

# EUROPEAN STORIES

EUROPEAN  
UNION  
PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE

**AUTHORS**  
**2025**



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LITERATURE

AUTHORS  
2025



Creative  
Europe



FEDERATION OF EUROPEAN PUBLISHERS  
FÉDÉRATION DES ÉDITEURS EUROPÉENS



The voice of booksellers



**BOSNIA AND  
HERZEGOVINA**  
Mihaela ŠUMIĆ



**NORWAY**  
Maria KJOS FONN



**AUSTRIA**  
Ljuba ARNAUTOVIĆ



**IRELAND**  
Sheila ARMSTRONG



**SPAIN**  
David UCLÉS



**GEORGIA**  
Tea TOPURIA



**ROMANIA**  
Bogdan CREȚU



**BELGIUM**  
Philippe  
MARCZEWSKI



**ITALY**  
Nicoletta VERNA



**UKRAINE**  
Halyna MATVEEVA



**GREECE**  
Makis MALAFEKAS



**SLOVAKIA**  
Lukáš CABALA



**LITHUANIA**  
Kotryna ZYLĖ

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# FOREWORD

Dear readers,

In this centenary year of the birth of one of Europe's great visionaries, Jacques Delors, it is fitting to recall his words to the European Parliament in 1989: 'Europe's diversity makes it prodigiously rich. This diversity must be preserved, so that it can bear fruit for the common good.'

At a time when geopolitical shocks are testing our continent, preserving this rich diversity is more vital than ever. Across Europe, the cultural sector is at the forefront of ensuring that the fruit Delors spoke of continues to grow – rooted in our shared values.

The European Union Prize for Literature is a celebration of this cultural richness – an embodiment of diversity serving the common good.

It is an honour to present this anthology featuring the 13 shortlisted authors of this year. This Creative Europe initiative continues to build the profiles of European writers, introducing their work to new audiences, while preserving each author's unique voice. The translations,

publishing and promotion facilitated by the Prize allow new cultural conversations to start and foster greater understanding. The European literary scene creates a space for discourse and exchange, ultimately reinforcing the democratic values upon which the European Union is founded.

In 2025, we begin a new three-year cycle of the European Union Prize for Literature, during which we will recognise and promote 40 emerging writers from across the 40 Creative Europe countries.

Starting this year, one author from the shortlist will be honoured as the overall laureate, while two others will receive special recognition. Therefore, I would like to once again congratulate our laureate, Nicoletta Verna, for her work *I Giorni di Vetro* (*The Days of Glass*), extend special mentions to Philippe Marczewski for *Quand Cécile* (*When Cécile*) and Sheila Armstrong for *Falling Animals* and warmly congratulate all the nominees for their outstanding contributions.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to our trusted partners in this endeavour, the Federation of European Publishers and the European and International Booksellers Federation.

And lastly, I would like to affirm the European Commission's continued commitment to the development of the European Union Prize for Literature, and to emerging writers across Europe. These emerging writers, their evolving voices and their contribution to a growing European literary space represent a most bountiful harvest. With their artistic drive and a strong platform from which to showcase it, we can ensure that we reap the rewards of this fruit for the common good.

**Glenn Micallef**  
**Commissioner for**  
**Intergenerational**  
**Fairness, Youth, Culture**  
**and Sport**



# EUROPEAN JURY

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

## **Jens Christian Grøndahl (Denmark)**

Jens Christian Grøndahl was born in 1959 in Copenhagen. After studies in philosophy, he was trained as a film director at the National Danish Film School. His first novel was published in 1985. He is the author of 23 novels, 10 volumes of essays and 3 books for children. His work has been translated into more than 30 languages including English, French and German. He was formerly vice president of Danish PEN and a member of the European Commission's Group of Intellectuals for Intercultural Dialogue. He has received *Le Prix Jean Monnet de littérature européenne* and *Le Prix Cévennes du roman européen*. Several novels of his have been shortlisted for the IMPAC Prize, *Prix*

*Médicis étranger* and *Prix Fémina étranger*.

He holds the rank of *Chevalier* in the French *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. He lives in Copenhagen with his wife and two daughters.

## **Anna Jarota (France / Poland)**

Anna Jarota is a literary agent with offices in Paris and Warsaw. She grew up in Poland under the communist regime, and as a member of the student's *Solidarność* movement, she had to leave her country for political reasons in 1986. She lived between London and Paris for many years, always working in publishing, and finally settled in Paris where she opened her literary agency. Her Warsaw agency followed soon thereafter. She also promotes the profession of literary agent in those parts of Europe where it is still less known, including France. Anna Jarota is on the board of the newly formed Association of Authors' Agents in Paris.

## **Svetlozar Zhelev (Bulgaria)**

Svetlozar Zhelev is a contemporary expert in the Bulgarian literary field. Former publisher, TV and radio host, he was a board member of the Bulgarian Book Association from 2006 to 2010, a member of the Bulgarian national jury for the 2021 EUPL, the chairman of the

European jury of the 2023 EUPL, and president of the jury for the 'Translations' programme of the National Culture Fund from 2018 to 2020. He is a member of the programming committee of the TRADUKI network, a member of ENLIT, co-founder of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation on Creative Writing and a lecturer at Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' since 2013. He is the director of the National Book Centre of the National Palace of Culture.

### **Rosa Azevedo (Portugal)**

Rosa Azevedo has a degree in Portuguese and French literature and a master's degree in text editing. Since 2007, she has been teaching several Portuguese literature courses, in addition to other production work related to literature, particularly in the areas of surrealism, independent publishing and women writers in Portugal during the 20th century. She has a bookshop in Lisbon, Livraria Snob, that is also an independent publishing house.

### **Barbara Anderlič (Slovenia)**

Barbara Anderlič is an interpreter and translator from Slovenia. Her most recent translation is Jurij Devetak's graphic novel *Nekropolis* (Schaltzeit

Verlag, Berlin, 2023), based on Boris Pahor's autobiographical book. Within TRADUKI, she manages several projects, including the annual Balkan Film Week in Leipzig, and is the network's current communications manager. She was the recipient of the 2014 Exil Dramatists Prize and a member of the Viennale audience jury in 2012. Having spent several years abroad, she is based in Ljubljana these days.

