EUROPEAN STORIES

EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

AUTHORS 2023

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AUTHORS 2023

FEDERATION OF EUROPEAN PUBLISHERS
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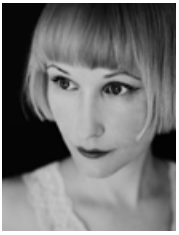
ARMENIA
Lusine Kharatyan



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CROATIA
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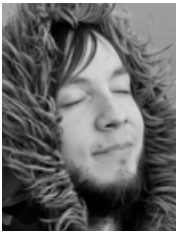


ESTONIA
Tõnis Tootsen

MONTENEGRO
Ilija Đurović

KOSOVO
Ag Apolloni

TABLE OF CONTENTS

5 **Foreword**

6 **European jury**

9 **Verdict of the European jury**

12 **The European Union Prize for Literature**

14 **ARMENIA**: Lusine Kharatyan

34 **CROATIA**: Martina Vidaić

42 **CYPRUS**: Hari N. Spanou

62 **CZECHIA**: Ondřej Štindl

74 **ESTONIA**: Tõnis Tootsen

88 **FINLAND**: Iida Rauma

100 **FRANCE**: Maud Simonnot

114 **KOSOVO**: Ag Apolloni

130 **LIECHTENSTEIN**: Anna Ospelt

140 **LUXEMBOURG**: Jeff Schinker

148 **MONTENEGRO**: Ilija Đurović

162 **POLAND**: Sabina Jakubowska

174 **SWEDEN**: Marit Kapla

FOREWORD

Dear readers,

So many new books, authors, stories and universes to discover! Literature in Europe is rich, creative and diverse. This anthology will help you discover books from 13 emerging European authors from Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Kosovo and many other countries. A true cultural and linguistic journey throughout the continent!

The 'Creative Europe programme' is proud to support the European Union Prize for Literature, which celebrates since 2009 the incredible creativity and diversity that can be found in Europe's contemporary literature scene.

The prize is emblematic of our long-term commitment to support the book sector in Europe, its competitiveness and its diversity: we give financial incentives to encourage the translation and the international promotion of European books – especially those from countries or languages less frequently present in bookstores.

2023 was also the year of the first edition of the Day of European Authors, an initiative led by Mariya Gabriel, at the time the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. It was an opportunity for 100 European writers to visit schools, debate on books and share the joy of reading and for 1 000 schools all over Europe to participate in reading sessions. We hope to see many more writers and schools involved next year for the second edition of the Day of European Authors, which will take place on 25 March 2024.

But now it is time to congratulate all nominated authors and the winner of the 2023 European Union Prize for Literature and discover their books!

Enjoy!

The 'Creative Europe programme' of the European Commission

EUROPEAN JURY

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE MEMBERS

Andrey Kurkov

Andrey Kurkov (born 23 April 1961 in Leningrad, Russia) is a Ukrainian novelist who writes in Russian. He is the author of more than 20 novels and 10 books for children. His work is currently translated into 42 languages. He has also written assorted articles for various publications worldwide.

For his novels and for his other literary and human rights activities he has been awarded the Halldor Laxness Prize (Iceland, 2022), the Légion d'Honneur award (France, 2015), the Medici Prize for best foreign novel (France, 2022), the Freedom of Expression Award (Index on Censorship, London, 2022), the Readers' Award (France, 2012), the Hans and Sophie Scholl Prize (Germany, 2022) and others. From 2018–2022, he was acting President of PEN Ukraine, running international and national literary and sociopolitical projects.

His books are full of black humour and Soviet/post-Soviet reality, with elements of surrealism.

Henrik Francke

Henrik Francke (born 1972) has been an agent at Oslo Literary Agency since 2016. He graduated in social anthropology at the University of Oslo and has also worked as a bookseller, translator and editor.

Imre Barna

Imre Barna is a writer, literary translator and editor born in Budapest in 1951. He received his university degree in Italian and German language and literature at ELTE, Budapest. He has been the director of the Európa Publishing House, director of the Hungarian Academy in Rome and chairman of the Hungarian Publishers and Booksellers Association. He writes essays, criticisms, proses and literary translations. He received the Wessely Prize (1989), József Attila Prize (2006) and the National Translator's Prize of the Italian government (Premio Nazionale per la Traduzione 2005–2007). He was awarded the Knight Degree and Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic (2003, 2018).

Koukla MacLehose

Koukla MacLehose was born in Athens and grew up in Greece, Germany, France and Italy.

She spent two years in North America after graduating in 'Lettres Modernes' at the Sorbonne, working first at Expo 67

in Montreal (French Pavilion), then as an assistant teacher at the French Lycée in New York.
From 1970 to 1975 she worked for an American advertising agency in Paris: Ogilvy & Mather. From 1975 to 1985, she was the foreign rights director for the publishing house Flammarion in Paris. Koukla left to marry fellow publisher Christopher MacLehose (then running The Harvill Press) in London, where she became a literary scout in February 1987, starting with four foreign publishers. By the end of the century, they were working with publishers in fourteen countries. In 2016 she gave 80% of the agency to two colleagues and went on scouting books written in French. She retired on 31 December 2022. The agency is now managed by Rebecca Servadio under the name of London Literary Scouting.

Sharon Galant

Sharon Galant has worked in publishing and the book industry for over 15 years. She started her career with Éditions Complexe, an independent publisher based in Brussels specialised in literature, history and international relations. In 2004 she moved to China where she managed a major English-language bookstore chain (Charterhouse Bookstores). In her role as buyer and events organiser, she reviewed virtually every title published about China and met new and upcoming authors, both Chinese and long-standing expats.
In 2009 she co-founded Zeitgeist Agency, an international literary agency with offices in Sydney and Brussels that represents authors from over 20 countries for book and screen rights. Her passion is to connect writers and publishers around the world.
Sharon is a fiction aficionado but has a soft spot for thought-provoking non-fiction. This stems from a previous career in international organisations (European Commission, CARE International) which brought her to live and work in different regions, including the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe.
Sharon holds a bachelor's degree in Economics and did a master's degree at the LSE in politics of world economy.

Sheila O'Reilly

Sheila O'Reilly has worked in the book industry for over 30 years.

Under her ownership, Dulwich Books was shortlisted in the 'Independent bookshop of the year' category of the British Book Awards in 2012 and 2013 before winning the overall award in 2014. Sheila is now the project manager for the Booksellers Association learning platform and since 2015 has been an independent bookshop mentor for the Unwin Charitable Trust / Booksellers Association scheme. She is a member of the Bookselling Ireland committee. In 2023 Sheila was selected to be a judge for the retail category of the British Book Awards.

Svetlozar Zhelev

Svetlozar Zhelev is the director of the National Book Centre at the National Palace of Culture in Sofia, Bulgaria. He holds a master's in History from Sofia University and a diploma on Corporate management from the Open University, London. He has been teaching 'Book publishing' as part of the master's program of Sofia University for more than 10 years. As an independent literary consultant, literary agent, professional reader and blogger, he is involved in a huge number of projects. Svetlozar Zhelev has worked in publishing since 1998. He was the publishing director of the publishing house Ciela from 2004 to 2012; marketing director of Colibri Publishers from 2013 to 2014; the founder, first publisher and editor-in-chief of *GRANTA Bulgaria*; member of the board of the Bulgarian Book Association from 2006 to 2010; co-founder of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation on creative writing and board member from 2007 to 2021; and president of the jury of the 'Translations' programme of the National Culture Fund of Bulgaria from 2019 to 2021.

As a jury member, he has been involved in the European Union Prize for Literature in 2021, the Novel of the Year Prize in 2019, 2020 and 2021, the Helikon Prize, the Askeer Prize for playwriting, Cultural Calendar and the 'Literature' programme of the Sofia Municipality, and many others.

Svetlozar Zhelev is the editor and author of five books. His latest one, *Love for Advanced Readers*, is a two-volume collection of texts of 88 contemporary Bulgarian poets and writers.

VERDICT OF THE EUROPEAN JURY

'First I want to thank my amazing colleagues from the jury, who made this literary journey through books and cultures unimaginable.
All 13 nominated books were great; I hope they will all be translated and I will read them in Bulgarian as well. They are very different in style, as themes, as messages, but at the same time united in the quality of literature, in the beauty of words, in humanism and empathy, in their search for universal values and personal self-knowledge.
Written in different languages, they all speak a single one. From Kosovo[1], Estonia, Liechtenstein and Luxembourg, to Czechia, Montenegro, Croatia and Poland, from Finland and Sweden in the north to Cyprus in the south, and from Armenia in the east to France in the west, mankind and its love, fears, happiness, struggle with evil and oneself, search for meaning and good, relationships with nature and society, pains and joys, from raising a child and a flower, to the horrors of war and death. Literature and its wealth give us the opportunity to get closer, to get to know each other, to overcome our traumas and to overcome our fears and our past, in order to build today the future we dream of.
Literature helps, heals and forgives.
It builds bridges, both outward to the world and inward to ourselves. It does not give ready answers, but asks questions – the crumbs by which we can find the way.
In the last month, while reading these wonderful books and talking with my amazing colleagues in the jury, I once again realised – perhaps even more strongly than ever before – how necessary it is for each person to find their own books, and their own paths to finding inner balance and harmony with the outside world. The wealth of literature gives us this opportunity. Different voices and perspectives help us to rediscover and heal ourselves.

(1) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

First I'll start with the five special mentions in alphabetical order.
It was not an easy process to choose the six books, nor to distinguish one winner among them. But we are all quite sure that these books and authors will be translated, read and understood, and will leave their mark on the consciousness of readers everywhere in Europe and the world. Now you will hear their names, remember them and read them.

Hari N. Spanou from Cyprus and her novel *The Outpost*.
Because she was able to convincingly show the continuity of time, and how history – ancient and recent – determines the thoughts and actions of modern man. Written with amazing warmth, the novel captivates the reader and allows us to better understand the anxieties and values of Cypriot society.

Tõnis Tootsen from Estonia and his *Pâté of the Apes: One Primate's Thoughts and Memories*.
We were blown away by the originality of this book, an intricate story of blue and red apes entangled in eternal conflict and power struggles, as well as Tootsen's vivid writing.
The world of monkeys and quasi-monkeys he constructs, with their bizarre apartheid and social-distancing rules, is a constant reminder of the fragility of our democracies and human societies. The novel explores several topics which are topical and universal, making the novel a perfect candidate for multiple translations across Europe. Following in the footsteps of George Orwell and Jonathan Swift, this is satire at its best.

Iida Rauma from Finland and her amazing novel *Destruction*.
Because of her strong individual voice. It has a strong message about the structures of society that fail to support its weakest members – children. It is an intense story about bullying and the exercise of power. But foremost, because it is a literary masterpiece, a unique work of art. It alters between narrative techniques and registers, facts and fiction, analytical and bewildering. This book is a shocking tableau of (not only) school violence in a country that is famous and internationally envied for its perfect public education system – but also, much more than this, of hatred and self-defence in this world.

Maud Simonnot from France and her amazing novel *The Hour of Birds*.
Because this novel, based on real facts, is about the right to be different. It is a tale of love, both maternal and among siblings. A story of violence and compromise. A story of child abuse and identity. There is a wealth of poetry and humanity in this short novel. With poetic prose, Simonnot's writing is almost musical with a perfect tone.

Ag Apolloni from Kosovo and his outstanding novel *Little Red Riding Hood: a tale for adults*.
Because of his amazing voice, narrative,

dialogue and the way of expressing some of the most terrible aspects of evil human deeds. The novel deals with an important subject – the rapes experienced by both men and women of Kosovo during the 1990s, which is treated with great sensitivity. It is also a love story between a playwright called Max and his young actress called Lorita. It is beautifully written, with a very good plot which keeps the reader turning the pages. A book which should appear all over Europe.

And the winner is: Martina Vidaić from Croatia and her novel *Bedbugs*!
Because of the beautiful writing, powerful metaphors and use of imagery.
Bedbugs is a brilliantly written novel about the motives of the physical surroundings we create for ourselves. Architecture, houses and furniture are skilfully handled to explore the book's themes of loneliness, identity and the difficulty of finding one's place in the world. But it's also an exciting piece of fiction, with great pace and high temperature. The prose is full of smart, surprising and often funny turns of phrase, with an attention to detail that clearly shows the author's experience as a poet.

Many of the nominated books are about war, trauma and pain. We now have war very close to us. I want to end with some words from one of the most prominent Bulgarian authors, Georgi Gospodinov, whose astonishing novel *Time Shelter* won the International Booker Prize this year.
In an essay on the war begun by the Russian dictator Putin against Ukraine, he said: "War will not end with the last bullet fired. It began years before the first shot and is likely to end years after the final one. But literature has a role: at the very least it can teach us resistance and empathy; it can offer us the tools with which to identify propaganda lies; it can preserve personal stories from the epicentre of pain, generate memory that will not be violated, and, if possible, console. Memory and culture are part of Europe's immune system. It must recognise and disarm the viruses of collective blindness, loss of reason, nationalistic madness and the birth of new dictators."

I hope, and I believe in this, literature will save us all.'

Svetlozar Zhelev, for the jury

THE EUROPEAN UNION PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is an annual initiative launched in 2009 that recognises the best emerging fiction writers in Europe. Its aim is to spotlight the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature in the field of fiction, promote the circulation of literature within Europe and encourage greater interest in non-national literary works.
The prize is open to 42 countries currently involved in the Creative Europe programme. Each year, national organisations in one third of the participating countries nominate a novel they trust has the potential to find an audience outside of their national borders, with all participating countries and language areas being represented over a 3-year cycle.
This fifth cycle of the project marks a restructuring of the prize, with a seven-member European jury now choosing one award winner for each edition of the EUPL, along with five special mentions.
All nominated authors will be promoted continuously on a European stage, aiming to reach a wider and international audience and to connect with readers beyond their national and linguistic borders.
The prize is financed by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union, which aims to achieve three main goals: promote the cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector, encourage the transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output and foster intercultural dialogue.

SELECTION PROCESS

The 13 nominated novels were proposed by national entities that are familiar with the literary scene of their country, used to promoting their own literature abroad and have expertise in literary quality and assessing the translatability potential of a book. The aim of the prize is to give international visibility to authors who are at the beginning of their

career in the country of their nationality/ residence and who have started to have international visibility. National selections are made on the basis of criteria stipulated by the EUPL Consortium in agreement with the European Commission, and fulfill the requirements listed below.

- The proposed book must be written in one or more of the officially recognised languages in that country.
- The author of the proposed book must have the nationality or be a permanent resident of the selected country.
- The proposed book must respect the European Union's values of respect and tolerance.
- The proposed book must demonstrate literary excellence and be translatable.
- The nominated book must ideally have been published no more than 18 months before the date of announcement of the prize winner.
- The nominated book must be the author's most recently published book.
- The author of the nominated book must have published between two and four fiction books in total (other genres are excluded, unless the author is already known on the international scene through this publication).
- The author of the nominated book cannot be currently employed by European institutions.
- All books published by the author must not have been translated into more than four languages.
- The selection of the national nominee must be the result of a consensus within the organisation.

All national organisations must respect the selection rules. Based on translated excerpts from the nominated books, the jury chooses one award winner and five special mentions. The jury's choice is made on the basis of a list of books nominated at the national level, one for each participating country.

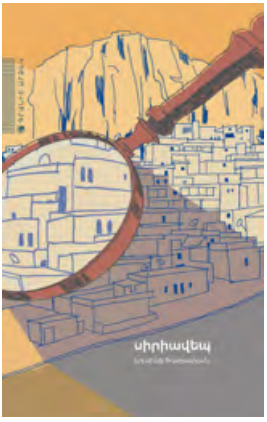
THE EUROPEAN JURY

The European jury is composed of seven members, all of whom are literary experts with highly recognised professional reputations and are competent and influential in the field of literature and translation. The members are appointed by the EUPL Consortium after consultation with experts in the sector. In each edition, experts are appointed to form the European jury. The members of the jury come from or represent countries not featured in the current edition of the prize.

THE CONSORTIUM

The EUPL is organised by a consortium of associations comprising the Federation of European Publishers (FEP) and the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF), with the support of the European Commission. These two federations are jointly responsible for setting up the European jury, organising the jury's announcement and celebrating the authors' achievements through a yearly dedicated literary event. They support the authors in promoting their work across Europe and beyond – online, in bookshops and at book fair events. Both organisations represent part of the book chain at the European level and work closely together to highlight the priorities in the sector.

ARMENIA



Lusine Kharatyan

Սիրիավեպ

A Syrian Affair

Granish, 2022
Language: Armenian
ISBN 978-9939-926-64-3

BIOGRAPHY

Lusine Kharatyan is a Yerevan-based writer, cultural anthropologist and translator. Born and raised in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia, she lived and studied in different parts of the world, including Egypt and the United States of America. Her writing is significantly influenced by her anthropological research, fieldwork, and travels. Kharatyan's first novel Ծուռ գիրք (*The Oblique Book*), was published in 2017. Her second book, a collection of short stories Անմոռուկի փակուղի (*Dead End Forget-me-not*), was published with a monetary prize from the first Yerevan Book Fest and shortlisted for the 2021 European Union Prize for Literature. In 2019 Kharatyan was awarded a grant from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Armenia for writing her second novel, Սիրիավեպ (*A Syrian Affair*), which was published in 2022. Kharatyan holds a master's degree in public policy from the University of Minnesota (2004), a diploma in demography from the Cairo Demographic Center (2000) and a diploma of higher education in history/sociocultural anthropology from Yerevan State University (1999). Since 2018, Kharatyan has been a member of the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

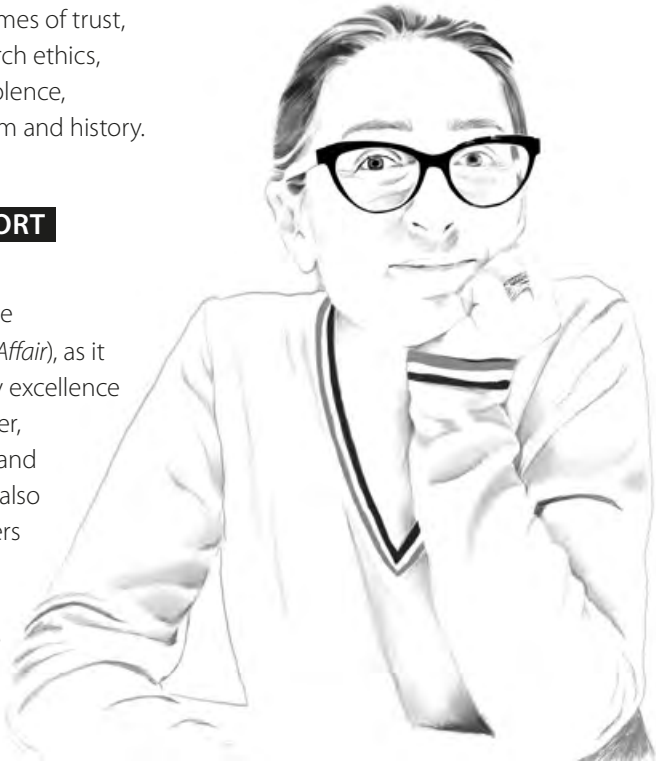
SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Astghik, Ester and Shushan are researchers from Armenia recruited by an unknown American organisation to conduct research on Syrian and Lebanese Armenians. For that purpose, the women have to travel to Syria and then Lebanon, where they will meet and interview local Armenians. Upon their arrival in Syria, they catch the attention of the Syrian Secret Service,

the Mukhabarat, who suspect them of being foreign agents spying for Israel and the United States. As they move in time and space, the women encounter different people and their stories. Woven into the main storyline of the novel, each story or encounter is also an autonomous, self-sufficient story in itself, thus creating and recreating a complex and multidimensional reality of the multiple contexts. On top of everything, the trio has to deal with each other and their pasts, while doing research and being followed and interrogated by the Secret Service. Loosely written in a travelogue style, the novel *Syriavep* (*A Syrian Affair*) is a semi-documentary fiction with some elements of science fiction. Set in pre-war Syria, it is an atmospheric, fast-paced, multi-layered and engaging story dealing with the themes of trust, fear, political beliefs, research ethics, womanhood, sexuality, violence, conspiracy, authoritarianism and history.

PEN ARMENIA'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

First and foremost, we have selected *Syriavep* (*A Syrian Affair*), as it demonstrates both literary excellence and is translatable. However, on top of its literary value and translatability, the novel is also quite informative for readers with a general interest in the political and cultural context of Syria before the crises; cultural, political and social diversity within the Armenian communities of the Middle East; manifestations of soviet emancipation in post-soviet women; the challenges of doing research and what it's like being a woman researcher in an authoritarian, patriarchal country. We also highly valued the feministic approach as it unveils the complex relationships between the conflicting and yet equally vibrant identities of the three women: scholars and mothers, soviet and post-soviet, adventurous and rebellious, curious and cautious at the same time. And last but not least, due to its adventurous plot and the elements of travelogue and detective literature, *A Syrian Affair* is a fascinating read on hard topics and keeps the reader curious till the very end.



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Լուսինե Խառատյան

ԶԵՏԵՂՎԱԾՆԵՐԸ

– Խումբ մը ստեղծած են, մեզ էլ հոն զետեղած են,– Դամասկոսի հայկական համայնքի հետ հանդիպման առաջին իսկ օրը մեզ այսպես ներկայացրեց ռուսախոս Էսթերը, որը չգիտես ինչու որոշել էր, որ ինքն արևմտահայերեն գիտի։

Մենք՝ զետեղվածներս, երեքն էինք։ Շուշանն ու Էսթերը համակուրսեցիներ էին, ԵՊՀ պատմության ֆակուլտետի ազգագրության ամբիոնի շրջանավարտներ։ Ես նրանցից մի քանի տարով փոքր էի ու սոցիոլոգիայի ֆակուլտետից։ Ծանոթացել էինք դեռ ուսանող ժամանակ, մի հետազոտական ծրագրի բերումով։ Դրանից հետո ես Շուշանի հետ էլի էի աշխատել։ Միասին մի քանի ծրագրերում էինք եղել, Հայաստանի տարբեր գյուղական ու քաղաքային բնակավայրերում աշխատել։ Էսթերի հետ համատեղ աշխատանքի որևէ լուրջ փորձ չունեի։ Միայն տարբեր կոնֆերանսների ժամանակ էինք խաչվել։ Սակայն Հայաստանից դուրս սա մեր երեքի առաջին համատեղ ուղևորությունն էր։ Էսթերը ռուսախոս ընտանիքից էր, ինքն էլ ռուսական կրթություն ուներ։ Ծնողները գիտնականներ էին, երկուսն էլ՝ քիմիկոս։ Մայրը Ռոստովից էր, հայրը՝ Բաքվից։ Ծանոթացել էին Մոսկվայում սովորելու տարիներին, սիրահարվել, ամուսնացել, տեղափոխվել Երևան՝ աշխատելու և ապրելու։ Մայրն ավանդական ռոստովահայ ընտանիքից էր, հայրը՝ արմատներով շուշեցի, Բաքվի պրոլետարիատը համալրած հայերից։ Ճիշտ է, ռուսական դպրոց էին հաճախել, իսկ այնուհետև սովորել Մոսկվայում, բայց երկուսն էլ մանկուց

արտասանում էին Նալբանդյանի «Ազատություն»-ն ու Չարենցի «Ես իմ անուշ Հայաստանի»-ն: Ռաֆֆու «Սամվել»-ի, Մուրացանի «Մարզպետունու» և Դեմիրճյանի «Վարդանանք»-ի ռուսերեն թարգմանությունները Էսթերի մայրական ռոստովյան տան գրադարանի ամենաընթերցված գրքերն էին: Իսկ հայրական Արմենիքենդի տան հսկայական գրադարանը հայալեզու էր՝ Խորենացուց մինչև Լեո: Էսթերի մանկության ամառները լցված էին ռոստովյան և արմենիքենդյան պատմություններով, բաքվեցի նավթարդյունաբերության մեջ աշխատող պապի հետ հայոց պատմության ընթերցանությամբ և երկար զրույցներով, ռոստովցի բժիշկ պապի հետ երկարատև ձկնորսության ժամանակ հայ-ռուսական հարաբերությունների քննարկումներով, հայերի ծագման վերաբերյալ խոսակցություններով: Բայց Էսթերի մանկության տարերքը արկածային գրականությունը, հնագիտական պեղումների մասին ֆիլմերն ու գրքերն էին: Նա մանկուց երազում էր հնագետ դառնալ, իսկ 12 տարեկանում ծնողների հետ Էրմիտաժ կատարած առաջին այցելությունից հետո առհասարակ քնում-վեր էր կենում հնագիտական երազներով: Նրան գրավում-տանում էր եգիպտական գանձերի, պեղումների, հող ու փոշու տակից պատմական արժեքներ գտնելու գաղափարը, և երևանյան բակի չորահողում ընկերների հետ պեղումներ էր կազմակերպում: Մի անգամ նույնիսկ ինչ-որ ոսկորներ գտան, ու Էսթերը որոշեց, որ դրանք պետք է ծնողների քիմիական լաբորատորիա անալիզի տանի՝ որոշելու ոսկորների տարիքն ու պատկանելությունը: Ծնողները տարան ոսկորները, գցեցին աղբամանը, բայց Էսթերին ասացին, թե դինոզավր է գտել, և որ այն ուղարկել են հետագա գիտական հետազոտությունների: Նույն օրն այդ մասին իմացավ ամբողջ բակը: Էսթերն, իհարկե, ծնողների՝ Մոսկվայից ու Լենինգրադից բերվող իր տարիքին համապատասխան հանրագիտարաններից ու տարբեր թեմատիկ գրքերից շուտով հասկացավ, որ իր գտածոն դժվար դինոզավր լիներ, բայց բակի համար առասպելը մնաց անփոփոխ:

Եվ պատահական չէր, որ դպրոցն ավարտելուն պես Էսթերն ընդունվեց ԵՊՀ պատմության ֆակուլտետ՝ հնագետ դառնալու անկոտրում մտադրությամբ։ Սակայն այդ մտադրությունը հենց առաջին կուրսում հանդիպեց «Հնագիտության հիմունքներ» առարկային, որը դասավանդող դասախոսն ինքն ասես վաղնջական հիմունք լիներ՝ առանց գիտության։ Հագուստը՝ միշտ ճենճահոտ ու պեղումնավտանգ, քսենոփոնյան ժամանակները դաջված հոգնած, գարեջրաքաղց աչքերում և դողացող ձեռքերում, իսկ սերն առ հնագիտություն՝ այնքան խորը թաքնված հոգնած մարմնի հազարավոր հնագիտական շերտերի տակ, որ անգամ գերժամանակակից գործիքներով պեղելը դժվար կլիներ։ Մի խոսքով՝ հնագիտության հանդեպ Էսթերի սերը շատ շուտով վերաճեց անսահման ձանձրույթի։ Փոխարենը՝ «Ազգագրության հիմունքների» դասախոսը կրակն աչքերում, լենինյան ոգևորությամբ ու անսահման սիրով պատմում էր Ավստրալիայի աբորիգենների հավատալիքների, Ամերիկայի բնիկների կենցաղի, սիբիրյան ու կովկասյան ժողովուրդների հետ իր անմիջական շփումների մասին՝ համալսարանի միակ դիդակտիկան՝ աշխարհի լեզվաընտանիքները պատկերող քարտեզը լցնելով իր աչքերից ու բերանից թափվող վառ տոտեմներով, զոհախարույկներով այրելով քարտեզն ու կուրսի աղջիկներին։ Էսթերի սրտին էլ կայծը կպավ, ու բոցավառվեց նրա ներսը դասախոսի ազգագրության խարույկից։ Էսպես հայտնվեց ազգագրության ամբիոնում։

Շուշանը ամբիոնի այդ տարվա ուսանողներից միակն էր, որ հայկական կրթություն ուներ։ Նա Իջևանից էր, իսկ ծնողները՝ Շամշադինի գյուղերից։ Մայրն ուսուցչուհի էր, հայրը՝ բանվոր։ Նա մեծացել էր ազգագրության մեջ, տեսել չխոսկան տատ, վախ չափող հարևաններ, անձամբ կատարել անձրևաբեր ծեսեր, սարի վարդավառ, պար բռնել շամշադինյան մշուշից հյուսված գյոռմափշտիկների հետ։ Այն, ինչ ազգագարագետների համար նյութ էր, Շուշանի կյանքն էր, օդ ու ջուրը, գյուղական ամառների համուհոտը։ Դասախոսի վառած կրակը նրա կողքով էր անցել

կամ հենց առաջին օրը մարել՝ վարդավառի ջրերում: Բայց միջի գյոռմափշտիկները հանգիստ չէին տալիս ու ավելին էին պահանջում՝ զգալ, իմանալ, տեսնել, ու նա տեղաշարժվում էր ազգագրության հիմունքների՝ աշխարհի լեզվաընտանիքների կամ ռասաների քարտեզներով, անցնում մայրցամաքից մայրցամաք, մանկությունը փնտրում մայաների և ացտեկների քաղաքակրթության մեջ, բուշմենների հետ որսի գնում, հոտենտոտների հետ ծիսական պարեր պարում:

Չնայած ակնհայտ տարբերություններին՝ Ազգային գրադարանում անցկացրած երկարուձիգ ժամերի շնորհիվ Շուշանն ու Էսթերն ընկերացան հենց առաջին կուրսում: Էսթերն օգնում էր ռուսերեն տեքստերը հասկանալ, Շուշանը՝ դրանք հայերեն կոնսպեկտել: Մի երրորդ ընկերուհի էլ ունեին՝ արթիկցի Կարինեն: Կուրսի լավ սովորողներն էին, որոնք իննսունականների ցուրտ ձմեռներն անց էին կացնում չջեռուցվող ընթերցասրահներում, նամակներ գրում Ղարաբաղում կռվող դասընկերներին, խմելու հավաքվում Շուշանի ուսանողական հանրակացարանի սենյակում կամ Կարինեի՝ Այգեստանում քրոջ հետ միասին վարձած նկուղային խոնավ սենյակում: Այստեղ լսում էին Էսթերի՝ նախապատերազմյան Երևանի հարուստ մշակութային կյանքի մասին պատմությունները, միասին պատրաստվում քննություններին, խոսում իրենց սիրահարվածություններից:

Ինչ-որ կետում՝ իննսունականների վերջին կամ երկուհազարականների սկզբին, երբ գիտական աթեիզմի մասնագետները դարձան աստվածաբան, իսկ կոմկուսի պատմությամբ ու տեսությամբ զբաղվողները՝ քաղաքագետ, ազգագրագետները դարձան մարդաբան: Ու մինչդեռ ազգային պետություն կառուցողներն ազգագրագետներից ակնկալում էին ազգայինի կանոնիկացում, հայի էությունն ու ինքնությունը բացատրող ունիվերսալ դեղատոմսեր և ազգային ու ավանդական տոները նշելու ինստրուկցիաներ, իրենց մարդաբան անվանող ազգագրագետները միշտ չէ, որ

բավարարում էին այս շրջանի էթնոպիայի[1] ազգայինի մոլուցքով տառապողների ցանկությունները։ Նրանցից շատերին չէին հուզում հայերի ծագման, բնիկության և այլ նման հարցերը, նրանք չէին լծվում տոլմայի հայկական լինելն ապացուցելու ազգանվեր գործին։ Եթե ժամանակին ազգագրությունը գաղութարարների գործիք էր տարբեր ազգերի մասին գիտելիք կուտակելու, նրանց հասկանալու, բացատրելու և ավելի հեշտ գաղութացնելու համար, իսկ խորհրդային ազգագրությունը մասամբ ծառայում էր խորհրդային ազգային քաղաքականության իրականացմանը, որպեսզի այդ բազմազգ երկրի անծայրածիր ծակուծուկերում ծվարած տարբեր ժողովուրդները խորհրդային գաղափարախոսությանը հարիր կերպով պահպանեին ու ներկայացնեին իրենց ազգայինը, ապա երիտասարդ Հայաստանի Հանրապետությունում ազգագրությունը, այնուհետև մարդաբանությունը, այդպես էլ լիովին չվերաձևակերպվեց, չնորացրեց իր ինքնությունը։ Այս մասնագիտության տեր մարդկանցից շատերը շարունակում էին զբաղվել ավանդական կենցաղի խնդիրներով, իսկ ոմանք մտան ավելի լայն հասարակագիտական և սոցիալական հետազոտությունների դաշտ։ Էսթերն ու Շուշանն այդ դաշտում էին։

Ի՞նչ պատմեմ իմ մասին։ Ծնվել եմ Երևանում, մեծացել քաղաքի արվարձաններից մեկում։ Ծնողներս ինժեներ էին։ Սովետի փլուզման տարիներին, երբ փակվեցին գործարանները, հայրս մեկնեց Մոսկվա՝ բախտը փորձելու։ Ու այդպես էլ չեկավ։ Բախտն իրեն փորձեց մի ռուս կնոջ հետ։ Դպրոցն ավարտելիս անգլերեն չգիտեի։ “I am a table” մակարդակի էի։ Բայց մի տարվա պարապմունքները մեծ արդյունք տվեցին, ու 19 բալ հավաքեցի ընդունելության քննության ժամանակ։ Երրորդ կուրսում որպես օգնական աշխատանքի անցա Հայաստանի Ամերիկյան Համալսարանում։ Սկզբում ամերիկացիներն ինչ

[1] Էթնիկ ուտոպիա։ Եզրը շրջանառել է արձակագիր Գևորգ Տեր-Գաբրիելյանը։

ասում էին, միայն ժպտում էի, որովհետև բան չէի հասկանում։ Բայց մի կես տարուց սկսեցի հասկանալ։ Գրադարանից էլ գեղարվեստական գրքեր էի տուն տանում՝ Հեմինգուեյ, Սելինջեր։ Էդպես լեզուս ահագին բացվեց։ Էնքան, որ հետո անգամ թոյֆլի քննություն հանձնեցի ու գնացի Ամերիկա սովորելու։ Ինքնուրույն։ Ափսոս միայն, որ մեր սերունդն առանձնապես մասնագիտության ընտրություն չէր կարող անել։ Դեռ չգիտեինք՝ ինչպես ինքնուրույն դիմել ամերիկյան կամ եվրոպական համալսարան, ինչպես կրթաթոշակ ստանալ։ Դիմում էինք միայն դեսպանատան հայատարարած ծրագրերին։ Դրանք էլ ունեին մասնագիտությունների սահմանափակ ցանկ, ու դիմորդները հաճախ ստիպված այդ ցանկից ընտրում էին ամենահամապատասխանը։ Ինձ ամենահամապատասխանը «քաղաքագիտությունն» էր։ Խառնվածքով արկածախնդիր էի ու ամեն տեղ քիթս խոթում էի համալսարանական տարիներին։ Հետազոտություններում սկսեցի ընդգրկվել երկրորդ կուրսից։ Հարցումներ էինք անում։ Հետո քանակական հետազոտությունները՝ իրենց միագիծ «հա-չէ» պատասխաններով, ինձ ձանձրացրին։ Երևի մեր բակի տղաների «ինքը ինձ հա ա ասել»-ն ու աչքերի հորթային արտահայտությունն էր, որ ամեն անգամ դեմս էր գալիս հերթական «հա-չէ»-ն լսելիս։ Հարցազրույցի մեջտեղում։ Էդպես սկսեցի խորանալ որակական հետազոտությունների մեջ, որտեղ կարելի էր բազում ինչուների հետևից գնալ, ու որտեղ ես երբեք ոչ «հա», ոչ էլ «չէ» չէի լսի։ Պատասխանն ավելի մոտ կլիներ ֆեյսբուքյան “It’s complicated”-ին։ Էդպես ծանոթացա ազգագրագետների հետ ու ինձ համար լրիվ նոր դաշտ բացահայտեցի։ Ոչ միանշանակության դաշտը, որը լի էր պատմություններով։ Իրական ու հորինովի, բայց շատ ավելի արժանահավատ։ Որովհետև կյանքում բարդ է հասկանալ, տարբերել իրականն ու հորինովին։ Ինչ-որ պահից երկուսն էլ լիիրավ իրական ու հավաստի են։ Ես ինչ-որ տեղ արանքներում էի. ոչ ազգագրագետ, ոչ մարդաբան, ոչ սոցիոլոգ, ոչ քաղաքագետ։ Ամեն ինչից մի քիչ-մի քիչ՝ մասնագիտական

ոչ հստակ ինքնությամբ մեկը, որն ինքն իրեն երևի որպես... «պոլյեվիկ» կձևակերպեր։ Դաշտավիկ։ Դաշտագետ։ Չեմ գտնում հայերենը։ Անգլերենն էլ չեմ գտնում։ Դաշտային հետազոտության մասնագետ։ Դաշտային ծաղիկ մը։ Քամուն տրված։ Դաշտից տեսություն գնացող, ոչ թե հակառակը։ Ուսանածս բոլոր գիտակարգերի մեթոդաբանությամբ։ Առանց տեսությունը դաշտի վրա փաթաթելու։ Առանց դաշտը էս կամ էն գիտնական-գաղութարարի հորինած շրջանակի մեջ տեղավորելու։ Այս այցին գրեթե չէինք պատրաստվել։ Դժվար է Հայաստանում գիտությամբ զբաղվելը։ Երբեմն՝ անհնար։ Քանդված համակարգ, որի առարկայական վկայությունը շենքերն են՝ նախկինում հսկայական գիտական համալիրներ, որոնք ճռռալով, ընթացիկ երկրաշարժերից լայն ու երկար ճեղքեր տալով, մի կերպ իրենց հնամաշ գոյությունն են քարշ տալիս ու վերքերը լիզում։ Անմխիթար զուգարաններ՝ ժանգագույն զուգարանակոնքերով ու զուգարանի թղթի բացակայությամբ։ Մշտապես բաց ծորակներ ու հոսող ջուր։ Աթոռներ։ Երբեմն՝ փոխված, օֆիսային, սև, երբեմն՝ հին, փայտյա։ Սեղաններ։ Խառը, հին ու նոր՝ վրան օգտագործվող ու չօգտագործվող համակարգիչներ։ Գրապահարաններ։ Թվային դարում։ Ծերակույտ ակադեմիա։ Կոպեկներ՝ աշխատավարձի տեսքով։ Հնամաշ, խունացած գիտական միտք ու լեզու։ Տեխնիկական ու բնական գիտություններ՝ առանց տեխնիկայի ու արդյունաբերության։ Հասարակագիտություն՝ կտրված հասարակությունից։

