

The European Union Prize for Literature

Twelve winning authors

2011



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EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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Foreword

Foreword by José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission

It is a great pleasure for me to present the 12 winners of the 2011 European Union Prize for Literature, coming this year from Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Iceland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Malta, Montenegro, Serbia, Netherlands, Turkey and the United Kingdom. This completes a 3 year cycle for the prize: launched in 2009, it has been awarded to authors from all the 36 countries participating in the Culture Programme of the European Union.

This edition is very timely in terms of the Commission's new funding proposals for the post 2013 period. We are proposing to strengthen the EU's support to the cultural and creative sectors through a new "Creative Europe" Programme. Its key aims will be to foster the safeguarding and promotion of our rich cultural and linguistic diversity while at the same time seeking to strengthen the cultural and creative sectors, with a view to boosting their contribution to jobs and growth. At the heart of the future programme will be efforts to strengthen the capacity of these sectors to work internationally, as well support for promoting the circulation of cultural and creative works beyond national borders in order to reach new audiences in Europe and further afield.

The EU prize for literature fits in well with these aims and is truly unique: it is the only award to celebrate authors in so many European countries writing in such a broad array of languages. It brings some of the newest and best European literary talent under the spotlight, helps these authors break into new markets and reach new readers. More generally the prize seeks to raise long-term interest among publishers, booksellers and the public in reading works by foreign authors. Books can also be life changing for us as individuals, fostering empathy for those with other lives, often less fortunate than ourselves. Reading works by authors from different countries opens up our eyes to entirely new cultural contexts, and helps us to understand each other better. This is all the more important in today's world.

Translation is of course central to emerging authors to find success outside their home base and the prize helps the winners in this regard. The winners are given priority under the literary translation strand of the EU's Culture Programme and I am happy to see that over the last two years 19 of the 23 Prize winners from 2009 and 2010 have been translated into twelve different languages with EU support. This has broadened access to these works, which can now be enjoyed by readers across Europe, from Bulgaria to Italy and from Slovenia to Poland.

Let me thank the European Booksellers Federation, the European Writers' Council and the Federation of European Publishers for their commitment to the Prize. Working together with a Consortium representing the whole book sector has in itself been a positive experience, showing how European support can stimulate new initiatives and cooperation. A warm word of thanks also to the national juries, who have dedicated precious time and hard work to a challenging process of selecting only one winner – out of so many talented authors – from each country.

I wish the winners every success with their future careers and hope that they will be discovered and enjoyed by many readers from across our entire continent as well as far beyond.



José Manuel BARROSO



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Kalin Terziyski

Има ли кой да ви обича (2009)

Is there anybody to love you (short stories)

Publishing House JANET 45

Biography

Kalin Terziyski was born in 1970 in Sofia. He graduated from medicine at the Medical Institute in Sofia, and for four years worked as a psychiatrist in the second largest psychiatric hospital in Bulgaria, the 'St. Ivan Rilski'. However, he says, "because young doctors were receiving very low wages, making it hard to live", he started writing for newspapers and magazines. During this time, he wrote a series of stories and cutting-edge alternative texts for magazines.

At the beginning of 2000, he quit his job as a doctor and devoted his whole time to writing, working as a writer for television and radio, and writing collections of short stories between 2007-2010. He also took part in literary evenings and, in 2006, he became a member of the literary alternative club 'Litertura dictatorship'. His brother, the writer Svetoslav Terziyski, is also a member of this club. Kalin is a very talented author in the field of new Bulgarian literature.

Synopsis

This collection incorporates 16 short stories. The book conveys the author's knowledge of modern cities, containing a subtle sense of humour and depicting larger than life characters. The young author turns life into a new narrative reality, into a new writer's philosophy. His stories relate to the mysteries of life in the urban space. But the big city in the book is not one we would know so well. It resembles a city in a fairy tale – filled with secrets and drama. It is a big city that offers very colourful theatrical decors, against the background of which deep and strange human drama develops. For example, the short story 'Love' is about the unacceptable love that a university teacher has towards her student – a pretty but unapproachable young man, who only looks unapproachable because everyone else thinks he is. The story unfolds in a microbiology lab where the teacher works. Out of despair, she decides to poison this young man. In the end, in a bizarre twist of fate, she finds out that he also loved her...

Another story, 'Collector of Values' is about a poor man who collects waste from the streets that only he, his eyes unburdened by social prejudice, can see the true riches of. He discovers a small bundle of discarded love letters, which become a real treasure to him.

The short stories of Kalin Terziyski are an attempt at establishing a new tradition in Bulgarian prose: a tradition of humanistic and poetical urbanism.

Има ли кой да ви обича

Kalin Terziyski

ПРОСЯК

Докато вървим с дъщеря ми по Иван Асен, аз оглеждам къщите. Къщите в София са грозни, защото са стари и старостта не ги облагородява, а само съсипева мазилките им.

Затова вървя и гледам всичко, все едно е нищо. Това се постига трудно, но всеки несъзнателно го прави всеки ден.

– А може би искаш пица?

– М-м, да... – отговаря провлачено дъщеря ми.

Много ме дразни, когато гледа встрани, унесена в някакъв неин си момичешки транс. Блее. Аз съм същия. Тя също гледа всичко все едно е нищо.

– Ама ще я ядеш, нали? – питам, като я подръпвам за ръката.

– М-м, да... – и пак гледа в невидимото пространство, унесена.

Знам този унес. Когато не мислиш, не чувстваш, не виждаш и не чуваш. Само си жив. Нещо като лесно постигната, детска Нирвана.

Вървим си към павилиона, където продават пици, аз внимавам да не ни блъсне кола, дъщеря ми е отпуснала ръка в моята и се побутва леко в крака ми, защото не гледа къде ходи.

Аз, докато внимавам да не ни блъсне кола, си мисля за детството. Дали през своето детство съм се чувствал добре? И въобще, дали нещо съм чувствал? Дали съм изпитвал постоянно тая смес от чувство за вина и раздразнение от постоянно напирашите задължения? Естествено, че не. Ето, откакто станах възрастен все такива неща чувствам. А като дете сигурно съм чувствал някакви детски глупости. Дъщеря ми се сепва и ме дръпва, защото до нея минава едро куче. Сега аз съм се унесъл.

Къде гледаш... уж си възрастен – дърпа ме тя за ръката.

Да, възрастен съм. Толкова е тъжно това. Но май като дете ми беше по-тъжно. Съвсем ясно осъзнавах, че съм зависим от всичко и всички. И че всички истински удоволствия са скрити от мене. В гардероба, под ключ – от строгата мама. Мисля, че за да се отърва от детството си, пораснах.

Татеш /Кой знае откъде ми измисли това унгарско име дъщеря ми/... тука сме. Какво мислиш?

Нищо, глупости си мисли татко.

Влизаме в ресторантчето и аз с досада гледам изложените парчета пица – тънки, неапетитни – вял опит да бъдат подлъгани гладни клиенти. Дъщеря ми ги харесва, защото имат царевица. Откъде пък се взе тая царевица? Дали не я тъпчат навсякъде, за да ни приучат на фуражна храна? И без друго истинската храна по света намалява.

Едно парче с царевица – подръпва ме дъщеря ми.

Едно парче с царевица – повтарям аз и подавам парите.

Чувствам се слаб и недоволен, защото не мога да влияя на собствената си дъщеря. Не мога да я науча на това, което смятам за добро. Тя е на седем, а вече знае всичко по-добре от мене. Готова е да спори. А аз нямам енергия да споря с нея. Пък и би било смешно – възрастен мъж и

малко дете да се препират на улицата. Искам тя да не яде макдоналдс и царевица. Искам да има естетическо отношение към храната.

Искам да има по-голям интерес към миналото и към истинските неща /тия, които аз си мисля за истински/ – струва ми се, че сегашните деца дотолкова не се интересуват от миналото, че то сякаш престава да съществува.

Иска ми се да имам власт над това мъничко човече – добра и благородна власт, за да я науча на добри неща. Но нямам.

Пък и на какви добри неща бих я научил? Ако беше момче, щях след години да я науча да се бръсне.

Тя си взема пицата и започва да я яде. Яде я, сякаш поглъща нещо непригодно за ядене. Не си личи да и е вкусно. А аз съм лаком човек. Струва ми се, че новите поколения дори няма да разберат смисъла на думата чревоугодничество. Ще се хранят с водорасли и рециклирани боклуци, за да не изпитват това досадно нещо – как се казваше – а, да – глад.

Аз пак мисля, тя ме води. Мисля си за храната. Храната е удоволствие, което ще стане по-срамно и от секса, когато стане недостатъчна. Да, да! Не яжте масло – има холестерол... както и месото. Хлябът е това, което ни убива. Алкохолът ни прави дебели и тъпи, накрая също ни убива. Виното – кръвта Христова, ни убива. Ех.

И ни пресрещна просяк. Едър, почти колкото мене. Попълен. Възрастен човек – около шейсетгодишен. Със синя униформа на кондуктор, но така преправена, че да изглежда просяшка.

С торба през рамо – толкова бутафорна, че ме ядосва. Все едно иска да ми докаже, че е просяк, че в торбата му има парчета стар хляб, с който ще храни гладни деца.

Господине, не съм просяк. Дай три лева да се приберем. Господ да те поживи. Да им ебем майката на просяците мръсни. Аз искам за влака, да се приберем. В плевенско ме чакат. Внучета... да ти е живо и здраво детето, дай три лева. А аз искам да покажа на дъщеря си, какво представлява милосърдието.

Мисля си: ето, той е противен, прилича на измамник, но тя – малката и невежата, ще разбере, че добрия човек не се интересува как и на кого дава. Ще научи, че важни са състраданието и милостта.

А в устата на просещия има златен зъб, който ме вбесява. И аз си казвам: Смири се и не съди за хората по златните им зъби. Нека види малкото момиче как се дава и как се прави добро.

И изваждам от джоба си четири лева – една двулевка и две еднолевки. Отброявам три лева и посягам да му ги дам. Той някак прекалено грубо и сръчно ги взема и издърпва и останалата еднолевка.

Да хапнем нещо, не съм ял, нищо не съм ял цел ден.

Още по-добре, мисля си. А дъщеря ми ме гледа малко уплашено.

Защо му даваш пари? Той е циганин.

Как... какво като е циганин...? Нали е човек и има нужда... не разбра ли, че няма пари да се върне вкъщи... и не е ял. Не е важно на кого даваш... важното е, че като дадеш... ставаш по-добър.

И й говоря още пет минути неща, на които трудно вярвам, но много ми се ще тя да повярва.

Но в главата ми, в сърцето ми се поражда гняв. Гнева на излъгания човек.

И заставам на ъгъла на улицата, наблюдавам какво ще прави просяка, след като вече има моите четири лева. Дъщеря ми е неспокойна и ме подръпва, иска да си ходим. Но аз я дръпвам по силно за ръчичката и тя разбира, че сега съм сериозен и нещо не е хубаво като преди.

Просякът се върти две – три минути напред назад. Аз ясно знам, че чака нов глупак, нов благороден мухльо, когото да излъже. Аз не съм благороден мухльо. Аз само исках да покажа на малката си дъщеря каква е благостта на себераздаването. Да и покажа, че е добре да даваш... и когато дясната ръка дава, лявата да не знае за това. Искам тя да е благотворителна и мила, а не озлобена като всички.

И се чувствам вбесен от глупостта си.

Дъщеря ми ме гледа объркано, не може да разбере нито какво правя, нито какво мисля.

Просякът ме вижда. Засуетява се и отива до лавка за алкохол и ядки. Прави съвсем нелепо движение, все едно ще си купува нещо. Ха, сигурно кашу и бърбън.

Защо не отидеш в някоя хлебарница, глупако – мисля си – поне да съм излъган както трябва?

Той отново ме вижда и ми кимва с глава – на двацет метра съм от него – и пак имитира купуване на нещо. И очаква, че аз ще се откажа да го наблюдавам. Но аз го наблюдавам.

Той имитира, че си тръгва.

Аз дръпвам дъщеря си, повличам я към вход на къща, където, тя съвсем объркана ме пита?

Следим ли го?

Да... той ни излъга... той нямаше нужда от пари за влак... сега ще видиш, ще поиска и от други

Ми... да си ходим тогава...

Не... не бива лъжците така... няма да го оставя да лъже и други...

Ми... ти защо му даде?

Защото му повярвах... важното е да даваш на тия, които ти искат, без непрекъснато да мислиш, че те лъжат

Хайде да си ходим...

Не... ще ни върне парите, ако е лъжец!

И наблюдавам просяка. А той, усетил, че е свободен да действа, спира момче и момиче. Не го чувам, но по мимиките му разбирам, че повтаря същите неща, които е казал и на мене.

Изпитвам силно пулсиране в слепоочията – този вид гняв, който понякога води до мозъчен удар или до убийство. Не мога да си обясня защо – не – обяснявам си веднага. Защото с тези пари, с тези четири лева щях да купя на дъщеря си темперни бои. Исках да ми нарисува портрет – такъв, какъвто съм – с брада и обичан от нея. А сега се чувствам измамен. Но нали съм добър? Нали не се интересувам от това, къде ще отидат дарените от мен пари? Нали не съм зъл параноик, който прави сметка и за парчето мухлясал хляб, което е дал на бездомно куче?

Но в ушите ми бумти кръвта, чак ми става зле от гняв и злоба. Стискам ръката на дъщеря си, тя ме гледа тревожно.

И да те излъжат... е много по-добре, отколкото ти да излъжеш... разбра ли – казвам тихо и дрезгаво.

Ами защо да ме лъжат?

Така...

А просякът спира момче с раница, унесено – от новия тип хора – които живеят някъде в задънените улици на

Интернет. Тогава аз излизам. В джоба ми има сгъваем нож. Много тънък – доста дълъг. Не става за рязане, а за мушкане. Сигурно нещо в мене не е наред, за да го нося. Тегля дъщеря си за ръката и приближавам просяка. Заставам пред него тъкмо, когато е взел поредните три лева от момчето, живеещо в Интернет. Допирам отворения нож в корема му. Той прави глупава, хитра, уплашена и противна физиономия.

Върни ми парите!

Защо... господине... аз за влака ти ги поисках...

Лъжеш – казвам грубо, а дъщеря ми нервно ме дърпа. Тя вече се е уплашила много.

Не те лъжем... Господине, честен кръст...

И лицето му става толкова нагло, че чак се стъписвам. Той гледа през мене. Вижда колко съм нищожен. Само имитира, че се е поуплашил. Знае добре такива като мене. Щом дават пари, няма да убият човек. Лицето му от секунда на секунда става все по твърдо и в очите му вече няма дребнава хитрина – само грубо, свирепо презрение. Бута ръката ми.

Аз не съм сам... от плевенско сме... със сина сме тука... и за него трябва билет да купувам... аз помислих, че си добър човек...

А, щом и сина ти... – не се чувам, какво говоря. Ръката ми иска да се върне при корема му, да го убие и да посее справедливост. А устата ми мънка – Значи и сина ти? И ти затова ли от всеки срещнат искаш? А?

И гласът ми трепери.

Абе я се махай от тука. Я! Какво... Я си бегай...

И забързано, ядосано, просякът се обръща и тръгва по улицата. А дъщеря ми измъква ръката си от моята и си я избърсва. Стоим две минути. Аз сгъвам ножа, който нелепо е висял в отпуснатата ми ръка.

Цялата ти ръка е потна – казва дъщеря ми.

Ми... ядосах се... излъга ни тоя дядо.

Нищо, аз имам спестени петдесет лева, ще ти дам четири...

Не е там работата.

Гледам след просяка и ми става толкова тежко, толкова гнетаво – все едно съм глътнал цялата му мръсна торба и сега тя ме души. Опитвам се да предизвикам смирение у себе си и не мога. Дъщеря ми ме поглежда. Да! Искам да бъда всеопрощаващ. Силен като океански прилив и добър като майка към детето си. И не мога. Сърцето ми бие силно и злобно, лицето ми се поти.

Излъга ни... и аз...

Какво? – пита дъщеря ми

Нищо не направих

А какво да направиш?

Уф... де да знам... нещо...

Но когато поглеждам към нея, виждам, че тя пак се е унесла в своята детска, чудесна Нирвана. Гледа всичко, все едно е нищо.

Аз мисля пет минути за случилото се, след това се отнасям нанякъде. И двамата с нея продължаваме да вървим по улицата, всеки унесен в своя невидим свят.

Is there anybody to love you (short stories)

Kalin Terziyski

Translated from the Bulgarian by Maria Boyadjieva

BEGGAR

While I'm walking along Ivan Assen Street, together with my daughter, I'm taking a survey of the buildings. The buildings of Sofia are ugly because they are too old and their old age doesn't dignify them but only ruins their coats.

That's why I'm walking, watching everything as if it's nothing. It's difficult to achieve, but everyone does it unconsciously every day.

'Maybe you want some pizza?'

'M-mm, yes... ,' my daughter answers drawlingly.

I become irritated when she looks aside, dreaming in some girlish trance of hers. She's roving. And I'm the same. She's watching everything as if it's nothing, as well.

'But you're going to eat it, aren't you?' I ask her while I'm pulling her hand.

'M-mm, yes... ,' then she's watching through the invisible space again, still dreaming.

I know perfectly well this dreaminess – when you don't think, feel, see or hear. You are just alive; something like an easily reached, children's Nirvana.

We are walking towards a pavilion where pizzas are sold, I'm being careful so a car doesn't hit us; my daughter has dropped her hand in mine and she's slightly walking into my legs, because she just doesn't watch where she's going.

And I, while I'm being careful a car doesn't hit us, I'm thinking about childhood. I wonder whether I felt good when I was a child, whether I felt something at all, whether I was constantly experiencing this mixture of guilt and the irritation of constantly pressing duties? Of course not. Ever since I grew up I felt such things. But as a child I probably felt some childish, silly things.

My daughter startles and pulls my hand, because a big dog passes by her. Now I'm dreaming.

'Where are you looking... ? As if you were a baby! You're supposed to be an adult.' she's pulling my hand.

Yes, I'm an adult. That's so sad! But it seems to me that I was sadder as a child. I pretty clearly understood that I was dependent on everything and everybody; and that all true pleasures were hidden from me – in the wardrobe, under lock and key – from a strict mamma.

I think I grew up in order to get rid of my childhood.

'Daddish (who knows from where she invented this Hungarian name and titled me)... we're here. What do you think?'

'Nothing, daddy thinks nonsense.'

We're entering the small restaurant and I'm bored, watching the displayed pizza slices – thin and uninviting – an apathetic effort to tempt some hungry clients. My daughter likes the slices because there's corn on them. But what the hell is this corn doing here? ! Maybe they stuff it everywhere in order to accustom us to animal feed? There's no doubt that, globally, we are running out of real, nutritious food.

'One slice with corn,' my daughter's pulling me.

'One slice with corn,' I repeat the order and hand over the money.

I feel myself weak and displeased because I don't have any influence on my own daughter. I can't teach her what I think is good. She's seven and she already knows everything better than me. She's ready to argue. And I don't have the energy to get involved in her arguments. Actually, it would be funny somehow – a middle-aged gentleman and a little girl having an argument on the street.

I'd rather she avoided eating McDonalds and corn. I'd rather she had an aesthetic attitude towards food and a bigger interest in the past and true matters (I mean, those matters I think are true) – it seems to me that the children of today are not interested in the past to the extent as if it had stopped existing. I'd rather be in authority over this little manikin – some kind of high-minded and good-natured authority in order to teach her what is good. But I can't.

And yet, how exactly to teach her good things? If she was a boy, after some years passed, I would teach her how to shave close.

She takes her pizza and starts eating it as if she were swallowing something unsuitable for eating. It doesn't look like it's tasty for her. But I am a gluttonous person and it seems to me that the next generations won't even understand the meaning of the word 'gluttony'. They will feed on seaweed and some recycled shit in order not to feel that annoying feeling – what was its name – oh, yes – hunger.

Now I go on thinking and she navigates me. I'm thinking about food. Food is a pleasure which is going to become even more disgraceful than sex when it turns out to be insufficient. Yes, yes! Don't eat butter – there's cholesterol in it... as well as in meat. Bread kills us. Alcohol makes us fat and thick headed; it ultimately kills us. And wine... the blood of Christ... it kills us as well. Oh, dear!

And in that moment a beggar pops up in front of us. Big, almost like me, though stouter. An old man around sixty in the blue uniform of a ticket-collector, but altered in a way to look beggarly.

He stands in front of me with a bag slung across his shoulder – so absurd is that bag that it pisses me off. As if he wants to demonstrate to me that he’s a beggar; that there are pieces of stale bread in the bag, and he’s going to feed starving children with them.

‘I’m not a beggar, sir. I just don’t have money to go home. Fuck all them beggars! Dirty rats they are! I need it for the train, to go home. They’re waitin’ for me to come. My grandsons... God bless your child, give me three *leva*.’

And I want to demonstrate to my daughter what mercy is.

I think to myself, ‘here he is, he’s lousy and looks like a cheat but she, being so little and ill-informed, she’ll understand somehow that the good person is not interested in how and to whom they give. She’ll learn that compassion and mercy are important.

There’s a gold tooth in the beggar’s mouth which pisses me off further. And I say to myself, ‘Be humble, man and don’t pass judgment on people because of their golden teeth. Let the little girl see how you give and do good.

And I take four *leva* out of my pocket – a two-*lev* banknote and two one-*lev* coins. Then I count out three *leva* and pass them to him. He grasps the banknotes and even manages to somehow pull out, rudely and skillfully, even the last one *lev*. ‘Let’s have something to eat! I haven’t eaten anything today, I’m starving.’

‘Even better,’ I think to myself. My daughter looks at me in amazement and fear.

‘Why do you give him money? He’s a gypsy.’

‘So... what if he’s a gypsy... ? He’s a man, isn’t he? ! He needs... don’t you understand... he’s got into trouble and can’t go home... and he’s starving. It doesn’t matter to whom you give... What’s most important is that... if you give away... you’ll grow up a better person.

And I keep on talking to her another five minutes about stuff I hardly believe much, but she’ll believe.

But in my head, in my heart anger rises against him – the anger of the fooled man.

I’m standing at the corner of the street, keeping a sharp eye on what exactly the beggar’s going to do after he took my four *leva*. My daughter is uneasy; she’s pulling my hand, it’s time we were moving. But I pull her hand more vigorously and now she understands how serious I am, and that something is not as good as before.

The beggar wanders for two or three minutes, back and forth. I see clearly how he’s waiting for another prey, some new noble fool to cheat. I’m not a noble soft-head. I just wanted to show to my little daughter the sweetness of selfless giving; to show her it’s good to give... and when the right hand gives, the left should not know about it. I want her to be a charitable and considerate person, not as embittered as all the rest.

And I feel myself in a rage because of my own foolishness.

My daughter’s looking at me in confusion. She can understand neither what I’m doing, nor what I’m thinking about.

The beggar spots me. He starts fussing about and moves to a small shop where spirits and nuts are sold. He makes some pretty ridiculous movement, pretending to buy something. Hum, probably cashews and bourbon.

‘Why don’t you go to some bakery, you bastard,’ I think to myself ‘at least I won’t feel deceived in that case!’

He spots me once again and nods – I’m twenty metres away from him – and he continues pretending to shop expecting that I’ll give up. But I continue watching him. He’s pretends to leave. I pull my daughter and start dragging her to some house entry where she asks me in total amazement:

‘Are we spying on him?’

‘Yes... he lied to us... this money for the train... he didn’t need it... now he’ll cheat someone else, you’ll see...’

‘Um... let’s go then...’

‘No... I can’t stand liars... I won’t let him cheat someone else...’

‘But... why did you give him the money?’

‘Because I trusted him... it’s more important to give to those who want, without constantly suspecting that they cheat you.

‘Let’s go, Daddish...’

‘No... if he’s a liar, he’ll pay us the money back!’

And I’m watching the beggar. And he, becoming aware that he’s free to operate, stops a boy and a girl. I don’t hear him, but I see his facial expression and I already know he’s repeating the same things he said to me.

I feel a violent pulsating in my temples– the kind of anger that sometimes leads to strokes or murder. I can’t explain to myself why it happens; no, I explain it right now. Because with this money, with this four *leva* I would buy my daughter tempera paints. I wanted her to paint me a portrait – such as I am – bearded and loved by her. And now I’m feeling cheated. But I’m a good person, aren’t I? I’m not interested in where the money donated by me would go, am I? I’m not a wicked

paranoiac who thinks twice about the mouldy piece of bread he's thrown to a homeless dog, am I?

But blood pounds in my ears; I feel faint with anger and spite. I'm squeezing my daughter's hand and she's looking at me with anxiety.

'And if it happens that somebody cheats you... it's much better than for you to cheat... got it?' I say quietly and hoarsely.

'Why should they cheat me?'

'So it is...'

Now the beggar stops a boy with a backpack, some dreaming boy – from this new type of people who live somewhere in the dead-end streets of the Internet. Then I get out. There's a jack knife in my pocket; very thin, pretty long. It's not fit for slicing but for a jab. Probably something in me is out of order otherwise why would I carry it around. I'm pulling my daughter's hand, approaching the beggar. I stand up in front of him just when he has taken the next three *leva* from the boy living in the Internet. I point the opened knife towards his stomach. He makes some stupid, cunning, scared stiff and odious face.

'Give me my money back!'

'Why... sir... I wanted it for the train...'

'You're lying,' I say rudely while my daughter nervously pulls me. Now she's really scared.

'I don't lie to you... Honestly, sir...'

And his face becomes so insolent that I'm almost taken aback. He's looking right through me. He clearly sees how insignificant I am. He's just imitating fear. He knows very well people like me. They won't kill somebody if they are willing to give their money away. His face becomes more and more unyielding and there's no petty cunning in his eyes – just a coarse, ferocious contempt. He pushes my hand away.

‘I’m not... we’re from a village near Pleven... we’re here with my son... I have to buy a ticket for him, too... I thought you’re a good man...’

‘Oh, your son too...’ I’m not hearing what I’m talking about. My hand wants to return to his stomach, to kill him and to sow justice. But my mouth’s mumbling, ‘So, and your son, too? Maybe that’s why you’re asking every person you see?’

My voice is trembling too.

‘Hey, get away from here! What... get away, man...’

And the beggar turns around and starts along the road – irritated and in a hurry. My daughter snatches her hand from mine and starts wiping it. We stand still for about two minutes. I fold up the knife that inconveniently dangles in my limp hand.

‘Your hand’s all sweaty,’ my daughter says.

‘Look... I got angry... This old man lied to us.’

‘Anyway, I have fifty *leva* saved up; I’ll give you four...’

‘That’s not the problem...’

I’m looking after the beggar and I feel so miserable, so oppressed as if I’ve swallowed his big, dirty bag and now it’s suffocating me. I’m trying to provoke some humbleness in me, but it’s impossible. My daughter doesn’t look at me. Yes! I want to be all-absolving; strong as an ocean tide and good as a mother to her child. But I can’t. My heart’s beating strong and maliciously; my face is sweating.

‘He lied to us... and I...’

‘What?’ my daughter asks.

‘I did nothing...’

‘And what should you do?’

‘Oh... I don’t know... something...’

But when I look at her I see that she's dreaming again in her children's wonderful Nirvana. She looks at everything as if it's nothing.

I think for another five minutes about the incident; then I fall into a reverie. And we keep walking along the street, everyone dreaming in his own invisible world.



Tomáš Zmeškal

Milostný dopis klínovým písmem (2008)

A Love Letter in Cuneiform Script

Publishing House **Torst**

Biography

The prose writer Tomáš Zmeškal (b.1966 in Prague) studied English language and literature, and he lived and studied in London for a number of years. In the 1980s, he played for a while in the band *Psí vojáci*, led by writer and musician Filip Topol. He works as a writer, translator and a secondary-school teacher of English literature.

Although he had earlier published short stories, he came to wider attention mainly through his first novel, *Milostný dopis klínovým písmem* (*Love Letter in Cuneiform Script*, 2008), which describes the post-war world of 1950s Czechoslovakia from a postmodern, fragmented perspective. For this novel, he was shortlisted for the Magnesia Litera Prize and was awarded the Josef Škvorecký Award.

Synopsis

Tomáš Zmeškal's debut novel, *Milostný dopis klínovým písmem*, is both a history and a love story, which touches on moral issues, myths and science fiction. This family saga might also be seen as a collage or a mosaic.

The main plot is set in Czechoslovakia between the 1940s and the 1990s and its narrative concerns the tragic stories of one family. Josef meets his wife, Květa, before the Second World War at a public lecture on Hittite culture. Květa chooses Josef over their mutual friend Hynek. At the beginning of the 50s, Hynek starts work as a police investigator and, when Josef is arrested and imprisoned, Květa gives herself to Hynek in return for help and advice.

The story of Josef and Květa isn't set out in chronological order and so, in the very first chapter, we find ourselves at the end of the 60s when their daughter, Alice, is about to get married. At the end of the novel we meet Josef, his life in danger, in a West Bohemian forest during the last days of the war.

This is a work with a thoughtfully considered structure. Several chapters contain stories from other eras and other lands – these fantasies point to the finality and uniqueness of every human life.

Milostný dopis klínovým písmem

Tomáš Zmeškal

Výňatek z kapitoly 3

Alice se narodila v roce 1950, několik měsíců předtím, než otce zatkli, odsoudili a uvěznil. Nic z toho si ale Alice nepamatovala, to všechno znala jen z vyprávění a ze vzpomínek příbuzných. Matka za ním každý měsíc jezdila. Někdy jezdila Alice s ní, ale dovnitř ji stejně nepustili, a tak zůstávala u tety v sousedním městě. A pak, po deseti letech, se její otec objevil doma. Alice ho znala z vyprávění a z fotografií. Dostávala od něj dopisy, které jí zprvu četla matka, a potom, když se naučila číst, si je už četla sama. Nebyla ráda, že jim posílal dopisy, i když to matka skrývala, většinou plakala, a to Alice věděla, i když se to matka snažila nedát najevo. A pak, když minuly její desáté narozeniny, otce propustili. Těšila se, všichni se těšili a všichni byli nervózní a šťastní. Nejprve matka chodila na nějaké úřady, potom je stále častěji navštěvovali různí příbuzní a známí a s matkou pročítali spousty papírů, které pak vyplňovali a o kterých mluvili jazykem, jemuž Alice nerozuměla. A pak jí jednoho dne matka řekla, že pro ni má veliké překvapení, to překvapení bylo to, že otec měl přijet přesně za dva týdny domů, že ho propustí už po deseti letech, ne po třinácti, jak stálo v původním rozsudku, a že bude opět s nimi. Alice matce příliš nerozuměla, protože podle matky měl otec přijet, měl se vrátit, ale co se Alice pamatovala, nikdy s nimi nežil, pro ni to tedy návrat nebyl, protože ona ho nikdy neviděla odcházet. Otec se měl vrátit z vězení ve čtvrtek. Ty dva týdny nebylo s matkou k vydržení. Alice nechápala, co se to s ní děje. Byla ráda, že se jí táta vrátí, už proto, že ho měla ve

vězení a že se o tom příliš nesmělo mluvit. Alice chápala, tak to alespoň říkal strýc Antonín, že její táta je statečný člověk, který se postavil bezpráví, a proto ho uvěznili, protože tenhle režim, říkal dál strýc Antonín, jsou stejně všechno jenom zločinci, od kterých nikdo nemůže nic dobrého čekat. Alice příliš nerozuměla, co to ten režim vlastně je, ale myslela si, že to bude někdo asi stejně tak důležitý jako školní inspektor, kterého se bála nejenom třídní učitelka Svobodová, ale i ředitelka školy Krausová, a to už tedy bylo něco. Alice také věděla, že jsou věci, o kterých se může mluvit jen doma, a ne ve škole nebo v obchodě nebo na ulici. Těšila se, že se její tatínek vrátí domů, i když matka neustále prala, uklízela, přerovnávala věci a utírala prach. Jednou Alice zaslechla, jak se radí se strýcem Antonínem, jestli má vymalovat nebo ne. Strýc ji přesvědčil, že nemá malovat, tím, že řekl:

„Uklidni se, Květuš, přijede ti Josef a on vymaluje. Vymalujete spolu, když budeš chtít.“ Nato se její matka jako obvykle rozplakala a to, proč její matka pláče kvůli malování, Alice už opravdu pochopit nedokázala. Byt byl uklizený, okna byla umytá, květiny přesazené, dokonce i Aliciny hračky matka zkontrolovala přinejmenším čtyřikrát. Už se to s ní nedalo moc vydržet, a tak se Alice raději zdržovala u kamarádky Terezy. Tam ji matka nechávala čas od času být, protože dědeček Terezky byl také ve vězení, i když v jiném než tatínek. V obývacím pokoji u Terezy byl obrázek dědečka. Byl to veliký mohutný pán s velikým břichem, velkými kníry a pohledem, který pronikal až do morku kostí. Jednu ruku měl ve vestičce, z které visel řetízek od hodinek, a Terezčina babička o něm říkala, že to byl moc velký dobrák a že si tohle nezasloužil. To Alice Terezčině babičce nevěřila, protože se z té fotografie díval tuze přísně a nevlídně. A navíc jeho břicho bylo tak velké a vypadalo stejně přísně jako jeho kníry a jeho neúprosný pohled.

V úterý šla Tereza k Alicí domů s tím, že si odpoledne udělají domácí úkoly. Matka si posledních několik týdnů kupovala mnoho věcí, které předtím nikdy doma neměly, byly tam rtěnky, hřebeny do vlasů, přibýly pudřenky, a dokonce i několik malých lahviček parfémů. Alice s Terezou si je zkoušely. Povolení od Aliciny matky měly, i když měly zároveň také příkázáno být se vším velice opatrné, poněvadž to stálo hodně peněz. Když zazvonil zvonek, bylo jisté, že to bude sousedka paní Poláčková a že buď bude chtít půjčit mouku, vajíčka, mléko, kvasnice anebo něco jiného, nebo že bude chtít vrátit, mouku, vajíčka, mléko, kvasnice anebo něco jiného. Obě dvě dívky se na sebe podívaly, ušklíbly se a Tereza řekla:

„Poláčková?“ Alice se ušklíbla ještě jednou a řekla:

„Nemáte náhodou, miláčku, kvasnice?“ a šla otevřít. Když se podívala kukátkem ven, nikoho neviděla. To nebude Poláčková, Poláčková vždycky stála tak, aby na ni bylo vidět v kukátku, a tak se Alice otočila a šla zpátky za Terezou.

„Kdo to byl?“ zeptala se Tereza.

„Nikdo,“ odpověděla Alice, „nikdo tam není, a když tam nikdo není, tak stejně nikomu nesmíme otvírat, tak co...“ Po chvíli se znovu ozval zvonek. Teď už se obě dívky zvedly a šly se podívat ke dveřím.

„Někdo tam je,“ řekla Tereza, „podívej se.“ Alice se podívala a za dveřmi stál muž, otočený ke dveřím zády, s taškou v ruce. Dívky se na sebe znovu podívaly a Alice otevřela. Ve dveřích stál její otec. To, že to byl její otec, poznala ihned, protože jeho fotografie byly všude v jejich bytě a nejvíce jich bylo v matčině pokoji. Byl ale mnohem, mnohem hubenější než na fotografiích. Když uviděl Alici, řekl:

„Dobrý den, Alice.“ Alice stála, držela kliku dveří a řekla:

„Dobrý den, pane.“

„Já jsem tvůj tatínek, Alice,“ řekl pán.

„Já vím, pane,“ řekla Alice.

„Můžu dál?“ zeptal se otec.

„Můžete, pane tatínku,“ řekla Alice a nejistě se podívala na Terezu. Tereza stála v rohu předsíně, všechno pozorovala, ale nic neříkala. Otec vešel do předsíně a uviděl ji. Podíval se na ni a řekl:

„Ty musíš být Terezka, ne?“

„Ano, pane,“ odpověděla Terezka a po chvíli váhání se zeptala: „Vy jste Alicin tatínek?“

„Ano, jsem,“ řekl otec.

„Aha,“ řekla Terezka. Muž vešel, zavřel za sebou dveře, sehnul se a uchopil Alici do náručí, když ji zvedl, byla Alice téměř až u stropu. Alice nevěděla, co dělat, ale když ji takhle někdy chytal strýc Antonín, teta Šárka nebo strýc Bedřich, tak je vždycky uchopila kolem krku. Udělala tedy to samé. Muž se začal smát, což se Alici líbilo, ale zároveň cítila, že má od něj mokrou tvář, což se jí zase tolik nelíbilo, protože si před chvílí s Terezou zkoušely nový narůžovělý a překrásně voňavý pudr. Odtáhla se od něj a snažila se na něj nenápadně podívat, zatímco ji držel vysoko nad zemí. Po chvíli ji otec postavil na zem, vytáhl z kapsy veliký kapesník a vysmrkal se. Ten kapesník Alici zaujal, protože ani ona, ani matka takové veliké kapesníky nikdy nepoužívaly. Takové veliké kapesníky byly vyžehlené a srovnané v matčině skříni, tam, kde byly otcovy věci. Takové kapesníky se používaly jenom na rozbité koleno, na ošetření říznutí do prstu při krájení cibule nebo mrkve, do takových kapesníků se nesmrkalo. Takové kapesníky se pak daly do špinavého prádla, vyvařily se, vyžehlily a složily na sebe ve skříni v matčině pokoji. Alice se tedy otočila a odběhla do matčina pokoje, otevřela skříň a vzala ze štosu

srovnaných kapesníků dva veliké, čistě vyžehlené kapesníky vonící mýdlem a s nimi se vrátila k svému otci do předsíně a vložila mu je do ruky. Otec se na ni spěšně podíval, teď se neusmíval, ale díval se jí najednou a nečekaně přímo do očí, až v Alici hrklo a málem se jí zastavil dech, a věděla, že kdyby něco jedla, určitě by se zakuckala. Díval se na ni tak přísně, že si ani netroufala dýchat. To, že se na ni takhle dívá, usoudila později, bude muset probrat s Terezkou. Takhle se dívat, takhle divně a přísně se dívat, když nic neudělala, to se přeci nedělá. Pak muž zdvihl oči vzhůru, rozhlédl se kolem dokola po předsíni a rukou jí projel vlasy. O tom Alice věděla, že tohle dělají dospělí, když nevědí, co říct a chtějí být na děti milí. Terezka si mezitím nasadila boty, uklonila se otci, rozloučila se s Alicí a odešla domů. Cítila se přebytečná, i když přesně nevěděla proč.