### **Vera Michalski-Hoffmann (France / Poland)**

Vera Michalski-Hoffmann holds a degree in political science from the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva. In 1987, she and her Polish husband Jan Michalski founded Éditions Noir sur Blanc, which aimed to build bridges between the cultures and people of Europe. Later, different imprints and publishing houses joined. The Libella group, now including a dozen publishing houses in France, the Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland, came into existence in 2000. Books are published in French, Polish and English and cover fiction, nonfiction and illustrated books (drawing and photography). In 2004, Vera Michalski-Hoffmann

created the Jan Michalski Foundation for Writing and Literature in Montricher, Switzerland. The foundation's mission is to support literary creation and to encourage the practice of reading by organising exhibitions and cultural events to bring together artists, writers and readers, by making a large multilingual library available to the public, by awarding an annual Prize for world literature, by providing financial support to a very wide array of projects in the field of literature and by hosting writers in residence.

Sheltered by a concrete canopy at the edge of a forest, in the middle of nature, the foundation offers a unique meeting and working place turned towards the world.

### **Vilis Kasims (Latvia)**

Vilis Kasims (1986) is a Latvian author, translator, editor and literary agent. He has published three works of fiction, with a collection of essays coming out in 2025. He translates from English, Catalan, Russian and Spanish and has around 20 published translations so far, including Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Sergei Dovlatov's *The Zone* and Bob Dylan's *Chronicles: Volume One*. Originally from a small village in northern Latvia, he has lived and worked in London and Barcelona but has settled down in Riga now with his wife and daughter.

# VERDICT OF THE EUROPEAN JURY

## INTRODUCTION

The question is often asked: what is the European narrative that may unite us despite our cultural differences? All book lovers know the answer: there is no such unifying narrative. In Europe, togetherness doesn't equal sameness. What we have is this multitude of stories called literature, told in a rich variety of languages. That is our cultural wealth, and that is why no one is in a position to define once and for all what it means to be European.

When we read and write, we mostly do so in the mother tongue we learned when we were children – the language in which our parents taught us to be human. In each of our languages, we each articulate our interpretation of the same sources of European civilisation, and when we read books translated from other European languages, we recognise the European in the narrative voice speaking to us. We become Europeans through these encounters, as we affirm and transcend our separate identities by way of storytelling.

The jury has taken part in this European adventure. We come from all corners of the continent. Some of us have lived in several European countries, and yet we have been united in our shared response to strong, imaginative writing, whatever the original language was. As we see them, all 13 books on this year's shortlist are examples of literature's wonderful way of embracing the particular and the universal at the very same time.

The imaginative ambition and cultural variety of the 13 shortlisted works made it difficult to come to a decision. In the end, we had to trust our combined experiences and our intuitive responses and choose the three books that we found were the most persuasive from a strictly literary point of view. Nevertheless, we find that all 13 authors merit the attention of publishers and readers throughout the continent, and we wish to thank them for having given us this opportunity to engage in a conversation across borders, languages, temperaments and sensitivities.

## JURY MOTIVATIONS

Italy – Nicoletta Verna, *I Giorni di Vetro*  
(*The Days of Glass*)

This year's laureate of the European Union Prize for Literature is a truly European book in scope as well as in spirit. In her novel *I Giorni di Vetro*, Nicoletta Verna confronts the darkest chapter of Italy's modern history through the deeply moving portrait of a woman. We follow Redenta in her own narrative as she grows up in a poor village in Emilia-Romagna at the advent of fascism, and the novel follows the story of her life as it is intertwined with the increasing brutalisation of society and the courageous resistance to tyranny.

As a child, Redenta survives polio but is marked by it and remains an outsider in her harsh, rural community, rendered with unsentimental clarity yet also with an eye for beauty and hope. The composition is epic, and the style is in complete accord with the vivid characters and their stark surroundings, blending the earthiness of spoken language with the integrity and keen observations of an uncorrupted, irrepressible mind.

Although Nicoletta Verna describes a horrific world of political and patriarchal violence, her writing is permeated by the light of a resilient soul, making this a novel with the potential to enrich a wide European readership with its undaunted, sincere humanity.

Belgium – Philippe Marczewski, *Quand Cécile* (*When Cécile*)

For one of its special mentions, the jury has chosen *Quand Cécile*, by the Belgian author Philippe Marczewski. In a language shimmering with the flux of time and vibrating with subdued emotion, the author examines not only grief but also the more subtle question, remaining unanswered, of why he was unable to embrace love when he could. Thanks to its uncompromising existential honesty and the fluid poetry of the writing, this short novel becomes a universal, elegiac meditation on remembrance, loss and emotional attachment.

*Quand Cécile* is a formally ambitious yet emotionally engaging novel articulating the inner life of a man haunted by memory. Composed as one long sentence, the text weaves together fragments of the past and the present, as the protagonist remembers Cécile, a woman he knew when they were young and who died in an airplane crash.

Ireland – Sheila Armstrong, *Falling Animals*

For the other special mention, the jury has chosen *Falling Animals* by the Irish author Sheila Armstrong: a masterful mosaic of narratives complementing one another. Set in a small, isolated coastal town in northwestern Ireland, this carefully crafted and highly original novel slowly draws the reader into a world of enigma and human insight.

The discovery of the dead body of an unknown man sitting on a beach is the pivotal point around which the author assembles a sequence of uncanny and melancholy, yet surprisingly familiar situations. The place itself becomes the novel's all-embracing element, as the

acute descriptions of landscape merge with the portraits of inconspicuous characters caught between solitude and a longing for community.

**Prague, 16 May 2025**

*Jens Christian Grøndahl, for the jury.*

# THE EUROPEAN UNION PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

## INTRODUCTION

The European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is an annual initiative launched in 2009 that recognises the best emerging fiction writers in Europe. Its aim is to spotlight the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature in the field of fiction, promote the circulation of literature within Europe and encourage greater interest in non-national literary works. The EUPL is open to 40 countries currently involved in the Creative Europe programme. Each year, national organisations in a third of the participating countries select novels they trust have the potential to find an audience outside of their national borders, making it possible for all countries and language areas to be represented over a three-year cycle.

The Prize is co-financed by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union, which aims to achieve three

main goals: promote the cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector, encourage the transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output and foster intercultural dialogue.

## SELECTION PROCESS

During each yearly edition, the shortlisted books are proposed by national nominating organisations that are familiar with the literary scene in their country. They are used to promoting their own literature abroad and have expertise in literary quality and assessing the translatability potential of a book.