Անկախացումից հետո հասարակագետների «ճարպիկ» հատվածն իր օրվա հացը հիմնականում վաստակում է միջազգային կազմակերպությունների դրամաշնորհներով ու հետազոտական ծրագրերով։ Մենք էլ։ Երեխաների կրթություն, առողջություն, տուն-տեղ։ Կարիքներ, որոնք ոչ մի կերպ հնարավոր չէ հոգալ ակադեմիայից ստացվող չնչին աշխատավարձով, և մնում են միայն կիրառական հետազոտությունները՝ ուրիշների պատվերներով եկող ինչուներ, սեփական ինչուները ձևակերպելու համար

ժամանակի, լեզվի, միջոցների ու տարածքի անհնարինություն։

Հայ-ամերիկյան ինչ-որ կորած ու անհայտ կազմակերպություն դրամաշնորհային մրցույթ էր հայտարարել՝ Մերձավոր Արևելքի հայկական համայնքների ուսումնասիրության։ Հիմնադրամը հայի ազգանուն էր կրում։ Ամենօրյա վազքի արանքում մի օր աչքովս ընկավ էդ հայտարարությունը ամուսնուս համակարգչի էկրանին։ Զանգեցի Շուշանին ու Էսթերին։ Հանդիպեցինք, քննարկեցինք, յուրաքանչյուրս մեր երեխաների կարիքները հիշեցինք, նաև՝ արկածախնդիր հետաքրքրասիրությունն ու քիթներս ամեն տեղ խոթելու ցանկությունը, ու առանց երկար–բարակ մտածելու՝ հայտ ուղարկեցինք։ Ուզում էինք հետազոտել Սիրիայի և Լիբանանի հայկական համայնքները։ Ազգագրական հետազոտություն՝ հարցազրույցներով ու ներգրավված դիտարկմամբ։ Նպատակը՝ հասկանալ համայնքի տոնածիսական կյանքում տեղի ունեցած փոփոխությունները Սիրիայի և Լիբանանի միջավայրի ազդեցությամբ։ Էսպիսի «ինչու»։ Նախնական հայտը նշված մեյլին ուղարկելուց մեկ շաբաթ անց նամակ ստացանք հիմնադրամից։ Ասում էին, որ իրենց ինքնության հարցերն են հետաքրքրում, և դատելով մեր CV-ներից՝ մենք ծանոթ ենք ինքնության պրոբլեմատիկային ու հարցադրումներին, արել էինք ինքնությանն առնչվող որոշ հետազոտություններ նախկինում։ Մի խոսքով՝ հարցնում էին, թե արդյոք կարող ենք ավելացնել ինքնությանն առնչվող հարցեր կամ փոխել հետազոտական խնդիրն ու հայտը։ Իրենք հասկանում են, որ տոնա-ծիսական կյանքը դրա մաս է, բայց միայն մի մաս, իսկ իրենք ավելի լայն հետազոտության կարիք ունեն։ Կուզեին, որ անդրադառնանք նաև համայնքային կառույցներին, ինքնակազմակերպման ձևերին, Հայաստանի, ինչպես նաև այլ երկրների հայկական համայնքների հետ կապերին, դիրքավորմանը՝ Սիրիայում/Լիբանանում և սփյուռքում։ Հավաքվեցինք Էսթերենց տանը։ Սուրճի ու էկլերի շուրջ փոխեցինք հայտը, ու մեր՝ ինքնության հարցերի հանդեպ մեծագույն հետաքրքրությունը հայտնող նամակով

ուղարկեցինք: Համոզված էինք, որ էշը ցեխից հաստատ կհանենք: Մանրուքների մասին կարող ենք հետո մտածել: Էլ ո՞վ կարող էր դա մեզնից լավ անել: 2007 թվի Հայաստանում լավ անգլերեն իմացող ու ազգագրական դաշտային աշխատանքի մեծ փորձով հետազոտողներն այնքան էլ շատ չէին: Մի շաբաթ էլ մեզնից գոհ-գոհ ֆոֆոացինք, մինչև եկավ հաստատող նամակն ու պարզվեց, որ հիմնադրամը մեզ պատրաստության համար երեք շաբաթ է տալիս: Պետք է գնայինք Սիրիա, այնուհետև հենց այնտեղից ցամաքային ճանապարհով անցնեինք Լիբանան:

Ամենքս մեր գործերով ու առօրյա հոգսերով՝ երկու շաբաթը թռավ, ու բավարար ժամանակ չհատկացրինք Սիրիայի համայնքին ավելի լավ ծանոթանալուն, գրականություն կարդալուն: Հազիվ հասցրինք վիզաներ ստանալ, հարցարանների վրա աշխատել, մի երկու կարճ բան կարդալ ու ճամփորդությունից մի քանի օր առաջ խորհրդակցել արաբագետ ընկերբարեկամների հետ: Ճամպրուկները հավաքեցինք ու՝ հայդե՛ Սիրիա:

A Syrian Affair

Lusine Kharatyan
Translated into English by Nazareth Seferian

The Emplaced

"They've set up a group and emplaced us there," this was how Esther—whose first language is Russian but, for some reason, believed that she could speak Western Armenian—introduced us on the very first day at a meeting with Armenian community representatives in Damascus.([1])

The emplaced consisted of three of us. Shushan and Esther had studied together, both graduating from the department of ethnography in the faculty of history at Yerevan State University. I was several years younger and had majored in sociology. We had known each other since our student days, and had first met during a research project. I had worked with Shushan on another occasion after that. She and I had been involved in several programmes together, worked in various rural and urban locations in Armenia. I had no real experience of working with Esther. But our paths had crossed at several conferences. This was our first trip out of Armenia together. Esther came from a family of Russian speakers, and Russian had been the language of her education. Her parents were scientists, both had built careers in chemistry. Her mother was from Rostov, her father from Baku. They had met as students in Moscow, fallen in love, married, and then moved to Yerevan to live and work. Her mother was from a family of traditional Rostov Armenians, and

([1]) There are two main variants of the Armenian language – Eastern Armenian (which is spoken in the Republic of Armenia, from where Esther and her friends are, and Western Armenian, which is spoken by the Armenians in Syria and some other Diaspora communities. Though mostly mutually intelligible, some words from one variant sound out of place or unnecessarily complicated in the other, as "emplace" would in a sentence like this [translator's note].

her father's family was from the Armenian proletariat of Baku, with roots in Shushi. While they had gone to Russian-language schools and then furthered their education in Moscow, both of them had also learned to recite Armenian pieces like Nalbandyan's *Freedom* and Charents' *My Sweet Armenia* as children. The most popular books in the library at Esther's mother's childhood home in Rostov were Russian translations of *Samvel* by Raffi, *Marzpetuni* by Muratsan, and *Vardanank* by Demirchyan. The massive library in her father's childhood home in Armenikend([2]) consisted of mostly Armenian-language publications – from Khorenatsi to Leo. The summers of Esther's childhood were full of all kinds of stories from Rostov and Armenikend, lessons in Armenian history and long conversations with her grandfather, who worked in the oil industry in Baku, discussions about Armenian-Russian relations and chats about the origins of Armenians during lengthy fishing trips with her other grandfather in Rostov. But Esther's childhood passions were adventure fiction as well as books and films about archaeological expeditions. She had always dreamed of becoming an archaeologist and, after her first visit to the Hermitage with her parents when she was 12, every moment she spent awake or asleep was filled with dreams of archaeology. She was captivated and carried away by thoughts of finding Egyptian treasures, leading expeditions, discovering historical artifacts beneath layers of soil and dust, and so she would organise excavations with friends in the dry soil of their Yerevan courtyard. On one occasion, they even found some bones, and Esther decided that she had to take them to her parents' chemistry lab for analysis, to determine their age and origins. The parents took the bones and later threw them in a garbage bin, but told Esther that she had found a dinosaur, and that the specimens had been forwarded to another facility for further examination. The whole neighbourhood heard this news the same day. Esther was,

([2]) An Armenian district in Baku [translator's note].

naturally, quick to learn from the encyclopaedias that her parents brought from Moscow and Leningrad that it was highly unlikely to have been a dinosaur, but that version of events remained popular in the neighbourhood.

It was no coincidence that, right after finishing school, Esther applied to the faculty of history at Yerevan State with the unwavering intention to become an archaeologist. But in the very first year of her studies, that intention happened upon a course called "Introduction to Archaeology" taught by someone who seemed to be the embodiment of everything archaic, without even a hint of science. His clothes always smelled of grease and looked like they had been buried somewhere for a while, the era of Xenophon seemed to be engraved in his tired and beer-thirsty eyes and trembling hands, and he had a passion for this discipline that was buried so deep in the many archaeological layers of his exhausted body that even the most modern equipment would have difficulty excavating it. In a word, Esther's passion for archaeology quickly transformed into endless boredom. Instead, the professor for a course called "Introduction to Ethnography" had fire in his eyes, the enthusiasm of Lenin, and boundless love as he talked about the beliefs of the aboriginal people of Australia, the everyday life of the natives of America, and his own direct interaction with the peoples of Siberia and the Caucasus, filling the only audio-visual material the university had—a map of the language families of the world—with the bright totems that popped out of his eyes and mouth, engulfing the map and the girls of the class in sacrificial flames. The spark also caught in Esther's heart, and her inner world was lit up with the fire of this professor's ethnography. And that was how she ended up at the department of ethnography.

Shushan was the only student at that department that year who had been educated in Armenian. She was from Ijevan, while her parents had been from the villages of Shamshadin. Her mother was a teacher, her father, a factory worker. She had grown up in what ethnogra-

phers studied – she had seen a silent grandmother, neighbours that muttered incantations to overcome fear, she had personally carried out rain dances, played during the water festival in the mountains, and pranced with the goblins some people believed they saw in the Shamshadin fog. Whatever ethnographers considered to be worthy material had actually simply been a part of Shushan's life, her air and water, her everyday existence in the village. The professor's fire had bypassed her, or perhaps it had been extinguished in one of the splashes of the water festival. But the goblins inside kept poking her and asking to sense, learn, and see more, making her study more closely the maps of language families or racial groups presented during the introduction to ethnography, shifting from continent to continent, seeking her childhood among the Mayan and Aztec civilisations, hunting with the Bushmen, and participating in ritual dances with the Hottentots.

Despite their obvious differences, Shushan and Esther became friends in their first year, thanks to the many long hours they spent together at the National Library. Esther helped Shushan make sense of texts in Russian, while Shushan helped Esther summarise those texts in Armenian. Another girl was part of their trio – Karine from Artik. They were the best students of that cohort, the ones that spent the cold winters of the 1990s in unheated reading rooms, who wrote letters to their classmates that were fighting in the Karabakh War, got together for drinks at Shushan's dormitory room or the damp basement that Karine and her sister rented in Aygestan. This is where they would hear stories from Esther about the rich cultural life in pre-war Yerevan, study together for exams, and talk about their latest crush.

At some point in the late 90s or the early 2000s, when specialists in scientific atheism turned into theologists, and those studying the history and theory of the Communist Party transformed into political scientists, ethnographers transitioned into anthropologists. And while the builders of the nation state expected ethnographers

to canonise the elements constituting a nation, and provide universal formulae explaining the essence and identity of the Armenians as well as the instructions for observing national and traditional holidays, the ethnographers-turned-anthropologists did not always satisfy the desires of those that suffered from a mania for "ethnopia".([3]) Many of them were not interested in issues concerning the origins and native belonging of the Armenians, and they were not tasking themselves with gathering evidence to prove that *dolma* was an Armenian dish. While ethnography was once a tool for colonialists to gather information about various ethnic groups and to better understand them, analyse them, and facilitate their colonisation, and Soviet ethnography partially served the implementation of the Soviet nationality policy, so that the various peoples living in the vast recesses of that multinational state would observe and preserve their national features in accordance with the Soviet ideology, ethnography—followed by anthropology—in the young Republic of Armenia, did not manage to fully redefine itself or gain a new identity. Many people in this profession continued the study of traditional practices, while others entered the broader fields of social studies and research. This was the field where Esther and Shushan had found themselves.

What can I say about myself? I was born in Yerevan and grew up in the city's outskirts. My parents were engineers. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, when factories shut down, my father went to Moscow to seek his fortune. And he never came back. His fortune and a Russian woman had sought him instead. I did not speak English when I graduated from school. The best I could do was "I am a table." But I studied hard for a year and achieved impressive results – I managed to get 19 out of 20 in the university admission exams. During my third year, I got a job as an administrative assistant at the American University of Armenia. At first,

([3]) Ethnic utopia – a term introduced by Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan

I would only smile at everything the Americans said, because I couldn't understand a word. But, in about half a year, I began to make sense of it. And I made good use of the library, taking home all kinds of fiction – Hemingway, Salinger. I made a lot of progress that way. To the extent that I managed to pass the TOEFL and go to the States to continue my education there. On my own. The only thing was that our generation did not have much of a choice when it came to the programmes available to us. We had not yet learned how to apply directly to US and European universities and how to get scholarships. We could only apply through programmes that the Embassy organised. But those were limited to a few disciplines and applicants were forced to pick a major that was closest to what they wanted to do. The one that was closest to mine was "political science". I was adventurous by nature and kept sticking my nose into all kinds of places. I got into research projects in my second year. We ran surveys. But those quantitative studies, with their "yes-no" closed questions, soon bored me. Perhaps it was because every time I asked a "yes-no" question, I recalled the boys of our neighbourhood shouting "She said yes!" with their eyes round and wide, like those of young bulls. In the middle of the interview. And this is why I started to work more on qualitative studies, where I could pursue a whole range of whys, and where I would never have to hear another "yes" or "no" again. The response would be closer to that Facebook option – "it's complicated". That was how I started working with ethnographers, and I discovered a whole new field. A field of ambiguity, full of stories. Real and imagined, but much more credible. Because in life, it's difficult to differentiate between the real and the imagined. At some point, they are both completely real and valid. And I was somewhere in between – I was neither an ethnographer, nor an anthropologist, neither a sociologist, nor a political scientist. There was a little bit of all that in me, but I was someone without a clear professional identity, someone who should present themselves as... I guess the word would be *polyevik*, the Russian word for a field worker. A field scholar. I don't know what the right word

would be, neither in Armenian nor English. A specialist in field research. A field blossom. Facing the wind. Someone who goes from the field toward theory, not the other way around. Using methodologies from all the disciplines I had studied. Without forcing theory on the field. Without forcing the field into a frame thought up by one theoretician-colonizer or another.

We had barely prepared for this visit. It's difficult to do research in Armenia. Sometimes, impossible. The system had collapsed, and this took the physical form of its buildings – academic institutions that were huge in the past now creaked, bearing wide and long cracks from the earthquakes that had shaken them, barely managing to eke out an existence and licking their wounds. Their toilets were in terrible shape – the bowls were rust-coloured, and there was no toilet paper to be seen. The taps always open and water constantly running. The chairs. Sometimes updated with office furniture that was black, sometimes old, wooden. The tables. A mix of old and new, with computers on them that were or were not used. The shelves. In the digital age. An academy of old people. Small change as salary. Faded, worn out academic ideas and words. Technical and natural sciences, without any technology or industry. Social sciences that were cut off from society.

After independence, those among the most "agile" social scientists began to earn their daily bread through the grants and research projects of international organisations. And so did we. Education for the kids, health issues, house maintenance costs. These were all needs that were impossible to cover using the miserly salaries offered in academia, and all that remained was to do applied research commissioned by a third party – asking someone else's whys, with no time, language, resources, or space to pose one's own questions.

An unknown and mainly invisible Armenian-American organisation had announced a competition for a grant to study the Armenian communities in the Middle East. The foundation bore the name of

an Armenian family. One day, in a moment between running other tasks, I came across the ad for that opportunity on my husband's computer screen. I called Shushan and Esther. We met and talked about it, each of us recounting our own children's needs as well as our sense of adventure and curious desire to stick our noses everywhere, and without much further thought, we submitted an application. We wanted to study the Armenian communities in Syria and Lebanon. An ethnographic study, with interviews and participant observation. The objective would be to see any changes in the ritual and festive life of the communities as influenced by the Syrian and Lebanese setting. That was the "why". A week later, we received a reply from the foundation. They said that they were interested in issues of identity and, judging from our CVs, this was a topic where we could understand the existing issues and questions, given that we had carried out research on the topic of identity in the past. They basically asked if we could either add questions on identity to our research plan or whether we could refocus on identity and resubmit our application. They understood that the rituals and festivities were part of this, but they were only a part, while they needed a broader study. They also wanted us to cover the community structures, their approach to self-organisation, their communication with Armenia and Armenian communities in other countries, their positioning in Syria/Lebanon, and in the Diaspora. We got together at Esther's place, made changes in the application around coffee and eclairs, and sent it with a cover letter expressing the greatest of interest in identity-related research. We were sure that we would be able to manage. We could worry about details later. Who could do it better than us? In 2007, there weren't many researchers in Armenia that spoke English and had experience in ethnographic fieldwork. So, we went about our daily tasks in a self-satisfied way for another week before the confirmation message arrived and we learned that the foundation had given us just three weeks to prepare. We would go to Syria first, and then travel by road from there to Lebanon.

The next two weeks flew by as each of us ran our own errands; we were unable to allocate enough time to learn more about the Armenian community in Syria or read appropriate literature. We barely managed to arrange our visas and work on the interview guides, read a couple of small things and talk to a few friends who had a background in Arabic studies. We packed our bags and it was *yalla* to Syria.

AWARD WINNER

CROATIA

Martina Vidaić

Stjenice

Bedbugs

Naklada Ljevak, 2021
Language: Croatian
ISBN: 978-953-355-536-2

BIOGRAPHY

Martina Vidaić was born in Zadar, Croatia on 19 February 1986. She completed her studies in Croatian language and literature at the University of Zadar. In 2011 she won the most important national poetry award – the Goran prize for young poets – and for that occasion her first book of poetry, *Era gmazova* (*Era of the Reptiles*), was published. Her poems have been published in several Croatian and international anthologies. In 2016 her collection *Tamni čovjek Birger* (*Dark Man Birger*) was published. Her next poetry book, *Mehanika peluda* (*Pollen Mechanics*), was published in 2018 and awarded for being the best poetry book written in Croatian in a 2-year period. Her first novel *Anatomija štakora* (*Anatomy of Rats*) was published in 2019 and was acclaimed by the critics and well received by readers in Croatia. Her next poetry book, *Trg, tržnica, nož* (*Square, Market, Knife*), published in 2021, won the Janko Polić Kamov Award. Her latest book is the novel *Stjenice* (*Bedbugs*), published in November 2021.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

A young architect deals with the loss of her partner by writing a letter. In the letter, i.e. the entire novel, the protagonist tells her story while walking around the city and contemplating the ugliness of the streets, meeting unknown people and remembering some situations and details from her previous life. After losing perspective in Zagreb, she returns to her hometown where she meets her dying mother and has to navigate other complicated family relationships. The narrator, with her keen eye and knowledge of human psychology, pictures the details of the surrounding spaces, houses, streets and human characters whose destinies are presented through tiniest detailed excerpts and peculiar life scenes. Like the protagonist, the reader continuously asks questions: how can we face life in all its complexity

and how can we arrange the world to avoid things which would hurt us? The main characters – the protagonist, whose surname Hrabrov means 'courage', and the addressee named Hladna (which means 'cold') – discuss what to do knowing that all the people are deeply cold and unable to help anyone but themselves. We are alone and we recognise the same loneliness within our family, friends and everyone else. There are also reflections of that loneliness in the material world around us.

CROATIAN LITERATURE'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

Bedbugs, by acclaimed poet and author of *Anatomy of Rats*, Martina Vidaić, in a particular and somewhat experimental way, deals with some of the basic struggles surrounding the modern individual – loneliness, anxiety, trauma, attempts to take one's own life back in their hands and understanding one's own identity, which always requires one to look into the past. This complex novel, narrated as an uninterrupted whole, puts forth a dynamic depiction of a gripping plot. Written as a confession to a mysterious person characterised solely as 'the Cold One', it functions as the heroine's stream of consciousness. The narrator is a young architect, scarred by the suppressed fears, secrets and traumas which she has battled with and which cause her to run away – first from her apartment and then from her life, marked by past events which have brought her to the brink of suicide. The novel follows the heroine's irrational footsteps through the streets of Zagreb, shifting to the space of Dalmatian coast and islands, which was convincingly executed in terms of atmosphere, but which also opens the door to a parade of interesting characters. It is the very return to her hometown that offers some of the answers that the heroine is looking for and reveals the source of her flight. The novel, which bears elements of psychological, family and existential novels, takes a deep look into the heroine's traumatic wounds. Poet by vocation, Martina Vidaić weaves brilliant poetic miniatures at textual micro levels, and the recollection technique and form of the novel open a space for her to demonstrate her command of language and its nuances. After all the personal turmoil, the heroine is faced with the actual Zagreb earthquake, which leads her to reflect on the ideal home, which is more than a building in space, but also some sort of a 'house of being'.

Stjenice

Martina Vidaić

Jaja su se kuhala, brojila sam u sebi sekunde. Sto. Sto pedeset. Dvjesto. Kad bi barem, mislila sam, izvadila ta jaja u idućih tridesetak sekundi. Dvjesto dvadeset. Dvjesto dvadeset pet. Dvjesto četrdeset. Kad bi ih izvadila sad, mislila sam, i ona i ja bile bismo spašene. Još nije prekasno da ostanu dovoljno meka da kažem: «Sićaš li se kad si za maškare..?» Pa da se ona zacrveni, razvedri i prizna: «Naravno!» Pa da Jere kaže, posprdno ali dobrodušno: «A vas dvi...» Pa da se svi skupa nađemo u smijehu i dugo prepričavamo kako je ono jednom Kate za maškare, ne želeći uništavati korisne žutanjke i bjelanjke kao ostala dječurlija, ponijela za bacanje na fasade kuhana jaja, namjeravajući ih kasnije, kad nitko ne bude gledao, pokupiti, donijeti kući i pojesti, ali ih je kuhala prekratko pa su ostala meka, i žutanjci su se ipak razmazali po nečijoj kući. Takva je bila naša Kate: uvijek u težnji da bude savršena i uvijek s nekom komplikacijom na plećima zbog te težnje. Ili me sjećanje varalo? Promatrala sam je dok je sjedala za stol noseći zdjelu punu jaja i dva mala tanjura s priborom. Djelovala je usklađeno s vlastitim pokretima i s prostorom, kao da uopće ne žali što je odustala od Medicine i vratila se roditeljima. Primaknula sam se. Jaja su bila sasvim tvrdo kuhana. Očistila sam ih, podijelila vilicom i posolila. Gledala sam sir i rajčice koje je upravo stavljala na stol. Hladna, ne možeš ni zamisliti koliko je bila mršava, onda u Zagrebu, na Medicini. Zašto sam je vidjela samo dva puta u te tri godine? Zašto se nisam više brinula za nju? Sjećala sam se da smo se našle, oba puta, u dvorištu Studentskog na Savi, sjećala sam se da je bila kao ptičica u snijegu pod debelom bijelom bundom i prevelikom kapom, ali nisam se mogla sjetiti zašto sam je bila spremna ostaviti da izdahne u hladnoći. Iz straha? Ili običnog ne-

mara? Gutala sam jaja kao što gladni gutaju, ali svejedeno su teško klizila niz grlo. Zamirisao je kravlji sir. Njegova bijela boja bila je identična boji tanjura na kojem se nalazio, tako da se činilo kao da je sir ranjivo mjesto tanjura, meka grba u kojoj je razotkrivena lažna kompaktnost keramike. Kapljice vode, načas napete, pucale su i klizile po neprirodno pravilnoj kori rajčica. I ti ljudi s druge strane stola, mogla sam čuti kako im pod zubima krckaju sjemenke i padaju niz jednjak u želudac da opet izađu van. Sve je bilo tako glupo, tako uzaludno. Tako užasno, Hladna. Odložila sam vilicu i pokrila oči dlanovima. «Što ti je?» upita Jere. «Ništa», rekoh. Spustila sam ruke. «Ovdi je vruće u pičku materinu», ustvrdila sam, pokušavajući zvučati vedro. Gledali su me, više začuđeno nego zabrinuto. Ustala sam, pomislivši načas da se jednostavno pokupim i odem, ali onda ipak rekoh: «Moram pišati.» Zaključala sam se u zahod, sjela na školjku i pokušavala se pribrati. «Sjeti se zašto si tu», šaptala sam si. Ali koliko god se trudila, nisam se mogla uvjeriti da je ikad postojao jasan cilj koji sam željela postići. Zapalila sam stan, pa su tinejdžeri vikali pokraj «džamije», pa sam otišla na kolodvor i kupila kartu. Tako je bilo. Što se nalazilo ispod toga, koju sam logiku slijedila, nisam mogla dokučiti. Policija će me svejedno naći, a novca za posuđivanje, čak i kad bih uspjela prevaliti molbu preko jezika, u ovoj kući ionako nikad nije bilo. Zašto sam onda tu? Brojila sam četkice u čaši. Ne četiri. Pet. Sad je s njima živio i Jerin sin, momak kojeg je majka dovukla s Kosova prije pet-šest godina i ostavila s ocem kojeg ne poznaje. Pokušavala sam dokučiti koja je četkica njegova, ali sve su izgledale isto, osim Draganove, koja je djelovala i kao da je korištena godinama i kao da se uopće ne koristi. Tješilo me: jedna od četiri četkice mogla je biti i moja. Razgledala sam prostor. Sve je izgledalo onako kako je oduvijek izgledalo. Crvenosmeđe pločice dolje, blijedoplave gore. Oguljena kada. Premaleni lavandin. Kamenac na slavini. Ogledalo kojem nedostaje komad, a nitko se ne sjeća kako je razbijeno. Klaustrofobična sigurnost prostora bez prozora, čija me longitudinalnost oduvijek podsjećala na unutrašnjost kakvog brodskog kontejnera. Dok sam sjedila na školjci, uvijek mi se činilo da putujem i da ću, kad izađem, doći na neko drugo mjesto.

Sad sam ustala i stala pred ogledalo. Šminka nije bila razmazana, ali se već jasno vidjela nemoć da zadrži lice koje je probijalo van. Pronašla sam vatu, namočila je losionom i uklonila puder, rumenilo i ruž. Krenula sam i prema lijevom oku da uklonim maskaru i sjenilo, ali sam se zaustavila. Znala sam kako će izgledati moje golo oko: izloženo u svoj svojoj ranjivoj toplini, bez pomoći trunke prijetećeg crnila. Uklonim li šminku s očiju, znala sam, postat ću umorna i tužna, i neću uspjeti izdržati dan koji me čeka. Bacila sam prljavu vatu u koš, napila se vode i izašla.

Bedbugs

Martina Vidaić

Translated into English by Ellen Elias-Bursac

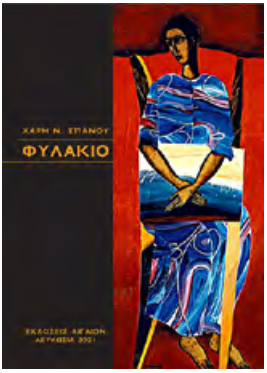
The eggs boiled and I counted off the seconds to myself. One hundred. One hundred fifty. Two hundred. If only she'd take the eggs out in the next thirty seconds, I thought. Two hundred twenty. Two hundred twenty-five. Two hundred forty. If I were to take them out now, I thought, she and I would be saved. It still wasn't too late for them to be soft enough, if I were to say: "Do you remember that time during Carnival week..." And she'd flush red, brighten up, and admit: "Of course!" And then Jere, snarky but well-meaning, might add: "Ah, you two..." And then together we'd laugh and take the time to retell how once Kate, not wanting to destroy perfectly good egg yolks and whites during the Carnival the way the other kids did, brought with her hard-boiled eggs to throw at houses, with the plan of going back later and picking them up when nobody was looking, bringing them home and eating them, but then she cooked them for too short a time so when she pelted the house with them they were soft and the egg yolks smeared all over the house. That was our Kate: always was striving to be perfect and always bearing the complications on her back. Or was my memory playing tricks on me? I watched her as she took her seat at the table, bringing a dish full of eggs and two small plates with silverware. She seemed in sync with her own movements and the space around her, as if she weren't at all sorry she'd given up the study of medicine and come back to her folks. I pulled up my chair. The eggs were hard hard-boiled. I peeled them, broke them into pieces and salted them. I looked at the cheese and tomatoes she was putting on the table. Hladna, you cannot imagine how thin she was while she was studying medicine in Zagreb. Why did I see her only twice in those three years? Why didn't I look after her better? I remembered that

we got together, both times, in the yard of the student dormitory on the Sava River, I remembered she was like a little bird in the snow in her thick white coat and oversized cap, but I couldn't remember why I was prepared to abandon her there to expire in the cold. Out of fear? Or simply neglect? I devoured the eggs the way the hungry gobble down food, but the chunks of egg had trouble going down my throat. The cheese was fragrant. Its white color perfectly matched the color of the dish it was sitting on, so the cheese looked like a vulnerable spot on the dish, a soft hump exposing the fake compactness of the ceramics. Droplets of water, momentarily tense, burst and slid along the unnaturally regular skin of the tomatoes. And the others across the table from me, I could hear how the seeds crunched under their teeth and dropped down their throats into their gut, only to come out again later. All this was so stupid, so pointless. So horrible, Hladna. I put down my fork and covered my eyes with my hands. "What's up?" asked Jere. "Nothing," I said. I put my hands down. "It is a fucking furnace in here," I said, trying to sound upbeat. They looked at me, more surprised than worried. I got up, thinking for a moment that I should collect my things and go, but then I said: "I have to pee." I locked myself in the bathroom, sat on the toilet and tried to pull myself together. "Remember why you're here," I whispered. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't convince myself that there had ever been a clear goal for me to achieve. I set my apartment on fire, then teenagers were partying around the "mosque," and then I went to the bus station and bought a ticket. That's how it was. What lay beneath this, what logic I was following, this was beyond me. The police would find me, regardless, and even if I were to muster the courage to ask for some, there was no money in this house anyway for me to cadge. Why was I here, then? I counted the number of toothbrushes in the glass. Five. Not four. Jere's son was living with them now, too, whose mother had delivered him here from Kosovo five-six years before and left the boy with his father who had never met him until then. I tried to figure out which of the toothbrushes was his, but

they all looked the same except Dragan's which looked as if it had been used for years and was not being used anymore now. I was consoled: one of the four brushes might be mine. I looked around the room. Everything looked as it always had. Reddish-brown tiles below, light-blue above. The peeling bathtub. The bathroom sink that was too small. The mineral stains on the faucet. The mirror that was missing a piece, yet nobody could remember how it had been broken. The claustrophobic sense of safety of a room with no windows, whose longitudinality always reminded me of the interior of a ship container. While I sat on the toilet, I always felt as if I were on a journey, and that when I came out, I'd be arriving somewhere different. Now I got up and stood in front of the mirror. The make-up hadn't smeared, but by now I could see it couldn't contain the face that was pushing its way out. I found some cotton balls, soaked them in lotion and stripped away the powder, rouge and lipstick. I moved up toward my left eye to wipe off the mascara and eyeshadow, but then I stopped. I knew what my bare eye would look like: exposed in all its vulnerable warmth, without the help of the mask of threatening blackness. If I stripped the makeup from my eyes, I knew I'd be tired and sad, I wouldn't be able to get through the day ahead. I tossed the dirty cotton balls in the wastebasket, drank a glass of water and came out.

SPECIAL MENTION

CYPRUS



Hari N. Spanou

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BIOGRAPHY

Hari was born in Cyprus in 1964. She graduated from the Pancyprian Gymnasium in Nicosia, Cyprus, and studied Medicine in Salonica, where she also obtained her speciality in internal medicine. She now works as a physician in Nicosia. As a teenager, she started writing in Greek in school journals, 'alternative' newspapers and literary magazines. Her vivid imagination was coupled with fiction writing from early on – she lives in her mind as much as in 'reality'. Three books of fiction were published. Twice divorced, she has three adult children. She presently lives with her two cats, Rho and Hermes, tends to her flowers and herbs and lives in a flat full of books. She reads more than she writes. She despises dusting, which is not a good thing for a person living on an island with frequent dust storms and long summers. Neither she nor the books enjoy the dust. Up until 1974, she was sure that she would become a ballerina – she loved dancing and ballet lessons and was thrilled by the ballet. That same year, the Turkish invasion took place while she was summering with her family in Kyreneia, her grandmother's birthplace. They survived; others did not. Her grandmother continued to nurture her with the stories and adventures of their seafaring ancestors.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

The storyline unfolds around a person who has been missing since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Nikiforos, a 19-year-old soldier of the national guard, doing his military service in the 361st infantry battalion in the Pentadaktylos mountain range, is missing in action. Nikiforos himself, as with every other missing person, knows exactly what happened to him and led to his 'disappearance' and death. Those who are ignorant to his plight and live through this vanished person situation

are people close to him: survivors like his siblings Hermes and Julia, his aunt Fani and his friend Savvas. Even Michael, Julia's son who was born 28 years after Nikiforos, went missing, thinks about him, makes assumptions and has feelings and fears associated with his uncle's fate. The background being the present time, which the characters observe, ponder and discuss whilst getting on with their everyday life, we follow Hermes, Julia, Michael, Savvas and Michael. By studying their thoughts and feelings, the hidden connections that link them with Nikiforos are unravelled. When a few bone fragments are identified and matched as being his, things darken and climax. The story ends with a scene which is completely different in ambience from the main body of *The Outpost* – a magical catharsis.

PEN CYPRUS' REPORT ON THE BOOK

Each character in *The Outpost* is a distillation carrying the collective dynamics of historical flow, from the mythical and biblical archetypes and the heroic figures, to the unknown heroes who survive as perpetual guardians at the outpost of their values and collective memory. A missing-in-action loved one reaches a space between life and death. Hari N. Spanou, with a striking density and exquisite writing, carves this space that dominates the lives of those left behind. The myth governs the plot following innumerable thin threads, connecting consciousness and the landscape of dreams as the author weaves the tale, pulling to the surface the most subtle shades of human thought. Every word in witty dialogues or in deep reflections penetrates unexplored places, carries associations and travels into dimensions that reflect the fate/needs of the struggling human being. The culmination of this comprehensive, insightful Logos is Hermes, the character in the book that reflects all Cypriot people as they change over time. He functions as a narration of all, in all their similarities and differences. An amazing literary accomplishment of the writer who condenses the flow of history into one character. The last chapter brings to mind Hemingway's habit of looking at paintings for hours in order to 'learn to write'. The fortunate reader enters a scenery that comes to live in a magical moment that absorbs time. An ending that lifts off the ground of realistic fiction and enters a sacred land.

Φυλάκιο

Χάρη Ν. Σπανού

ΙΟΥΛΙΑ

Δασύτονο άγος

Θυμός – ένας αρχέγονος τρόπος να ενδύει κανείς τη Θλίψη του.

Θλίψη, Απώλεια, Θυμός.

Ζωή, Φθορά, Αγωνία.

Θεμελιώδεις τριάδες.

Το μεσημέρι λοξοδρομώ από τον αυτοκινητόδρομο προς τα ημιορεινά. Σταθμεύω και βγαίνω από το αυτοκίνητο. Βα δίζω για καμιά ώρα με ταχύ βήμα, θαρρείς θέλω να τρυπή σω τη Γη με τις πατούσες μου. Ύστερα πάλι οδηγώ. Ο νους μου τρέχει. Η θάλασσα ίσως να μπορεί να ξεπλύνει για λίγο την Αγωνία. Ιστορίες για αγρίους.

Δυαδικός βηματισμός. Με τον άντρα μου περπατούσαμε τέσσερις πέντε φορές την εβδομάδα. Ο διασκελισμός μας ταίριαζε, ήταν συγχρονισμένος. Κουβεντιάζαμε πολύ· πολλές φορές συμπλήρωνε ο ένας την πρόταση του άλλου – όχι οποιαδήποτε πρόταση για τα καθημερινά, άλλωστε δεν πολυμιλούσαμε για τα καθημερινά. Ξέρω πως δεν είναι συχνό το φαινόμενο στα ζευγάρια· αυτό δεν σημαίνει ότι δεν διαφωνούσαμε, αλλά ότι βρισκόμασταν «on the same page». Σπάνιο κι αυτό. Το μάτι του Ερμή τα πιάνει αυτά, μας πείραζε όταν μας έβλεπε να χορεύουμε – ε ναι, χορεύαμε, χαιρόμα σταν. Η νιότη μας συνέπεσε με χρόνια δύσκολα· όταν περνά δύσκολα ο άνθρωπος, τότε μαθαίνει να γιορτάζει τη ζωή. Υπονοώ

πως τώρα, που όλα μοιάζουν κανονικά, δυσκολεύ εται ο κόσμος να γιορτάσει με την ψυχή του· θέλει βοηθήματα: χαπάκια, σφηνάκια, ποτάκια. Όλα υποκοριστικά, όπως έγραψε ο Σάββας Παύλου. ([1]) Εξωφρενικά δυνατή μουσική, σαν να εμποδίζει το είναι σου να ψιθυρίσει. Δεν είναι ρετρό τα γούστα μου, αλλά η τωρινή διασκέδαση θυμίζει γήπεδο: φώτα, φωνές, χοροπηδητά, χειρονομίες, συνθήματα. Μια αγωνία ατέρμονη.

Δύσκολα χρόνια σημαίνει σκιά θανάτου να παραμονεύει – η αντίθεση με τη νιότη, τη χαρά, τον έρωτα, τη φιληδονία ήταν χτυπητή. Δεν ήταν ασυνήθιστο να καταλήγουν τα γλέντια μας με σβησμένα μικρόφωνα, χαμηλόφωνη ψαλμωδία, δάκρυα και σούπα στα ξενυχτάδικα της πόλης. Λες και η σούπα παρέα με τους επαγγελματίες ξενύχτηδες ταξιτζήδες, πόρνες, χαρτοπαίκτες μας επανέφερε στην πραγματικότητα. Τώρα όλοι παριστάνουν ότι παίζουν σε αμερικάνικη σειρά – πέφτουν ξεροί / σηκώνονται / μπαίνουν κάτω από το δυνατό ντους / φορούν κολλαριστά πουκάμισα από ντουλάπες με δεκάδες άλλα και κινούν να κατακτήσουν τη ζωή της νέας μέρας.

Η ζωή είναι προς κατάκτησιν;

Κι εγώ που νόμιζα πως είναι για να τη ζεις.