Otec vešel do kuchyně, otevřel kredenc, vytáhl veliký kameninový hrnek, který stál v druhé řadě a který nikdo do té doby nepoužíval, a neomylně sáhl do poličky pro velkou plechovku, v které byla káva. On se tady vyzná, říkala si pro sebe Alice. Můj tatínek, říkala si v duchu, můj tatínek se tady vyzná, tady u mě doma, tady u mě doma v kuchyni.

Tolik se těšila, tolik se bála, tolik se na něj zlobila, a teď nevěděla, co s tím velikým vysokým mužem má vlastně dělat. Tak jen stála, koukala nahoru na něj, protože byl o mnoho větší než máma, a on koukal dolů na ni, až jí to bylo tak trochu nepříjemné, a vůbec se jí z té výšky, do které se na něj musela dívat, začala tak trochu točit hlava.

„Kde je maminka?“ zeptal se, když si udělal kávu, posadil se a díval se na svou dceru.

„Něco zařizuje,“ odpověděla Alice. „A také, také mi říkala, že přijedete až ve čtvrtek.“ Chvíli ho provázela po bytě, v kterém se za těch deset let mnoho nezměnilo. On se divil,

proč mu vyká, když si v dopisech vždycky tykali, a v duchu se podívoval nad tím, jak velkou slečnu má za dceru, i když poslední fotografie, na které ji viděl, byla stará sotva půl roku. Ona se zase v duchu podívovala, že i přes svou výšku nikam nenarazí, obratně se vyhne lampám v kuchyni i v pokoji, a že jí občas projede vlasy jeho suchá dlaň, do které se za jeho mozoly její vlasy občas zachytly. Všimla si také, že když ji hladí po ruce a po ramenou, látka její halenky se zachycuje o jeho ztvrdlou kůži, a Alice měla trochu obavu, aby ji jeho ruce nepotrhal. Jeho ruce byly tak trochu jako struhadlo a potřebovaly by určitě manikúru, nebo alespoň pořádně promazat nějakým hodně mastným krémem, takovým, který používá maminka nebo teta Šárka, to si ale netroufala říct nahlas. Každému jinému by to řekla, ale on byl tatínek, a to bylo úplně něco jiného. A pak, najednou, zničehonic, byl večer a on seděl ve tmě na zemi, tam, kde se nikdy nesedá, opřený o postel a ona mu seděla na kolenou, a to bylo příjemné, a i když se v setmělém pokoji vždy trochu bála, tak teď se tu nebála, i když se zase naopak toho vysokého hubeného muže přece jenom trochu bála, tak jí to ale také bylo příjemné. A najednou zapraskaly klíče ve dveřích a ona cítila, jak mu pod košilí a pod sakem najednou začalo tuze nahlas bouchat srdce a jak ji najednou stiskl tak, že ji to až zabořilo, jak jí svíral obě dvě zápěstí a zase se tak divně díval do dveří, které vedly do kuchyně a které byly pootevřené. A náhle vstal, a aniž cokoliv řekl, ji vzal do náruče a stále ji tiskl o něco víc, než to bylo zapotřebí, takže se Alice začala trochu škubat a připadala si jako bělička chycená v síti. A on pootevřel dveře do kuchyně a skrze druhé pootevřené dveře do předsíně bylo slyšet, jak se maminka zouvá, jak si přezouvá boty, jak si bere své domácí přezůvky a jak se ptá, kde je Alice a jestli Terežka už odešla. A pak se otáčí a vidí je oba dva stát ve dveřích. Jeho, svého

muže, který drží svou dceru, a ještě se jednou sehne a popaměti si upraví pásek na střevících pro doma, ale už se na ty své domácí střevíce ani nepodívá a jde k nim a říká jenom: „Josefe, Josefe...“ a nedoříká větu do konce, tak jak se má a tak jak kvůli tomu vždycky sama kárá svou dceru. A přichází k nim a hladí ji po vlasech a dává svoji tvář vedle té jeho a Alice má pocit, že rozhodně za chvíli začne maminka zase brečet, což je jí nepříjemné, ale kupodivu ona nebrečí, jenom svého manžela drží za rameno a ji objímá a Alice si všímá, že srdce jejího otce, které ještě před chvílkou bilo rychle jako běžící stádo gazel, které jednou viděla v zoologické zahradě, už bilo pomalu a jakoby rozvázně, ale zase cítila, že se z maminciny ruky odvíjí malý tenký teplý pramínek, který pulsoval, který hnal její krev až do prstů, které ji svíraly a hladily, a ten pramínek se měnil a sílil a uklidňoval a bouřil. A pak ji tatínek postavil na zem, a tak nějak bylo jasné, že teď bude večere, a tak si šla sednout na svou židli a on si sedl naproti ní a maminka začala dělat pomazánku a on se na ni díval a stejně času věnoval své ženě jako své dceři a maminka jenom občas přišla a pohladila ji po vlasech a jeho taky, tak jak se to dělá jen malým dětem, ale taky ho občas – jako by nechtěla, aby to bylo vidět – bleskurychle a jakoby nenápadně pohladila po rukou, které měl položený na stole a které byly o mnoho větší než ty maminky.

A Love Letter in Cuneiform Script

Tomáš Zmeškal

Translated from the Czech by Nathan Fields – Excerpt from chapter 3

Alice was born in the year 1950, a few months before her father was arrested, convicted and imprisoned. Alice didn't remember any of it, she knew everything only from the stories and experiences of her relatives. Her mother went to see him every month. Sometimes Alice went with her, but they wouldn't let her inside anyway, and so she would stay with her aunt in a neighboring town. And then, after ten years, her father appeared at home. Alice knew him from stories and photographs. She had received letters from him, which her mother would read to her at first, and then, when she learned to read, she read them herself. She wasn't happy that he would send them letters, and although her mother hid it, she would almost always cry, and Alice knew it even though her mother tried not to show it. And then, after her tenth birthday had passed, they let her father go. She looked forward to it, everyone was looking forward to it and everyone was nervous and happy. First her mother had begun visiting some offices, then there were more and more frequent visits from relatives and acquaintances and with her mother they would read through many papers which they then filled out and about which they would speak in a language Alice didn't understand. And then her mother told her one day that she had a big surprise for her, and that the surprise was that her father should come home in exactly two weeks, that they were letting him go after ten years, not after thirteen as the original sentence had judged, and that he would be with them

again. Alice didn't understand her mother too well because, according to her, her father was supposed to return, but as far as Alice could remember, her father had never lived with them, so then it wasn't a return for her because she had never seen him depart. Her father was supposed to return from prison on Thursday. It was impossible to endure those two weeks with her mother. Alice didn't understand what was happening to her. She was glad that her father was returning to her, if only because he was in prison and she wasn't allowed to speak about it too much. Alice understood that, at least Uncle Antonin would say that, her father was a brave man who had stood up to injustice, and that's why they imprisoned him, because this regime, Uncle Antonin would go on to say, are all complete criminals anyway, from whom nobody could expect anything good. Alice didn't much understand what this regime actually was, but she thought that it was probably just as important as the school inspector, of whom not only her class teacher Mrs. Svobodova was afraid, but even School Director Krausova, and that was really something. Alice also knew that there were things about which she could speak only at home, and not at school or in the shop or on the street. She was looking forward to her dad coming back home, even though her mother was continuously washing, tidying up, rearranging things and dusting. Once Alice overheard her asking Uncle Antonin if she should paint or not. Her uncle persuaded her that she shouldn't paint by saying:

“Calm down, Kveta, Josef will come to you and he will paint. Paint together if you want.” At that her mother started crying as usual and why her mother was crying about painting, Alice now really was not able to comprehend. The flat was cleaned, the windows were washed, the plants were replanted; her mother had even inspected Alice's toys at least four times.

It was already almost unbearable with her and so Alice preferred to spend time with her friend Tereza. Her mother would let her stay over there from time to time, because Tereza's grandfather was also in prison, though a different one from her dad. In the living room at Tereza's house there was a picture of her grandfather. He was a great massive man with a large belly, a large mustache and eyes which penetrated to the marrow of the bone. He had one hand in his vest, from which a watch chain was hanging, and Tereza's grandmother would say about him that he was a very kind man and that he did not deserve this. Alice didn't believe Tereza's grandmother about this because he looked overly strict and harsh in that photograph. Even his belly was so big and looked just as strict and harsh as his mustache and relentless gaze.

On Tuesday, Tereza came over to Alice's home to do homework together in the afternoon. Her mother had already been buying many things the past few weeks which they had never had at home before; there were lipsticks, hair combs, powder boxes, and even several small bottles of perfume. Alice tried them out with Tereza. They had permission from Alice's mother, though they were also instructed to be very careful with everything because it had cost a lot of money. When the doorbell rang, it was sure to be Mrs. Polackova and that she would want to borrow either flour or eggs, milk, yeast or something else, or that she would want to return flour, eggs, milk, yeast, or something else. Both girls looked at each other grinning and Tereza said:

"Polackova?" Alice grinned again and said:

"Wouldn't you happen to have some yeast, dearie?" and went to open the door. When she looked out the peephole she didn't see anyone. So it wasn't Polackova, Polackova always stood so that she could be seen through the peephole, so Alice turned and went back to Tereza.

“Who was it?” Tereza asked.

“No one,” Alice answered, “No one’s there, and if no one’s there, we’re not allowed to open the door to anyone anyway, so...” A moment later the doorbell rang again. Now both girls stood up and went to look at the door.

“Someone’s there,” said Tereza, “look.” Alice looked and behind the door stood a man, his back turned to the door, with a bag in his hand. The girls looked at each other again and Alice opened the door. In the door stood her father. She recognized it was her father immediately because his photograph was everywhere in their flat and in her mother’s room most of all. He was, however, much, much skinnier than in the photos. When he saw Alice he said:

“Hello, Alice.” Alice stood holding the handle of the door and said:

“Hello, sir.”

“I’m your dad, Alice,” the man said.

“I know, sir,” Alice said.

“Can I come in?” her father asked.

“You can, Mr. Dad,” Alice said and looked insecurely at Tereza. Tereza stood in the corner of the entry, observing everything, but saying nothing. Her father came into the entryway and saw her. He looked at her and said:

“You must be Tereza, right?”

“Yes, sir.” Tereza answered, and after a moment’s hesitation, she whispered, “You are Alice’s dad?”

“Yes, I am,” the father said.

“Aha,” said Tereza. The man came in, closing the door behind him, straightened up, clasped Alice into a hug and lifted her up almost to the ceiling. Alice didn’t know what

to do, but when Uncle Antonin caught her like that, or Aunt Sarka or Uncle Bedrich, she always hugged them around the neck. So she did the same this time. The man started to laugh, which pleased Alice, but she also felt her face get wet from his, which didn't please her so much because she and Tereza had tried out a new pink and beautifully scented powder a moment before. She pulled away from him and tried to look at him subtly while he was holding her high above the ground. After a moment her father set her back onto the ground, pulled a large handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. The handkerchief caught Alice's attention because neither she nor her mother ever used such a big handkerchief. There were handkerchiefs like that ironed and folded in her mother's wardrobe where her father's things were. These kinds of handkerchiefs were only used for busted knees, for treating cuts on fingers incurred while slicing onions or carrots; one didn't blow their nose into such handkerchiefs. These handkerchiefs were then put into the dirty laundry, boiled, ironed and folded up in the wardrobe in mother's room. So then Alice ran to her mother's room, opened the wardrobe and took from a stack of straightened handkerchiefs two large, freshly ironed handkerchiefs scented with soap and returned with them to her father in the entryway and put them into his hand. Her father looked at her hastily, not smiling now, and looked suddenly and unexpectedly directly into her eyes until it scared Alice and she almost stopped breathing and knew that if she were eating something that she would have certainly choked. He was looking at her so severely that she didn't dare to breathe. She would have to discuss this severe look with Tereza, she thought later. To look at her like that, so strangely and severely, when she hadn't done anything, this just wasn't done. Then the man raised his eyes, started to look

all around through the entryway and ran his hand through her hair. Alice knew about this, that adults did this when they didn't know what to say and wanted to be nice to a child. Meanwhile Tereza had put on her shoes, bowed to her father, said goodbye to Alice and went home. She felt superfluous, although didn't know exactly why.

Her father went into the kitchen, opened a cupboard, took out a large earthenware pot which stood in the second row and which no one had used until that time, and unerringly reached into the shelves for a large can in which there was coffee. He knows his way around here, Alice said to herself. My dad, she said in her mind, my dad knows his way around, in my home, in my home in the kitchen.

She was so excited, she was so afraid, she was so angry at him, and now she didn't know what she was actually supposed to do with this big tall man. So she just stood, looking up at him because he was much taller than mom, and he looked down at her, until it was a bit unpleasant for her, and just looking up to those heights she had to look to had started to make her a little dizzy.

"Where's Mom?" he asked when he had finished the coffee and sat down and looked at his daughter.

"She's taking care of something," Alice answered. "But Mom also told me that you were coming on Thursday." She led him through the flat for a bit; much hadn't changed in it in those ten years. He wondered why she was speaking formally to him, when she had always been so personal in her letters, and he reflected on what a big young woman he had for a daughter, even though the last picture he had seen her in was merely a half year old. She then wondered again on how, despite his height he didn't bump his head anywhere, he skillfully avoided the lamps in the kitchen and even in the

room, and that he sometimes ran his dry palm through her hair and how his calluses sometimes caught in it. She also noticed that when he stroked her shoulder, the material of her blouse caught on his hardened skin, and Alice was a little afraid that his hands would tear it. His hands were a bit like a grater and would certainly need a manicure or at least a good rubbing with a very greasy cream, the kind that Mom or Aunt Sarka used, but she didn't dare to say that out loud. She would say it to anyone else, but this was Dad, and that was something else completely. And then, suddenly, from out of nowhere, it was evening and he was sitting in the dark on the ground, where nobody ever sits, leaning on the bed and she was sitting on his knees, and it was pleasant, and although she was a bit afraid in the darkened room, she wasn't afraid here now, although, then again, she was a little bit afraid of this tall thin man, but this was also pleasant for her. And suddenly keys were crunching in the door and she felt his heart suddenly begin to pound extremely loud under his shirt and jacket, and how he suddenly pressed her until it hurt, how he gripped both of her wrists and then looked so strangely towards the door which led to the kitchen and which was half open. Then he stood abruptly, and without saying anything, lifted her into his arms and continued to press her a bit more than was necessary so that Alice started to squirm a little and felt like a fish caught in a net. He further opened the door to the kitchen and through the second open door into the entryway one could hear Mom taking off her shoes and slipping into her house shoes and asking where Alice was and if Tereza had already left. And then she turns around and sees both of them standing in the doorway. Him, her husband, holding his own daughter, and she bends down once again to adjust the band on her slippers from memory and not looking

at her house slippers anymore and walking towards him and saying only: “Josef, Josef...” and not completing her sentence as she should and for which she is always chastening her own daughter. And she comes to them and strokes her hair and puts her own face next to his and Alice has the feeling that her mother will definitely start crying again in a moment, which is unpleasant for her, but she surprisingly doesn’t cry but only holds her husband by the shoulder and he hugs her and Alice notices that her father’s heart, which only a moment ago had been beating as fast as a herd of running gazelles, which she had once seen at the zoo, is already beating slowly now as if deliberately, and then she felt a small thin warm trickle unfurling from her mom’s hand which was pulsing, which was pushing her blood all the way to her fingers, which were gripping her and stroking her, and that trickle changed and strengthened and calmed and stormed. And then her dad set her on the ground, and then it was somehow clear that there would be dinner now, and so she went to sit on her chair and he sat opposite her and Mom started to make spread and he watched her and devoted the same amount of time to his wife as his daughter and Mom only came occasionally and stroked her hair and his, too, as one only does to little children, and she would also sometimes – as if she didn’t want it to be seen – lightning-quick and somehow discretely stroke his hand, which was set on the table and which was much bigger than Mom’s hand.



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Kostas Hatziantoniou

Agrigento (2009)

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Biography

Kostas Hatziantoniou was born in 1965 in Rhodes, where he also grew up. He studied political sciences and public administration at the Law School (University of Athens), and made his first appearance in literature in 1990, as a publisher of the literary magazine *Remvie*. Since then, he has collaborated with all of Greece's notable literary magazines, as well as with encyclopaedic publications, writing literature, critical essays and historical articles. He has received awards from the Greek PEN Club, the Company of Christian Letters, and the P. Foteas prize for essays. In 2009, he was selected as a committee member of the National Literature Awards. His narrative works during the last decade include the *The Book of Black Bile* (Parousia Publications, 2001) and the novel *Agrigento* (Ideogramma Publications, 2009).

Synopsis

Agrigento looks at what happens when a group of people, for whom ordinary life is not enough, meet in modern-day Agrigento, a town in southern Sicily with a long history, as well as one which reflects modern Sicilian culture.

These people include an odd elderly doctor, Pausanias Anchite (who immerses himself in the story of ancient Akragas, guided by the great philosopher of the city, Empedocles); his daughter Isabella, a painter who seeks redemption, not through art, but in an unforeseeable personal fate; an outlaw called Gaetano, who hides there while pondering over his life, shooting down popular myths concerning organized crime; a Greek man called Linos, who chooses to flee and to return to his first love in order to save himself from boredom and from his homeland's collapse; and an unfrocked Catholic priest, who together with his brother, remembers people and events of another, unknown Sicily.

The story initially follows the parallel lives of the characters and gradually escalates on multiple levels. *Agrigento* is a book that is a hymn to Sicily beyond stereotypes and preconceptions, but also a hymn to the real life we miss out on, when we surrender ourselves to obsessions. It is a classical, realistic novel, with a solid architecture and a magical atmosphere, which attracts and captures the reader in search of literature of a high standard. A book that entertains, cultivates, gets one thinking and defends the hope for a true life via the vivid landscape of European intellect.

Agrigento

Kostas Hatziantoniou

Στην πόρτα φάνηκε η θεία Αυγούστα. Ήταν η μεγάλη θεία της οικογένειας, η μεγάλη αδελφή της Μπιάνκα. Ερχότανε από το Κόμο, πατρίδα του άντρα της. Διπλωμένη από τα χρόνια αλλά μεγαλοπρεπής, μπήκε ψυχρή, φίλησε την Ισαβέλλα και τους στενότερους συγγενείς, με αυστηρή ιεραρχική σειρά, και μετά, αφού χάρισε ένα νεύμα στους υπόλοιπους, κάθισε απόμερα. Μιλούσε ελάχιστα, πάντα με βεβαιότητες και με λέξεις εντυπωσιακές, σχεδόν αρχαϊκές. Την άκουγαν με απεριόριστη ευλάβεια. Παρά τα σπουδαία της πνευματικά προσόντα, εξηγούσε σε μια παρέα μια μικρανιψιά της, είχε περιοριστεί στη ζωή της να στηρίζει με αφοσίωση την καριέρα του συζύγου της, γερουσιαστή και μακαρίτη εδώ και χρόνια. Η θεία Αυγούστα αναγνώριζε τον ψυχικό πλούτο της Ισαβέλλας αλλά κατέκρινε την έλλειψη ευελιξίας και τη μόνιμη περιφρόνηση προς τα προσχήματα. Με το κοφτερό της βλέμμα συσχέτισε το πένθος διακριτικά με την παρουσία του Λίνου και ρώτησε μίαν ανιψιά της. Εκείνη δεν ήξερε και φώναξε το δον Τζουζέππε που της εξήγησε. Αμήχανη για ώρα, αν ο φίλος της Ισαβέλλας ανήκε στην πρώτη κατηγορία φυσικής οικειότητας, αποφάσισε να περιμένει το τέλος της εξόδιας ακολουθίας για να τον εξετάσει και να αποφασίσει.

Πιο εκεί στεκόταν ο θείος Μαουρίτσιο, πρώτος εξάδελφος της μητέρας της Ισαβέλλας. Αγόρευε σ' έναν πρόχειρο κύκλο για τον Τανκρέδο της Ωτβίλ, τον προπάτορα των Νορμανδών ηγεμόνων της Σικελίας. Ψηλός με παράστημα ωραίο, βλέμμα γαλάζιο και φωτεινό μα λίγο απογοητευμένο – κι όχι από πένθος λόγω της περίπτωσης. Στο λεπτό και στοχαστικό

του πρόσωπο μπορούσες να θαυμάσεις την ιδανική σύνθεση ανδρισμού και ευγένειας. Τύπος αισθαντικής αρχοντικής ζωής που έλεγε πως οι ηθικές υποχρεώσεις μόνο ως έξαρση ευαισθησίας έχουν γι' αυτόν νόημα. Εκκεντρικός και αβλαβής, χωρίς κακίες για κανένα μα και χωρίς καλοσύνες. Αυτή ήταν εξάλλου η κεντρική ιδέα της ζωής του: Ούτε καλό ούτε κακό. «Μόνο έτσι» υποστήριζε «μπορείς να είσαι γνήσια ανεκτικός και ανοιχτόκαρδος». Το θείο Μαουρίτσιο τελευταία τον συγκινούσαν γυναίκες όλο και πιο κοινές, έργα τέχνης όλο και πιο χοντροκομμένα. «Διχασμός παράξενος» σχολίασε ο Ρουτζέρο. «Καθόλου» απάντησε ο δον Τζουζέππε, αμίλητος για πολλή ώρα. «Σημάδι γηρατειών ενός γνήσιου αριστοκράτη».

Καθώς περίμεναν να ξεκινήσουν για το ναό, είχανε πιάσει κουβέντα για τα έργα αναστήλωσης στην κοιλάδα των ναών. Ο δον Τζουζέππε θυμήθηκε τον αρχαιολόγο Πιέτρο Γκρίφο που στα δύσκολα χρόνια της υστερίας της προόδου, με γενναιότητα αντιστάθηκε στη βιομηχανική επέκταση προς την αρχαία πόλη, στα σχέδια για εργοστάσιο της Fiat. Πολλοί τον κατηγορούσαν τότε ότι εμπόδιζε τη φυσική ανάπτυξη του Αγκριτζέντο προς τη θάλασσα και χαρακτήριζαν... κατάρα και πρόσκομμα για την ανάπτυξη και τον πλουτισμό τις... πέτρες των δωρικών ναών.

«Ο Γκρίφο έσωσε την κοιλάδα των ναών και στον πόλεμο, στις επιχειρήσεις μετά την απόβαση το 1943» παρατήρησε ένας απόστρατος συνταγματάρχης με βαμμένο μαλλί που όλο τον προσφωνούσαν “στρατηγέ” γιατί έτσι δήλωνε παντού.

«Λένε οι ξύπνιοι πως ο τόπος μας είναι άσχημος. Εμένα μ' αρέσει. Μισώ τα γραφικά μέρη» πετάχτηκε ένας εξάδελφος του Πausανία. Ο Ρουτζέρο συναίνεσε κι ο δον Τζουζέππε πρόσθεσε απευθυνόμενος στο Λίνο με εγκαρδιότητα:

«Όσα εργοστάσια κι αν στηθούν εδώ, δε θα αλλοιώσουν το χρώμα του χώματος, το χρώμα της σικελικής ψυχής. Αυτοί οι

κάτοικοι», είπε κι έδειξε μια παρέα ντόπιων που είχαν έρθει στην αυλή για να τιμήσουν το νεκρό, «θα είναι πάντα οι ίδιοι. Μην κοιτάς τα γοτθικά και τα νορμανδικά, τα αραβικά ή τα καταλανικά χαρακτηριστικά. Μάσκες, όλα. Οι άνθρωποι δίνουν χαρακτήρα στους ρυθμούς. Πάντα αυτοί δίνουν ρυθμό, σε κάθε ιστορική περίπτωση».

Κάποιοι μετακινούνταν διακριτικά σε αναζήτηση στενότερου γνωστού. Η θεία Θηρεσία, η αγαπημένη «μικρή» θεία, ψιθύριζε τις τελευταίες οδηγίες στην Αννουντσιάτα που έκλαιγε ασταμάτητα. Στην άλλη γωνιά η Ισαβέλλα, με την πιο οικεία της εξαδέλφη, τη Βερόνικα και τη Χριστίνα -που ήταν έτοιμη να ρωτήσει τον ψευδοστρατηγό με ποιον τρόπο θα μπορούσε να επισκεφθεί τον Γκαετάνο- έκανε νόημα στο Λίνο να πλησιάσει για να τον συστήσει. «Όποιος έρχεται από τόσο μακριά, τέτοιες στιγμές, δεν είναι τυχαίος» είπε η θεία Θηρεσία που είδε τη σκηνή. Πλάι η θεία Αυγούστα χαμογέλασε με δυσπιστία. «Τίποτα δεν πετυχαίνουμε στη ζωή χωρίς κάποιο ρίσκο» είπε αινιγματικά στην αδελφή της. Πιο κει ο θεός Μπερνάρντο, με φωνή σπηλαιώδη αλλά ευγενική, αφηγούνταν ιστορίες απ' τα χρόνια του πολέμου. Μα κρίνοντας ως άτονες τις εντυπώσεις του λόγου του, έπιασε να λέει όσα θυμόταν από τις διηγήσεις του παππού του για μια επίσκεψη του Μουσολίνι το 1924 στο Αγκριτζέντο, για την κήρυξη του αμείλικτου πολέμου ενάντια στις συμμορίες του οργανωμένου εγκλήματος. «Μα έχουν και οι συμμορίτες δικαίωμα στη ζωή» είχε τολμήσει να αντιδράσει εκείνη τη μέρα κάποιος. Δεν τον ξαναείδαν» είπε χαμηλώνοντας με τέχνη τη φωνή.

«Ήταν ο Τότο ο μαγεμένος, μάρτυρας στις δίκες του 1932» παρενέβη ο Ρουτζέρο κι όλοι έσκυψαν να ρωτήσουν ποιος ήταν γιατί τα χρόνια που έλειπε τον είχαν πολύ αλλάξει.

«Αλήθεια; Μου φαίνεται απίστευτο» είπε ο ψευδοστρατηγός που είχε διακόψει τη χαμηλόφωνη συζήτησή του με έναν πρώην δήμαρχο για να ακούσει την ιστορία του Μπερνάρντο.

«Ο παραλογισμός δεν χρειάζεται να είναι αληθοφανής. Είναι αληθινός. Κι αυτό φτάνει» αποκρίθηκε ο Ρουτζέρο.

Οι κόρες του θείου Μπερνάρντο πρώτη φορά ακούγανε με προσοχή και χωρίς να κοροϊδεύουν τις ιστορίες του πατέρα τους κι αυτό τον ευχαριστούσε τόσο που δεν σταματούσε. «Οι λεπτομέρειες έρχονται μετά από χρόνια» ξαναπήρε το λόγο και άρχισε να κατεβάζει σειρές ξεχασμένα γεγονότα, οικογενειακές αποχρώσεις από την εποχή που παντρεύτηκε ο Πausανίας την Μπιάνκα. Η γυναίκα του, η θεία Θηρεσία που μόνο μέσο για να αντιλαμβάνεται τον κόσμο είχε την ειρωνεία -αντίδραση στην άνοδο των αχρείων όπως εξήγησε μία και μόνη φορά μετά από έναν ομηρικό καυγά με τον πάντα καταδεχτικό άντρα της- έμοιαζε να απορεί για τη στάση που έπρεπε να κρατήσει. “Η ατμόσφαιρα αυτού του σπιτιού πρέπει να είναι αιτία” υπέθεσε.

Στο Λίνο, υπό άλλες συνθήκες, μια τέτοια συγκέντρωσης-γιωρτή θανάτου, θα του προκαλούσε πλήξη και αμηχανία. Τώρα όμως ένιωθε φυσικότατα και ας συγκέντρωνε κάθε τόσο όλα τα μάτια πάνω του. «Είστε ο σύζυγος της Ισαβέλλας;» ρώτησε κάποιος βαρήκοος συγγενής του Πausανία που κάτι άκουσε μα δεν είχε καταλάβει. Η ερώτηση ήταν ξαφνική, δεν πρόλαβε καν να στρίψει αλλού το βλέμμα για να την αποφύγει ή για να κάνει τον αφηρημένο. Χαμογέλασε όσο πιο ευγενικά μπορούσε και γύρισε να δει την Ισαβέλλα. Τα μάτια της έλαμπαν μίαν άλλη λάμψη, αλλιώςτικη. Ο τόνος και ο ρυθμός της ευαισθησίας της έλεγαν πως “είναι κρίμα που δε γνώρισε λίγο περισσότερο τον πατέρα” μα ευθύς την παρηγορούσε πως δεν ήταν τυχαίο που τον γνώρισε μια μέρα ακριβώς πριν φύγει. Τρόμαξε. Οι τάσεις αυτές από το βάθος της συνείδησής της, τάσεις που δεν είχαν ως τώρα εκδηλωθεί, απειλούσαν να την παρασύρουν -ούτε κι η ίδια ήξερε προς τα πού- όταν η θεία Θηρεσία την πλησίασε να της πει πως ήταν ώρα να ξεκινήσουν για το ναό...

... Προχωρούσε αμίλητη, ανέκφραστη, με σταθερό βάδισμα και μάτια να τρέχουν διαρκώς. Πιο πίσω ο Λίνος αναλογιζόταν πως σε μια εκφορά είχε αποφασίσει να έρθει εδώ και με μια εκφορά τώρα κάτι ένιωθε να τελειώνει. Ή μήπως άρχιζε; Αυτές οι περιφορές σωμάτων, μοιάζουν με περιφορά επιθυμιών και ακυρώσεων, με πομπή κενών που ποτέ δεν θα γεμίσουν. Λέξεις, αισθήματα και σκέψεις έπλεαν σ' αυτά τα κενά όταν ακούστηκε στην είσοδο του ναού το πρώτο αντίφωνο: "Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine et lux perpetua luceat eis" – Ανάπαυση αιωνία δώρησον αυτοίς Κύριε και φως ανέσπερο ας λάμψει επ' αυτοίς εις τον αιώνα...".

Πλήθος είχε προσέλθει, φίλοι, παλιοί ασθενείς μα και απλοί γνωστοί. Από σεβασμό -άλλοι προς τον ίδιο και άλλοι για την οικογένεια Τιμοκρέι. Πολλούς τους έφερε η περιέργεια. Είχαν έρθει και κάποιοι επίσημοι, όχι από αυτούς που εκλέγονται μα κάποιας άλλης τάξης, μυστικής. Υπήρχαν εκείνοι -λίγοι είναι η αλήθεια- που όσο και να λυπόντουσαν, με τη χαρά πως αυτοί ζούσαν ακόμη, συνομιλούσαν με κάποια κρυμμένη ευθυμία, με ανακούφιση που κάποιος έδινε το στατιστικό παρών απ' τη γενιά τους στο σκοτάδι. Οι πιο πολλοί, λες και τους ζητούσε ο νεκρός παρηγοριά, μιλούσαν για τη ματαιότητα μα ούτε αυτοί είχαν καμιά διάθεση να ξεχάσουν πόσο δροσερή και ευχάριστη είναι πάντα η ζωή. Τελικά, μάλλον πιο αισιόδοξοι θα έφευγαν όλοι απ' αυτή την εκφορά. Μόνο ο δον Τζουζέππε παραδομένος στις δικές του σκέψεις, ανατρίχιασε κάποια στιγμή όταν νόμισε πως είδε τον Πausανία στην άκρη του ναού, να παρακολουθεί την εκφορά του από μια κόγχη, χαμογελώντας με τις ευχές...

... Όταν κινήσανε για να παραδώσουν το σώμα του στη γη, λαμπερές σταγόνες είχαν αρχίσει να πέφτουν από το μολυβένιο βάθος του ουρανού. Τα συννεφοσκιάσματα γίνονταν ολοένα και πυκνότερα αλλά οι σταγόνες έπεφταν πάντα

αραιά κι ευθύβολα. Ούτε κλαράκι δεν κουνιόταν. Στα δέντρα κρέμονταν σχήματα παράξενα, ράκη μιας ακίνητης ομίχλης. «Όπως το ήθελε, όπως το ήθελε» ψιθύριζε ο δον Τζουζέππε. Ελάχιστος, μακρινός ερχόταν ο θόρυβος της πόλης. Στη σκηνογραφία της θολής ημέρας όλα φαίνονταν προσεκτικά, σαν να εκτελούσαν ρόλους, αιχμάλωτα θαρρείς μιας απόλυτης ιδέας αξιοπρέπειας στην οποία τα πάντα κάποτε θα φτάσουν, πριν ή έστω μετά το θάνατο που επιβάλλει τη γενική και υποχρεωτική αξιοπρέπεια της σιωπής. «Είναι καλό να αναμένει κάποιος στη σιωπή τη σωτηρία» επανέλαβε ο δον Τζουζέππε το ανάγνωσμα των Θρήνων...

... Εκείνο το απόβραδο στην κοιλάδα των ναών βασίλευε μια άφραστη γαλήνη. Σήματα διακριτικά μα επίμονα αιχμαλώτιζαν τα μάτια όσων έτυχε να βρεθούν εκεί κι αναρωτιόντουσαν τι να συμβαίνει. Μια εποχή τελιώνει οριστικά, πλησιάζει χειμώνας, είπαν κάποιοι. Κι όμως. Λίγο πιο ψηλά, κάτω απ' τον ίσκιο του Αγκριτζέντο, τα άψυχα πράγματα στο σπίτι που θ' άρχιζε σιγά-σιγά ν' αδειάζει, ήταν σίγουρα πως τίποτα δεν τελιώνει. Όταν ο Λίνος πλησίασε να αποχαιρετίσει την Ισαβέλλα, το ένιωσαν κι οι δυο πως η εποχή που ερχόταν, θα απαιτούσε υπομονή και αποφασιστικότητα. Υπομονή απ' αυτόν και αποφασιστικότητα από εκείνη. Δεν θα ήταν εύκολο. Γιατί ήταν ακριβώς οι αρετές που μέχρι τώρα τούς έλειπαν.

Τον πήγε μέχρι την αυλόπορτα. Ψυχρό το αγέρι κένταγε το δέρμα, έκανε τα φυλλώματα να ριγούν. Το φεγγάρι, στην αρχή της χάσης, πρόβαλε ανάμεσα στα σύννεφα και φώτισε ερωτικά τις αρχαίες δωρικές κολόνες. Περιττές μεταμέλειες ή αναγκαίες εκμυστηρεύσεις δεν χάραζαν τα όρια των αισθημάτων τους. Δεν χρειάζονταν. Καθώς μιλούσαν, η Ισαβέλλα του έκανε νόημα να σωπάσει για ν' αφουγκραστεί μια μελωδία που ερχόταν από την κοιλάδα. Ήταν η μουσική εκείνη που

άκουγε ο πατέρας της. «Ακούς;» τον ρώτησε σφίγγοντάς του το χέρι. Κι αυτός μπορεί να μην άκουγε ακόμη τίποτε αλλά ψιθύρισε «ναι». Γιατί πρώτη φορά στη ζωή του ήταν έτοιμος, δυνατός και έτοιμος και για τα πιο δύσκολα. Τα δύσκολα που πάντα αύριο αρχίζουν...

Agrigento

Kostas Hatziantoniou

Translated from the Greek by Irene Noel

Zia Augusta had appeared at the door. She was the elderly aunt of the family, and Bianca's older sister. She had travelled to Sicily from Como, which had been her husband's city. Bowed with age, but still splendid, she kissed Isabella and all her close relatives coldly, with a strict regard to precedence, and then, after gracing everyone else with a nod, she sat apart. She was terse and dogmatic, and her use of words was striking, half archaic. They all revered her without question. Despite her formidable intellect – as one of her great nieces explained to a clutch of people – she had devoted her life to supporting her husband's career. He was a senator, now long dead. *Zia* Augusta could see that Isabella possessed greatness of soul; and yet she found fault with her lack of flexibility, and her fixed contempt for appearances. She was sharp enough to notice a connection between Isabella's bereavement and the presence of Linos, and she asked a niece about him. The niece didn't know, so she called Don Giuseppe who explained. After spending some time puzzling over whether Isabella's friend fell into the closest category of intimacy, she decided to wait until after the funeral to quiz him and make up her mind.

In another part of the room, *Zio* Maurizio, a first cousin of Isabella's mother, was talking to a gathering of friends and relatives about Tancred of Hauteville, the Norman ancestor of the kings of Sicily. Tall, handsome, he had eyes that were blue and bright, but a little disenchanted – and not through grief

at the occasion. His fine, thoughtful face was admirable for its ideal combination of manliness and civility. His was a type of aesthetic, noble life which looked upon moral duty purely as a refinement of the sensibility. Eccentric and inoffensive, he never had a bad word for anyone, but was not particularly kind either. That was, in any case, his guiding principle in life: neither good nor bad. "It is the only way" he would argue, "to be truly tolerant and open hearted". Recently Uncle Maurizio had found himself attracted more and more by women who were coarse, and works of art lacking in taste. "A strange contradiction" commented Ruggiero. "Not at all" answered Don Giuseppe, who had been silent for a while. "It's a sign of old age in a real aristocrat".

While they were waiting to go to church, a conversation began about restoration work on the Greek ruins of ancient Akragas, in the *Valle dei Templi*, near the house. Don Giuseppe remembered that it was the archaeologist, Pietro Griffo, who had bravely resisted modern Agrigento's industrial expansion towards the ancient city. During those difficult years of frenzied development, when there had been plans for a Fiat factory, people had criticized him for preventing the natural spread of Agrigento towards the sea, saying that the ruins of the Doric temples were nothing but a curse, an obstacle to the city's development and prosperity.

"It was Griffo who saved the temples earlier, when there had been military operations there during the war, after the landings in 1943", observed a retired colonel with dyed hair, whom they all called the "general", for so he generally styled himself.