The nominating organisations are chosen based on criteria stipulated by the EUPL consortium in agreement with the European Commission, and they accept to abide by the following principles.

- The choice of the national nominee must be made fairly and independently by the relevant organisation designated by the EUPL.
- The names of the members of the national committees responsible for making the selections should be recorded and shared internally with the EUPL.
- All decisions must be taken based on consensus within the organisation and mutual agreement with the EUPL.
- The organisations designated by the EUPL cannot submit a work by an author with whom they have direct ties.
- The organisations designated by the EUPL cannot submit a book published by a publishing house with which they have direct ties.
- The organisations designated by the EUPL cannot submit a self-published book and/or one not distributed in the country's bookshops.
- The content of the nominated book must respect the values of the European Union, namely the respect for human rights, human dignity, freedom and equality and the rights of persons belonging to minorities.
- The author of the shortlisted book cannot be currently employed by the European institutions.
- The author of the shortlisted book should be ready to take part in EUPL-related activities.
- The nominating organisations should proactively engage with publishers.

All national organisations must respect the selection rules. Based on translated excerpts from the shortlisted books,

the jury chooses one laureate and two special mentions. The jury's choice is based on a list of books nominated at the national level, one for each participating country.

## **THE CONSORTIUM**

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

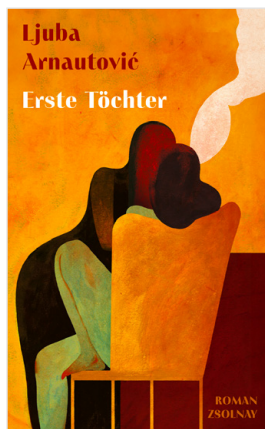
# NOMINATING ORGANISATIONS

**N**ational nominating organisations are invited to submit a national nomination, which consists of a book and a nominated author. They are experts on their national literature scenes and know how to grant authors international visibility. The nominating organisations in 2025 are the following:

- **Austria:** Austrian Publishers and Booksellers Association
- **Belgium:** Direction des Lettres, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** PEN Bosnia and Herzegovina
- **Georgia:** PEN Georgia
- **Greece:** Hellenic Foundation for Books and Culture
- **Ireland:** Literature Ireland
- **Italy:** Fondazione Circolo dei Lettori
- **Lithuania:** Lithuanian Cultural Institute
- **Norway:** NORLA
- **Romania:** Romanian Cultural Institute
- **Slovakia:** Slovak Literary Centre
- **Spain:** Acción Cultural Española
- **Ukraine:** Ukrainian Book Institute



# AUSTRIA



**Ljuba ARNAUTOVIĆ**

**Erste Töchter**

***First Daughters***

Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2024

German

ISBN: 9783552075085



## BIOGRAPHY

**Ljuba Arnautović** (born in 1954 in Kursk, Soviet Union) is an Austrian translator, journalist, author and writer. After studying social pedagogy, she worked for the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance as a Russian translator and radio journalist. // Most recent works and publications: (1) *Im Verborgenen*, Picus-Verlag, Vienna, 2018; (2) *Junischnee*, Zsolnay-Verlag, Vienna, 2021; (3) *Erste Töchter* [*First Daughters*], Zsolnay-Verlag, Vienna, 2024. // Awards: (1) exile Literature Prize 'Writing Between Cultures', third place, 2013; (2) exile Literature Prize, 'Writing Between Cultures', 2014: first place for the short story 'Substitutes may be used'; (3) Floriana Prize, second place for *Im Verborgenen*, 2018; (4) shortlisted for the Austrian Book Prize/Debut for *Im Verborgenen*, 2018; (5) Vienna Book Prize, 2018; (6) Austrian Book Prize for *Junischnee*, 2021; (7) Vienna Book Prize of the City of Vienna Culture for *Junischnee*, 2021.

## SYNOPSIS

After 12 years in the gulag, Karl returns to Vienna with his Russian wife and two daughters. People in post-war Austria don't want to know anything about what happened to him. The 'Russians' are met with suspicion at best. He therefore has to climb the social ladder as quickly as possible and by any means necessary. Karl gets divorced, marries a young medical student, moves to Germany, makes dubious connections in Moscow – and separates his daughters. From then on, Lara and Luna grow up in different worlds: one in simple circumstances with her mother in Vienna, the other with her father and his new middle-class family in Munich.

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Ljuba Arnautović writes in a detached, observant and sober manner about herself, her family and the upheavals of a century. In this novel, she distils an extraordinary array of fates into a vivid mosaic of an uprooted family, concluding an immensely compelling generational trilogy. Through poetic yet unsentimental language, she makes twentieth-century European history tangible.

Arnautović's storytelling is marked by brevity and emotional restraint. She employs a succinct, almost chronicle-like style, foregoing extensive dialogue or detailed scene-setting in favour of a minimalist approach. This narrative

technique powerfully conveys the profound emotional undercurrents of her characters' experiences without overt sentimentality. The concise chapters and deliberate pacing mirror the fragmented and often painful realities of a family disrupted by external forces.

*Erste Tochter* is not just a personal family saga but also a reflection on the broader societal and historical forces that shape individual destinies. Through Luna and Lara's perspectives, Arnautović explores themes of identity, belonging and the enduring impact of history on the present. The novel highlights the resilience of the human spirit in adversity and the strength of family bonds that transcend even the most challenging circumstances.

Arnautović's skilful storytelling and deep insight into the human condition make *First Daughters* a profound and moving read. This nuanced portrayal of one family's struggle sheds light on the overlooked personal dimensions of historical events, offering a compelling exploration of the intersections between personal and collective identity.

► *Austrian Publishers and Booksellers Association*

# Erste Töchter

*Ljuba Arnautović*



## **Pages 18–19**

Die erste Umarmung fühlt sich anders an als von beiden erträumt. Die lange Trennung hat sie einander zu Fremden werden lassen. Das Gesicht der Mutter war Karl nach und nach in Vergessenheit geraten. Vor ihm steht eine grauhaarige, auf einen Stock gestützte alte Frau. Sie wiederum hat das Bild eines kleinen Buben und seine helle Stimme in Erinnerung bewahrt. Der zarte Neunjährige ist jetzt ein Mann. Sehr mager ist er, nicht sehr groß, und seine Haut wirkt fahl. Eva sucht gierig nach den Spuren ihres Kindes in diesem Gesicht, aber um seinen Mund haben sich tiefe Falten gegraben, das Haar wird an den Schläfen schütter, und die Augen strahlen Härte aus. Seine Muttersprache hat er fast vergessen, er spricht mit starkem Akzent, die Sätze sind fehlerhaft – wo Eva doch so großen Wert auf gutes Deutsch legt.

