, 2003
Die Haus dem Nebel kam, Klagenfurt: Hermagoras, 2003
Pijetlov doručak, Zagreb: Mlinarec & Pavlič, 2004
Halgato, Prague: Dauphin, 2005
Hahnenfrüstück, Klagenfurt: Hermagoras, 2006
Muriša, Ljubljana: Slovene Writers' Association, 2008

From the novel *Muriša*

Night over the Mura was as black as pitch. That's how it felt to Julian with his lingering memories of despair. No horizons could be discerned that would visibly divide the black weight of the plains from the black emptiness of the sky. Even the internal border that he could always count on had somehow strangely withdrawn. The past about which he had no say and the future which should be his alone had become strangely close during his walk and were now almost overlapping. A long feared premonition that the strange fate of his family would leave an indelible trace on him made him break into a sweat. It occurred to him that he must take measures to prevent it. But what could he do? Is it even possible to recognize the unmarked turns and hidden traps in this life? He believed it should be possible and yet he wondered. He was twenty-four years old. He had a diploma and a good state job. He had enough savings in the bank to easily buy three Chevrolets of the kind owned by the factory owner Cvetič. The estate in Rakičan and the many-storied villa in Sobota were worth even more. He was in all ways well-supplied and prepared for life. It was only necessary to enter it. But what would this life be? He felt anxious again. Was it possible to choose?

At that moment, he made out the first lights of the town.

It was a few minutes past eleven, Saturday night, and there was a big dance at the Crown Hotel. The fiddler Baranja would be playing with his Gypsy band at the Sočič tavern. The students were probably still holding down the fort at the new bowling alley at Benkič. He could visit these places that had never attracted him and thus shorten the night that, despite his fatigue, would probably not be visited by sleep. Though the very thought that he might now have to look upon people showing off their wallets from under their waistcoats or, God forbid, flatter the ladies flaunting the latest fashion from Modeblatte, was unpleasant to him. The only place he could go without such feelings was Faflek's, though since the declaration of neutrality and the prohibition on listening to the radio, fewer guests came there and the place would probably be closed at this hour. He was already past the Turopolje cottages and hadn't even bothered to turn down Aleksandar Street, having decided to forgo a glass of white wine from the Jerusalem hills and just go home, when he spotted a bonfire surrounded by shadows on the field behind Garany's garden shack. From a distance, it looked as if the shadows had come to put out the fire but when he stepped closer, he realized that they were warming themselves.

The fire had been made from a number of great logs that were just now beginning to catch. The men, most of them young, stood by the pit and kicked at the logs that the flames had not yet engulfed. At this point, Julian noticed a stocky Gypsy holding a bear on a chain. The animal, which otherwise would surely have been taller than the Gypsy, sat on the ground like a man, chewing on the stick with which it was tamed and calmed. A good deal of saliva flowed from its muzzle and its clipped ears trembled. It was a dancing bear that had probably been travelling with his owner from market to fair. In other words, it was certainly not trembling from fear of all the people. Perhaps the fire had unnerved it or it did not feel like being up at this late hour.

"Varaždinec was paid to bring water to this brute," someone near Julian said.

"What are they thinking?" another man added with some irritation. "The world has never seen such a thing!"

"Why would it need water?" another asked.

But no one answered. The thing was clear: somebody had got the idea to bring the bear to the party. One of three Gypsy women took some ginger cake from her apron and placed it in a basin. A bottle of rum, perhaps also meant for the bear, travelled from hand to hand. Those gathered around the fire gradually grew warmer and more childish – at least that's how it seemed to Julian who pitied the animal even more as it would soon be pricked by the human lust for sensation. He was wondering whether he would even stay and watch the spectacle when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

It was the hand of a woman.

"Let's listen if the bear will fart or not," a familiar voice breathed in his ear.

"Zinaida!" He nearly shouted when he turned around. He never would have dreamed that he would meet her of all people at this hour and in this place – the girl from his street who was never allowed to play with any of the cottagers or other tenants.

"We were at the Crown but they were playing Czech music and nobody wanted to dance," she said breathlessly. She had also apparently been drawn in by the present madness. "And then Garany made a bet with Hanc that he could make the bear dance," she explained to Julian, her nose against his neck. "Now you can see what came of that bet?" She pinched his shirt and pulled him closer. "Our boys are really losing their minds...."

The flames now flickered high over the heads, illuminating slices of laughing faces. The Gypsy rattled the chain and struck the drum. The dancing Gypsy women teased the bear with the ginger bread soaked in rum. It was obvious that this wasn't the first time they'd done this – the beast recognized the crazy food and saliva foamed under its snout. Its heavy paws moved to the rising rhythm and its jaws snapped hungrily. "That an animal can be such a drunkard!" The company shook with laughter. "She has no idea of the hangover she'll have in the morning!" they howled. "If we let her off the chain, she'll certainly run straight to Nadey's wine cellar," they warned the Gypsies. One with a pointy moustache gestured to the women and the bear smacked its lips.

"Isn't it nearly human?" Zinaida stamped her foot. "Isn't it cute?"

The whole thing seemed terrible to Julian so he didn't answer.

The Gypsy now banged on the drum faster and began to sing with a course voice. No one present understood the song – it was probably a child's counting song as Gypsy lyrics were generally clever but simple – but everyone thought it funny and clapped along. The bear, of course, was accustomed to all of this and began to sway all the more.