"Sophisticated people say that our region is ugly. But I like it. I detest picturesque places" threw in a cousin of Pausanias. Ruggiero agreed, and then Don Giuseppe turned to Linos, and addressed him, cordially:

“However many factories they build here, they cannot alter the colour of the earth, the true colour of the Sicilian soul. These people, who live here”, he said, and indicated a group of locals who had come to the front of the house to pay their respects to the deceased, “they will always be the same. Whether Gothic or Norman, Arabic or Catalonian it doesn’t matter. Masks, all of them. It is people who bring order and rhythm, whatever the historical circumstance. They are the ones who give style its substance”.

A few of them began to move discreetly away in search of the closer relatives. *Zia* Teresa, the much loved “younger” aunt, whispered final instructions to *Annunciata*, who had not stopped crying. In the opposite corner, *Isabella* and *Veronica*, her closest cousin, and her friend *Christina* – who was about to ask the bogus general how she could get to see *Gaetano* – motioned to *Linos* to come over and be introduced. “It can’t be accidental that he comes from so far away at a time like this” said *Zia* Teresa, who was watching the scene. Next to her, *Zia* *Augusta* smiled and disagreed. “Nothing can be achieved in life without taking risks” she said to her sister enigmatically. A little way off, *Zio* *Bernardo*, in a booming, affable voice, was talking about his time during the war. When he saw that interest in the conversation was flagging a little he drew on what he could remember of the stories his grandfather had told him, about *Mussolini*’s visit to *Agrigento* in 1924, when he had declared a merciless war on organized crime. Someone then in the crowd had dared to speak out and object “But surely even gangsters have a right to life!” *Bernardo* lowered his voice to a dramatic whisper, “That man was never seen again”.

“That was the *Toto* the idiot” said *Ruggiero*. He was a witness in the trials of 1932”, and everyone bent closer to ask who *Ruggiero* was, he had been so altered by his time away.

“Really? That seems unlikely” said the phoney general, who had broken off a hushed conversation with a former mayor in order to listen to Bernardo’s story.

“Absurdity does not have to be likely, in order to be real. It is real. That’s all it takes” returned Ruggiero.

Uncle Bernardo’s daughters were listening attentively to their father’s stories for the first time without making fun of him, and this pleased him so much that he wouldn’t stop. “It is the details which come back to me so suddenly after all these years”, he said, and began again, recalling forgotten events and shades of family memories from the time when Pausanias had married Bianca. Aunt Teresa, Bernardo’s wife, who could only relate to people through irony – her sole defence against the rising filth around her, as she once explained, and only once, after an epic argument with her ever tolerant husband – seemed unsure now what attitude to adopt. “Perhaps it is the atmosphere in this house that is to blame” she ventured.

In any other circumstance Linos would have found it irksome and embarrassing to be at a gathering like this – a funeral party. But here he felt at ease, even if every now and then he sensed that they were all looking at him. “You are Isabella’s husband?” asked a relative of Pausanias, who was hard of hearing and had picked up something without fully understanding what was said. The question came so suddenly that Linos didn’t have a chance to look away and avoid it, or appear distracted. He smiled as politely as he could manage and then turned around to look at Isabella. Her eyes were shining, unusually bright, and different. He saw that the pitch and rhythm of her tender sensitivity said, “It’s such a pity that he didn’t come to know Father a little better” and then again, he saw her consoled by the thought that it wasn’t an accident, his meeting her father on the very day before he died. Isabella

shuddered. There were forces tugging at her from the depths of her consciousness, forces which had never revealed themselves before, and they were threatening to carry her away – she had no idea herself where they were taking her – when Aunt Teresa approached to tell her that it was time for them to leave for church...

...She walked on in silence, her face expressionless, her footsteps rhythmical, tears flowing down her cheeks. Behind her, Linos was considering the fact that he had started out from Greece because of a funeral, and now, at another funeral, he had the feeling that something was ending. Or was it beginning? A procession bearing bodies, like a ritual, wheeling out and setting aside of wishes; a procession of empty spaces never to be filled. Words, feelings, thoughts floated in these spaces, and from the open doors of the church they heard the first responses: “Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine et lux perpetua luceat eis” – Eternal rest, grant them O Lord, and light perpetual shine upon them.

Quite a crowd had gathered, of friends, former patients and people who had known the dead man; to pay their respects – some to him, others to the Timocrei family. Many of them were just curious. Some officials were present, though not of the elected variety, but from another, secret, order. There were those – and it is true they weren't many – who however sad they were at his passing, could not help feeling pleased to be alive themselves, or so their conversations seemed to say, which transmitted a hidden gaiety, because they felt relieved that, of all their generation, it had been someone else's lot to meet with darkness, and not theirs. Many of them spoke about the vanity of things, as if the dead man was looking to them for consolation, but really they were in no mood to forget how fresh and enchanting it was to be alive. On the whole, they

probably all felt more optimistic when the ceremony came to an end than when they had started out. Don Giuseppe alone, far away in his own thoughts, shuddered when he thought he saw the dead man, Pausanias, standing at the far end of the church, watching the ceremony from a niche in the wall, and smiling at the well-wishers...

... As they all moved forward to bury the body in the ground, gleaming drops began to fall from the depths of a leaden sky. The dimness thickened as the clouds massed, and separate raindrops began to fall, heavy and accurate. No leaf stirred. In the trees hung strange shapes, shreds of motionless fog. "It's just as he would have wished, as he would have wished" murmured Don Giuseppe. Scarcely perceptible and from a long way off they could hear the throb of the city. It was a turbid scene, and yet everything seemed to have been picked out deliberately that day, as if fulfilling a role, hostages to an ideal of complete decorum which must be achieved eventually, whether before, or after, death, with its insistence on the total, binding dignity of silence. "It is right to wait, with silence, for salvation" said Don Giuseppe to himself, echoing the reading from the Lamentations...

...That evening, in the *Valle dei Tempi*, a mute stillness reigned. There were signs, discreet and yet insistent, which caught their attention while they stood there, wondering at it all. A season was over for good, winter nearly here, some said. And yet. A little higher up, under the shadow of Agrigento, the inanimate, soulless objects knew, as the house gradually emptied around them, that nothing is ever over. When Linos came up to say goodbye to Isabella, they both felt that the new season, now on its way, would need patience and resolution. Patience from him, and resolution from her. It wasn't going to be easy, since those were precisely the qualities that they had so far lacked.

She walked with him as far as the garden gate. A chill breeze pricked at their skin, and made the foliage shiver. The moon, just beginning to wane, came out from behind the clouds, and threw its light, amorously, over the ancient Doric columns that stood in the valley below the house. There were no superfluous regrets or vital revelations, to set down limits as to how they were feeling. There was no need. As they were talking, Isabella signalled to him to be quiet, so that he could catch the melody coming from the valley. It was the music her father had heard. “Can you hear it?” she asked him, squeezing his hand. And although he might not have heard it yet, he whispered “yes”. Because for the first time in his life he was ready, strong and ready enough for the hardest things. The hardest things, which always start tomorrow...



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Ófeigur Sigurðsson

Jon (2010)

Publishing House **Mál og menning**

Biography

Poet and author Ófeigur Sigurðsson was born in Reykjavík on November 2, 1975. He has published six books of poetry and two novels. Ófeigur has tried his hand at a number of things: working as a uniformed night-watchman at a hotel, pre-packing ham and bacon at a factory farm, exercising his brawn as a dock worker, and exercising his brains as a student at the Philosophy Department of the University of Iceland, from where he received his BA degree in 2007, with a thesis on the taboo and transgression in the works of Georges Bataille. Ófeigur is at the forefront of a poetic movement of dynamic young creative people, who have recently had a hand in reshaping the form of Icelandic poetry. He has translated literature and written for radio on writers including Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Michel Houellebecq.

Synopsis

In the terrible winter of 1755-1756, Jon Steingrímsson travels through Iceland, dwelling in a cave in the south and writing letters to his pregnant wife in the north. He is under suspicion of having murdered her former husband and has been expelled from his position at his monastery. The south, however, is not a desirable place to be in: the glacial volcano Katla is erupting, shrouding everything in a cloud of ash, destroying everything in its path, and Jon is at risk of being buried alive in the cave. Despite this, he works hard to prepare for the arrival of his wife in the spring so that they can start a new life there away from everything. But the scandal of the suspected murder follows Jon all the way into the cave and tortures him there both day and night. Very soon, the general sheriff pays him a visit...

Reverend Jon Steingrímsson is one of the most remarkable people in the history of Iceland, and later became known as the 'pastor of fire'. This unique novel portrays him as a young man in the dark times of the first sparks of the Enlightenment.

Jon

Ófeigur Sigurðsson

Hjartans guðsgjöf og ekta kona

Það er aðeins fyrir guðs moldríku miskunnsemi sem við bræður erum komnir heilir í hellinn eftir ferðina suður yfir hálendið og hingað inn í myrkrið. Að við skyldum lifa af er mildi og kraftaverk; á fjöllum hrepptum við eitt það sterkasta veður. Elsku Þórunn, ég læt snöggvast þessi niðurhripuðu orð mín í hendur manns sem kom hér við í Hellum, hann segist ætla norður til Skagafjarðar fyrr eða síðar. Maðurinn er stórvaxinn og klæðist ullarhempu einni gríðarmikilli og rauðri, hann hefur smábarn á öxlunum, selur bækur en er ólæs sjálfur. Þetta eru hans auðkenni. Hann heitir Kristófer og lofaði að koma þessum blöðum til þín. Rétti ég honum einn ríxdal fyrir ómakið. Sem sagt, fáir þú þetta smælki, þá er það staðfesting á því að við lifðum manndrápshríðina á Kili; við bræður erum komnir í Hella.

Landið er ein lifandi skepna. Líkami. Og Þórunn, hve sárt er að hafa þurft að skilja við þig og okkar guðsmyndarkríli í kroppnum, megi okkar góði Herra vera með ykkur og góð ljósmóðir þá barnið vill hingað koma í okkar snautlegu jarðvist. Við verðum að láta okkur duga sendibréf um sinn og treysta á þá sem ferðast milli landshluta þótt veður séu válynd, köld og tíðin hörð norðanlands. Var Skúli fógeti ekki að nefna einhverja bögglabera / sendla / pósta / þá sem fara með bréf?... Má ske að enginn vilji vera póstur hér á landi nema einstakir furðufuglar og flökkubjössar. Gaman væri ef þessu yrði kippt í liðinn og mér skilst að Skúli sé eitthvað að

vinna í því með greifunum í Kaupenhöfn. Þar njóta póstarnir mikillar virðingar og fá einkennisbúning skaffaðan frá konungsins skradara, með látúnshnöppum og silkiborðum / harðar húfur / hest og lúður! Þessar persónur fá greiddan góðan skilding fyrir ferðalögin. Og svo eru það Taxarnir í Hamborg, þeir þeysast um allt Þýskaland!

Hér á Suðurlandi eys Katla eldi og eimyrju yfir Mýrdalinn og fellur sandur og aska úr lofti svo aldimmt er um miðja daga. Auk þess gengur á með ausandi vatnsveðrum og blotasnjó og þegar allt þetta blandast saman þá er sem úr mekkinum rigni þykkvu bleki. Þá harðnar krapaskánin á jörðinni í frosti og vindpurri svo sveitin er öll sem slegin í kopar. Jafnfallinn sandur er eins og gerist mest á snjóavetrum og stórir blökkuskafar gera landið að grængljáandi eyðimörk. Þá fýkur askan og smýgur um allar gáttir og spillir matvælum. Dýr þola mistrið illa og öll augu sviða. Með guðs réttlæti mun öllu þessu slota og burt fjúka og niður rigna og við aftur fyrir finnast í vorblíðum högum. Þá set ég fífil í hatt minn og kyssi þig!

Annað bréf

Kristófer er einhversstaðar á leiðinni með bréfið til þín yfrum hálendið í Skagafjörðinn. Þetta tröllvaxna góðmenni var bóndi í Litluey á Mýrdalssandi en er nú uppflósnaður og burt hrakinn. Þegar hann kom hér við skrifaði ég upp frásögn hans, því hann var þá á leið burt úr mekkinum.

Bóndi er við sýsl hátt í hlíðum eyju sinnar á sandinum að laga garða og huga að fénu og er langt kominn með vísu, hún er dýr og ætlar hann að hún verði fleyg, þá tekur jörðin að hoppa og harðna og mýkjast á víxl og gengur brekkan öll í

bylgjum, óhirtar slægjur snúast að sjálfsdáðum og þurrkast, þykir honum þetta hentugt fyrirkomulag og finnst guð vera að launa sér sitt erfiði í vísnagerðinni, en í vísunni lofar hann Dróttinn Jesús Kristmús. Þá heyrir hann skelfilegar drunur og sprengingar eins og hleypt sé af hundrað fallbyssum samtímis, heldur hann fyrst að Tyrkirnir séu komnir, síðan að dómsdagur sé upprunninn en þá er það Kötluskömmin! hún er byrjuð að spýja undan kjólfaldi sínum reiðinnar býsnum af leðju og aurvatni og brýst upp úr kolti hennar eldmökkur sem stígur til himins, breiðir þar úr sér með þrumum og eldingum svo himinninn verður svartur sem ein kolagryfja og myrkvar sólina, þá hleypur fram á sandinn ofsafengið flóð og fer beggja megin Hafurseyjar, klýfur eyna í tvennt með brauki og bramli, geigvænlegu hringli og skringli svo gervallur Mýrdalssandur verður eitt beljandi straumfljót með veltandi jakabjörgum, þá heyrir hann brest mikinn líkt og heljarstór blaðsíða sé rifin í tvennt, þá drunur og einn hörku dynk, það er einn hávaði, flóðið brýst fram og sér hann þetta allt úr brekkunni á Litluey þarna syðst á sandinum, sér hann að hlaupið stefnir til sín og drýlir ófrýnilega með fýluhroða; Katla ætlar þá alla feiga, hugsar hann og hrópar: Er nú hefndar hugur í þér stelpuskömm! og steytir hnefann mót jöklinum, nú er að duga eða drepast; í öllu þessu gleymir Kristófer vísunni sinni og reynir af alefli að rifja hana upp svo hann geti drepist glaður með hana á vörunum, en hún sekkur í óminnið; Múlakvísl sópar fyrst burt öllum kirkjum í sveitinni, svo skepnuhúsum, þá bæjarhúsum, fer fornfræga höfuðbýlið Dyrskógar með bylmingsdrunum í flóðið, þar voru 50 hurðir á flúruðum járnum og handverk mikið, og svo allt hverfið norðan við Litluey, þar koma strax í staðinn stærðar klakabyggingar, glærar að sjá, heil speglaborg og kastast af þeim svimandi kynjamyndir og er náttúran öll brengluð orðin; vísan er farin, Kristófer biður bænir sínar og

æðir úr einni í aðra, þá skellur flóðbylgjan á Litluey og skelfur eyjan við það högg / hækkar vatn hastarlega og grefur sig græðgislega upp brekkurnar / tæandi allt í sundur sem fyrir verður / bóndinn biður bænirnar á tvöföldum hraða / þrjár í einu / hlaupandi á staðnum / stökkvandi jafnfætis / en vatnið hækkar hraðar og hraðar; þá lítur hann til húsanna, sér vatnið hlaupa þar um, hrifsar það burt útihúsin í sama vetfangi, 150 kindur eru í haganum og öll lömbin, það sveipast burt í einni svipan, nautin sökkva öskrandi í jökulflauminn og er þetta allt átakanleg sýn, hlaupið gleypir hvað sem fyrir verður og ropar síðan ógurlega, verður bóndi af þessu hneykslaður, þá byltast ísjakarnir í umrótinu, í þeim eru áföst grjót og klettar, og standa sumstaðar aldagömul tré, fúin og grjót frosin, á berum greinum sitja krákur og krunka gamla útfararsálma, nú ætlar hlaupið að heimsækja baðstofuna sem Kristófer taldi örugga, þá er þar inni allt hans fólk og verður honum hugsað hratt til barnsins, það sefur í vöggunni, það stúlkubarn átti kona hans daginn áður / í miklum landskjálfta / stökk það út líkt og tappi úr flösku / lenti á fótunum / en settist svo og fór að gráta / það er sárt að koma í heiminn / konan elur það á brjóstamjólk eins og Bjarni landphysicus segir að eigi að gera, hefur hann komið í veg fyrir mikinn barnadauða á Íslandi og er Bjarni landphysicus sannur íslenskur dýrlingur! þá hleypur Kristófer niður hlíðina og æðir inn í húsið, flæðir vatnið þá þar inn og sópar til öllum húsbúnaði, er það braml mikið, þá tekur hann barnið og ryðst til útgöngu með það á móti straumnum, flæðir aurinn yfir þau fedgin og fyllir fljótt stofurnar, er það seig drulla og þung, verða allir aðrir þar eftir inni, þar á meðal hans heittelskaða stórfagra og stórbrotna kona, hann kallar til hennar úr göngunum: „Við hittumst á himnum hnossið mitt ég ann þér af alefli og er guð að því vitni og allar vísurnar í kistunni! “hún gefur honum

grátandi fingurkoss og hverfur í flauminn, þá ryðst Kristófer með offorsi upp á húsið og hefur barnið í fangi sínu, hann sér að húsið mun skjótt sökkva og út fletjast, og þá hleypur hann upp á eyna hvar hún liggur hæst og horfir yfir sandinn og allan Mýrdalinn og blasir Katla við og stendur á blístri og gengur svartur strókur úr henni til himins: „Fagurt er í fjallasal, fagurt er í Mýrdal!“ það er vísan! hún krafsar í yfirborðið, vill láta bjarga sér, það eru guðlaunin, Kristófer tekur hálf gleði sína og kyssir barnið, sandurinn er allur sem eitt ólgandi haf og þá sekkur vísan, hann getur ekki munað hvað kemur næst, þá ætlar Litlaey að hverfa í vatnið / stendur Kristófer með barnið efst á klettinum / á stórutánni / langri kartnögl sem svignar / hleypur í hana sprunga / hyldjúpin blasa við / þá stekkur hann á einn ísjaka og fljóta þau á honum fram á haf út / tekur það skammt af og eru þau undir eins komin langt frá landi / reika þau um hafið og komast hvergi / fyrst sigla þau með mörgum öðrum ísjökum en svo ein / verður þá myrkt sem af nótt og duftað loftið, veit Kristófer ekkert af tímanum en eitthvað líður hann, þá verður barnið svangt og gargar hátt sem einn sjófugl, hefur hann ekkert að drekka á jakanum, þá lætur bóndinn barnið sleikja ísinn, en barnið vill ekki sleikja ísinn, í honum er sandur og óþverri, ekki þýðir að bjóða ungabörnum hvað sem er og eru nú góð ráð dýr, þá rífur hann af sér geirvörtuna og gefur barninu að drekka, hýrnar þá heldur yfir því, lifir það á blóðinu næstu dægur, en ekki sjá þau neitt til lands, er enn myrkt yfir og kalt, hafrót og ein örvænting, sker Kristófer þá af sér hina geirvörtuna og gefur barninu enn að drekka og heldur því þannig á lífi, sjálfur sleikir hann ísinn, þau rekur um hafið marga daga og nætur þar til jakinn kemur að landi í Meðallandi, þá fer Kristófer fótgangandi með barnið á öxlinni í Kirkjubæjarklaustur og fær barnið mjólk úr brjósti einu sem

Þar er þá statt, bóndi fær plástra á sín brjóst og undrast margir að sjá geirvörtulausan manninn, þá fær hann broddstaf einn mikinn og fer enn fótgangandi með barnið á öxlinni yfir Mýrdalssandinn, eru þá vötnin í rénun eftir flóðið og margir feiknar ísjakar á sandinum á við björg og himinháa kletta, sýnist honum lagðar götur á milli þeirra, þá finnst honum þar vera urmull af fólki, ys og þys og verslanir, fara þar um hestvagnar og hjólvagnar hávaðasamir í allskonar litum og gerð sem bóndinn úr Litluey hefur aldrei áður séð: þar er einn eirgrænn á lit, annar blikandi túrkís, þriðji indígó, fjórði okru litaður og sá fimmti bleikur eins og glassúr, þá eru hestarnir svarthvítir og allstórir, á torgunum er fólkið prúðbúið og klæðist bæði kvenfólkið og karlfólkið riffluðum kjólum og brakar í þeim og brestur svo hátt að enginn nær heyra hvað hinn segir, þá eru hattarnir barmmiklir og fjaðurskreyttir en stígvélin glitrandi slegin gimsteinum, stírnir á þetta alltsaman; fólkið dáist að lífinu, spásserar innan um gosbrunna og allskyns sprænur og bunur, þar eru englar og myndastyttur af öllum guðum veraldar, þarna er íburðamikil kirkja á stærð við Litluey, ganga af henni tangar og múlar og fljúga um hana stórir hópar af skrautdúfum, þá er þar kúpull á stærð við tröllkonubrjóst og turnar eins og Reynisdrangar en undir þeim börn betlandi og hundar snusandi og fara um svæðið þjófar með góss sitt innan um heiðarlega menn, finnst Kristóferi þetta líkast því að ganga um á Eyrarbakka, þótt hann hafi aldrei þangað komið, né um lesið, heldur aðeins heyrt um getið, en svona blekkja speglanir þreyttan ferðalang. Við enda sandsins veður hann Múlakvísl sem nær honum upp undir nasir og er áin straumþung, blotna tær barnsins sem situr á höfðinu og heldur sér í þykkva hárlökkana, hann furðar sig á þyngd þess og ætlar undan að sligast, nær þó við ramman leik loks á fast land og kastar þar mæðinni.

Kom Kristófer þá til okkar í Hella með barnið á öxlinni og þáði graut og hressingu. Þegar hann lauk frásögn sinni kom vísan fullkomin fram á varirnar. Ég fékk þeim feðginum ullarklæði, kæfu og mysu, bréfið til þín og heilsuköku að skilnaði. Söng svo einn sálm og horfði á eftir þeim út á mýrarnar.

Jon

Ófeigur Sigurðsson

Translated from the Icelandic by Philip Roughton

God's dearest gift & precious wife

It is only by God's ample mercy that we brothers have reached the cave safely following our trip south over the highlands and hither into the darkness. That we should have survived is a blessing and a miracle; in the mountains we were caught in the most violent of storms. Beloved Þórunn, I will soon place these scribbled words of mine in the hands of a man who stopped here in Hellar; he says that he will be going to Skagafjörður sooner or later. The man is large and wears an enormous red woolen cassock, he carries an infant on his shoulders, sells books but is illiterate himself. These are his traits. His name is Kristófer and he promised to bring these pages to you. I gave him a rixdollar for his trouble. In other words, if you receive these trifles, it is proof that we survived the murderous snowstorm on Kjölur; we brothers have made it to Hellar.

The land is a single living creature. A body. And Þórunn, how painful it is to have had to part from you, with our blessed little one in your own body; may our good Lord be with you and the good midwife when the child wishes to come forth into our dreary earthly habitation. We must content ourselves with written messages for the time being and trust to those who travel the country despite the perilousness and cold of the weather and the harsh conditions in the North. Did not

Sheriff Skúli mention some bearers / couriers / postmen / letter carriers?... It may be that no one wishes to be a postman here in this country but for certain eccentrics and vagrants. It would be most pleasing if this were rectified, and I understand that Skúli is working on this matter somewhat with the counts in Copenhagen. There the postmen enjoy great respect and wear uniforms provided by the king's tailor, with brass buttons and silk ribbons / stiff caps / a horse and a trumpet! These individuals are paid a good shilling for their journeys. And then there are the Taxis in Hamburg, who rush all over Germany!

Here in the South Katla pours fire and embers over Mýrdalur and so much sand and ash fall from the sky that it is totally dark at midday. In addition, the weather is wet and windy and heavy with snow and when this is all combined it is as if thick ink rains from the ashen cloud. Then the slushy skin hardens on the earth in the frost and dryness of the air, making the entire countryside appear as if cast in copper. The sands are spread evenly as they most often are during winters of heavy snow and the large black drifts turn the land into a glinting green desert. The ash blows and slips in through every crack and spoils the victuals. The livestock endures the mist poorly and all eyes sting. With God's justice all of this will cease and blow away and be washed clean by rain and we will once again find ourselves in gentle spring pastures. Then I will put a dandelion in my hat and kiss you!

Second Letter

Kristófer is somewhere on his way over the highlands to Skagafjörður with my letter to you. This gigantic, kind man was a farmer at Litlaey on the Mýrdalur sands, but now his household has been broken up and he driven off. When he came here I wrote down his story, because he was then on his way out of the ashen cloud.

The farmer is working high on the slope of his island on the sands, repairing fences and looking after the sheep and has come a long way in composing a verse, it is precious and he expects it to be excellent, and then the earth starts hopping and hardening and softening by turns and the whole slope moves in waves, the ungathered mown grass turns over of its own accord and dries, he finds this a convenient arrangement and feels that God is rewarding him for his efforts in versifying, since in the poem he praises the Lord Jesus Christmus. Then he hears a horrendous booming and explosions as if from hundreds of cannons firing all at once; at first he thinks that the Turks have come, then that Doomsday has arrived, but it is in fact that damned Katla! From beneath the hem of the dress of her wrath she has started spewing gobs of mud and muddy water, and breaking forth from her crown is a cloud of fire that ascends to the heavens and there spreads itself out with thunder and lightning while the sky turns black as a coal pit and darkens the sun; then a violent flood gushes forth over the sands and rushes past both sides of Hafursey, splits the isle in two with a tumult and turmoil, an ominous rattle and clatter, and all the Mýrdalur sands become one bellowing river of tumbling ice floes; he hears a great crackle as if a huge page is being torn in two, then a booming and an intense rumbling, all is one giant clamor, the flood bursts

forth and he sees this all from the slope on Litlaey, furthest south there on the sands, he sees the debacle heading toward him, tumbling hideously with a fearsome stench; Katla is going to kill them all, he thinks, and shouts: “You’re out for revenge now, you damned girl!” and he shakes his fist at the glacier, now it is do or die; in all of this Kristófer forgets his verse and tries with all his might to recall it so that he can die happily with it on his lips, but it sinks into oblivion; first Múlvísl River sweeps away all the churches in the district, then the barns, then the farmhouses; the renowned old estate of Dyrskógar goes with a mighty roar into the flood, it had 50 doors of decorated iron and great handworks, and then the entire area north of Litlaey, immediately replaced by huge buildings of ice, transparent to the eye, an entire mirror-city casting from it strange and dizzying shapes and confusing all of nature; the poem is gone, Kristófer says his prayers, rushing from one to the next, then the flood wave hits Litlaey and the island shudders at the blow / the water rises suddenly and digs itself ravenously up the slope / tearing apart everything it meets / the farmer says his prayers at double speed / three at once / jumping on both feet / but the water rises faster and faster; then he looks to the houses, sees the water rushing around them, it snatches away the outbuildings at the same moment, 150 sheep are in the pasture and all the lambs, they are all swept away at one moment, the cattle sink bellowing into the glacial stream and it is an entirely pathetic sight, the debacle swallows everything it meets and then belches terribly, the farmer is shocked at this, and then the ice floes tumble in the turmoil, stuck in them are rocks and boulders, and in some places stand ancient trees, rotten and frozen hard as stone, on bare branches sit crows croaking old funeral hymns, now the debacle is on its way to the sitting room that Kristófer

considered secure, inside it are all of his people and his mind turns quickly to the child, it sleeps in its cradle, the baby girl that his wife gave birth to the day before / in the great earthquake / it leapt out like a cork from a bottle / landed on its feet / then sat down and started to cry / it hurts to enter the world / the woman feeds it with breast milk as Bjarni the Physicus General says should be done, he has prevented high numbers of infant deaths in Iceland and Bjarni the Physicus General is a true Icelandic saint! Then Kristófer runs down the slope and rushes into the house, the water floods in and sweeps away all the furnishings, there is a huge commotion, then he takes the infant in his arms and pushes against the stream to the exit, the mud streams over the father and his child and swiftly fills the rooms, it is viscous, heavy mud, all others are left there inside, including his most dearly beloved, immensely beautiful and magnificent wife, he calls to her from the passageway: “We shall meet in Heaven, my treasure, I love you with all my heart as God is my witness and all of the verses in my chest!...” She blows him a tearful kiss and vanishes into the flood, and Kristófer climbs furiously up onto the house, the baby in his arms, he sees that the house will soon sink and be flattened, then he dashes up to the highest point of the island and looks out over the sands and all of Mýrdalur and Katla appears on the verge of bursting and a black column of smoke ascends from it to Heaven: “Fair it is in the mountain hall, fair it is in Mýrdal!...” that’s my verse! it scratches at the surface, wants to be rescued, it’s God’s thanks, Kristófer takes half his joy and kisses the infant, the sands are all as one turbulent sea and then the verse sinks, he cannot remember what comes next, and then Litlaey is about to vanish in the water / Kristófer stands with the child at the peak of the cliff / on his big toe / a long diseased nail that bends / cracks open / the

abyss appears / then he jumps onto an ice floe and father and daughter float aboard it out into the sea / it happens quickly and they are immediately far from land / they drift about the sea with nowhere to land / first they sail with many other ice floes and then alone / it turns dark as night and the sky dusty, Kristófer knows nothing of the time but it does pass by, then the baby grows hungry and shrieks as shrilly as a seabird, it has nothing to drink on the floe, so the farmer tries to get it to lick the ice, but the baby does not want to lick the ice, which contains sand and filth, one can't simply offer infants anything and now things look desperate, he then rips off his nipple and suckles the infant, it rather cheers up at that, lives on blood over the next days, but they catch no sight of land, it is still dark and cold, the swell and desperation alone, Kristófer then cuts off his other nipple and continues to let the infant suckle from him and in that way keeps it alive, he licks the ice himself, they drift about the sea for many days and nights until the floe comes ashore at Meðalland, and then Kristófer walks with the child on his shoulders to Kirkjubæjarklaustur and gives it milk from the breast of someone there, the farmer's chest is bandaged and many are amazed to see the nippleless man, he then takes a large mountaineer's staff and walks with the infant on his shoulder over the Mýrdalur sands, the waters are subsiding after the flood and there are numerous huge ice floes on the sand, the size of boulders and lofty crags, it looks to him as if roads lay between them, then he feels as if there is a swarm of people there, a hustle and bustle and shops, horse-drawn carts and wagons drive around there noisily in such colors and shapes as the farmer from Litlaey has never seen: there is one a coppery green, another a glittering turquoise, a third indigo, a fourth ochre-colored and the fifth pink as frosting, the horses there are black and white and

giant, on the squares the people are dressed genteelly, both women and men wearing ruffled dresses that creak and snap so loudly that no one can hear what the other is saying, the hats are all wide-brimmed and feathered while the boots are polished and set with gems, all of this gleams; the people adore life, converse among the fountains and all sorts of jets and gushes of water, there are angels and statues of all the gods of the world, there is a bombastic church the size of Litlaey, extending from it are spits of land and promontories and flying about it are large groups of ornamental pigeons, there is a dome the size of an ogress' breast and towers like the Reynisdrangar sea stacks and beneath them children begging and dogs sniffing, thieves prowl the area in the midst of honest men, Kristófer feels that this most resembles being in Eyrarbakki, although he has never been there, nor read about it, has only heard it mentioned, but that is how the reflections deceive a weary traveler. At the end of the sands he fords Múlavísl, which reaches up to his nostrils, its current heavy, the child's toes are wetted as it sits on the farmer's head and holds onto his thick locks, he is amazed at the baby's weight and is on the verge of giving up, yet finally reaches firm ground after a difficult struggle and there catches his breath. Kristófer then came to us in Hellar with the baby on his shoulder and received porridge and refreshments. After concluding his story the verse came out perfectly on his lips. I gave father and daughter woolen garments, pâté and whey, the letter to you and a salutary biscuit upon parting. I then sang a hymn and watched as they crossed the moors.



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Inga Zolude

Mierinājums Ādama kokam (2010)

A Solace for Adam's Tree (a collection of stories)

Publishing House **Dienas Grāmata Publishers**

Biography

The prose writer Inga Zolude was born in 1984 and received her master's degree in English from the University of Latvia. She studied English literature at Southern Illinois University through the Fulbright Program and worked as a project coordinator and manager in the field of culture and education. She is currently studying for her doctorate at the University of Latvia. She has been a member of the Writers' Union in Latvia since 2010. Zolude has had her works published in various periodicals, and her debut novel, *Silta zeme (Warm Earth)* was published in 2008. She regularly reviews works by Latvian and foreign authors. She has also translated poetry by Philip Larkin and Robert Crawford, among others. She received a special award from the cultural magazine *Rīgas Laiks (Riga Times)* in 2007. She has taken part in many literary and cultural projects and has received several grants, including the Nordic Council of Ministers' Baltic Sleipnir Grant.

Synopsis

Inga Zolude's short story collection reflects on different scenes of life in urban and rural areas in modern-day Latvia. The author's rich and ripe language describes a bright and panoramic view of the past, present and future. A very specific pattern of Zolude's writing (also demonstrated in her first novel) is her skill at destroying any borders between reality and fiction, known and unknown, national and cosmopolitan. Sometimes it is impossible to guess the place or time that frame these stories, which deal with the so-called 'big subjects' at the heart of human life. Despite that, Zolude's stories strongly reflect the atmosphere of 21st century Europe, and make the collection one of the most important prose works published in Latvia during recent years.

Mierinājums Ādama kokam

Inga Zolude

Sprīdīte

Es tieši nācu no darbā iekārtošanas aģentūras Nadežda's Global Human Work Market, kas specializējies sūtīšanā uz Īriju. Es gāju cauri tiem vecajiem kapiem. Es vispār nesa-protu, kā tur nokļuvu. Man šķiet, es apmaldījos. Eju pa ielu priecīga, ka beidzot braukšu uz Dublinu un satikšu pārējos radus, priecājos, priecājos, pārlasu līgumu un info paketi un pēkšņi skatos — apkārt kaut kādi veci, sagāzušies pieminekļi. Nebija tā, ka es nesaprastu, kur atrodos, es zināju, tie noteikti ir tie vecie kapi. Es te esmu bijusi agrāk, kad mācījos Banku augstskolā. Mani gan ātri atskaitīja. Negāja man. Vispār gāja labi, bet trīs priekšmetus nevarēju nokārtot sekmīgi — angļu valodu, vācu valodu un latviešu valodu. Jau no bērnības man bija tā slimība, ka neprot lasīt, neatšķir burtus, man viss vienmēr bija jāiekaļ no galvas. Citos priekšmetos es uzmanīgi klausījos un iegaumēju un pēc tam varēju ļoti sekmīgi atstātīt. Augstskolā es ierakstīju lekcijas diktofonā un ietaupīju laiku, mēģinot atpazīt vārdus. Es, protams, tagad protu lasīt, taču man tas tāpat aizņēma nedaudz ilgāku laiku, un ieskaitēs stresa situācijā es vispār visu aizmirstu, tāpēc arī izkritu valodās. Bet man tāpat riebās tā Banku augstskola. Tagad man ir daudz labāks diploms, es pabeidzu LU Ekonomikas un vadībzinātņu fakultāti gandrīz ar sarkano diplomu, psiholoģijā tikai seši dabūju. Vispār biju uzcītīga. Paralēli arī mācījos taisīt manikīru, skropstu ilgviļņus un pielikt mākslīgās skropstiņas. Katrai sievietei tas būtu jāprot, jā rūpējas par

sevi, taču nē, raud, ka vīrieši ne tādi, bet pašas kā slaucējas staigā. Paskatieties apkārt!

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Man kļūst baisi. Parks ir satumsis, piepeši te vairs nav tik daudz jauno māmiņu vai citu vienkāršu caurgājēju, bet viņu vietā uzradušies dīvaina paskata cilvēki — rudiem matiem, vasarraibumiem, viņi līdzinās elfiem un sarunājas nesaprotamā valodā. Es mēģinu sev iedvest, ka tas tikai manu baiļu auglis, un meklēju izeju no parka, taču nespēju to atrast. Centrā te ir dīvaina baznīca, iekšā deg gaismas, bet ārpusē tā ir tumša, tumša, melna, un visas durvis ir ciet, slēgtas, tām priekšā režģi. Apeju baznīcai apkārt, raustu visas durvis, bet nekā, dažas no tām ir vispār aizcementētas, līdz sabīstos ne pa jokam, kad ieraugu divus bērnus smilškastē pie baznīcas sienas, viņi spēlējas tumsā, runādami nesaprotamas zilbes, es nopriežu, ka tā vien tāda dīvaina bērnu valoda, bet ieklausoties es saprotu, ka tā ir īsta valoda, un izskatās viņi paši arī pavisam dīvaini — mati gaisā, kā vēja izpūsti, spilgti sarkani kā uguns, un sejas no vienas vietas nosētas vasarraibumiem. Es ņemu kājas pār pleciem un steidzos projām no šīs dīvainās baznīcas, skrienot garām kapličām, sajūtu tādu kā ēdiena smaržu un piepeši atceros, ka esmu izsalkusi, nez cik stundas jau te maldos, jau nakts melnums, bet nākamā doma ir daudz šaušalīgāka — tie noteikti ir bomži, kas kapličā cep tādu pašu nevainīgu meiteni, kas ieklīdusi parkā. Es skrienu, ko kājas nes, man pretī skrien koki, no kuriem nevaru izvairīties, ieskrienu vienā ar plecu, aizķeros aiz saknes, skrienu pieliekusies, lai neviens mani neredzētu, līdz tiešā trāpījumā...

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Zelta pods. Pods ar zeltu. Godadieva vārds! Pamostos no bezsamaņas, galva sāp no trieciena, ar kādu iedrāzos kokā, saknes spiežas sānos. Es ceru, ka tas bijis tikai ļauns murgs un es tagad piecelšos, iziešu no parka un došos mājās. Arī tumsa vairs nav tik necaurredzami melna, šur tur spīd uguntiņas. Sākumā domāju, ka tās ir laternas, bet tad pamanīju, ka uguntiņas mirgo, nevis spīd rāmi, tās burtiski raustījās, tad izdzisa pavisam, it kā pārtrūktu elektrība. Tad gaismiņa iedegās citur, sāka raustīties un atkal izdzisa. Taču es pamanīju, ka ar katru reizi tās pietuvinājās man, līdz bija tik tuvu, ka es varēju saskatīt, ka tā sākas kā sprakšķis, tad no tās izlaužas liesma un mazs zaļš cilvēciņš, rūķis, kas tur kaut kādu māla podu, no kura nāk gaismas stars, tad tas sāk mirgot, un pazūd gan liesma, gan cilvēciņš, gan pods ar staru. Un es palieku atkal viena tumsā, savākusi savus Īrijas līgumus, pieceļos kājās un eju uz ielas pusi.