Die russische Frau an seiner Seite ist ihr noch fremder. Nina hatte insgeheim gehofft, dass es mit der Rückkehr ihres Viktors, wie sie ihn immer noch bei seinem russischen Lagernamen nennt, nichts werden und er bei ihr in Kursk bleiben würde. Sie fürchtet sich vor der Fremde, wo sie niemanden kennt und nicht weiß, was sie dort erwartet. Sie möchte in ihrer Heimatstadt bleiben, bei ihrer Mutter und ihren Geschwistern, sie kennt nichts anderes, und Karl hat sich doch so gut eingelebt. Sie versteht aber auch seine Sehnsucht nach seiner Mutter, nach seiner Heimat. Als sich dann abzeichnet, dass sie ihn nach Wien begleiten würde, denn eine Ehefrau folgt ihrem Mann, lernt sie rasch etwas Deutsch aus einem alten Schulbuch.

Bei der ersten Begegnung mit ihrer Schwiegermutter sagt sie ihr Begrüßungssätzchen auf. Eva ihrerseits versucht sich auf Russisch, vor Jahren erlernt, als sie noch an eine Übersiedlung in die Sowjetunion zu ihren Kindern glaubte. Vor lauter Aufregung rutscht sie ins Tschechische, ihre eigene Muttersprache. Kühle Verlegenheit steht zwischen den drei Menschen, die einander doch so gerne verwandt wären. Wie gut, dass da das Kleinkind ist, diesem kann man sich zuwenden und so die betretene Stimmung etwas überspielen.

## **Page 20**

Karl ist wild entschlossen, dass hier und jetzt sein eigentliches Leben beginnen soll. Er will in kürzester Zeit nachholen, was andere in ihren frühen Jahren erledigen. Seine gesamte Jugend hat er in den Lagern gelassen, zwischen seinem 16. und 28. Lebensjahr war er ein Gefangener. Er hat weder eine höhere Schulbildung noch einen Beruf, weder die richtige Sprache noch nützliche Kontakte. Da ist nur diese innere Gewissheit, dass sein Ehrgeiz und sein starker Wille ihn zum Ziel führen würden. Zuerst muss er Anker werfen.

[...]

## **Pages 21–23**

Karl und seine russische Frau Nina schließen sich Erikas Freundeskreis an. Es sind allesamt frühere Zöglinge aus dem Kinderheim, einige von ihnen haben, wie Karl, eine russische Frau mitgebracht. Sie haben sich in Wien zusammengefunden, und immer wieder sind Heimkehrende dazugestoßen. Karl ist einer der Letzten. Bald würde er verstehen, warum fast keine »echten« Österreicher in diesem Kreis verkehren.

Die Hiesigen begegnen den »Russen« voller Misstrauen. Nach Kriegsende waren im Sprachgebrauch die Befreier sehr schnell zu

Besatzern geworden. Österreichs Nationalfeiertag wird den Schulkindern als jener Tag erklärt, an dem mit dem Verlassen des letzten russischen Soldaten die zehn Jahre Besatzung zu Ende gegangen sind – »Österreich ist frei«.

Die Gräueltaten des Faschismus sind rasch verdrängt, man bedauert sich als arg gebeutelte Nation, die unverschuldet zu Hitlers Opfer geworden und ebenso unverschuldet in Stalins Geiselhaft geraten war. All das soll jetzt vorbei und vergessen sein, der Blick soll sich nach vorne, in die Zukunft richten. Das Zurückschauen tut nur weh, und haben wir nicht alle genug erdulden müssen? Die Begegnung mit diesen in Russland aufgewachsenen Österreichern ist unangenehm. Gerne stimmt man ein, wenn die bolschewistische Gefahr beschworen wird, und erschreckt einander und seine Kinder mit dem Stehsatz: »Der Russe kommt.«

Nina lernt eifrig Deutsch aus ihrem Lehrbuch, aber sie versteht den Wiener Dialekt nicht. Sie ist meist allein mit dem Kleinkind, das in der Wohnung keinen Lärm machen darf, um die studierende Großmutter nicht zu stören. Sie leidet unter unerträglichem Heimweh.

Einzig bei den russischen Ehefrauen erhofft Nina sich Freundschaft, oder wenigstens Verständnis. Sie versteht nicht, warum sich keine Nähe zu ihnen herstellen will. Bei den gemeinsam verbrachten sonntäglichen Picknicks packen die Frauen Speisen aus, die sie auf russische Art zubereitet haben. Nina kann mithalten. Ihr Beitrag ist ein Salat aus Erdäpfeln, Roten Rüben und Salzgurken. Leider schmeckt das Sonnenblumenöl, das es hier zu kaufen gibt, nicht so, wie sie es von daheim kennt. Die Lieder, die Scherze und die Speisen sind russisch, und gleichzeitig spürt Nina, wie die Frauen genau dieses Russischsein ablegen, verleugnen wollen. Die meisten sind schon seit Jahren hier, bemühen sich, österreichisch zu sein, und wollen nicht wahrhaben, dass sie immer noch nicht dazugehören. Sie sprechen fast akzentfreies Deutsch. Ihre Kinder besuchen

Wiener Schulen. Die Neue, die noch so russisch ist, hält ihnen einen Spiegel vor, und was sie darin sehen, gefällt ihnen nicht.

[...]

### **Pages 26–27**

Ein Saal mit hohen Fenstern und langen Tischen. Linoleumboden. Ein Raum für viele Zwecke. Hier werden Mahlzeiten eingenommen, Hausaufgaben gemacht, hier wird gespielt. Es riecht muffig, nach Lauge und Suppe. Und dann ist da noch ein Geruch – er erinnert an warme Semmeln, so riechen Kinder.