"Where are you now, Garany?" someone cried out. "You said you would dance!"

Vendi Garany was Julian's peer and had been his school fellow for two years during gymnasium. He was the only son of the lawyer Elemer Garany whose second wife was the widow of the trader Cigüt and, for some time therefore, the man had not needed to work in his venerable profession. Vendi had had difficulties with his studies and continued his schooling in Szarvar, Hungary where his sprawling clan lived. He supposedly studied harder there and was accepted to Sopron, one of the most renowned universities in this part of Europe. As a result, Julian hadn't heard much about him anymore except for the report that he borrowed his father's car one Sunday and drove the girls through the neighbourhood pumpkin patches. He saw him at the occasional village parties where he and his Hungarian comrades were usually raising a rumpus. His famous foppishness was a combination of the latest Magyar fashion and a sort of cosmopolitan reserve. It also served as an exhibition of the wealth that his father had not even earned. Julian opposed one and the other. Once again, he made an effort to leave but Zinaida grabbed his sleeve as if she had designated him her protector. He thought it would be impolite to leave her.

Young Garany strode into the yellow fiery light, smoothing between his thumb and forefinger a moustache as black as a crow's feather. He lifted his chin and looked down at the Gypsy and then at the bear that was swaying drunkenly. This was a sure sign for the czardas dance which the drummer then beat out with his quick fingers on the pigskin. "*Ä-za-sejp, ä-za-sejp, ni-ka, ne-ga, sä-mo kejp.*" The Gypsy sang the familiar Hungarian lyrics in his own way, pulling the drunken bear, who could no longer keep pace with the rhythm, behind the dancers around the fire. "*Ä-za-sejp, ä-za-sejp, ni-ka, ne-ga, sä-mo kejp,*" sang the Gypsy women, swinging their arms above their heads.

At this moment, the foppish young man suddenly kicked the Gypsy with his heel. "Are you making fun, Gypsy?" The silence after the question was broken only by the crackling of the flames.

"No, I am not making fun, young sir," the small-eyed Gypsy feigned ignorance. "Not at all – as God is my witness – I meant no harm." In an instant, the Gypsy who had been holding the leash, pulled the hat from his head, and pressed the crumpled thing against his chest.

"Once more like that, Gypsy, and you'll be sorry!" Garany bristled and waved a menacing finger. "You'll get it on your bare ass and you'll return my money!"

"I am without sin, I swear to you, sir!" The Gypsy gestured with his hat. "Let my wife die, let my children grow sick, let my hands and feet wither..."

At this point, the bear, who no longer felt the leash, began to sway more broadly. Its rear paws escaped it. Its heavy head hung low. It began to rock back and forth and it almost seemed that it would begin to dance again. A woman's voice giggled in the pained silence and turned to loud laughter. The unpleasantness of the moment had become overwhelming and the animal, ignoring the comic relief, lunged into the emptiness, seeking its balance. The Gypsy jumped after it and pulled on the chain, brandishing the stick to keep it away from the fire to which, during its convulsive dance, it had come dangerously close. In vain: for the animal was now utterly intoxicated and the Gypsy was too weak for its drunken mass. The wavering fur-covered body inclined forward and then tried, at the touch of the heat, to lift itself up. Then flailing paws and gaping muzzle plunged straight into the embers.

A wave of ashy heat rose with the dull blow to the ground and everyone around the fire retreated or fled. Then from out of the smoke there came a heart-rending wail and a swarm of sparks flew up to the sky. The Gypsy, the only one to remain near this particular hell on earth, hoarsely cried out to the animal and pulled on its chain. The other men who ran to his assistance could do nothing because the glowing logs had ignited the bear's fur. Every so often, the animal let out an indescribably sad and mournful sound.

Julian, staring silently at the dying body, felt Zinaida's sharp nails digging into the flesh of his back. She clung to him, pressing her face under his arm, her whole torso trembling with her sobs. He held her around her narrow shoulders, almost lifted her, and pulled her into the darkness.

Translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak

Miha Mazzini (b. 1961) is a writer, the author of 20 published books translated into eight languages; the screenwriter of two award-winning feature films and the writer and director of four short films. Mazzini taught writing for film at the Slovenian Show Your Tongue School of Film Narration (1999 - 2005), he was a visiting lecturer at the Croatian Academy of Dramatic Art (2001), at the Palunko workshop (2004 - 2005) and the Northwest Film Forum, Seattle, USA (2004). He holds an MA in Creative Writing for Film and Television from the University of Sheffield and is a voting member of the European Film Academy.

About the novel *Guarding Hanna*: He was born a freak. With above-average intelligence, which soon realises that a body bent on destruction cannot live among others. The only person who can help him is a Mafia don, who has enough money to isolate the monster. But nothing comes for free. And now, the moment when the freak has to repay the favour has arrived. He has to come out of isolation and for one week become a bodyguard of a woman named Hanna.