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Paldies dievam, es tikpat kā pilnībā biju atguvusies pēc trieciena un gāju mērķtiecīgi uz ielas pusi, es redzēju tālumā mašīnas un autobusu, es domāju, ka tūdaļ man izdosies atrast izeju no šī parka. Taču, kad nonācu jau pavisam tuvu ielai, tā sāka attālināties, es sāku skriet tai pretī, bet tā kļuva arvien tālāka, es jutos, kā skrienot uz skrejceļiņa trenāžiera sporta zālē, tad es apstājos un skatījos uz ielu, mēģināju saprast, kā lai apmāna šo celiņu, kas mani ved atkal parkā iekšā, un es jau tuvojos dīvainajai baznīcai bez ieejas, kas tāpat deg gaiša un bija sākusi skanēt lūdzēju kora balsī, kas dziedāja kādu meldiņu ar nezināmu tautisku pieskaņu nesaprotamā valodā. Te piepeši pamanīju, ka man pretī nāk divi cilvēki, un es uzelpoju. Es viņiem atvainojos un vaicāju pēc izejas no parka. Viņi

uz mani dīvaini skatījās, tad latviski ar šausmīgu, neidentificējamu akcentu jautāja, kāpēc es gribu tikt ārā. Es atbildēju, ka vēlos nokļūt mājās, jo man jāatvadās no saviem draugiem un tuviniekiem un jāsāk kravāt mantas, jo es beidzot došos uz Īriju, kur strādāšu par menedžeri vienā no labākajiem restorāniem, kur nāk ēst zvaigznes. Piepeši es sajutu spēcīgas sāpes kājā, tad rāvienu, elpas trūkumu, pārbīli, mani ierāva zemē! Man pie kājas bija pieķēries kāds skelets, liķis!

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Es atguvos un drīz vien sapratu, ka esmu dzīva, man matos un uz sejas bija smiltis un zemes bumbuļi, es gulēju uz auksta betona, virs manis bija betona velve, un griestos bija sprauga, pa kuru nāca gaiss un varēju redzēt satumsušas debesis. Man apkārt stāvēja vairāki cilvēki, viņi visi bija nosēti vasarraibumiem, ar ugunīgi rudiem matiem, dažiem no viņiem bija uz priekšu izbīdīts apakšzoklis. Kur es esmu, es vaicāju, kas jūs esat? Tu esi tur, kur tev jābūt. Mēs redzējām tavu līgumu. Jā, es braukšu strādāt uz Īriju. Tev nekur nav jābrauc. Tu jau esi šeit. Mēs esam Īrijā. Bet kā? Es pārlaidu skatienu betonētajai telpai. Šī ir Īrija? Ko jūs gribat man iestāstīt? ! Formāli šī jau ir Īrija, bet mēs vēl joprojām esam pie ieejas. Tūliņ dosimies tālāk. Un ieeja ir caur kapu, cauri zemei? Kur es esmu? ! Vai šī ir elle? Viņi mani piecēla un veda pa gaiteni, kas pārtapa šaurā ieliņā ar mazām mājiņām, uz kurām bija dažādas izkārtnes. Iela kā iela, tikai tā nelīdzinājās nevienai no Rīgas ielām, virs māju jumtiem nebija debesu, bet griesti, kas bija nokrāsoti kā debesis. Viņi mani ieveda durvīs, virs kurām bija izkārtne Barbers, tur darbojās tādi paši ugunīgi rudi cilvēki priekšautos, viņi bija draudzīgi, taču es nesapratu daudz no viņu sarunām, viņiem bija dīvaina izruna. Viņi mani iesēdināja

krēslā, frizieris, kā izrādījās, atvēra skapīti, kas bija piekrauts pilns ar vienādām kastītēm, viņš paņēma vienu tādu, uz tās bija rakstīts Irish Red, viņi man teica, ka, pirms ieeju pilsētā, mani jāsaģatavo, lai pārējā sabiedrība mani pieņemtu kā savējo. Pēc aptuveni stundas mani mati bija rudi, tad mani savās rokās ņēma permanent make-up artist Katy, un pēc diezgan sāpīgas un nepatīkamas procedūras mana seja bija nosēta gaišbrūniem vasarraibumiem. Pēc tam viņi man paziņoja, ka esmu gatava, tikai vēl viena lieta — viņi man uzdāvināja The Concise Dictionary of Gaelic. Iekšā bija ielikta lapiņa ar biežāk lietojamiem izteicieniem pirmajam laikam.

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No citiem paslepšus debesis vērojošajiem uzzināju, ka ir arī citas ieejas, viņi man uzzīmēja karti, un es apstaigāju šīs vietas, daudzi no portāliem bija kapličas, kur rūķi glabāja savus zelta podus. Tie bija portāli starp tagadni un pagātņi, mājām un Īriju, taču es nekad nemēģināju neko vairāk, nebāzu galvu ārā pa šķirbu, neskatījos, kas notiek virszemē, jo mani būtu ieraudzījuši mazie zaļie rūķīši — spiegi un portālu sargātāji, bet es nevēlējos pamest šo laimīgo zemi, kur par cilvēkiem tika gādāts, sākot no friziera reizi mēnesī, kurš piekrāsoja saknes ar Irish Red, beidzot ar integrēšanu sabiedrībā un dzīves limeņa celšanu. Īrija piepildīja manus sapņus.

A Solace for Adam's Tree (a collection of stories)

Inga Zolude

Translated from the Latvian by Suzanne McQuade

Thumbelina

I've just come from Nadezhda's Global Human Work Market, an employment agency specializing in emigration to Ireland. I was walking through this old cemetery. I don't really know how I got here. I seem to be lost. I'm walking along the road, happy that I'm finally about to go to Dublin and meet my other relatives, happy, happy, reading the contract and the info packet and suddenly I look up—all around me are these old, crumbling monuments. It wasn't like I couldn't figure out where I was, I knew that this must be the old cemetery. I've been here before, when I was studying at the BA School of Business and Finance. They counted me out quickly. I didn't do well. I did well in general, but I couldn't successfully pass three subjects -- English, German, and Latvian. I've had that disease since childhood where you can't read, can't differentiate the letters, I always had to chisel everything out of my head. In other subjects I listened carefully and memorized and then I could very successfully recite it all. In high school I recorded the lectures with a dictaphone and set aside time to try to identify the words. Of course, now I can read, but it still takes me a little more time and in a stressful test situation I forget pretty much everything, and so I failed languages. But I hated the BA School of Business and Finance anyway. Now I have a much better diploma, I graduated from the

University of Latvia in the Faculty of Economics and Management, nearly with honors; I only got a middle passing grade in psychology. Basically I was diligent. I also learned how to do manicures on the side, give eyelash perms and apply false eyelashes. All women should be able to do that, should be able look after themselves; if not, they cry over the fact that they don't have such and such a guy, while they themselves walk around looking like milkmaids. Look around!

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I've become frightened. It's gone dark now in the park, suddenly there aren't as many young mums or other mere passers-by, these strange looking people have appeared in their place—red-headed, freckled, looking like elves and speaking in an unintelligible language. I try to reassure myself that they're just a creation of my fear, and I look for the exit from the park, but I can't find it. Here at the center there's a strange church with lights burning inside of it, while the outside is dark, dark, black, and all the doors are shut, locked, covered by grates. I walk around the church, pulling on all the doors, but nothing, some of them are practically cemented shut, until I'm startled, no joke, by the sight of two children in the sandbox at the door of the church. They're playing in the dark, speaking in unintelligible syllables; I decide it must be one of those strange languages children have, but on listening further, I understand that it's an actual language, and they look just like all those strangers—their hair in the air, as if blown by the wind, bright red like fire, and faces dotted everywhere with freckles. I hightailed it, racing away from this strange church, running past the crypt, sensing the smell of food cooking and suddenly I remember that I'm hungry, I've

no idea how many hours I've been lost here, the night already grown dark, but my next thought is far more gruesome—they must be bums there in the crypt, bums who cook the very same innocent girls who wander into the park. I run as fast as my legs will carry me, trees racing towards me, I can't avoid them, I run into one with my shoulder, tripped up by roots, I run stooped over, so no one will see me, until the direct hit...

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A golden pot. A pot of gold. God's honest word! I wake from a blackout, roots pressed into my side, head aching from the blow of running into a tree. I'm hoping that it was all a bad dream, and now I'll get up, leave the park, and head home. Even the dark is no longer so impenetrably black, little fires burn here and there. At first I think they're lanterns, but then I notice how the little fires glimmer rather than shine calmly, they literally flicker, then fade completely, as if the electricity had been cut off. Then the little light ignites somewhere else, begins to flicker and fades again. But I'm noticing it get closer to me each time, until it's so close that I can see how it starts like a sparkle, and from that sparkle a flame breaks out, and a tiny little green person too, holding some sort of stone pot emitting these beams of light, then it begins to glimmer, and then it disappears: the flame, the tiny person, even the pot and its beams. And I'm left alone again in the dark, gathering up my Irish papers, rising to my feet and heading towards the road.

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Thank god I'd almost completely recovered from the blow and was heading determinedly towards the road. In the distance I could see cars and buses, I thought I'd manage to find an exit from this park any minute. But when I came almost right up to the road, it started to get further away, I started to run towards it, but it grew even further. I felt like I was running on a treadmill at the gym. Then I stopped and looked at the road, trying to understand how to trick this path that carries me back to the inside of the park, and then I was right up next to the strange entranceless church with its burning lights, and there was the sound of a church choir, voices singing a little melody of an unknown folk song in an unintelligible language. Here I suddenly noticed two people approaching me, and I took a breath. I excused myself and asked for the exit to the park. They looked at me strangely, then in Latvian, with an awful, unrecognizable accent, asked why I wanted to get out. I answered that I would like to get home, I have to say goodbye to my friends and relatives and have to start packing my things, I'm finally headed to Ireland, where I'm going to work as a manager in one of the finest restaurants, where all the stars come to eat. Suddenly I felt an intense pain in my leg, then a jerk, the loss of breath, a sudden shock, and I was pulled into the ground! I'd been caught hold of at the leg by a skeleton, a corpse!

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I came to and soon enough understood that I was alive, there was sand and clumps of dirt in my hair and face, I lay on cold cement, above me, a cement vault, and in the ceiling there were cracks that let the light through, and through which I could see the darkening sky. Several people stood around me,

all of them had faces dotted with freckles and fiery red hair, some of them had underbites. Where am I, I asked, who are you? You're where you're supposed to be. We saw your contract. Yes, I'm going to work in Ireland. You don't have to go anywhere. You're already here. We're in Ireland. But how? I cast a glance around the cement room. This is Ireland? What are you trying to tell me? ! Technically this is Ireland, but we're still only at the entrance. We'll head further soon. And the entrance is through a grave, through the earth? Where am I? ! Is this hell? They picked me up and led me down a hallway, which changed into a narrow lane with little houses on which were posted various signs. A street like any street, only not like any streets in Riga, there was no sky over the rooftops of the houses, but a ceiling painted to look like the sky. They led me to a door signposted "Barbers," there the same fiery red people worked in pinafores, they were friendly, although I didn't understand much of their conversation, they had a strange accent. They sat me in a chair, the hairdresser, as he turned out to be, opened a cupboard stocked full of identical boxes. He took one of them out and on it was written "Irish Red"; he said that before entering the city, I had to prepare myself so that the rest of society would accept me as one of their own. After about an hour my hair was red, then "Permanent Make-up Artist Katy" took me in her hands, and after a rather painful and unpleasant procedure my face was dotted with light brown freckles. After that they informed me that I'm ready, just one more thing—and they gave me *The Concise Dictionary of Gaelic*. Inside, a one-page insert of the most useful beginner phrases.

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From the other secret sky watchers I learned that there are other entrances as well, they drew me a map, and I made the rounds of these places. Several of the portals were crypts where the gnomes kept their pots of gold. These were portals between the present and the past, between home and Ireland, but I never tried anything more, never thrust my head out through the cracks, never looked at what was happening above ground, for I'd see the little green gnomes—spies and portal guards—and didn't want to leave this happy land, where I'd come to be expected, starting with the hairdresser, once a month, who colored my roots with *Irish Red*, and ending with my integration into society and the promise of a better life. Ireland fulfilled all of my dreams.



© Verena Büchler

Iren Nigg

Man wortet sich die Orte selbst (2006)

Wording the Places Oneself

Biography

Iren Nigg was born in 1955 in Schaan, in the Principality of Liechtenstein. She also grew up in Schaan and attended the *Höhere Töcherschule St. Elisabeth*. Nigg then travelled extensively before she studied journalism at the *Institut für Journalistik und Kommunikation, University of Fribourg* in Switzerland, from 1981-1984. After her studies, she did press and PR work for various newspapers and non-profit organisations. From 1997-99 she was responsible for the PR of the association *Aktion Miteinander*, which promoted rights for foreigners in Liechtenstein.

Nigg started publishing short pieces of prose in literary magazines in 1987. In 1988, her first full-length book, *Fieberzeit*, appeared. After that she did not publish much at all until 2005, when 19 short prose texts by her were included in a compilation of writing by regional authors called *Land Sichten II*. In 2006, Nigg published her second book, *Man wortet sich die Orte selbst*.

Synopsis

Man wortet sich die Orte selbst consists of prose texts of different lengths, from short, condensed vignettes to short stories and novellas. In these texts, the author's main concern is the exploration of the creative writing process. Iren Nigg starts at the level of individual words, more specifically, the sounds of words. At this level, she is often inspired by the way children play with new things or words: unbiased, with intense curiosity and serious dedication. When she takes her exploration on to the level of voices, characters and stories, or fragments of stories, the references change. Given the musical quality of Nigg's writing, it is no surprise that dancing is one of the major metaphors for the creative writing process. Plots and characters are subordinated to the musical play of words and Nigg reveals and constructs different layers of meaning in her texts. She addresses stars, animals and human soulmates, among them a brother and a friend. Only rarely does she refer to concrete political events. Life is presented as a screenplay with stages that keep changing, while in the process of creative writing it is always "the heart which is her companion".

Man wortet sich die Orte selbst

Iren Nigg

Junges

Endlich! hab ich ihre Schönheit gesehen. Und habe sie gerettet. Zum erstenmal! hab ich sie schön gesehen... zuvor bin ich mein Leben lang bei ihrem Anblick vor Schreck erstarrt. Der fein geformte Kopf... die warmen braunen Augen und dann! das Zünglein, blitzschnell! ist es herausgeschnellt. Was wollte sie im Hof? auf Steinen! hab sie genommen und ins Gras zurückgebracht. Sich so zu rollen – wie sie das kann! die kleine Schlange. Vor den grossen hat's mir nie gefürchtet, im Gegenteil! ich hatte einmal eine junge Boa um den Hals. Sie hat sich zu erkennen gegeben, mit leichtem Druck... 's war schier entzückend. Und nun die kleine! endlich die Wahrheit sehn: so schön! ist sie, so schön ~ und warm und braun und glänzend. Sich so zu rollen – wie macht sie das? so als Spirale würd ich als nächstes in die Höhe gehn.

Der November macht, was man von ihm erwartet – huch! ist Nebel, wie macht er das? und dunkelt! er den Morgen und den Abend. Macht alles neu, wo ist es? im Nebel, und im Dunkel ist's. Wie macht er das? will uns wohl necken... lehren. Als nächstes wird er auch noch Schnee draufwerfen! ach, im Frühling werden wir ja sehn. Gewiss ist es bis dahin gross geworden... jetzt wirkt der Humus! des Gewesenen.

Die Sprache hat Humor: nichts, sagt sie, gar nichts! als könnte man das Nichts noch steigern. Gar nichts! So oder so, das kleine Ich ist drin verschwunden, fein. Aber die Sonne im Nachmittag! der Spinnwebfaden ~ das Licht ist drauf herumgereist.

Einfach leben, weisst du. Rechtschaffen, heiter – und ein Mensch. Bin kein Roboter, darf Fehler machen, soll ich? einfach leben! na los. Einen neuen Namen! erschaffen, bald ist Dezember. Bei Mutter wird der Christbaum stehn. Aber die Strassen blenden! vor Glitzer – besser weitergehn.

Am Rauch dort drüben erkenne ich den Südwind. Oh! unwiderruflich... dieser Tag.

An Wunder glaub ich, ich hab den Hund! gesehn, im Sommer, er ist gerettet worden. Im Wald hör ich sein Schreien, ich war schon auf dem Rückweg, da bin ich umgekehrt, und hab den Schritt beschleunigt, Weh! hab ich empfunden, gehört. Ich hab's geortet, es kam aus einem hohen Haufen Holz. Hab da hineingesprochen: Hilfe! geh ich holen, halte durch! und bin gerannt, quer durch den Wald bin ich gerannt. Drei Männer mit Beil und Axt und Säge haben die blonde Hündin rausgeholt, ihr Bestes haben sie gegeben und eine ganze Stunde! hat's gedauert, bis sie geborgen war. Sie war verletzt, erschöpft... und kürzlich hat sie mein Gesicht geschleckt, ein Wiedersehen... heil! das schöne Wesen. Drei Tage muss es eingesperrt gewesen sein im Holz, zum Glück! war Regen.

Unwiderruflich... dieses Jahr; und endlich! Abschied.

Schuldlos bin ich, frei.

2

Die höchsten! Wolken sind aus reinem Eis... es sind die Sehnsuchtswolken, auch wenn sie nicht so heißen, die Cirren – Frau Holle, bist du da? Machst du die Federwolken? Windbäume... den richtigen Namen haben sie. Wind ~ nimmst

du mich mit? Cirren, Cirren! in den Himmel. *Der Wind, der Wind, das himmlische Kind* – alles! darf er sein, der Wind, sanft und stürmisch, wild und heiss und kalt. Er muss nur Wind sein, Wind ~ und ich? Nebel! kommt wieder auf, im Januar mag ich ihn gar nicht, verschwinde! Nebel, geh. Keine Kraft, die Sonne. Im Rauhreif schwarz! die Vögel. Falsches Denken, Unvermögen ist ewige Rache an sich selbst... Nichts! hindert das Gemüt an Heiterkeit, wenn man vergeben hat, und losgelassen. Was ist der Sinn des Lebens? hab ich einmal eine junge Frau gefragt. Glücklich sein! war ihre Antwort und gross! und schelmisch lachend ihre Augen. Recht wird sie haben... Kinder wissen es. Zu kokettieren mit dem Unglück, das Denken darum kreisen lassen: käme Kindern niemals in den Sinn. Dafür ist die Form des Kreises nicht gedacht...

Manchmal ist das Leben Winter. Die Natur! lässt ihn geschehn. Leb wohl – ein wunderschöner Wunsch, lieb! wie meine Katze.

Ich lebe wohl.

Ist Winter.

Leb wohl.

Was würd ich tun, wenn ich in Urlaub wäre? auf der Erde. Würd alle Sprachen lernen, viele! würd tanzen, singen, spielen würd ich Tag und Nacht, würd alles tun, was mich zum Lachen bringt und alles! was spannend ist und Freude macht. In Augen sehn, vertrauen! von Kindern lernen. Alle Zeiten lieben. Nachts! ging' ich ins Universum. Hey, bin ab sofort in Urlaub! auf der Erde. Faszinierend... mit Tieren sprechen, mit dem Wasser, und mit Sternen. Welcher Stern ich selber bin? hab keine Ahnung, an den Augen! müsste man's erkennen. Was Erwachsene eins vergessen, kann ins Ungeheuerliche gehn – seit zwei Wochen muss ich darum an das Rätsel denken: *Was*

ist grösser als Gott? Bösertiger als der Teufel? Die Armen haben es. Die Glücklichen brauchen es. Und wenn du es isst, stirbst du. Kleine Kinder wissen es sofort und zweifelsohne, während die Erwachsenen sich verlieren... weitab, weitab! verirren sie – genügen ein paar Zeilen nur, um zu vergessen? dass nichts, gar nichts! grösser ist als Gott... bin immer noch verschreckt.

Freitag abend, Winter. Will ich den Winter nutzen, will kuscheln! in mich selbst, bei mir daheim. Ohne Lärm... ganz still, gemütlich! soll es sein. Was höre ich da drinnen? hell! ist der Himmel heut und hell! die Erde. *Blumen soll man nur dann ablichten, wenn die Sonne scheint – sonst leuchten sie nicht.* Soll ich mal wieder in den Spiegel schau? der Entzug von Sonne ist vorbei, der Februar! hat sie zurückgebracht, bald wird sie kräftig sein. Ich hör den Ton der Hoffnung... nicht weit! den Ton der Leichtigkeit. An Wunder glaub ich.

Ein- und derselbe Schnee! ist Schmuck geworden, durch die Sonne.

Wenn ich Atem gebe, geht er durchs Universum? Und wenn ich Atem nehme, an welchem Rhythmus nehme ich teil? Was ist Liebe? Und warum fühl ich nicht? den Flügelschlag des Schmetterlings in China ~ das Universum fühlt! ihn, als Orkan... muss unermesslich reich und mächtig die Liebe sein. Ist sie geheim? Fühlen will ich! den Flügelschlag des Schmetterlings ~ wenn nötig als Orkan, lieb! sei mein Atem zum Universum.

Bin Nora, Aron! will die Geschichte kennenlernen, wo die Liebe ist.

Saat! Ernte...

Selbstvertrauen säe ich als erstes aus und wertvoll! bin ich, das ganze Universum hat's gehört, bin gut. Saatgut, kostbar!

werf ich aus, die Freude. Nur Gift darf nicht hinein – kein Zweifel! darf den Samen töten. Wille, grosse Willenskraft! wach auf. Und bloss nicht rückwärts schau... Holzscheite kann man brauchen – wird Scheitern auch für etwas gut gewesen sein. Das Gute! in meinem Leben will ich anerkennen, sehn. Frohmut ist ein kluges Wort... und denk ich an das Echo...

Hohe Kunst! die Sonne...

Und, lieber Gott, wie bist du bloss auf die Idee gekommen, das Schnurren zu erfinden! und das Miauen, und den Wind ~ das Lachen! und das Kind... wie! auf das Atmen ~ Geheimnis... ist im Atem, ich dehn die Flanken! weit. Ist irgendwie doch komisch, in dieser Form, in einem Körper! zu sein. Die Flanken dehn ich, weit. Bin Nora, Aron – ich atme aus! und ein.

3

Brot, Brote – ein Olivenbrot, würzig, salzig! wähl ich aus. Braucht nicht mal Butter, ist eine Mahlzeit ganz für sich allein. Die Einfachheit... ist wundervoll, ist köstlich. Brot brechen... und gestern habe ich ein Liebespaar gesehn, ihr Lächeln war wie eins. Kommt der Frühling? Oder ist er ausgewandert für alle Zeit? Blüten! treibt die Orchidee in meinem Fenster. Unten hör ich die Gitarre spielen, am Radio. Reizlos scheint die Landschaft draussen, ohne Farbe, leblos. Akzeptieren... akzeptieren, selber Leben schaffen, innen, Orange! und helles Gelb, und Grün. Mozart danken, Bach, Vivaldi. Warum nicht selber einen Engel erschaffen? einen Engel! für mich allein. Nach meiner Vorstellung! wird er wirksam sein. Mein Gespieler, mein Vertrauter, so einen hatt ich doch! als

Kind. Aber später hab ich ihn entlassen. Der wird staunen... Wenn ich die Sache mit Katz und Maus begreifen dürfte, bitte; das sag ich ihm zuerst. Ich weiss tatsächlich nichts... und wird er lachen? herzen! soll er mich, und mir erklären – Gott; ich bin kein Kind mehr. Schaukeln, wiegen ~ soll er mich, mich in die Lüfte heben, er ist sehr gross.

Mich herzen... so dass ich tue, was die Sonne tut.

Ist März, April! die Sonne. Bärlauch pflücken und aufs Butterbrot! das würzige Grün. Und ins Olivenöl, in alle Saucen! die Kraft, sie mundet. Atmen, Licht! neu ist das Jahr. Ich werd mir Arbeit geben lassen. Tun, was die Sonne tut... das will ich. Und werd auch nie mehr einsam sein, versprochen. Als kleine Sonne –

4

Im eignen Universum gibt's einen Punkt! da kann man lernen, glücklich zu sein, man muss nur klopfen. Innen! am linken Knie, nur daran klopfen, eine kleine Weile. So wurde mir gesagt, von berufner Seite. Klopf! klopfklopf. Während ich mich frage, wer ist der Schmetterling? Ist's meine Lunge? Ich fühle! die Lungenflügel... beim tiefen Atmen. Klopfklopf... Oder die Nieren sind's, die Lungen! sind der Adler. Ach, Schmetterling ~

Ich glaub, der Schmetterling ist nicht allein, ich hab schon zwei! gesehn, in diesem Jahr.

Neuerdings hat das Kamel grosse Sympathie bei mir gefunden: Wenn man es selber ist, im Tanz, fühlt man – es ist ein gutes, es ist ein liebes! Tier, weich die Bewegung, graziös, erhaben. Man muss ihm nur Musik aus seinem Land vorspielen, schon lächelt's, und setzt sich in Bewegung. – Ich setz mich in Bewegung, in Richtung Nadelöhr? die ersten Blüten

seh ich, Musik! paar Tropfen Regen. Ululala. Ruft endlich jemand meine Seele? Bitte Musik! aus meinem Land.

Ululala. Es regnet jetzt so frech: ohne zu fragen! Die Antwort meiner Katze tönt nicht nett. Es rauchen die Kamine. Es dunstet die ganze Welt. Dämmerung wird sein. Ululala, lula.

Am Rauch dort drüben erkenne ich den Nordwind. Oh! unwi-
derruflich, dieser Tag.

Hier ist alles jung, die Eiben, Lärchen, jung – wo bin ich?
Schlüsselblumen, üppig! am Weg. Aus der Mauer stossen
winzige Farne, aus der Mauer! Farne.

Lieber Gott, danke, dass du unaussprechlich bist...

Roh, der Acker. Ist die Zukunft schon gesät? Nora, Aron –
Und hier, hier ist ein Zeitraum ganz für sich, die Ebene durch-
brochen nur von Birken, Weiden, und von ergrautem Stall.
Welche Zeit hat dieser Raum? Der Kiesel feiner als in der Welt.
Wind... treibt silbrige Gestalten übers Gras, Flüchtige. Silber,
flüchtig. Ein echter Reiter. Und verbotene Wege! wo die Vögel
brüten. Kunstschritte zeigt das Pferd; dann aber seh ich seine
Mähne fliegen. Pferd! Ich hauche Leben in meine Hand. Und
grüsse; ich werde wiederkommen, ich komme wieder. Dort
hinten ein bewegter kleiner See – Spielsee der Vögel?

Ich hab ans linke Knie geklopft, am Morgen, beim Kaffee,
klopfklopf. Spannend, denk ich, in meinem Körper ist Sili-
cium, genau wie in der Erde, und wird für jedes Bauwerk ver-
wendet, und Magnesium! für den Flugzeugbau – haben die
Vögel etwa mehr Magnesium im Körper als ich? Klopfklopf.
Ob's dem jungen Mann auch helfen würde? Oder sind seine
Knie tot? Wie kommt's, dass er im Rollstuhl sitzt? mich bittet,

seine Plastikflasche zu versorgen, gehorchen seine Hände nicht? sehr sympathisch, sein Geruch und schade! fährt er ein Stück weiter, gegen Norden, er ist gewiss ein Dichter. Ist er dabei zu lernen, stark zu sein: widerstandslos, weich?

Gebt ihm Silicium und Magnesium, zeigt ihm den Punkt! in seinem Universum, innen, am linken Knie, daran mag er klopfen. Lernen, glücklich zu sein.

Wind lodert an meiner Haut.

Gras züngelt.

Huflattich – lange nicht gesehn, salut! und Sumpfdotter, mmh, schöne Blumen. Keine stellt ihr Licht unter den Scheffel.

Ans Hungerblümchen denk ich: Das Kleine traut sich gar als eins der ersten aus dem Boden, Hut ab! und ich, ich lass mir Arbeit geben, bald. Das wird spannend! da draussen. Aber noch ist April, er ist zum Oeffnen da – aprire, öffnen, ja.

Das einzig Störende im Gehen: man selbst – der Lärm der eigenen Schritte; hier wäre Stille... da...

Löwenzahn wird durch die Luft getragen, als flauschiger kleiner Schirm, als Same – Biegung, eine Biegung! macht der Weg und nur die Biegung kann ich sehen, nicht! den weiteren Weg. Vögel sind zu hören ~ sichtbar einer, zwei.

5

Nicht gegen eine Fliege kämpfen! hab ich heut gelernt, wann kann ich's üben? wenn's denn sein muss... War nämlich nicht mehr ich... Zwei Stunden hat sie mich geplagt heut in der frühesten Früh – nun weiss ich, wie es ist, voll Hass zu sein und morden wollen, morden! schlecht war mir, als ich endlich

aufstand... Pardon, lieb' Gott, dich hatt ich ganz vergessen, ist ja deine Fliege, hm. Nächstes mal sprech ich mit ihr: ich werd ihr einfach sagen, dass ich gottgegeben bin, dann fällt wohl auch bei ihr der Groschen runter. Hm.

Und wenn ich gottgegeben bin, muss ich ein liebenswertes Wesen sein... ich will's mir merken, hm.

Will gut! über mich denken, dann werd ich immer schöner, so hab ich's mit dem Farn gemacht, er war noch klein, ich hab ihm jeden Tag geflüstert, wie einzigartig und wie wundervoll er sei – einen solchen! nie gesehen! staunen heut die Leut.

Und spielt der Wind die Wolken ~

Und spiel ich Leben, hm?

Spiel Nora Aron, hab ich den Text dabei.

Kein Grollen, das Gewitter ist vorbei, erhellt das Grün sich wieder, Licht! ein Glanz in allem. Und Sommer ist der Wald und Sommer! ist mein Rosenbäumchen, Fülle ~ nie hab ich eine solche Fülle an rosa Blüten an ihm gesehn. Dabei hatt ich gedacht, ich hätt's zu Tode geschnitten im Frühling, üh! so viel geschnitten... kenn mich mit Rosenschneiden doch nicht aus. Merkwürdig, man stellt sich unter Fülle üppig Schweres vor, doch wie ich mit Entzücken sehe, ist wahre Fülle leicht ~ Jung ist der Lavendel, Geheimnis... die kleine Tanne strahlt, und überall auf dem Balkon sind Steine, Kinder haben sie bemalt.

Wording the Places Oneself

Iren Nigg

Translated from the German by Marissa Grünes

Youthful

Finally! I've seen her beauty. And have rescued her. For the first time! I've seen her beautiful... my whole life I've been paralyzed with fear at her gaze. The finely-formed head... the warm brown eyes and then! the little tongue, quick as lightning! it's whisked out. What did she want in the courtyard? on the stones! I took her and put her back in the grass. To coil oneself up like that – how she can do that! the little snake. I've never feared the big ones, on the contrary! once I had a young boa around my neck. She announced herself with a light pressure... it was utterly enthralling. And now the little one! finally seeing the truth: she's so beautiful! so beautiful ~ and warm and brown and gleaming. To coil oneself up like that – how does she do that? like that, as a spiral, I'd go upwards next.

November does what's expected of him – oh! it's fog, how does he do that? and he darkens! the morning and the evening. Makes everything new, where is it? in fog, and in darkness it lies. How does he do that? seems to want to taunt us... to teach. Next he'll throw snow outside! ah, in spring we'll see. It will certainly have grown great by then... now acts the humus! of what's past.

Language has her humor: nothing, she says, absolutely nothing! as if one could further increase nothing. Absolutely nothing! Somehow or other the little Me has vanished inside, smoothly. But the afternoon sun! the strand of cobweb ~ the light has been traveling along it.

Just living, you know. Upright, cheerful – and a person. I'm not a robot, am allowed to make mistakes, should I? just live! come on. To create a new name! soon it will be December. There will be a Christmas tree at Mother's. But how the streets dazzle! with glitter – better to go on.

By the smoke over there I know the southerly wind. Oh! irrevocable... this day.

I believe in miracles, I saw the dog! in summer, it was saved. In the forest I hear its screaming, I was already on my way back, but I turned around and quickened my pace, pain! I felt, heard. I located it, it came from a tall pile of lumber. I spoke into it: Help! is on its way, hang in there! and I went running, cutting across the woods. Three men with hatchet and axe and saw got the blonde bitch out, they gave it their all and it took a whole hour! until she was safe and sound. She was bruised, exhausted... and recently she kissed my face, a homecoming... healed! the beautiful being. Three days she must've been imprisoned in the wood, luckily! there was rain. Irrevocable... this year; and finally! parting. I am guiltless, free.

2

The highest! clouds are of pure ice... these are yearning clouds, even if they're not called that, the cirrus clouds – Frau Holle, are you there? Do you make the feather clouds? Mare's tails... they have the right name. Wind ~ will you take me with you? cirri, cirri! to the sky. *The wind, the wind, the heaven-born wind* – he can be everything! the wind, mild and blustery, wild and hot and cold. He must be only the wind, wind ~ and I? fog! rises again, in January I don't like the fog at all, clear out! fog, go. No strength, the sun. In hoarfrost black! the birds. Wrongheaded thinking, lack of means is eternal revenge on itself...nothing! bars the mind from cheerfulness, if one has forgiven and let go. What is the meaning of life? I once asked a young woman. To be happy! was her answer and great! and impishly laughing her eyes. She's right... children know it. To flirt with misfortune, allow one's thoughts to circle it: this would never occur to children. The form of the circle isn't meant for that...

Sometimes life is winter. Nature! lets it happen.

Fare well – a beautiful wish, lovely! like my cat.

I fare well.

It's winter.

Fare well.

What would I do if I were on vacation? on earth. I'd learn every language, many! would dance and sing, play day and night, would do everything that makes me laugh and everything! that's thrilling and brings joy. Look others in the eyes, learn trust! from children. Love forever. At night! I'd go into the universe. Hey, from now on, I'm on vacation! on earth. Fascinating... to speak with animals, with water, and with stars. Which star am I myself? have no idea, by the eyes! one

should recognize it. What adults forget can shade into the monstrous – for two weeks I’ve been mulling over the riddle: *What is greater than God? More evil than the devil? The poor have it. The happy need it. And when you eat it, you die.* Small children know it immediately and with certainty, while adults get lost... far off, far off! they stray – are a few lines enough to forget? that nothing, absolutely nothing! is greater than God... it still frightens me.

Friday evening, winter. I want to make use of the winter, want to snuggle! in myself, at home. Without noise... how hushed, cozy! it should be. What do I hear inside? bright! is the sky today and bright! the earth. *One should only take photos of flowers when the sun shines – otherwise they don’t glow.* Should I look in the mirror again? The retreat of the sun is over, February! has brought the sun back, soon the light will be strong. I hear the sound of hope... not far! the sound of lightness. I believe in miracles.

One-and-the-same snow! has been bejeweled by the sun.

When I release my breath, does it go through the universe? When I take a breath, in what rhythm do I participate? What is love? And why do I not feel? the wing beat of a butterfly in China ~ the universe feels! it as a hurricane... how immeasurably rich and strong the love must be. Is it secret? I want to feel! the butterfly’s wing beat ~ if necessary, as a hurricane, beloved! be my breath to the universe.

I’m Nora, Aron! want to get to know history, where love is.

Sow! Reap...

I sow self-confidence first of all and how worthwhile! I am, the whole universe has heard it, I am good. Seeds, precious!

I toss out, joy. Only poison may not come in – no doubts! may be allowed to kill the seeds. Will, great willpower! awake. And just don't look back... one can use pieces of wood – even something in pieces will have been good and useful. I will acknowledge, see the good! in my life. Lightheartedness is an astute word... and I think of the echo...

High art! the sun...

And, dear God, how did you come upon the idea to invent purring! and meowing, and the wind ~ laughter! and the child... how! upon breathing ~ mystery... is in the breath, I expand my sides! wide. It's somehow funny to be in this form, in a body! I expand my sides, wide. I'm Nora, Aron – I breathe out! and in.

3

Bread, breads – I choose an olive bread, tangy, salty! Doesn't even need butter, it's a meal all to itself. The simplicity... is wonderful, is delicious. To break bread... and yesterday I saw a couple, their smile was as one. Is spring coming? Or has he emigrated for all time? Orchid blossoms! open in my window. Below I hear guitar-playing on the radio. Stale, the landscape outside seems colorless, lifeless. To accept... to accept, to create life oneself, inside, orange! and bright yellow, and green. Thank Mozart, Bach, Vivaldi. Why not create an angel myself? an angel! just for me. After my own imagination! he'll take effect. My playmate, my confidant, like the one I had! as a child. But later I let him go. The angel will marvel... If I might be allowed to grasp the case of cat and mouse, please; I'll say that to him first. I know literally nothing... and will he laugh? he should hug! me, and explain to me – God; I'm not a

child anymore. Cradle, sway ~ me, that's what he should do, he should lift me in the air, he is very great.

He should hug me... so that I do, what the sun does.

It's March, April! the sun. To pick wild garlic and eat buttered bread! spread with the spicy green. And dip it in olive oil, in all sauces! the strength is delicious. Breathing, light! the year is new. I'll grant myself work. To do what the sun does... that's what I want. And I'll never be lonely, it's promised. As a small sun –

4

In one's own universe, there's a point! where one can learn to be happy, just by knocking. Inside! on the left knee, just knock there for a little while. So I was told by a competent authority. Knock! Knockknock. While I ask myself, who is the butterfly? Is it my lungs? I feel! my lungs unfold... when I breathe deeply. Knockknock... or it's the kidneys, the lungs! are the eagle. Ah, butterfly ~

I believe the butterfly isn't alone, I've already seen two! this year.

Lately the camel has aroused great sympathy in me: If one turns into a camel when dancing, one feels – it is a good, it is a lovely! animal, its motion supple, graceful, dignified. One need only play him music from his own land, then he laughs and sets himself in motion. – I set myself in motion, toward the eye of a needle? I see the first blossoms, music! a pair of raindrops. Ululala. Does someone finally call out to my soul? Please, music! from my own land.