Der Vater muss die kleinen Finger aufbiegen, um seine Hände frei zu bekommen. Er flieht zum wartenden Taxi und blickt sich kein einziges Mal um zu seinen Mädchen, die ihm nachschreien, fassungslos, verzweifelt. Blind vor Tränen, versuchen sie sich mit aller Kraft loszureißen. Aber eine große dicke Frau hält eisern die kleinen Handgelenke fest. Betrogen. Verlassen. Ausgesetzt.

Bei der Abfahrt in Wien liegt bereits ein Koffer mit dem Gewand der Kinder im Kofferraum eines Taxis. Ein geschiedener berufstätiger Mann kann keine Kinder versorgen, seine Umgebung hat Verständnis und Mitgefühl. Man hilft ihm bei der Suche nach einer guten Betreuung. Auch hier weiß seine Mutter Rat. Das Evangelische Kinderheim liegt in einer wunderschönen hügeligen Landschaft in Niederösterreich. Überhaupt soll es ja nur eine Übergangslösung sein.

Es ist ein warmer Sommertag, eine Fahrt mit einem Auto – wie aufregend! Ein Ausflug aufs Land, Blumenwiesen, ein plätschernder Bach, Einkehr im Gasthaus, Würstel und Limonade. Bei Kakao und Apfelstrudel beginnt der Vater von seiner Kindheit zu erzählen, wie schön er selbst es einst im Kinderheim gehabt habe, und ob man sich nicht gleich eines anschauen wolle, das zufällig hier ganz in der Nähe liege?

»Stellt euch das nur einmal vor, so viele Kinder, nie wird euch langweilig. Immer ist jemand da zum Spielen.«

Eine böse Ahnung steigt auf.

Beim Rundgang durch das riesige Haus mit den dunklen Winkeln und dem seltsamen Geruch lassen die Kinder die Hand des Vaters keinen Augenblick los. Es wird nichts nützen. Tante Wallys kalte Finger sind stärker.

Die Ältere hat sich bisher immer wie eine Prinzessin gefühlt. Ein geliebtes erstes Kind, immer im Zentrum, selbst im Streit der Eltern. Dass es da eine kleine Schwester gibt, war nicht von Bedeutung. An diesem Tag ändert sich ihre Wahrnehmung. Heute hat sie plötzlich eine Schwester bekommen, eine, die zu ihr gehört in dieser Fremde, und für die sie sich – weil die doch noch so klein ist, noch keine vier Jahre alt – verantwortlich fühlt.

Wann immer eine der Schwestern weint oder schreit, stimmt die andere mit ein. Die Große lernt, den Impuls zu unterdrücken, damit die Kleine weniger weinen muss.

Tante Wally erzieht zum richtigen Sprechen. Wer sagt: »Die Frau Lehrerin hat gesagt, wir müssen das noch einmal wieder holen«, zählt Tante Wally an ihren dicken Fingern ab: »Noch. Einmal. Wiederholen. Das macht also dreimal.«

Tante Wally erzieht zu richtiger Tischkultur. Wer sich mit den Ellbogen aufstützt, dessen Unterärmchen umfasst sie von hinten und trommelt mit der Kraft einer wütenden Frau die zarten Knochen etwa zehnmal auf die Tischplatte – und zum Abschluss noch je einmal über die Kante. Das macht Schürfwunden, die mit brennendem Jod behandelt werden müssen.

Für Buben und Mädchen gibt es unterschiedliche Arten der Bestrafung. Mädchen müssen Schuhe putzen, und zwar die Schuhe sämtlicher Kinder, was einen ganzen verpassten Spiel-Nachmit-

tag bedeutet. Buben werden im Sommer vor versammelter Schar mit dem nackten Hintern in die Brennesseln hinter dem Haus gedrückt, im Winter in den Schnee. Die Mädchen brauchen das nicht zu fürchten, dennoch macht es sich die Große zur Gewohnheit, in unbeobachteten Momenten ihre nackten Arme und Beine immer wieder durch die Nesselstauden zu ziehen, dabei empfindet sie das Brennen als eigenartigen Triumph. Sie macht sich stark gegen den Schmerz, und zugleich spürt sie, die sich so oft versteinert, sich dabei kurz als lebendigen, warmen, empfindenden Körper.

Tante Wally und ihre junge Kollegin Gitti wechseln einander beim Nachtdienst ab. Gitti liest im Schlafsaal immer noch etwas vor. »Heimatlos« heißt der französische Abenteuerromanum einen Waisenjungen, der am Ende wieder zu seiner richtigen Familie findet. Ist ein Kapitel zu Ende, klappt Gitti das Buch zu, nimmt eine riesige blaue Nivea-Creme-Dose und geht damit von Bett zu Bett. Sie verteilt auf den Wangen eines jeden Kindes etwas davon, und dies ist die einzige zärtliche Zuwendung, die die Kinder während ihres Aufenthalts im Heim erfahren. Literatur bekommt durch dieses sinnliche Erleben neue Verknüpfungen: ein angenehmes Rieseln im Nacken, ein minimales Ansteigen der Außentemperatur. Fortan wird der Geruch dieser Creme die Lust zum Lesen wecken. Lange warten und sehnen alle im Schlafsaal diese Momente herbei, und viel zu schnell gehen sie vorüber. Eines Tages verkündet Tante Wally: »Die Tante Gitti hat geheiratet und kriegt ein eigenes Baby, sie will jetzt nicht mehr zu euch kommen.«

[...]

## Pages 78–79

Karl hat Nina erlaubt, sich einen lange gehegten Wunsch zu erfüllen und mit ihren Töchtern in ihren Geburtsort Kursk zu fahren, um ihre Verwandten zu besuchen. Karl kann sich inzwischen sicher

sein, dass die Fünfzehn- und die knapp Dreizehnjährige auf keinen Fall dortbleiben würden, selbst wenn Nina so etwas im Sinn haben sollte.

Er sollte recht behalten. Um nichts auf der Welt würden die westlich verwöhnten Kinder in dieser schiefen, staubigen, schlecht riechenden Stadt leben wollen.

Bei allem Widerwillen und aller Fremdartigkeit spürt Luna aber doch etwas irritierend Vertrautes. Der Geruch im Haus und am Fluss, Stimme und Hände der Babuschka, das »Rote Eck« mit der Ikone spülen Erinnerungen herauf, und das in einem Lebensalter, das eigentlich noch nicht anfällig ist für Nostalgie.