Θυμούμαι τι έκανα όταν μπήκαν οι Αμερικανοί στο Κουβέ ιτ (ήταν η πρώτη φορά που τα βλέπαμε ζωντανά στην τηλεόραση), όταν τους χτύπησαν τους δίδυμους πύργους στη Νέα Υόρκη και όταν οι Αμερικανοί εισέβαλαν στο Ιράκ. Το ίδιο θα θυμούμαι, όσο ζω, πως σήμερα με ειδοποίησε η Διερευνητική Επιτροπή Αγνοουμένων για τον αδερφό μου τον Νικηφόρο· προέκυψαν κάποια «δεδομένα» και καλούν εμένα και τον Ερμή να πάμε στα γραφεία τους και μετά στο εργαστήριο. Το εργαστήριο ζωντανού θανάτου 1974 – έτσι έπρεπε να το λεν. Αφού αυτό είναι.

([1]) Σάββας Παύλου, Φώναξε τα παιδιά, σελ. 27, «Τα επικίνδυνα υποκοριστικά», εκδόσεις Κουκκίδα, Αθήνα 2015.

Και σαν τι «δεδομένα», άραγε, να βρήκαν για τον Νικηφό ρο; Τι να φανερώθηκε; Σαράντα εφτά χρόνια στη φαντασία μου ο τρόμος, το κακό, τα τέρατα όλου του κόσμου θαρρώ πως τρύπωσαν στο μυαλό μου και δεν άφησαν περιθώρια για τίποτε. Σαν τι «δεδομένα» θέλουν να μας μεταφέρουν; Βρήκαν τον αδερφό μου ολόκληρο, θαμμένο; Έναν φαντάρο που ατύχησε, σκοτώθηκε στον πόλεμο; Ή θα αρχίσουν τα ίδια με τόσων άλλων; Κομμάτια κοκκαλάκια σκορπισμένα σε ομαδικούς τάφους, σε πηγάδια, σε χωράφια χέρσα, πεταμένα σε λάκκους κρανία με τρύπες από χαριστικές βολές. Πόσα κακά, τι βάσανα κάναν στο αδερφάκι μου; Καταφτάνει η επιστήμη, καθαρή, φρεσκοπλυμένη από χώμα και αίμα, σε εργαστήρια με λευκά φώτα και μεταλλικούς πάγκους με φωτογραφίες, τοπογραφικά, σχεδιαγράμματα, DNA και ταυτοποιήσεις για να ταξινομήσει το κακό. Να κλείσει έναν φάκελο ακόμα. Να δώσει μια κούτα με «ευρήματα». Να τη θάψουμε με τιμές και σημαίες, να γραφτεί –πώς το λένε οι εφημερίδες;– «ο επίλογος της τραγωδίας». Εδώ σε θέλω κάβουρα.

Να αντέξεις τον επίλογο.

Όταν έφτασε στο σπίτι, είχε ξεθυμάνει. Μπήκε στο λουτρό. Έλεγξε τη θερμοκρασία του νερού και στάθηκε κάτω από το ντους. Άφησε το νερό να τρέξει πάνω της μέχρι που θάμπωσε για τα καλά ο καθρέφτης και το τζάμι. Δεν ήλπιζε πως θα ξεθώριαζαν οι εικόνες που πλημμύριζαν το μυαλό της, αλλά δεν μπορούσε να αντισταθεί στη ζεστή αγκαλιά του νερού. Η λευκή σαπουνάδα σχημάτιζε φυσαλίδες που ιρίδιζαν στο φως. Ή ήταν δάκρυα που τη θάμπωναν;

Ποιος ξέρει;

Φρεσκολουσμένη με τις πιτζάμες, έχωσε το κεφάλι της από τη μισάνοιχτη πόρτα του υπνοδωματίου. Ο Μιχαήλ καθόταν στο πάτωμα και τακτοποιούσε τα ηλεκτρονικά παιχνίδια στο χαμηλό ράφι της βιβλιοθήκης.

«Καλησπέρα, δεν θα βγεις απόψε;»

«Μπα, μπορεί να φάω σπίτι. Τι θα παραγγείλουμε;» Η Ιουλία δοκίμασε να τον δελεάσει.

«Έστειλε η νονά σου φρέσκο κοτόπουλο – έφτιαξα σούπα αυγολέμονη. Να τηγανίσω τα συκωτάκια, τα θέλεις; Έφερα φρέσκο ψωμί».

Την κοίταξε κοροϊδευτικά.

«Νέο κόλπο; Από πότε τηγανίζεις; Ίσα ίσα επιμένεις, σχάρα-ατμός-κατσαρόλα».

Η Ιουλία γέλασε.

«Λυπήθηκα να τα πετάξω. Η όρνιθα είναι από την αυλή της, άρα τα συκωτάκια νόστιμα. Ή εσύ θα τα φας ή ο Μαξ θα απολαύσει αυτοκρατορικό φαΐ».

Ο Μιχαήλ σηκώθηκε.

«Αν πεις όρνιθα ξανά, δεν θα φάω! Κοτόπουλο, μάνα. Ο Μαξ θα φάει στήθος».

Το κόκερ μπήκε τρέχοντας στο δωμάτιο –άκουσε το όνομά του δυο φορές– και πήδηξε χαρούμενο στα πόδια του Μιχαήλ. Εκείνος πέρασε την παλάμη του από το κανελί του κεφάλι και χάιδεψε τα αυτιά του.

«Άντε, Μαξ, θα φάμε αμαρτωλά απόψε!»

Τα μάτια του Μαξ σπινθήρισαν ενώ τραβούσε τον Μιχαήλ από το μανίκι.

«Θα πάμε για μια γρήγορη βόλτα εμείς και σε μισή ώρα θα είμαστε στο τραπέζι. Μαξ, θα φάμε "όρνιθα", ακούς κι εσύ». Το κόκερ ήδη βρισκόταν στην εξώπορτα με το λουρί στα δόντια και χοροπηδούσε επί τόπου χωρίς να μπορεί να κρύψει τον ενθουσιασμό του.

Η υπόθεση κεραμική γεννήθηκε τα τελευταία είκοσι χρόνια της ζωής μου. Ωσάν να γέννησε ο γάμος μας τρία παιδιά και τον πηλό. Χρειάστηκαν χρόνια για να ωριμάσει.

Θυμούμαι γύρω στο 2000 όταν περιδιαβαίναμε με τον Σάββα τα ορεινά χωριά της Πιτσιλιάς που ξαφνικά θύμωσε, έγινε φονιάς μπροστά σε μια εκκλησία με κάμποσα πιθάρια στημένα στη σειρά σαν σε εκτελεστικό απόσπασμα. Όταν ξεθύμανε κάπως, μου εξήγησε ότι θεωρούσε ασυγχώρητη ανοησία το γεγονός ότι γόνοι χωρικών, των οποίων όλο το βιος και η ζήση βασίζονταν στα κρασοπίθαρα, τα κουμνιά, τα πιθάρια του λαδιού, τα κόσκινα, τα εργαλεία κάθε λογής, τους αργαλειούς, είχαν την αναίδεια να τα μετατρέπουν σε φολκλόρ, παριστάνοντας τους αρτιστίκ. Άρχισα τότε να παρατηρώ συστηματικά αυτή τη συνήθεια της εποχής. Οι περισσότεροι γεμίζουν τα πιθάρια με λουλούδια ή φοίνικες – τα στήνουν σε κήπους, στα σπίτια, στα ξενοδοχεία. Αυτό συνέβη εδώ και πενήντα χρόνια – τώρα πια είναι λες και εθίστηκαν όλοι να μετατρέπουν στοιχειώδη χρηστικά αντικείμενα σε ντεκόρ. Βοήθησε και ο τουρισμός. Τα πράγματα γρήγορα χειροτέρεψαν. Δεν έμεινε τίποτε· σαν οδοστρωτήρας η νέα εποχή εξολόθρευσε έναν κόσμο αιώνων. Κι ύστερα, σαν σε χοντρό αστείο, εμφανίστηκε η απάτη των περιβαλλοντιστών. Παγιδευμένοι κι αυτοί στην ίδια τρέλα της ανάπτυξης. Τη βάφτισαν, μάλιστα, πράσινη και αειφόρο. Τι βαριά λέξη·

«αειφόρος», όπως το «αθάνατος». Τι ξέρουν οι άνθρωποι για αειφορία; Εφόσον κατεξοχήν ασχολούνται με τη θνητότητα. Όταν πέθανε ο Σάββας, κοιμόμουν πλάι του. Με ξύπνησε ένας ήχος, δεν ήταν βρόγχος ή κραυγή· ήταν ένας ήχος βαθύς σαν να έβγαινε από τα έγκατα της γης. Πρόλαβα να δω τα μάτια του πριν δραπετεύσει η ζωή. Δεν είχαν ούτε φόβο ούτε απελπισία ή γαλήνη ούτε κάτι που μπορώ να το πω με λόγια. Αδυνάτισαν οι λέξεις ή εγώ αδυνατούσα να βρω λέξη να αντιστοιχεί με την τελευταία του ανάσα ή το βλέμμα του. Πήρα έναν μήνα άδεια μετά τον θάνατό του. Ήταν μια περίοδος σαν λαβύρινθος· δεν έβρισκα άκρη, δεν μπορούσα να βάλω τίποτε σε τάξη. Η απώλεια δεν έμπαινε σε τάξη. Έπρεπε να βρω έναν άλλον τρόπο για να ζω. Με τον Σάββα ήμασταν μαζί από

τα νιάτα μας· από φοιτητές. Διέφερε από τα αδέρφια μου – ήταν φίλοι αχώριστοι με τον Ερμή και τον Νικηφόρο, αλλά ήταν αλλιώτικος. Ζούσε και σκεφτόταν με τρόπο θαρρείς... ζωικό. Τα θεωρητικά σχήματα τον άφηναν αδιάφορο. Δεν ήταν διανοούμενος, πώς να το εξηγήσω; Ήταν άνθρωπος της ζωής· έμοιαζε περισσότερο με μέλισσα. Θυμούμαι κάποτε μια συνέλευση που τράβηξε ώρες ατελείωτες στο πανεπιστήμιο. Έντονη συζήτηση, κόντρες, απόψεις, τι να κάνουμε, πώς να το κάνουμε, έτσι, αλλιώς και αν και μήπως. Φεύγοντας τα χαράματα, ο Σάββας άφησε ένα τετράδιο ιχνογραφίας στο προεδρείο. Είχε καμιά δεκαριά σκίτσα για αφίσες διαμαρτυρίας – ήταν το 1983 όταν ανακηρύχθηκε στα κατεχόμενα το ψευδοκράτος. Ήταν περίεργο το κλίμα τότε· δεν είχαν περάσει ούτε δέκα χρόνια από την εισβολή. Δεν ξέραμε, θα χτυπήσουν; Θα αντιδράσουν οι δικοί μας; Ο Σάββας άφησε το τετράδιο στο τραπέζι και μου είπε: «Αυτά είναι προτάσεις για αφίσες. Οτιδήποτε άλλο, θα φανεί· αν χρειαστεί, θα κατέβουμε κάτω να αμυνθούμε. Ό,τι περνά από το χέρι μας. Τα άλλα είναι κουβέντες δίχως νόημα».

Του πήγαινε που ήταν μηχανικός. Έκανε διδακτορικό στην αντοχή υλικών, ενώ ταυτοχρόνως δούλευε στη βιομηχανία. Όταν γεννήθηκαν τα παιδιά, συνεχώς κατασκεύαζε διάφορα, απλά και σύνθετα – ξύλινη κρεμάστρα για τα μόμπιλε να παίζει το βρέφος ενώ ξαπλώνει στο κρεβάτι ή το κάθισμά του, ένα σκηνικό κουκλοθεάτρου με στηρίγματα ώστε να είναι στη σκηνή πολλές κούκλες, όχι μόνο δύο, όσα και τα χέρια του παιδιού. Παθιάστηκε να φτιάξει ένα δεντρόσπιτο στη βαλανιδιά της αυλής χωρίς να το πάρουν είδηση τα μικρά. Τους είπε ότι το δέντρο ήταν άρρωστο και το σκέπασε με κάτι πράσινους μουσαμάδες ώστε να μην πλησιάζουν και μέσα σε δέκα μέρες το έφτιαξε. Είχε σκάλες μπροστά και πίσω, βεραντούλα, παραθυράκια, πέρασε και καλώδια και τους έβαλε ρεύμα. Έμεναν ώρες και έπαιζαν. Να φανταστείς πήραν και μικρή σκούπα και φτυαράκι και καθάριζαν. Δεν καθόταν ήσυχος. Αν δεν σκάλιζε ή έχτιζε κάτι, σχεδίαζε κάτι άλλο: βιβλιοθήκες, τραπεζάκια, πάγκους. Όταν τον βαρι όμουν με την ανακατωσούρα που προκαλούσε, πήγαινε στο χωριό, στο σπίτι της πεθεράς μου που είχε μπόλικο χώρο και έβρισκε απασχόληση.

Στη γειτονιά μας ζούσε ο Σταμάτης που είχε κεραμείο. Όταν πέθανε ο Σάββας, πήγαινα στον Σταμάτη και καθόμουν. Ήταν λιγομίλητος άνθρωπος, γι' αυτό και δεν περίμενε να μιλήσω. Σιγά σιγά μαγεύτηκα από τον πηλό. Το ζύμωμα, το πλάσιμο, τα καλούπια. Αυτό ήταν. Δεν έχανα ευκαιρία, πεταγόμουν στο κεραμείο. Έκανα μαθήματα, μετά έψαξα να βρω τα ντόπια χώματα, γιατί, ενώ είναι πανάρχαια η τέχνη του πηλού στα μέρη μας, οι περισσότεροι δουλεύουν εισαγόμενο πηλό. Μου πήρε τρία χρόνια να αποφασίσω να φύγω από τη δουλειά. Ήταν καλή απόφαση. Τώρα πλέον, εκτός από τέχνη, είναι και βιοπορισμός. Είναι η ζήση μου.

Και η ζωή μου που σημαδεύτηκε από τον θάνατο. Όπως όλων των θνητών.

Μέχρι να στρώσει τραπέζι άκουσε το γάβγισμα του Μαξ στην εξώπορτα. Ο Μιχαήλ μπήκε στην κουζίνα.

«Ωραία μυρίζει. Είναι έτοιμο, να κάτσω;» Η Ιουλία έγνεψε:

«Κοπιάστε!»

Κάθισαν αντικρυστά στο στρογγυλό τραπέζι. Ο Μιχαήλ εφόρμησε με όρεξη στο φαγητό. Η Ιουλία γέμισε το ποτηράκι της ζιβανία.

«Θα πιεις;»

Ο Μιχαήλ, σκυμμένος πάνω από το πιάτο, ύψωσε τα φρύδια του.

«Το ρίξαμε στα σκληρά, μάνα; Βάλε μου λίγη».

Για λίγη ώρα ακουγόταν μόνο η κλαγγή των μαχαιροπίρουνων. Ο Μαξ μπήκε στην κουζίνα και έτριψε τη μουσούδα του στα πόδια της Ιουλίας. Εκείνη ξεσκέπασε την κούπα και την έβαλε στη γωνιά, δίπλα στο νερό του. Το σκυλί, κουνώντας την ουρά του, άρχισε να τρώει.

Η Ιουλία επέστρεψε στο τραπέζι.

«Μου τηλεφώνησαν από τη ΔΕΑ[2] σήμερα», είπε ουδέτερα. Ο Μιχαήλ ανακάθισε και, ακουμπώντας το πιρούνι στο πιάτο, έβγαλε από την τσέπη τον καπνό, τα χαρτάκια και τα φίλτρα του.

«Τι σημαίνει αυτό;»

«Σημαίνει ότι προέκυψαν στοιχεία για τον Νικηφόρο. Θα πάμε με τον Ερμή την Πέμπτη. Θα φανεί, δεν λένε τίποτε από το τηλέφωνο. Είναι ανάγκη να καπνίσεις;» διαμαρτυρήθηκε ξέπνοα.

«Θα βγω έξω. Άμα θες, έρχομαι μαζί σου», είπε χαμηλόφωνα. «Η σούπα είναι επί τη ευκαιρία; Για παρηγοριά;» Πέρασε το χέρι από τα μαλλιά του. «Τώρα βλακείες λέω. Είσαι καλά;»

Η Ιουλία χαμογέλασε.

«Καλά είμαι». Δίστασε και πρόσθεσε: «Καλά θα είμαι. Μου ήρθε σαν αστροπελέκι· έτσι θα ερχόταν, αλλά... προετοιμασμένη δεν ήμουν. Μετά την τελευταία φορά που ξέρεις, είχαμε νομίσει όλοι πως θα τον έβρισκαν και δεν...»

Έκανε μια παύση και σιώπησε. Ο Μιχαήλ πήγε προς τη βεράντα, η Ιουλία τον ακολούθησε. Όρθιος, ακουμπώντας στον τοίχο, άναψε τσιγάρο ο Μιχαήλ, φύσηξε τον καπνό που έπνι ξε έναν βρυχηθμό κι έβηξε. Η Ιουλία έσκυψε στα φυτά και μάζεψε μερικά ξερά φύλλα από τις γλάστρες.

«Να χαρείς, μάνα, μην τρελαθείς όπως την άλλη φορά. Κάτσε να δούμε τι θα πουν».

Η Ιουλία πέταξε τα ξερά στον κάδο και τον έκλεισε. Γύρισε τον μοχλό και ακούστηκε ο υπόκωφος ήχος της ανάμειξης. Τίναξε τις παλάμες της.

«Δεν είχα τρελαθεί ακριβώς. Έτσι το θυμάσαι;» Ο Μιχαήλ μετάνιωσε.

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[2] Διερευνητική Επιτροπή Αγνοουμένων.

«Κάπως πρέπει να το πω. Κι οι δυο, κι εσύ κι ο πατέρας, ήσασταν κάπως εκτός. Ο Ερμής και η Φανή ήταν ψύχραιμοι. Παλιά ξινά σταφύλια – έτσι δεν το λες;»

Η μάνα του γύρισε την πλάτη.

«Έτσι είναι η έκφραση, εγώ πάω μέσα, κάνει ψύχρα».

Μπήκε στην κουζίνα να τακτοποιήσει. Καθώς έπλενε τη χύτρα, ο Μιχαήλ έσκυψε και τη φίλησε στο μάγουλο.

«Καλά, θα δούμε. Εγώ θα πεταχτώ στης Ουρανίας».

«Καληνύχτα, μην ξημερωθείς».

The Outpost

Hari N. Spanou
Translated into English by Patricia Barbeito

Julia

Of honor and awe

Anger – a tried and true method of veiling one's Grief.

Grief, Loss, Anger

Life, Decay, Anguish

Essential triads

In the middle of the day, I veer off the highway towards the foothills. I park and get out of the car. I walk for about an hour at a rapid stroll, as if trying to pierce the Earth with the soles of my feet. Afterwards, I drive some more. My mind is going a mile a minute. Perhaps the sea may succeed in washing away the anguish for a while. Quirky stories.

A double tread. My husband and I used to take walks four, five times a week. Our stride was well paired, synchronized. We talked a lot; often we used to finish each other's sentences – not just any old sentence about our daily routines; besides, we didn't often talk about routine. I know it's not a common phenomenon for couples. This does not mean that we always agreed, but simply that we were "on the same page." That, too, is rare. Hermes, who was always perceptive about such matters, would tease us whenever he watched

us dancing – yes, that's right, we would dance; we were happy. Our youth coincided with a difficult era, and when a person goes through tough times, they learn how to celebrate life. I'm alluding to the fact that now, when everything seems so normal, people find it hard to truly celebrate, wholeheartedly. They seem to need so much help: a few little pills, a few little shots, a little alcohol. A little bit of this, a little bit of that – so many diminutives, as Savvas Pavlou once wrote.([1]) Then, there's the outrageously loud music that seems to be trying to keep our very beings from muttering. It's not that my tastes are retro, but the current entertainments remind me of an evening watching sports at the stadium: bright lights, noise, jumping up and down, broad gestures, slogans. An endless anguish.

Difficult years means the lurking shadow of death. The contrast with youth, joy, love, hedonism was striking. It was not unusual for our parties to end with switched off microphones, quiet chants, tears and soup in the town's late-night joints. As if a bowl of soup in the company of the nocturnal professions – taxi-drivers, prostitutes, card players – would bring us back to reality. Now, everyone acts as if they are playing a part in an American television serial: they fall into bed like a sack of potatoes, get up, stand under a strong shower, throw on a starched shirt chosen from a wardrobe full of dozens of others just like it, and off they go to conquer yet another new day of life.

Is life something to be conquered?

Silly me, I thought it was something to be lived.

I still remember what I was doing when the Americans entered Kuwait (it was the first time that we watched something like that live on television); when New York's Twin Towers were attacked; and when the Americans invaded Iraq. Just as I will always remember, for as long as I live, that today the Committee on Missing

([1]) Savvas Pavlou, Call the kids. "Those dangerous diminutives." Athens: Koukkida, 2015, p. 27.

Persons contacted me to say that they have found some new "data" concerning my brother, Nikiforos, and to invite me and Hermes to their offices and then to the laboratory. The laboratory of the living dead 1974 – that's what they ought to call it. Because that is what it is.

What kind of "data," I wonder, have they found concerning Nikiforos? What has come to light? For forty-seven years, terror, evil, the monsters of the entire planet have lurked in my imagination. So much so that I feel as if they have burrowed into my brain and crowded out anything else. What kind of "facts" do they now want to relay to us? Have they found my brother buried in one piece? Just one of those unlucky soldiers killed in war? Or will they start the same song and dance that they have started with so many others? Tiny pieces of bone scattered in mass graves, in wells, in uncultivated fields; skulls shattered by merciful deathblows and tossed into holes in the ground? How much torture did my brother endure? What torments did he have to suffer? Freshly cleansed of all the dirt and blood, all purity and brightly-lit laboratories full of metal counters, photographs, contour maps, diagrams, DNA, and identifications, science charges in to taxonomize evil; to close yet another file; to hand over a box of its "findings"; to ensure that we bury them with all due pomp and flags waving, and that, as the newspapers put it, we get to the "epilogue to the tragedy." And that my friends, is the million-dollar question.

How does one get through that epilogue?

By the time she got home, all the anger had dissipated. She went to the bathroom, checked the water temperature, and stood under the shower, letting the water run over her until the mirror and the window had completely steamed up. She had no hope that the images flooding her brain would fade, but she could not resist the water's warm embrace. The white lather made bubbles that shimmered in the light. Or was it the tears that were blurring her sight?

Who knows?

Hair freshly washed and in her pyjamas, she poked her head through the half-opened door to the bedroom. Michail was sitting on the floor and arranging his electronic games on the lower shelf of the bookcase.

“Hey there. You’re not going out this evening?”

“Nope. I may eat in tonight. What shall we order?”

Julia tried to tempt him. “I’ve made chicken-soup with the fresh chicken your godmother sent us. I could also fry up the livers. Would you like some? I have some fresh bread.”

He glanced at her, a teasing look in his eyes. “New tricks? Since when do you fry things? In fact, you’ve always insisted that its either grill, steam, or stew.”

Julia laughed. “I feel bad throwing it out. The fowl is from her yard, so the liver is sure to be delicious. Either you eat it, or Max will get a meal fit for a king.”

Michail got up. “If you say fowl again, I’m not eating! It’s chicken, mum. Max will eat the breast.”

Having heard his name uttered twice, the cocker spaniel trotted into the room and cheerfully leapt onto Michail’s legs. The latter ran his hand over the dog’s cinnamon head and stroked its ears. “Ah, Max, we’re going to eat sinfully well tonight!”

Max’s eyes sparkled as he pulled Michail by the sleeve.

“Let’s go for a quick walk and in half an hour we’ll be at the table. Max, we’re eating ‘fowl,’ do you hear?”

The spaniel was already at the front door with the leash between his teeth, skipping in place, unable to hide his excitement.

It was only in the past twenty years that I gradually became involved with ceramics. As if our marriage gave issue to three children and a lot of clay that took years to mature.

I remember that around 2000, when Savvas and I were roaming the mountain villages of Pitsilia, he suddenly got angry, murderously so in fact, in front of a church with a number of amphorae standing in a row as if before a firing squad. When he calmed down a little, he explained that he found the younger generation's artistic feints unforgivable. There they were, offspring of villagers whose entire lives and livelihoods depended on wine pitchers, urns, olive oil amphorae, sieves, all manner of hand tools and looms, and they had the brazenness to turn them into folklore. I then began to consistently notice this affectation of the period. Most people fill their urns with flowers or potted palms and place them around their gardens, homes, hotels. This has been happening for the past fifty years – now it is as if everyone has become addicted to converting rudimentary functional objects into décor. Tourism played a role too, of course, and things went from bad to worse very quickly. Nothing remained, like a bulldozer the new era trampled over the world that had prevailed for centuries. Then, like a bad joke, came the environmentalists and their deceptions. They, too, trapped in the same madness for growth and development, which they chose to christen green and sustainable. What a heavy word, "sustainable," very like "immortal." What do people know of sustainability, when their one eminent concern is mortality? When Savvas died, he was sleeping at my side. I was woken by a noise, which was neither a rattle nor a cry, but a deep sound as if emanating from the bowels of the earth. I was in time to see his eyes before the life left them. They were free of fear, despair, peace, of anything that I can put in words. Either words failed, or I failed to find words to account for his final breath and the look in his eyes. I took a month of leave after his death. That time was like a labyrinth; I could not make sense of things; I could not put anything in order. Loss cannot be put in order. I had to find another way to live. Savvas and I had been together since

our youth, since university. He was not like my brothers – he and Hermes and Nikiforos were fast friends, but he was different. He lived and thought in a manner that one might describe as ...bestial. Theoretical formulations left him cold. He was not an intellectual, how can I explain? He was a man fully immersed in life, more like a bee than anything else. I remember a student assembly at the university that went on interminably, for hours. Heated discussions, arguments, opinions, what to do, how to do it, like this, like that, and perhaps not so let's start all over again. At dawn, when he finally departed, Savvas left a sketch-book at the student center. He had made approximately ten drawings for protest posters – it was 1983, when the pseudo-state unilaterally declared independence in our occupied territories. The atmosphere was tense back then. Not even ten years had elapsed since the invasion. We did not know if they would attack again, or how our side might react. Savvas placed the sketchbook on a table and said: "I've made some drawings for posters. Whatever else is needed will become clear as we go. If we have to, we'll go defend ourselves, and do what we can. Everything else is just a lot of hot air."

The engineering profession suited him. He completed a Ph.D. focused on the endurance limit of various materials while at the same time working in industry. When the children were born, he wouldn't stop building things, some simple, some elaborate: a wooden hanger to transport a child's favorite mobile from crib to car-seat; a puppet theatre stage with supports for many more puppets than the two on a child's hands. He was obsessed with building a tree house on the oak tree in the yard without the children knowing. He told them that the tree was sick and covered it with green canvas so they wouldn't go near, and within ten days he had built it. There were ladders both in front and back, a small deck, windows, and even wiring for electricity. They played there for hours. They even had a tiny broom and dustpan to keep the place clean. He could not sit still. If he wasn't puttering around or building something, he was making plans for something else: book shelves, side tables, bench-

es. When I'd get tired of the mess he always made, he would go to the village, to my mother-in-law's house, which was quite large, and would find something to do there.

Stamatis, the owner of a pottery workshop, lived in our neighborhood. When Savvas died, I would go there to kill some time. He was a man of very few words, which is why he did not expect me to talk. Gradually, the clay bewitched me. The kneading, the throwing, the trimming. That was it. I would dash over to the pottery studio at every opportunity. I took classes, then I tried to find local clay, because, even though the art of clay is ancient as can be in our part of the world, most people work with imported clay. It took me three years to decide to leave my job. It was a good decision. Now, besides an art, it is also a way of making a living. It is my livelihood.

It is my life, kneaded as it was by death. Like those of all mortals.

By the time the table was set, Max was barking at the front door. Michail entered the kitchen.

"Smells good. Is it ready? Shall I sit?"

Ioulia beckoned: "Sit!"

They sat across from each other at the round table. Michail pounced hungrily on the food, while Ioulia filled a small glass with *zivania*. "Will you have some?"

Bowed over his plate, Michail's brows shot up. "Going for the hard stuff, are we? Ok, Mum, pour me a little."

For a while only the clang of cutlery could be heard. Max pattered into the kitchen and rubbed his snout against Julia's legs. She took the lid off his bowl and put it down in the corner, next to his water dish. Wagging his tail, the dog started eating.

Julia returned to the table. “They called me from the Committee on Missing Persons today,” she said, keeping her tone neutral.

Michail sat up in his chair and placing the fork on his plate, he pulled the tobacco, rolling papers, and filters out of his pocket. “What does it mean?”

“It means that they have information about Nikiforos. Hermes and I will go there on Thursday. We’ll see, they don’t usually say much over the phone. Do you have to smoke?” she complained breathlessly.

“I’ll take it outside. If you want, I’ll go with you,” he said in a low voice. “So, all this about the soup is what? Incidental? A consolation?” He ran his hand through his hair. “Oh, I’m being silly now. Are you OK?”

Julia smiled. “I’m fine.” She hesitated before adding. “I will be fine. It came like a bolt out of the blue. That’s the way it was bound to come, wasn’t it? But… I wasn’t prepared. After that last time – you know what I’m talking about – when we all thought they would find him and they didn’t…”

She paused, then went silent. Michail got up and went to stand in front of the terrace, Julia following behind him. Leaning against the wall, Michail lit a cigarette, took a deep inhale of the smoke to stifle a cry, and started coughing. Julia bent over the plants and plucked a few dried leaves from the pots.

“Please, Mum, don’t go crazy like last time. Let’s wait and see what they say.”

Julia threw the dried debris in the compost bin, closed the lid, and turned the crank, releasing a hollow rumbling. She raised her hands. “I wouldn’t say that I went crazy. That’s just how you remember it.”

Michail repented. “I must find a way to say this. Both of you, you and dad, were beside yourselves. Hermes and Fani were cool and collected. Been there, done that– isn’t that what you like to say?”

His mother turned her back to him. “Yes, that’s the expression. I’m going inside. It’s cold.”

She went back to the kitchen to clean up. As she was washing out the pressure cooker, Michail bowed down and kissed her on the cheek. “Alright, we’ll see. I’m going over to Ourania’s.”

“Good night. Don’t stay up too late.”

CZECHIA

Ondřej Štindl

Tolik popela

So Much Ash

Argo, 2022
Language: Czech
ISBN 978-8025-739-08-2

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

An ageing writer and translator, the novel's protagonist Kryštof abruptly finds himself at a crossroads when he meets the young leftist intellectual Kristýna, and not long afterwards Kamil, a guru with a strange connection to Kryštof's deceased sister. The emerging pandemic is changing life as he knows it, making the possibility of the world's end more real than ever – in fact, Kryštof might be headed towards a 'personal apocalypse,' plagued by melancholy, the grotesque, intrusive memories and dark forebodings. He becomes a hesitant actor in what is either a story of great revelation or a cruel cosmic joke, or a love story.

BIOGRAPHY

Ondřej Štindl (born in 1966) is a film and music critic, writer, screenwriter and DJ. The film *Pouta* (*Walking Too Fast*), based on his script, premiered in 2010. In 2020 he was awarded the Ferdinand Peroutka Prize for his journalistic work. He is the author of the novels *Mondschein* (2012), *K hranici* (*To the Border*, 2016), *Až se ti zatočí hlava* (*Until Your Head Starts Spinning*, 2020) and *Tolik popela* (*So Much Ash*, 2022).

CZECHLIT'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

At the beginning of Ondřej Štindl's novel, *So Much Ash*, is a clash of generations and opinions between the ageing translator and writer Kryštof and the young progressive sociologist Kristýna. However, as it soon turns out, their televised exchange, which ends in a fiasco, does not lead to just another disapproving sigh over a divided society. Instead, it

is the trigger for a colourful narrative full of sometimes slightly exaggerated, sometimes brilliantly observed and psychologically nuanced episodes, which bring to light the vulnerability and wounds of both the main protagonists and other characters, while in the background the COVID-19 pandemic begins to stir.
One of the main strengths of the novel is the fact the author reflects on the burning issues of today's society but does not stop at mere descriptions. Instead, he unmasks their superficiality, views them from unusual angles and vividly portrays the seemingly irreconcilable opponents' deep emotions, which their strong opinions should have covered up like a fig leaf. Furthermore, Ondřej Štindl employs extremely lively, rhythmic and captivating language, which allows him to occasionally slip into the poetic or the almost aphoristic. It is precisely its language and penetration behind the curtain of attractive topics and seemingly stagnant pigeonholing, which makes *So Much Ash* a novel that transcends the norms of contemporary Czech literary fiction and can also attract foreign readers.

Tolik popela

Ondřej Štindl

Kluk se zastavil uprostřed běhu a mlčky zíral na Kryštofa, rychle dýchal pusou a z nosu se mu pomalu spouštěla nudle. Po cestě od dětského hřiště se zvolna blížila jeho maminka, konverzovala s kamarádkou. Dvě upravené dámy po třicítce v kabátcích pastelových barev a se sladěnými rouškami dodržovaly předepsaný odstup. Praha zvládá pandemii na úrovni alespoň tady, v centru na Petříně, kam se v hojném počtu dostavilo měšťanstvo a užívalo si slunný jarní den. Radost z pobytu venku, z možnosti promluvit s někým známým se v těch lidech tloukla s přetrvávající opatrností. Nejenom kvůli strachu z nákazy, ale snad i v obavách, aby nedisciplinovaným chováním neohrozili pověst země, kde občané pandemii vzdorují příkladně bez ohledu na odpudivou vládu.

Kryštof ten v jasných barvách vyvedený obraz trochu kazil, pán v uváleném černém oblečení, už dlouho ho nevypral a zjevně nepoužívá ten správný prostředek, tvář zmačkaná a oči zapadlé. Upírá je teď na tříleté dítě, které vypadá, že od něj něco očekává, on ale netuší, co by to asi tak mohlo být. Tak se na kluka usmál, hned si uvědomil, že přes roušku to nebude vidět. V přítomnosti malých dětí byl často v rozpacích, nedokázal shodit dospělou masku a s nelíčenou radostí vydávat infantilní zvuky. Smál se na ně, to jo, nebyl to ale ten reflexivní úsměv, který druhým naskakoval ve tváři pokaždé, když na ně nějaký malý tvor upřel oči. Kryštofovy úsměvy byly vědomé a usilovné, musel si je nařídit, vyslat příslušnou instrukci nervovou soustavou, aby se mu přiměřeně roztáhla pusa. A děcka tyhle jeho nuceně vlídné projevy moc nebaštila. Kluk dál zíral a Martina, která na lavičce seděla vedle Kryštofa, už musela zasáhnout. Střelila po Kryštofovi pohledem a s ironií

obrátila oči v sloup. Další nepoužitelnej chlap. Pak se naklonila k dítěti a něco mu říkala, sáhla do kapsy pro tyčinku, tu zdravou s oříškama – jak jinak. Za chvilku už kluk utíkal zpátky k mámě a hlasitě a nadšeně na ni volal. Martina si Kryštofa ještě jednou pobaveně změřila.

„Co je to s tebou, prosim tě?“

„Nic. Dal bych si cigáro. Ale nechce se mi sundavat roušku, když je tu tolik lidí. To je furt něco.“

Martina se zasmála, trochu útrpně.

„Ty jsi fakt pořád stejnej.“

Kryštofa těšilo, že to slyší, v určitým věku se člověk takovýho ujištění rád chytne. A taky byl rád, že Martina přišla, neposlala ho do háje, když se jí zmateně vykecával do telefonu po probdělé noci, a že můžou sedět vedle sebe na lavičce na Petříně jak stárnoucí pár, sice jím dávno nebyli, ale třeba být mohli. Dva lidi, znají se příliš dobře na to, aby jeden před druhým něco hráli, stejně se ale snesou. Vědomí, že k sobě už dávno nepatří, uhlazovalo všechny ostré hrany. Projevy vlastností a sklonů, jimiž kdysi dávno dokázali jeden druhého vytočit k nepříčetnosti, se změnily v milou připomínku starých a bezpečně minulých časů. Už tam seděli přes hodinu, ledacos si řekli. Pár drbů z pražské společnosti, jejich naprostá nicotnost jim v téhle dramatické době přišla osvěžující, probrali taky zdraví společných známých a kamarádů, téma, které s přibývajícím časem narůstá a vážní.

„Jíš dost vitamínů?“

„Žeru je jak nezavřenej.“

Se smíchem do něj strčila.

„Hele, vážně. Jak to všechno zvládáš?“

„Ale jo. To víš. Jsem většinou zalezlej, trochu mi to leze na mozek.“

Nechtěl si kazit odpoledne řečmi o tom, co přesně se mu tím mozkem honí. Zneklidňovat Martinu výklady o prorockých snech, vymítání ďábla a ztracených berlích, o krvavém šlinci na bílém rukávu a inženýrech z Veselí nad Lužnicí. O tom, že se uspává láhví alkoholu, a ani to někdy nestačí. Že se v posledních pár dnech pokoušel na internetu zjistit kontakt na všechny Pražany jménem Filipec, že pár čísel našel a postupně na ně volal pod smyšlenou záminkou a snažil se z jejich majitelů vypáčit něco, co očividně nevěděli, připadal si při tom neuvěřitelně trapně, ale stejně to zkoušel dál, k ničemu to samozřejmě nebylo. Že občas nenápadně vykoukne z okna a kontroluje, jestli v ulici není zaparkované auto, které tu dřív neviděl, a jestli vevnitř nesedí nějací lidé. Vděčně přijal šanci chvíli pobývat v Martinině neotřesitelně praktickém světě, smysl se v něm neprojevoval jako z řetězu utržená a rozum popírající síla. Spíš jako cosi neustále a klidně přítomného, nepřináší prorocké sny, ale obyčejnou starostlivost. O Evžena, je nervózní, protože musel kvůli karanténě zavřít firmu, někdy se z toho nicnedělání vztekne a začne buzerovat celou domácnost, aby měl na chvíli pocit, že řídí aspoň něco. O děti, vypadla jim škola, ale zvládají to dobře, starší dcera už u nich ani nebydlí, pronajaly si s kamarádkama krásný byt na nábřeží, jenom si to představ. O práci, ta teď stojí, ale Martina toho má hodně i tak, založila sousedskou skupinu, rozváží roušky seniorům v okolí a vyřizuje jim nákupy, aby nemuseli ven. Má dneska odpoledne pohotovost, musí být na telefonu, pro případ, že by někdo něco potřeboval.