Photo by Tomaž Grdin

MIHA MAZZINI

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Guarding Hanna, Seattle: Scala House Press, 2000
The Cartier Project, Seattle: Scala House Press, 2004
The King of the Rattling Spirits, Seattle: Scala House Press, 2004
Tito a gramofon, Prague: Argo, 2005
Slatki snovi, Zagreb: Fraktura, 2005
Guarding Hanna, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2007
Pies, Warshaw: Grube Ryby, 2008
Hanin telohranitelj, Belgrade: Klett, 2008
Il Giradischi di Tito, Rome: Fazi Editore, 2008

WEDNESDAY, 2:33 p.m.

"I'm sorry about earlier," she starts. "I've got to explain."

I put the hamburger down and wait.

"My mother…How shall I say it…Did you see how she was looking at you?"

"Yeah."

"There…I have to explain that…"

I remember that Hanna had spent most of the time standing behind her mother's back and couldn't see her eyes, but I didn't dare interrupt with questions.

"…this lust," she finishes the sentence.

A long pause. I say goodbye to the last hamburger and the apple pie I'd ordered for dessert. I'd tried eating them cold once, but they were completely inedible. Obviously the chemicals used to make the meal only taste good when they're hot.

"My mother…likes…sex. It's so hard for me to talk about this! She…is a collector of sex. But…how can I explain…she doesn't collect quantity but variety. How shall I put it…She's had sex with men with blonde hair and men with dark hair. With blacks, Asians, American Indians-she's been through all the races. Then she went through the fat and the thin, the tall and the short ones. The ones with just one arm, one leg, without both arms, without both legs, without either arms or legs. With midgets and giants. Not to mention the various professions. Have you any idea how many of those there are in this world? And I mustn't leave out illnesses. I remember once, when she found out about a neighbor who had cancer of the prostate, she immediately ran to him. She hadn't done it with somebody with that particular problem before. That's why she was looking at you like that. Because…"

She tries to catch the right words with her hands.

"I know," I say, "I understand."

"…because you are a bodyguard with such distinguishing features to boot. It's best if I start at the beginning. I was brought up by my grandmother. I also occasionally stayed with my aunt here, in this flat. My grandmother lived in a village and oh, how unhappy I was there. She didn't know where she'd gone wrong with her daughter, I just had a feeling that she blamed it all on her husband, who did nothing else wrong but died soon after my mother had been born. She certainly tried to ensure, by being as strict as possible with me, that her granddaughter, who was also growing up without a father, didn't turn out like her daughter. Not that my mother came anywhere near us. Not for quite a few years, there were so many things happening in the world. San Francisco with flowers in her hair, Woodstock, free love everywhere. She'd had me somewhere on the way, had brought me back to her home village, deposited me there and disappeared again. I think I was eleven when I first saw her. My grandmother didn't even have any pictures of her. She never spoke about her daughter. Not a word.

"Well, my mother came and they had a terrible fight. I shut myself into my room and trembled. My mother won, dragged me out, we went around a few bars in the nearby town. I was eleven-I should remember everything, but I don't. Only that I wanted to go home, to bed. I kept nodding off at the table while my mother giggled with some strange guys. I can only remember one of them, a beer-bellied biker. In the morning, she delivered me home and disappeared for a few years again. I admit, next time she came I gladly went out with her, but I still found all the men around her repulsive.

"She used to come every few years, sometimes every year, for one night. My mother is constantly on the move, and wherever she is, she's always just passing through, on the way to somewhere else. When I was seventeen she brought me here. She had a wild romance with Erwin, the guy you saw on Monday. He then took me on as an apprentice. I lived with my aunt, who died after a year and left me this flat. My mother was already somewhere else. She comes occasionally, to have her hair done, as you heard.

"Every time, she shouts 'Hanna, Hannichka.' It really annoys me! As if we really did have some Polish blood. Yes, I've got a birth certificate and I know my father's name, Leopold Woyczik, but I've never seen him. But from what I've heard, I can't help feeling that my mother had a moment of feeling guilty, and when a Polish immigrant came past, a newcomer who couldn't speak the language very well and didn't understand what he was signing, she turned the opportunity to her advantage. Do I sound nasty? I do, don't I? But I'm only nasty to myself, sometimes. I can't help it. That's how it was. That's how my mother and I got our surname and that's how I got an official father.

"You know what I can't forgive her for? The apologizing, looking for excuses. Instead of saying, 'I like sex,' she'll say, 'I'm studying Tantric Yoga with the best teacher of our time.' Or something like that. Why can't she say, 'Wow, I love sex, it feels good.'"

She taps on the table with the end of the spoon handle.

"Tantric Yoga! The group feeling of aura! Free love! The free-flowing of cosmic energy! Why not just call it a fuck?"

She stops.

"I'm sorry, I got carried away. It won't happen again. Go ahead, eat."

I pretend to chew my hamburger. She can't really see what I'm doing under the shelter of my hand.