Ululala. The rain has gotten fresh: it pours without even asking! My cat's answer doesn't sound nice. The chimneys smoke. The whole world lies in mist. Twilight will come. Ululala, lula.

By the smoke there I recognize the northerly wind. Oh! irrevocable, this day.

Here everything is young, the yews, larches, young – where am I? Primroses, lush! along the path. On the wall jostle tiny ferns, along the wall! ferns. Dear God, thank you that you are unsayable.

The field is untended. Is the future already sown? Nora, Aron – And here, here is a space of time all to oneself, the field broken up only by birches, pasture land, and a graying barn. What time is it in this place? The pebble smoother than in the world. Wind... drives silvery forms over the grass, fugitives. Silver, fleeting. A true horseman. And forbidden paths! where the birds brood. The horse dances a few steps; but then I see his mane fly. Horse! I breathe life into my hand. And greet; I will return, I come back. There behind a small, stirred lake – playing-lake of the birds?

I knocked on the left knee, in the morning as I drank my coffee, knockknock. Exciting, I think, there's silicon in my body, just as in the earth, and that's used in every building, and magnesium! for airplane construction – do the birds have more magnesium in their bodies than me? Knockknock. Would it also help the young man? Or are his knees dead? How has it come that he sits in a wheelchair? he asks me to look after his plastic bottle, do his hands not obey? very agreeable, his smell and a shame! he drives further away, toward the north, he is certainly a poet. Is he learning to be strong: unresisting, supple?

Give him silicon and magnesium, show him the point! in his universe, inside, on the left knee, let him knock there. Learn to be happy.

Wind blazes on my skin.

The grass flickers.

Coltsfoot – long time no see, greetings! and marsh marigold, mmh, beautiful flowers. They don't hide their light under a bushel.

I think about the shadflower: the little one dares to be among the first out of the earth, hats off! and I, I'll grant myself work, soon. That will be exciting! there outside. But it's still April, it waits to be opened – *aprire*, open, yes.

The one disturbance in walking: one's self – the noise of one's own steps; otherwise it would be silent... here...

Dandelion is carried through the air, as a tiny fluffy shield, as a seed – turning, a turning! in the path and I can only see the curve, not! the way beyond. Birds can be heard ~ one, two are visible.

5

Not to fight with a fly! is what I learned today, when can I practice it? if it must be... wasn't myself anymore... Two hours it plagued me today in the early dawn – now I know what it is to be full of hate and to want to murder, murder! felt ill when I finally got up... Pardon, dear god, I completely forgot you, it is *your* fly, hm. Next time I'll talk to it: I'll simply tell it that I'm god-given, then maybe the penny will drop for it as well. Hm.

And if I'm god-given, I must be a being worthy of love... I want to keep that in mind, hm.

I want to think good! of myself, then I'll grow more beautiful, just as I did with the fern, it was still small, and each day I whispered to it, how unique and how wonderful it was – such a one! never seen before! people marvel today.

And does the wind play the clouds ~

And do I play life, hm?

Play Nora Aron, I have the text with me.

No rumbling, the storm is past, the green brightens itself again, light! a brilliance in everything. And summer is the forest and summer! is my little rosebush, abundance ~ never have I seen such an abundance of pink blossoms on it. And here I thought I'd clipped it to death in spring, huh! chopped so much... I don't know anything about cutting roses. Strange, one imagines abundance as luxurious heaviness, but as I see with delight, true abundance is light ~

The lavender is young, secret... the small fir tree glows, and everywhere on the balcony are stones, children have colored them.



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Immanuel Mifsud

Fl-Isem tal-Missier (tal-iben) (2010)

In the Name of the Father (and of the Son)

Publishing House **Klabb Kotba Maltin**

Biography

Immanuel Mifsud was born in Malta in 1967, the youngest in a working class family of eight children. He has been active on the literary scene since the age of 16, when he started writing poetry and co-founded the literary group Versarti. He later founded several drama groups and also directed plays written by himself and by a variety of famous playwrights. He is a leading contemporary poet and fiction writer and some of his works have been translated and published in some European countries and the USA. His 2002 short story collection *L-Istejjer Strambi ta' Sara Sue Sammut (Sara Sue Sammut's Strange Stories)* won the Malta National Literary award and the same book was later nominated for the Premio Strega Europa prize. He has participated in prestigious literary festivals across Europe. Mifsud is a lecturer at the University of Malta, where he teaches modern Maltese poetry and theatre.

Synopsis

Back from his father's funeral, the narrator starts reading a diary his father kept during his days as a soldier during the Second World War. The diary is very scant, almost impersonal, but it is exactly this impersonality which pushes the narrator to re-examine the personal relationship he had with his father. The father, who the son knew only as a cripple after he had been injured in a motorcycle accident, had always tried to convince those around him that he was tough enough to withstand all hardship, and had tried to bring up his son in his mould. The narrator revisits his father's past, as well as his own, to look for cracks in this façade, to find signs of weakness and displays of emotion. This turns out to be an opportunity to also look back at his own upbringing and especially at the way he had been educated to become a man. Episodes from the past are recalled and examined for any light they can shed on the matter. The narrator is not only older, which makes him attach new meanings to old events, but he has also changed in two other ways, which both influence the way he now sees things: he has just himself become a father, and he has become a scholar. He has read things that his working-class father would never understand, let alone know that they would be used to understand him.

Fl-Isem tal-Missier (tal-iben)

Immanuel Mifsud

L-Addolorata. Fuq il-qabar t'ommok. Minn wara nuċċali b'lenti ħoxna u skura, rajt id-demgħa niezla. Ma kellhiex tagħmel hekk, imma qabżet u żżerżqet. Ħsibt li ma rajt xejn, imma jien kont qed inħarislek. Jien dejjem kont inħarislek lilek, dejjem nġhasses fuqek, ħalli nara kif qed iġġib ruġek. Bħal meta qbadtek titfa' idek wara dahrek u toħroġ qrun malli xi ħadd ma nafux qallek li alla jbierkek minkejja l-età, minkejja l-mankament li kellek f'sieqek ix-xellugija, minkejja x-xeni li rajt. Jien dejjem attent għalik kont inkun. U dakinhar rajtek b'did-demgħa niezla kollha mistħija, bħalma stħajt meta ġbidtlek l-attenzjoni għal demgħa niezla ma' ħaddek. Stħajt minni dakinhar, aktar u aktar meta mort nigħannaq mal-fardal b'riħa taqşam ta' tewm u basal li kienet liebsa martek u ħabbart lil kull min kien miġbur li koint rajtek tibki.

Ma kontx naf li s-suldati jibku wkoll.

Kont naħseb li s-suldati kienu tal-azzar.

Kont naħseb li wiċċhom dejjem imqit u b'saħħtu u qawwi.

Kont naħseb li jien biss nibki, li jien biss nagħmel dak li mhux suppost nagħmel.

Bħal dakinhar.

Dakinhar.

Dak

kien iż-żmien meta kont tgħidli li jien ma nistax nibki. Jien tifel. Ma tistax issir raġel jekk tibki. Kif għadek tibki tifel bhalek? Int taqleb kulm'hawn, u tibki? Ma tistax tibki, fhimt? Ma tistax.

Imma jien nibki. U nisthi meta nibki. U nisthi għax jien mhux suppost nibki. U nisthi aktar għax – trid tkun tafha din? – nieħu gost nibki. Nieħu gost inħoss dak l-ilma sħun iġelben. Nieħu gost inħoss imnieħri jitrass, għajnejja jingħasru. Nieħu gost nara kollox imżelleġ.

Nieħu gost ma nobdikx.

Nieħu gost nibża' minnek għax int tal-biża'. Għax int tħares lejja u bil-ħarsa kerha li tagħtini twerwirni. U nibża' u nilbet.

Anki int tibki.

Suldat, anki int tibki.

Bħal dakinhar li miet ta' maġenbek. Ma bkejtx dakinhar li rajtu jintlaqat? Ma bkejtx?

Bħal dakinhar li rajt kollox jiġġarraf quddiemek.

Bħal kull meta tiftakar li t-tieg tiegħek sar ġo xelter.

Taħt dik il-lanterna

ħdejn dak il-kancell,

qalbi kif niftakrek

tistenna dejjem hemm.

Kont issejjaħli m'nn taħt l-ilsien,

u tgħid li tħobbni u dejjem int

Wie einst Lili Marlene,

Wien einst Lili Marlene.

Is-sigarett jitgħażzen fir-rokna ta' ħalqek. Il-kappell imniżżel għal fuq għajnejk. Humphrey Bogart. Casablanca. Tripli. Bengazi. Il-qmis bl-għonq illamtat. L-ingravata b'għoqda żgħira u ssikkata. Il-ħarsa. Il-mustacċi rqaq fuq wiċċ lixx, riħa ta' sapun tal-lehja kull filgħodu qabel ma tilhaq titla' x-xemx. *Wie einst Lili Marlene, Wie einst Lili Marlene.*

U allura fuq il-qabar tal-familja, xhin nara d-demgħa li mhux suppost rajt, nibqa' ssummat.

Jien, Ġużeppi Marija Mifsud, mill-Belt Valletta, bin Pawla u Salvu, proletarju u Soċjalist anki jekk jekk qatt ma qbadt u qrajt il-kotba l-homor (għax dawk miżmuma minn Ommna l-Knisja Appostolika rumana, u għax għalkemm naf naqra xi haġa, mohħi mhuwiex mixhut għal-qari ta' kotba tqalu ħżiena), suldat fit-Tieni Gwerra Dinjija, assenjat fuq il-kanuni anti-aircraft, niddefendi lil art twelidi mill-attakki mill-ajru tal-bgħula Faxxisti Taljani u ta' dawk il-ħnieżer Nazisti, nissogra ħajti għal art twelidi, għall-familja li Alla għoġbu jafdali, bit-tpingija fuq dirgħajja għax jien suldat proletarju, kapural, u mbaġhad surġent tal-King's Own Malta Regiment u r-Royal Malta Artillery, fuq Bigi u Tignè, ninxtewa bl-azzar jikwi, nitbagħal kif bdejt nagħmel minn tfuliti wara li ommi romlot għat-tieni darba, niġri fit-toroq b'żarbuna waħda biex ma ngharraqx il-par shiħ, nagħmel dak li jiġi għal idejja ħalli mmantni lil ommi u lil ħuti iżgħar minni, u nitgħallem il-ħajja fil-kantunieri, fil-ħwienet tax-xorb jien u naħsel il-platti u t-tazzi kollha bżieq u zlazi u isfar tal-bajd moqli, jien u naqta' l-biljetti fuq tal-linja, jien u nġhawweġ dahri ganċ fil-fabbriki tal-Marsa u nimtela nugrufun u frak tal-faħam, jien u nibni l-muskoli, jien u nsir raġel kif għandhom ikunu l-irġiel, jien u nqaddes il-ħefa u nispira lill-Moviment tal-Ħaddiema, jien u nġix u mmur u nimmira ħalli noqtol lil dak l-għadu li qed itajjar l-ajruplani ħalli jtajjarli rasi, jien u nsir, jien u nkun, jien u jien.

Ta' sebgħa u erbghin sena lqajt fi ħdani t-tmien wild, l-ghaxar wieħed li kellhom jghixu kollha. U lill-Mulej ghidtlu: Mulej, tkun magħmula r-rieda tiegħek, ghax avolja ħsibt li issa wasal iż-żmien li nistrieħ wara li rabbejt familja u ddefendejt lil art twelidi u l-Fidi Mqaddsa, il-Providenza Tiegħek ħarset lejja mis-smewwiet u lemħet il-ħila tiegħi u għarfet li għad għandi s-saħħa minkejja dak li ġrali u dak li rajt u dak li għaddejt minnu, u baġhtitli wild iehor. Ma nafx kif se ngħajjex lil din iż-żieda mhux mistennija, imma nafda fik, Mulej, kif dejjem għamilt.

Ta' sebgħa u tmenin sena, Mulej, għoġbok issejjahli għal għandek.

Guzeppi Marija Mifsud, magħruf bħala l-Kikkra.

Ha nara tafx din: b'subgħajk ġo toqbitha u b'xufftejk ma' xoffitha. Ha nara, x'inhi?

U jien nihmar għax mohħi diġà thammeg, u nissuspetta li int indunajt u qiegħed tipprova tkejjal kemm thammeg diġà. *Isa, x'inhi? Subgħajk ġo toqbitha u xufftejk ma' xoffitha.* U jien nibqa' kwiet għax ma nafx x'int tistenna mingħandi: intix tara sirtx raġel jew għadnix it-tifel li dejjem kont. U mbagħad titbissem u tgħidli: *Kikkra, ħmar!* Sewwa, kikkra. Kont qed naħseb, fl-isqaqien imġiddma ta' moħi li jixbhu t-toroq li ggerrejt fihom b'żarbuna waħda, li kont qed titkellem fuq dik li kont magħha lbieraħ filgħaxija meta suppost mort nisma' l-quddiesa tal-Ewwel Ġimgħa tax-xahar. Il-Kikkra l-laqam tiegħek, hux hekk? Mifsud il-Kikkra.

Iż-żarbun tqil u iswed. Żarbuna mhux bħall-oħra. Suppost daż-żarbun jaħbilek il-mankament. Xi mkien lejn il-Madliena, suldat tiela' telgħa fuq mutur. Xi mkien il-Madliena, suldat mixħut f'għalqa mitluf minn sensih. Sena l-isptar militari ta' Bigi. Sena oħra fi sptar militari Londra.

Meta tasal tinxtehet fuq l-ewwel sigġu li ssib u tħoll iż-żarbun. Dejjem tħoll iż-żarbuna tax-xellug l-ewwel. U titlobni niġi nnehhilek iż-żarbun. U nħossu tqil meta fl-aħħar jirnexxili naqlaghhulek. U tghidli npoġġih pulit taht is-sodda. U timxi qisek dgħajsa fil-maltemp. U l-maltemp jihrax hekk kif tneħhi ż-żarbun. Minkejja s-sigaretti n-nifs jibqa' tajjeb u tinzel fil-qiegħ nett it-Torri tax-Xgħajra ha ttella' r-rizzi. Għexieren ta' rizzi fil-bixkilli. Irejhu l-baħar. Jien ma nafhiex ir-riħa tar-rizzi, u t-Torri tax-Xgħajra ma nżilt qatt u l-qiegħ skur ibezzagħni. Jien nibza', nibza' minn hafna affarijiet: miċ-ċimiterju li tħobb toħodni fih Hadd iva u Hadd le; miż-żwiemel kbar tal-kavallerija tal-pulizija li teħodni nara; minn sieqek ix-xellugija mgħawġa ganċ; mill-klieb; mill-ġurati li jtiru maċ-ċentufolju fir-rokna tal-biħa; mill-fekruna li daħhalt bla permess fil-barżakka li kont iġġorr lejn Tripli, lejn Bengaži; miċ-ċorma qtates jabqzu u jkattru u jwelledu fil-gwardarobbi ta' Leli Cousin li joqgħod maġenbna; minn Leli Cousin innifsu, irejjaħ l-għaraq, il-bewl, u s-sigaretti *Du Maurier*; mid-dlam li jaqa' kull lejla; mir-raqħad; mis-sajjetti; mit-terremot f'nofs ta' lejl fl-1972; mill-pressjoni għolja li tbat biha; minn leħnek meta tghollih; miċ-ċintorin li tibda tħoll jekk ma nobdikx; min-nuċċali ta' fuq wiċċek; mill-mustaċċi ppuntati; mit-tpiġija ħadra fuq dirgħajk; mill-età tiegħek; mit-telfa t'ommi li nistennieha tiġi minn waqt għal ieħor; mill-wiċċ sfigurat ta' Kristu msallab; mir-ritratt ta' ommok b'xoffitha ta' isfel imdendla; mill-istejjer kollha misteri taz-zija Stella li qatt ma rajt u tant xtaqt li niltaqa' magħha; mill-ħallelin li daħlu għand tar-Rex u fgawha wara li tawha xebgħa u ħadulha ħamsin lira; mill-fatati li tghid li kont tara fil-kerrejja ta' zitek Bażilka li kienet toqgħod il-Belt; minn tal-Labour meta kien u jgħaddu minn quddiemna jdawru lil Lorry jew lil Grima; mill-gvern li tak transfer vendikattiv

għax ma kontx tħasibhom, u kont tpaċpaċ kontrih; mill-ħolma li kont noħlom kuljum, ta' raġel moribond fuq sodda li narah imut u malli joħroġ l-aħħar nifs jaqa' pupu fl-art minn taħt is-sodda tiegħu; mid-dell li kien jġri warajja (hekk kont tgħidli: *Int anki minn dellek tibża'!*); fuq kollox: minnek.

Imlejtli l-ħolm bil-passi tqal tal-militar; bil-Bofors jisparaw; bit-twerdin tal-Istuka nieżel jogħdos. Imletjli l-ħolm bir-remettar tal-Faxx u tal-fizzjali Ingliżi jħduh f'sormhom bik, għax int daqsxejn ta' Malti tomghod il-ħobż, iġġewweż il-ġobon tal-ħakk, u ġġib it-tfal. U għedtlek kemm-il darba: *Dak is-salib x'nambuh fuq il-bandiera?* U int kont tkun pront toħroġ ir-ritratti, u tikxef il-farrett fuq koxxtok tax-xellug u tgħidli l-istejjer li kibru fl-umdità tax-xelter fejn kellek it-tieg fi Frar 1942. Imlejtli l-ħolm bl-eroj b'sidirhom beraħ, b'sidirhom mimli, b'sidirhom affrontat għal art twelidhom, għall-kuruna tal-Britannja tixxemmex fuq dil-gżira. Imlejtli tfuliti bil-ħoss tad-Dama Vera Lynn, *We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when; but I'm sure we'll meet again some sunny day.*

On the 21st Dec 1939 I joined the British army and was enlisted in the 2nd Battalion. The King's Own Malta Regiment, this Regiment was stationed at St. Andrews barracks and we were instructed by the NCO's of different units. The first day that I spent at the barracks I was very happy, my comrades used to teach me how I must fowled the blankets and how to mount the equipment how to clean the Rifle.

Kont sibtlek id-djarju kannella skur u sraqtu. U żammejtu. *On the 21st Dec 1939 I joined the British army and was enlisted in the 2nd Battalion.* Ta' dsatax-il sena tawk azzarin bil-bajunetta u libbsuk uniformi u ħaduk lejn St Andrew's biex titgħallem tispara.

The following day I was marched to the Quarter Master store to collect the rest of my uniform after I had all my uniform I was told by the company sargeant major to take off my Plain clothes and to put on the uniform so I did as I was told. I put the army boots and socks and then I put on the overall dress and the equipment and a stif cap I tooked the Rifle and went the first time on parade I was placed at No 9 Squad under the Instructor L/c Homes of Royal Irish. The Instructor after he spoke to me and recognised that speaks english he told that I will be squad leader. From now on I started the army life.

In the Name of the Father (and of the Son)

Immanuel Mifsud

Translated from the Maltese by Albert Gatt

At the Addolorata. On your mother's grave. From behind the thick, dark lenses of your glasses, I saw the tear sliding down. It shouldn't have done that, but it did; it just popped up and slid down. You thought I hadn't noticed anything, but I was watching you. I was always watching you, always keeping an eye on you, to see how you'd behave. Like the time I caught you with your hand behind your back, making the sign of the horns when someone – I don't know who – commented on how well you looked, God bless you, in spite of your age, in spite of the permanent damage to your left leg, in spite of everything you'd been through. I was always on the lookout where you were concerned. And on that day, I was watching as this tear slid shamefully down, with the shame you had felt when I had once drawn your attention to another tear sliding down your cheek. On that day, I made you feel even more ashamed when, clinging to your wife's apron reeking of garlic and onions, I announced to all and sundry that I'd just seen you cry.

I didn't know that soldiers could cry too.

I thought that soldiers were made of steel.

I thought their face was always stern and strong and tough.

I thought it was just me who cried, just me who did things I wasn't supposed to do.

Just like that day.

That day.

That

was the time you used to tell me that I couldn't cry. I'm a big boy. You can't grow up and become a man if you cry. How can a boy like you still cry? How can you still cry when you're strong enough to tear this place apart? You can't cry, do you understand me? You just can't.

But I do cry. And I feel ashamed when I cry. And I feel ashamed because I shouldn't cry. And I feel even more ashamed because – do you really want to hear this? – I actually like crying. I like to feel that trickle of warm water. I like the constricted sensation in my nose, my eyes screwed shut. I like it when everything looks bleary.

I like disobeying you.

I like feeling scared of you because you're scary. Because you look at me and your withering look scares me. And I quail and move away.

You cry too.

You cry too, soldier.

As you did on that day, when the man at your side died. Didn't you cry on that day, when you saw him get hit? Didn't you?

As you did on that day, when everything was pulverised before your eyes.

As you do whenever you remember that your wedding ceremony was held in a bomb shelter.

Underneath the lantern

By the barrack gate,

Darling I remember

The way you used to wait.

T'was there that you whispered tenderly

That you loved me;

You'd always be

My Lili of the lamplight,

Wie einst Lili Marlene,

Wie einst Lili Marlene,

The cigarette hanging lazily from the corner of your mouth. Droopy-eyed. Humphrey Bogart. Casablanca. Tripoli. Benghazi. The stiff-collared shirt. The small, tight knot of your tie. That look. That thin moustache on a smooth face, the smell of shaving cream every morning before sunrise. *Wie einst Lili Marlene, Wie einst Lili Marlene.*

Which is why, when I see the tear that I wasn't supposed to see, there by the family grave, I am stunned.

I, Joseph Mary Mifsud, from Valletta, son of Pawla and Salvu, proletarian and committed Socialist, though I have never read the red books (because those are blacklisted by our Mother the Apostolic Roman Catholic Church and because I don't have a head for difficult, evil books, though I do know how to read a little), soldier of the Second World War assigned to the anti-aircraft cannon to defend my homeland from the air assaults of the Fascist Italian bastards and the Nazi pigs, risking my life for my homeland, for the family entrusted to my care by the grace of God, with a tattoo on my arm because I'm a proletarian soldier – first a corporal, then a sergeant in the King's Own Malta Regiment and the Royal Malta Artillery in Bigi and Tigné – my skin blistered by white-hot steel,

toiling as I had been doing since childhood, after my mother was widowed for the second time, running about the streets wearing only one shoe in order to make the pair last longer, taking on whatever jobs I could find to support my mother and my younger siblings, and learning the facts of life on street corners, rinsing saliva, sauce and fried egg yolk off plates and glasses in village bars, checking passenger tickets on the bus, bending double in the factories at Marsa and getting covered with soot and coal fragments, becoming a man as men are supposed to be, a hymn to barefooted humanity and an inspiration for the Workers' Movement, living and moving and taking aim at the enemy whose aeroplanes train their guns at my head, becoming, existing, being.

At the age of forty-seven, I welcomed my eighth child with open arms; he would have been the tenth had all my children survived. And I said to the Lord: Lord, thy will be done, for even though I thought I'd earned a rest, having brought up a family and defended my homeland and the One True Faith, thy Providence looked down upon me from on high and recognised my abilities and saw that I still had the necessary strength in spite of all that had happened to me, all I had been through, all I had witnessed, and thereby sent me another child. I do not know how I will support this added burden that came so unexpectedly, but I place my trust in thee, O Lord, as I have always done.

At the age of eighty-seven, Lord, you summoned me unto you.

Joseph Mary Mifsud, also known as *il-Kikkra*, The Cup.

Now, let's see if you can get this one: your lips against hers in a kiss, and one finger right through her orifice. Go on then, what is it?

And I go red. My mind has been sullied already and I suspect you've noticed and you're trying to see just how dirty-minded I've become. *Go on, what is it? Your lips against hers in a kiss, and one finger right through her orifice.* And I remain silent because I'm not sure what you expect: whether you're trying to see how much of a man I've become or whether I remain the little boy I've always been. And then you smile and say: *It's a cup, thicko!* Oh right, a cup. In the grimy alleyways of my mind that rather resemble the streets you used to run through half-shod, I was thinking you might be talking about this girl I was with last night when I skived off mass for the First Friday of the month. The Cup – that's your nickname, isn't it? Mifsud, *il-Kikkra*.

Those heavy, black boots. Mismatched. The boots that are meant to conceal your disability. Somewhere on the way to Madliena, a soldier riding a motorbike up the hill. Somewhere in Madliena, a soldier lying unconscious in a field. One year in the military hospital at Bigi. Another year in the military hospital in London.

When you get home you collapse onto the nearest chair and unlace your boots. You always unlace the left boot first. And you ask me to pull your boots off for you. And when I've finally pulled them off, they feel heavy in my hands. And you tell me to line them up neatly under the bed. And you roll along like a boat on a rough sea. And the sea gets rougher once your boots are off. No shortness of breath, in spite of all the cigarettes you smoke; you dive to the very bottom of the bay below Xgħajra Tower to bring up sea urchins. Scores of sea urchins in the wicker basket. They smell of the sea. I don't know the smell of sea urchins, and I've never been down to Xgħajra Tower and those dark depths scare me. I'm scared. I'm scared of a lot of things: of the cemetery you take me to every other Sunday; of

the big horses belonging to the mounted police that you take me to see; of your left leg, twisted out of all proportion; of dogs; of the grasshoppers that leap among the hundred-leaved roses in the corner of our yard; of the tortoise you smuggled in without a permit, hidden in the rucksack you used to carry en route to Tripoli, to Benghazi; of the litter of cats that jump about and multiply and give birth in the wardrobes in Leli Cousin's house next door; of Leli Cousin himself, reeking of sweat, of piss and of *Du Maurier* cigarettes; of the darkness that falls every evening; of thunder; of lightening; of the earth's tremors one night in 1972; of the high blood pressure you suffer from; of your voice, whenever you raise it; of the belt you begin to undo whenever I disobey you; of the glasses across your face; of your pointed moustache; of the green tattoo on your arm; of your age; of the death of my mother mother, which I expect any moment; of the disfigured face of Christ on the cross; of the photograph of your mother with her bottom lip hanging; of all the mysterious stories of my aunt Stella, whom I've never seen but whom I'd really like to meet some day; of the thieves who broke into Rexie's place and made off with fifty quid after giving her a beating and throttling her; of the ghosts you claim you used to see in the tenement building in Valletta where your aunt Basilica used to live; of the Labourites who would troop past our place escorting minister Lorry or minister Grima; of the vindictive state apparatus that transferred you to a different post at work because you couldn't keep your mouth shut and voiced your criticism; of the dream I used to dream every night of a moribund man whom I watched as he lay dying on a bed, a doll falling out from under his bed just as he breathed his last; of the shadow that doggedly pursued me (that's what you used to tell me: *You're afraid of your own shadow!*); and above all: of you.

You filled my dreams with the heavy tread of the military; with the crackle of Bofors guns; the screech of diving Stukas. You filled my dreams with regurgitated images of Fasces and the English officers taking the piss out of you, this little Maltese man chewing on bread, nibbling at hard white cheese and bringing forth children. And I asked you so many times: *What's that Cross doing on our flag?* And you would promptly take out your photographs, show off the scar in your left thigh and tell me the stories that had swollen in the damp of the bomb shelter where your wedding ceremony was held in February 1942. You filled my dreams with barrel-chested heroes baring their chests and standing, chest out, to defend their homeland and the British Crown, shining brightly above this island. You filled my childhood with the sound of Dame Vera Lynn, (1)*We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when; but I'm sure we'll meet again some sunny day.*

On the 21st Dec 1939 I joined the British army and was enlisted in the 2nd Battalion. The King's Own Malta Regiment, this Regiment was stationed at St.Andrews barracks and we were instructed by the NCO's of differenti units. The first day that I spent at the barracks I was very happy, my comrades used to teach me how I must fowled the blankits and how to mount the equipment how to clean the Rifle.

I found your diary, bound in dark brown, and nicked it. And I kept it. *On the 21st Dec 1939 I joined the British army and was enlisted in the 2nd Battalion.* At the age of nineteen they handed you a rifle with a bayonet and dressed you up in a uniform and took you to St Andrew's to learn how to shoot.

(1) In the original text, this passage of ungrammatical English is a quotation from a diary and has therefore been left as it is.

The following day I was marched to the Quarter Master store to collect the rest of my uniform after I had all my uniform I was told by the company sargeant major to take off my Plain clothes and to put on the uniform so I did as I was told. I put the army boots and socks and then I put on the overall dress and the equipment and a stif cap I tooked the Rifle and went the first time on parade I was placed at No 9 Squad under the Instructor L/c Homes of Royal Irish. The Instructor after he spoke to me and recognised that speaks english he told that I will be squad leader. From now on I started the army life.

Acknowledgement

The lyrics of the song *Lili Marlene* are from the English version by Tommie Connor (1944).



© Radoslav Ratkovic

Andrej Nikolaidis

Sin (2006)

The Son

Publishing House OKF Cetinje, Milorad Popović
(co-publisher Durieux)

Biography

Andrej Nikolaidis was born in 1974 in Sarajevo, to a mixed Montenegrin-Greek family. Until the age of six, he lived in the city of Ulcinj, where he returned in 1992 after the war in Bosnia erupted. Since 1994, he has written for regional independent and liberal media, as well as for cultural magazines. He is considered by many to be one of the most influential intellectuals of the younger generation in the region, known for his anti-war activism and for his promotion of the rights of minorities.

Nikolaidis also publicly defended the victims of police torture, which resulted in his receiving many threats, including a death threat during a live radio appearance. He has often stated that he considers freedom of speech to be the basis of freedom.

He has worked as a columnist in the weekly magazine *Monitor* and for publications including *Vijesti* (Montenegro), *Dnevnik* (Slovenia), *Slobodna Bosna* (Bosnia-Herzegovina), *E-novine* (Serbia), and *Koha Ditore* (Kosovo). Since 2010, he has been employed as an advisor for culture and free society in the parliament of Montenegro.

Synopsis

The Son follows one night in the life of a hero with no name, a writer whose life is falling apart. That afternoon, his wife left him, while for many years he has been in conflict with his father, who blames him for his mother's death. Incapable of finding inner calm, he leaves into the warm, Mediterranean night, in the city of Ulcinj, itself a multilayered mixture of European dimensions, African influences, and the communist past.

The hero of *The Son* is a man who can't adapt to new times and rules. On his journey into the night, he meets an assortment of characters: a piano student from Vienna who has abandoned his musical career and converted to Islam, a radical Christian preacher and a group of refugees from Kosovo. In the style of Mihail Bulgakov, the characters meet in the old city of Ulcinj, at the Square of the Slaves – a location where the pirates who lived in the city until the 19th century would bring and sell captured slaves, including Miguel de Cervantes, according to legend.

Sin

Andrej Nikolaidis

Bio je prvi sumrak. Sunce je ponovo zalazilo iza Stričevog maslinjaka, kako smo zvali brdo sa desetak korijena masline, koje nam je, tih pedeset hektara makije pune poskoka i divljih svinja, zaklanjalo pogled na more. Otac je tvrdio da je jednom vidio *nešto sa onog svijeta*, tako je rekao, kako slijeće iza tog brda. Nikada ga nisam uspio ubijediti da je to bilo sunce. Iz popodneva u popodne sjedjeli smo na terasi i čekali suton. Šutke smo gledali sunce kako zalazi, kako se gubi iza siluete brda koje oduvijek stoji između mene i svijeta. Kada bi svjetlost zgasnula, utac bi ustao, autoritativno rekao *ne, nipošto, to nije bilo sunce*. Potom bi nestao u kući. Nadalje su samo tonovi Bacha odavali da još uvijek postoji, da kao i svake večeri leži u mraku spavaće sobe, paralisiran depresijom koja ga zlostavlja već dvije decenije.

Te večeri, brdo je gorjelo. Umjesto svježeg vjetra s mora, u lice me je tukla vrelinu šume u plamenu. Vatra će ponovo odnijeti sav očev trud, pomislio sam. Poslije svakog požara, policija je obilazila teren i pokušavala pronaći trag koji bi ih doveo do počinioca. Nikada, treba li reći, nisu otkrili ništa. Ni komad stakla, ni šibicu, kamoli tragove piromana. Nikada ni neće otkriti ko nam pali brdo, kad vam kažem, kako bi i mogli otkriti, kada ovaj ogranj dolazi s onoga svijeta, ponavljao je otac.

Kada je brdo prvi put gorjelo, on je to shvatio kao znak od Boga. Čitav život mi je prošao, a da se nisam ni okrenuo na maslinjak koji mi je stric ostavio. Sada više nema maslinjaka. Ima samo moje obaveze prema toj zemlji. Tako je rekao moj otac sklon fatalizmu, kao i svi u ovoj mahnitoj, proklesoj porodici.

Ogradio je čitavo brdo. Probijao se kroz izgorjelu šumu, korak po korak, lomio kamen i u stijenu, kao u srce vampira, zabijao glogove kočeve. Onda je na kočeve kačio bodljikavu žicu koja mu je drala meso na rukama. Mjesecima se kući vraćao crn od glave do pete, kao rudar koji je upravo izašao iz najdubljeg kopa. To i jeste bio: rudar. Ušao je u srce svojih uspomena. Nije on krčio šumu: on je kopao svoju nutrinu, lomio je taj kamen koji ga je gnječio, uklanjao je lavinu koja ga je prekrila i živog sahranila. Mokar i garav se vraćao kući, sve dok jednoga dana nije saopštio da je njegov posao završen. Imanje je bilo ograđeno i očišćeno. Nove suvomeđe podignute, nove masline zasađene. Poveo nas je na terasu, mene i majku, i po ko zna koji put nam pokazao Stričev maslinjak. Rodio sam ga iz plamena, rekao je moj otac.

Kada je brdo izgorjelo po drugi put, opet je postavio ogradu i zasadio masline. Povrh svega, izgradio je i štalu. Onda je iz Austrije doveo koze. U svojoj radišnosti išao je tako daleko da je čak i čuvao koze. Te godine bio je pastir. Preko dana bi sa kozama lutao brdom. Predveče bi ih odveo u štalu, na spavanje. Ispaša je ove godine savršena, govorio je, iz spržene zemlje izlaze mladice, stoga moje koze jedu najbolju hranu. Ograđene su, bezbjedne od šakala, konačno su na suvom. Kao u hotelu s pet zvjezdica, ponavljao je. Majka je držala da zna

korijen očeve posvećenosti kozama. Stric je, tvrdila je da se toga sjeća iz babinih priča, bio grudobolan. Sa grudoboljom je i umro, rekla je majka. Posljednje godine života dugovao je kozama, rekla je. Neka žena iz Šestana donosila mu je mlijeko. Zahvaljujući tom mlijeku živio je i nakon što su ga doktori otpisali. Bio je sam, bez žene i poroda, pričala je majka. Imao je samo babu, ženu pokojnog brata, imao je tvog oca i te koze gore u Šestanima. Kod babe i oca je živio, zahvaljujući kozama je živio, rekla je majka.

Čovjek iz rodne Crmnice odlazi u Ameriku. Napuš ta svoje selo bježeći od gladi, samo da bi stigao u New York, velegrad u kojem će tri naredne godine gladovati. Spava u napuštenim skladištima. Na pijacama krađe povrće, da bi se prehranio. Ponekad ubije psa–lutalicu, i tada Gospodu zahvaljuje na vještini ubijanja koju je stekao loveći ptice na Skadarskom jezeru. Već nakon nedjelju dana znao sam da ću uspjeti, znao sam da ću preživjeti, pričao je kasnije bratovoj ženi i njenom sinu. Usred New Yorka živio sam kao usred gore, govori im. Dječak ga netremice gleda dok govori o psećoj koži od koje je načinio cipele. Nikada taj dječak nije vidio oca, ali ga zamišlja sličnog stricu, s kratkim sijedim brkovima, kako u cipelama koje mirišu na — možda baš pseću — kožu ulazi u njihovu kuhinju, kako grli majku i njega, kako mu, onako kako čine stričevi, u džep tutne nešto novca za slatkiše, kako uveče, *kao stric*, pripovijeda sve one uzbudljive avanture koje je proživio.

Čovjek u Americi stekne imetak, ali umre prepuklog srca. Nikada se nije ženio, zato je nesretan umro, dječak čuje majku kako govori. Sve što sam uradio, sav put koji sam prošao, sve je uzalud jer umirem bez sina, tako je pred smrt rekao tvoj stric, rekla mu je majka, rekao mi je otac. Sve što je imao

ostavio je porodici svoga brata. Da se stric nije vratio duže bi živio, do smrti je tvrdila moja majka, gledao je tvoga oca i patio za svojim nerođenim sinom, imala je običaj da kaže, to ga je na koncu ubilo. Čovjek se čitav život muči da bi umro sam kao pas. Sav imetak ostavi ženi svoga brata. Spasi je od siromaštva u kojem je, nakon muževe smrti, bila osuđena da podiže dijete. Čitavu mladost sam jeo stričev trud, hranio sam se njegovim znojem i mukom, tako je govorio moj otac.

Čovjek se muči i onda umre. Eto čitave priče o svakom od nas, eto potpune biografije čitavog ljudskog roda. Sahranjen je prije pedeset godina. Sve što je od njega ostalo noćas gori.

Sada je sve gotovo, mislio sam dok sam gledao plamen kako se diže u noćno nebo. Šuma je ponovo gorjela, po treći put u deset godina. Vatra će napokon poraziti oca. On više nema snage da imanje ponovo diže iz pepela. Otkako je majka umrla, kroz nametnutu samoću na koju nije bio spreman, ojačala je depresija. Gotovo da je sasvim prestao izlaziti iz kuće. Po čitav dan je samo sjedio u zamračenom salonu. O čemu je razmišljao, pitao sam se i bilo mi je svejedno. Samo sam se nadao da razmišlja, da barem misli uspijevaju da probiju glatke, visoke zidove depresije koja ga je okružila.

Te noći je brdo gorjelo, ali on nije izašao pred kuću, ni da osmotri vatru koja je gutala sav njegov trud. Sa balkona svoje kuće gledao sam terasu njegove, bez nade da će se ukazati, da će kročiti kroz vrata iza kojih je riješio da umre. Njegova žena je umrla, moja je otišla. Dva čovjeka, svaki u svojoj kući, koje čak ni stotinjak metara udaljeni požar nije mogao ujediniti, makar u pogledu na vatru u kojoj nestaje njihovo imanje.