„A roušky šiješ taky, se tě ani nemusim ptát."

Kryštofova ironie jí vůbec nevadila, ten už jiný nebude, nemohla otřást její neokázalou sebejistotou. Tahle válka je spíš pro holky, napadlo ho. Můžou se v ní dobře uplatnit, pořádně se předvedou, jak uměj organizovat a pečovat, když se jim chce. Pro pány to je ale složitější, nemůžou patrolovat s puškou v ulicích, cítit se odpovědný za všechny doma a bejt připravený za ně umřít. Co si v takovýhle válce počít? Zvlášť když jeden není doktor a k všeobecnému úsilí by mohl přispět především svým nezvykle velkým talentem překážet. To mu pak nezbude než sedět doma, sledovat čísla a

spřádat divoký teorie. Martině zazvonil telefon, rychle přijala hovor, vytáhla z kabelky propisku a zapsala nějakou adresu na okraj novin. Domluvila a usmála se na Kryštofa.

„Budu muset jít."

„Počkej ještě moment."

Martina se na něj usmála, teď už trochu netrpělivě. Nemá čas se vykecávat, závisí na ní další lidi, už čekají.

„Jsem se s tebou chtěl vidět taky kvůli tomu Křemenáčovupohřbu. My jsme se tam už pak nepotkali. A já jsem dost přemýšlel... Prostě jsi měla pravdu. Choval jsem se tenkrát jak kretén. Hodil jsem to celý na tebe a umyl si nad tím ruce, dotlačil jsem tě k tomu, aby ses rozhodla, a já byl přitom rozhodnutej už dávno. Rozhodnul jsem to i za tebe, jenom jsem neměl dost odvahy ti to přímo říct. Promiň."

Martina vypadala nesvá. Třeba nestála o to, aby ji ve dnech, kdy měla všechno tak krásně pod kontrolou, připomínal chvíli, kdy kontrolu ztratila.

„To už je jedno, Kryštofe. Já pohřby těžko snášim a neměla jsem tam pít a pak to ze mě najednou vylítlo. Taky jsem pakbyla překvapená, co se to se mnou děje. Nech už to bejt."

Kryštof se díval na její modročernou roušku, je zvláštní nevidět jeden druhému na ústa a mluvit zrovna o tomhle.

„Takžes mi odpustila?"

Martina vstala z lavičky a obrátila se k němu, teď už zjevněnetrpělivá a neklidná, na ni čeká práce, a on si zrovna v tuhle chvíli usmyslí otevírat tu starou věc.

„Odpustila. Já nevim, Kryštofe, jestli se to dá takhle říct. Je to dávno a hodně se toho od tý doby stalo. Byla jsem na tebe tehdy strašně naštvaná a dneska už nejsem. Jednou za dlouho se to připomene, nic víc. Ale většinou, vlastně skoro pořád nemyslim ani na tebe, ani na to, co mezi náma bylo. Nevim, jestli se tomu dá

říkat odpuštění. Čas prostě plyne a člověk zapomíná, věci se mi ztrácej z hlavy. Některejch mi je líto. A některejch ani ne. Promiň, už fakt musim jít."

Spěšně se rozloučili a Martina vyrazila cestou dolů na tramvaj. Kryštof se díval za ní, jak rázuje krokem ženy, která se udržuje v kondici, krokem ženy, která nutně musí být někde jinde, protože navzdory plynutí času a milosrdnému zapomnění jsou chvíle, kdy od Kryštofa potřebuje být co nejdál. Trochu se zatáhlo a ochladilo, park se zvolna vyprazdňoval. Teď si už může zapálit, už je to bezpečný. Rozvázal si roušku a vytáhl zapalovač a cigarety, natáhl do sebe kouř spolu se svěžím jarním povětřím. Začínalo se smrákat, do Kryštofa se zakusoval chlad, taky vyrazil k domovu, když se blížil k zastávce, ujistil se, že tam Martina už nestojí. Zastihl by ji tam nerad, nechtěl na ni být pověšený jak výčitka, dávná, živá a nespravedlivá, jenom by jí strašila v hlavě cestou domů.

So Much Ash

Ondřej Štindl

Translated into English by Graeme and Suzanne Dibble

The boy stopped in mid-run and stared silently at Kryštof. He was breathing rapidly through his mouth and a line of snot dripped slowly from his nose. His mother was approaching along the path from the children's playground, chatting with a friend. The two well-groomed ladies in their thirties, wearing pastel-coloured jackets and matching face masks, were maintaining the prescribed distance. Prague was managing the pandemic in style – at least here in the centre, on Petřín Hill, where the locals had turned out in large numbers to enjoy the sunny spring day. Their joy at being outdoors and being able to talk to someone they knew clashed with a lingering sense of caution. Not only because of the fear of contagion, but perhaps also a concern that any undisciplined behaviour on their part would threaten the reputation of a country where the citizens were resisting the pandemic in an exemplary fashion, in spite of their abhorrent government.

This bright, colourful scene was slightly marred by Kryštof, a man with a creased face, rumpled black clothes – he hadn't washed them for a long time and clearly wasn't using the right detergent – and sunken eyes. Just then those eyes were focused on the three-year-old child, who looked as if he was expecting something from Kryštof, though he had no idea what that could be. So he smiled at the boy, realizing at once that it wouldn't be visible through his face covering. He tended to feel awkward in the presence of small children, unable to drop the grown-up mask and make infantile noises with unfeigned joy. He would smile at them, that was true, but it wasn't the kind of reflexive smile that automatically appeared on other people's faces every time one of the little creatures laid eyes on them. Kryštof's smiles were deliberate and laboured; he had to organize them, send the relevant instruction through the nervous system for his mouth to

stretch out in the appropriate way. And kids didn't really buy these forced displays of friendliness. The boy kept staring and Martina, who was sitting on the bench next to Kryštof, had to intervene. She shot Kryštof a look and rolled her eyes sardonically. Another useless bloke. Then she leaned over to the child and said something to him, reaching into her pocket for a cereal bar, the healthy kind with the nuts – of course it would be. The next moment the boy was running back to his mum, calling out to her loudly and enthusiastically. Martina sized Kryštof up once more in amusement.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I fancy a cigarette. But I don't want to take off my face mask with all these people around. There's always something."

Martina laughed, a little ruefully.

"You really haven't changed."

Kryštof liked hearing that – at a certain age, you're glad to cling to an assurance like that. And he was also glad that Martina had come, that she hadn't told him where to go when he'd blabbered incoherently to her on the phone after a sleepless night, and that they could sit next to each other on a bench on Petřín Hill like the ageing couple they hadn't been for a long time but perhaps could have been. Two people who knew each other too well to put on a front but still got along anyway. The awareness that they hadn't belonged to each other for a long time smoothed out all the rough edges. Signs of character traits or habits that would once have driven the other person to distraction had become a touching reminder of old and safely bygone times. They'd already been sitting there for over an hour and had told each other all sorts of things. A few snippets of gossip from Prague society, whose utter triviality seemed refreshing in these turbulent days, and they also discussed the health of mutual acquaintances and friends, a subject that grew in size and importance as time went on.

"Are you taking plenty of vitamins?"

"I'm guzzling them as if they were going out of fashion."

She elbowed him, laughing.

“Hey, seriously. How are you holding up?”

“Yeah, all right. You know. Most of the time I’m cooped up in the flat, it’s getting to me a bit.”

He didn’t want to spoil the afternoon by talking about what was really on his mind. To disturb Martina with explanations about prophetic dreams, exorcisms and lost crutches, about a bloody streak on a white sleeve and graduates from Veselí nad Lužnicí. About the fact that he needed a bottle of booze to get to sleep, and sometimes even that wasn’t enough. That in the last few days he’d been scouring the internet for contact details for anyone in Prague by the name of Filipec, had found a few numbers and had been calling them one by one under a false pretext, trying to coax information out of strangers that they clearly didn’t know, finding the whole thing incredibly awkward but keeping at it anyway, useless though it was. That from time to time he would surreptitiously peek out of the window to check whether there was a car parked in the street that he hadn’t seen there before, and whether there were people sitting in it. He was grateful for the chance to spend some time in Martina’s unshakeably practical world, where purpose didn’t take the form of a rampaging, logic-defying force. Her version of purpose was something constantly and serenely present – instead of prophetic dreams, it manifested itself in ordinary concern. Concern for Evžen – he was on edge because he’d had to close the business due to the lockdown; at times all that sitting around put him in a foul mood and he started bossing the whole family about, just so he could feel he was in charge of something for a while. Concern for the children – their classes had been cancelled, but they were coping fine; their older daughter was no longer living with them anyway, she was renting a lovely flat with her friends on the embankment, can you imagine. And concern about her job – that was on hold, but Martina had her hands full as it was: she’d set up a neighbourhood group that distributed face masks to elderly people in the area and did their shopping for them so they didn’t have to go out. She was on call this afternoon; she had to keep her phone handy in case somebody needed something.

"And of course you sew face masks too – I don't even have to ask."

Kryštof's sarcasm didn't bother her in the slightest; he was never going to change. It would take more than that to shake her quiet confidence. This is a war for the girls, he thought. It allows them to put their skills to use and show off how good they are at organizing and caring when they want to be. But it's more complicated for the men – they can't patrol the streets with a rifle, feeling responsible for everyone at home and ready to die for them. What are they supposed to do in a war like this one? Especially if you aren't a doctor and the main thing you can contribute to the general effort is your special talent for getting in the way. Then the only option you have left is to sit at home, tracking the numbers and concocting wild theories. Martina's phone rang and she quickly answered, pulling a pen out of her handbag and writing down an address on the edge of the newspaper. She ended the call and smiled at Kryštof.

"I have to go."

"Hold on a second."

Martina smiled at him again, a little impatiently this time. She didn't have time to shoot the breeze; other people were depending on her, and they were already waiting.

"I also wanted to see you because of what happened at Křemenáč's funeral. We didn't bump into each other again. And I've been doing a lot of thinking... Basically, you were right. I acted like a jerk back then. I dumped it all on you and washed my hands of it. I pushed you into taking the decision when my mind was already made up. I decided for you as well, I just didn't have the guts to say it to your face. I'm sorry."

Martina looked uncomfortable. Perhaps at a time like this, when she had everything nicely under control, she didn't like being reminded of a moment when she had lost control.

"It's water under the bridge, Kryštof. I'm not good with funerals and I shouldn't have been drinking there and all of a sudden I just came out with it. I surprised myself too. Just forget it."

Kryštof gazed at her blue-and-black face mask – it was strange not to see each other's mouths when talking about a subject like this.

"So you've forgiven me?"

Martina got up from the bench and turned towards him, now visibly impatient and restless – she had work to do and he had to go and choose a moment like this to reopen old wounds.

"Forgiven you... I don't know, Kryštof, if you can put it like that. It was a long time ago and a lot has happened since then. At the time I was really angry at you and now I'm not. Every once in a while something reminds me of it, that's all. But most of the time – in fact, pretty much all of the time – I don't even think about you or what happened between us. I don't know if you can call that forgiveness. Time goes by and things get forgotten, they fade from my memory. Sometimes I regret that. And sometimes I don't. I'm sorry, I really do have to go."

They said a hasty goodbye and Martina set off down the hill to catch a tram. Kryštof watched her go, striding along with the brisk step of a woman who keeps herself in shape, a woman who urgently needs to be somewhere else, because despite the passage of time and the mercy of forgetting, there are moments when she needs to be as far away from Kryštof as possible. It was starting to turn cloudy and cool, and the park was slowly emptying. He could light up, it was safe now. He untied his face mask and pulled out a lighter and cigarettes, drawing in the smoke along with the crisp spring air. The light was fading and the cold was nipping at Kryštof, so he headed for home too. When he got near the tram stop, he checked to make sure Martina was no longer standing there. He wouldn't have liked to have caught up with her, didn't want to hang around her like an unfair living reproach from days long past that would only have haunted her on the journey home.

SPECIAL MENTION

ESTONIA

Tõnis Tootsen

Ahvide pasteet. Ühe ahvi mälestusi ja mõtteid

Pâté of the Apes: One primate's thoughts and memories

Kaarnakivi Seltsi Kirjastus, 2022
Language: Estonian
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BIOGRAPHY

Tõnis Tootsen (born in Estonia in 1988) is a freelance writer who has primarily focused on translating, editing, design and sound/video editing. He has studied semiotics at Tartu University. Tootsen has published a collection of short stories, *Nukumeister* (*The Puppet Master*, 2012), and a monumental handwritten and illustrated novel, *Esimene Päev* (*The First Day*, 2016), the latter of which won the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Literature in the free category. Tootsen has also recently written and illustrated a poetry collection titled *Uttu* (*Into the Fog*, 2021). He currently lives in a forest in southern Estonia.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Pâté of the Apes: One primate's thoughts and memories is, as far as anyone knows, the first book written by a monkey. Ergo, who has been exiled to solitude on the Isle of the Dead, pens his memoir. Acquiring literacy takes him to the very brink of humanity. He has the opportunity to live as a person, though nothing good comes of it. The absurdity of humankind is instead highlighted in exceptionally rich and luxurious detail. Observing the world through simian eyes allows us to step back and form striking generalisations. Both the ape's autobiographical experiences and the period during which Estonia was freed of Soviet occupation and endeavoured to restore its status as a free European state are viewed through a funhouse mirror. Human modes of behaviour and societal hierarchies, which can easily be upended in the shifting winds of politics, are put under

a microscope. 'Red' and 'blue' apes clash in the story – unintentionally prophetic in light of the present war in Ukraine. The book explores marginalisation and colonisation through satire, like in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and occasional over-the-top humour. Obviously, the title contains a direct reference to *Planet of the Apes*. *Pâté of the Apes* can similarly be read as a critique of anthropocentrism and a strong blow to the idea that humankind is evolution's crown jewel.

ESTONIAN LITERATURE CENTRE'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

Pâté of the Apes: One primate's thoughts and memories is unique in both style and concept, evoking the works of George Orwell. With Jonathan-Swift-like satire, the author shows humans and human society from the perspective of primates, playfully addressing the most pressing issues of our days. It is a parody of all memoirs and open to a wide range of interpretations. The book can certainly be read as a critique to anthropocentrism, which sees humankind as the end-all of existence. Similarly exceptional are the book's varied layers. As the story goes, it was written by a literate ape and annotated by a fellow ape who reads the text transcribed on scraps of paper in a museum. One after another, the person rejects the author's claims, suspecting a hoax and even a secret operation being carried out by the 'red apes'. Such commentary adds another layer of upside-down reality. Although the work is, in a way, tragic, the writing is witty and revels in wordplay. With its intertextual references, *Pâté of the Apes* is well-suited in the context of world literature, though the author simultaneously manages to allude to several of the best Estonian classics.

Ahvide pasteet. Ühe ahvi mälestusi ja mõtteid

Tõnis Tootsen

Mõtlema hakates – minu esimene mälestus ei olegi emast või isast, vaid hoopis inimestest. Kui ma seda mälupilti tagantjärele ise maalinud pole – olen seda lugu teiste suust lihtsalt nii palju kordi kuulnud. Sünnipäevadel, sabavõtetel, inimesekssaamispühadel ja nii edasi. Isegi siis, kui juba täisahv olin, tuletati muudkui meelde, kui lähedal ma õigupoolest olin.

Millele täpselt, selle üle vaieldi. Seepärast see lugu suguvõsa lemmikute hulka kuuluski – kuna jagas tollesama võsa pooleks. „Kuulge, kuidas see asi ikkagi oli," ütles keegi, tavaliselt minu onu, sabavõttebanaane värvides, muidugi võimalikult hajameelse näoga, nagu oleks ta „selle asja" täielikult unustanud – ja arvas „sellest asjast" siis täpselt sedasama, mida iga kord.

Lugu ise oli selline. Üsna minu pärdikupõlvekodu lähedal oli taksopark, kus töötas minu vanaisa, ja tol päeval tähistati seal tema 35. sünnipäeva. Ja järsku sõitis parki mingi täiesti tundmatu auto. Ema väitel punane. Isa vandus, et sinine. Onu vandus, et algul rääkis ka isa punasest autost. Onunaine, et vastupidi: ema oli rääkinud sinisest. Igatahes olid autos inimesed, mees ja naine, kes mind nähes vaimustusid. Naine oli mu kohe enda kaissu rabanud, et „oi, ahvibeebi". See on see, mida ma mäletan – paljad käsivarred. Mõjus see juba siis kuidagi erutavalt? Tema nahk oli sama siidjas kui kleit, mida ta kandis. Ja kas ta polnud sama soe kui päikese köetud liiv... Ja kui magusalt ta lõhnas! Näen veel praegugi oma tillukesi sõrmi mängimas suurte ümmarguste kividega, mis tal kaelas rippusid. Järgmiseks mäletan, kuidas mind sellest soojast embusest välja tiritakse.

Hoian ühest kivist kinni, aga siis põrklevad need juba maas, naine karjatab. Rohkem ma ei mäleta. See ongi minu esimene mälestus. Kaotatud paradiisist, arvaks isa – tema enda isa, vanaisa Suva, jällegi, et põrguväravast – tookord tähistati küll teise vanaisa sünnipäeva. Igatahes tahtsid need inimesed mind ära osta. Mängukaaslaseks oma lapsele. Aastate jooksul paisutas isa pakutud summat, seda mäletan isegi mina – võib-olla hakkas tal piinlik? Aga mõistagi polnud asi ainult rahas, kui üldse. Tänu nendele inimestele oleksin viibinud kõige selle sees, millest isa päevast päeva jutlustas. Oleksin olnud sellele veel palju lähemal kui ta ise – tema, kes ta puutus inimestega kokku palju rohkem kui mõni tavaline ahv, kes võis üht sellist oma käega katsuda vahest kord aastas, inimesekssaamispühade aegu. Isa uskus, et kuigi ahvist saab inimene alles pärast surma – „heast ahvist," armastas ta täpsustada, kui mõne tükiga hakkama sain –, siis inimlähedus pidavat neid šansse võrratult suurendama. Tema meelest võisid sa olla kuitahes nurjatu ahv – kui sa inimese süles surid, pidi sinustki inimene saama. Ja just selline saatus oodanuks mind kindla peale, kui ma neile inimestele hea ahv oleksin olnud. Aga vanaisa Suva kaotas kiiresti kannatuse ja rebis mu tolle naise käte vahelt. Ja mis edasi oleks saanud, see oli juba kogu suguvõsa välja nuputada. Võib-olla tegid need inimesed lihtsalt nalja? Arvamusi oli väga erinevaid. Ja enne kui vaidlus liiga kirglikuks läks, ütles keegi ikka: „Inimene ise teab, mis tast saanud oleks. Seda ei mõtle ükski ahv välja." Ja sellega võisid enam-vähem kõik nõus olla. Eks igaüks kuulis ses loos, mida tahtis kuulda.

Minu vanaisal – sellel, kelle sünnipäeva tol korral peeti, minu ema isal – ei olnud paremat kõrva. Ta kaotas selle punaahvidega võideldes. Sellest oli järel pisikene nahariba. Kui ma seda väiksena sõrmitsesin ja küsisin, et vanaisavanaisa, miks sul nii väike kõrv on, siis ütles ta, et eks ikka seepärast, et ta lolle küsimusi ei kuuleks. Peamiselt mäletan teda taksopargi pingilt. Ikka istus ta, saba rõngas, päikese käes, suure plekkämbri kõrval ja poetas sinna ühe suitsukoni teise järel, kuni ämber ääretasa sai. Siis kallas ta ämbri kuskile tühjaks ja alustas otsast. Suurest sõjast ei rääkinud ta kunagi mitte sõnagi, nii

et juba pärdikuna sain aru, et seda teemat – seda kõige põnevamat! – pole mõtet puudutada.

„Kas sa surma kardad?“ julgesin ükskord siiski küsida.

„Loll küsimus,“ vastas vanaisa.

Nii ta seal suitsetas, taksopargi hoovis, ja vaikis. Või rüüpas kohvi. Ja vaikis. Vaikis kõigest. Kui juba suurem olin, küsis ta aeg-ajalt, kuidas mul läheb. Ja ma vastasin, et „hästi“. Ja tema vastas, et „siis on hästi“.

Aeg-ajalt veeresid taksoparki Undo või Redo – vanaisa palju nooremad kolleegid. Kui mõlemad korraga, siis müürisid nad vanaisa kohe sisse, prantsatasid ta kummalegi küljele, pistsid talle pihku paki suitsu ja tüürisid jutu Suurele Sõjale. Kuigi Undo ja Redo olid sündinud alles pärast sõda, rääkisid nad harva millestki muust kui sellest, millal ja milliseid manöövreid pruunahvid sooritasid või milliseid haamreid kasutasid punaahvid: kui suured olid kõige suuremad haamrid, kui pisikesed kõige pisemad, kuidas varre pikkus ja haamri kaal löögitäpsust ja -tugevust mõjutasid ja nii edasi. Haamer oli muidugi paraadrelv – sellega jooksid lahingusse vaid valitud ahvid, kes kohe tapeti. Nii et selle kandmine oli suur au. Undol oli vanaisa pikavarreline vaskhaamer siiamaani alles. „30 kilo puhast õiglust,“ ütles ta ise ja silitas vasara pead: „Kes teab, mitme inimese pea sellega sodiks on löödud.“ Kuigi ilmselt oli ta isegi üks neist teadjatest, kes teadis, et suure tõenäosusega mitte ühegi. Aga unistada ju võis. Igatahes nii nad siis patsutasid ja silitasid ja kiitsid vanaisa ja neil oli talle lõputult küsimusi. Nii põnevaid, et nad ei lasknud end tema vaikimisest häirida, vaid asusid oma küsimustele ise vastama. Kahe peale teadsid Undo ja Redo just täpselt nii palju, et vastastikku oma lüngad täita – olgugi kriisates ja aeg-ajalt teineteist kergelt näksates. Vanaisa kuulas neid vaikides, tänas suitsu eest ja kadus sööklasse kohvi jooma.

Minu kannatus oli pikem. Kui nad vanaisast niiviisi istuma jäid, kuulasin jutte muudkui edasi. Ja kui vanaisa suri, tekkis tema asemele, Undo ja Redo vahele, tohutusuur purk käärinud apelsinimahla, mida

nad kordamööda kummutasid – mõistagi alles pärast tööpäeva lõppu. „Sina, pärdik, jäta see kõik meelde!“ käskis Undo alatasa, mõne eriti tulise vaidluse lõpetuseks, endal lõug mahlane ja rinnakarvad kokku kleepunud. „See on ajalugu!” Pruunahvide ridades sõdinud vanaisa surma järel rääkisid Undo ja Redo, punaahvide okupatsiooni ajal sündinud ja kasvanud šimpansijurakad, ka okupantidest hoopis leebemalt.

Just punaahvidelt pärines erutav idee, et ahvidel polegi inimesi vaja, et viimased kasutavad ahve lihtsalt ära. Nii lõid punaahvid hea hulga inimesi – aga ka neile ustavaid ahve – lihtsalt mättasse. See teguviis oli Undole ja Redole ääretult sümpaatne. Neist, kel põgeneda õnnestus, said ajapikku siniahvid. Siniahvide juhid kartsid, et punaahvide idee võib kulutulena levida. Ja kui nende ja punaahvide piirimaile tekkis pruunahvide liikumine, kühveldati sellesse koormate kaupa banaane ja relvi – sellest pidi saama sein, mis punaahvid kinni peab, veelgi enam: sahk, mis nad ajaloo prügikasti lükkab. Aga sahk hakkas oma elu elama ja asus ajaloo prügikasti lükkama kõiki ahve, olgu laia- või kitsaninalisi, nii et alles jääks ainult šimpansid ja inimesed. Seegi teguviis oli Undole ja Redole ääretult sümpaatne, sest juhtumisi olid nemadki šimpansid. Aga siniahvide meelest oli nii valimatu tapmine äärmiselt küüniline – mistahes ahvide tapmine, olgu nad laia- või kitsaninalised, oli õigustatud ainult siis, kui nad olid punaahvid. Tappa võis ahvi, kelle peas olid vale kujuga mõtted, mitte ahvi, kelle pea oli vale kujuga. See oli siniahvide kultuuri üks alusteese: kuitahes vale kujuga pea kandjale pidi jääma vabadus täita oma pea õige kujuga mõtetega.

Nii et kui ma nüüd järele mõtlen, veel vanemana kui Undo ja Redo toona, saan ma aru, et nende maailmapilt oli süntees kahest ideoloogiast, mis üritasid teineteist maamuna pealt pühkida. Nende kõige ilusamad noorusaastad olid möödunud punaahvide võimu ajal, mil majaseinu ehtisid pildid lahkelt naeratavast gorillast, kelle kätel ja süles on terve trobikond ahvibeebisid: šimpanse, orangutane, reesusahve, bonobosid, makaake ja nii edasi. Rõõmsas üksmeeles pidi see kirev seltskond ehitama inimvaba tulevikku. „Vot see oli aeg, kus ahvi elu ka midagi maksis,“ seletas Undo. „Ahv hoolis ahvist. Tõesti

hoolis! Aga nüüd lööme üksteisele kohe noa selga, kui tarvis inimesele meele järele olla.“ Seepärast oli punaahvlus Undole ja Redole armas – eriti Undole, kuna tema vanaisa oli sõdinud punaahvide armees. Ja ometi oli nii, et kui paraadpilt tehtud, raputas too gorilla endalt kõik need beebid, nagu kirbud, ja judistas oma hõbedast selga. Kuidas sellist kirevust küll ohjata?

Pruunahvid pakkusid välja hea lahenduse: jätta alles ainult üks värv – pruun. Nad muidugi taipasid, et siis poleks pruun enam pruun, ja nii oli pruunahvidel plaan ehitada suur pruun muuseum, kuhu mahutada ülejäänud värvid. Seal oleksid nad ilusti paigal püsinud, õigesse järjekorda seatuna – nagu taevatrepp, mille viimaseks astmeks, paradiisi läveks, oleks olnud kõikide värvide kuningas, pruun. Seepärast oli ka pruunahvlus Undole ja Redole armas – eriti Redole, kuna tema vanaisa oli sõdinud pruunahvide leegionis. Võitsid siiski punaahvid. Aga üsna kiiresti sai selgeks, et nemadki nägid maailma monokroomselt ja tahtsid ehitada üsna samasugust värviredelit, mille viimane, taevale lähim pulk oleks punane.

Tõeliselt kirjuks läks elu alles minu sündides, kui punavõimust liiguti sinivõimu alla. Ühtäkki kuulutati kõikide värvide võrdsust – senikaua, kuni igaühte neist on segatud natuke sinist. Aga mida tähendab natuke? Selle piiriga mängides tekkis hulganisti puna- ja pruun-, rohe- ja lillaahve, kes näinuks sinise asemel hea meelega enda värvi ja tahtnuks, et hoopis seda kõikidesse ülejäänud värvidesse segataks.

Segased lood nende värvidega. Ja nii võisid Undo ja Redo, kes olid äsja punaahvide võimu härdusega meenutanud, mõne siniahvi kohta kähvata: „Ahh, see on ju vana punane.“ Niisamuti võisid nad pahandada, et sinised ongi uued punased, et pole neil mitte mingit vahet. Ja kui nad olid selle kinnituseks tublisti apelsinimahla rüübanud ja mõtlikult noogutanud, alustasid nad uut juttu sellest, kui erinevad sinised ja punased ikkagi on. Kui sellele tähelepanu juhtisin, seletasid nad õpetlikult, et punasel ja punasel on vahe: võid olla heas mõttes punane ja halvas mõttes punane. Seepeale kavaldasin, et kas ka lillaroosal ja lillaroosal on vahe – selle värviseguga tähistasid Undo

ja Redo absoluutselt kõike, mida nad vihkasid. Et kas võid olla ka heas mõttes lillaroosa? Redo ei jäänud isegi mõttesse: muidugi võid! Sa oled heas mõttes lillaroosa siis, kui sa oled surnud lillaroosa. Millele Undo lisas, et viimane aeg midagi sellist öelda, sest varsti keelavad sinised sellise jutu ära, sest tegelikult nad ongi juba lillaroosad. Siis jäid nad mõneks ajaks vait ja uurisid kahtlustavalt, ega ma ometi kunagi lillaroosade poolt hääletanud pole. Või veel hullem...

„Poiss, kui sa ise kah lillaroosa oled, siis me kägistame su sinu enda sabaga surnuks," pahandas Undo.

„Ma olen õnneks šimpans," kogelesin, katsudes asja naljaks pöörata.

„No küll me selle saba leiame, millega sind surnuks kägistada."

„Ah, ei ole, ei ole! Pole ta mingi lillaroosa!" viskus Redo minu kaitsele.

Umbes selline oli Undo ja Redo, kahe elukunstniku värviteooria oma rumalale õpipoisile. Tulemuseks see, et käte ja pintsli tudisedes ei julgenudki ma enam ühtki potsikut avada, vaid seisin halvatult lumivalge lõuendi ees. Eks sellisest väärikast värvitusest vaatab maailmale enamik ahve ja inimesi – iseendale maitsed ikka nagu paljas vesi, kosutav sõõm mõistlikkust.

Pâté of the Apes: One Primate's Thoughts and Memories

Tõnis Tootsen
Translated into English by Adam Cullen

Thinking back, my first memory isn't of my mother or father, but of humans. That is if I haven't sketched the recollection into my mind later; I've just heard about it so many times from other mouths. On birthdays and Tailster holidays and Manifestation Eve and so forth. Even after growing into a full-fledged ape, I was constantly reminded of how *close* I'd been regardless.

How close to what, exactly, was a point of contention. That's why the story was a family favourite, splitting my relatives into two camps. "Hey, how'd that one thing go again?" someone would ask (usually my uncle while painting Tailster bananas), looking as casual as possible as if they'd completely forgotten about "that one thing" already but still held the exact same opinion each and every time.

This is how the story went. Not far from my monkeyhood home was a taxi garage where my grandpa worked and was, on that day, celebrating his 35th birthday. A car that no one had ever seen before suddenly pulled up. Mom claimed it was red. Dad swore it was blue. My uncle insisted that my dad said it was red at first, too. My aunt argued the opposite: that my mom said it was blue. In any case, the driver and passenger were humans, a man and a woman, who were ecstatic when they saw me. The woman immediately scooped me up into her arms, cooing: "Oh, a baby ape!" That's what I remember—bare arms. Were they already titillating back then? Her skin was as velvety smooth as the dress she was wearing. And wasn't she just as warm as sun-heated sand … And how sweetly she smelled! I can still see my own teensy fingers playing with the big, round stones

hanging around her neck. The next thing I remember is being torn away from that warm embrace. I cling to one of the stones, but the next thing I know, the rest are hitting the ground and the woman is screaming. That's all.

My first memory. Paradise lost, as Dad would say. His own father, Grandpa Puma, would, on the other hand, call it the gates of hell. It was my other grandpa's birthday which we were celebrating that day, of course. In any case, those humans wanted to buy me as a playmate for their child. As the years passed, my dad inflated the amount they offered—even I can remember that. Maybe he started to feel embarrassed? It wasn't about the money, naturally, but the question itself. With those humans, I would have been surrounded by everything my dad preached about day after day. I would've been far closer to it than he himself—someone who came into contact with humans exponentially more than any ordinary primate who was allowed to touch a person with their own hands maybe once a year around Manifestation Day. Dad believed that although an ape can only become human after death ("a *good* ape," he made a point of specifying whenever I got into mischief), proximity to humans would increase the likelihood by leaps and bounds. According to his faith, an ape could be utterly dishonorable in life but if they perished in the arms of a human, then they were destined to be reborn human. He was also convinced that such a fate would certainly await me if I were a good ape to those people. Yet, Grandpa Puma quickly lost his patience and wrenched me away from that woman. Whatever might have happened next was left to my extended family to speculate. Perhaps the humans were just joking? Opinions ranged from one end of the spectrum to the other but before the debate became too heated, someone would always remark: "Only humans can know what would've become of him. It's not for a single ape to say." And more or less everybody would agree. I suppose they each took exactly what they wanted to take from the story anyway.

My grandfather—the one with the birthday, on my maternal side—had no right ear. He lost it fighting the red apes. Only a tiny strip of flesh was left. When I fingered it as a little monkey and asked, Gram-

pa-Grampa, why's your ear so little?, he said it was so he wouldn't hear stupid questions. I mostly remember him sitting on the bench at the taxi garage. He'd lounge there in the sun, his tail curled up, chain smoking and dropping the butts into a big metal bucket at his side until it was filled to the brim. Then, he'd dump it out somewhere and start all over again. He never spoke a word about the Big War, so even when I was just a little monkey, I realized there was no point bringing up the topic—though it was the most exciting subject of all!

"Are you afraid of death?" I nevertheless dared to ask one time.

"Stupid question," he replied.

So, he just sat and smoked outside the garage and was silent. Or sipped coffee. And was silent. He was silent about everything. When I was older, he'd occasionally ask how I was doing. "Good," I replied. "That's good," he'd say.

Every now and then, Undo or Redo, Grandpa's younger colleagues, would roll onto the lot. When both showed up at once, they'd immediately wall him in, plop down on either side, jam a pack of smokes into his hand, and steer the conversation towards the Big War. Although Undo and Redo were both born after it ended, they rarely talked about anything other than what maneuvers the brown apes executed or what kinds of hammers the red apes used: how big the biggest were, how tiny the tiniest were, how the length of the handle and the weight of the head affected the precision and strength of a strike, et cetera. Hammers were parade weapons, of course, and carried into battle only by chosen apes who were also instantly killed. Thus, it was a great honor to bear one. Undo still had his grandfather's long-handled copper hammer. "Thirty kilos of pure justice," he'd say, stroking its head. "Who knows how many craniums it's beaten to a pulp." Even though he was likely well aware there was a high probability of zero. But an ape could always dream. In any case, they patted Grandpa on the back and pet him and praised him and had endless questions lined up. Questions so exciting that they wouldn't be put off by his silence, but started answering themselves. Undo and Redo knew just enough to fill each other's gaps, albeit

while screeching and exchanging occasional nips. Grandpa would merely listen in silence, thank them for the smokes, and then disappear into the cafeteria for a coffee.

My own patience held out longer. When they stayed on the bench after he'd left, I'd continue listening to their conversation to no end. After Grandpa passed away, his spot between Undo and Redo was occupied by a giant jar of fermented orange juice that they took turns sipping—only after the end of the workday, of course. "You just remember that, little monkey!" Undo would customarily command to finish a particularly intense argument, juice smeared across his chin and his chest fur matted and sticky. "It's history!" Undo and Redo, burly chimpanzees who were born during the red apes' occupation, spoke of the occupiers much more mildly after Grandpa, who'd fought for the brown apes, was no more.

Red apes were responsible for the intriguing idea that primates had no use for humans; that humans were simply exploiting them. So, the red apes simply massacred a sizeable share of the population (and the apes who were loyal to them). Those who managed to escape became blue apes over time. The blue-ape leaders feared the red apes' idea could spread like wildfire. And when the brown-ape movement arose on the peripheries of both, then blues shoveled bananas and weapons galore into the cause, intending for it to be a bulwark, or what's more, a bulldozer that could push the reds into the dustbin of history. However, the bulldozer started living a life of its own and plowing *all* apes into the dustbin of history, broad- and narrow-nosed alike, leaving only chimpanzees and people. Undo and Redo found this method extremely agreeable, as both just happened to be chimpanzees as well. The blue apes, on the other hand, believed such indiscriminate killing was utterly cynical: that the killing of any ape, be they broad- or narrow nosed, was justified only if it was a red ape. One was permitted to kill those whose heads were filled with thoughts of the wrong shape, not apes whose head itself was the wrong shape. Such was a fundamental principle of blue-ape culture: no matter how wrong the shape of one's head, they must still have the freedom to fill it with thoughts of the right shape.

Now that I, older than Undo and Redo were at the time, think about it, I realize their worldview was a combination of two ideologies that were trying to wipe each other off the map. The golden days of their youth transpired under the rule of the red apes, when walls were plastered with posters displaying a gorilla smiling kindly, his arms heaped with a bevy of baby primates: chimpanzees, orangutangs, rhesuses, bonobos, macaques, and so forth. The colorful assortment was meant to build a human-free future in cheerful solidarity. "Now *that* was a time when an ape's life really meant something!" Undo railed. "Ape cared for ape. He really did! But now, we stab each other in the back whenever we need to grovel to humans." Consequently, they were also fans of red principles; especially Undo, whose grandfather fought in the red-ape army. But the truth of the matter was that as soon as the picture was taken, that gorilla shook off all the babies as if they were fleas and quivered his silver back. How on earth could such diversity be curbed?

The brown apes offered a fine alternative: leave only one color; their own. They realized, of course, that it meant brown would no longer be brown, so they devised a plan to build a big brown museum with just enough space for the rest of the colors. There, they would all stay nice and still, arranged in the correct order like a stairway to heaven, the last rung of which—the threshold to paradise—would have been brown, the king of all colors. Brown-ape principles were therefore also dear to Undo and Redo; especially the latter, as his grandfather fought in the brown apes' legion. The red apes triumphed regardless, though it quickly became clear that they also saw the world in monochrome and intended to construct a rather similar color ladder, the uppermost rung of which—the closest to heaven—would be red.

Life only became truly multicolored when the red regime submitted to the blue regime, around the time I was born. All of a sudden, all colors were declared equal—that is, so long as each was blended with *a little* blue. But what does *a little* mean? Experimenting with the boundary, there came to be a whole lot of red, brown, green, and purple apes who would have gladly seen their own color dominate instead of blue and wanted *that* to be mixed into all the rest of the colors.

It's hard to tell with colors. Undo and Redo, who began wistfully reminiscing about the former red-ape regime, were known to grunt, "Oh, they're just an old red," about one blue ape or another. It also wasn't unheard of for them to grumble that the blues were actually the new reds; that there was no real difference between them. And after slurping a healthy mouthful of orange juice and nodding thoughtfully in affirmation, they launched into a fresh discussion about how dissimilar blues and reds were all the same. When I pointed this out, they explained didactically that not all reds were alike: you could be red in a good sense or red in a bad sense. Provokingly, I asked if that meant not all magentas were alike—the purplish-pinkish blend which stood for absolutely everything that Undo and Redo despised. Could you also be magenta in a good sense? I asked. Redo didn't even take a moment to consider. Of course you can! You can be magenta in a good sense when you're a dead magenta. To which Undo added that it was his last chance to say something like that, because before you know it, blues will be banning that kind of talk because in reality they're all magentas already. Then, they fell silent for a few minutes before asking suspiciously if I hadn't, by chance, ever voted for magentas. Or even worse . . .