"I know, I'm obsessed with my mother. No. I'm obsessed with proving that I'm not like her, which is what I had to do all my childhood. My grandmother's beady eye followed me all the time. When I was still very little I used to think that she was watching over me to stop me from falling over, hurting myself or something. But later on I understood. She was waiting for the first signs to appear, just like they had with her daughter. She died five years ago, and even right at the end, when she was in the hospital, she didn't want to see me. She didn't trust me. I'd gone with my mother, become like her. I'd disappeared, as far as my grandmother was concerned. The look in her eyes…I remember it so well. A look of somebody who'd had a tiger cub forced on them and now they were waiting for it to grow up into a wild animal and attack them. I had to prove that I was different from my mother to everybody else, too. The rumors about my mother reached the village, of course. Nobody knew and nobody cared what was true and what wasn't. But with Kristina Woyczik you never know anyway; I'd learned that if nothing else. When I was at school boys approached me differently than other girls, I was supposed to be easy. That's probably why I was the only girl in my class who didn't lose her virginity at school. I lost it here, in town. After I got married. Yes. I was so pleased when I got away from that village. Really I was. I was the only virgin in the class and at the same time the only girl with a reputation."

She gets up from the table and goes to the kitchen. She's making one of her teas again. She comes back with a steaming cup.

"Then one day, when I was sitting where you're sitting now, I was looking at that Mercedes sign going round-my aunt was already dead, the salon owner had stopped pestering me-I said to myself, 'This is it. You're grown up. You're in town, nobody knows you, what now?'

"Yes, what now?

"I didn't have to battle with my mother's reputation any more. She would come for a visit, once every one or two years, for five minutes, all elated and blooming. She'd mention a few of the latest achievements in her passionate pursuit and then move on. Oh, I nearly forgot: the year before last she mentioned to me that she didn't hold out much hope of adding to her collection. Quite simply, she'd had everything that could be had. She'd changed direction and started collecting locations, she said. She described to me having sex in the crow's nest of a replica pirate ship. There you are. That's why she couldn't take her eyes off you. Obviously, she had never seen a bodyguard close up."

She sips her tea.

"Nettle," she says completely out of context, "purifies the blood."

Is that the reason for her confession? I ask myself.

Another sip.

"Yes, I was sitting there, saying to myself, is this all that's left?"

A stab in my heart. How I remember asking the same!

"I realized that something was missing in me. Not just something, but it was that so

much was missing that I thought I didn't exist at all. So I started thinking."

She blows on her tea.

"First, I got divorced. From my first husband. The others don't count, as they were only on paper.

"Things were a bit better, but not as much as I thought they would be. I got a lover, then another one, but it didn't make any difference. So it wasn't men I needed. I was obsessed with that question. I would sit there looking at the rotating sign, thinking, 'Should I go to college? Leave hairdressing?' I didn't have the courage. I didn't have to do anything difficult there, I got paid. Obviously I'm a coward, always playing it safe. I started making pottery figurines. But that didn't help. I thought more and more about religion. Don't laugh!"

I showed no inclination to.

"But I didn't want to go to the church, the main, Catholic one. Another shadow from my mother's past-she'd had to leave the village because she was caught with the priest in the confessional. He'd hung himself after. My workmate Mary used to go to some discussion group as they called it. She'd been trying to talk me into going with her from the first day I started working there. I used to resist as hard as I could. I have to say there's one thing my mother had left me with forever. Before I make any decisions, I always think what would she do, and then I do the exact opposite. My mother is a veteran of every possible and impossible discussion group and religious sect. 'You can always find good sex in the new-age spirituality,' she'd said once to me. To join Mary's group would have meant following in my mother's footsteps. But there was less and less of me, I was more and more empty. I didn't even feel like combing my hair in the morning and wandered around looking a total mess. Even now, I don't like sitting in that chair, believe me. There's nothing sadder than looking at a Mercedes sign that doesn't take you anywhere.

"So I went with Mary. We held hands and the energy flowed. The leader of the group was a replica of Erwin, the salon owner, and I asked myself why Mary would want to go there. She could look at Erwin all day at work. In the evening, we all went to a restaurant and, faithful to the idea of healthy living and the new spirituality, ordered soya bean sprouts. Only the leader had a doubly thick T-bone steak, rare. He chewed and chewed while we watched him. Oh, I forgot to tell you, he was the only man in the group. Then I asked him, 'Excuse me, but how do you explain this? You talked so much about cleansing ourselves, then we go and eat bean sprouts while you devour tons of meat.' He said he'd already cleansed himself in the previous life so he didn't have to be careful anymore, whereas we were just starting out on our journey through reincarnation. And he went on eating. I got up and left. Last year, I read a book by one of the women I vaguely remember from that meeting. The scene I've just described is quoted in her book as a proof of why we have to make the effort to cleanse ourselves-so that we can do what we like in the next life! Eat steaks or whatever. She mentioned my departure when she talked about the dropping out of non-believers who don't have the intelligence to comprehend the secrets of mysticism. Just imagine!

"Mary kept giving me angry looks for a long time after that. 'You didn't even go through the initiation,' she blurted out once. 'And what was that like?' I asked. She squirmed and squirmed and then admitted that the spiritual leader slept with each new convert. After that, I looked on the salon and Erwin in a completely new way-as a sect. There too, the owner had to sleep with everyone. I said this to Mary and she thought for a bit. Obviously she hadn't seen the connection before. The next day she offered to shake hands, asked to make up and not talk about it anymore. And we haven't.

"I said to myself, 'A Catholic priest with my mother in the confessional, the esoteric leader with each new convert after dinner. I just don't have any luck. But somewhere there has to be the real spirituality. Everything can't boil down to just sex.' Am I boring you?"

I shake my head.