Brdo u plamenu je zvučalo kao pucketanje stare ploče. Kao šum na kaseti. Kao nešto što će ukloniti pritisak na dugme *Dolby*. Plamen se, međutim, nezaustavljivo širio ka podnožju strme padine. Uključio sam lokalni radio. Javljao je da su *prve kuće već evakuisane*. Iza prvih kuća su, naravno, druge kuće. A onda moja. Užasnula me je pomisao da je čitav komšiluk ponovo *udružio rad* i svim snagama pokušava da zaustavi požar. A zapravo smetaju vatrogascima da rade svoj posao. Mogao sam da zamislim kako me ogovaraju. Samo on nije došao, vidio sam ih kako šapuću, pa njihovo gori a njega nema, pa zar mi da gasimo njihovo, pitaju se. I pri tom ignorišu činjenicu da spašavaju svoje kuće, ne moj maslinjak. Da moj maslinjak gase samo zato što se boje da će plamen zahvatiti njihove kuće. *Moj maslinjak*, koji uostalom i nije moj.

Vlada je, javili su na radiju, sve kanadere prodala Hrvatskoj, zato što su procijenili da im nije potrebna flota aviona za gašenje požara. To je bilo na proljeće. Već u prvim danima juna primorje je zapaljeno. I još gori. Lastva iznad Tivta, Budva, Petrovac, Možura, sve do Skadarskog jezera. Sada gori i Ulcinj, plamen se sa Stričevog brda proširio do prvih kuća Limana. Zidine Starog grada su u opasnosti, javio je radio.

Zato što je Vlada prodala avione, požar gase helikopterima. U nečem što liči na vreće vuku vodu koju ispuštaju na vatru. U trenutku kada voda padne po tlu, dim i para zaklone pogled na ljepotu vatre. Sve nestaje u sivilu i narednih minut–dva potrebno je plamenu da ponovo uspostavi vladavinu nad imanjem moga oca.

Ubrzo shvatam da mi je prizor dosadan. Sada su tu već tri helikoptera. Jasno je da će poraziti vatru — još jedan trijumf tehnike. Nema tu više ničeg za mene, ničeg tamo gdje se bore tehnika i priroda. Prosto ne znam što je od to dvoje monstruoznije — priroda ili tehnika kojom je pokušavaju nadvladati. Prije nego se okrenem i vratim u sobu, pogledam očevu kuću. Svjetla su ugašena, ali znam da ne spava.

The Son

Andrej Nikolaidis

Translated from the Montenegrin by Will Firth

The first shades of night were falling. The sun was setting once more behind my great-uncle's olive grove, which is what we called the hill laden with rows of overgrown olive trees. In fact, it was fifty hectares of viper- and boar-infested scrub blocking our view of the sea. My father claimed he had once seen 'something other-worldly' come down to land behind the hill. I never managed to convince him that it was just the sun. Evening after evening, we sat on the terrace waiting for darkness to fall. We watched in silence as the sun slowly disappeared behind the silhouette of the hill, which had always stood between me and the world. When the light was gone, my father would get up, state resolutely, 'No way, that wasn't the sun!' and disappear into the house. From then on, the only sign of his existence would be strains of Bach which escaped from the dark of the bedroom, where he lay paralysed by the depression which had abused him for two decades.

That evening the hill caught on fire. Instead of feeling a breeze from the sea, I was hit in the face by the heat of the burning forest. The fire would erase all my father's labours once more, I thought. After each blaze, the police scoured the terrain searching for evidence which would lead them to the culprit. Needless to say, they never found anything: not a single piece of broken glass or a match, let alone a trace of the firebug. 'They'll never find out who sets fire to our hill, I tell you.

How can they when the fire comes from the other world?’ my father repeated.

When the hill burned the first time, he saw it as a sign of God: ‘My whole life had passed by without me even taking a proper look at the olive grove my uncle left me. Now there’s no olive grove left – just my obligation to the land,’ my father said in the fatalism so typical of this crazy, blighted family.

He built a fence around the entire hill. He worked his way through the charred forest step by step, breaking stones and driving hawthorn-wood stakes into the rock, as if into the heart of a vampire. Then he tied barbed wire to the stakes, which tore into the flesh of his hands. For months he came home black from head to toe like a coal miner who had just come up from the deepest pit. And that’s what he was: a miner. He delved into the heart of his memories. He wasn’t clearing the charcoaled forest but digging at what was inside him, breaking the boulder which oppressed him, shovelling away the scree which had buried him alive. He came home all wet and sooty for months, until one day he announced that his work was done. The property was fenced in and cleared. He had built new dry stone walls and planted olive saplings. He took me and my mother onto the terrace and showed us my great-uncle’s olive grove for the umpteenth time. ‘I’ve resurrected it from the flames,’ my father said.

When the hill burned the second time, he installed a new fence and planted the olive trees again. As if that was not enough work, he also built a barn. Then he brought in goats from Austria. His diligence went so far that he even minded them.

That year he was a goatherd. During the day he would roam over the hill with the goats; in the early evening he would bring them back to the barn for the night. ‘The pasture is excellent this year –,’ he said, ‘fresh growth is coming up from the scorched earth, and so the goats are eating the best food. Now they’re fenced in, safe from the jackals, and have a nice dry place to sleep: like a five-star hotel,’ he was fond of saying.

My mother thought she knew the root of my father’s devotion to the goats. She claimed to remember from my grandmother’s stories that my great-uncle had tuberculosis. ‘He died of it in the end, too, but he owed the last years of his life to the goats,’ my mother said. ‘A goatkeeper came from Šestani and brought him milk. He lived on even after the doctors had written him off, thanks to that milk. He had no wife or children, only your grandmother – the wife of his deceased brother, your father, and those goats up in Šestani. He lived with your grandmother and your father, and the goats helped him survive,’ my mother told me.

Born in the coastal range of Crmnica, my great-uncle had left for America. He fled his impoverished village for New York, only to go hungry in the big city for the next three years. He slept in neglected warehouses and stole vegetables from the markets to feed himself. Occasionally he would kill a stray dog, and then he thanked the Lord for the skills with knife and stick he had learned hunting birds on Lake Skadar. ‘After the first week I knew I’d succeed. I knew I’d survive,’ he later told his brother’s wife and her son. ‘I eked out a lonely living in the middle of New York as if I was up in the wilds of Montenegro,’ he told them. The boy stared, riveted, while he spoke about the dog skin he made shoes from. The boy had never seen his own

father, but he imagined he must have looked like this uncle with the short grizzled moustache who now came into their kitchen in shoes of strong-smelling leather (maybe even dog-leather?), hugged his mother and him, slipped some money for sweets into his pocket like uncles do, and in the evening told them tales of his adventures. What an uncle, what a man!

He made it good in America but died of a broken heart, my grandmother told my father, who later told me: 'He never married and therefore died unhappy. "Everything I've done and all the roads I've travelled have been in vain because I'm dying without a son, "he said before he died.' My mother, while she was alive, maintained he would have lived longer if he'd stayed in America: 'But he came back, saw your father, and fretted for the son he'd never had – that's what killed him in the end.'

He slaved away all his life, only to die in misery. He left all his worldly goods to his sister-in-law. That saved her from the penury she faced after her husband's death and would have had to raise her child in. 'All my young years I ate the fruits of my uncle's labour; I fed on his sweat and suffering,' my father said.

The man from Crmnica laboured, suffered and died. That's the whole story about each and every one of us: the complete biography of the human race. He was buried fifty years ago, and what's left of him is going up in flames tonight.

Now it's all over, I thought as I watched the flames rising into the night sky. The hill was burning for the third time in ten years. The fire would be my father's final defeat. He no longer had the strength to raise the property from the ashes again.

After my mother died, the enforced loneliness he was ill-prepared for exacerbated his depression. He hardly ever left the house any more. He would just sit in the darkened living room all day. *What was he thinking about*, I asked myself, but in fact I didn't care. I just hoped he *was* thinking and that at least his thoughts managed to break through the tall, smooth walls of depression which surrounded him.

That night the hill was on fire, but he didn't go out in front of the house even just to watch the flames which were swallowing up all his labours. From the balcony of my house I watched the terrace of his, without hope that he would appear and maybe even step through the door he had decided to die behind. His wife had died, and mine had left me. Two men, each in his own house, whom not even a fire blazing a hundred metres away could unite, not even just to watch it devour their property.

The burning hill sounded like the crackle of an old record. Or the hiss of a cassette. Something you could get rid of by pressing the Dolby button. But now the flames spread out of control down the slopes of the hill. I turned on the local radio. They reported that the first houses had been evacuated. Behind the first houses, of course, were more houses. And then mine. I was horrified by the thought that the whole neighbourhood had again pooled its efforts and was doing its utmost to stop the fire. And in doing so was obstructing the fire brigade in doing its job. I could just imagine the neighbours gossiping about me. *He's the only one who's not here*, I could hear them whisper to each other. *It's their property that's burning and he's not here. Why do we have to put out their fire?* they asked themselves, ignoring the fact that they were out there protecting their

houses, not my olive grove. They were only fighting the fire in my olive grove because they feared it could encroach on their houses. ‘My olive grove’, which wasn’t mine anyway.

They said on the radio that the government had sold all its Canadair aircraft to Croatia because it had assessed that the country didn’t need a fleet of water bombers. That was in the springtime. The coastal area had been set alight in the first days of June and was still burning – from Lastva above Tivat to Budva, Petrovac, Možura and all the way to Lake Skadar. Now Ulcinj was ablaze too: the flames had spread from my great-uncle’s hill to the first houses in the suburb of Liman. The walls of the Old Town were also at risk, the radio reported.

Since the government had sold the aeroplanes, the fire was being fought with helicopters. They were hauling up water in what looked like sacks and dropping it on the fire. The moment the water fell on the ground, smoke and steam obscured its elemental beauty. Everything vanished in grey, but the flames only needed another minute or two to re-establish their reign over my father’s property.

Soon I found the scene boring. Three helicopters were now in operation and it was plain to see that they would defeat the fire – one more triumph of technology. There was nothing left for me where technology and nature were pitted against each other. I simply don’t know which is more monstrous – nature or the methods people employ in order to dominate it. Before turning and going back into the room, I glanced over to my father’s house. The lights were off, but I knew he wasn’t asleep.

The Netherlands



© Patrick Spiegelaere

Rodaan al Galidi

De autist en de postduif (2009)

The autist and the carrier-pigeon

Publishing House

Meulenhoff/Manteau WPG Uitgevers België

Biography

Rodaan, who first called himself Al Galidi (his complete name is Rodaan Al Galidi) is a writer of Iraqi descent. As his native country didn't register births when he was born, he does not know his birth date. He studied as an engineer in Iraq before fleeing to escape military service, arriving in the Netherlands in 1998. However, his request for asylum was rejected, and since he was not allowed to follow the official courses of Dutch language, he taught himself the language and started writing. He is now considered to be a Dutch writer and receives stipends from Dutch as well as Flemish institutes.

In 2007, Rodaan was one of the people to benefit from the general pardon given by the Dutch parliament to asylum seekers arriving before 2001, and he still lives in the country.

Synopsis

Geert is an autistic boy, born to Janine, his alcoholic mother. He takes things literally and considers language something that means exactly what it says.

Take the word in Dutch for 'to move' which is 'verhuizen' and contains the word 'ver', which means 'far away'. So 'verhuizen' should, in Geert's view, also take place far away. Also, when his mother tells him that he should make a girl wet before making love to her he throws a bucket of water over a girl. Things just don't work the way he thinks they should.

Because of the way his mind works, he likes to add up things, and combines different machines in order to construct new objects. Through this, he discovers his talent of building violins out of benches, and starts a prosperous business by selling them to a German merchant. He combines this business with caring for a carrier pigeon that always returns to him after flying. As disparate as all these actions and obsessions may seem, they still form a unity for Geert, and the reader is permitted a strange but fascinating insight into his unusual, yet pure and innocent, mind.

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Toen Geert vijf jaar oud werd, vroeg hij zijn moeder naar zijn vader. Janine stond op, liep naar een ladekastje en haalde er een doosje uit, terwijl Geert al haar handelingen nauwgezet volgde. Uit het doosje haalde ze het rietje.

‘Dit is jouw vader’, zei ze.

Geert twijfelde er niet aan dat hij uit een rietje kwam door de manier waarop zijn moeder het rietje bewaard had en de uitdrukking op haar gezicht toen ze het doosje opende. Geert keek naar het rietje. Zijn hersenen probeerden er twee handen en voeten bij te fantaseren en een gezicht met twee ogen, oren en een mond, maar hij zag alleen een rietje.

‘En nu tanden poetsen en naar bed’, zei Janine.

Na de kennismaking met zijn vader ging Geert naar de badkamer en poetste zijn tanden. In zijn hoofd was hij druk bezig met het rietje, dat anders was dan de vaders die hun kinderen van school haalden. Daarna ging hij in bed liggen en deed het licht uit. Het rietje begon in zijn gedachten te groeien tot het net zo lang was als meester Matthijs. Het kreeg zijn gezicht en dezelfde grote voeten. Geert dacht diep na tot hij weer wist welke schoenen meester Matthijs had en trok in zijn gedachten het rietje die schoenen aan. Hij hoorde het rietje fluisteren met een stemmetje dat klonk als een cassettebandje dat te snel gaat.

‘Welterusten, Geert.’

Datzelfde moment viel hij in slaap. Hij droomde die nacht dat hij het station uit stapte met Janine en zijn vader het rietje om naar de dierentuin te gaan. Alle mannen in zijn droom waren rietjes die op meester Matthijs leken.

Zo'n twee jaar later begon Geert Janine naar zijn opa en oma te vragen. Ze vertelde hem dat zij ook rietjes waren en dat ze in Zeeland woonden. Ze vertelde – ze was een beetje dronken – dat ze niet wilden geloven dat Geert uit een rietje kwam, maar dat ze – nu klonk haar stem boos – zelf uit twee smerige rietjes kwamen, die hun hele leven gewassen moesten worden en die je niet kon gebruiken om cola te drinken. Ze nam een slok wijn en praatte met Geert. Hij luisterde zonder haar in de ogen te kijken.

‘Ze geloofden niet dat jij uit een rietje kwam, maar ze geloofden wel in Jezus, die niet eens uit een rietje kwam.’

Ze stond op en liep naar het doosje waarin zijn vader het rietje zat. Geert verwachtte dat zijn moeder er dit keer twee rietjes uit zou halen en zou zeggen dat dat zijn opa en oma waren, maar er kwam een zwart-witfoto tevoorschijn van een man en een vrouw van een jaar of vijftig. Geert moest goed kijken naar hun kleren om te zien wie opa en wie oma was.

Twee maanden later ging Geert bij opa en oma logeren in een huis in een dorpje in Zeeland waar niets gebeurde, behalve bloemkool en de Heer. De vrijwilligster die de afspraak had gemaakt en Geert ernaartoe bracht, klopte zacht op de deur. Oma deed open. Geert stond voor de vrijwilligster, haar handen op zijn schouders, alsof ze hem vasthield zodat hij niet zou vallen. Geert keek naar het sleutelgat in de deur en begon in zijn hoofd te tellen hoeveel gaatjes de deur zou hebben als

die alleen uit sleutelgaten bestond. Daarna keek hij naar de brievenbus en telde eerst hoeveel brievenbussen in de deur pasten en dan hoeveel als er een lijn brievenbussen en een lijn sleutelgaten zou zijn.

‘Goedemorgen’, zei de vrijwilligster.

‘Goedemorgen’, zei oma.

‘Dit is Geert. Ik heb gebeld.’

Het gezicht van oma bleef uitdrukingsloos. ‘Ik weet het, we hebben een afspraak gemaakt’, zei ze.

‘We zijn een kwartiertje te laat, we moesten even zoeken. Mijn excuses’, zei de vrijwilligster glimlachend, om daarmee een emotie op te roepen in het lege gezicht van de oude vrouw.

‘Geeft niet’, zei ze en opende de deur.

Geert liep achter haar naar binnen, gevolgd door de vrijwilligster, haar handen nog op de schouders van Geert, die nog steeds de deur kalligrafeerde met sleutelgaatjes en brievenbussen. Ze liepen naar de man die bij de tafel stond te wachten en die de vrijwilligster en Geert een hand gaf.

‘Wilt u iets drinken misschien?’ zei opa tegen de vrijwilligster, maar zij excuseerde zich.

‘Ik heb de auto geleend en moet terug.’ Ze keek naar Geert, zei dat ze hem morgen om tien uur weer zou zien en ging.

De stilte in het huis van opa en oma was zwaar. Geert zat aan de tafel en zijn oma bracht hem tomatensoep. Verbaasd keken zijn opa en oma hoe hij aan de soep begon.

‘Bid je niet voor het eten?’ vroeg opa.

‘Nee’, zei hij, terwijl hij naar het bord keek.

‘Bid je niet na het eten?’ vroeg opa.

‘Of voor het slapengaan?’ vroeg oma.

‘Nee, ook niet.’

Geert at de soep en dacht dat bidden iets te maken had met de woorden ‘voor’ of ‘na’. Daarna begon hij in zijn gedachten woorden te tellen die hij met ‘voor’ of ‘na’ kon combineren: eten, slapen, drinken, plassen, poepen, scheten laten, denken, rusten, praten, regenen, vakantie, school, vervelen, douche, tandarts, een boer laten, huiswerk... Na elk woord stelde Geert zich zijn opa en oma biddend en een kruis slaand voor. Hoe sneller hij dacht, hoe sneller hij de lepel naar zijn mond bracht, tot zijn opa en oma de lepel niet meer konden volgen. Toen de soep op was, sloegen ze een kruis. Geert keek naar de beweging van de handen van zijn oma, liep naar haar toe, raakte de plekken op haar lichaam aan waar zij het kruis had gemaakt en zocht die plekken op zijn eigen lichaam.

Daarna brachten opa en oma hem naar boven. Geert liep alsof hij de weg kende naar de kamer waar zijn moeder altijd had geslapen. Hij opende de deur en keek aan tegen een muur met een groot schilderij van de kruisiging van Jezus. Jezus was omringd door engelen en soldaten, achter hem waren wolken en daarachter bergen, voor hem zat Maria neergeknield. Aan de andere muur hingen foto’s van zijn moeder, een van toen ze zeven weken oud was en lachte met een mond zonder tanden, een andere waarop ze twee te grote voortanden had, op andere foto’s elke keer een tand meer, tot haar gebit compleet was. Daarna verdween haar glimlach in het huis gevuld met stilte.

Geert bleef in de kamer van zijn moeder. Elke keer als oma de deur opende, zag ze hem zitten spelen met de blokken, de knuffelberen en poppen die van zijn moeder waren geweest en de kussenslopen, de bedsprei en de handdoeken die er klaarlagen. Toen het tijd was voor het eten, opende oma de

deur om hem te roepen. Ze schrok. Hij had van de blokken een kruis gebouwd. Zonder spijkers had hij er een knuffellaap aan vastgemaakt. Een andere knuffel zat ervoor als huilende Maria. De soldaten stonden ernaast en erachter waren de kussenslopen de wolken geworden en kussens de bergen. Precies zoals op het schilderij scheen er licht van achter de aap, omdat Geert het bedlampje erachter had gezet. Oma kon haar ogen niet geloven. Ze sloeg een kruis en rende naar opa, die geloofde dat de duivel in Geert moest zijn omdat hij zo'n vernuft had dat te kunnen bouwen.

'Eten', zei opa, terwijl hij diep in de ogen van Geert keek om de duivel erin te zoeken. De eettafel had vanaf 1950, toen opa en oma trouwden, op dezelfde plek in de keuken gestaan. Hoe het leven en de maatschappij ook veranderden met de jaren, nooit had er op die tafel roti-kip gestaan of was er een brommer voor de deur gestopt met Chinees eten of een pizza. Geert zat aan de tafel op de stoel waarop zijn moeder had gezeten. Naast zijn bord lag aan de ene kant een lepel, aan de andere kant een vork en een mes. Meteen dacht hij aan zijn bord als hoofd, de tafel als lichaam en de lepel, de vork en het mes als twee handen. Opa en oma begonnen diep en stil te bidden en vulden daarna de borden met aardappels met jus, bloemkool en een stukje kipfilet. Ze aten zonder geluid te maken.

Na het eten gaf opa hem een bijbeltje en oma een kruis van hout. Zijn opa praatte met hem over de Heer, terwijl Geert aandachtig naar het kruis keek. Opa en oma dachten dat de Heer in Geert begon te komen, maar eigenlijk was hij bezig te tellen hoeveel kruisen er op de muur geschilderd konden worden en hoeveel afstand er tussen de kruisen moest blijven om het een even aantal te laten zijn. Van elke hoek in het huis telde Geert hoeveel kruisen er geschilderd konden

worden. Terwijl opa en oma sliepen, tekende Geert kruisen op de muren van de kamer van zijn moeder. Alle kruisen even groot, met dezelfde afstand ertussen. Ze kwamen precies zo hoog als hij kon reiken. Toen de inkt van de laatste pen die hij vond op was, viel hij in slaap.

Die ochtend sloegen opa en oma een kruis toen ze Geert zagen slapen tussen al die kruisen. Wakker geworden keek Geert ernaar alsof ze er altijd zo hadden moeten staan.

Onderweg naar huis vroeg de vrijwilligster hem of hij het gezellig had gehad.

‘Ja’, zei hij, terwijl hij door het autoraam naar de groene weilanden staarde.

‘Dus je wilt er nog wel eens heen?’

‘Ja.’

‘Wanneer?’

Geert wilde weer ja zeggen, maar bedacht zich dat op die vraag een ander antwoord moest komen. Hij dacht aan het woord ‘ja’, dat voor hem niet het woord ‘ja’ zelf was, maar de stilte die erna komt.

‘Volgend jaar misschien?’ vroeg de vrijwilligster.

‘Ja’, zei Geert, waarna de verwachte stilte volgde.

Maar Geert ging niet het volgende jaar of het jaar daarop op bezoek bij zijn opa en oma, die echt veranderd leken in twee rietjes in het doosje van zijn moeder. Zelfs Zeeland bezocht hij niet opnieuw. Hij dacht er niet meer aan, alsof Zeeland na dat bezoek ook in een rietje veranderd was.

The autist and the carrier-pigeon

Rodaan al Galidi

Translated from the Dutch by Brian Doyle

4

When Geert turned five he asked his mother about his father. Janine got to her feet, walked over to the sideboard and took out a little box while Geert watched her every move. She produced a straw from the box.

‘This is your father’, she said.

Geert had no doubt that he had come from a straw, seeing the way his mother had preserved the straw and the expression on her face when she opened the box. Geert looked at the straw. His brain tried to imagine a pair of hands and feet, a face with two eyes, two ears and a mouth; but all he saw was a straw.

‘Now brush your teeth and off to bed’, said Janine.

Having made his father’s acquaintance, Geert went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. The straw filled his head. It wasn’t the same as the fathers who collected their children from school. He then got into bed and switched out the light. The straw began to grow in his thoughts until it was the same height as his teacher Mr Matthijs. It acquired his face and his huge hands. Geert racked his brains until he remembered the shoes Mr Matthijs wore and in his thoughts he put them on the straw. He heard the straw whispering with a tiny voice that sounded like a cassette tape at high speed.

‘Good night, Geert.’

At that same moment he fell asleep. He dreamed that night about leaving the train station with Janine and his father the straw on their way to the zoo. All the men in his dream were straws that looked like Mr Matthijs.

A couple of years later Geert asked Janine about his grandma and grandpa. She said that they were also straws and that they lived in Zeeland. She informed him – slightly tipsy – that they refused to believe that Geert had come from a straw, but that they themselves – and now her voice turned angry – came from a pair of dirty straws that had to be washed every day of their lives and that you couldn’t use them for drinking cola. She slurped at her wine and talked to Geert. He listened without looking her in the eye.

‘They refused to believe that you came from a straw, but they believed in Jesus, and he didn’t come from a straw.’

She got to her feet and crossed to the box containing his father the straw. Geert expected his mother to produce two straws this time and tell him they were his grandma and grandpa, but instead she pulled out a black and white photo of a man and a woman in their fifties. Geert had to look closely at their clothes to see which was grandma and which was grandpa.

Two months later Geert went to visit his grandma and grandpa in a house in a village in Zeeland, where nothing happened, except cauliflower and the Lord. The voluntary worker who had arranged the visit and provided the transport knocked gently on the door. Grandma opened. Geert was standing in front of the voluntary worker, her hands on his

shoulders as if to be sure he wouldn't fall over. Geert stared at the keyhole in the door and started to count in his head how many holes the door would have if it had been made entirely of keyholes. He then looked at the letterbox and counted how many letterboxes would fit into the door, and then how many if you had a line of letterboxes and a line of keyholes.

'Good morning', said the voluntary worker.

'Good morning', said grandma.

'This is Geert. I called.'

Grandma's face remained expressionless. 'I know, we had an appointment', she said.

'We're fifteen minutes late. It wasn't easy to find. My apologies', said the voluntary worker with a smile, hoping to arouse some emotion in the old woman's empty face.

'Doesn't matter', she said and opened the door.

Geert followed her inside, the voluntary worker at his rear, her hands still on his shoulders. Geert was still etching elegant keyholes and letterboxes into the door. They walked up to the man who was standing by the table and the voluntary worker and Geert shook his hand.

'Would you like something to drink?' said grandpa to the voluntary worker, but she turned down his offer.

'The car's on loan and I have to get back.' She turned to Geert, told him she would see him at ten the following morning, and left.

The silence in grandma and grandpa's house was oppressive. Geert took his place at the table and grandma brought him tomato soup. His grandma and grandpa stared at him in amazement as he started into the soup.

‘Don’t you pray before meals?’ asked grandpa.

‘No’, he said, staring at the plate.

‘Don’t you pray after meals?’ asked grandpa.

‘Or before you go to sleep?’ asked grandma.

‘No.’

Geert ate his soup and thought that praying had something to do with the words ‘before’ and ‘after’. He then started to count the words in his mind that could be combined with ‘before’ and ‘after’: eating, sleeping, drinking, peeing, shitting, farting, thinking, resting, talking, raining, holidays, school, being bored, shower, dentist, burping, homework... After each word Geert pictured his grandma and grandpa praying, and before each word making a sign of the cross. The faster he thought, the faster the spoon moved between the plate and his mouth, so fast that grandma and grandpa could no longer keep up with it. When he was done grandma made a sign of the cross. Geert watched his grandma’s hands and how they moved, walked up to her, touched the places on her body where she had made the sign of the cross, and looked for the same places on his own body.

Grandma and grandpa then brought him upstairs. Geert headed for the room in which his mother had always slept as if he knew the way. He opened the door and came face to face with a huge painting of the crucifixion of Jesus hanging on a wall. Jesus was surrounded by angels and soldiers, with Mary kneeling in front of him. There were photos of his mother on the other walls, one with a toothless smile when she was seven weeks old, another in which she had two oversized front teeth, and others in which teeth appeared one by one until she had a complete set. Then her smile disappeared in the house full of silence.

Geert stayed in his mother's room. Every time his grandma or grandpa opened the door they found him playing with the building blocks, teddy bears and dolls that had belonged to his mother and the pillowcases, bedspread and towels that had been left out for him. When it was time for dinner, grandma opened the door to call him. She jumped. He had made a cross with the blocks and secured a plush monkey to it without nails. He had arranged another cuddly toy in front as a sorrowing Madonna. Soldiers stood at either side, and the pillowcases to the rear had become clouds and the pillows mountains. In an exact copy of the painting, the monkey was illuminated from behind; Geert had set up the bedside lamp at its back. Grandma could hardly believe her eyes. She crossed herself and ran to grandpa who was convinced that Geert had to have the devil in him if he was clever enough to construct such a thing.

'Dinner', said grandpa peering deep into Geert's eyes in search of the devil. The table had stood in the same place in the kitchen since 1950, the year grandpa and grandma got married. No matter how life and society had changed in the years that followed, chicken roti had never been served on that table, nor had a moped ever stopped at the door to deliver Chinese or a pizza. Geert took his place at the table, the same place as his mother. On one side of his plate there was a spoon, on the other side a fork and a knife. His plate immediately made him think of a head, with the table as a body, and the spoon, fork and knife as a pair of hands. Grandpa and grandma started to pray, intensely and silently, and then filled the plates with potatoes, gravy, cauliflower and a slice of chicken breast. They ate without making a sound.

After dinner grandpa gave him a miniature bible and grandma a cross of wood. His grandpa talked to him about the Lord, while Geert gazed attentively at the cross. Grandpa and grandma thought that the Lord had started to take hold of Greet, but in fact he was busy counting the number of crosses you could paint on the wall and what the distance between each cross would have to be to get an even number. Geert counted the number of crosses you could paint in every corner of the house. While grandpa and grandma were asleep, Geert drew crosses on the walls of his mother's bedroom. Each cross was the same size, with the same distance between them. He drew them as high as he could reach. When the ink in the last pen he could find was dry, he fell asleep.

Grandpa and grandma both crossed themselves that morning when they saw Geert asleep in the middle of all those crosses. Geert looked at them when he woke as if they had always been meant to be there.

On the way home, the voluntary worker asked Geert if he had enjoyed himself.

'Yes', he said, staring through the car window at the green meadows.

'So you'd like to go back again?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

Geert wanted to say yes again, but realised that the question required a different answer. He thought about the word 'yes', which for him wasn't the word 'yes' as such, but the silence that followed it.

'Next year perhaps?' asked the voluntary worker.

‘Yes’, said Geert, and the expected silence followed.

But Geert didn’t visit his grandpa and grandma the following year or the year after. They really seemed to have changed into a couple of straws in his mother’s box. He didn’t even return to Zeeland after that. He didn’t give it another thought, as if Zeeland had also turned into a straw after that first visit.



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Jelena Lengold

Vašarski mađioničar (2009)

Fairground Magician

Publishing House **Arhipelag**

Biography

Jelena Lengold (b.1959) is a storyteller, novelist and a poet. She has published five books of poetry, one novel (*Baltimor*, 2003) and four books of stories, including *Pokisli lavovi* (*Rain-soaked Lions*, 1994), *Lift* (*Lift*, 1999) and *Vašarski mađioničar* (*The Fairground Magician*, 2008). She has been represented in several anthologies of poetry and stories, and her works have been translated into several languages. Lengold worked as a journalist and an editor for ten years in the cultural department of Radio Belgrade. She currently works as a project coordinator in the Conflict Management programme of Nansenskolen Humanistic Academy in Lillehammer, Norway. She teaches about topics such as dialogue, interethnic tolerance, discrimination, negotiations, human rights and peaceful conflict resolution. She lives in Belgrade.

Synopsis

The Fairground Magician tells stories about love fulfilled and unfulfilled, about things that are visible in the everyday world and about values that are perceptible only in exceptional moments. The narration assumes various forms, from apparent realism to various other genres, such as crime fiction, thrillers and erotic prose.

Depicting the inner conflicts of her protagonists, Jelena Lengold often creates intertextual dialogues with similar characters from global literary history or with recognizable symbols of modern culture. Memories, intimations and premonitions are in these stories infused with a tranquility that accepts destiny, even when efforts are made to change it, like in the stories 'Pockets Full of Stones' or 'Downfall'. In addition, eroticism as a natural ingredient of human life, as an integrated tension consisting of two inseparable sides – body and soul – energise stories like 'Love Me Tender', 'Fairground Magician', 'Zugzwang', 'Wanderings', and 'Aurora Borealis'. In *The Fairground Magician*, Lengold is a lucid observer of minute details and subtle emotional shifts. In stories like 'It Could Have Been Me', 'Shadow', or 'Ophelia, Get Thee to a Nunnery', she manages to vault the wall between the bodily surface and the human interior in a very distinctive way. No matter how common are the situations she depicts – whether it be the motives of forlorn lovers, broken marriages or unfulfilled expectations – Lengold is in a constant search for the authentic, finding it within sophisticated irony, a distinct trademark of her fiction.

Vašarski mađioničar

Jelena Lengold

Lutanja

Baš kad je žena sklanjala sa stola tanjire i posudu za salatu, mačak se pojavio. U jednom skoku preskočio je dvorišnu ogradu i uputio se ka svojoj činijici sa hranom. Tačno je znao gde ga čeka njegov obrok. Žena uzviknu radosno:

– Hej, evo ga Lola!

– Rekao sam ti da će se vratiti – čuo se glas iz kuće. – Uvek se vrati.

Muškarac je izašao na prag kuće i pružio ruku da prihvati posuđe koje je njegova žena nosila. Nasmehio se:

– Mačori se uvek vraćaju po svoj komad mesa, valjda toliko znaš o nama.

Uzvatila mu je jednim od onih osmeha čije puno značenje razumeju samo ljudi koji dele isti krevet. Oboje su neko vreme stajali tu, kao u zamrznutom kadru, i posmatrali svog velikog žutog mačka. Mačak je glasno i halapljivo dovršavao svoju porciju. U jednom momentu, kad je valjda osetio da je sit, okrenuo je leđa svojoj činiji i počeo pažljivo da se oblizuje. Prvo bi olizao svoju šapu, a onda njome prelazio po svim delovima svog gipkog tela. Savijao se u nemoguće lukove i uspevao da jezikom dotakne i najudaljenije tačke svojih leđa, stomaka i repa.

– Izgleda da je okej – reče žena. – Deluje mi da je čitav, ne fali mu uvo, ne fali mu oko, rep je ceo, izgleda da se gospodin Lola i ovaj put izvukao.

– Ma naravno – reče njen muž ulazeći u kuću. – Ti previše brineš za njega. Skuvaću nam kafu.

Žena se vratila za sto, u hladovinu velike lipe. Bio je topao aprilski dan. Lale i narcisi svuda unaokolo, to je bilo njihovo vreme. Zapalila je cigaretu i prelazila pogledom po bašti. Gledala je žbunove koje bi trebalo orezati, mesta na kojima joj se činilo da fali još poneki cvet, onda je ponovo gledala u Lolu, koji je sada već sasvim spokojno ležao na pohabanom ćebetu, žmirkajući ka njoj svojim žutim očima. Znala je da će uskoro da zaspi i da će zatim spavati satima. Uvek je tako bilo. Ljudi nikada ne spavaju tako spokojno, pomisli ona sa pomalo zavisti. Čak ni kada su deca. I onda im u san dolaze kojekakva čudovišta. A Lola je spavao savršeno bezbrižno. Tek pomalo bi se naziralo njegovo disanje, ritmično kretanje njegovog stomaka gore i dole. Ponekad bi mu se, od neke muve ili bubice, trgnulo uvo. Ponekad bi, ne otvarajući oči, ustao, izvio leđa, promenio pozu i nastavio da spava. I to bi bilo sve. Nije imao nikakvih briga. Nije mislio o onome što je bilo juče, nije imao planova, nije ga mučila zavist, nije imao nikakvih ambicija, nije osećao strepnju. A ko zna, pomisli ona, možda se ja varam, možda i on ima neke svoje mačje brige? Ipak, ova joj se pomisao činila malo verovatnom. Lola je, ovako usnuo, izgledao kao slika i prilika apsolutnog spokoja. Sit, umiven i bezbrižan. Savršeno bezbedan u svom dvorištu. Upitala se da li on uopšte zna šta je to bezbednost. Ili zna samo za strah, u trenutku kada ga oseti.

Posmatranje mačka uvek ju je na neki neobičan način umirivalo. Volela je da sedi pored njega, da spava pored njega, da gleda film pored njega, da jede dok on jede, da čita knjigu dok on drema sa glavom na njenim papučama, jednom rečju – volela je kada je mačak tu, u njenom vidokrugu.

Ali kad ga nije bilo, uvek je strepela. Kada je lutao unaokolo, po okolnim dvorištima, po trotoarima, po maloju brezovoj šumi koja je počinjala odmah iza njihovog zadnjeg dvorišta. Ko zna gde je sve Lola odlazio, mislila je ona. I svaki put je strepela, sluteći najstrašnije scenarije.

Zaglavljn u nečijem podrumu tužno mjauče danima i noćima i niko ga ne čuje.

Proždire ga komšijin ogroman krvožedni pas.

Upada u potok, ne uspeva da izađe i davi se.

Penje se na drvo jureći pticu, skače do najtanje grane i onda pada sa velike visine i sav se polomi.

Napada ga banda velikih glavatih uličnih mačora koji ga mrze zato što je lep i čist i uvek sit. Mora biti, slutila je, da ovi večito gladni mačori znaju da je on srećniji od njih. Nekim čulom osećaju to, bila je sigurna. Jedino nije mogla pretpostaviti da li ove osobine Lolu čine privlačnijim uličnim macama, za kojima je povremeno jurio, ili, naprotiv, one više vole one ogrubele, pune ožiljaka i ratnih trofeja? Ko bi razumeo mačke. Ko bi razumeo žene. Ko bi razumeo bilo koga...

– Evo kafe – reče njen muž i stavi dve šoljice na sto.

Seo je preko puta nje i posmatrao je. Ona je ćutke i dalje gledala u mačora.

– Nećeš valjda opet... ?

Ona ga samo pogleda i slegnu ramenima.

– Molim te – reče on – pokušavajući da zvuči smireno – toliko puta smo već o tome pričali. Molim te, nemoj više...

– Ali svi kažu da bi to bilo mnogo bolje za njega...

– Svi! Koji svi? – prekinu je muž usred rečenice, gotovo vičući. – Ko su ti svi, zaista?

– Nemoj odmah da vičeš. Veterinar. I drugi ljudi koji imaju mačke. Svi kažu da uopšte ne bi lutao kad bi bio kastriran. Bio bi više vezan za nas i stalno bi sedeo tu, u dvorištu.

– Da, sedeo bi tu kao neka stvar. Kao preparirana mačja lešina.

– Ne preteruj...

– Ja preterujem? – Ispio je svoju kafu gotovo u jednom gutljaju i nervozno lupkao prstima po stolu. – Slušaj, stvarno mi je muka da više razgovaramo o tome. Nećeš kastrirati ovog mačora! Nećeš, i tačka! I nećemo više o tome. Zaista. Zaista. Hajde da sad, ovog trenutka, promenimo temu.