"Boy, if you turn out to be magenta, too, then we'll strangle you to death with your own tail," Undo growled.

"Luckily, I'm a chimpanzee," I stammered, trying to turn the whole thing into a joke.

"Well, I'm sure we'll find the tail to strangle you to death with."

"Ah, he ain't! He ain't! The boy's no magenta!" Redo protested, coming to my defense.

That was more or less the color theory that Undo and Redo, masters of living, propagated to their foolish apprentice. The outcome being that I no longer dared to even open another jar of paint, my hands and brush quivering as I stood frozen before the snow-white canvas. I suppose the majority of apes and humans view the world from a dignified colorless perspective such as that—to yourself, you always taste like pristine water; a refreshing sip of sensibility.

SPECIAL MENTION

FINLAND

Iida Rauma

Hävitys: Tapauskertomus

Destruction: A Case Study

Siltala Publishing, 2022
Language: Finnish
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BIOGRAPHY

Iida Rauma was born in 1984. Her debut novel, *The Book of Disappearances*, was published in 2011 and nominated for the Helsingin Sanomat Literature Prize. Her 2015 novel, *Of Sex and Mathematics*, was nominated for the European Union Prize for Literature and won both the Kalevi Jäntti Literature Prize and the Torch-bearer Prize. Rauma has a master's degree in political science with a specialisation in political history. She lives in Turku, Finland.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Iida Rauma's third novel succeeds at the impossible. The furious urge to remember, a love for the marvellous history of a burned and demolished city, and pain that strikes at the core are woven into a stunning tableau of violence, its rings spreading out to the ends of the earth. Destruction demonstrates the ability of literature to tell the truth when all other ways of speaking have been denied or condemned as lunacy.
While jogging at night, A sees a familiar figure at the city's desolate fringes and realises nothing ends, nothing is over. So begins a breathless, desperate attempt

to hunt down and escape the past across the ravaged city of Turku, into the water-damaged classrooms of the 1990s and a darkness for which there are no words but still must be expressed. Destruction asks how one can write about oneself if one's own self has been shattered. How can we document the horrors of one's childhood in a culture where adults hate children and want to erase the traces of past wrongs?

THE FINNISH READING CENTRE'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

Iida Rauma's powerful novel has a strong voice of its own. It has a strong message about the structures of society, that lack to support the weakest: children. It's an intense story about bullying and exercise of power, but foremost it's a literary masterpiece, a unique work of art. It alters between narrative techniques and registers, facts and fiction, analytical and bewildering.

Hävitys: Tapauskertomus

Iida Rauma

”Ihmiset luulee et pahin on ku joutuu jonku väkivaltasen hyökkäyksen uhriks”, Ira sanoi ja huojui silmät puoliummessa. ”Et ku joku yrittää hukuttaa, et se ois niinku se grand trauma mut siis musthan se hukuttamisjuttu on aiva ihana. Kun ne painaa mun päätä veden alle ja mä oon ykstoista ja niit on kolme yhtä vastaan. Et onhan se joteski vaa tosi pysäyttävää ku siit alkaa kertoo jossai työpaikan kahvihuonees tai sukujuhlil ku eihä kukaan muu ku joku psykopaatti ois siin iha kylmänä et ei toi mitään. Ku se just on mitään. Ku se iha varmasti on.”

A:n kehossa kaikui Eternal Flame, talon rakenteissa vinkui kylmä, turkulainen tuuli, jonka yllä Iran ääni oli kuin osa suurempaa orkesteriteosta. Sanat ropisemassa ikkunalautaan, imeytymässä maaperään ja syövyttämässä maata, ja A ajatteli, että hänen pitäisi kerätä voimansa ja keskeyttää Ira.

”Joskus must tuntuu et parasta mitä mul tapahtu koko peruskoulun aikan on just se hukuttaminen”, Ira sanoi, ”vähä niinku parasta mitä sul tapahtu oli se vuoden ysiysi kiirastorstain kuristamisjuttu, semmosest voi tiristää, voi oikeen vääntää ja siis mä osaan niin kuvitella itteni jossain kirjamessuil puhumas siit hukuttamisest ja yleisö on iha vakavana ja joitain itkettää ja ne katseet, varmaan jotain veteraanei katotaan silleen pakahtuneesti, ja joku sanoo et sä oot kyl tosi vahva ku sä pystyt puhuun tost ja mä siinä tietty iha silleen vaatimattomana et eihän tää helppoo oo mut kyl jonku näistäki asioist pitää puhuu, vaiks fakta on et sehä on iha älyttömän helppoo puhuu jostain hukuttamisesta, mähä puhuisin siit varmaan joka päivä, joskus mä puhunki, siit tulee semmonen lämmin olo. Ainaski hetkeks. Ainaski hetkeks

tulee lämmin. Niinku pakkasel lämmittelis pissaamal housuun. Onha se eka tosi hyvä tunne. Et hetken mä oon siinä iha ku joku oikee ihminen oikeiden ihmisten keskel ku eihä ne pirun runkut ikin tajuu et todellinen kaameus alkaa vast sen hukuttamisen jälkeen, sit ku yskii ja kakoo ja tulee opet ja vanhemmat ja reksit ja terkkarit ja kuraattorit ja psykologit ja vanhempainyhistyksen puheenjohtaja joka on sitä mieltä et ei meijän Empukas oo mitään vikaa, meijän Emppu-pemppu on nii kiva tyttö, oikeen hymytyttö ja hurjan hyvä koulus. Et ne pahimmat jutut tapahtuu just jossai neuvottelukopeis ja kansliois ku jotku aikuiset päättää vähä selvitellä tilannetta, jotku semmoset luotettavat aikuiset jotka jotai objektiivisina ja oikeudenmukasina sönkkää et kyl täs on kaikki osapuolet tehny ja sanonu vähän yhtä ja toista ja kaikki liukenee, kaikki liukenee...”

Voimat eivät tulleet. A:n jäsenet olivat väsyneet ja vetelät, ja hän tajusi kyllä, mistä Ira oli aikeissa puhua, tajusi ja halusi estää. Hän yritti tanssittaa Iraa kohti kaatunutta nuottitelinettä, toivoi että tämä kompastuisi tai satuttaisi jalkansa.

”...muuttuu joteski nii suttuseks et siit on iha turha missään kirjamessuil yrittää selittää”, Ira sanoi. ”Ja niist näkee et niit ällöttää, niitä aikuisii ku ne kattoo mua. Et jos mä lojuisin kuolleena siäl vessan lattial niin kait ne sit sitä suris ja ois iha et kauheeta ku tolleen pääs käymään, mut mä en oo kuollu, mä oon hengis ja likanen ja piloil. Ootsä koskaan miettiny et suomenkielen sana raiskata meinaa pilaamista? Et ku tyyliin joku mettä on raiskattu nii se tarkottaa et se on hakattu alas ja se on ruma ja turmeltu eikä siit oo enää kellekää mitään hyötyy. Iha sama se merkitys on sillonki ku puhutaan niinku raiskausraiskauksista. Semmone kaunis ja perinteikäs ajatus et nainen on niinku se mettä ja jos joku siihen kajoo nii se on sitte hyödytön ja piloil. Vähä niinku joku käytetty vessapaperi. Muutahan me ei osata tehä ku pistää metät serlaks ja huuhdella viemäristä alas. Vettä päälle. Märta Tikkanen oli oikees ku se sanos et miestä ei voi raiskata ja joo joo, tietty mä tiiän et miehil voi tehä mitä tahansa hirveetä seksuaalist väkivaltaa mut joteski periaatteellisesti ne ei koskaan oo sillä lail-

la esineitä et ne vois lopullisesti pilata. Paitti ehkä iha nuoret pojat. Lapset voi ain pilata. Musta raiskaus on tosi ällöttävä sana. Ällöttää nytki sanoo se. Raiskaus raiskaus raiskaus raiskaus.

” Metalli vingahti, kun Ira tallasi nuottitelineelle, mutta tämän ääni ei edes värähtänyt, tämä vain jatkoi ja jatkoi vaikkei A kestänyt tai halunnut kuulla.

”Joskus esiteininä mä pelkäsin hirveesti et mul kävis nii”, Ira sanoi. ”Pelotti et bussis joku jäis pois samal pysäkil ja lähtis mua seuraan ja raahais johonki puistoon. Mä kävelin pitkin kaupunkii ja kuulin sen askeleet ja puristin avaint mun kädes et ainaskaan se ei sais tietää mis mä asun ja et jos joku ny tulee mä lyön vaiks en mä varmaa ois mitään lyöny, mä oisin vaa maannu ja oottanut et se on ohi ja varmaan keittäny kahvit päälle... Haluisitsä kahvii? Yksin koton mä ain pelkäsin et se joka mua seuraa seisoo kadul ja tuijottaa mun ikkunast... Vaiks mä miten oisin vetäny verhot eteen nii ei se mitään auttanu ja mä olin varma et taas se tapahtuu, taas ne kattoo mua ja näkee vaa likaa. Ja varmaa mun pitäs itteki sit käyttää sitä sanaa. Silleen et hei, ny kävi näin et mut on niinku raiskattu eli pilattu. Joteski viäl enemmän ku se raiskaus mua pelotti just se. Et mun pitäs sanoo se ja sit tulis taas ne luotettavat aikuiset ja kansliat ja kaikki. Äläkä viitti heijata ittees niinku sä et tajuis mist mä puhun. Mä näin ku sä tulit siält kuraattorin luota. Mä näin ku sä tulit siält vaareksin kansliast. Eikä tarvii panikoida, en mä kysy mitä niis tapahtu ku tiekkö ei mun tarvii, mä tiiän ilmanki. Ku sehän siin on pahint. Et viime kädes koko maailma on kanslia ja täynnä luotettavii aikuisii jotka aattelee et kyl sitä on olemas joku oikeus ja järjestys silleen et hyvil ihmisil tapahtuu hyvii asioit ja pahoil ihmisil tapahtuu pahoi asioit ja et jos ite vaa on hyvä nii sit käy hyvin. Se on kato just se hetki ku kusi alkaa jäähtyy. Ku se kirjamessuyleisö alkaa kelaa et onhan se hirveetä tommone hukuttamine mut joha sota loppus ja tarviiks näist jutuist viäl kolkyt vuotta myöhemmin jauhaa. Et sehän kummiski selvis hengis ja vähä on hysteerist meininkii ja eiks ois jo aika mennä eteenpäin ja unohtaa ja antaa anteeks, kyl anteeks pitää osata antaa, ja eihä sitä ittelkää ain ollu koulus kivaa mut kuka semmosii koko aika miettii, mahtasko olla vähä omaaki syytä ku ei

kait ne iha tyhjän tähde sitä kiusannu. Mist lyödään vetoo et säkin ain fiilistelet sitä kuristamisjuttuu mut niist kanslioist sä et sano mitään, et siit kuraattorist tai vararekisist tai...”

”Se oli apulaisrehtori”, A sanoi ja kuuli äänensä etäisenä ja kaikuvana, kuin syvältä veden alta.

”Tolleenk seki korjas ku sä sanoit sen tittelin väärin? Vararekisi. Apureksi. Varamulkku, apumulkku, mulkku mikä mulkku iha...”

”Eikä sua kukaan koskaan vainonnut. Mä se seurasin sua sillon kaupungilla.”

”...yks ja sama.”

”Kuljin sun peräs ja yritin nähdä.”

”Luuletsä et mä en tienny? Luuletsä et mä en tienny mitä sä oisit mul tehny? Sä oot stalkannu mua jotai miljoona vuotta mut täs mä ny oon iha livenä et miltä tuntuu?”

”Lopeta!”

”Kiihottaako? Kaduttaako?”

”Vittu lopeta ny!”

”Eiku ens me tanssitaan. Ens me tanssitaan oikeen kunnol. Iiis thiiis burning an eeeternal flame?”

He töytäilivät ympäri pehmeänä vellovaa lattiaa, tuuppasivat mennessään sohvapöytää, niin että steariini roiskui ja kynttilöiden liekit lepattivat uhkaavasti. Laulu purkautui syvältä heidän solumuististaan, ja A:n mielessä kävi kuvia kamalasti palaneista ja ruhjoutuneista ruumiista, ihmisistä, joiden iho kuoriutui irti ja joiden silmät sulivat kuoppiinsa, kuvia sekunneissa tuhkaksi ja radioaktiiviseksi pölyksi muuttuneista kaupungeista, tyhjäsilmäisistä aaveista, jotka vaelsivat keskellä kuun maisemaa ennen kuin tuupertuivat maahan eivätkä nousseet. Ei sellaista olisi pitänyt olla, ei sellaisesta olisi pitänyt selvitä hengissä, mutta ne, jotka selvisivät, maksoivat selviytymisestä koko elämänsä. A sanoi lukeneensa, että hibakushia,

Hiroshiman ja Nagasakin atomipommeista selviytyneitä ei haluttu palkata töihin, heidän seuraansa kaihdettiin eikä heidän kanssaan solmittu avioliittoja. Stigma oli niin vahva, että monet kätkivät kokemuksensa jopa lapsiltaan ja lapsenlapsiltaan, ja jolleivat kätkeneet, syrjintä siirtyi jälkeläisiin, sillä hibakushat olivat olleet jossain, missä kenenkään ei olisi pitänyt olla, A sanoi, he olivat kokeneet jotain, mitä kenenkään ei olisi pitänyt kokea, he olivat käyneet toisella puolella, vaeltaneet aaveina aaveiden joukossa ja palanneet elävien keskuuteen todistamaan kokemastaan. Miten sellaisten ihmisten kanssa olisi voinut olla tekemisissä? Helposti, A sanoi, jollei sattunut vaalimaan mielessään lohdullisia älyttömyyksiä, joiden mukaan hyville ihmisille käy hyvin ja pahoille pahoin, aivan kuten Ira oli sanonut, noita näennäisen viattomia uskomuksia, joiden avulla torjutaan elämän mielivaltaisuuden aiheuttama kauhu, sillä onhan toki mukavampaa luulotella, että onni ja kärsimys ovat omissa käsissä kuin myöntää, että kenelle tahansa voi tapahtua tuhoisia asioita, kuka tahansa voi joutua väkivallan tai sodan uhriksi. Sattuma ratkaisee, kuka syntyy köyhänä, kuka joutuu onnettomuuteen, kuka kuolee tuskalliseen sairauteen ja kuka elää satavuotiaaksi, A sanoi, kuka istuu kerjäämässä kadunkulmassa ja kuka kävelee ohi antamatta mitään, varmana siitä, että kerjäläinen on ansainnut kohtalonsa. Siksi uhri on aina syyllinen, A sanoi, siksi syöpäpotilaan pitää kiinnittää kukkamerkki rintaansa, siksi työttömiä pitää rankaista heidän työttömyydestään, hulluja hulluudestaan, jotta muut ihmiset voisivat kuvitella olevansa suojassa, ja epäilemättä myös hänen luokkalaisensa pitivät häntä erilaisena juuri siksi, jotta ne voisivat olla varmoja siitä, ettei niille itselleen voisi ikinä käydä samoin. Epäilemättä juuri siksi kiusaamisoppaiden kirjoittajatkin pitivät. Estoniasta pelastuneet raportoivat ystävien ja tuttavien alkaneen karttaa heitä, A sanoi.

Hän itsekin yritti karttaa itseään. Koska tuntui liian raskaalta myöntää, että kovin vähän oli hänen hallinnassaan, A sanoi. Että juuri mikään ei ollut hänen hallinnassaan. Lohdullisempaa oli ajatella, että pahat asiat tapahtuivat tarkoituksella, että ne olivat hänen syytään, ja että jos hän yrittäisi riittävän lujasti, hänelle kävisi hyvin.

Destruction: A Case Study

Iida Rauma
Translated into English by David Hackston

'People think being the victim of a violent attack is the worst thing ever,' said Ira and swayed, her eyes half shut. 'Like, if someone tries to drown you, that would be some kind of massive trauma, but to me the whole drowning thing is wonderful. When they push my head under the water and I'm eleven and it's three against one. I mean, it's pretty arresting when you start talking about it in the work staffroom or at a family gathering 'cause only a total psycho would be so cold about it, like it's nothing. 'Cause it *is* something. That's exactly what it is.'

Eternal Flame was echoing through A's body, the structure of the house rattled with the chilly Turku wind, above which Ira's voice was like part of a greater orchestral work. Words pattering on the windowsill, seeping into the ground and corroding the earth, and A thought she should gather her strength and try to interrupt Ira.

'Sometimes I think the best thing that happened to me at school was the whole drowning episode,' said Ira. 'Just like the best thing that happened to you was the strangling thing on Maundy Thursday back in ninety-nine. You can really milk something like that, wring it for all it's worth, and I can just see myself at some bookfair talking about the drowning episode, and the audience is sitting there all serious and some people are even crying, and their faces, people probably look at veterans like that, like they're about to burst, then someone says you're so strong being able to talk about this, and of course I'm all modest about it, like, it's not easy but someone's got to talk about it, right, though in actual fact it's ridiculously easy to talk about the drowning episode, I could talk about it every day, and sometimes I do, it makes me feel kind of warm. For a moment, at least. For a moment, I feel warm. Like warming yourself in the freezing cold by pissing in your pants. At first it's a really nice feeling. For a moment I'm like a real person, standing there among all the other real people,

'cause those wankers don't realise the really terrible bit only starts after the drowning, when you start coughing and spluttering and the teachers and parents and headmasters and psychologists all turn up, and the chair of the parents' association, who says there's nothing wrong with our Emppu, our sweet little Emppu is such a good girl, such a well-behaved girl, and she's really good at school too. You see, the worst things happen in some office or conference room when the adults try to get to the bottom of the situation, trusted adults who pretend they're objective and fair and babble that everybody's said such-and-such and done such-and-such, then everybody dissolves, everybody dissolves...'

The strength never came. A's limbs felt tired and weak, and she knew what Ira was planning to talk about, she knew it and wanted to stop it. She tried to dance Ira towards the toppled music stand, hoped she'd stumble and hurt her leg.

'...and becomes so blurry there's no point trying to explain it at a bookfair,' said Ira. 'And you can see it grosses them out, those adults, when they look at me. Like, if I was lying dead on the toilet floor, I suppose they'd be upset about it and they'd be like isn't it awful that it came to this, but I'm not dead, I'm alive and dirty and ruined. Have you ever thought about how the Finnish word for rape actually means 'ruin'? Like when a forest is 'raped' it means the trees have all been cut down and it's ugly and tainted and no use to anybody. It's the same as when you're talking about rape-rape. That beautiful, traditional idea that a woman is like a forest and if someone touches her then she's ruined and worthless. Like a sheet of used toilet paper. That's all we can do, turn trees into Andrex and flush them down the toilet with a bit of water. Märta Tikkanen was right when she said you can't rape a man, yeah yeah, I know, men can experience all kinds of sexual violence too, but in principle they're never seen as objects that can be ruined for good. Except really young boys, maybe. You can always ruin kids. I think rape's a really gross word. I feel gross just saying it. Rape rape rape rape.'

The metal creaked as Ira trampled on the music stand, but her voice didn't waver, she just carried on and on though A couldn't bear to hear it, didn't want to hear it.

'In my early teens I used to be really worried that's what would happen to me,' said Ira. 'I was afraid someone would get off the bus at the same stop and follow me and drag me into a park somewhere. I would be walking through the city and hear footsteps behind me, and I would grip my keys in my hand so at least they wouldn't find out where I live and if someone came up to me I'd smack them, though I probably wouldn't have smacked anybody, I would've just lain there and waited for it all to be over and probably made some coffee afterwards... Fancy a coffee? While at home alone, I was afraid that whoever was following me would be standing in the street staring in through my windows... No matter how tightly I drew the curtains, it wouldn't matter, and I was certain it was going to happen, they're looking at me again and all they can see is dirt. And then I'm supposed to use that word myself. Like, hey, that's what happened, I've been raped and, like, ruined. Somehow, I was more afraid of this than of the actual rape, that I'm supposed to say it out loud, then all the trusted adults and headmasters and everything would turn up. Don't shake your head like you don't get what I'm talking about. I saw you come out of the counsellor's office. I saw you come out of the assistant head's office. Don't panic, I'm not going to ask you what happened in there 'cause, you know what, I don't need to, I already know. That's the worst of it. At the end of the day, the whole world is one big school office full of trusted adults who all think some kind of justice and order exist, like, good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, and if you're good then you'll be fine. That's the moment your piss starts to cool. When the audience at the bookfair starts to think that was terrible, that drowning episode, but the war's over now and is there any point raking over the same stuff thirty years later? I mean, she survived, sure, but she's a bit hysterical, and isn't it time to move on and forget the past and forgive, forgiveness is a virtue, right, and after all, school wasn't always fun for us either but who spends their whole life thinking about stuff like that, it's probably partly her fault too 'cause I doubt they would've

bullied her for nothing. Wanna bet you'll still reminisce about the whole strangling thing but you'll never say anything about the office, the counsellor or the assistant head or...'

'It was the deputy head, actually,' said A, and she heard her own voice, distant and echoing, as though it was coming from somewhere deep under water.

'Is that how she corrected you when you said her title wrong? Deputy head, assistant head, deputy twat, assistant twat, one twat is pretty much like another...'

'Nobody ever stalked you. I'm the one that used to follow you around town.'

'... so never mind.'

'I walked around after you and tried to see you.'

'You think I didn't know? You think I didn't know what you'd do to me? You've been stalking me for like a million years but here I am in the flesh, so what does it feel like?'

'Stop it!'

'Turning you on?'

'Just fucking stop it!'

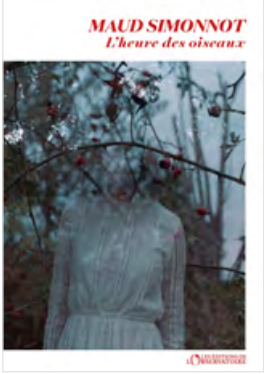
'No, we're going to dance first. We're going to dance properly first. *Iiis thiiis burning an eeeternal flame?*'

They shuffled across the softly swirling carpet, knocking into the coffee table, spilling wax onto the table and making the candle flames give a foreboding flicker. The song came from somewhere deep in their cellular memory, and A's mind was filled with images of catastrophically burned, battered bodies, people whose skin was peeling off and whose eyes were melting in their sockets, images of towns reduced to ash and radioactive dust in a matter of seconds, empty-eyed ghosts wandering through a lunar landscape before collapsing to the ground, never to get to their feet again. It shouldn't have been like that, nobody should have survived that, but those who did paid for their survival for the rest of their lives. A said she'd

read somewhere that the *hibakusha*, the people who survived the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, became pariahs that nobody wanted to employ, people avoided their company, and nobody would marry them. The stigma was so strong that many people concealed their experiences from their own children and grandchildren because, if they didn't, the discrimination they faced would pass to their descendants because the *hibakusha* had been somewhere nobody was ever supposed to be, said A, they had experienced something that nobody was supposed to experience, they had visited the other side, wandered like ghosts among other ghosts and returned to the realm of the living to bear witness to what they had experienced. How could anyone associate with people like that? Easily, said A, as long as you didn't harbour ludicrous notions like good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people, just like Ira had said, those superficially innocent beliefs that we use to stave off the terror caused by the arbitrary nature of human life, because it's more comfortable to make yourself believe that happiness and suffering are in your own hands than it is to admit that devastating things can happen to anybody at all, anybody can end up a victim of war and violence. Fate decides who is born poor, who will be in an accident, who will die a premature death, and who will live to be a hundred, said A, who will sit begging on the street corner and who will saunter past without giving anything, certain in the knowledge that the beggar deserves his fate. That's why the victim is always guilty, said A, that's why cancer patients pin flower badges to their chest, that's why the unemployed should be punished for their unemployment, the insane for their insanity, so that other people can believe they are safe, and without a doubt her classmates considered her *different* precisely so they could be certain that the same thing could never happen to them. Without a doubt, that's why the people who wrote books about bullying thought her different too. The people rescued from the MS Estonia recalled how their friends and family eventually started avoiding them, said A. She even tried to avoid herself. Because it was too hard to admit that very few things were actually under her control, said A. That, in fact, nothing was under her control. It was more comforting to image that bad things happen on purpose, that they were her own fault, and that if she just tried hard enough, she'd be all right.

SPECIAL MENTION

FRANCE



Maud Simonnot

L'heure des oiseaux

The Hour of Birds

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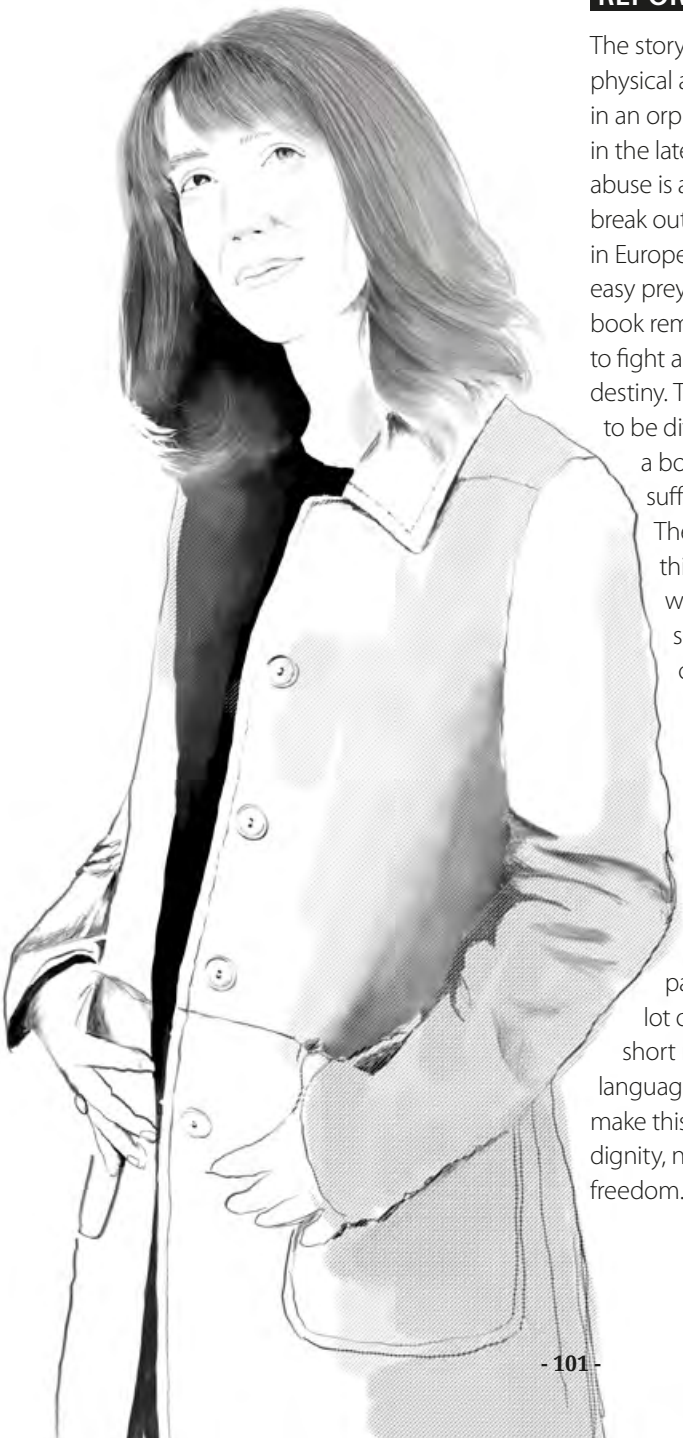
BIOGRAPHY

Maud Simonnot is a French writer. Her biography of the publisher Robert McAlmon, *La nuit pour adresse* (Gallimard, 2017), has received the Valery-Larbaud literary prize and was a finalist for the prestigious Medicis literary prize. After *L'Enfant céleste*, Goncourt selection and finalist for the 2020 Goncourt des lycéens, *L'Heure des oiseaux* is her second novel.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

This novel is about the aftermath of the war on children and the abuse of innocent orphans, often the first victims of adult cruelty. The story takes place on Jersey Island in 1959. To avoid the cruelty and sadness of the orphanage, Lily, rejected as being different, draws all her courage from the song of the birds, her ability to re-enchant the world, the strange friendship she shares with a hermit in the 'Forgotten Forest' and the unconditional love she has for a young boy called 'le Petit'. Sixty years later, a young ornithologist travels from France to Jersey to investigate the past of her father, a pianist who also has a passion for birds. The islanders dodge the questions asked by this foreigner about the sordid affair linked to the orphanage: what happened to Lily and to his brother? What's the drama that has been kept secret for so long?



BUREAU INTERNATIONAL DE L'ÉDITION FRANÇAISE'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

The story is based on real facts, the physical and sexual abuse of children in an orphanage on the island of Jersey in the late 1950s. But the issue of child abuse is a universal theme. When wars break out, as we also have seen recently in Europe, children and orphans are an easy prey that must be protected. This book reminds us of the responsibility to fight against such inequalities of destiny. This book is also about the right to be different because Lily is in fact a boy who wants to be a girl and suffers discrimination and abuse. The two stories that coexist in this book – that of this young woman who investigates the secret surrounding her father's childhood, but also and above all that of the children who try to face pain and sorrow by evolving in a marvellous nature, a poetic universe that gives them joy and peace – both tell us what the imagination of children sometimes manages to transcend, even in the most painful circumstances. There is a lot of poetry and humanity in this short novel and Maud Simonnot's language, and the accuracy of her tone make this novel a great book about dignity, nature, imagination, hope and freedom.

L'heure des oiseaux

Maud Simonnot

Le jour où je suis arrivée sur l'île, il neigeait.

J'avais rêvé d'azur, de voiliers et de soleils couchants qui brûlent en silence, j'ai débarqué en pleine tempête dans un endroit où personne ne m'attendait.

Par facilité j'avais choisi un vieil hôtel dans un port du sud de l'île, près de la capitale, Saint-Hélier, à quelques kilomètres du lieu des crimes. Comme tous les villages bordant cette côte, celui-ci était bâti au creux d'une baie abritée des tempêtes. Mon guide précisait : « une superbe baie dessinée par des chaos de roches se perdant dans le bleu intense de la Manche ».

D'ordinaire le soir on pouvait voir, ajouta le patron de l'hôtel, le demi-cercle scintillant d'une guirlande qui ourlait la côte sur des kilomètres. J'étais prête à croire le guide et cet homme enthousiaste mais ce jour-là on ne distinguait pas son chien au bout de la laisse, et tout était d'un blanc triste, le ciel comme la mer.

Dans mon esprit se superposaient aussi des images d'archives : j'avais vu un documentaire sur la Seconde Guerre mondiale dans les îles Anglo-Normandes et je savais qu'une attaque navale terrible avait illuminé autrement cette jolie anse, les fusées repeignant le ciel en vert et rouge, aux couleurs de l'enfer. Le grondement des canons avait retenti pendant des heures tandis que les sirènes du port hurlaient, recouvertes à leur tour par les cris, les bruits des bottes, les balles traçantes sur la plage...

*

Une fois dans ma chambre, j'ai laissé glisser le lourd sac de toile de mon épaule et passé l'appel téléphonique promis : « Oui, ça y est, je suis à Jersey. »

Lily voit que le Petit a encore pleuré. Parce qu'il a eu peur, parce qu'on lui a dit quelque chose d'effrayant, ou qu'on l'a grondé pour une faute inconnue. Sous la frange trop courte, mal coupée, de ses cheveux fins, les yeux clairs sont cernés.

Elle a une idée. C'est dimanche ; les adultes, après la messe, vaquent à leurs occupations à l'extérieur, l'orphelinat est vide. Elle court à la cuisine et revient avec quelques légumes dérobés dans un panier du marché.

Il y aura la reine Rutabaga ceinte d'un chiffon blanc. Un œuf de caille trouvé au pied d'un mur, que Lily garde précieusement avec d'autres trésors sous son lit, sera parfait pour représenter l'enfant sur l'autel. Les reflets céladon de la coquille émerveillent le Petit qui n'en a jamais vu de semblables. Lily aligne les carottes comme des soldats de chaque côté et bâtit pour ses autres créatures un mobilier miniature à partir de branchettes.

Le spectacle commence. Le Petit oublie ses larmes, béat devant l'histoire qui se matérialise sous ses yeux. Lily a transformé l'atmosphère autour d'eux avec cette manière si particulière des enfants souverains, capable de réenchanter l'endroit le plus sordide et de créer un monde plus heureux.

Un instant.

Dès le lendemain, j'ai voulu voir l'orphelinat.

Face à moi s'élevait une immense bâtisse victorienne en granit, rendue plus lugubre encore par son histoire et le fait que depuis des années elle soit abandonnée aux vents et aux dégâts du temps. Un brouillard marin épais rejoignait un ciel cendré : le décor naturel était en harmonie.

Un des orphelins, parmi les témoins les plus importants du procès, avait déclaré qu'il souhaitait voir démolir cet endroit, symbole de son traumatisme. Dans ce sombre bâtiment bordant la forêt à la sortie du village, des dizaines d'enfants placés par l'Assistance publique avaient subi l'inavouable. Maltraitances physiques, humiliations, privations, punitions. Et, d'après plusieurs victimes qui avaient enfin parlé, sévices sexuels.

Tout avait débuté en 2008 lorsqu'on avait dégagé les restes d'un corps enterré dans une cave de l'orphelinat sous une dalle de béton. Un appel téléphonique anonyme avait précisé au commissariat l'emplacement des ossements. À partir de là, l'enquête était enclenchée : le chef de la police arriva sur les lieux et fit venir le médecin légiste, la route qui mène au pensionnat fut barrée – elle le resterait des années. Les premières constatations ne permirent pas de trouver le moindre indice supplémentaire, mis à part l'entrée dissimulée d'une autre cave, identique, dans laquelle des prélèvements furent effectués. Il s'avéra rapidement que les ossements provenaient d'animaux, c'était une fausse alerte. L'affaire aurait donc pu s'arrêter là mais, après la macabre découverte, les langues s'étaient déliées.

La presse locale évoqua des caves secrètes dans lesquelles des enfants auraient été attachés et enfermés sans rien à manger ni à boire, à l'isolement complet. Des journalistes de grandes rédactions anglo-saxonnes prirent le relais, tout s'emballa et le scandale médiatique entraîna une bien plus vaste investigation. Des lettres et des appels affluèrent de l'Europe entière. Au total cent soixante anciens pensionnaires racontèrent les violences infligées par des membres

du personnel et certains visiteurs à partir de l'après-guerre. L'accumulation des témoignages et leur concordance ne permirent pas sur le moment de remettre en question leur parole.

Les policiers tentèrent de dresser la liste des personnes impliquées et celle des victimes. L'une comme l'autre furent difficiles à établir : l'orphelinat avait été fermé en 1986, on n'avait conservé aucun registre des employés ni des enfants. Dans l'enquête menée par la Jersey Child Abuse Investigation, une douzaine de spécialistes de la police scientifique furent chargés de la recherche et de l'identification de traces humaines qui pourraient raconter une histoire vieille de plus d'un demisiècle. Car d'autres témoignages signalaient aussi des disparitions d'enfants. La terre brune de l'île fut entièrement retournée aux alentours de l'orphelinat et les enquêteurs furent aidés par les plus fameux limiers du Royaume, deux épagneuls renifleurs déjà utilisés lors de la disparition de la petite Maddie. Mais on ne retrouva pas d'ossements, juste quelques objets tachés de sang, impossibles à identifier.

Et puis plus rien. Dans les médias, le doute sur ce qui s'était véritablement passé dans l'orphelinat s'était peu à peu installé, faute de preuves. La police locale, qui se divisait entre une police dite « officielle » et une police « honorifique » constituée de connétables, centeniers et vingteniers – des citoyens élus depuis le xive siècle par les paroissiens pour « le maintien de l'ordre » –, était débordée par une si grosse affaire, rien n'avait pu être fait dans les règles. Des preuves avaient été égarées, les analyses et les témoignages se contredisaient, des informations censées rester confidentielles avaient circulé, certains témoins avaient été intimidés et étaient revenus sur leur déposition… Parmi les suspects encore vivants, trois seulement furent un temps inquiétés. On conclut à des « défaillances » dans la gestion de l'enquête, le chef de la police, dont l'intégrité gênait les notables locaux, servit de fusible et fut limogé.

Last but not least, des experts en relations publiques furent engages pour redorer l'image du paradis fiscal. Dans l'île britannique, à vingt kilomètres des côtes françaises, l'onde de choc s'éteignit aussi vite qu'elle s'était levée et le bailliage de Jersey put recouvrer sa tranquillité légendaire, ses banques et son bocage verdoyant.

Le Petit a le front contre la vitre : « Il y a vraiment beaucoup de neige... » Son visage s'anime : « Imagine si c'était l'inverse, si le ciel était blanc et que les nuages et la neige étaient bleus ? »

En contemplant avec lui la course des nuages insouciants,

Lily est envahie de tendresse, elle aime tellement cet enfant rêveur :

« Tu aimerais sortir ?

— On a le droit ? »

Elle lui sourit, un doigt sur ses lèvres : « Suis-moi. »

Le garçon longe en trottinant le mur de la buanderie puis se glisse après elle derrière la réserve de bois jusqu'à une ouverture dissimulée dans le mur. Elle pousse la trappe, les voilà dehors dans la blancheur éblouissante de ce premier matin du monde.

Lily s'élance dans la neige vierge, si inhabituelle, qui a enseveli le parc. Tandis que le Petit expérimente cette étendue lisse et moelleuse, elle grimpe sur une souche pour s'approcher d'un nid en mousse encore accroché à une branche du vieux magnolia.

« Une famille de mésanges à longue queue vivait ici l'été dernier. Je les ai souvent vues. Les plus fragiles sont certainement mortes. »

Elle descend le nid précautionneusement, quelques cristaux de neige tombent de l'arbre. Les enfants défont les brindilles et comptent trois cadavres parmi les plumes floconneuses qui tapissent l'intérieur. Ensemble, ils creusent une tombe au fond du parc et recouvrent les oisillons de poudreuse et de feuilles arrachées à l'herbe givrée. Le Petit hésite, et ose demander :

« Où sont le papa et la maman maintenant ? »

Lily ne sait pas.

Ce qu'elle redoutait arrive : le Petit enchaîne avec des questions sur leurs propres parents. Il faudrait qu'elle invente une histoire qui tienne la route, mais là encore aucune réponse ne lui vient.