"I won't go on for much longer. I'd heard about the Forest brotherhood sect. I gave that up because I couldn't make myself drink the priest's urine. That was what the beginners got there. Those with a longer service were allowed to reach for the temple, the very source of that magic juice, called 'Jesus' treasure chest.' More sex. I stopped going. I'd already heard about Tantric Yoga from my mother, and I was becoming more and more desperate. I was sick of all those meetings in deserted gymnasiums and small rooms at the back of bookshops. At all those gatherings I saw the same faces-not the same people but the same types of people. One type really-the middle-aged housewife. 'Where were all the men?' I asked. 'Didn't they feel this emptiness inside?' Men were always the teachers and they always led their pupils to sex. I asked myself, 'Is everybody like my mother, does everybody need an excuse? Why don't they just go to bed with each other if they feel like it? Why must a middle aged housewife accept the role of a pupil on the way to enlightenment and the man become an apostle of the Great Spirit, so that they can have sex?' And what I saw with my own two eyes wasn't called sex but the flowing of cosmic energies. I realized everyone knew what was meant by all those words, except somebody as na?ve and innocent as me, who was then made to look stupid. Fuck it."

I nod that I excused her language even before she could apologize.

"I went to the library and brought home a book this big and this thick."

She indicates the measurements. Quite impressive.

"The History of Sects. I read it and what did I find out? It was always a man who thought up a sect and the women who came running. And in most cases, the founder of a sect was a tailor. I could just imagine him sitting there, sticking his needle into various things all day, thinking how nice it would be to stick something else into something for a change, and then proclaim himself a prophet. From my own and other people's experiences, I know that prophets always try and get on top of you. But in spite of that, or because of it, every idiot finds a flock of followers. Usually middle-aged housewives. I don't know why. Maybe because of this emptiness inside us."

She sips her tea and shapes her lips into a, how shall I say it, a square-I've never seen anything like it before.

"As if a prick could fill that emptiness," she says.

The square falls apart, and she gives me a confused look.

"Sorry, that was vulgar. What I wanted to say was that most women go to these gatherings to fill physical holes. And they get precisely what they came for. But there's a problem with a few like me, who have holes in our souls."

She stops talking for a while and turns toward the window. It's getting cloudy, the rotating sign has already lost contact with the sunlight.

"So I finished with spirituality."

We sit awhile in silence.

"And as for my emptiness...It's still here, it's no smaller, it's just somehow faded."

She adds more to herself, "I've met a lot of prophets but there wasn't one saint among the lot of them."

Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon

AUTOPORTRAIT

Andrej E. Skubic (b. 1967) has been publishing short stories in Slovenian literary magazines since 1990. His first novel *Grenki med* (Bitter Honey) won the 2000 Kresnik Award as well as the Slovenian Publishers and Booksellers prize for best first book. His second novel *Fužinski bluz* (Fužine Blues) was nominated for the Kresnik Award in the following year. In 2004, his first collection of short stories *Norišnica* (The Madhouse) was published, while the non-fiction book *Obrazi jezika* (The Faces of Language), based on his PhD thesis on social dialects, was published in 2005. His latest novel is *Popkorn* (Popcorn, 2006), the winner of the Cankarjeva Založba competition for the best novel on the topic of contemporary life. It won the Župančič Award 2007 and was shortlisted for the 2007 Kresnik Award. His short stories have appeared in various literary magazines in English, Czech, Croatian, German, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Macedonian and been widely anthologised.

Skubic has translated several Irish, Scottish, American, Croatian and African authors (Flann O'Brien, Irvine Welsh, Enda Walsh, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Borivoj Radaković, Gertrude Stein, James Kelman, Ken Saro-Wiwa) and edited several anthologies and readers. He received the 2007 Sovre award for his translations of James Kelman and Gertrude Stein. Skubic is currently a freelance writer and lives in Ljubljana.

About the novel *Fužinski bluz*: Fužine has a bad reputation in Ljubljana. It is a housing estate that was built about 20 years ago – that was of course when good old socialist Yugoslavia still existed, when most flats were owned by the state or public enterprises and rented out cheaply to employees and were forms of social security. At that time there was also an influx of workers from the southern republics of Yugoslavia; that is how the reputation of Fužine – as the Harlem of Ljubljana – came about. You know, the *čefurs* of Slovenia, with the universal reputation enjoyed by their brother niggers, Pakis, darkies and wops elsewhere in the world – they'll mug you in the street and rape your women, and they'll do it in crappy clothes; they'll never learn the language properly; they have dark faces and listen to horrible accordion music.

Fužine Blues is a novel examining modern urban identities struggling to find their position in an emerging world they cannot fully understand. The times have always been changing; the four stories in Fužine Blues explore what it takes to adapt.

ANDREJ E. SKUBIC

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Fužinský Blues, Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2005

Fužine Blues, Ljubljana: DSP, Litterae Slovenicae, 2007

Fužinski blues, Novi Sad: Vega Media, 2008

From the novel *Fužine Blues*

"There'll be a real fucking party when we finally give those Yugos a pasting," says Bobi. Trobevšek just grins at him.

"Will you fuck," says Željo. "Want to put some money on it?"

"Money, what money? Where would I get money from?" For once, he speaks the truth.

"If you've got the balls, go and borrow some from Brković and have a bet. You're gonna get fucking stuffed today, you'll see."