Lola je za trenutak podigao glavu i lenjo pogledao u njih. Da li on uopšte sluti o čemu pričamo, pomisli žena. I, ako bi znao, da li bi uopšte mario?

Već sledećeg trenutka mačak se izvalio na leđa i nastavio da spava. Usta su mu bila pomalo otvorena, virila su mu dva oštra očnjaka, vrh jezika mu je visio iz usta. Izgledao je kao da je mrtav, pomisli žena, užasnuta. Došlo joj je da ode do njega i pomeri ga. Nije želela da ga dugo posmatra u ovoj pozi u kojoj joj liči na mrtvu mačku. Videla je u svom životu nekoliko mrtvih mačaka i sve su izgledale baš ovako, pomalo iskeženo, kao da su se u svom poslednjem, samrtnom času nekako gorko nasmejale sopstvenom mačjem usudu. Kao da su svetu, na kraju, poslale baš ovakav osmeh, sa očnjakom koji sija u pozadini.

Šta bi bilo kad bih mu rekla da razmišljam o mrtvim mačkama, pomisli žena. Šta bi bilo kad bismo jedni drugima govorili sve o čemu mislimo? Ili još gore, kad naše misli ne bi mogle da se sakriju? Možda bi onda ljudi uvežbali tehniku čistih, bezbednih, transparentnih misli?

Ona pogleda u njega, smešeći se, i shvati da je njegovo lice i dalje ljutito.

– Zbog čega se sad smeješ? – upita je muž.

– Pokušavam da mislim samo čiste misli. Misli koje bi svako mogao da čuje. Šta misliš, da li je to moguće?

– Ne verujem da bi želela da u ovom času čuješ moje misli.

– Zašto? – upita žena i dalje se smešeći. – Zar su tako užasne?

– Mislim – počeo on polako, kao da vrlo pažljivo bira reči koje će izgovoriti – da ti zapravo želiš da imaš potpunu kontrolu nad njim. Ne želiš da bilo gde ide, ne želiš da ima bilo kakav život izvan ovog ovde. Želiš da on neprestano leži tu na pragu i uklapa se u ambijent savršenog doma. Eto to mislim.

Žena skupi džemper oko sebe. Odjednom joj se učinilo da je dunuo neki oštar vetar i da je zahladnelo. Pogleda u lišće lipe. Bilo je potpuno mirno. Nema vetra, pomisli ona, nema vetra, umišljam.

– Ne, nije tačno. Znaš i sam da nije tačno. Ja samo želim da on bude bezbedan.

– A šta bi, po tebi, bila cena te bezbednosti? Jedan besmisleni život u kome nema ni želje, ni izazova, ni opasnosti, ni rizika, ni borbe, jedan život u kome će se sve svoditi na to da se on dobro najede i onda legne da spava? Jesi li sigurna da znaš koliko zadovoljstva mu možda oduzimaš zato što ti hoćeš da budeš spokojna?

– Zadovoljstva? Ne vidim kakvo je zadovoljstvo u tome što se neprestano tuče s drugim mačorima i dolazi nam ovamo sav u ranama i onda mesecima moramo da ga krpimo i lečimo? Kakvo je to zadovoljstvo?

– Otkud ti znaš – reče njen muž – nikad nisi bila mačak. Ne možeš da znaš.

– A ti si bio?

Otvorio je usta kao da će da odgovori, ali nije rekao ništa. Samo je tako sedeo par sekundi, otvorenih usta, a onda ustao i otišao do stepenica. Seo je na prag i pomilovao Lolu po glavi. Mačak se u dva poteza smestio kod njega u krilo i nastavio da spava. Bilo mu je lepo, videla je to. Bilo mu je dobro tu, u nečijem krilu, nisu mu bile potrebne nikakve tuče i lutanja.

Ćutali su neko vreme, ona je polako dovršavala kafu, njen muž je rukom lagano prelazio po Lolinim leđima, čulo se samo kako mačak prede i kako se vrapci svadaju negde u krošnji lipe.

– Zašto ovo nije dovoljno, ne razumem? – reče ona tiho, više kao da pita samu sebe.

Ne prestajući da miluje mačka, njen muž, isto tako tiho, reče:

– Zato što tamo, izvan ove ograde, postoji čitav jedan život koji treba istražiti. Onjušiti. Ugristi. Ogrebati. Zato što svaki mačor ima pravo na svoje rane i na svoja lutanja. I ako s tim ne možeš da se pomiriš, onda je bolje da nikoga i ne pokušavaš da voliš. Nikada.

Sada joj je definitivno bilo hladno. Ustala je i ušla u kuhinju. Mehanički je stala pored sudopere i počela da pere sudove od ručka. Napravila je puno pene i razgledala, sa zanimanjem, balončice koji su se pravili na njenim dlanovima i nestajali pod mlazom vode. Sve to bilo je i pomalo smešno, mislila je. Sva ta njegova borba. Kao da ona ne zna. Naravno da zna. Svi ti odlasci i dolasci. Sva ta preterana pospanost. Naravno da zna. Uskoro će i telefon da zazvoni. Naravno da zna. I on će ponovo negde da ode. I neće ga biti satima. Naravno da zna. I on bi morao znati da ona zna.

Kasnije, kad je njen muž već zatvarao kapiju za sobom, ona mu doviknu sa praga:

– Ne zaboravi da kupiš sijalicu kad se budeš vraćao, pregorela je u kupatilu!

Njegov se glas već gubio, ali ga je čula, ulazeći u kuću:

– Okej, ako radnje još budu radile...

Mačak je nečujno ušao u kuću za njom.

– Šta kažeš na jednu viršlu? – upita ga ona.

Lola nije kazao ništa. Ali izgledao je kao da nema ništa protiv viršle. Pažljivo je iseckala viršlu na komadiće, ubacila sve to u činiju s malo tople vode jer mačak nije voleo hladnu hranu iz frižidera, sačekala minut, ocedila vodu, probala prstom da li su se komadići viršle ugrijali i tek onda dala mačku da jede. Jeo je halapljivo, kao da nije pre samo sat vremena radio to isto.

– Eto vidiš – reče ona mačku. – Znam ja odlično šta tebi treba. A kad to pojedеш, ti i ja idemo do veterinara. Neće te ništa boleti, dobićeš finu malu anesteziju. I sve će biti gotovo za nekoliko minuta. Je li tako?

Učinilo joj se da je Lola klimnuo svojom žutom glavom. To joj je bilo sasvim dovoljno.

Skinula je sa ormana korpu u kojoj će da ponese mačka i pošla da se obuče.

Fairground Magician

Jelena Lengold

Translated from the Serbian by Rusanka Ljapova

Wanderings

Just as the woman was removing the plates and the salad bowl from the table, the cat appeared. In a single leap he jumped over the yard fence and made for his food bowl. He knew exactly where his meal awaited him. The woman shouted joyously:

– Hey, there’s Lola!

– I told you he’d come back – a voice replied from inside the house.

– He always comes back.

The man came out onto the threshold and held out his hand to take the dishes that his wife was carrying. He smiled at her:

– Tomcats always come back for their slice of meat, you should know that much about us.

She responded with one of those smiles the full meaning of which is understood only by people sharing the same bed. They both stood there for a while, as if in a freeze-frame, watching their big yellow tomcat. He was finishing his meal loudly and voraciously. Then, presumably feeling full up, he turned abruptly away from his bowl and started licking himself meticulously. He licked his paw first, and then slid it over his entire lithe body. He contorted impossibly, managing

to touch even the remotest parts of his back, belly and tail with his tongue.

– He looks OK – the woman said.

– He appears to be in one piece, his ears and eyes are all in place, his tail is intact, Mr Lola seems to have got away with it this time as well.

– Why, of course – her husband said entering the house.

– You worry about him too much. I'll make us some coffee.

The woman went back to the table, in the shade of the tall linden-tree. It was a warm April day. There were tulips and narcissi all around, it was their time to bloom. She looked at the bushes that needed pruning, the places that seemed to lack a flower or two, then she looked at Lola again, who was lying quite peacefully now on a worn blanket, blinking at her with his yellow eyes. She knew he would fall asleep soon and sleep for hours. It always happened like that. People never slept so peacefully, she thought with a little envy. Not even while they were children. Even then, all sorts of monsters appeared in their dreams. But Lola slept without a worry or care. One could see him breathe, the rhythmic up-and-down motion of his belly. Occasionally, one of his ears twitched away a fly or some insect. Sometimes, without opening his eyes, he stood up, arched his back, changed his position and went on sleeping. And that was all. He had no worries. He did not think about what had happened the day before, had no plans, was not plagued by envy, did not have any ambitions, felt no apprehension. And who knows, she thought, maybe I am wrong, maybe he does have some tomcat worries of his own? Still, it seemed highly unlikely to her. Asleep as he was, Lola seemed the perfect image of absolute calm. Full up, licked clean and carefree. Perfectly safe in his own yard. She

wondered whether he knew at all what safety was. Or perhaps he knew only fear, at the moment when lie felt it.

Watching the cat always calmed her down in some strange way. She liked sitting next to him, sleeping next to him, watching a movie next to him, eating while he ate, reading a book while he dozed on her slippers, in a word – she liked having him around, within sight.

But when he was not around, she always fretted. While he wandered around, through the neighbouring yards, across pavements, through the little birch wood that started right behind their back yard, she fretted. Who knows where Lola went, she thought. And each time she fretted, imagining the worst scenarios.

Stuck in someone's cellar, he meows mournfully for days without being heard.

The huge neighbour's bloodthirsty dog devours him.

He falls into a brook and drowns.

He climbs a tree in pursuit of a bird, jumps onto the thinnest branch and then falls from a great height, breaking every bone in his body.

A gang of huge, big-headed street cats attack him; they hate him for being so good-looking and clean, and always well fed. It must be, she surmised, that these perennially hungry tomcats knew he was happier than they were. They felt it with some sense or other, she was sure of that. The only thing she could not fathom was whether these characteristics made Lola more attractive to the street pussycats he chased from time to time, or perhaps they preferred those rough tomcats full of scars and war trophies? Who could understand cats? Who could understand women? Who could understand anyone...?

– Here’s coffee – her husband said and placed two cups on the table.

He sat opposite her and watched her. She remained silent and kept watching the cat.

– You’re not going to...not again?

She just looked at him and shrugged her shoulders.

– Please – he said, trying to sound calm – we have discussed it so many times. Please, not again...

– But everybody says it would be much better for him...

– Everybody! Everybody who? – her husband interrupted her in mid-sentence, almost shouting. – What do you mean, everybody, who are they really?

– Please, don’t shout. The vet said so. And other people who have cats. They all say he would not wander around if he were castrated. He would be more attached to us and would sit here in the yard all the time.

– Yes, he would sit here like an object. A stuffed cat corpse.

– Don’t exaggerate...

– Me, exaggerate? – He drank his coffee almost in a single gulp, nervously drumming his fingers against the table. – Listen, I’m really sick of talking about it. You’re not going to have this cat castrated! That’s final! And I can’t talk about it any longer. Really. Really. Let’s change the subject this second.

For a second, Lola raised his head and looked at them lazily. Does he have any idea of what we’re talking about, the woman thought. And if he knew, would he care at all?

The very next moment, the cat rolled onto his back and went on sleeping. His mouth was slightly open, two sharp eye-teeth and the tip of his tongue protruding. He looked as if he were dead, the woman thought, horrified. She felt the urge

to get up, go over to him and move him. She did not want to go on watching him like that, looking like a dead cat. She had seen a few dead cats before, and they all looked like this, grinning slightly, as if they had smiled bitterly at their feline fate at the last moment. As if, towards the end, they had sent the world a farewell smile just like that, with an eye-tooth glistening in the background.

What would happen if I told him I was thinking about dead cats, the woman thought. What would happen if we told one another what really was on our minds? Or even worse, what if it was not possible to hide our thoughts? Maybe then people would train themselves to think pure, safe, transparent thoughts?

She looked at him with a smile and realised his face was still angry.

– Why are you laughing now? – her husband asked.

– I'm trying to think pure thoughts only. Thoughts everyone could hear. What do you think, is it possible?

– I don't think you would like to hear my thoughts right now.

– Why? – the woman asked, still smiling. – Are they so horrible?

– I think – he began slowly, as if choosing his words with great care – that you actually want to have total control over him. You don't want him to go anywhere else, you don't want him to have any other life away from here. You want him lying there on the threshold all the time, fitting the atmosphere of a perfect home. That's what I think.

The woman pulled her cardigan closer to her body. All of a sudden it seemed to her that a cold wind had started blowing and that it had grown colder. She looked at the leaves of the linden-tree. They were quite still. No wind, she thought, no wind, I'm just imagining things.

– No, that’s not true. You know it isn’t. I only want him to be safe.

– And what do you think would be the price of that safety? A pointless life without any desires, challenges, dangers, risks, fights, a life reduced to filling his belly and then sleeping all day. Are you quite sure you know how much pleasure you may be depriving him of because you want to put your mind at rest?

– Pleasure? I don’t see any pleasure in his constantly fighting other tomcats and coming back home all scarred, and then we have to patch him up and heal his wounds for months. What sort of pleasure is that?

– How would you know, – her husband retorted – you’ve never been a tomcat. There’s no way you could know that.

– And you have?

He opened his mouth as if to reply but said nothing. He just sat like that for a couple of seconds, with his mouth open, and then got up and went over to the stairs. He sat down on the threshold and stroked Lola’s head. With a couple of swift movements, the cat shifted onto his lap and went on sleeping. He was contented, she could see that. It felt nice to be there, in someone’s lap, he needed no fights and wandering.

They remained silent for a while, she slowly finished her coffee, her husband slowly caressed Lola’s back, the only sound to be heard was that of the cat’s purring and of sparrows quarrelling somewhere in the crown of the linden-tree.

– Why is this not enough, I don’t understand – she said softly, as if to herself.

Continuing to caress the cat, her husband said, just as softly:

– Because over there, on the other side of that fence, there’s an entire life to be explored. Sniffed. Bitten. Scratched. Because each and every tomcat has a right to his wounds and his wanderings. And if you can’t live with that, then you’d better not try to love anyone. Ever.

She was definitely cold now. She got up and went into the kitchen. Mechanically, she stood next to the sink and started washing the dishes remaining from lunch. She made a lot of foam and looked with interest at the bubbles forming on her palms and disappearing under a jet of water. All that was a bit funny, she thought. All that fighting on his part. As if she didn’t know. Of course she knew. All those comings and goings. All that excessive sleepiness. Of course she knew. The phone would ring soon. Of course she knew. And he would go off somewhere again. And he would be gone for hours. Of course she knew. And he ought to know that she knew.

Later, when her husband was already closing the gate, she shouted to him from the threshold:

– Don’t forget to buy a light-bulb on your way back, the one in the bathroom has burned out!

His voice was already fading, but she heard him going into the house:

– OK, if the shops are still open...

The cat entered the house noiselessly after her.

– What do you say about a hot dog? – she asked him.

Lola said nothing. But it seemed that he had nothing against a hot dog. She carefully cut it into small pieces, threw the lot into a small bowl with a little hot water, for the cat did not like cold food from the fridge, waited for a minute, poured out the water, checked with her finger that the hot dog pieces were warm and only then put the bowl in front of the

cat to eat. He ate quite greedily, as if he hadn't eaten only an hour before.

– See – she said to the cat. – I know full well what you need. And when you're finished with that, we'll go to the vet. It won't hurt a bit, you'll get a nice little injection. And everything will be over in a matter of minutes. Right?

It seemed to her that Lola's yellow head nodded. That was quite enough for her.

She took the basket in which she would carry the cat down from the cupboard and went to get dressed.



© Senol Altun

Çiler İlhan

Sürgün (2010)

Exile

Publishing House Everest Yayınları

Biography

Born in 1972, Çiler İlhan studied International Relations and Political Science at Bosphorus University and then hotel management at the Glion Hotel School in Switzerland. Having worked as a hotelier, a freelance writer (*Boğaziçi, Time Out İstanbul, etc.*) and an editor (*Chat, Travel+Leisure*) at different periods of her life, İlhan, based in İstanbul, now works as the public relations manager of the Çırağan Palace Kempinski hotel.

In 1993, she received a prestigious youth award for a short story. The award was a tribute to the memory of Yaşar Nabi, a leading publisher and writer. İlhan's stories, essays, book reviews, travel articles and translations into Turkish have been published in a variety of journals and newspaper supplements.

Synopsis

The stories in *Exile* are monologues by a variety of real-life and fictional characters. İlhan has a wide-ranging and deep understanding of human experience and suffering, and she is capable of expressing the multi-faceted realities of life strikingly and plainly, sensitive to its pains and injustices. Her literary approach is in harmony with Einstein's aphorism: "A formula should be as simple as possible, but not simpler".

The fact that the monologues constitute a relatively connected whole is another positive aspect of *Exile*. The succinct monologues form a polylogue. This is a short story collection that has the taste of a novel.

Sürgün

Çiler İlhan

5 Numara

Ben, Han. Anne karnında öldürülmeye çalışılmış biri için ironik bir isim olduğunu kabul etmeliyim.

Olay şu: Annemle babam Temiz Gen Programı'nın üyesiymişler. Program dahilinde, annemin rahmine düştüğüm anlaşılır anlaşılmaz testlerim yapılmış. Alet sinyal vermemiş. Herkes mutlu: "Beşinci dölünüz temizdir, buyrun doğurun." Ama kandırdım sizi he heyt kandırdım!

Hamilelik çok sakın geçti; mahsus yaptım. Çıt çıkarmadım içeride şüphe çekmemek için... Ne tek bir bulantı verdim anneme, ne uykusuz tek bir saat... Hatta o iyice rahat etsin diye büyümedim bile doğru dürüst. Aman ne mutluydu annem, ne mutluydu herkes... E, temiz gen. Bu temiz genlerin hali bir başka oluyor, iyi ki yazıldık bu programa. Bak Ayşe'ye, yazık ne çok gazı var.

Bekledim. Aslına bakarsanız epey bekledim; epey bekledim en azından... Zannettim ki dokuz aya kadar beklersem artık ne olursa olsun çıkmam garantidir. Ne de olsa artık resmi olarak insan sayılırım! Dokuzuncu ayın sonunda ellerim biraz fazla büyümüştü ve ben annemin karnı fazla şişmesin diye onları yumruk yapmaktan yorulmuştum; birazcık açıverdim. Öyle tümü tümü değil ha, birazcık rahatlamak için, azıcık. Aman sen misin bunu yapan! Bir eli yağda bir eli

balda, prensesler gibi, raprahat bir hamilelik geçiren annem karnında ufacık bir sızı duyar duymaz doktora koştu. Beyaz gömlekliler, pek severler böyle şeyleri ahkâm kesmeye doyamazlar, bir çırpıda toplandılar. Geni temizlenmiş bir bebeğin rahatsızlık vermesi! Olacak şey değil! Beyaz gömlekliler şüphelendi. Hayır dediler, hayır. Bu işte bir yanlışlık var. Hemen o meşhur alet getirildi, karın dinlenildi, gizli gizli bakışıldı, açık açık konuşuldu: Korkunç bir hata olmuş. Milyonda bir görülecek cinsten. Aletin sinyal vermesinden de anlamışsınızdır; bebeğinizin geni temiz değil!

Annem o koca karnıyla köpürdü! Böyle şey nasıl olur! Çuvalla para döktüm ben bu programa!

Çok üzgünüz hanfendi, paranız hemen iade edilecektir.

Saatlerce dil döktüler ama ben bebek güdüsüyle anladım ki anneme göre tek çare, ikimizden de kurtulmak. Hem uğraşamaz bozuk genli bir bebekle, çok iş; hem de iş yerinde bebeği bozuk çıkmış tek kadın yok.

Ama ölmedim işte. Ölmedim. Hava-ambulans köprünün ayağına ulaştığında annem son nefesini çoktan vermişti. Mavi gömlekliler hemen oracıkta annemin karnını açıp çıkarıverdiler içindekini. Beni... Kör ama capcanlı.

Exile

Çiler İlhan

Translated from the Turkish by Ayşegül Toroser Ateş & Nuri Ateş.

Number 5

I'm Khan. I must admit it's an ironic name for someone whose life was nearly taken in his mother's womb.

Here is what happened: Apparently my mother and father were members of the Gene Purging Programme. Under the programme, my gene tests were carried out as soon as it was understood that I had been conceived. The device did not give out a signal. Everyone was happy: "Your fifth seed is pure, there, you may give birth." But I fooled you, there! I did.

The pregnancy passed unperturbed; I did it on purpose. I didn't make the slightest noise in there so that I wouldn't cause any suspicion... I caused my mother neither a single bout of nausea nor a single sleepless hour... In fact, I didn't even grow properly so that she would be totally comfortable. Oh, how happy my mother was, how happy everyone was... Well, a pure gene. These pure genes *are* something, good thing we joined this programme. Look at Ayşe, poor woman, how flatulent she is.

I waited. To tell you the truth, I waited quite a long time; I waited for quite a long time, at least... I thought that if I waited for nine months I would be sure to get out no matter what. After all, by then I was officially considered a human being! By the end of the ninth month my hands were slightly overgrown, and I was tired of making them into fists so that my mother's belly would not swell too much; I loosened them a little bit. Not altogether, mind you, just a little bit, just to get a little bit comfortable. If only I hadn't done that! My mother, whose pregnancy was passing so easily, as if she were a princess, having felt the slightest discomfort in her belly ran off to the doctor, ordering my father over the phone to "Come quickly". The white-shirts, they love pontificating on such matters, they can't have enough, they got together at once. That a baby with purged genes should cause discomfort! Impossible! The white-shirts got suspicious. No, they said, no. There is something wrong here. That famous device was brought in straight away, the belly was listened to, glances were exchanged secretly, words were exchanged openly: There has been a terrible mistake. A one-in-a-million kind of thing. You must have understood by the fact that the device gave out a signal; your baby's genes are not pure!

My mother was furious, with that huge belly of hers! How could such a thing happen! I spent a bagful of money for this programme!

We are very sorry, madam, you will get a refund immediately.

They went on coaxing her for hours to no avail; my mother would have none of it... While *she* was storming at the doctors I suddenly realized that my father had already slipped away! That's what he does, my father gets lost whenever things get

messy, that is my observation of nine months... When my mother finally realised the absence of my father she jumped into her car in a panic, naturally she did not listen to the doctors' orders about not driving... She's both driving and calling my father on her mobile... but there is no answer. Now she cannot stand that, she cannot stand my father ignoring her... It's not because she adores her husband, it's because of her keen concern for her reputation! "Honey," she often tells her friends, "I cannot remember a single night when we did not sleep close together, hand in hand, all these years we have not had a serious argument or disagreement." There is bound to be no disagreement if you keep being such a witch!

But this time she's in deep trouble; the baby is flawed, the husband is gone, she's disgraced before workmates... She is actually quite delicate, but was it her hormones or what, after all she is pregnant, even I couldn't predict it, whereas my baby's instincts are very powerful, in the blink of an eye should she not drive the car towards a cliff! I do not know whether she was angrier with me or with herself.

But her plan didn't work, I didn't die! I didn't! By the time the air-ambulance arrived my mother had already breathed her last breath. The blue-shirts immediately opened up my mother's belly there and then and took out what was inside. Me... Blind but full of life.



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Adam Foulds

The Quickening Maze (2010)

Publishing House **Jonathan Cape, Random House**

Biography

Adam Foulds was born in 1974, went to Bancroft's School in London, read English at St Catherine's College, Oxford, and took an MA in creative writing from the University of East Anglia in 2001. He lives in South London.

His first novel, *The Truth About These Strange Times* (2007), won the 2008 *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award and a Betty Trask Award. This was followed by the long narrative poem, *The Broken Word* (2008), about Kenya's Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s. It was shortlisted for the 2008 John Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize and the 2009 *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award, and won a Somerset Maugham Award and the 2008 Costa Poetry Award. *The Quickening Maze* (2009) was his second novel. A powerful fictionalized account of the poet John Clare's incarceration in an asylum in 1840, it was shortlisted for the 2009 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. In 2010, Foulds was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Synopsis

Epping Forest, 1840. The poet John Clare, once admired by the critics but now out of favour and struggling with alcohol and mental disturbance, is incarcerated in an asylum, High Beach. At the same time, the young Alfred Tennyson moves in nearby: his brother Septimus, suffering from melancholia, is also a patient at the asylum. Matthew Allen, the charismatic asylum owner, has recurring financial worries, having already been imprisoned for debt earlier in his life. He hopes to solve these problems by persuading investors, the Tennyson brothers included, to support an ill-fated scheme. Beyond the walls are all that Clare longs for: the beauty of the natural world, home, and the possibility of reunion with his childhood sweetheart, Mary, and his wife, Patty. Outside is also the world of the gypsies whom Clare encounters on brief excursions.

The closed world of High Beach asylum is vividly depicted – the travails of individual patients, the mad with 'their frantic, tunnelling logic, their sorrow, their hopelessness and aggression and indecencies', as well as the hopes and aspirations of Allen and his wife and family. At the centre is Clare's own fall into madness and the delusions that convince him he is Byron, or prize-fighter Jack Randall, or even Robinson Crusoe. At the end of the book, Clare escapes and struggles homewards towards his village of Helpston, not knowing that Mary has died in his absence.

The Quickening Maze

Adam Foulds

John walked on through the forest, passing charcoal burners sitting inside their huts, ancient things of poles walled with cut turf, old as any dwelling probably. They had to spend days out there, making sure the fires didn't catch, but slowly ate down to coal the wood piled under covers. The smoke that rose was sweet, much sweeter than at the lime kilns where John had worked off and on. He saw them look up and stare out of their darkness and risked a greeting doffing of his hat, but they didn't move.

Then, half a mile away, in a clearing there were vardas, painted caravans, tethered horses, and children, and a smoking fire. A little terrier caught the scent of John and stood with its four feet planted, leaning towards him, as if in italics, to bark. An old woman seated near the fire, a blanket around her shoulders, looked up. John didn't move or say anything.

'Good day to you,' she said.

'Good day,' John answered, and then to let her know he knew them, was a friend, said, 'Cushti hatchintan.'

She raised her eyebrows at that. 'It is. It is a good spot. You rokkers Romany then, do you?'

'Somewhat, I do. I was often with the gypsies near my hatchintan, in Northamptonshire. We had many long nights. They taught me to fiddle their tunes and such. Abraham Smith, and Phoebe. You know them?'

'We're Smiths here, but I don't know your crew. I haven't been into that county, or had them here. This is a good spot,'

she raised an arm to gesture at it. ‘Plenty of land and no one pushing you off it. And the forest creatures, lots of hotch-witchis to eat in winter. This is one commons that don’t seem to be getting ate up.’

John shook his head and answered as one weary elder to another. ‘It’s criminal what is nominated law now. Theft only, taking the common land from the people. I remember when they came to our village with their telescopes to measure and fence and parcel out. The gypsies then were driven out. The poor also.’

One of the children ran over to the old lady and whispered in her ear, watching John. The others stood apart like cats, eyes among the branches. The terrier that had warned of John’s coming now jogged over to join the children’s conspiracy.

The old woman spoke. ‘He thinks you might be a forest constable or a gamekeeper who might not be keen on us here.’

Wanting very much to stay in this comfortable loose nest of a place, with the free people, John declared himself. ‘I’m homeless myself, sleeping nearby. And often I’ve been arrested by gamekeepers.’ This was true: he’d often been mistaken for a poacher as he skulked and wrote his poems, a man with no reason to be in that place but being there.

‘What’s your name?’

‘John. John Clare.’

‘Well, I’m Judith Smith. I take you as an acceptable man, John Clare, pale and lorn, albeit well fed, whoever you are. I smell the wrong in men, crosswise intentions, and I don’t smell that in you, with your foolish open face. I’m known for my duckering, and my predictions have proved most accurate, most accurate.’

‘I know many ballads. I can sing, if you like.’

Judith Smith laughed and pulled a twig from the fire to light her pipe. 'Later, if you like when the others get back. Quick at making friends, ain't I? The chavvies are fearful, but they'll simmer down.'

John looked round at the children, four or five of them keeping their distance, as the one who'd whispered to her sprinted back to them.

'Chavvies ought to be fearful,' John said. 'It might save them now and again.'

'It's possible. Will you sit, then? You can keep the yog going till we've something to cook. That's why they's worrying. Fellers have gone off to get something to eat, you see, and they don't want it ruined.'

'Quite right,' John said.

So John sat beside her and poked the fire, turning its sticks to keep it burning while the chavvies gradually lost their fear and ran over to sprinkle dry leaves on, waiting for the ones that caught and lifted on wandering, pirouetting flights that drifted at times excitingly towards them. The old woman offered John a wooden pipe to smoke, its stem dented with yellow tooth marks, but he showed her his own. He drew whistling sour air through it to check it would draw, then filled it from a twist of tobacco she had. That wrapper of old newspaper was probably the only bit of printed matter in the place and John smiled to see it put to good use, its smudged words unread, its sharp voices sounding in nobody's mind. He lit his pipe with a burning twig. They talked about the weather and the plants. Long silences between thoughts were filled with the sound of the fire and the ceaseless sound of wind through the branches, bird flights, scurryings.

Younger women emerged from the caravans – they must have been hiding there the whole time – and John made himself

known to them. They seemed less certain of his presence than Judith Smith, offering the bare bones of greetings as they went about their business, rinsing pots, gathering more wood for the fire, smacking dirt from the chavvies' clothes. John liked the brisk, free, tumbled life around him and watched it affectionately as the fire grew ruddier against the weakening light.

The men's voices returned a few minutes before they did. By then the fire had been enlarged and pots arranged. As the voices approached, the children stopped burying each other in leaves and even pushed their hair back out of their faces. The dog, frantic, barked and ran in tight circles to bark again. It ran off to meet the men and returned ahead of the party with a few rangy lurchers and a blurring number of other terriers.

When John saw the men and the deer slung between two of them, covered in a blanket but still obvious, he knew what all the caginess had been about. He stood up immediately to introduce himself. 'I'm John Clare, a traveller, and always a friend of the gypsies. I bring cordial greetings from Abraham and Phoebe Smith of Northamptonshire.'

'He's a good fellow,' Judith attested. "Knows the plants and cures as well as we do. He must've been long with those Smiths because he knows all our names for them.'

The foremost man made a decision as quick as Judith's had been. He answered with the formality of a man speaking for his tribe. 'S'long as you are no friend of the gamekeepers and don't fall to talking with them you're welcome among us, John Clare. My name is Ezekiel.'

So John was let stay and watched the men, who didn't seem in any way encumbered by thoughts of transportation and a life of whippings at Botany Bay as they dismantled the deer.

He watched with great pleasure the skill of the men, their knives quick as fish. They said nothing, only the work made noises, knockings on joints, wet peelings, the twisting crunch of a part disconnected.

First, a trench was dug to receive and hide the blood and the deer was hung from a branch upside down above it. With sharpened knives they slit it quickly down the middle and found the first stomach. Very carefully one man cut either side of it, and knotted the slippery tubes to keep the gut acid from the meat. This made something like a straw-stuffed cushion, filled with undigested herbage.

Then the forelimbs were cut through to the precise white joints and removed. After loosening work with a knife, the skin was pulled from the deer. It peeled away cleanly with a moist sucking sound, leaving dark meat and bones beneath a sheeny blue underskin. As they did all this, the men had to kick at the dogs who were crowding round the trench to lap at the blood.

The gullet was separated and the weasand was drawn from the windpipe. They cleared the chest of its entrails. The heart and lungs were snicked out and placed in a bowl, then the long rippled ropes of the intestines were hauled out and dropped into the trench. Working from the back, the chuck, saddle and loin portions were removed from the ribcage and spine in one piece, both sides together like a bloody book the size of a church Bible. They were then cut into pieces, some of which were sliced and spitted immediately over the fire. Other parts were taken away by the women. Then the neck was stripped of meat. The deer looked odd now with its whole furred head and antlers hanging down, its skeleton neck and body, and its breeches of flesh still on. Those too were now removed, divided, and packed. The ribs were sawn through, and all of them were split and set over the fire. The deer now was clean. Its skeleton faintly glowed in the

dusk, its sorrowful head merged with the shadows. Another pit was dug and the skeleton was placed inside it, curled around like a foetus. The earth was replaced, leaves and twigs dragged over to hide the spot.

The dogs jostled round the other trench in a cloud of flies. John could hear the knocking of their empty jaws and short huffing breaths. With the smell of the venison rising in the smoke, John's own hunger became acute and his guts let out a long crooning grumble like a pigeon's note. Beer was poured and drunk and soon the air was splashy with talk and voices. John didn't join in very much but listened to the flow and switch of it, hearing Romany words he'd almost forgotten he knew.

Handed his first rib, John was told, 'Blood on your hands, my friend. You're our accomplice now.' The meat was delicious, charred muscle to tear at and smooth soft fat. There was no harm in eating the deer, to John's mind: they kept themselves; there were many in the forest. They flowed unnumbered through the shadows.

Afterwards there was more drink and music while bats, in their last flights of the year, flickered overhead. John proved his claim to know their music when he accepted a fiddle from them. He played Northamptonshire tunes and gypsy tunes. He played one that circled like a merry-go-round and lifted them all smiling on its refrain. He played a tune that reached out and up, branching into the trees. He played a tune that was flat and lonely as the fens, cold as winter mist. He played one for Mary. After he'd played, there was singing, John listened to the strong joined voices, adding his own notes of harmony, and his mind's eye swept back to see them all in the middle of the darkened forest, in the circle of firelight, the bloody-muzzled dogs lying outstretched beside their hard-packed bellies. The people made a well of song; it surged up from eternity into that

moment, a source. He lay back, really overwhelmed, and saw stars through the almost bare branches. He closed his eyes and lay there in the middle of the world, denied his wives, his home, but accompanied and peaceful.

Eventually the singing stopped and a little while after that he felt a blanket placed over him. He opened his eyes to see the rosy fire still breathing at the heart of white sticks. An owl cried its dry, hoarse cry and the bats still scattered their tiny beads of sound around him. He loved lying in its lap, the continuing forest, the way the roots ate the rot of leaves, and it circled on. To please himself, to decorate his path into sleep, he passed through his mind an inventory of its creatures. He saw the trees, beech, oak, hornbeam, lime, holly, hazel, and the berries, the different mushrooms, ferns, moss, lichens. He saw the rapid, low foxes, the tremulous deer, lone wild cats, tough, trundling badgers, the different mice, the bats, the day animals and night animals. He saw the snails, the frogs, the moths that looked like bark and the large, ghost-winged moths, the butterflies: orange tips, whites, fritillaries, the ragged-winged commas. He recounted the bees, the wasps. He thought of all the birds, the drumming woodpeckers and laughing green woodpeckers, the stripe of the nuthatch, the hook-faced sparrowhawks, the blackbirds and the tree creeper flinching up the trunks of trees. He saw the blue tits flicking between branches, the white flash of the jay's rump as it flew away, the pigeons sitting calmly separate, together in a tree. He saw the fierce, sweet-voiced robin. He saw the sparrows.

And just before he fell asleep, he saw himself, his head whole, his body stripped down to a damp skeleton, placed gently, curled around, in a hole in the earth.

Le Labyrinthe de l'éveil

Adam Foulds

Traduit de l'anglais par Catherine Pierre-Bon

John s'enfonça dans la forêt, passant devant des charbonniers assis dans leurs cabanes, de vieilles cahutes faites de piquets de bois recouverts de tourbe, probablement aussi vétustes que les autres habitations. Ils devaient passer des jours ici, s'assurant que le feu couvait sans flammes et se consumait lentement pour carboniser la meule de bois étouffant sous sa chape. Il s'en élevait une fumée douce, bien plus douce que celle qui sortait des fours à chaux où John avait travaillé quelques fois. Il vit les hommes qui levaient les yeux et le fixaient du fond de leur l'obscurité, risqua un salut en soulevant son chapeau, mais aucun ne bougea.

Puis, à quelques centaines de mètres, dans une clairière, des *vardas*, les roulottes peintes, des chevaux attachés, des enfants et un feu crépitant. Un petit Terrier attiré par l'odeur de John se campa fermement sur ses quatre pattes et se pencha vers lui, comme en italiques, avant d'aboyer. Une vieille femme assise près du feu, une couverture sur les épaules, leva les yeux. John ne bougea pas, ne dit pas un mot.

« Bien le bonjour, dit-elle.

– Le bonjour, » répondit John. Puis, pour qu'elle comprenne qu'il les connaissait, qu'il était un ami, il lança : « *Cushti hatchintan.* »

A ces mots, elle fronça le sourcil. « Oui, la place est bonne. Vous *rokkers romani*, alors ?

– En quelque sorte, oui. J'ai passé beaucoup de temps avec les gitans, près de ma *hatchintan*, dans le Northamptonshire. Nous avons veillé de longues nuits ensemble. Ils m'ont appris leurs airs au violon, entre autres. Abraham Smith, et Phoebe. Vous les connaissez ? – Nous aussi c'est Smith, mais jamais entendu parler de ceux-là. Jamais mis les pieds dans ce comté et les ai jamais vus ici. Oui, la place est bonne. » Elle embrassa l'endroit d'un geste du bras. « De la terre autant qu'on en veut, et personne pour vous déloger de là. Et puis des animaux plein la forêt, des *hotchiwitchis* en veux-tu en voilà pour se nourrir l'hiver. Cette race-là est pas prête de manquer. »

John hocha la tête et répondit comme un ancien usé par les ans s'adresserait à un autre. « C'est criminel ce qu'ils appellent la loi, aujourd'hui. Du vol, ni plus ni moins, s'approprier les terres qui appartiennent à tout le monde. Je me souviens quand ils sont arrivés dans notre village avec leurs instruments pour arpenter les terrains, clôturer et délimiter les parcelles. Ils ont chassé les gitans. Les pauvres aussi. »

L'un des enfants courut vers la vieille et lui murmura quelque chose à l'oreille, en regardant John. Les autres se tenaient à l'écart tels des chats, des yeux dans les branches. Le Terrier qui avait averti de l'arrivée de John s'éloigna au petit trop pour rejoindre la bande de jeunes conspirateurs.