The Hour of Birds

Maud Simonnot
Translated into English by Jeffrey Zuckerman

The day I come to the island, it is snowing.

I have dreamed of azure, of sailboats and setting suns blazing in silence; I debark in a raging storm someplace nobody has been expecting me.

For convenience's sake, I chose an old inn on a harbor in the south of the island, by the capital, Saint-Hélier, a few miles from where the crimes happened. Like all the villages along this coast, this one has been erected inside a bay sheltered from storms. My guide clarifies: "a gorgeous bay formed by a mess of rocks amid the Channel's intense blue."

On most evenings, the innkeeper adds, people can see the gleaming half-circle of a wreath hemming in the coast for miles. I want to believe the guide and this enthusiastic man, but on this day I can't make out the dog at the end of his leash, and sky and sea alike have a sad pallor.

Archival images, too, are overlaid in my mind: I once saw a documentary about World War II in the Channel Islands and I know a horrific naval attack lit up this pretty cove in its way, the rockets tingeing the sky green and red, in hellish colors. The cannons' roar reverberated for hours while the harbor sirens shrieked, drowned out in turn by shrieks, thudding boots, tracers along the beach…

*

In my room at the inn, I slip the heavy canvas bag off my shoulder and make my promised phone call:

“Yes, I’m here, I’m in Jersey.”

Lily saw that The Boy was still crying. Because he was afraid, because he’d been told something scary, or scolded for some unknown mistake. Under the too-short, blunt-cut bangs of his fine hair, his light eyes had dark rings.

She had an idea. It was Sunday; after Mass, the grown-ups attended to matters outside and the orphanage was empty. She rushed to the kitchen and came back with a few stolen vegetables in a market basket.

There’d be Queen Rutabaga in a white rag. A quail egg found at the foot of a wall that Lily guarded jealously under her bed along with other treasures would be a perfect stand-in for the child on the altar. The shell’s celadon tones amazed The Boy who had never seen such hues. Lily lined up carrots like soldiers on each side and for her other creatures she built miniature furnishings out of twigs.

The performance began. The Boy forgot his tears, agape at the story unfolding before his eyes. Lily changed the atmosphere around them in this singular way only a haughty child could, infusing the most squalid places with newfound splendor and creating a happier world. In no time.

What I want the next day is to see the orphanage.

Before me stands a huge granite Victorian building, made even more stolid by its past and the fact that for years it has been left to the winds' mercy and to time's vicissitudes. A thick sea fog blurs into an ashen sky: the natural surroundings are in harmony.

One of the orphans, among the most important witnesses at the trial, said that he wanted to see this place, this symbol of his trauma, razed. In this dark edifice on the edge of the forest at the village's entrance, dozens of children sent by Child Welfare endured unspeakable things. Physical abuse, humiliation, poverty, punishment. And, according to several victims who finally spoke out, sexual assault.

Everything began in 2008 when the remains of a body were unearthed beneath a slab of concrete in the orphanage's cellar. An anonymous tip alerted the police to these bones' location. And so the investigation began: the police chief arrived on the premises and brought in the forensic doctor, the road to the boarding school was blockaded—and would stay so for years to come. The preliminary findings turned up no further clues, apart from a hidden entrance to another, identical cellar. The remains taken from there soon proved to be merely animal bones: a false alarm. The case might have been closed there, after such a macabre discovery, but tongues were now loosened. The local papers described secret cellars in which children had been tied up and locked away without food or drink, in total isolation. Journalists from the bigger British papers stepped in, things snowballed, and the media furor set off a far more wide-ranging investigation. Letters and calls came in from all across Europe. All told, a hundred and sixty former boarders came to describe the violence inflicted upon them by the staff and some visitors beginning after the war. The sheer mass of eyewitness accounts and their consistency staved off any questions as to their factuality.

The police tried to draw up a list of people involved and another of victims. Both were difficult to authenticate: the orphanage had been shuttered in 1986, no register had been kept of employees or children.

The Jersey Child Abuse Investigation charged a dozen forensic specialists with finding and identifying any human traces that might shed light on a story over half a century old. Other accounts, after all, had indicated that children had died. Every inch of the island's brown soil around the orphanage was turned over and the investigators were assisted by the United Kingdom's best-known bloodhounds, two sniffer spaniels already used after little Maddie's death. But no bones were found, just several bloodstained things that could not be identified.

And that was it. For lack of evidence, questions began to grow in the media about what had actually happened at the orphanage. The local police, which consisted of an "official" police and an "honorary" police made up of constables, centeniers, and vingteniers—citizens elected since the fourteenth century by parishioniers to "maintain law and order"—was out of its depth with such a sweeping affair, and little had been done in accordance with regulations. Evidence had been lost, analyses and accounts contradicted each other, confidential information had been leaked, some witnesses had been intimidated and had recanted their depositions… Among the suspects still alive, only three were worried. It was concluded that mistakes had been made in managing the investigation. The police chief, whose honesty was an embarrassment to the community leaders, was made a scapegoat and dismissed. To cap off matters, PR experts were hired to restore this fiscal paradise's image. On the British island only twelve miles from the French coast, the shock waves subsided as quickly as they had come and the bailiwick of Jersey managed to regain its legendary tranquility, its banks, and its verdant landscape.

The Boy's forehead was pressed to the window: "There's lots and lots of snow…" His face lit up: "What if it was the other way around, what if the sky was white and the clouds and the snow were blue?"

As she contemplated the untroubled clouds with him, Lily was overcome with tenderness, she was fond of this daydreaming child: "Do you want to go outside?"

"Can we?"

She smiled, brought a finger to her lips: "Follow me."

He scampered around along the laundry's wall then followed her behind the wood stockpile to a hidden opening in the wall. She pushed open the trapdoor, and then they were outside, in the dazzling whiteness of this first morning in the world.

Lily launched herself into the untouched snow, a rare sight, that had buried the grounds. As The Boy experienced this smooth, soft expanse, she climbed onto a stump to reach a nest covered by a snowy foam still attached to a branch of the old magnolia tree.

"A family of long-tailed bushtits was here last summer. I saw them all the time. The weakest babies have to be dead."

She brought down the nest carefully, a few snow crystals falling from the tree. The children pried apart the twigs and counted three corpses among the fluffy feathers papering the interior. Together, they dug a grave at the back of the park and covered the nestlings with powder snow and leaves pulled off the iced-over greenery. The Boy paused, and went so far as to ask: "Where are the ma and pa now?"

Lily doesn't know.

What she feared had come: The Boy followed up with questions about their own parents. She needed to come up with a story that made sense, but in the moment no answers came.

SPECIAL MENTION

KOSOVO [1]

Ag Apolloni

Kësulëkuqja, përrallë për të rritur

Little Red Riding Hood – A fairy tale for adults

Bard Books, 2022
Language: Albanian
ISBN 978-9951-777-61-2

BIOGRAPHY

Ag Apolloni (born in Kosovo in 1982) is an Albanian author. He studied dramaturgy at the Faculty of Arts, and literature at the Faculty of Philology, both at the University of Prishtina, where since 2008 he has been working as a professor of literature. In 2012 he earned his PhD in literature. In 2013 he founded the cultural studies journal *Symbol*. He conducted interviews with Jonathan Culler, Linda Hutcheon, Mieke Bal, Stanley Fish, Peter Singer, etc. His writings and works have been translated into several languages, including Czech, Dutch, English and German.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

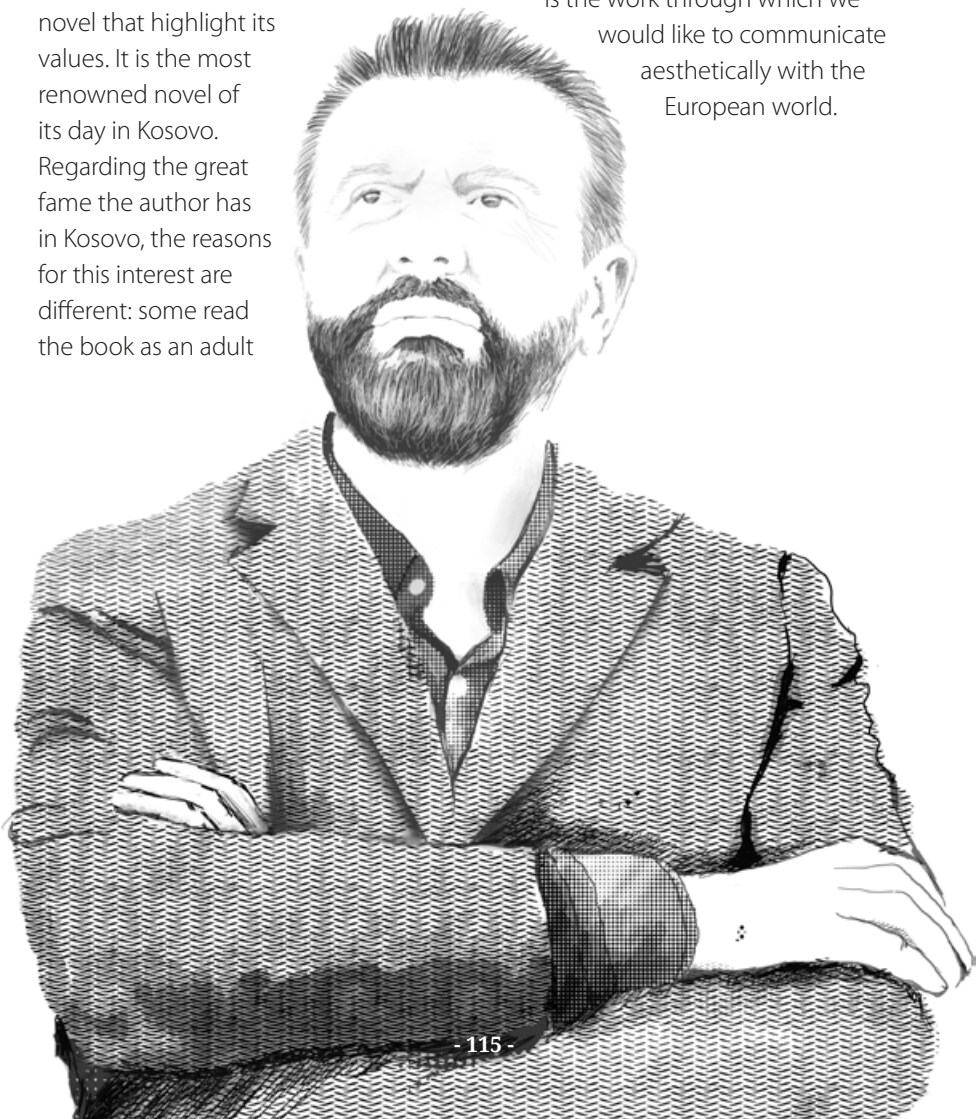
Ag Apolloni's latest novel is a love story between a 40-year-old dramatist and a 20-year-old actress, taking place in Prishtina in 2022. Lorita (the actress) was chosen to play the role of 'Judita' in a show prepared by the National Theatre, while Max (the dramatist and writer) is in a psychological crisis, being unable to write his novel about rapes during the war. He also has a health problem concerning his lungs as a result of COVID-19. Therefore, to get fresh air, he goes to the park, where he meets the actress, who has gone out for a run. They meet in the park, surrounded by trees, Max in black as a sick wolf, Lorita with a red cap as a grown-up Red Riding Hood. From that moment, love blossoms between them, and has its ups and downs throughout the novel.

(1) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF KOSOVO'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

Ag Apolloni's novel, *Little Red Riding Hood – A fairy tale for adults*, has aroused great interest in Kosovo. It was promoted at the National Library of Kosovo, then in other libraries in several cities and was presented by all Kosovan media. Furthermore, many reviews have been written about the novel that highlight its values. It is the most renowned novel of its day in Kosovo. Regarding the great fame the author has in Kosovo, the reasons for this interest are different: some read the book as an adult version of the famous tale, some for the shocking evidence he brings to the readers and some for the author's approach towards the topic of war rapes, connecting them with the origin of the tale, with Greek myths and with archival documents.

Since this novel stands out for its humanistic approach to the subject of rape, its philosophical views and its dramatic style, we decided that this is the work through which we would like to communicate aesthetically with the European world.



Kësulëkuqja, përrallë për të rritur

Ag Apolloni

GJYSHJA E MBAROI përrallën dhe bëri sikur po më hante. Pastaj unë i thashë: Edhe? Gjyshja tha: Çka edhe? I thashë: Pasi i hëngri, çka ndodhi? Tha: Kurrgjë. I hëngri. U kry. Përralla në shkallë, dukati në ballë. Thashë: Jo, nuk u kry. Tha: U kry, merr vesh! Unë jo, ajo po, unë jo, ajo po. Dikur më bërtiti: Ik, se më lodhe, fëmijë i mërzitshëm! Atëherë, s'di se qysh më erdhi, - po fëmijë kam qenë, - e t'ia kam futë shuplakë gjyshes: bam! Veç kur ia kam pa syzet dhe protezën e dhëmbëve te pragu, para këmbëve të babit. Aty e kuptova sa është sahati, dhe mora turr kah dritarja. Meqë salloni ishte në katin e parë dhe nga vapa e mbanim dritaren hapë, arrita të shpëtoj nga kthetrat e tij. Unë e kisha kalu' oborrin, kur babi u shfaq në dritare. Nuk guxova me u kthy, derisa u lëshu' mami prej punës.

- Hahaha. Vërtet i ke ra shuplakë gjyshes?,- pyeti Maksi.

- Po. Bile ajo shpesh thoshte as burri jem, rahmetliu, s'e ka pasë dorën ma të randë,- e imitoi gjyshen, dhe pastaj piu lëng portokalli nga shishja e saj me cucëll. Mjaft e vogël dukej, por ta shihje duke pirë me atë shishe, dukej edhe më e vogël, një trohë.

Ai qeshte sa me tregimin, aq edhe me imiti- min e saj.

- Ti je fëmija i vetëm që e ka rrahë gjyshen, prejse ekzistojnë gjyshet dhe përrallat.

- Po ajo e meritonte. Për shembull, unë e kisha edhe tjetrën gjyshe, por ajo ma tregonte përrallën ndryshe. Mbasi i hante Ujku të dyja, vinte gjahtari, e gjente Ujkun, ia çante barkun, i nxirrte gjyshen

dhe Këselëkuqen, mandej ia mbushnin Ujkut barkun me gurë, ia qepnin dhe, ai, kur zgjohej, shkonte drejt pusit për me shue etjen dhe binte aty brenda. Fundi i përrallës. Bile, ajo gjyshja nga mami, kur s'përtonte, tregonte edhe detaje të tjera: se si vazhdonin ata tre të pinin çaj nën hijen e arrës dhe t'i tregonin njëri-tjetrit historinë me Ujkun. Këselëkuqja thoshte: po unë s'e kam ditë, se kurrë s'i kisha tregu' Ujkut; gjyshja e saj tregonte: sikur jam kanë tu nejtë, veç kur ka hy diçka me turr, edhe t'm'u ka hedhë përmbi, edhe mâ sen' s'kam pa; gjahtari, duke shkundë kapelën, fliste: e dëgjova një gërhatje, ish aq e fuqishme, sa kulmin e çonte përpjetë, e disha që insani s'gërhet ashtu. Bile-bile, gjyshja nga mami, njëherë më pati tregu' sesi Këselëkuqja mbas disa vjetësh kishte mbetë jetime, pa nanë, kurse baba i ishte martu' dhe kishte bâ fëmijë me gruen e re, e cila nuk e donte Këselëkuqen, të cilën e detyronte të punonte si shërbëtore për të dhe vajzat e saj, derisa një ditë, pa dijen e njerkës, kjo mori pjesë në një ballo ku e humbi këpucën, por e gjeti fatin... E kështu, lamsh m'i bënte përrallat: Këselëkuqja bëhej Hirushe, Hirushja Borëbardhë e ku ta di unë. Ama, ishte fantastike, ta ndizte imagjinatën, të kënaqte. Unë doja që historia të vazhdonte, dhe ajo e vazhdonte derisa më merrte gjumi. Kurse kjo gjyshja nga babi: e hangri Ujku dhe u kry! Jo, bac, s'u kry, i thashë, dy lidhje me cartoon logic s'i ki. Nuk e dinte se përrallat nuk përfundojnë me vdekje. Duhet një happy end patjetër.

- E shkreta, nuk e paska lexu' as Propp-in.

- Po, sigurisht. Ajo është analfabete, - tha vajza duke e prekur strehën e kapelës së saj të kuqe sportive.

- Kot i ke ra shuplakë gjyshes. Ajo ta ka tregu' një version të hershëm, të bazuem në një version edhe ma të hershëm, të para njëmijë vjetësh.

- Qysh përfundon ai version?

- Ujku shkon në shtrat me Këselëkuqen dhe fund.

- Hm. Shkon në shtrat? Domethënë...?

- Ëhë.

- Po kjo s'është për fëmijë.

- Po, Kësulëkuqja para se të bëhej përrallë për fëmijë, ishte histori për të rritur. E tregonin fshatarët francezë. Argëtoheshin me një histori përdhunimi, ose thjesht me një histori erotike, meqë shumë interpretues thonë se Kësulëkuqja e lejon veten qëllimisht të joshet nga Ujku, dhe kështu, duke bâ dashni me të, kalon nga faza e adoleshencës, në fazën e pjekurisë.

- Uh, kuçka që paska qenë!, - tha ajo duke qeshur, dhe duke nxitur të qeshurën e tij.

- Bile, krejt në fillim, antagonisti nuk ishte ujk, po një njeri-ujk, lykantropos, ose werewolf.

Në Mesjetë, kur bëheshin ato gjyqet e tmerr- shme, persekutoheshin, torturoheshin e vrite- shin në mënyrat më të tmerrshme ata që supo- zohej se ishin lykantropë.

- Çka bënin lykantropët?

Ata ishin në parkun e Tokbashçes, ku ai zakonisht në mëngjes dilte për të ecur dhe për të kërkuar ajër të pastër për mushkërinë e tij të sëmurë. Aty kishte gjelbërim, lule, ngjyra dhe, po, rreze, natyrisht.

- Uluronin, - tha duke ngrehur kokën lart. I pëlqente kjo trajtë, në vend të asaj të butës: ulërinin.

- Vampirë?

- Pastaj i hanin Kësulëkuqet, - shtoi ai duke ia ngulur sytë kapelës së saj të kuqe.

- Domethanë, vërtet i hanin çikat e reja?

Kështu thoshte shoqëria e asaj kohe. Shoqëri besëtyte. Ndoshta të tjerë njerëz përdhunonin dhe ua hidhnin fajin atyre. Apo ndoshta edhe ata përdhunonin, por sigurisht nuk i hanin. Krejt çka mund të bënin ata ishte të flinin me çikat, dhe mandej të jepnin material

për histori tavernash, ku njerëzit deheshin dhe fantazonin duke u gajasë e gogësitë.

- Pra, Ujku ishte njeri?

- Ashtu duket.

- Apo njeriu ishte ujk?

- Edhe kështu mund të thuhet.

- Eh, përralla!

- Asnjë përrallë nuk është vetëm përrallë.

- Mendoj se nuk ka kurrgjë të keqe të jesh ujk.

- Sigurisht.

- Jeton i vetmuem...

- Edhe kur del me shokë, del me ujq e jo me qen...

- Ha mish të freskët...

- Del natën dhe i uluron hanës...

- Ah, po! Ky është imazhi më i bukur...

- ...dhe më domethënës.

Ajo e shikoi në sy, pastaj uli kokën.

- Pse i ke sytë e kuq?

Me të pa ty më mirë, - ia ktheu ai, pa i penguar fare që ajo po i drejtohej në një mënyrë joformale, edhe pse ky takim rastësor ishte i pari mes tyre.

- Hahaha. Jo, jo, vërtet po të pyes?

- Sepse nuk pata fat t'i kem blu.

- Eh, blu mund t'i ketë vetëm Kësulëkuqja, - tha ajo dhe puliti qepallat, mandej preku kape- lën me dorën e saj të djathtë, thonjtë e gishtave të së cilës ishin lyer me blu.

Maksit i bëri përshtypje gjithçka e saj – mollëzat sllave, hunda e vogël, buzët mishtore, gjinjtë që i dukeshin të mëdhenj nën duks, shkurt e shqip, i pëlqente gjithçka e saj – por sytë, sytë blu, ata sy ashtu, e habitën, e goditën, e tronditën më së shumti. Kësi sysh do të ketë pasur edhe Elsa e Aragonit. Sytë e tu e sfidojnë qiellin kur hapet moti, kujtoi ai.

- A mendon se regjisori ka bërë mirë që më ka zgjedhë mua për rolin e Juditës?, - pyeti ajo.

- Po ta kisha ditë që ndonjëherë dikush si ti do ta luajë atë rol, do ta kisha shkru' shumë më mirë.

- Ka shumë tekst, më këputi. Sikur ta kishe shkurtu' pak, do ta kisha më lehtë me e mësu'.

- Mund ta shkurtojë regjisori.

- Oh, e njeh Metin ti? Thotë s'mund ta shku- rtoj, se s'durohet autori mandej. Njëmend, thotë se je shumë i padurueshëm dhe... mendjemadh.

- Mendjemadh? Epo, nga mendja e vogël s'ka dalë asnjëherë ndonjë vepër e madhe.

Një çift i vjetër kaloi para tyre, plaka kishte një qëndrim konkav, kurse plaku konveks; ajo i merrte erë tokës, ai qiellit.

- E, ti çka mendon për Juditën?, - e pyeti Maksi Kësulëkuqen.

- Kam lexu' drama edhe më të dobëta, - ia ktheu ajo, duke e mbledhur grushtin dhe duke e prekur strehën e kapelës me gishtin e mesëm. Ai e kuptoi se ku shenjonte ai gisht, dhe, sado që u përpoq të rrinte serioz, njëri cep i buzës i kishte ikur.

- A je i martuem?, - ia ndërroi ajo rrjedhën bisedës papritur.

Ai e shikoi sikur t'i thoshte "epo, tash e teprove. Edhe liria duhet të ketë njëfarë kufiri". Por, nuk foli, vetëm e pa dhe heshti.

- Nuk të kujtohet?, - ironizoi ajo duke u lëpirë.

Ai buzëqeshi, dhe kjo buzëqeshje ishte dorëzim para ngacmimeve të saj seksuale për të cilat, siç dukej, ai nuk e kishte ndërmend ta padiste atë.

- Jo, nuk jam, - ia ktheu më në fund.

- Domethënë, jeton vetëm, apo jo?, - vazhdoi ta ngacmonte ajo.

- Jo.

- Me kë, atëherë?

- Me fantazmat e mia, - tha ai, dhe shikoi njerëzit me pantolla të shkurta që po vraponin në shtegun e shtruar me gomë.

- Ke cigare?

- Jo, Këshulëkuqe. Dhe mendoj se s'duhet ta pish. Nuk dilet në park me pi cigare.

- Faleminderit për kujdesin, xhaxhi ujk, - i tha duke e vënë theksin te fjalët e fundit, sa për t'ia përkujtuar moshën, aq edhe për t'ia nxitur dëshirën.

Ai e shikoi atë, por ajo kishte ulur kokën dhe po kërkonte në xhepa, ku e gjeti një cigare dhe një shkrepëse, dhe e ndezi. Ai shihte strehën e kapelës së kuqe dhe buzët e kuqe të fryra, mes të cilave u fut lehtë dhe ngadalë cigarja e bardhë. Çka të kisha hangër, tha Ujku brenda tij, ndërsa me zë shtoi:

- Më duhet të shkoj.

Ajo e pa e befasuar. S'e kuptonte, ose shtirej sikur s'e kuptonte çfarë ndodhi.

- Më vjen mirë që u njohëm, - tha ai dhe u çua.

- Ej, xhaxhi, para se me shku, a po ma sugjeron ndonjë këngë?, - i tha ajo, duke i treguar kufjet.

Ai nuk u mendua gjatë dhe i tha:

- Li'l Red Riding Hood nga Sam The Sham & The Pharaohs, - dhe u largua duke marrë frymë me vështirësi.

Ajo e shtypi këngën në telefon, dhe para se t'i vinte kufjet në vesh e të shkonte te stoli ku po e prisnin shoqet me veshje sportive, i tha:

- A del përditë në park?

- Jo..., po..., shpesh.

- Paske nevojë, se t'u paska fry barku si me i pasë hangër gjyshen dhe Kësulëkuqen.

Ai vetëm buzëqeshi, pa e kthyer kokën, dhe pa e kuptuar që ajo po e përshëndeste me gishtin e mesëm, ndërkohë që po vallëzonte për ta ndjekur ritmin e këngës:

Owo!

Who's that I see walkin' in these woods? Why, it's Li'l Red Riding Hood.

Hey there Li'l Red Riding Hood, You sure are looking good.

You're everything a big bad wolf could want.

Little Red Riding Hood: A Fairy Tale for Adults

Ag Apolloni

Translated into English by Suzana Vuljevic

"Granny finished the story and pretended to bite me. I begged her to keep on going. *And*...I said, and she'd go, *and what?*

After the wolf ate them, what happened?"

'Nothing. He ate them. The end,' she said. 'And they all lived happily ever after.'

'No, that's not all.'

'It is. Get it through your head!' When I would say no, she'd say yes, and it'd go on and on.

At some point, she shouted: 'Scram, I've had it with you, you little brat!' Then I'm not sure what came over me,—I was a kid after all—but I slapped my grandmother. *Whack!* It was only when I saw her glasses and dentures in the doorway at my father's feet, that I understood what was coming to me, and I rushed to the window. Considering that the living room was on the first floor and we left the window open because it was so hot, I managed to escape my father's clutches. I'd already made it past the yard when he appeared in the window. I didn't dare go back home until mom was back from work."

"So you really slapped your grandma?" Max asked, laughing.

"Yeah, believe it or not, she used to say *not even my husband, God rest his soul, had such a heavy hand*," she said, imitating her grandmother.

"And then she'd take a swig of orange juice from her baby bottle. She was already a little old lady, but seeing her drink from that bottle made her look even tinier."

He found her play-by-play of events even funnier than the story itself.

"You're the only kid in the entire history of grandmothers and fairytales that ever slapped her own grandmother."

"Oh, but she deserved it. I mean, I had another grandma who'd tell the story differently. After the wolf ate the grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood, a hunter comes, finds the wolf, cuts its stomach open, and pulls them both out. Then they fill the wolf's belly with stones, stitch it up so that when he wakes up, he goes to the well to quench his thirst and ends up falling in. That's the end. And get this, when my grandma on my mom's side wasn't too tired, she'd throw in other details, like how the three of them would get together to have tea under a walnut tree and trade stories about the wolf. Little Red Riding Hood would say, *but I didn't know, because if I had, I never would've told the wolf.* The grandmother would say, *while I was sitting there something came running in out of nowhere, and jumped on top of me, and I couldn't see a thing.* The hunter, shaking his hat out, said, *I heard snoring so loud that it sent the roof flying, and I knew that no human snores like that.* In fact, my grandma on my mom's side once told me that years later Little Red Riding Hood became an orphan. Her dad married another woman and he had a kid with the new wife. The new wife didn't like Little Red Riding Hood and made her work as a servant to her and her daughters, until one day, without her stepmother knowing, the girl went to a ball and lost her slipper, but met her destiny... And that's how she'd mix up all my stories. Little Red Riding Hood became Cinderella, Cinderella became Snow White and who knows what else. But she was the greatest, she'd make your imagination come alive. It was such a fun time. I never wanted the story to end, and she'd go on telling them until I fell asleep. But my grandma on my dad's side would be all *the wolf ate her, the end!* No, lady, it's not over, I'd tell her, you don't know the first thing about

cartoon logic. She didn't know that fairy tales aren't supposed to end with someone dying. There had to be a *happy ending*."

"It sounds like the poor woman never read Propp."

"Probably not, she can't read," she said, adjusting the brim of her red baseball cap.

"You hit your grandma for no reason. She was telling you an early version of the story based on an even earlier version that's more than a thousand years old."

"How does that one end?"

"The wolf goes to bed with Little Red Riding Hood. That's the end of the story."

"Huh. He goes to bed with her? So they...?

"Uh-huh."

"But that's not a kid's story."

"Yeah, before Little Red Riding Hood was a fairy tale for kids, it was a fairy tale told in French villages. People would entertain themselves with a story of rape, or simply an erotic story, since most people say Little Red Riding Hood lets herself be seduced, and sleeping with the wolf takes her from adolescence into adulthood."

"Wow, she must've been a real whore!" she said, laughing and evoking his laughter.

They were in Tokbashqe park, where he went most mornings to walk and to get some fresh air into his weak lungs. The park had greenery, flowers, color, and sun, naturally.

"So, at the very beginning, the bad guy wasn't a wolf, but a man-wolf, a lycanthrope, or a *werewolf*. In the middle ages, when they had those awful trials, people who were suspected of being werewolves were persecuted, tortured and killed in the most horrific ways."

"What did the werewolves do?"

"They'd howl," he said, throwing his head back. He liked the term better than the more subtle *yowl*.

"Vampires?"

"Then they would eat Little Red Riding Hoods," he added narrowing his eyes on her red hat.

"So they actually ate young girls?"

"That's what they used to say. Society was superstitious. Maybe girls were being raped and werewolves were the ones being blamed for it. Or maybe they also raped girls, but they definitely didn't eat them. The most they could do was sleep with the girls, and then they had the material for stories they'd tell in the taverns. They'd get drunk and start spinning fantasies between burps and belches."

"So the wolf was a person?"

"Looks like it."

"Or a person was a wolf?"

"You could say that, too."

"Ugh, fairy tales!"

"No fairy tale is simply a fairy tale."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with being a wolf."

"Guess not."

"You live alone..."

"And when you do go out, you go out with wolves as opposed to dogs..."

"You eat fresh meat..."

"Howl at the moon at night..."

"Oh, yeah! That's the coolest part..."

"...and the most meaningful."

She looked into his eyes and lowered her head.

"Why are your eyes so red?"

"All the better to see you with," he replied, unbothered that she had addressed him informally, and that this chance encounter was their first one alone.

She laughed. "No, no, seriously."

"Because I wasn't lucky enough to have blue ones."

"Ah, only Little Red Riding Hood could have blue eyes," she said, batting her eyelashes. She touched her hat with her right hand and he saw that her nails were painted blue.

Everything about her left an impression on Max—her Slavic facial features, the small nose, full lips, breasts that appeared large under her zip-up. In short, he liked everything about her—but her blue eyes, above all, astounded, struck, and stirred something in him. They were the eyes of Elsa of Aragon. *Your eyes rival the bluest skies*, he recalled.

"Do you think the director was right to pick me for the role of Judith?" she asked.

"If I'd known that someone like you would get the role, I would've written it a lot better."

"The script is so long, it's killing me. If you'd made it shorter it would've been easier to learn."

"The director can shorten it."

"You know the director? He said he can't because then the audience wouldn't be able to stand you. Seriously, he says you're insufferable, and that you're...full of yourself."

"Full of myself? Well, great works never came from small minds."

An older couple walked past them, the woman's spine bent into a concave curve whereas the man's bent into a convex one; she sniffed the ground, he, the sky.

"And what do you think of Judith?" Max asked Little Red Riding Hood.

"I've read worse," she replied, making a fist and gripping the brim of her hat with just her middle finger. He understood the hand gesture. However much he tried to be serious, one corner of his mouth betrayed him.

"Are you married?" she said, suddenly changing the subject.

He shot her a look as if to say "well, now you've gone too far. Even freedom has its limits." But he didn't say it, only observed her quietly.

"You don't remember?" she asked sarcastically, licking her lips.

He smiled. The smile was a sign of submission to her sexual innuendos that, it seemed, he didn't plan to call her out on.

"No, I'm not," he replied, finally.

"So, you live alone, I assume?" she pressed again.

"No."

"With who, then?"

"With my ghosts," he said and looked away at the people running around the track in shorts.

"Got a cigarette?"

"No, Little Red Riding Hood. And I don't think you should smoke. You don't come to the park to smoke."

"Thanks for your concern, *papa wolf*," she said, placing the stress on the last two words both to remind him of his age and to turn him on.

He was looking at her, but she had lowered her head and was searching her pockets for a cigarette and a match. She lit the cigarette.

His gaze moved from the brim of her red cap to her round, red lips. She placed her white cigarette softly between them. *Oh, how I'd enjoy eating you*, the wolf thought to himself, and said aloud, "I have to go."

She looked at him with surprise. Either she didn't understand what had come over him or pretended not to.

"It was good to meet you," he said, and left.

"Hey, pops, before you go, could you recommend a song?" she said, gesturing toward her headphones.

It didn't take him long to come up with "Li'l Red Riding Hood by Sam the Sham & the Pharaohs." And with that, he left, feeling out of breath.

She looked the song up on her phone and, before putting her earbuds back in and going to the bench where her friends, dressed in sport attire, stood waiting for her, she said:

"Are you here every day?"

"Not every day... but often."

"You clearly need it, your belly's getting pretty big. Looks like you ate Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother."

He only smiled, without turning his head to notice that she was flicking him off as she danced to the song:

Owo!

Who's that I see walkin' in these woods?

Why, it's Li'l Red Riding Hood.

Hey there Li'l Red Riding Hood,

You sure are looking good.

You're everything a big bad wolf could want.

LIECHTENSTEIN

Anna Ospelt

Frühe Pflanzung

Early Planting

Limmat Verlag, 2023
Language: German
ISBN 978-3039-260-52-2

BIOGRAPHY

Anna Ospelt, born in 1987 in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, studied sociology, media and education in Basel. She publishes poetry and short stories in literary magazines and anthologies. For her book *Wurzelstudien*, she received, among others, a scholarship from the Nantesbuch Foundation as part of the German Prize for Nature Writing and the Literary Colloquium Berlin, and was nominated for the Clemens Brentano Prize. In April 2023 her new book, *Early Planting*, was published by Limmat Verlag, Zurich. Anna Ospelt lives in Vaduz.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Plant a seed in the ground, water carefully and wait. Let a child grow in the mother's womb and wait for it to be born. Anna Ospelt describes these elementary processes in her inimitable poetic way. Explorations of the child, the garden, the trees and birds intertwine to form a powerful book about life's beginnings. Ever-present is the social question: What does becoming a mother mean for a woman today, and for her work – in the author's case, her writing?

Early Planting is a sensitive investigation of parenthood and an idiosyncratic observation of nature.

LITERATURHAUS LIECHTENSTEIN'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

The female flowers of the oak tree are inconspicuous, ripen into acorns after fertilisation, fall from the tree, sprout and grow into new oak trees. A child grows in the mother's womb and is born. A miracle of nature. *Early Planting* deals lyrically with two themes: nature itself and the motherhood of a young woman. Anna Ospelt describes these elementary processes in a poetic manner with great subtlety. She formulates thoughts, emotions and experiences in her own creative way, combining a sensitive observation of nature with the emotions of motherhood. These are small sentences about small and big things, one-word sentences, two-word thoughts, paraphrases, short stories that form their own world, their own cosmos, their own nature. You open the book and are caught in the middle of the meandering story on every page. In between, there are pictures, signs and drawings that are texts, that depict, that create new images of language, that oscillate between image, poetry, prose, essay. The days, things, the essence of man and nature captured in pictorial and written observation. The supposed disorder is wrested from the order of the days, written down between the tasks. Intermediate lines try to create clarity that cannot exist. Not quite here, not quite reality, but with the certainty that beyond it there is a thinking and feeling that works back, that never lets you be quite sure in which world who and what has its order. 'Snow falls between the lines. The word crackles' (p. 84).

Frühe Pflanzung

Anna Ospelt

Frühling
In unserem Garten sind die Spitzen erster Frühlingsblüher zu sehen.
—
Eine Schneedecke legt sich über die Blütensprieße.
—
Ich sitze am Fenster und warte, bis E. neben mir aufwacht.
Sie ist fünf Tage alt.
—
Einzelne Knospen streckten ihre Köpfe aus der Erde, als
wir nach Hause kamen.
Außerdem blühten auf der Wiese Primeln und Krokusse.
—
Fortwährend dieses Öffnen und Schließen der Augen.
Fortwährend dieses Wachsein und Schlafsein.
—
Ich streiche E. mit einer Haarsträhne über die Wange.
Meine Haarspitzen aus einer Zeit vor der Schwangerschaft.
—
Ich schreibe links oder rechts, je nach Stillposition.
Entweder raschelt der Bleistift, oder eine Buchseite knistert.
—
Ich mache das Wochenbett lesend und schreibend bewohnbar.
—
Das Baby erst in mir
dann auf mir
halb du
halb ich

fadendünne Grenzlinie
übertreten unerwünscht.
—
Ich trage Hemden meines Bruders, Blusen meiner Großmutter. Vergesse mitten im Satz, was ich sagen will.
—
Die archaische Kraft in E.s Kiefer.
—
Der erste Spaziergang mit dem Kinderwagen außerhalb des Gartens. Eine Freundin begleitet mich, wir drehen kleine Runden. Auf dem Foto sehe ich strahlend aus, stolz. Gefühlt habe ich mich wackelig.
—
Ich esse Karotten und Äpfel unter der Dusche.
—
E. ist zehn Tage alt, mein Leben zwischen zwei Leben auch.
—
E.s glückliches Staunen in der Badewanne. Ist es ein Erinnern?
—
Ich sei nun ein richtiges Mütterchen geworden, meint die betagte Nachbarin. «Du Müeterli!», ruft sie freudig aus.
—
Meine Freundin schreibt mir aus Ankara, dass ihre pensionierten Nachbarn den ganzen Tag auf dem Balkon sitzen und lesen. «Sie lesen und lesen und lesen!»
—
Ich liege mit Schüttelfrost im Bett und denke an diese lesenden, sich sonnenden Männer.
—
E. nimmt zu, entfaltet sich.
—
Ich sehe mich in E.s Pupillen. Sehe E.s Mutter in ihren Pupillen sich spiegeln, sehe mich, vornübergebeugt, still.
—
Ich sehe mich aber nicht in E.s Blick, noch geht dieser hauptsächlich nach innen.