Brković is a locally bred version of my uncle. Fuck me, if there's one thing that gets on my tits today it's this football. I mean, football's okay. But this Slovenia-Yugoslavia gig really is too much. Everything's gonna be so fucked up. Okay, the whole of Fužine knows who'll be rooting for who. They're all in on it. After coffee they'll all be voting one way or the other. For Slovenia? To the left, if you please. Yugoslavia? To the right, please. Even the girls. Daša for Slovenia, of course – or perhaps not if Mirsad glares at her. Samira for Slovenia, of course, though her folks are from southern Serbia and there is Miran to think about. Unless he comes to see me instead. I don't get it. Okay, I do get it why *ćale* would root for Yugo, but not where Željo gets the same idea. He's only ever seen Yugoslavia on the telly. And then only when bombs were falling on it. If there's one of the players who's our boy it's Zahovič – he's a Slovene Yugo just like us. But anyway, who gives a fuck? What do I care what I am or what he is?

This football debate is just *glupa,* stupid, so I decide to tell a story instead. I turn to Dunja and start telling her about yesterday. And there you go, after ten secs they all forget about the fucking footie and start listening to me. Specially when I mention the cops and what Jaro said. Hey, crazy, that really is so bad. I mean, it really was. Even I regretted not being there at the pool, that they hadn't made me take a swim. Though for sure it wouldn't have been as it as with the Swedish guy. If it'd been me, I'd have been straight in the clink overnight. I don't have the right kind of surname for those fuckers.

"The cops should come here instead and sort these junkies out," says Daša, jerking her head towards a group of lads sitting at the edge of the terrace. She's still got a strop on 'cause Mirsad's nowhere to be seen. She hates the whole world when he's not around. When he's around, she hates him. Shit, if remember how it was yesterday.

"Hey," Bobi spits at her. "What's your problem?"

"They're just sitting there gawping."

"Careful, that one you're pointing at is a friend of mine. I'll invite him over if you want, tell him what you said and you can sort it out together."

"Don't want anything," says Daša.

"It's not nice to talk about folk behind their backs."

I mean, hello! It's no great surprise Bobi has such friends, he's wacko himself. Half the time, you've no idea what he's on about. I remember once we ran into him at New Year time near the stalls in town. He had a tin of beer in his hand and started explaining something to me. I hadn't the slightest what he was trying to tell me 'cause I spent half the time observing him. He looked kind of on edge and the hand he held the beer in was trembling the whole time. Then his face became all flushed, dunno what stuff he was on, and he started to cool himself down with the beer tin. Then he started to bang his face with it and after a while he'd bashed his forehead so much that the beer was running down his face. Then I really didn't hang about, you know, I said sorry and everything, *žuri mi se,* I'm in a hurry.

Trobevšek is looking towards the Malibu. Seems he's not happy if he's not the centre of attention. Then he points towards one of the places in the passageway.

"Hey," he says, "remember when there was a watchmaker's there?"

The waiter comes to the table and starts clearing glasses.

"Think we can order anything here?" asks Daša.

"Course, I remember," I say. "Crazy Đogić." I remember how *ćale* showed me once when we went past. He says: see Đogić over there? Yes, I say. Then he says: take your watch there if you never want it to work again.

"What'll you have?" says the waiter.

"Coke," says Daša.

"Ice tea," I say.

"Can I get you anything?" he says to Dunja, who doesn't have a drink in front of her.

"I once took this watch to him I got for my birthday," says Trobevšek "Just to get a new battery..."

"Man, if I had any cash on me I know what I'd have," says Dunja. "If I knew where I could get lay my hands on some of the readies I'd order a whisky."

"Such a smart watch, it was, just little lines, you know, no numbers. I mean I was in the eighth grade then an' that was the best watch in the world," says Trobevšek.

"I know where you can," says the waiter, wiping the table. "But only if you're serious."

"Then sort me out a job, man, if you know of one," says Dunja.

"And you know what Đogić did? When I come to collect it, the guy had scratched Roman numbers on the face. I mean, scratched them with a file on my beautiful watch."

The waiter goes off. Everyone laughs, even Dunja, who hasn't even heard the story.

But one of the druggies is a bit of a looker. Short blond hair, you know, and his eyes look kind of bright. Doesn't look too healthy, though, very pale. Dunno why I always fall for such pathetic sorts. Maybe 'cause they're completely different from bigmouths like Mirsad and Trobevšek and Bobi. Harmless. I'd like to give him a bit of TLC. But fuck me, he probably doesn't have a very glowing future. The most likely future he faces is getting arrested after he breaks into some office to snaffle computers he's going to sell for small change. And he'll be so high that he won't even realise it's the police, he'll think he's hallucinating, you know? And he's younger than me, probably no more than fifteen for fuck's sake.

Daša gets up and goes towards the entrance. Bobi calls after her "Going for a piss or a shit, girl?" When Daša ignores him, he shouts even louder: "Going to drop a load, eh?"

Fucking moron. Fuck him and his load dropping.

"Fuck me, look at the arse on that," says Željo suddenly, staring past me. They all look the same way, so that I have to as well. This chick has just come onto the terrace. She's really heavily built and I think I can smell her perfume, even though she's about ten metres away. She's wearing a mini and enough make-up to make your eyes water.