La vieille parla. « Il a idée que vous êtes peut-être un garde-forestier ou un garde-chasse qui pourrait bien nous voir d'un mauvais œil. »

Comme j'aimerais rester dans ce nid douillet et sans artifices, avec ces hommes libres, se dit John. « Moi-même je n'ai pas de maison, je dors tout près d'ici. Plus d'une fois, j'ai été arrêté par les garde-chasses. » C'était la vérité : on l'avait souvent pris pour un braconnier tandis qu'il rôdait à écrire ses poèmes, un homme qui n'avait aucune raison de se trouver là, mais qui s'y trouvait.

« C'est quoi vot'nom ?

– John. John Clare.

– Moi, c'est Judith Smith. Sûr que vous êtes un brave homme, John Clare, triste et pâle, mais bien nourri pourtant, qui que vous êtes. J'devine le mal chez l'homme, les arrières pensées pas propres, et j'vois pas ça chez vous, derrière vot' visage honnête. On me connaît pour dire la bonne aventure et mes prédictions ont pas manqué d'êt' justes, très justes.

– Je connais de nombreuses balades. Je peux chanter, si vous voulez. »

Judith Smith éclata de rire et tira une brindille du feu pour allumer sa pipe.

« Plus tard, si vous voulez, quand les autres reviendront. Je vais vite en besogne pour me lier d'amitié, pas vrai ? Les *chavvies* ont la frousse mais ça finira par passer. »

John se retourna vers les enfants ; quatre ou cinq d'entre eux gardaient leur distance ; celui qui avait chuchoté à l'oreille de la vieille détaillait vers le groupe.

« Il faut que les *chavvies* aient la frousse, dit John. Ça pourrait les sauver, un jour ou l'autre.

– Possible. Alors, vous vous asseyez ? Ca vous dérange pas d'entretenir le *yog* en attendant qu'on ait quelque chose à cuire ? C'est pour ça qu'ils s'inquiètent. Les hommes sont partis chercher de quoi manger, vous voyez, y veulent pas qu'il s'éteigne.

– C'est normal, » dit John.

John s'assit à côté d'elle et attisa le feu, remuant les rameaux pour aviver les flammes tandis que la peur des *chavvies* retombait peu à peu et qu'ils s'affairaient à ramasser des feuilles sèches qu'ils jetaient dessus, attendant tout excités de voir lesquelles allaient s'enflammer, tourbillonner et s'élever

dans les airs, retombant parfois dangereusement vers eux. La vieille tendit à John une pipe en bois dont le bec était criblé de marques laissées par des dents jaunes, mais il lui montra la sienne. Il émit un sifflement en aspirant l'air aigre dans le tuyau pour s'assurer qu'elle tirerait bien, puis la bourra de quelques pincées de gris de la vieille. Ce morceau de vieux journal qui enveloppait son tabac était probablement le seul papier imprimé de l'endroit. John sourit d'en voir fait un si bon usage, ses mots à moitié effacés sans avoir été lus, leur ton acerbe ne résonnant à aucune oreille. Il alluma sa pipe à l'aide d'une brindille incandescente. Ils parlèrent du temps et des plantes. Entre leurs pensées, de longs silences que venaient remplir le bruit du feu et le souffle incessant du vent dans les branches, un vol d'oiseaux, les allées et venues des enfants.

Des femmes, plus jeunes, sortirent des roulottes – elles avaient dû se cacher là pendant tout ce temps – John se présenta à elle. Elles semblaient moins attentives à sa présence que Judith Smith, se contentant d'un maigre salut tandis qu'elles vaquaient à leurs occupations, rinçant les marmites, ramassant du bois pour le feu, secouant la poussière des vêtements des *chavvies* de quelques tapes. John aimait cette vie libre, l'animation et le désordre de la scène qui se déroulait autour de lui et l'observait avec tendresse tandis que le feu rougeoyait encore plus dans la lumière tombante.

La voix des hommes arriva quelques minutes avant eux. On avait étalé les braises et disposé les marmites. Les voix se rapprochant, les enfants cessèrent de s'enfouir sous le feuillage et pensèrent même à dégager leurs cheveux de leur visage. Le chien, tout-fou, aboyait, tournait en rond en faisant du surplace, aboyait de plus belle. Il s'élança à la rencontre des hommes et revint en tête du groupe accompagné de quelques chiens de chasse efflanqués et d'un certain nombre d'autres Terriers.

Lorsque John vit la troupe avec le cerf suspendu entre deux hommes, et que l'on devinait malgré la couverture qui le recouvrait, il comprit pourquoi toutes ces réticences. Il se leva sur le champ pour se présenter. « John Clare, voyageur et ami fidèle des gitans. Je vous apporte le bonjour cordial d'Abraham et Phoebe Smith du Northamptonshire.

– C'est un brave homme, attesta Judith. Il connaît les plantes et les remèdes, comme nous. Pour sûr, il a dû rester longtemps avec ces Smith car il connaît tous les noms qu'on leur donne. »

L'homme qui menait la troupe prit une décision aussi vite que Judith l'avait fait. Il répondit avec la solennité d'un homme parlant au nom de son clan. « Tant que vous êtes pas un ami des gardes-chasses et que vous ne bavassez pas avec eux, vous êtes le bienvenu parmi nous, John Clare. On m'appelle Ezekiel. »

John fut donc autorisé à rester et regarda les hommes qui ne semblaient en aucun cas obsédés par la crainte de la déportation et des coups de fouet qui faisaient le quotidien de Botany Bay tandis qu'ils équarrissaient le cerf.

Il observa avec grand plaisir l'habileté de ces hommes, leurs couteaux vifs comme l'éclair. Ils se taisaient, on n'entendait que les bruits de leur travail, les coups sur les articulations, les raclements brusques, le craquement des torsions exercées sur les os tandis qu'ils défaisaient la bête.

Après avoir creusé une tranchée pour recevoir et enfouir le sang, le cerf fut suspendu à une branche, la tête en bas au dessus du trou. De leurs couteaux affûtés, ils incisèrent le ventre d'un geste vif et sortirent le premier estomac. Un homme le coupa prudemment de chaque côté et noua les canaux visqueux pour que l'acide des viscères ne coule pas sur la viande. On aurait dit une sorte de coussin bourré de paille, rempli d'herbes non digérées.

Puis, ils taillèrent les fuseaux au niveau des articulations blanches et les arrachèrent. Après avoir glissé le couteau sous la peau pour la décoller, l'animal fut dépouillé. Le pelage se détachait proprement avec un bruit de succion, révélant la viande noire et les os sous la membrane bleu luisante. Tout en travaillant, les hommes devaient envoyer valser du pied les chiens qui s'agglutinaient près de la tranchée pour laper le sang.

Ils enlevèrent l'œsophage et raclèrent la viande de la trachée, nettoyèrent la poitrine de ses entrailles, détachèrent le cœur et les poumons de quelques incisions et les placèrent dans une cuvette, puis déroulèrent l'interminable cordon des boyaux repliés sur eux-mêmes qu'ils jetèrent dans la tranchée. Travaillant maintenant du côté de l'échine, ils coupèrent la selle puis la longe de la cage thoracique et de l'épine dorsale d'un seul tenant, tel un livre sanguinolent de la taille d'une bible d'église. Ils les coupèrent en morceaux dont certains furent détaillés en tranches qu'ils jetèrent immédiatement sur le feu. Les femmes emportèrent les autres. Puis, ils détachèrent la viande du cou. Le cerf avait une drôle d'allure maintenant, avec sa tête recouverte de son pelage et ses bois qui pendouillaient vers l'avant, sa carcasse décharnée et ses membres postérieurs encore charnus. Eux aussi furent arrachés, dépecés et mis de côté. Les hommes scièrent les côtes et les séparèrent une par une. Toutes furent jetées sur le feu. Il ne restait plus rien sur le cerf maintenant. Sa carcasse jetait une faible lueur dans le crépuscule, sa triste tête se fondait dans la pénombre. Les hommes creusèrent un autre trou dans lequel ils déposèrent le squelette, lové comme un fœtus. Ils remblayèrent et étalèrent des feuilles et des brindilles dessus pour cacher l'endroit.

Les chiens se bouscuaient autour de la première tranchée telle une nuée de mouches. John entendait le claquement de leurs mâchoires avides et le souffle court de leurs halètements. L'odeur de la viande s'élevant avec la fumée, sa faim se fit plus tenace, elle aussi, et ses intestins laissèrent échapper un long gargouillement chantant, tel le roucoulement d'un pigeon. La bière coula dans les verres puis dans les gosiers et l'air se remplit bientôt des éclats de voix et des conversations. John parlait peu mais écoutait ce flot de paroles et ses inflexions, entendant des mots romanis qu'il se souvenait à peine avoir connus.

Après qu'on lui eut tendu sa première côte, quelqu'un dit à John : « Te voilà avec du sang sur les mains, mon ami. Tu es notre complice maintenant. » La viande était succulente, la chair grillée à mordre à pleine dents, le gras tendre et moelleux. Il n'y avait pas de mal à manger le cerf, se disait John. Ils se perpétuaient, il y en avait beaucoup dans la forêt. Ils passaient, innombrables, dans la pénombre.

Puis, la bière continua de couler, la musique de résonner, tandis que les chauves-souris, dans leurs derniers vols de l'année, voletaient au dessus de leurs têtes. John prouva aux hommes qu'il connaissait leur musique en acceptant un violon qu'on lui tendait. Il joua des airs du Northamptonshire et des airs gitans. Il en joua un qui tournait comme un manège et les transporta, tous souriaient à son refrain. Un autre qui s'élevait et tendait vers le ciel, se propageait dans les arbres. Un autre aussi plat et désolé que le Fens, aussi froid qu'une brume d'hiver. Un autre pour Mary. Après le violon, vinrent les chants. John écoutait les voix puissantes qui se mêlaient, apportant ses propres notes à cette harmonie, et dans son imagination, il vit soudain tous ces hommes au milieu de la forêt tombée dans l'obscurité, réunis autour du feu, les chiens

au museau ensanglanté étendus de tout leur long, couchés sur leur flanc débordant de leur ventre repu. Les hommes creusèrent un puits de leur chant qui jaillit de l'éternité en cet instant, telle une source. Il s'allongea, véritablement submergé et vit les étoiles à travers les branches presque nues. Il ferma les yeux et resta allongé ainsi au milieu du monde, nia ses femmes, sa maison, mais en compagnie et en paix.

Finalement, les chants s'arrêtèrent ; quelque temps après, il sentit qu'on le couvrait d'une couverture. Il ouvrit les yeux et vit le feu rosissant qui continuait de battre au cœur des rameaux blancs. Un hibou lança son cri sec et rauque, les chauves-souris répandirent les minuscules perles de leurs chapelets de sons autour de lui. Il aimait reposer dans son giron, aimait l'insondable forêt, la façon dont les racines se nourrissaient de la moisissure des feuilles ; et elle tournait, tournait. Par pur plaisir, pour agrémenter le chemin qui le menait au sommeil, il passa en revue ses habitants. Il vit les arbres, les hêtres, les chênes, les charmes, les tilleuls, les houx, les noisetiers et les baies sauvages, les différentes variétés de champignons, les fougères, les mousses, les lichens. Il vit les renards vifs et courts sur pattes, les cerfs frémissants, les chats sauvages solitaires, les blaireaux se dandinant sur la plante des pieds, les rongeurs, les chauves-souris, les animaux diurnes et les animaux nocturnes. Il vit les escargots, les grenouilles, les grands papillons de nuit aux ailes transparentes, les hépiales qui se confondent avec l'écorce, les piérides, les fritillaires, les aurores, les robert-le-diable. Il fit l'énuméré des guêpes, des abeilles. Il repensa à tous les oiseaux, aux pics épeiches, aux pics verts moqueurs, aux sittelles à la tête rayée, aux éperviers aux becs crochus, aux merles et aux grimpreaux des bois qui se hissent sur le tronc des arbres. Il vit les mésanges bleues voletant entre les branches, l'éclair blanc du croupion du geai

lorsqu'il prend son envol, un groupe de pigeons posés tranquillement côte à côte, réunis dans un arbre. Il vit le féroce rouge-gorge au chant mélodieux. Il vit les moineaux.

Et juste avant de s'endormir, il se vit lui-même, sa tête, entière, son corps réduit à un squelette humide, posé doucement, lové dans un trou dans la terre.

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Iceland – **Ófeigur Sigurðsson**

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Liechtenstein – Iren Nigg

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The Netherlands – **Rodaan al Galidi**

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Turkey – **Çiler İlhan**

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United Kingdom – **Adam Foulds**

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Other

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EUPL 2011 National Juries

Bulgaria

Organisation coordinating the jury:

The Union of Bulgarian Writers

President:

Mr. Gueorgui Konstantinov, poet, publicist, novelist, President of the Bulgarian PEN Center, editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Plamak* / “Пламък”.

Members:

Mr. Vladimir Zarev, novelist, editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Savremennik* / “СЪВРЕМЕННИК” for several years.

Mr. Deyan Enev, novelist and journalist.

Mr. Stefan Tafrov, diplomat, translator, public figure, and journalist.

Ms. Iglia Vasileva, translator, professor at St. Kliment Ohridsky, Sofia University.

Czech Republic

Organisation coordinating the jury:

The Arts and Theatre Institute – Literary Section

President:

Mr. Vladimír Karfík. Literary critic, scholar, and editor.

Members:

Mr. Vladimír Pistorius, publisher, President of the Association of Czech Booksellers and Publishers.

Ms. Marcela Turečková, member of the Board of the Association of Czech Booksellers and Publishers, PR manager and editor (Argo publishing house).

Mr. Lubomír Machala, literary critic, scholar, and editor, nominated by the *Obec spisovatelů* (Society of Writers).

Greece

Organisation coordinating the jury:

The Hellenic Author's Society

President:

Mr. Alexis Ziras, President of the Hellenic Author's Society, literary critic.

Members:

Mr. Aris Maragkopoulos, author, critic, editor and publisher, he represents the Hellenic Federation of Publishers and Booksellers.

Mr. Dionissis (Dennis) Magliveras, essayist (sociology, social anthropology, art and politics). Vice President of the National Society of Greek Writers.

Mr. Costas Asimakopoulos, novelist, translator, Chairman of the Greek Society of Translators

Iceland

Organisation coordinating the jury:

The Writers' Union of Iceland

President:

Ms. Audur Aðalsteinsdottir, expert in Icelandic media and contemporary literature, she is a member of the publishers' association.

Members:

Mr. Gyrdur Eliasson, writer and translator, recipient of major literary awards in Iceland, his works have been widely translated.

Mr. Adalsteinn Asberg, author of numerous books of poetry, children's books and translations. His work has been translated into several languages.

Latvia

Organisation coordinating the jury:

The Writers' Union of Latvia

President:

Ms. Ieva Kolmane, editor, translator, literary critic, elected President of the Writers' Union of Latvia.

Members:

Mr. Peteris Jankavs, translator, Director of Atena Publishers.

Ms. Ingmara Balode, poet, translator, literary critic, editor, representative of the literature and philosophy portal, and of the publishers.

Mr. Janis Oga, editor, Director of the Latvian Literature Centre.

Mrs. Dace Sparane, poet, literary critic, Director of "Dienas Gramata Publishers."

Liechtenstein

Organisation coordinating the jury:

Literaturhaus Liechtenstein

President:

Dr. Verena Bühler, Programme Director of the Literaturhaus Liechtenstein.

Members:

Prof. Dr. Peter Gilgen, Professor of German Studies at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, author of articles and essays on Liechtenstein literature, philosophy, and contemporary experimental literature.

Mr. Hansjörg Quaderer, painter, book designer, author, co-founder of the Robert Altmann Projects, co-organiser of the Liechtensteiner Literaturtage.

Malta

Organisation coordinating the jury:

The Maltese Language Academy

President:

Mr. Carmel Azzopardi, author of several books on Maltese orthography, President of the Maltese Language Academy.

Members:

Dr. Marco Galea, teaches Theatre and Maltese Literature at the University of Malta, author of academic essays on Maltese literature.

Mr. Olvin Vella, author of studies on the history of the Maltese language, and council member of both the Maltese Language Academy and the National Council for the Maltese Language.

Mr. Mario Cassar, Senior Lecturer within the Department of Maltese at the University of Malta Junior College, author of essays on Maltese language, and literature.

Mr. Stephen Bonanno, Senior Lecturer at the University of Malta Junior College where he lectures on Maltese Literature with a focus on narrative.

Montenegro

Organisation coordinating the jury:

Crnogorsko Drustvo Nezavisnih Knjizevnika (CDNK)

Montenegrin Association of Independent Writers

President:

Ms. Lena Ruth Stefanovic, member of the CDNK, author of fiction.

Members:

Mr. Sreten Asanovic, author of numerous collections of short stories, and a novel; his work has been translated into more than twenty languages, nad has received several awards for his work.

Mr. Zuvdija Hodzic, poet and novelist, president of the board of the Center for Montenegrin diaspora, and editor in chief of the magazines *Almanah* and *Putovanja*.

Secretary General of Montenegrin PEN. Member of CDNK.

Mr. Vlatko Simunović, literary critic and writer, as well as journalist in the daily newspaper *Pobjeda* and columnist with ARS magazine.

Mr. Milorad Mijo Popovic has published several books of poetry and received several awards, President of CDNK (Montenegrin Association of Independent Writers).

The Netherlands

Organisation coordinating the jury:

Vereniging van Schrijvers en Vertalers

President:

Mr. Rob Schouten, writer, poet, has published ten volumes of poetry, essays, a collection of short stories and a novel, literary critic for the Dutch daily *Trouw* and the weekly *Vrij Nederland*.

Members:

Ms. Grietje Braaksma, nominated by the booksellers association, bookseller.

Koen van Gulik, publisher and owner of the *Wereldbibliotheek*, an independent Dutch publishing company of international literature.

Serbia

Organisation coordinating the jury:

Serbian PEN Centre

President:

Mr. Zoran Paunovic, literary critic, essayist, translator, professor of University of Belgrade.

Members:

Mr. Mihajlo Pantic, short story writer, literary critic, essayist, translator, professor of at the University of Belgrade.

Ms. Vladislava Gordic Petkovic, literary critic, essayist, translator, professor at the University of Novi Sad.

Mr. Mladen Veskovic, literary critic, essayist.

Mr. Vuk Vukicevic, Secretary General of Serbian Association of Publishers and Booksellers.

Turkey

Organisation coordinating the jury:

Turkish Centre – International PEN

President:

Mr. Tarık Günersel, poet, playwright, fiction writer, President of PEN.

Members:

Ms. Inci Aral, novelist & former President of the Turkish PEN Centre.

Mr. Metin Celal, critic, member of PEN, Secretary General of the Publishers' Association of Turkey.

Mr. Mario Levi, a leading novelist, Board member of Turkish PEN.

Ms. Zeynep Oral, journalist & essayist, PEN Board Member.

United Kingdom

Organisation coordinating the jury:

The Society of Authors

President:

Mr. Lawrence Sail, poet, has published ten collections of poems and edited a number of anthologies. He has been a judge for several national book awards, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Members:

Mr. Peter Kemp, Chief Fiction Reviewer of the Sunday Times, and editor of the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Quotations. He has been a judge for the Booker Prize, the Betty Trask Award, the Whitbread Novel Award, the Encore Prize and the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award.

Mr. Robert Adams has written and edited more than 100 books about crime, prison riots, protests by pupils, empowerment, social policy, and social work. He was chair of the judges of the UK Writers' Guild 2008 Best Book Award.

Mr. Tom Chatfield, a freelance author, essayist, game writer and theorist. He writes for the *Observer*, *Independent*, *Sunday Times*, *Wired*, *New Statesman*, *Evening Standard* and *Times Literary Supplement*.

Ms. Cathy Rentzenbrink, a bookseller since 2002.

She thinks that good bookselling is all about finding wonderful stories to put in the hands of the readers who will appreciate them.

EUPL 2011 Jury Reports

Bulgaria

The Bulgarian jury has the honour to propose the young Bulgarian writer Kalin Terziyski for the European Union Prize for Literature 2011. His book *Is There Anybody to Love You? (short stories)*, published in 2009, is probably the best in the area of new Bulgarian literature.

The short stories in this book stem from bitter personal experiences and reveal a subtle sense of humour. The collection conveys an authentic knowledge of modern cities and depicts characters larger than life. The author succeeds in creating the portrait of a modern young man and a whole generation that has experienced profound political and societal changes. Early on in his creative work, Terziyski published two small books of poetry. He is also an author of some non-fiction texts for magazines, TV and radio. In the last five years, he has become a significant emerging author in new Bulgarian literature. Terziyski currently has no works translated abroad and he is yet to begin to receive literary prizes.

Report by Gueorgui Konstantinov, President of the EUPL National Jury

Czech Republic

The recent debut of this previously unknown author was particularly impressive due to the strength of his artistic talent and his literary maturity (attention was also focused on his unusual background – a Czech mother and a father from the Congo). In his first novel, Tomáš Zmeškal immediately managed to capture the plight and character of Czech society in the second half of the 20th century, when, shortly after the war, it was once again governed by a totalitarian regime. Zmeškal's original approach comes from a new generation's view of events: he doesn't slot ready-made characters and their stories into specific historical events in order to explain the character of the period. Instead it is from individual lives and human psychology that the character of the period is recreated so convincingly. Historical events and politics are not his main theme, but rather the people "who have been tripped up by history and have to deal with it" in order to survive.

The somewhat complex narrative style is also original. However, the author leads it purposefully to the final revelation – what is this mysterious love letter, written in such exotic script and then secretly hidden, but which is unfortunately sent to the recipient too late? For within the letter lies the memory of the beginnings of a true love which was never abandoned or extinguished, while it also provides the key to a misunderstanding for which no-one is to blame.

Zmeškal does not adhere to a linear structure as the basis for this tragic story, but instead leaves the reader to freely browse the subplots and minor episodes which enrich it, whilst at the same time distancing the hidden secret. He masterfully employs various literary genres and equally inventively handles the changes in narrative which reinforce its authenticity.

Report by Vladimír Karfík, President of the EUPL National Jury

Greece

Bringing together styles from different types of literature isn't something new in the history of European fiction. But the modern novel is the most hospitable, friendly and open format of our time. No longer belonging to a literary field representing simple old-fashioned stories, it has become a complex field where things that used to be distinct (poetry and philosophical thought, drama and prose, biography and essay), today coexist. The modern novel can often follow the principles of a literary 'polymorphic engine'.

And that's what *Agrigento* (2009), Kostas Hatziantoniou's novel, is doing. It is a book of "pilgrimage", a quest for the sources of cultural and existential identity, and also for the timeless essence of a place. In southern Italy and Sicily, which was once called *Magna Grecia*, before its small ethnic communities were incorporated into major European nations, Hatziantoniou develops a story in which legends – ancient and new, philosophical and political, historical and ethnological – create a fluid fictional scope. Ancient past determines the present, and the dry Sicilian landscape influences the characters of the book.

The small Italian town of Agrigento is on the site of the ancient city of Akragas. Evidence of ancient wealth and power can be found not only in the ruins of the Valley of the Temples, but also in the bay that took its name from the ancient philosopher Empedocles: Porto Empedocle. These two, the philosopher and the city of Agrigento, star as major presences in Hatziantoniou's book. The novelist was inspired by the theoretical principles of Empedocles, who believed in two cosmic forces, hate and love, and in the constant struggle between them.

I could say that *Agrigento* is a kind of philosophical novel, but without the thoughts and reflections that could make it abstract and difficult to read. This is because Hatziantoniou's poetic eye is always active, and his style is dense and sinewy, but also evocative and radiant.

Report by Alexis Ziras, President of the EUPL National Jury

Iceland

Ófeigur Sigurðsson (b.1975) has a BA degree in philosophy and was already a part of the radical new Icelandic poetry scene when he published his first novel, *Áferð* (*Texture*), in 2005. The novel was acclaimed as a powerful mirror of contemporary society. In his second novel, *Jón* (*Jon*), he heads in a different direction, exploring an obscure part of the life of a famous priest in Icelandic history, combining 18th century literary style with his own poetic touches. Ófeigur has in a short literary career shown varied potential, with no way to predict where he will touch down next.

Jon's main character is the 18th century 'pastor of fire', Jon Steingrímsson, who allegedly stopped burning lava from an erupting volcano from engulfing a small country church. In *Jon*, however, we are presented with an earlier and historically obscure phase in Jón's life: a season he spends living in a cave, under an awakening volcano, writing letters to his pregnant wife and fearing the law, as he is suspected of having killed her first husband. Jon's writings are famous for his special style and Ófeigur renders a truthful, albeit modernized, version of it, e.g. using poetic touches to break up the somewhat slow rhythm of long and complicated sentences. The book is the story of a young man dealing with his inner conscience on the one hand and dramatic outer forces on the other.

The setting of the story is deeply rooted in Iceland's violent nature and history, but its form and themes also tie it closely to European tradition. In addition, the letter form draws on the epistolary novel. Parallel to the imminent danger of the worst natural disasters in the history of Iceland is the force of the Enlightenment breaking in from the mainland. This interconnect- edness of Iceland and the outside world, which peaks in a scene depicting the volcano Katla running as a giantess through Europe, adds a new dimension to the story when read as a contri- bution to contemporary discussion of nationality and global responsibility.

Report by Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, President of the EUPL National Jury

Latvia

Two nominees were considered worthy and appropriate, but the jury took into account that both Inga Zolude's first novel and her second book, a collection of short stories, have been nominated for the Annual Prize of Latvian Literature. In 2009, her novel *Warm Earth* was nomi- nated as the best debut of 2008, and her book *A Solace for Adam's Tree* was nominated as the best prose work of 2010. Moreover, excerpts from Zolude's first novel have already appeared in translations, and the response to her work has been intense both at home and abroad, showing that she can be truly considered to be "a young and promising author".

If one wants to understand what has happened in Latvian fiction in 2010 and perhaps get an idea where it might be going next, one has to read *A Solace for Adam's Tree*. It's a book that could be entitled 'The Final Postmodern Book in Latvian Literature' and presented to all students in Latvia so that they may understand what postmodernism in Latvia is all about. Afterwards, it could be discussed if it should be termed postmodernism, post-structuralism or some other kind of 'post-'. The book is a must for all who like postmodernism, as it really contains the best of what is possible when employing this style.

The stories are rounded, brisk and bitter with fine psychological nuances, plausibly absurd and containing a rare empathy, which makes the reader – when he or she understands how stupidly the protagonist acts – not fling the book away, but continue to read on, thinking, "please, please don't do that, you dope, *let it all end well*," even if there is no way anything may end well.

Zolude is a talented author with a fine sense of genre, but also a master of stylization and a com- piler of topical trends. The publication of this book was necessary, not so much for its own sake, as for the sake of Latvian literature, relevant to the present as well as showing future trends and possibilities.

Report by Ieva Kolmane, President of the EUPL National Jury

Liechtenstein

Iren Nigg published one full-length book in 1988 and then only a handful of short texts in books which were not literary in nature but devoted to local historical subjects like *500 Jahre Alpenossenschaften Schaan*. So she can thus be called a “re-emerging author”.

Her second book, *Man wortet sich die Orte selbst*, was published in 2006. Some of the texts in *Man wortet sich die Orte selbst* are straightforward short stories told from different perspectives (often in the first person, without giving away to whom the voice belongs). Some of the shortest texts are extremely condensed vignettes in which all that is left out is as important as all that is said. These shorter texts might well be compared, for instance, to Hemingway’s vignettes between the actual short stories in his seminal collection *In our Time*. The fact that some of the texts in Nigg’s very fine book have more of a snapshot quality does not disqualify them as fiction, and neither does the fact that her style of writing is extremely conscious of the language in play. On the contrary, both of these specific qualities are significant elements of Nigg’s literary art. The sequencing of her stories and vignettes creates a specific rhythm that determines the composition of the entire book. Moreover, her work on, and with, language strikes us as the *sine qua non* of any literature that deserves the name and has not (yet) become a mere commodity in the marketplace.

Report by Dr. Verena Buehler, President of the EUPL National Jury

Malta

Fl-Isem tal-Missier (u tal-Iben) is a ground-breaking book in Maltese literature and not only because it is the first to attempt to fuse fiction with autobiography and with the ‘in-between’ genre of both fiction and philosophy, often associated with feminist writing. The book takes its lead from the author’s (or is it the narrator’s?) father’s wartime diary, re-read after his funeral. Through it, the author tries to understand and explain what it means to be a son, a father and a man. Unlike normal autobiography, the timeline moves forwards and backwards and includes episodes that would have happened before the author was born and others that seem to imply that the father still haunts the son after he is gone. These interpersonal relationships are played out against a background of a small British colony on the outskirts of Europe changing into an independent state and coming to terms with its own relationship to the “mother-country”. Immanuel Mifsud has managed to create a haunting book, where biography is only the starting point for a self-questioning that is indicative of a generation of writers trying to get to grips with themselves as human beings, and also dealing with a social and political landscape that, unlike their fathers (a term that’s all too often mentioned in Maltese discourse on identity, referring to our ancestors), they cannot be comfortable with. In the end, it is this sense of discomfort that the reader is left with as the remains of the dead ancestors are hastily and unceremoniously put aside, presumably to make way for our own remains, which our own sons will in turn have to deal with.

Report by Carmel Azzopardi, President of the EUPL National Jury

Montenegro

Andrej Nikolaidis is considered by many to be one of the most gifted Montenegrin and regional prose writers. His work is characterized by a refined prose style and the sharpness of his public presence. He is an intellectual, well-known in Montenegrin society, who in the times of war and later on during transition was spreading the message of tolerance, broadly and loudly.

Andrej's short stories usually carry a neo-realistic approach, while the novel *The Son* is a mixture of Mediterranean talkativeness with Central-European minimalist elegance, reminding us somewhat of W.G. Sebald and Thomas Bernhard. Simultaneously, Andrej is a type of intellectual who is firmly present in society as an anti-war activist, a promoter of peace in ex-Yugoslav territories as well as a defender of the rights of minorities – in his latest public speeches and articles he has been strongly promoting the rights of sexual minorities.

His novel *Mimesis* (2003) was applauded by the liberal audience throughout the region and has significantly contributed to the establishment of cultural ties between Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which had been lost during the 90s wars. *The Son* is his best work so far: a short, but condensed and highly intense novel, which reveals the various civilizations and religious layers of contemporary Montenegro. It is a story of a lonely man in a dramatic conflict with his family, who at the end, in an unexpected twist, finds his inner peace and salvation.

For the novels *Mimesis* and *The Son* he was shortlisted for the Meša Selimović award for the best novel written in the territory of Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. His short-story 'The Coming' is included in the anthology *Best European Fiction 2012*, published by Dalkey Archive Press.

Report by Lena Ruth Stefanovic, President of the EUPL National Jury

The Netherlands

Rodaan al Galidi (who writes under the name Rodaan), is Iraqi by birth but Dutch by choice. Since he arrived in the Netherlands and mastered the Dutch language he has enriched the nation's literature with a remarkable oeuvre of poems, fiction and columns, which are ironic and confrontational at the same time.

In *De Autist en de Postduif* (*The Autist and the Carrier Pigeon*), Rodaan describes the miraculous world of Geert, a weird autist, whose life in many ways reflects the position that newcomers in Dutch society often have. He has to master things that are strange to him, things that he has to learn instead of them being spoon-fed. Interpreting the book in a philosophical way, this novel is also about eternal repetition and return.

The profundity of his writing is such that things which may be disturbing or conflicting, are leavened with a hint of lightness and humour. In a refined and subtle way, one might consider *De Autist en de Postduif* to be a fairy tale in which the reader looks through a funny glass at the strangeness of Dutch society. It's a society that, despite his apparent fondness for the country, sometimes gets sneered at – for instance, when he refers to rural villages 'where nothing happens, except for cornflower and the Lord'.

There is no doubt that Rodaan, this fertile writer from abroad, has in a relatively short time developed a voice of his own and might be considered a born storyteller who offers the Dutch, and indeed European literature, new horizons with his own style and imagination.

Report by Rob Schouten, President of the EUPL National Jury

Serbia

After four sessions, discussing the work of five writers, the jury reached the decision that the winner of EUPL award for 2011 in Serbia is *Vašarski mađioničar* (*The Fairground Magician*), a collection of short stories, written by Jelena Lengold and published by Arhipelag, Belgrade, in 2009.

The Fairground Magician is a book of stories about love and desire, about ordinariness and passion in the urban milieu. Written with veritable literary zest and power, these stories provide an authentic testimony about the wonders of love and everyday epiphanies. They are tales of transgression, overcoming all sorts of taboos openly and passionately, and dealing with the subject of love in a manner that is truly unique in contemporary Serbian literature. Lengold deliberately rejects the challenge of grand narratives focused upon history, politics or society. Instead of tackling such huge topics, in her highly sophisticated style she shows the reader how small details from everyday intimate life can become universal and grow into powerful literature.

Exciting and insightful at the same time, the stories from this book are also characterized by a subtle psychology and masterful characterization. The protagonists are people that belong to our time, with yearnings and desires that we can recognize as ours. These properties undoubtedly place *Vašarski mađioničar* among the best collections of stories in Serbian literature of the last few decades.

Report by Zoran Paunović, President of the EUPL National Jury

Turkey

Although more than 30 fiction writers are emerging in Turkey that meet the prize's aims and expectations, the five members of our jury – Ms İnci Aral (novelist), Ms Zeynep Oral (essayist and journalist), Mario Levi (novelist), Metin Celal (critic and President of the Turkish Publishers Association) and Tarık Günersel (President of Turkish PEN) – have unanimously selected Ms Çiler İlhan's book of short stories, *Sürgün* (*Exile*), as the winner.

Exile, İlhan's second work, was published by Everest Publishing House in Istanbul in 2010, and she is represented by Kalem Literary Agency in Istanbul. Her first book, *The Dream Merchants' Chamber* (Artemis Publications, 2006), was composed of stories that carry traces of magical realism.

The stories in *Exile* contain monologues by a variety of real-life and fictional characters. İlhan has a wide-ranging and deep understanding of human experience and suffering, and she is capable of expressing the multi-faceted realities of life strikingly and plainly, sensitive to its pains and injustices. Her literary approach is in harmony with Einstein's aphorism: "A formula should be as simple as possible, but not simpler".

The fact that the monologues constitute a relatively connected whole is another positive aspect of *Exile*. The succinct monologues form a polylogue. I agree with the statement of the publisher that this is a short story collection that has the taste of a novel.

The jury is convinced that the book deserves international readership and respect. We think it will be a significant contribution to life and literature in Europe.

No translations of the book have been published yet. The extracts used in the summary are from the English translation by Ayşegül Toroser Ateş and Nuri Ateş.

Report by Tark Günersel, President of the EUPL National Jury

United Kingdom

The UK jury met on 9th May to consider the four books on the UK shortlist. There was an extremely interesting discussion on all the books individually, which between them cover a wide range of themes and settings. In the end, *The Quickening Maze* by Adam Foulds emerged as a clear winner. A brilliant evocation of the confinement of the poet John Clare in an asylum in 1840, the novel fuses historical fact and imaginative insight – and does so seamlessly. The jury was particularly impressed by the way in which the known historical facts and a creative evocation of the characters and minds of the protagonists are merged. It would have been all too easy for historical research to predominate, or for the facts to have been submerged by the writer's imagination. Dealing as the book does with two poets – Alfred Tennyson as well as John Clare – there could also have been the temptation to import their poetic activity too comprehensively. The novel avoids all such pitfalls triumphantly, with a judicious tact that gives it real authority. There was also great admiration for the elegance and precision of Foulds's writing – a reminder that he is not only a novelist, but also a poet.

The jury felt that this is a book that is timeless, one that will retain its appeal and endure. It also noted that this is only Foulds's second novel: in this sense it meets well the criterion of 'an emerging writer'. It is further distinguished by a remarkable sense of compassion and understanding, but without the least trace of sentimentality: it is in all respects a worthy winner, and the jury was unanimous in its decision.

Report by Lawrence Sail, President of the EUPL National Jury

The European Union Prize for Literature

The aim of the European Union Prize for Literature is to put the spotlight on the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature in the field of fiction, to promote the circulation of literature within Europe and encourage greater interest in non-national literary works.

The works of the selected winners (one per country participating in the prize on a rotation basis) will reach a wider and international audience, and touch readers beyond national and linguistic borders.

The Prize is co-financed by the Culture Programme of the European Union whose objective is to achieve three main goals: to promote cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector; to encourage the transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output; and to foster intercultural dialogue.

Selection process

The winning authors are selected by qualified juries set up in each of the 12 countries participating in the 2011 award.

The nomination of candidates and the final selection of one winner in each country took place between February and July 2011.

The new emerging talents were selected on the basis of requirements stipulated by the European Commission and fulfil in particular the following requirements:

- Be a citizen of one of the 11 countries selected
- To have published between 2 and 4 books of fiction
- The books should have been published during the five years before the prize

Juries

Jury members are appointed by national members of EBF, EWC and FEP. National juries are composed by minimum of 3 and a maximum of 5 members.

The jury reports were delivered in the national language, and in English or French translation, justifying the jury's choice and providing relevant information on the winner and his/her work.

The European Commission, DG Education and Culture

www.ec.europa.eu/culture

The consortium

The European Booksellers Federation

www.europeanbooksellers.eu

The European Writers' Council

www.europeanwriters.eu

The Federation of European Publishers

www.fep-fee.eu

The European Union Prize for Literature

www.euprizeliterature.eu

Twelve winning authors

Kalin Terziyski

*Има ли кой да ви обича,
Издателство (2009)*

Tomáš Zmeškal

*Milostný dopis klínovým písmem
(2008)*

Kostas Hatziantoniou

Agrigento (2009)

Ófeigur Sigurðsson

Jon (2010)

Inga Zolude

Mierinājums Ādama kokam (2010)

Iren Nigg

Man wortet sich die Orte selbst (2006)

Immanuel Mifsud

Fl-Isem tal-Missier (tal-iben) (2010)

Andrej Nikolaidis

Sin (2006)

Rodaan al Galidi

De autist en de postduif (2009)

Jelena Lengold

Vašarski mađioničar (2009)

Çiler İlhan

Sürgün (2010)

Adam Foulds

The Quickening Maze (2010)