—
Ich sehe meine Vorstellungen ihre Schutzhüllen verlieren.
Bin von je einem Auge berührt.
—
«Genieß es!»
—
Ich lese in einem Gedicht von Elisabeth Sharp McKetta von «Grapefruit-Tagen» mit einem Neugeborenen. Wie tröstlich eine passende Bezeichnung sein kann.
—
E. ist fünf Wochen alt. Ich bin zum ersten Mal ohne sie unterwegs. Gehe in ein Kunstmuseum. Ich renne nahezu durch die Ausstellung.
—
E. kann nun lächeln. Und sehr laut schreien.
—
Wir liegen wie Ölsardinen zu dritt im Bett, der Hund neben dem Bett. N. und ich blass um die Nase, E. rosig, der Hund schnarchend.
—
Ich bin zum zweiten Mal alleine unterwegs. Die Zeit läuft. Ich gehe an eine Führung in dasselbe Kunstmuseum. Die Museumspädagogin kennt mich, erkundigt sich nach dem Baby. Eine Teilnehmerin will nicht glauben, dass ich ein sechs Wochen altes Baby alleine lasse, ob ich denn nicht stille.
—
Tatsächlich stille ich gefühlt den ganzen Tag. Das ist der bedürfnisorientierte Ansatz, der derzeit im Trend liegt.
—
Esse Eis an der Sonne. E. schläft.
—
E. hat eine Wimper auf der Schulter. Ihre Wimper, die von N., meine?
—
Der morgendliche Gang in den Garten. Nach einer durchwachten, verschwitzten Nacht, vor einem langen Stilltag. Ich zähle die Blüten.

—
Tannen strecken mir ihre Astspitzen entgegen. Zum Trost, denke ich.
—
E. schaut in Baumkronen
verliert sich in üppigem Grün
kaut an ihrem Fäustchen
rankt sich
um sich
lacht.
—
Das Frühlingskind.
—
Ich gehe in Kreisen.
—
Verbringe erneut einen halben Tag mit Schüttelfrost im Bett.
—
Die Hebamme bestärkt mich. Zu schreiben. Zu lesen. Wenn ich sie anrufe und sage, ich könne einfach nicht mehr andauernd stillen, fragt sie: «Und wann willst du dann lesen?»
—
Und da hat sie recht. Die Tage verbringe ich hauptsächlich auf dem Schaukelstuhl, stille und lese. Ich lese ein
Buch nach dem anderen, ich lese E. vor.
—
Nasen, Augenbrauen, Wangenknochen beginnen, sich abzuzeichnen. Die Bergkette gegenüber entwickelt Gesichter.
—
Ein Gesicht ist besonders akzentuiert, jeden Tag, bei jeder Wetterlage hat es eine andere Stimmung. Es wird mein Freund.
—
Ich stille, wickle, lese und notiere. Mache ich mehr, holt mich der Schüttelfrost ein. N. wickelt, kocht, putzt und geht seiner Erwerbsarbeit nach.

Early Planting

Anna Ospelt

Translated into English by Anne Posten

Spring

You can see the tips of the first spring flowers in our garden.
—
A blanket of snow lies over the flower sprouts.
—
I sit at the window and wait until E. wakes up next to me. She's five days old.
—
A few buds were stretching their heads out of the ground when we came home.
Primroses and crocuses were blooming on the meadow too.
—
Constantly this opening and closing of eyes. Constantly this being awake and being asleep.
—
I stroke E.'s cheek with a strand of hair. The tips of my hair come from a time before the pregnancy.
—
I write with my right or left hand depending on which side she's nursing on.
Either the pencil rustles or the page of a book crackles.
—
Reading and writing, I make lying-in time livable.
—
The baby first in me
then on me
half you

half me
hair-thin borderline
don't cross.
—
I wear shirts from my brother, blouses from my grandmother. Forget what I want to say mid-sentence.
—
The archaic power in E.'s jaw.
—
The first walk with the stroller outside of the garden. A friend comes with me, we make little rounds. In the photo I'm beaming, I look proud. What I felt was shaky.
—
I eat carrots and apples in the shower.
—
E. is ten days old, as is my life between two lives.
—
E.'s happy wonder in the bathtub. Is she remembering?
—
I've grown into a real mom, says the old neighbor woman. "You little mama, you!" she cries out happily.
—
My friend writes me from Ankara that her retired neighbors sit on the balcony all day reading. "They read and read and read!"
—
I lie in bed with chills and think of those reading, sunbathing men.
—
E. gets bigger, develops.
—
I see myself in E.'s pupils. I see E.'s *mother* reflected in her pupils, see myself bent over her, quiet.
—
But I don't see myself in E.'s look, it's still mostly directed inward.
—

I see my expectations losing their protective coverings.
I feel brushed by each of the eyes.
—
"Enjoy it!"
—
I read in a poem by *Elisabeth Sharp McKetta* of "grapefruit days" with a newborn. How comforting a fitting term can be.
—
E. is five weeks old. I'm out without her for the first time. Go to an art museum. I practically run through the exhibition.
—
E. can now smile. And cry very loudly.
—
The three of us lie in bed like oil-packed sardines, the dog next to the bed. N. and I green around the gills, E. rosy, the dog snoring.
—
I'm out alone for the second time. The clock is ticking. I go on a tour in the same art museum. The docent knows me, asks after the baby. Another participant can't believe that I've left a six-week-old baby *alone*, am I not nursing?
—
In fact I feel like I'm nursing all day long. That's the responsive approach that's currently trendy.
—
I eat ice cream in the sun. E. sleeps.
—
E. has an eyelash on her shoulder. Her eyelash, N's, mine?
—
The morning walk in the garden. After a sleepless, sweat-soaked night, before a long day of nursing. I count blossoms.
—
Firs stretch the tips of their boughs toward me. In consolation, I think.
—

E. looks into the treetops
loses herself in the lush greenery
chews on her little fist
twines
around herself
laughs.
—
A spring child.
—
I walk in circles.
—
Spend another day in bed with chills.
—
The midwife encourages me. To write. To read. When I call her and say I can't just keep nursing all the time, she asks, "Then when are you going to read?"
—
And she's right. I spend my days in the rocking chair for the most part, nursing and reading. I read one book after another, I read to E.
—
Nose, eyebrows, cheekbones begin to emerge. Faces develop in the mountain range across from me.
—
One face is particularly accentuated. Every day, with every change of weather, it has a different mood. It becomes my friend.
—
I nurse, change diapers, read, and make notes. If I do more I get chills. N. changes diapers, cooks, cleans, and continue to work for money.

LUXEMBOURG

Jeff Schinker

Ma vie sous les tentes

My Life in Tents

Hydre Éditions, 2021
Language: French
ISBN 978-9998-788-30-5

BIOGRAPHY

Jeff Schinker, born in 1985 in Luxembourg, is a writer and journalist. He studied in Paris, where he obtained a master's degree in Comparative literature. Since 2017 he's been working as editor of the cultural pages of the Luxembourg daily newspaper *Tageblatt*. In 2015 Jeff Schinker published *Retrouvailles*, a novella about a protagonist who organises and simultaneously describes a meeting among old friends. While this task seems at first superficial and banal, eventually uncomfortable truths are revealed. *Sabotage*, Schinker's second book, is a collection of stories in English, French, German and Luxembourgish that confront its protagonists with the excesses and perversions of the world of work and relationships in a neoliberal society. It was published in 2018 and shortlisted for the Servais Prize for Literature, the Lëtzebuerger Buchpräis and the European Union Prize for Literature. Schinker's most recent novel, *Ma vie sous les tentes*, was published in October 2021 and shortlisted for the Servais Prize for Literature in 2022. Jeff Schinker has also written several plays. His most recent one, *Bouneschlupp*, addresses racism in Luxembourg. Since 2014, he has also been organising,

hosting and participating in the lecture series Désoeuvrés – Work in progress. In 2016 Jeff Schinker was the laureate of the writer's residency at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, for which he has also been selected in 2023.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

The novel *Ma vie sous les tentes* by Jeff Schinker uses the experience of traveling to and attending music festivals to explore the existential insecurities of a writer and music fanatic. The protagonist sees in the unformatted revelling of festival life a way of resisting the patterns of modern consumer society, and in the friendships made through music a way of escaping an unsatisfying love life. The title's tents become both a symbol for nomadic life, allowing the protagonist to travel through Europe and experience surprising and occasionally ludicrous or incredible adventures, and for the book itself, writing being seen as a similarly unstable refuge from personal and societal issues. The author revels in metafictional excursions and linguistic digressions that expose the narrative process and, in characteristic self-mockery, the futility of any search for meaning and stability. The unfamiliar becomes the commonplace, the only thread holding it all together being the communal experience of listening to music. The novel celebrates this by including listening suggestions and creates, with the addition of drawings by Alasdair Reinert, a multi-layered artistic experience. Both the story and the language reflect the sense of volatility and transience of a generation more at home in their friendships and the bonds created by music than in the families, villages and cities of their childhood.

KULTUR|LX'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

The jury recommends *Ma vie sous les tentes* for its unflinchingly honest look at a way of life in which the fear of mediocrity and solitude drives every move and every sentence in the search for connections that transcend the seemingly unremarkable. The novel's insightful exploration of the sociology of festival life adds a further point of interest to this story which aims to mirror content and form.

Ma vie sous les tentes

Jeff Schinker

Au final, cela s'est payé par une odeur pestilentielle dans ladite automobile puisque, par un effet physiologique que je serais en mal de vous expliquer dans les détails (sans quoi j'aurais pu prévoir la débâcle en question), la tente humide, exposée dans le coffre de la voiture, sur lequel un soleil élançant s'abattait, avait fini par suer et suinter, créant une ambiance tropicale dans le véhicule (me sermonna plus tard un ami qui aime sermonner) et quand, au bout de quelques jours, j'ouvris le coffre de la voiture, je vis qu'en dessous de la tente, des traces de moisissure avaient envahi tout ce qui y traînait et qui n'était pas grand-chose de valeur, il y avait là seulement quelques magazines, des affiches pour des soirées lecture jamais accrochées, un t-shirt sale et un classeur que j'avais récupéré chez ma sœur, qui l'avait trouvé au cours d'un déménagement, et qui contenait des dessins que j'avais dû effectuer en classe, à l'école, classeur dont des feuilles débordaient et sur lesquelles, une fois que je l'ouvris, je pouvais constater à nouveau mon peu de talent pour le dessin et la peinture, ça faisait peine à voir, mais, couverts de taches de moisissure qu'ils étaient dorénavant, leur niveau artistique en était relevé, il y avait là quelque chose de touchant, les productions ratées d'un jeune enfant et la moisissure qui mangeait ces feuilles biscornues et racornies.

Sur une des feuilles, j'avais crayonné un carré dont le tracé suivait de près les marges de la feuille. Le carré était censé représenter le corps de mon père, que j'avais surmonté d'un rond minuscule (sa tête) et complété, tout en bas, par une paire de crochets (ses jambes), le portrait ressemblant à une partition étrange écrite par un compositeur avant-gardiste devenu fou. Je ne me rappelle plus la tronche de mon père une fois que je lui eus tendu, avec une fierté mal dissimulée, le dessin (une maîtresse particulièrement inspirée nous avait incités à le finir vite fait afin que nous puissions l'offrir à nos paternels pour la

fête des Pères), il a dû faire la moue puis me caresser les cheveux en se disant Celui-là il ira pas loin. À présent, le corps ballonné de mon père, comme marqué par le passage du temps, était traversé de bouffissures. J'y jetai un dernier regard avant de tout balancer à la poubelle (j'aime pas la nostalgie).

Par ailleurs, je suis bien trop bordélique pour me constituer un équipement de campeur, qui ne ferait que prendre poussière dans ma cave, une cave aussi foutraque que mes textes, tout comme je serais aussi bien en peine de l'entretenir, ce matos. Un jour, mon père m'avait offert une table de camping avec bancs attachés qui, par une sorte de miracle de la mécanique, se dépliaient dès lors que l'on ôtait le verrou de sécurité. Elle était fort jolie. Au bout de son deuxième jour d'utilisation, un Espagnol passé par là pour nous parler de cinéma d'auteur (un peu) et draguer ma sœur Sarah avec ostentation (beaucoup) était tombé dessus et l'avait cassée en deux (salut Raul). Drôles de techniques de drague, ces Espagnols.

Depuis, on avait abandonné un tel luxe, retour à la case de départ rustique, une tente, des sacs de couchage, et hop! au lit, et qu'on se félicite déjà d'avoir pensé à tout amener, ce qui était loin d'être toujours le cas, parfois manquait, quand on déballait le tout, un petit détail, genre la moitié de la tente (je te disais bien qu'il y avait un sac qu'on n'a pas ramené, me lançait alors mon pote Alasdair, stoïque, faisant accompagner sa remarque du pschitt caractéristique d'une bière décapsulée, pschitt suivi quelque quart d'heure plus tard par le délicat froissement de la cannette en métal vidée qu'il avait coutume de plier dans sa main une fois le contenu transvasé dans son estomac, marquant ainsi l'écoulement du temps, comme le prisonnier gratte le mur de sa cellule pour faire des entailles verticales – la durée, au festival, est comptée non plus en heures, mais en concerts et en bières ingurgitées, c'est une temporalité autre, plus gracieuse, plus légère, plus floue aussi, surtout en fin de soirée, loin de cette fastidieuse division en faisceaux d'heures par le monde du travail).

Mais, alors que je répétais encore une fois les gestes pour ranger la tente dans le sac censé la contenir et qui n'arrive à la contenir qu'une seule et unique fois puisque après, peu importe la façon dont on la plie, qu'on s'y avachisse tel un ivrogne (que peut-être, selon l'heure, l'on est

encore), qu'on fasse ensuite des roulés sur la toile et le tissu aplanis, ressemblant à quelqu'un qui s'adonne à quelque obscur exercice de yoga, un chien tête en bas (adho-mukha-svanâsana) qui se serait couché sur son flanc ou un guerrier (virabhadrâsana) agonisant avant sa mort au combat, ou encore à un artiste qui exécute une étrange chorégraphie de danse contemporaine, essayant en vérité de faire sortir les moindres poches d'air de l'amas de toile ainsi aplati, dans l'espoir de pouvoir le plier en quatre – expression idiote, on le pliait bien plutôt en seize ou en trente-deux – et de le faire rentrer dans son contenant ridiculement minuscule, peu importe la façon dont on s'y prend, on n'y arrive plus jamais ;

alors que je répétais donc encore une fois ces gestes (ça y est, on est encore parti pour une de ces phrases dont je me demande toujours, en leurs beaux milieux, comment je vais faire pour m'en sortir, comme ces acrobates au cirque qui doivent se poser la même question alors que, debout sur une sorte de plateforme minuscule à une hauteur abracadabrante, ils s'élancent dans le vide (je dramatise un peu ma situation, et je n'ai d'ailleurs jamais été au cirque)),

les découvrant à nouveau, ces gestes, avec une naïveté et une ingéniosité assez incompréhensibles, m'étonnant du fait que mon corps, au bout de tant d'années, n'ait retenu aucune des étapes à accomplir, je me disais que, peut-être, j'écrivais comme j'installais mes tentes, me lançant à l'aventure à chaque fois sans savoir comment je ferais pour achever l'édifice, me servant du matériau de base pour tenter de construire quelque chose de brinquebalant, d'éphémère, mais quelque chose qui serait conscient de ce caractère précaire, et qui en jouirait, puisant d'abord dans les outils à ma disposition pour créer une sorte de charpente, autour de quoi j'allais par la suite, plaçant et enfonçant les éléments de la phrase comme autant de piquets dans le sol de la syntaxe, consolider, remplir, meubler, puis essayant, une fois la chose debout, d'y dormir et d'y vivre, d'y revenir aussi, ivre parfois, de tenter d'y faire la fête en rameutant des gens, d'y glisser des tentatives de vécu et de voir si, à la fin, ça allait tenir.([1])

([1]) Amélie Nothomb, au contraire, est l'écrivaine-Quechua: ses phrases sont comme ces tentes qu'on jette avec dédain à ras le sol et qui se déploient, se montent d'elles-mêmes. Par contre, au premier coup de vent, bonjour les dégâts.

My Life in Tents

Jeff Schinker
Translated into English by Anna Leader

In the end, the result was a foul odour in the aforementioned automobile because, due to a chemical reaction which I'd be hard pressed to explain in detail (otherwise I could have foreseen this whole debacle), the humid tent, lying loose in the car boot in the blazing heat, had eventually begun to sweat and ooze, creating a tropical microclimate in the vehicle (as my friend who loves to lecture me lectured me later), and when a few days later I opened the boot of the car, I saw that traces of mould had ravaged everything underneath the tent—nothing of high value, just some magazines, a few flyers for author readings that I'd never passed out, a dirty t-shirt, and a folder my sister had found while moving house, with drawings that I must have done for a class, back at school, a folder stuffed full of papers which, once opened, offered yet more proof of my lack of talent for drawing and painting, and yes, they were embarrassing to look at, but, covered with patches of mould as they now were, their artistic value had appreciated, and there was something touching about the sight of a young child's creative failures and the mould devouring those hardened, gnarled sheets.

On one piece of paper, I'd drawn a square, the contour closely tracking the margins of the page. This square was supposed to represent my father's body, which I had topped with a tiny circle (his head) and concluded right at the bottom with a pair of crotchets (his legs), making the portrait look like a strange piece of sheet music by a deranged avant-garde composer. I don't remember the look on my father's face when, full of barely-concealed pride, I handed him the drawing (a particularly inspired teacher had encouraged us to finish them quickly so we could present them to our fathers on Father's Day); he must have grimaced and tousled my hair, saying to himself, "This one won't go far." Now my father's bloated body was covered

with blotches and blemishes, as if marked by the passage of time. I glanced at my handiwork one last time before chucking it all in the bin (I don't like nostalgia).

Besides, I'm far too disorganised to invest in real camping equipment, which would only gather dust in my basement—a basement as jumbled and cluttered as my books—and I would find it too much of a hassle to take care of all that gear. Once, my father gave me a camping table with bench seats which, by some kind of mechanical miracle, unfolded when you pulled a lever. It was a real beauty. At the end of our second day using the table, a Spaniard who had stopped by to talk to us about art-house cinema (a bit) and blatantly flirt with my sister Sarah (a lot) fell on it and broke it in two (hello Raul). Odd pick-up techniques, those Spaniards have.

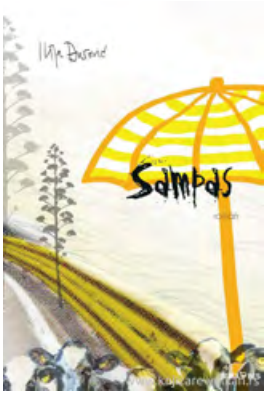
After that, we had abandoned such luxuries and gone back to the basics: a tent, sleeping bags, and voilà—bedtime! And though we patted ourselves on the back for remembering everything, this was far from always true: sometimes when we unpacked it all, something was missing, a small detail like half the tent (I told you there was a bag we didn't bring, my mate Alasdair said, stoic, chasing his comment with the telltale hiss of a beer can opening, always followed a quarter hour later by the delicate crumpling of the empty metal can in his hand once its contents were decanting in his stomach, thus marking the passage of time, as a prisoner tallies days on the wall of his cell—at a festival, time is not counted in hours, but in concerts and beers imbibed; time works differently there, it's lither, lighter, hazier, especially at the end of a night, a far cry from the way the working world divides time into blocks).

But, when I was once again going through the motions of stowing the tent in the bag that could supposedly contain it but had only contained it one time, because since then, however you folded it, whether you threw your weight onto it like you were drunk (which, depending on the time of day, you might still be), whether you rolled from side to side on the canvas and fabric, like you were twisting yourself into some obscure yoga pose, perhaps a downward fac-

ing dog (adho-mukha-svanâsana) lying on its side or a warrior (virabhadrâsana) in death throes after battle, or even like a dancer performing a strange contemporary choreography, when you're actually just pressing the small pockets of air from the heap of canvas under you, hoping you'll be able to fold it in four—stupid expression, surely you fold it into sixteen or thirty-two—and fit it back into its ridiculously tiny bag (it doesn't matter what you do, you'll never manage); so, when I was once again going through those motions (that's it, we're off again on one of those sentences which make me wonder, when I'm in the middle of one, how I'll pull through, a question circus acrobats must ask themselves when, perched on a tiny platform at an unearthly height, they throw themselves into space (I'm exaggerating my situation a little bit, and besides, I've never been to the circus)),rediscovering them as if for the first time, those motions, with a naïveté and inexperience that were fairly difficult to justify, astonished that after so many years, my body still hadn't retained any of the steps, I told myself that maybe I write like I pitch my tents, throwing myself into the adventure each time without knowing how to build the structure, using basic materials in an attempt to construct something teetering and ephemeral, but conscious of its own precarious nature, even relishing it, first using the tools at my disposal to create a sort of frame, and then building around it, positioning and staking the parts of speech like so many pegs in the soil of syntax, stabilising, filling, furnishing it, then, once the thing is up, trying to sleep in it and live in it, to come home to it (sometimes drunk), to bring everyone together and throw a party in it, to fill it with attempts at living and see whether, after all that, it stays standing.([1])

([1]) Amélie Nothomb, on the other hand, is a Quechua-writer: her sentences are like those tents that unfold and pitch themselves of their own accord when thrown nonchalantly on the ground. On the other hand, the first puff of wind will blow the house down.

MONTENEGRO



Ilija Đurović

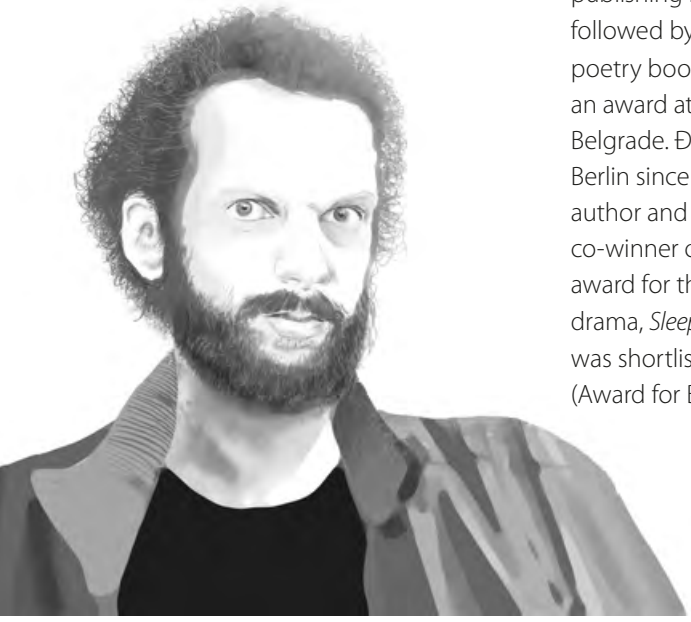
Sampas

Sampas

Treći Trg, 2021
Language: Montenegrin
ISBN 978-8664-071-39-0

BIOGRAPHY

Ilija Đurović was born in 1990 in Podgorica, Montenegro. Đurović writes prose, poetry, plays and film scripts. His first book of prose, *They do it so beautifully in those great romantic novels*, came out in 2014 under Yellow Turtle Press, a small Montenegrin publishing house he runs. This was followed by *Black Fish* (2016) and the poetry book *Brink* (2018), which received an award at a literature festival in Belgrade. Đurović has been living in Berlin since 2013 as a versatile freelance author and publicist. In 2019 he was co-winner of the Montenegrin theatre award for the best contemporary drama, *Sleepers*. His first novel, *Sampas*, was shortlisted for the 2021 *NIN* Award (Award for Best Novel of the Year).



SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Sampas is written in the form of a road novel, where through fragments of a journey we follow the tale of two young people who travel through central and southern Montenegro, where they, as the main characters, illuminate the complexities of their individual fates, but also the collective experience of the spirit of the place and the time in which the story unfolds. The different events and internal sensations of the protagonists are conditioned by the social and political realities and the atmosphere of the tale, which strengthens their desire to leave Montenegro in search of a different, better life. The milieu within which the characters in the novel seek their 'sampas' (a local term symbolising freedom, but also wanderlust) is that of contemporary Montenegro, or the ex-Yugoslavian context. Alongside the political references in the novel (the action takes place over an election weekend) 'Sampas' also works at the level of a love story, where the couple's relationship is explored, and thus the story becomes an exploration of the idea of that relationship, indeed of all relationships.

FORUM MLADIH PISACA'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

Within the novel *Sampas*, written in the experimental form of a novel-sentence that develops over a hundred pages without a full stop, Ilija Đurović has successfully, through his originality, his skill and his aesthetic choices, incorporated elements of various literary genres and styles, along with post-modern literary techniques. That single, unbroken sentence, with no full stop, is a very thoughtful, cause-and-effect, grammatically correct, stylistically impeccable one.

The reader is presented with a 'story of the road' or, as the subtitle of the novel puts it, 'a poem of the road', bringing the text closer to the language of poetry in terms of its style and rhythms and the richness of its imagery.

At the same time, the novel is clearly situated in the current sociopolitical and indeed existential climate of Montenegro. In that context, young people are faced with entrenched paradigms, which are unacceptable to them. These are resolved only through the decision to be unrestrained and free, even with the awareness of the insufficiency of their own strength to change things as they would wish or find the right location for self-realisation.

Sampas

Ilija Đurović

Ada Bojana je veliki pijesak uz veliku vodu i kad zamišljam nju ne vidim nju, vidim vlažan, močvarni vazduh koji može biti bilo gdje, zbog toga je Ada voda i njeni su komarci moji i njeni i svačiji, idemo rastinjem privučeni ljuljanjem reggaea, pokušaćemo se uplažiti u ono što se roji nad pijeskom, rastafarijanci, rejveri i ostali, *ajte, ajte, ne ozuvajte se*, jedan od rastafarijanaca pruža nam pivo, ne pijemo pivo, pijemo rum, *ima li rum*, ruma nema, nije važno, s pivom u ruci idemo dalje, trijezni i nepovjerljivi, spremni da pijeskom zamažemo noseve i povjerujemo, gazimo mirno kroz rastinje nepoznatih, pred nama hoda muško tijelo i vodi nas do drugog tijela koje izgleda kao predsjedavajući šanka, rukovodilac alkohola, prvo tijelo kaže *tu vas predajem, to je Pisko*, pitam *Piško*, tijelo iza šanka kaže *Pisko, sa c*, pitam *Pisko kao Pisco Sour*, kaže *tako je* i iz fioke šanka izvlači na dva dijela rastavljenu srebrnu granatu šejkera, u podnožju jezika podiže se neslana voda, oko nas so i mlaka hladnoća, *Pisco Sour za dvoje*, prelazim pogledom preko elemenata koji će se uskoro sjediniti u unutrašnjosti kapsule, Pisko je izgledao pouzdano, ali niko nije dovoljno pouzdan dok ne napuni cijev i opali, zbog toga sam pogled skrenuo ka rulji koja je zaklonjena trskom igrala po reggeaeu, rejveri su čekali svoj red, nisam želio da Pisko osjeća pritisak, ipak pseći, njuhom i sluhom i dalje sam bio okrenut njemu, njušio sam limetu kako se cijedi, kristal šećera puca pod tučkom, pisko je izgmizao iz flaše, jaje se slomilo, led je obasjao noć i napunio čauru, Pisko je repetirao, iz slabo sklopljene granate geler alkohola pogodio me je u vrat, Pisko je pričvrstio spoj, repetirao još jednom i pronašao ritam, Pisko-samba, uhvatio sam

je za ruku i zatvorio oči, u miru sam čekao *Pisco Sour*, samba se zaustavila, Pisko je sipao, a onda Pisko *Umrije Gabo, Gabo muere*, ponovio sam *Gabo umrije, umrije Gabo*, Pisko ostatak noći nije pisnuo, niko osim nas nije naručivao njegova pića, napravio je još nekoliko koktela bez ljubavi i povukao se u trščanu postelju, mi smo ostali za šankom, gledali smo reggae kako se gega i pravili pi ća, *Sazerac*, *Gringo*, *El Camino*, *Daiquiri*, bjelanci su točili sa ivica šanka dok se nismo rastočili zajedno s njima i umrli do jutra, ujutru su rojevi glavobolja zujali vazduhom, bili smo upleteni rukama i nogama, kožom, najviše mirisima, navukli smo minimum odjeće i izašli u ostatke fronta, napolju, na pijesku, u rastinju ležali su budući leševi rejvera, neki su bili goli, preko nekih je bila prebačena plahta, da smo imali vremena preko svih bismo zasuli kamenje i vlažan pijesak, lijek protiv zvijeri i komaraca, ali vremena nismo imali, ušli smo u kola i krenuli, duga, suva pravina već puna užarenih automobila sjekla je polje pred nama, utjeha Ulcinja bila je dvanaest kilometara daleko, znali smo da se nemamo čemu radovati, ali što veća udaljenost od Ade bila je već dovoljno dobra, vozili smo ka terasi hotela, pokvarenom ozvučenju iz kojeg kapaju otpaci zvukova, horizont sječe ograda sa plavim staklom, kao da mora svuda okolo nije već previše, mora dovoljno plava, soda sa limuna struže premaze pesticida i to je prvo zadovoljstvo dana, njemu se radujemo, tanki hlad čempresa, smrad sumpora, miris starih, golih žena umočenih u ljekovitu vodu miluje nas kroz otvorene prozore, još jedna krivina i parkiraćemo se u hladu terase, pokloniti se procvalom triju agava, njihovoj budućoj smrti, popeti se stepenicama do plavih stolova i plave ograde okrenute ka plavom moru, konobar prilazi sa srebrnim diskom na ruci, guta *l* u *izvolite* i spušta kafu i vodu na sto, gledamo se na trenutak pa izgovaram *hvala*, zvuk u njegovoj glavi ponovo se ujednačava, točkići se opet okreću, izgovara *molim* od slova do slova, jasno i čitavo, četvorotaktni motor svijeta nastavlja da bruji i brekće kao što je brektao do zatišja pred nepoznatim jezikom mutavih, četvoročetvrtinski takt pjesmuljka o moru nastavlja da kaplje po nama, kisjela voda

lansira male, providne vatromete nad rubom čaše, žeđ polako nalazi smisao i mi sa njom uranjamo u olakšanje minerala i razmišljamo o doručku, o rejverima pokopanim u pijesku koji smo ostavili za nama, o otrovima koktela koje još nismo istisnuli iz nas i otpustili ka plavoj, mediteranskoj govnovodici, ali prije toga ćemo pojesti spržena jaja, nafilovati krvne sudove svježim holesterolom prije nego što se spustimo na stijene da okitimo lobanje i ramena oreolom sunčanice, bio joj je potreban prvi espresso, voda, hrana i još jedan espresso za prve riječi u danu, *moram do toaleta* značilo je da će polako ustati, namjestiti gaćice koje su se uvukle između dvije polulopte dupeta, otići sporim korakom lijevo od šanka i u mirisu asepsola mirno srati, mrzi moje misli o njenim govnima ali to me ne zaustavlja, želi da prestanem da serem i prihvatim mediteransku pjesmu kao čistu i svoju, ne uspijevam joj objasniti da spodobe stasale na sprženoj poljani, na tri rijeke razapete između planinčina i mora ne mogu biti ništa do to što jesu, spodobe iz zaleđa, da nas more nikad neće prihvatiti jer ga se plašimo, za nas je suva, pustinjskim ljetima izujedana zemlja, hladna i brza rijeka, prilagođenost pluća na disanje pokvarenog vazduha, pluća naviknuta na gutanje blatnjave smješe prašine, smoga i spržene trave, pokazali bismo se posebno dobro u dušegupki, ali ne možemo izranjati ježeve, skakati na glavu bez straha, to je protiv prirode zaleđa, iako ona želi više, želi naći u nama ono čega nema, tražimo zajedno, ponekad zajedno seremo i to je ljubavna pjesma par excellence, vraća se iz toaleta sporo, *presvukla sam se, možemo dolje*, otjerala je moju misao o našim govnima i vratila nas na terasu Albatrosa, spremne da se spustimo niz kozju stazu do samo za nas morem nazubljene stijene i tu plivamo goli, operemo se od proteklih noći i tuđih smrti, kako je pater familias umro može se ispričati iz mora, dok je njeno solju isprano dupe napadnuto račićima na obali, a moje potopljeno dva metra pod vodom, dostupno ribama i meduzama, umro je, naravno, sa cigaretom u ruci i to je sve što mu je bilo važno, za njim će ostati priče o ocu koji je pušio na motoru, biciklu, u bolnici, ostaće nepopušena polja duvana i žena koja će

ga žaliti, dva sina koja će ga se sjećati i ništa više, proletersko dijete na svijet došlo i sa svijeta otišlo golo kao puška koja je njegovim roditeljima izborila pristojan život srednje klase, stan, kola, redovne ljetnje i zimske odmore, propuštenu mogućnost besplatnog obrazovanja i iskorištene izlete do samih rubova zemlje, ponekad i preko ruba, povratak kući sa novom modom i boljim duvanom, dovoljno za čitav život u provinciji i rušenje onoga što je od sjećanja na takav život ostalo, proletersko dijete golo kao puška koju je uspjelo da izbjegne kad je došao red na njegov rat, kad su se rubovi zemlje kojom je kao mlad putovao počeli gužvati, sužavati, da bi na kraju ostali jedva nešto veći od groba u koji su ga spustili među poznate kosti, tu bi se priča o smrti pater familijasa mogla završiti i završava se, jer je lažna, pater familias je živ i srećan se igra sa prvim i jedinim unukom, sinom njegovog prvog sina, mog brata koji živi daleko od toplog mora i zaleđa, pater familias češlja duvan i dječaku govori psovke koje još ne razumije, hvata ga za tek iždžikljalu ćunu, to je jedina slika koja je ostala u glavi nakon dva popodneva u punoj roditeljskoj kući, ali strah od smrti ostao je kao debeli mrak, nikakav pater familias, klasičan mužjak u žilavom sistemu latentnog matrijarhata, na svijet donesen da raspe sjeme i pokuša pritom da se ne oznoji previše, što bi mu skoro i pošlo za ćelavom glavom da ga prva decenija novog milenijuma nije zatekla nespremnog, na polovini životnog puta, u punoj snazi, odlučna da mu oduzme sve za šta je mislio da će mu po pravu pripadati do kraja jedinog života u koji je vjerovao, dekada koja je ćelavu glavu premazala bojama hipertenzije, zastavom pod kojom se sa rukom na suženim krvnim sudovima pjeva *žuti žutuju crveni putuju*, pod zastavom uvijek na pola koplja u duhu babine revolucije i prezira smrti, ruka hipertenzije na čelo je ucrtala crveni grb-upitnik na koji niko nema odgovor, ali upitnik na koji, makar spolja, crveni otac, sad već crveni đed, ne obraća pažnju, dva dana roditeljskog doma, dva dana mirisa jagoda i jagnjetine u sosu od meda dovoljno je da se nakon trećeg doručka pokupe ključevi i krene iz zaleđa ka vodi, toplom moru, zapišanom suncem koje svakog ljeta sve duže

piša, ali ona ipak sjedi na oštroj stijeni i prži se albino-gušteru slična, već izranjavana sunčevim pjegama čeka nove kiklade mladeža da mirno izrone, čipka ostataka zdrave kože ponuđena nebeskom zubu da je sažvaće i ispljune u makiju, među svlakove zmija, željna tena primorske djevojčice suncu nudi neotporni, kontinentalni svlak serviran na pladnju stijenja, sa salatom od račića i morskih rajčica, usoljena i premazana uljem, meso spremno da se raspadne mlado i meko, plivača oko nas nema, stazom iznad ponekad se prevuče tijelo, muškarac uvijek upornog pogleda, oko nas u borovoj šumi hijene gule kurčeve i čekaju da ona ustane i pokaže reljef hridine na mesu, polako preskačem puževe ka komadu hlada, *žuti žutuju crveni putuju*, tek sa obale može se o majci, žuta mater familias, tajna želja svih nas da ona žutuje duže jer život za sjeme na svijet donijetog crvenog oca nije osposobljen za bliske smrti, majka-matematika, majka sveštenica boga Venea, avgustovskog božanstva pred kojim znojave žrtve polažu mlade mozgove, majka svih mjeseci u godini i svih godina u životu jedne porodice, tranzicione generacije socijalističke srednje klase, porodice koja samo uz pomoć matematike-majke uspijeva biti dostojanstvena olupina, nikad dokazana teorema sirotinje, majka svih naših rođendana i majskih pucanja cvjetova lipe malih i žutih kao lica Liliputanaca, majka viđeno lice boga, bol je bog majke-matice, bolom puževe kućice smrskane pod stopalom rekao sam *vidiš li ih kad prođu gore ljigavi kao oguljen mango*, rekla je *dabogda im zmija ušara pojela kite i pljunula ih u oči, da zauvijek oslijepe i da im vječno sunce boga Prostatitisa žari kroz rupu iz koje pišaju sebi niz noge*, nastavila je da žvaće smežuranu kožu zubima oguljenu sa prstiju, njena je ljubav prema svijetu magnet, jedini razlog zašto i dalje želim biti tu, otvarati roze pupoljak pičke-ljubavi, *voliš li sunce*, rekla je *Sunce volim jedino, Sunce Sunce Sunce, ono nas grije i život daje pužu i vitkoj ribi, grožđu, kajsiji, breskvama, melanome beračima, boju travi i bubama, moždane udare trombofiličarima, puni pluća pustinji, mrvi nas kao žrvanj, oštri kljun bjeloglavog supa, grije Cres dok sup prelijeće svijet, dok jede i jebe prije nego što se vrati i zaotoči*

zauvijek, stari supovi vole se nad Cresom dok ne umru, dok ih ne zapljusne prejak talas i Sunce više nikad ne osuši a drugi supovi pojedu, velika nebeska sušilica, volim je i dajem joj tanku kožu, bljesnula je niskom zuba od koje meduze pod vodom oslijepe, hobotnice ispuste mastilo, ribe izgube rođena jata, njen je osmjeh jedina sreća koju je lako gledati, bez osmjeha njeno je lice lijepo, s osmjehom jedino živi, kratko i samo kad dobija ono što želi, *osušićemo se i isploviti* izgovorila je sunčanu rečenicu i legla na ražanj stijenja, legao sam i ja i slušali smo kako ćirikavci zelenom zrikom usisavaju Sunce (...)