"One hell of an arse," says Trobevšek, "probably rips her pants every morning."

"Probably got mussels growing up there," says Bobi and all three guys start to laugh. Dunja looks at me none too happily.

"Fucking molluscs, yeh," says Trobevšek. Molluscs. Molluscs, that's biology. I mean, the guy's barely passed one year of secondary school and he's eighteen already.

Then it's quiet at the table. For a while we all sit, looking round. That suits me best of all. Then Daša comes back, sits down in a dignified way.

"Did you drop a big one?" says Željko. Daša just looks at me and says nothing. But she's got a pained look on her face.

"I've got this schoolmate," says Dunja out the blue, like she's just remembered something. "This schoolmate who's crazy about molluscs. Collects them."

"What molluscs?" asks Daša, somewhat confused.

"Oh, it's a long story," says Dunja, starting to smile. "No, I mean really, he's just crazy about them. This friend said she'd been to his home, and he's got starfish and shellfish, you know, in jars like, and, what're they called, sea anemones and such..."

Now we girls are smiling more than the guys. I'm trying to imagine going to see some guy and being shown sea anemones.

"Did he show you any sea cucumbers, as well?" asks Trobevšek.

"But I mean, for fuck's sake, molluscs of all things," says Daša. "Is there anything more disgusting than sea cucumbers? And snails, aren't they just..."

But if you really think about it

"But if you really think about it, why are they so disgusting?" I say. Wouldn't it be boring if we all agreed all the time? What's so disgusting about them? I mean, we probably don't look all that beautiful to them, do we, thrashing around in the water like non-aquatic freaks? "I mean, it may seem pretty dumb to us just lying there all day," I say, "but they probably have a really exciting life by their standards. Like, lying there may seem real cool thing to do if you're a sea cucumber, we've just no idea what other creatures find cool, or not."

They all look at me as if I've finally lost it completely. Even Daša's giving me a funny look.

"You've been watching too much Discovery Channel," says Željo.

"I fucking well haven't."

"I can get you this guy's phone number," says Dunja with a grin. The others smirk. Idiots, you've no idea, have you? Okay, okay, it's all pretty stupid anyway, what a *glupa* conversation. Or maybe not.

It's like, I don't know, but why, for example, should some guy who studies sea cucumbers be any more stupid than say Eva, who puts on all that idiotic gear and smears herself with warpaint? I like people that are a bit odd sometimes. Not that I'd want to go to his place and look at them or anything – no way José. But at least he's doing his own thing, doesn't give a toss what anyone else thinks. There should be more like him. That Eva is the other extreme, creating some image for herself 'cause she thinks that's what folk want to see. Even worse, 'cause she thinks guys 'll fall for it.

Fuck this, my girl, you're getting too philosophical.

The waiter's back. He's got a Coca Cola and an ice tea on his tray and, wait for it, a whisky. He puts the Coke in front of Daša and the whisky in front of Dunja, who looks gobsmacked.

"Hey, I didn't order that," she says. "Said I haven't got any money."

The waiter puts the ice tea in front of me.

"Didn't you say you wanted to earn some?" he says. "See that gent through the window there? Don't stare, it's rude," he says, as we all turn to look in that direction. Can't help it. This guy's sitting right next to the window, so we can see him, the guy opposite and another one. He's about forty, very smart. Perfectly turned out, you know?

"This is from him," says the waiter. "If you want to earn a little cash. You could be back in half an hour."

"What?" says Dunja, dopey like, not quite getting it. The guys have already started to grin.

"He's very clean and smart," says the waiter, "really, nothing to it."

Trobevšek snorts with laughter and starts to bang the table with his hand. But the waiter's looking none too happy, seems he doesn't like being too much the centre of attention.

"Maestro!" yells Trobevšek. "Come on Dunja, we'll have enough for a couple more rounds."

"Are you completely off your trolley?" Dunja stares at the waiter, who looks totally serious. Doesn't move an inch. Total fucking pro. I could even like the look of him if he hadn't started to disgust me with what he said when he brought the drink.

"You said you wanted to earn something," he says. "If you're not happy I can take it back."

"Get rid of it!" snaps Dunja, looking at me and Daša, who rolls her eyes. I feel a laugh coming on, but it wouldn't do to show it. I'm supposed to look shocked. The waiter doesn't bat an eyelid, just says okay, no problem, takes the glass of whisky and goes back. Out of the corner of my eye I see the guy through the window. Now he's looking towards our table – would be odd if he weren't – and when the other guys start laughing and he sees the waiter coming back with the whisky, he just waves his hand lazily towards us, saying oh leave it there. The waiter turns and comes back.

"The gent says it's on him," he says, putting the glass on the table. Dunja just glares at the glass.

"I'm not drinking that," says Dunja, understandably Though it's a real dilemma. In the end, Željo saves the situation and the whisky. He reaches across the table and says:

"No problem, I'll drink it."

Krista is a good counter-example. A really great chick, you know? A good friend. We've really had some wild times together and all. Yeh, that guy'd better watch himself – it'd be real wicked to see him talking to Danila, say, or Biljana, then he'd soon be clear where chicks get their money from. Yeh, Krista and I were together, whether it was a crap time or the best. Once we went to this do, near the river I think. First we got totally tanked up. We almost

always drank fruit brandy and *bambus*. A litre of *bambus* – orangeade and red wine – now that's a drink and a half, should be made compulsory, though no-one seems to drink it these days.