Die Mädchen bemerken die bewundernden und neidischen Blicke auf ihre Kleidung und auf ihr Anderssein, ihr Westlichsein. Hier sind die Unterschiede der Schwestern mit einem Mal fortgewischt, hier erleben sie sich wie von der gleichen Sorte. Sie verteilen gnädig Kaugummi und Strumpfhosen an die dankbare Verwandt- und Nachbarschaft und fühlen sich als etwas Besseres. Lara war zu jung, als dass sie ihre Muttersprache erinnern würde. Luna ist nach wenigen Tagen wieder darin eingetaucht.

Die Verwandten sehen die Mädchen immer noch so, wie sie vor einem Jahrzehnt bei ihrer Abreise gewesen sind – gewachsen sind sie halt. Luna dagegen spürt, dass fast nichts davon übrig ist. Als sei ihr eine neue Haut gewachsen, und nur noch ein winziger Kern alter Herkunft verbirgt sich noch irgendwo tief drinnen. Dieses Gefühl ist warm, aber auch störend, sie kann es nicht brauchen. Sie hat doch schon zwei Heimaten – wie viele passen in einen Körper?

# First Daughters

*Ljuba Arnautović*

Translated into English by Charlotte Collins

## **Pages 18–19**

Their first hug doesn't feel the way they had dreamed. The long separation has made them strangers to each other. Little by little, Karl has forgotten his mother's face. In front of him stands an old, grey-haired woman leaning on a stick. For her part, she has preserved in her memory the image of a young boy with a high voice. That tender nine-year-old is now a man. He is very thin, not very tall, and his skin is sallow. Eva greedily searches his face for traces of her child, but deep lines have engraved themselves around his mouth, his hair is thinning at the temples, and there is a hardness in his eyes. He has almost forgotten his mother tongue; he speaks with a strong accent, makes mistakes – and good German is so important to Eva.

The Russian woman at his side is even more of a stranger. Nina had secretly hoped that Viktor's homecoming would not work out – she still calls him by his name from the Russian camp – and he would stay with her in Kursk. She is afraid of going abroad, where she doesn't know anyone and doesn't know what awaits her. She would like to stay in her home town with her mother and siblings; she doesn't know anything else, and Karl has settled in so well. But she does understand his yearning for his mother, his homeland. When it becomes apparent that she will accompany him to Vienna, because wives follow their husbands, she quickly learns a little German from an old school textbook. On meeting her mother-in-law for the first time, she recites her words of greeting. Eva attempts to respond in Russian, which she learned years ago, back when she still believed she would be able to emigrate to the Soviet Union and join her children. In her excitement, she slips into Czech, her own

mother tongue. Embarrassment and reserve stand between these three people who so want to have a relationship. It's a good thing the little girl is there: they can turn their attention to her to try and disguise the awkward atmosphere.

## **Page 20**

Karl is absolutely determined that his real life should begin right here and now. He wants to make up as quickly as possible for what other people get to do when they are young. He spent the whole of his youth in the camps: he was a prisoner from the ages of 16 to 28. He has neither secondary education nor a profession, neither the right language nor useful contacts. All he has is the inner conviction that his strong will and ambition will take him where he wants to go. First, he needs to anchor himself.

[...]

## **Pages 21–23**

Karl and his Russian wife Nina are introduced to Erika's circle of friends. They are all former wards of the children's home; some, like Karl, have brought home Russian wives. They met up in Vienna, and more returnees keep coming to join them. Karl is one of the last. Soon he will understand why there are hardly any 'real' Austrians in this social circle.

The locals regard the 'Russians' with great suspicion. After the war, the liberators quickly started to be referred to as occupiers. Austria's national holiday is explained to schoolchildren as the day the 10 years of occupation ended with the departure of the last Russian soldiers – 'Austria is free'.

The horrors of fascism are swiftly suppressed. Austria feels sorry for itself, sees itself as a beleaguered country that fell victim to Hitler through no fault of its own and was held hostage by Stalin, also through no fault of its own. All that is now meant to be over and forgotten: people should look forward, to the future. Looking back just causes pain, and haven't we all suffered enough? It's uncomfortable, encountering these Austrians who grew up in Russia. People like to chime in whenever the Bolshevik menace is invoked, and to frighten themselves and their children with the stock phrase 'The Russians are coming'.

Nina is diligently learning German from her textbook, but she doesn't understand the Viennese dialect. Most of the time she is alone with the little girl, who is not allowed to make any noise in the apartment so as not to disturb her grandmother's studies. Nina's homesickness is excruciating.

The Russian wives are the only ones Nina looks to for friendship, or at least understanding. She doesn't understand why she can't seem to get close to them. At their communal Sunday picnics, the women unpack dishes they've prepared in the Russian style. Nina can hold her own. Her contribution is a salad of potatoes, beetroot and pickled gherkins. Unfortunately the sunflower oil they sell here isn't like the one they have at home. The songs, the jokes and the dishes are Russian, and at the same time Nina senses that this very Russianness is something these women want to reject, deny. Most of them have been here for years; they strive to be Austrian, and don't want to accept that they still don't belong. Their German is almost accent-free. Their children attend Viennese schools. This new woman who is still so very Russian holds a mirror up to them, and they don't like what they see.

[...]

## **Pages 26–27**

A room with high windows and long tables. Linoleum floors. A room with many functions. This is where they eat meals, do homework; this is where they play. It smells stale, of cleaning fluid and soup. And there's another smell, too, reminiscent of warm bread rolls: this is the smell of children.

Their father has to prise open their little fingers in order to free his hands. He flees to the waiting taxi and doesn't look back once at his girls, who scream after him in bewilderment and desperation. Blinded by tears, they try with all their might to tear themselves free, but a tall, corpulent woman is holding their little wrists in an iron grip. Betrayed. Forsaken. Abandoned.

A suitcase with the children's clothes is already in the boot of the taxi when they set off from Vienna. A divorced man with a full-time job can't look after children; the people around him understand and sympathise. They help him look for good childcare. Here, too, his mother has an idea. The Evangelical Children's Home is situated in beautiful, rolling countryside in Lower Austria. Anyway, it's only meant to be a temporary solution.

It's a warm summer's day: a drive in the car – how exciting! A trip to the countryside, flowery meadows, a babbling brook, a stop at a guesthouse, sausages and lemonade. Over cocoa and apple strudel, their father starts telling them about his childhood, what a nice time he had back then in the children's home, and why don't they go and take a look at one that happens to be close by?