Sampas

Ilija Đurović

Translated into English by Will Firth

Ada Bojana is a big sand by a big water, and when I imagine it I don't see it but the dank swampy air that could be anywhere, therefore the Ada is water and its mosquitos belong to me, it and everyone, we made our way through the vegetation, drawn to the swaying reggae, we'd try to beach-bash over to the teeming on the sand, Rastas, ravers and the rest, *come on, join in, don't be shy*, a Rasta offered us beer, we don't drink beer, we drink rum, *is there rum*, there was no rum, no problem, we went on with a beer in hand, sober and distrusting, ready to have our noses rubbed in the sand and to believe, we calmly ploughed through the thicket of strangers, a male body walked in front of us and led us to another that looked like the president of the bar, the commander of alcohol, and the first body said *I'm handing you over, this is Pisko*, I asked *Piss-ko* and the body behind the bar said *Pisco, with a C*, I asked *like pisco sour?* he said *yeah* and took a two-piece silver grenade of a shaker from a drawer behind the bar, saltless water welled up at the base of my tongue, salt and tepid cool surrounded us, *pisco sour for two*, and my gaze wandered over the elements that would soon unite inside the capsule, Pisco looked reliable, but no one is reliable enough until they load and fire, so I turned to look at the throng obscured by reeds and dancing to the reggae, the ravers were waiting for their turn, I didn't want Pisco to feel pressured, but still I sensed him with my ears and nose like a bloodhound, I smelled the lime being squeezed, the crystal sugar cracked beneath the pestle, pisco crept from the bottle, an egg was broken, ice lit up the night and filled the cartridge, then Pisco discharged, shrapnel from the poorly assembled alcohol shell hit me in the neck, Pisco tightened the connection, reloaded and now found the rhythm, a pisco samba, I grabbed

her hand and closed my eyes, I waited in peace for the *pisco sour*, the samba stopped, Pisco poured, and then he said *Gabo is dead, Gabo muere*, I repeated *Gabo is dead, Gabo is gone*, Pisco didn't say another word all night, no one apart from us ordered his drinks, he mixed a few more cocktails without devotion and withdrew to a cane bed, while we stayed at the bar watching the reggae shuffle and making drinks, *Sazerac*, *Gringo*, *El Camino*, *Daiquiri*, egg white dripped from the bar until we also dropped and were dead to the world until morning, when swarms of headache droned through the air, we were entangled with arms, legs, skin and mostly smells, we put on some basic clothing and went out to what remained of the front, out on the sand, the undergrowth was strewn with the future corpses of ravers, some naked, with a sheet thrown over them, and if we'd had time we would have covered them with stones and damp sand, good as animal and mosquito repellent, but we didn't have time, we got into the car and took off, a long dry straight line already full of incandescent cars cut the field before us, the consolation called Ulcinj was twelve kilometres away, though we knew there was nothing for us to look forward to, but the increasing distance from the Ada was good enough, we were heading for a hotel terrace with a defective sound system oozing acoustic refuse, a fence of blue glass cutting the horizon as if there wasn't too much sea around already, a very blue funk, and with soda stripping the pesticide coating from the lemon, which would be the first enjoyment of the day, that's what we were looking forward to, the slim shade of cypresses, the stench of sulphur and the smell of naked old women soaking in spa water caressed us through the opened windows, one more bend and we'd park in the shade of the terrace, bow to the trio of blooming agaves, to their future death, climb the stairs to the blue tables and the blue fence facing the blue sea, the waiter now came up with a silver disc on his arm, put our coffees and water down on the table and dropped the H in *here you are*, we exchanged glances for a moment and I said *thank you*, the sound equalised once more in his head, the little wheels turned again, he pro-

nounced *you're welcome* letter for letter, clearly and fully, the four-stroke engine of the world kept on roaring and rumbling as it had done until the quiet before the unknown language of mutes, the four-four time ditty about the sea kept oozing at us, the mineral water launched small transparent fireworks above the rim of the glass, thirst gradually found meaning and we and it immersed ourselves in the relief of minerals, thinking about breakfast, the ravers buried in the sand we left behind and the cocktail poisons we hadn't yet expressed from our bodies and expelled to the blue Mediterranean cesspool, but before that we'd eat scorched eggs, fill our blood vessels with fresh cholesterol before going down to the rocks to adorn our skulls and shoulders with the halo of sunstroke, first she needed an espresso, water, food and another espresso for the first words of the day, *I have to go to the bog* meant she'd slowly get up, adjust her knickers wedged between the two hemispheres of her bottom, amble over to the left of the bar and calmly shit in the cloud of disinfectant, she hates me thinking about her turds but that doesn't stop me, she wanted me to cut the crap and accept the Mediterranean song as something pure and part of me, I couldn't convince her that creatures who grew up on parched flats, on three rivers strung up between huge mountains and the sea, could not be anything but what they are, creatures from the hinterland, I couldn't persuade her that the sea would never accept us because we're afraid of it, for us it's a dry land eaten away at by desert summers, a cold fast river, the adaptation of the lungs to breathing tainted air, lungs used to swallowing a mucky melange of dust, smog and singed grass, we'd certainly prove ourselves in a gas van, but we can't bring up sea urchins, dive in headfirst without fear, that's against the nature of the hinterland, although she always wants more, wants to find in us what there is not, we search together, sometimes we shit together, and that is a love song par excellence, now she came back from the toilet slowly, *I got changed, we can go down*, which dispelled my thoughts about our turds and returned us to the terrace of the Albatros Hotel, ready to descend the steep,

narrow path to the serrated rocks the sea carved just for us, and there we swam naked, washed ourselves of the past few nights and deaths of others, how the paterfamilias died could be told from the sea while her salt-washed bottom was attacked by little crabs on the shore, and mine submerged two metres under for the fish and medusas to assail, he died with a cigarette in hand, of course, that was all that mattered to him, stories would be told about him as a father who smoked on the motorbike, on the cycle and in hospital, whole fields of tobacco would remain unsmoked and his wife would mourn for him, two sons would remember him but nothing more, he was born a proletarian child and left the world again as naked as the rifle that carved out an urbane, middle-class life for his parents, with a flat, car, regular summer and winter holidays, he missed the opportunity of a free education but used the ones for excursions to the very ends of the country, and sometimes even beyond, returning home with new fashion and better tobacco, enough for a whole life in the backwoods and the razing of what remained of the memory of that life, an infant born into poverty who managed to avoid the infantry when his war came, when the edges of the country he travelled as a youth began to crumple and contract, so that in the end there was scarcely anything left bigger than the grave they lowered him into, among familiar bones, the story about the death of the paterfamilias could end there, and it did because it was phoney, the paterfamilias is alive and happily playing with his first and only grandson, the son of his eldest son – my brother – who lives far from the warm sea and the hinterland, the paterfamilias combs tobacco and tells the boy swearwords he doesn't yet understand, grabs him by his tiny new cock, and that was the only image left in my head after two afternoons in my parents' full house, but the fear of death remains like a pole of darkness, he's no paterfamilias at all but a classical male in the sinewy system of latent matriarchy, brought into the world to sow his seed while trying not to work up too much of a sweat on his bald head, and he would almost have succeeded if the first decade of the new millennium hadn't caught

him unprepared halfway along the journey to life's end, at the height of his powers, it was determined to rob him of everything he thought he had a right to until the end of the only life he believed in, a decade that painted his bald head the colours of hypertension, a flag under which we sing *yellow will mellow, red will be dead*, he with his hand on constricted arteries, a flag always at half-mast in the spirit of grandmother's revolution and contempt for death, the hand of hypertension blazoned a red question-mark on his forehead, to which no one has an answer, but a question mark to which the red father, by now a red grandfather, pays no attention, at least outwardly, two days at my parents', two days with the smells of strawberries and lamb in honey sauce were enough for me to snatch the keys after the third breakfast and head from the hinterland for the water, the warm sea that the sun pisses in longer and longer every summer, but she goes and sits on the jagged rock and fries like an albino lizard, already wounded all over by freckles, she waits for new Cyclades of liver spots to calmly emerge, the lace of remaining healthy skin is offered up to the tooth of the sky to masticate and spit out into the scrub among the snake sloughs, she wants the complexion of a girl from the coast, so she offers the sun her unresistant continental skin served on a platter of rocks, with a salad of crabs and sea tomatoes, dressed with salt and oil, meat ready to fall apart young and tender, there were no swimmers near us, sometimes a body trudged along the path above, a man who always stared, hyenas peeled their pricks in the pinewood around us and waited for her to get up and show the relief of the rock on her flesh, I slowly hopped over snails into a patch of shade, *yellow will mellow, red will be dead*, the story of mother could only be told from the shore, the yellow materfamilias, the secret wish of us all that she mellow longer because the life of the red father brought into the world for his semen is not equipped for imminent death, mother mathematics, mother priestess of Sine, Cos and Tan, the August deity, before whom sweaty victims lay their young brains, the mother of all the months of the year and all the years in the life of one fam-

ily, the transition generation of the socialist middle class, a family that only manages to be a dignified wreck with the aid of the mathematics mother, the never-proven theorem of poverty, the mother of all our birthdays and the bursting of linden flowers in May, small and yellow like the faces of Lilliputians, mother as the seen face of god, pain is the god of the mother-gyne, I said with the pain of a snail shell crushed underfoot *do you see them when they go up as slimy as a peeled mango*, and she said *may an eared serpent bite off their dicks and spit them in their eyes so they go blind forever and so the eternal sun of the god Prostatitis burns through the hole they piss out of and down their legs*, her teeth kept chewing the wrinkled skin pared from her fingers, her love of the world is a magnet, the only reason I still want to be here, to open the pink bud of pussy-love, *do you love the sun*, she said *the Sun is all I love, the Sun the Sun the Sun, it warms us and gives life to the snails and slender fishes, to the grapes, apricots and peaches, gives melanomas to the pickers, colour to the grass and beetles, strokes to the thrombophiliacs, it fills the lungs of the desert, crushes us like a millstone, the sharp beak of a griffon vulture, it warms the island of Cres while the vulture flies over the world, while it feeds and fucks before returning and isling itself forever, old vultures make love over Cres until they die, until a wave too strong sweeps them away and the Sun never dries them again and other vultures eat them, I love that big drier in the sky and give it my thin skin*, the row of her teeth flashed so bright as to blind the jellyfish under water, make the octopuses squirt ink and the fish lose their schools, her smile is the only happiness easy to look at, her face is beautiful without a smile, but only with that smile is it alive, briefly and just when she gets what she wants, she spoke the sunny words *we'll dry off and sail on* and lay down on the roasting spit of the rocks, I lay down too, and we listened to the crickets absorbing the Sun with their green chirps (...)

POLAND

Sabina Jakubowska

Akuszerki

The Midwives

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BIOGRAPHY

Sabina Jakubowska has been accompanying women during childbirth as a doula for years. She graduated from the archaeology department. She is fascinated by local history, to which she devoted numerous articles and her PhD. Her debut novel for young people, *Dom na Wschodnia*, received the main prize in the Debut Promoters competition. *Akuszerki* is her first novel for adult readers. So far, the book has been named the Krakow book of the month (September 2022) and was nominated by the jury for the Polityka Passports cultural award. The novel may also be adapted to the screen.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Winter of 1885, a village near Krakow. Young Franciszka gives birth to her first child. She is accompanied in childbirth by Regina, the woman who adopted her and a well-known midwife in the area. The difficult experience of the child's death brings the women closer together and allows them to reveal the secrets of Franciszka's origins. At the same time, another baby is born in a nearby mansion. Franciszka is hired as its foster mother. A series of events lead to her starting to help local women with

the birth of their children and, thanks to unexpected support, she begins her studies at a midwifery school in Krakow. At first, she is lost, but soon gains confidence. She returns from Krakow to her native village, richer in knowledge about delivery, which collides painfully with the rural realities of poverty and superstition. The First World War breaks out and destroys Franciszka's village. Invariably, even in such times, Franciszka continues on her path.

POLSKA IZBA KSIĄŻKI'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

Emotion, curiosity, bewilderment, compassion and transformation of consciousness instead of the expected: fear, abomination, misunderstanding, alienation and rejection. That's what *Akuszerki* by Sabina Jakubowska does to the reader. The reading takes one's breath away, as when we experience a sudden illumination facing a reality, whose presence we have been aware of, but which was made visible and comprehensible only by the art. *Akuszerki* speaks about the most fundamental event in human life; however, there a is strictly female perspective. It is a novel about the continuous and unstoppable coming into this world, and about women who, over the centuries, accompanied other women in this difficult, risky and painful process of giving birth to people. *Akuszerki* is epic in scale, with hundreds of characters and a varied style and narrative that, in many ways, tries to evoke the various historic and social worlds of the novel's heroes. The reader is captivated by an encyclopaedic wealth of knowledge about the art of obstetrics from a century ago, but above all by the fascinating, complex, perfectly constructed title heroines from multicultural Galicia of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. This well-documented novel gives visual authenticity and psychological credibility to the events, the characters and their micro-worlds. The noble tricks of literature involve us emotionally in the experiences of our heroes and make us the author's companions on a personal journey to the world of her ancestors, led by her great-grandmother, the legendary accoucheuse whose diary became the inspiration for a wise and beautiful fiction.

Akuszerki

Sabina Jakubowska

Godzina za godziną mijała. Franciszka przestała krwawić, ale życie z niej uchodziło razem z gorącym potem. Dreszcze nią wstrząsały, zimno wkręcało się w stopy.

Babka zdawała się spać, cicho oddychała, tyłem oparta o kraj łóżka. Nagle bez uprzedzenia zerwała się z zydla bez jednego głosu, bez skrzypnięcia i dygając, jakby to nie ona, ale dama jakaś wielka, ukłon głęboki złożyła w stronę ściany, gdzie mrok był najgłębszy, gdzie blask od śnieżnej nocy nie padał nijaki.

– Witajcie, Wasza Łaskawość – przemówiła babka cicho.

Nie było odpowiedzi na to i Franciszka zrozumiała, że teraz śni i sen to tylko, że matka jej gada dwornie do ściany.

– O to jedno życie proszę, Wasza Łaskawość. O Wasze błogosławieństwo.

Cisza w ciemności, ciemność w ciszy... I tylko głos matki:

– Które? To mniejsze życie se weźcie, Wasza Łaskawość. Ja proszę za moją Francysią.

Franciszka wpatrywała się w mrok. Wytężała wzrok do bólu i w tej nieruchomej ciemności nagle... ujrzała. Na jedną jedyną chwilę. Ale majak ten zaraz zniknął wobec ruchu, jaki uczyniła Perkowa, dygając znów i z wielkim uszanowaniem pokłon składając ponowny. A potem otwarła drzwi, przytrzymała chwilę. Powiew zimna wtargnął do izby, Franciszkę zatelepał ostatni mocny dreszcz i wtedy... jakby ktoś lodowatą dłoń do czoła jej przyłożył i

zabrał gorączkę... Regina po chwili zawarła drzwi i podeszła cicho do łóżka. Dotknęła główki dziecka i westchnęła.

– Tak i po wszystkim. Nie dycha – powiedziała sama do siebie i powolnym ruchem zdjęła zawiniątko, przeżegnała je i ułożyła na klepisku pod łóżkiem.

– Matko... z kim wyście gadali? – spytała Franciszka nieswoim głosem.

– Słyszałaś to? A ze Śmiercią – odrzekła stara po prostu.

– Niezwyczajne koneksyje macie.

– Niezwyczajne – potwierdziła. – A nie gadaj o tym nikomu, choćby... choćby cię pławiono w smole.

– Tak jak prababkę waszej prababki? – ośmieliła się zapytać Franciszka.

– Ano tak. Jej też było tak jak mnie, Regina Perkowa. Pani ze dworu ją oskarżyła o czary, a razem z nią Reginę Białą, Kubalinę, Kozubkę, Salinę, Kantorczynę i szewcową, że mleko odbierały dworskim krowom. Odbył się sąd. To był rok tysiąc sześćset dziewięćdziesiąty ósmy. Pławili je w Czarcieńcu, a potem w smole, posypali pierzem i przegnali przez wieś. Pozwolili wrócić, bo na końcu trzeba zapła- cić grzywnę. Ale przeżyły. Bo pani dziedziczka była dobrą chrześci- janką i im wybaczyła. Jakby były niewinne, toby przecie utonęły – prychnęła, nieodmiennie w tym momencie.

Franciszka już może i tysięczny raz wsłuchiwała się w słowa tej ponurej baśni, którą matka opowiadała jej i siostrze w długie zimowe wieczory, gdy akurat była w domu. Opowieść dawała jej poczucie bezpieczeństwa, bo oznaczała wieczór, kiedy matka była z nimi. Ale częściej jej nie było. W Jadownikach rodziło się dużo dzieci.

– To już teraz mi powiedzcie – poprosiła młoda kobieta. – Bo wy wiecie, czemu dziecię moje umarło, czemu wodę miało w głowie. To przez moje utopienie.

– Tyś topiona nie była.

– Pamiętam wodę zieloną. Nie wiem ino, kiedy to się stało.

– A niech ci już będzie. To się stało wtedy, gdyś była dzieckiem w łonie matki. Ale nie w moim.

Przy tych słowach Franciszka poczuła, jak jej serce przeszywa kłujący ból, ale nie drgnęła, bojąc się głośniejszym oddechem przerwać, żeby ta tajemnica wreszcie wyszła na jaw, żeby się uwolniła, urodziła, a choćby i w bólu. Regina Perkowa mówiła:

– Wszystko się zaczęło, gdy przeciwnie do Bożego porządku poumierały wszystkie moje dzieci z Perką, i wreszcie sam stary Perka, a długo chorował wcześniej. Był rok tysiąc osiemset sześćdziesiąty siódmy, a ja miałam roków trzydzieści i siedem. Zostałam wdową, z brzuchem. Ludzie nie wierzyli, że to dziecko jest Perkowe. Baby we wsi się na mnie zmówiły, obgadały, oczerniły, bo się wszystkie bały, że to właśnie ich chłop dziecko mi zrychtował... Zgorszenie zobaczyli. Akurat u mnie. Ukarać mnie chcieli dla przykładu, ze złości. Nie miał mię kto obronić. Przypomnieli nagle, że ja jestem Regina Perkowa, tak jak moja praprababka. Samo to imię już znaczyło czarownica, taka, co chłopów opętuje. W całej wsi aż huczało.

A przecie ja nie musiałam tych chłopów czarować, sami do mnie leźli jak pszczoły do kwiatu. Plebanowi ktoś powiedział, że nie wiadomo, czyje dziecko noszę, że pół wsi w tym sprawę ma... Pleban młody był, całkiem nowy i nieobyty, i nie wiedział, gdzie jest prawda. Stary proboszcz Borkowski mnie znał od dziecka, ale co z tego, już mu było wszystko jedno, już się wyprowadzał na nową parafię za Bochnię i nie chciał mi pomóc, bo osobliwie miał wstręt do czarownic po tej sprawie z Kaśką Niedźwiedzionką cztery lata wcześniej.

Była wiosna. Przyleciały bociany. Rodziłam Hankę i byłam sama w słabości mojej. Nawet nie było komu zanieść ją do chrztu. Ledwom wstała, ledwom sił nabrała, żeby se naciągnąć wody ze studni i coś przecie ugotować, przyszli po mnie, spod tej studni mnie zabrali, do olchy mnie przywiązali koło nowego smętarza, a śmiali się i od czarownic wyzywali. Stałam, stałam, długo stałam, cycki pęknąć z bólu chciały, już od mleka koszula mokra była, a oni gapili się na te moje cycki i gęby rozdziawiali. Oni wszyscy, cała wieś, bez prawdziwego sądu, sąd nade mną uczynili, jako i nad dziewką kuchenną Rozalką ze dworu, która takoż brzuchata była, tyle że do niej nie pół wsi zachodziło, ale jeden – ważny – bo sam pan ze dworu.

Stara pani, matka pana, nagadała na nas, co jej ślina na język przyniosła. Taka wielka dama, a taka głupia. Ledwo co syna bogato ożeniła, a on wolał dziewkę kuchenną, i dziewka kuchenna miała za to zapłacić.

Pana w tym dniu we wsi nie było, razem z wójtem pojechali z jakąś sprawą do dziedzica, co u niego dzierżawił, a pleban znów do Wojnicza. Było w tym dniu bezprawie, tak jakby się wszyscy radni wiejscy po kątach pochowali. Ludzie robili, co chcieli. Wytarzali nas w błocie dla śmichu próżnego, dla wstydu... i cieszyć się kazali, że nie w smole. Przez wieś nas pognali, prosto do Czarcieńca... Wiosna była, zielono... Wody bajora stały rzęsą oblepione, tatarakiem okolone... Skurcz mnie złapał, na dno szłam prosto... ale spódnice wodą nabrzmiały, wypłynęłam. Nie wiedziałam, co będzie dalej, tyle złości w nich było a uciechy z cudzego cierpienia... Ale pan skądś nadjechał i rzekł ludziom, że to już nie średniowiecze i sądów takich czynić nie przystoi ani w czarownice wierzyć. Co innego rozpustnym babom pokazać, gdzie ich miejsce... dla wzrastania moralności i obyczajności u ludu, a co innego samosądy i zabójstwo, bo to podlega pod kryminał.

Ze mną sprawa była zakończona, zipałam se na brzegu, szczękając zębami. A Rozalka nie wypłynęła, widać brzuch ją głębiej

ciągnął... Postali ludzie zatem, popatrzyli... Nikt nie chciał leźć w wodę, bali się Czarcieńca. Uradzili, że topielicę wyciągną później, jak wypłynie... i poszli, każdy do swej roboty. A panu powiedzieli, że nikt do tego ręki nie przyłożył, postradała rozum i w wodę uciekła.

Leżałam nad stawem bez sił i sama nie wiedziałam, czy mam się modlić i dziękować Panu Bogu za uratowanie życia, czy też pomstować skarania Boskiego dla tych ludzi nieczułych, zakłamanych, dla tego pana, młodego a prześmiewczego, o obyczajność ludu dbałego, a brzuchy czyniącego pannom kuchennym.

I wtedy wypłynęła Rozalka, trzymając się tataraków. Rodziła.

Przechowała się pod wodą tak długo, wychylając się tylko przez trzciny dla zaczerpnięcia tchu, dopóki ciszy nie usłyszała, a wszystko po to, by dziecko uratować przed zawiścią ludzką. I stało się tak, że to ja na świat to dziecię przyjęłam w wodach Czarcieńca, z dala od oczu ludzkich, a potem siadłam w krzakach i własnym mlekiem wykarmiłam, chcąc swoim bolącym cyckom ulżyć. Tyś jest dzieckiem owym.

A gdy Rozalka umierała, osuwając się w szuwary, była taka cisza, jakby nas odgradzały od świata wszystkie te dawne, pławione tu czarownice. I w tej ciszy zobaczyłam Śmierć po raz pierwszy twarzą w twarz, i Łaskawość mieli dla mnie dobre słowo, swoje przyrzeczenie, Błogosławieństwo.

Życie za życie – raz ino mogłam poprosić. Lata mijały, a ja daru swego nie wykorzystałam. Tego Błogosławieństwa Śmierci. I teraz padło ono na ciebie, Franciszko.

The Midwives

Sabina Jakubowska
Translated into English by Kate Webster

The hours passed. Franciszka had stopped bleeding, but the life was draining out of her along with her hot sweat. She was shivering, the cold biting at her feet.

Regina seemed to be asleep, breathing softly, her back against the edge of the bed. Suddenly, without warning, she sprang up from the stool without a sound, without a creak, and curtsying as if she were a lady of great importance, she took a deep bow towards the wall, where the darkness was deepest, where the glare from the snowy night did not reach.

"Good evening, Your Grace," said Regina quietly.

There was no answer, and Franciszka understood that she was dreaming now, and that in her dream her mother was talking extremely politely to the wall.

"For this one life I ask, Your Grace. For your blessing."

Silence in the darkness, darkness in the silence... And only her mother's voice: "Which one? Take this lesser life, Your Grace. I'm asking for my Franciszka."

Franciszka stared into the darkness. She strained her eyes until they hurt, and in that still darkness, suddenly... she saw. For a split second. But the hallucination disappeared as Regina moved, curtsying again and bowing in a show of great respect. Then she opened the door, held it for a moment. A gust of cold air entered the room, Franciszka's body gave a final shudder, and then... it was as if someone had placed an icy hand to her forehead and taken away the fever... Regina closed the door and quietly approached the bed. She touched the baby's head and sighed.

"It's over. He's not breathing," she said to herself, and with a slow movement she took the bundle, made the sign of the cross over it, and placed it on the dirt floor under the bed.

"Mother... who were you talking to?" asked Franciszka, her voice husky.

"You heard that? I was talking to Death," replied Regina plainly.

"You have some unusual companions."

"Unusual indeed," she replied. "And don't you say a word about it to anyone, even... even if you're tarred and feathered."

"Like your great-grandmother's great-grandmother?" Franciszka asked hesitantly.

"That's right. She had the same name as me, Regina Perkowa. The lady of the manor accused her of witchcraft, and others along with her, Regina Biała, Kubalina, Kozubka, Salina, Kantorczyna, and the shoemaker, saying they'd dried up the milk from the court cows. There was a trial. The year was 1698. They dunked them in the village pond, then covered them in tar, sprinkled them with feathers and drove them out of the village. They let them come back because they had to pay a fine at the end. But they survived. Because the lady of the manor was a good Christian and she forgave them. If they were innocent, they'd have drowned, after all," she said with a snort.

Franciszka had listened perhaps a thousand times to this gloomy fairy tale her mother used to tell her and her sister on long wintry evenings when she happened to be at home. The story gave her a sense of security because it signified an evening when her mother was with them. But more often she wasn't. Many babies were born in Jadowniki.

"So tell me now," the young woman begged. "Because you know why my baby died, why he had water in his head. It's because of my drowning."

"You weren't drowned."

"I remember the green water. I just don't know when it happened."

"Oh, alright then. It happened when you were a baby in your mother's womb. But not in mine."

With those words, Franciszka felt her heart pierced with a stabbing pain, but she didn't move, afraid to breathe too loudly, so that the secret would finally come to light, so that she would free herself, be born, even in pain. Regina continued.

"It all started when, contrary to the divine order, all the children I'd had with Perka died, and finally old Perka himself, who had been ill for a long time. The year was 1867, and I was thirty-seven years old. I was a widow, with a belly. People didn't believe it was Perka's baby. The village women conspired against me, talked about me, slandered me, because they were all afraid that it was their man who had planted that child in me... In me, they saw depravity. They wanted to punish me, to make an example, out of anger. There was no one to protect me. They suddenly remembered that I was Regina Perkowa, just like my great-grandmother's great-grandmother. The very name denoted a witch, someone who beguiles the men. The whole village was pulsating with it.

"And yet I didn't have to cast spells on those men, they flocked to me like moths to a flame. Someone told the parish priest that it was unclear whose child I was carrying, that half the village was involved... The parish priest was young, quite new and unacquainted, and he didn't know where to seek the truth. The old parish priest, Borkowski, had known me since I was a child, but so what, he didn't care anymore, he was already moving to a new parish outside Bochnia and he didn't want to help me, because he had a curious aversion to witches after that business with Kaśka Niedźwiedzionka four years earlier.

"It was spring. The storks had arrived. I'd just given birth to Hanka and I was alone in my weakness. There was no one to take her to

be christened. I'd barely got up, barely had the strength to draw water from the well and cook something, and they came for me, took me from the well, tied me to an alder next to the new cemetery, and they laughed and called me a witch. I stood there, stood for a long time, my breasts practically bursting with pain, my shirt already wet with milk, and they stared at my breasts, their mouths wide open. All of them, the whole village, without a trial, cast judgment on me, and also on the kitchen maid Rozalka from the manor house, who was pot-bellied too, except it wasn't half the village that had come for her, but one man – an important one – the lord of the manor himself.

"The old lady, the lord's mother, blabbed about us till the cows came home. Such a fine lady, and yet so stupid. She had only just married her son off to a wealthy family, but he preferred a kitchen maid – and the kitchen maid was to pay for it.

"The lord was not in the village that day, having gone with the mayor on some business to see the squire who was leasing from him, and the parish priest had gone to Wojnicz again. There was lawlessness that day, as if all the village aldermen were hiding away. People did what they wanted. They rolled us about in the mud for idle laughter, for shame... and they told us to be glad we weren't being rolled in tar. They drove us through the village, straight to the pond... It was spring, green... The water was covered with duckweed, surrounded by sweet flag... I got a cramp, I was going straight to the bottom... but then my skirts swelled with water, I rose to the surface. I didn't know what was going to happen next, they were harbouring so much anger and delighting in the suffering of others... But then the lord appeared out of nowhere and told the men that it was no longer the Middle Ages and it was not proper to make such judgments, nor to believe in witches. It's one thing to show debauched women where they belong – for the growth of morality and decency among the village folk – but mob law and murder are something else entirely, because they fall within the realm of criminality.

"For me it was finished, I dragged myself onto the shore, my teeth chattering. But Rozalka hadn't surfaced, her belly was pulling her deeper... So the people stood and looked on... Nobody wanted to go into the water, they were afraid of that pond. They decided that the drowned woman would be pulled out later, when she resurfaced... and off they went, each to his own work. And they told the lord that no one had a hand in it, that she'd lost her mind and run into the water.

"I was lying by the pond with no strength left and I didn't know whether to pray and thank God for saving my life, or to revile this plague, these heartless, hypocritical people, this young and irreverent lord, who cared about the decency of the people, and gave kitchen maids big bellies.

"And then Rozalka surfaced, holding on to the sweet flag. She was in labour. She had hidden under the water all that time, leaning only through the reeds to take a breath, until she heard silence, all to save the baby from the villagers' envy. And it so happened that I helped this baby into the world in the waters of the village pond, far from human eyes, and then I sat down in the bushes and nursed it with my own milk, wanting to relieve my aching breasts. That baby was you.

"And when Rozalka was dying, slipping into the rushes, there was such silence, as if we were isolated from the world by all those ancient witches drowned there. And in that silence, I saw Death face to face for the first time, and Grace had a kind word for me, a promise, a Blessing.

"A life for a life – only once could I ask. The years passed, and I did not use my gift. This Blessing of Death. And now it has fallen upon you, Franciszka."

SWEDEN

Marit Kapla

Kärlek på svenska

Love in Swedish

Teg Publishing
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BIOGRAPHY

Marit Kapla is a Swedish author and journalist. She was born in 1970 and grew up in the small village of Osebol in the mid-western parts of Sweden. She served as Artistic Director of Göteborg Film Festival 2007–2014, as Founder and Program Director of the festival's digital streaming platform Draken Film 2014–2015 and during 2016–2020 she was one of two editors-in-chief of cultural journal *Ord & Bild*. She is a member of the board of PEN Sweden. In April 2019, she debuted with the book *Osebol*, an extraordinary work based upon interviews with almost all the residents of her home village. *Osebol* would grant her the 2019 August Prize for best fictional book, the Publicistklubben Prize Guldpennan 2019, the Studieförbundet Vuxenskolans författarpris 2019, Borås Tidning's Debutant Prize 2020, Göran Palm-stipendiet 2021, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation 2022 and a shortlist placement for the British Academy Book Prize for Global Cultural Understanding 2022. Her latest book, *Kärlek på svenska* (*Love in Swedish*) was published on 24 August 2022 and consists of interviews with people all over Sweden about love, made by documentary filmmaker Staffan Julén for his film with the same title.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

In *Kärlek på svenska* (*Love in Swedish*), a number of individuals of different ages and backgrounds speak open-heartedly of the love in their lives. Each person lives somewhere in Sweden, from Ystad in the south to Karesuando in the north. Their unique experiences and formulations form the core of this striking lyrical depiction of the terms and conditions of love in our time. The texts are quotations from verbatim interviews made by Staffan Julén for his documentary film, which is also entitled *Love in Swedish*. The reader will meet the 31 individuals one after another, from the oldest to the youngest. The text is laid out like poetry, highlighting all the joy and grief that love brings us.

BOOKSELLERS ASSOCIATION AND SWEDISH PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION'S REPORT ON THE BOOK

How she builds her stories fascinates and invites the reader to think in depth. She reflects the development of society from the perspective of the little man with a unique style and voice. Marit Kapla's literature is worthy of reaching a larger audience in Europe.

Kärlek på svenska

Marit Kapla

Marianne Davidson, 74år

Det var en sajt på nätet.

Asta som är bibliotekarie i Simrishamn
sa till mig
att jag skulle gå in där.

Då hade jag lagt upp min sajt
men ingen bild
för Simrishamn är inte så stort.

Så la jag ut en bild
på mig själv i en växtfärgad mössa
som jag har stickat.
Den var bara ute någon timma
och så ryckte jag den.

Då lyckades Janne se det
och kände igen mig.

Han hade sett mig på torget
i den här mössan.

Vi hade skrivit någon gång innan
så då gav inte han med sig.

Han skrev och skrev flera gånger
och jag svarade.

Jag hade opererat handen
och kunde inte lämna Gladsax.

Då kom han ut
och hade Sigge med sig.

Det blev succé.

Inte bara Janne
mest Sigge.

Han var änkling
änkeman
och hade levt ensam i två år.

Jag hade också levt ensam i två år.

Vi började träffas
käka middag tillsammans
gå ut med Sigge
och göra grejer.

Det är inte så himla roligt
att alltid gå någonstans
och vara ensam.

Under de tiderna jag har varit ensam
det är tre perioder
då har man väldigt lite socialt liv.

Det är som att det bara går att ha

ett jämnt antal stolar
runt ett bord.

Att man inte kan ha
ett ojämnt antal.

Går man ut någonstans när man är ensam
alla män som är där
de är ditsläpade.

Det är väl en gång som jag har varit bjuden
när det har varit
ett udda antal människor
och människor i olika typer av relationer.

Livet är så konventionellt.

Det är inrättat efter
att man ska vara två och två
hur lyckliga eller olyckliga
människor än är.

Janne Björklund, 68år

Det var en bar som jag brukade gå på.

Jag hade träffat henne förut
när jag var i Thailand.

Men hon hade stuckit ifrån den baren.

Hon var uppe i norra Thailand någonstans.

Då ringde barägaren till Lin.

Jag var där
för att jag skulle sätta in nya tänder
men nu syns inte det.

Annandag jul tror jag
var det jag träffade henne.

Hon kom dit.

Piffade upp sig rätt mycket.

Sen for hon med hem till hotellet.

Och då bodde vi där.

Sen åkte vi mellan mitt hotell
och hennes systers hotell i Phuket.

Hon satt jämte mig.

Vid tandläkaren och allting.

Sex veckor.

Vi fick gå med teckenspråk
eller hur man gör.

Det fungerade någorlunda.

Sen tog jag hit henne till Sverige
året efter.

Tre månader fick de stanna utan visum.

Först var det väldigt jobbigt för henne.

Då kunde hon ingen svenska.

Men hon var duktig.

Vi köpte böcker
inne i bokhandeln i stan.

Det stod på engelska, thai och svenska.

Nästa år hon kom här
då kunde hon svenska rätt bra.

Hon jobbade mycket nere i Burgsviks camping
och tjänade lite pengar.

Hon var väldigt fattig kan man väl säga.

Hon hade ingen klocka
och ingen mobiltelefon.

Men det köpte jag till henne.

Dmitri Plax, 50år

Jag har fortfarande inte förstått
att Peter är borta.

Det har gått tio månader
och jag förstår det rent faktamässigt.

Jag förstår att han inte lever längre.

Men jag förstår det inte
samtidigt.

Hans grav på kyrkogården
har ingenting med honom att göraa

Du frågade
om tanken på att kärleken inte försvinner
bara för att objektet försvinner
om det hjälper.

Det hjälper inte.

Det är mitt svar.

Love in Swedish

Marit Kapla

Translated into English by Linda Schenck

The text is based on interviews made by documentary filmmaker Staffan Julén for his film LOVE IN SWEDISH.

Marianne Davidson, age 74

There was this website.

Asta the librarian in Simrishamn
suggested
I look at it.

I already had a profile
but no photo
since Simrishamn's not a big place.

So I added a picture
of myself in a cap of hand-dyed yarn
I had knitted.

After just an hour or two
I took it down.

But Janne had time to see it
and recognized me.

He'd noticed me at the market
in that cap.

We'd chatted once or twice before
so this time he didn't give up.

He kept writing and writing again
and I answered.

I'd had hand surgery
and couldn't get out of Gladsax.

So he came over
and brought Sigge along.

That was a hit.

Not only Janne
mostly Sigge.
He was a widower
lost his spouse
and had been living alone for two years.

I'd been living alone for two years myself.

We started seeing each other
having dinner together
taking Sigge out
and doing stuff.

It's not a barrel of laughs
always going places
by yourself.

During the times I've been alone
there were three such periods
you don't have much of a social life.

It's as if there can only be
an even number of chairs
around a table.

As if you couldn't have
an odd number.

If you go out somewhere when you're alone
all the men there
they've been dragged along.

I think only one time I was invited out
and there were
an odd number of people
and people in different kinds of relationships.

Life is so conventional.

It's arranged by
the idea that people are meant to exist two by two
however happy or unhappy
they might be.

And then he broke up with me once.

We were at the market at Kivik.

I had a stall and was selling
I was in my element.

He used to sell at Kivik market too.

He's a bookseller.

That time he was supposed to help me
set up my market stall

but it didn't work out.

And I was the one who knew exactly how to do it.

The next day he broke up.

The day after that
he called and said
Sigge was very cross with him.

Janne Björklund, age 68

There was this bar I used to go to.
I had met her before
when I was in Thailand.

But she'd left that bar.

She was up north in Thailand somewhere.

So the owner of the bar phoned Lin.

I was there
to get a new set of teeth
though you can't tell now.

Boxing Day I think
it was when we met again.

She came in.

Had fixed herself right up fancy.

Then she went back to the hotel with me.

After that we lived there.

Later we were back and forth between my hotel
and her sister's hotel in Phuket.

She sat next to me.

At the dentist's and all.
Six weeks.

We had to get by with sign language
or whatever people do.

It worked pretty well.

I brought her back here to Sweden
the next year.

Three months they could stay without a visa.

At first it was really hard for her.

She didn't know any Swedish back then.

But she was a good learner.

We bought books
at the bookstore in town.

The words were in English, Thai and Swedish.

The next year when she got here
she was pretty good at Swedish.

She worked a lot down at the Burgsvik campsite
and earned a bit of money.

She was very poor you might say.

She didn't have a watch
or a cellphone.

But I bought 'em for her.

Dmitri Plax, age 50

I still can't believe
that Peter is gone.

Ten months have passed
and I understand the facts.

I understand that he is no longer alive.

But at the same time I
cannot understand it at all.

His grave in the cemetery
has nothing to do with him.

You asked
about the idea that love doesn't go away
just because its object does
whether that helps.

It doesn't help.

That's my answer.

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