Anyway, we were so far gone we didn't realise just how far gone we were, you know? Then, well, I liked riding pillion behind Krista on the motorbike 'cause she really knew how to go for it. Somewhere near Brod we nicked the first machine we could get our hands on and whizzed off on it. Somewhere in Šiška, near the engineering works, we hit a bend at full speed and came off. We rolled over a couple of times then came to a halt and started laughing. Like we thought it was oh-so-funny. But if some fucking car had come zooming round the bend we'd have been dead. We didn't give a shit.

Daša has already drunk her Coke. She knocked it back pretty damn fast and looks real nervous.

"Janina, let's go back to the supermarket and take a look," she says. She's already itching to go. Sad cow

"For fuck's sake, Daša, when did you ever see Mirsad at the supermarket?" I ask, rather tetchily I admit, but I mean, how inconsiderate can you get – I've still got half a glass of ice tea left. "He's probably in town, in any case. Can't you see I haven't finished?"

"Oh fuck the bloody drink," explodes Daša. "You're so bloody self-centered! You can come back, it's only ten minutes there and back."

Hello! I have to look away so as not to blow it. She accuses me of putting myself first. What about yesterday, when she hid in the bushes? I mean, really.

I get up.

"Okay, let's go," I say, waving towards the other four. Daša just says see you.

When we're far enough from the table I lay it on the line for her:

"Right, we'll go Mercator, but if he's not there – which I'm sure he isn't – then I'm not moving another inch. We can go up to mine. My dad's not there anyway, he went to the bar to watch the footie.

"What'll we do at yours?"

"Dunno, I'll make some hot chocolate with cream and we can watch the match, or whatever, play some music."

Daša's quiet as we walk along. Then after a bit she says:

"Bit of a spooky fucking place that."

Translated by David Limon

Katarina Marinčič (b. 1968) received a PhD in French literature (Balzac) from the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana where she now works as a lecturer of 18th and 19th century French literature. She is the author of the novels *Tereza* (1989), *Rožni vrt* (Rose Garden, 1992) and *Prikrita harmonija* (Hidden Harmony, 2001), a story set around the time of the First World War, for which she received the Kresnik Award. Her last book *O treh* (About the Three, 2005), awarded with the Fabula Award in 2007, contains three longer novellas that take place in different historical periods. The main characters of the three stories are the Etruscan Vel Matuna, who we meet after his convalescence from a serious illness, the Belgian botanical draughtsman, Joseph Redouté who, while absorbed in the drawing of a flower, is enveloped by the outbreak of the French Revolution, and the Slovenian immigrant Zlatko, who travels to America in the 1950s for an eye operation, falls in love, and settles there. Although these are three distinct destinies, the author unobtrusively links them. All three exceptional and unique protagonists share liminal experiences. A similar atmosphere and sensuous impressions characterise the three novellas. The attentive reader will also perceive strategically repeated images and sounds in phrases and sentences.

In all of her works Katarina Marinčič experiments with the traditional forms of historical fiction. However, her main artistic interest lies in personal histories, not in History. She has been praised for the 'almost Proustian sensitivity' of her writing, her 'keen eye for detail' and her 'polished style'.

Photo by Marko Marinčič

KATARINA MARINČIČ

BOOKS IN TRANSLATION

Die Verborgene Harmonie, Kitab Verlag: Klagenfurt-Wien, 2008

From the novel *O treh:*

Zlatko from Litija (excerpt) – VI.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One evening in the tavern, Zlatko had picked up a hint. Zlatko was a bit slow in the picking up of hints even if they were broad ones. But the boys counted too much on his poor eyesight. What he didn't see, he perceived with his skin and with his ears: winks, grimaces, tittering, the name of Jenny Harrison. Then he watched and then he saw. He distanced himself from the group and ordered a double bourbon. He leaned on the bar, stared for a long time, stared darkly out from under his bushy eyebrows through his thick glasses. His lips were puffy from the whiskey which he wasn't used to. His head emptied slowly and slowly something boiling flowed into it, began to prickle him in his chest and stomach. It was worse than the worst of pains. He stepped into a ray of moonlight on the way home. Everything was silver and the bushes filled with mysterious murmurs. Zlatko felt the urge to roar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Zlatko?

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

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

Maybe Zlatko is not the main protagonist of this story. Maybe the story really revolves around Jenny and the blacks. When Zlatko joined the boys in the tavern, he had no idea what had happened to someone whom Jenny had loved as a young girl. Because no one told him that. They were silent about Jenny and even she only told him (all pale she was, with dead white lips) that he would lose her if he fell into bad company. Zlatko made an understandable but fatal mistake: he was proud of her girlish jealousy. One day, he returned from the fields, took a shower behind the garage, and ran up the stairs all sweet smelling and cold. In the room above the garage, he found instead of a lover a woman with her bags packed, her eyes shining like ice cubes.

"You were with that red-haired Donaldson tonight," Jenny hissed.

Zlatko smiled like an idiot.

"Are you mad?" he asked.

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

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

"But Jenny," said Zlatko. "I didn't know that. How could I know that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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