'Just imagine – so many children, you never get bored. There's always someone around to play with.'

A sense of foreboding starts to build.

As they walk around the enormous house with the dark corners and the strange smell, the children don't let go of their father's hand for a second. It's no use. Aunt Wally's cold fingers are stronger.

Until now, the elder girl has always felt like a princess. A beloved first child, always the focus of attention, even in her parents' arguments. It didn't matter to her that she had a little sister. This day alters her perception. Today she has suddenly acquired a sister, someone in this strange place who belongs to her, and for whom – because she's still so small, not even four years old – she feels responsible.

Whenever one of the sisters cries or yells, the other joins in. The elder girl learns to suppress the impulse so the younger won't have to cry as much.

Aunt Wally teaches them to speak properly. If someone says, 'The teacher said we have to repeat it once again', Aunt Wally counts off on her fingers: 'Repeat. Once. Again. That's three times.'

Aunt Wally teaches them proper table manners. If someone leans on their elbows, she grabs their little forearms from behind and drums the delicate bones furiously on the tabletop about 10 times, and finishes by slamming them against the edge. This produces grazes that have to be treated with stinging iodine.

Boys and girls are subjected to different forms of punishment. Girls have to polish shoes – all the children's shoes, which means missing a whole afternoon of games. In summer, boys are pushed bare-bottomed, before an assembled crowd, into the stinging nettles behind the house, and in winter into the snow. The girls don't have to fear this; nonetheless, the elder makes a habit of repeatedly dragging her bare arms and legs through the nettles when no one is looking, and the stinging feels like a strange kind of triumph. She fortifies herself against the pain, and at the same time she, who so often has to be hard, briefly senses herself as a warm, living, feeling body.

Aunt Wally and her young colleague Gitti take it in turns to do the night shift. In the dormitory, Gitti always reads something aloud. 'Homeless' is the name of the French adventure story about an orphan boy who eventually finds his way back to his true family. Whenever she finishes a chapter, Gitti snaps the book shut, picks up a huge blue tub of Nivea cream and goes from bed to bed with it. She spreads a dab of cream on each child's cheeks, and this is the only tenderness the children receive in all their time in the home. As a result of this sensual experience, literature acquires new associations: a pleasant tickle at the nape of the neck, a tiny increase in air temperature. From now on, the smell of this cream will trigger the desire to read. Everyone in the dormitory waits and yearns for these moments, and all too quickly they are over. One day, Aunt Wally announces, 'Aunt Gitti has got married and is having a baby of her own; she doesn't want to come to you any more.'

### **Pages 78–79**

Karl has allowed Nina to fulfil a long-held wish to take her two daughters to their birthplace, Kursk, to visit their relatives. These days, Karl can be sure that the two girls, aged fifteen and almost thirteen, definitely wouldn't stay there even if Nina were to consider such a thing.

He's right. Nothing in the world could make these spoiled Western children want to live in this crooked, dusty, smelly city.

Yet despite her revulsion, and the foreignness of it all, Luna does have a nagging sense of familiarity. The smell of the house and by the river, her babushka's voice and hands, the 'red corner' with the icons all bring back memories, even though she's at an age that doesn't yet incline towards nostalgia.

The girls observe people's admiring, envious glances at their clothes and their otherness, their Westernness. Here, the differenc-

es between the sisters are suddenly swept away; here, they feel cut from the same cloth. They graciously distribute chewing gum and tights to grateful relatives and neighbours, and feel superior. Lara was too young to have remembered her mother tongue. Within a few days, Luna is immersed in it again.

Their relatives still see the girls as they were before they left a decade ago; they've just grown a bit. Luna, on the other hand, feels there is almost nothing left of that time. As if she has grown a new skin, and only a tiny kernel of her old origins is still buried deep inside. It's a warm feeling, but also disturbing: she doesn't need it. She already has two homelands – how many will fit in one body?

SPECIAL  
MENTION

# BELGIUM



**Philippe  
MARCEWSKI**  
**Quand Cécile**  
*When Cécile*  
Éditions du Seuil,  
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French  
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## BIOGRAPHY

**P**hilippe Marczewski was born in 1974. He worked as a neuropsychology researcher for 7 years before setting up an independent bookshop, which he ran for 16 years. His first two books were published by Inculte: *Blues pour trois tombes et un fantôme* (2019), a melancholy tale exploring the moods generated by his home town of Liège, and *Un corps tropical* (2021), a caustic contemporary adventure novel (Prix Victor Rossel; Special Mention of the Jury of the Prix Senghor). In March 2024, Éditions du Seuil published his novel *Quand Cécile*, which evokes absence, mourning, memory and forgetting without sadness.



## SYNOPSIS

Cécile was a young woman who died prematurely at the age of 27 in a plane crash. The narrator, who had a brief youthful relationship with her, is haunted by her memory. One day, he meets her double in the street and follows the woman. He then imagines the potential lives Cécile could have had, weaving stories around presences and absences. The novel takes the form of a long, uninterrupted sentence with no distinct chapters, which reflects the continuous flow of the narrator's thoughts. He remembers her, the fineness of her hair, the blondness of her eyelashes, the taste of persimmons on her salty lips. The others, those who were close to her, are only ghosts. He is entirely focused on his memory, an evanescent, elusive memory. The past is intertwined with the present, the future and the death that must be delayed, like the sentence that will only end with the novel, which we will finish without catching our breath. An intimate account of the disappearance of a loved one, *Quand Cécile* also raises the universal questions of grief, memory and forgetting in language so delicate that it could be called poetic.

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

*Quand Cécile* rides along a tenuous thread, with palpable emotions based on elusive facts. A single sentence, just over 100 pages long, an intimate monologue

that we follow like an investigation – what remains of our dead? You have to be able to 'go beyond the memory (...), to climb on the fragments as if on a stepping stone in order to see further', because *Quand Cécile* is just that: much more than an account of grief, it is a book of ineffable sensations, as Maurice Blanchot's epigraph sums up so beautifully and aptly, 'Whoever wants to remember must entrust himself to oblivion, to the risk of absolute oblivion and to the beautiful chance that remembrance then becomes'. That's the art of this novel: balancing delicately between the little things that must be remembered and the great black hole of oblivion. We are all familiar with the temptation to want to bring dearly departed ones back to this side of existence, and the powerlessness of seeing swallowed up what we would like to be eternal.

This novel explores both absence and what remains, building a bridge between the two shores and linking them with the same breath. And so the novel unfolds in a continuous text, without a break, for fear of breaking this thin silk thread: from the same spool. The exercise is not so much stylistic as existential. It's a question of keeping in the light the little that has been preserved of a face, an expression, a laugh.

► *Direction des Lettres,  
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# Quand Cécile

*Philippe Marczewski*



Quand Cécile se réveille au matin, regarde-t-elle encore le ciel à l'est pour chercher la lumière, sent-elle le vent souffler sur elle qui la soulève et l'emporte, a-t-elle soif, a-t-elle faim, a-t-elle chaud, s'accroche-t-elle aux branches des peupliers ou aux pierres ridées des falaises qui écorchent sa chair, tout cela est-il encore possible ? parfois il l'imagine avancer vers la mer, comme ce matin venteux de septembre quand désœuvrés et vacants ils avaient marché en grappe éparpillée sur une plage d'Italie, leur jeunesse indolente alors ne pesait rien et ne creusait presque pas le sable sous leurs pas, une poussière morose s'était posée sur lui, dissimulant son visage, elle l'avait remarquée, il n'y avait pas de raison, peut-être seulement l'espace d'une seconde avait-il eu la sensation de tout ce que ce mouvement portait en lui d'éternité autant que d'éphémère, ou peut-être était-ce seulement le vent qui balayait les peaux si vite perdues pour devenir adultes, et Cécile avait dit qu'elle aussi était d'humeur cyclique, cela ne s'expliquait pas, ne se comprenait pas davantage, il avait souri c'était déjà fini, entre eux la poussière avait révélé le relief d'une possible connivence, arrivés au bord de l'eau ils avaient ri à nouveau et c'est ainsi que parfois il l'imagine, avançant vers la mer les pieds nus sur le sable qui ne conserve aucune empreinte, jeune et lumineuse, puis elle disparaît dans un reflux de marée, dans un cycle de temps si bref qu'il ne peut le saisir, et son image sur la plage est fugace comme son passage dans la vie, déposée sur le sable et aussitôt reprise, effacée déjà par l'écume des années, lui reste alors en tête la blondeur de ses cheveux, de ses sourcils et des cils autour de ses yeux dont l'iris parfois se voyait à peine à travers la fente étroite des paupières, son visage juvénile

n'était que blondeur et lumière au rose de ses joues, il s'efforce en plongeant dans la mélasse obscure de sa mémoire de recomposer la forme de sa bouche et son sourire et les fossettes qu'il dessinait et son rire blond et solaire, un tel visage est-il encore possible pense-il, une telle blondeur jusqu'aux cils peut-elle encore émerger du sommeil au matin et s'habiller du vent qui souffle sur elle et l'emporte, peut-il y avoir encore du rose à ses joues et des fossettes s'accrochant aux branches hautes des peupliers et aux rides des falaises ? mais non, il sait bien que c'est impossible, il sait bien que Cécile ne sent plus le vent souffler sur elle, n'a plus faim ni soif, ne se réveille pas de sa nuit et plus jamais ne se réveillera, on ne se réveille pas de ce sommeil-là, elle ne sait plus rien des branches des peupliers ni des flux de marée et de sa blondeur ne subsiste que son souvenir qui déjà s'étiole, voilà pourquoi il s'agrippe à ces rares images comme à un fil ténu sur quoi tirer, un fil sans début ni fin qui pourrait se briser et sans doute se brisera avec le temps, avec l'oubli et la vieillesse, alors il engage une lutte, il doit fixer ce qui disparaît, ce qui déjà n'est plus, avant d'oublier la forme de son visage et le rose à ses joues, car il a déjà oublié tant de choses importantes comme la couleur de ses yeux, il peut imaginer leur forme et leur lumière quand elle souriait et que l'iris se voyait à peine à travers les cils mais leur couleur précise a disparu et si quelqu'un lui demandait aujourd'hui la couleur de ses yeux il répondrait qu'ils étaient blonds, c'est ainsi qu'il s'en souvient, son regard était blond parce que ses cils étaient blonds et ses sourcils, voilà comme on oublie les choses, comme on oublie les êtres et comme il oublie Cécile, et il voudrait empêcher cette béance qui s'ouvre peu à peu dans sa mémoire de dévorer son visage, parce que l'oubli est injuste et brutal, il avale la couleur des yeux la forme des mains les parfums et les mots et ne laisse affleurer que le souvenir de la mort

de la mort de Cécile le souvenir est vif, et claire l'image de l'annonce reçue malgré l'érosion qui peu à peu en use la netteté, il était assis à son bureau et le téléphone a sonné, D. pleurait, il ne l'avait plus entendue depuis des mois, elle avait disait-elle cherché pendant deux

jours à le joindre, sa voix était faible et lente comme engluée elle sanglotait, ensuite il ne sait plus, peut-être de but en blanc a-t-elle dit dans une plainte Cécile est morte, ou bien elle a d'abord parlé d'un accident et seulement après elle a dit Cécile est morte il ne sait vraiment plus, il pense qu'elle a dit qu'il y avait eu un accident, que Cécile était dans un avion avec d'autres personnes qu'il connaissait aussi, un petit avion de tourisme, qu'ils avaient décollé d'un aérodrome dans le Sud et que le vent avait apparemment rabattu l'avion qui s'était écrasé, ils sont morts tous les quatre a sans doute dit D. mais ce dont il se souvient c'est seulement cette phrase, Cécile est morte, c'était le 10 août 2001 et l'accident avait eu lieu le 8 croit-il, des dates il est à peu près certain mais des minutes et des heures qui ont suivi l'annonce il ne sait plus grand-chose, elles ont l'apparence d'un bouillon laiteux et opaque, il sait qu'il a ressenti le besoin d'annoncer à son tour la nouvelle, bien sûr il pensait que d'autres personnes devaient être prévenues mais au fond ce n'était qu'une manière de se débarrasser de la mort de Cécile comme on rejette loin de soi une grenade dégoupillée, il a appelé B. qui avait été le petit ami de Cécile dix ans plus tôt à l'époque où il l'avait vue pour la première fois, et lorsque B. a décroché sa voix a gagné les graves et il lui a dit Cécile est morte puis il a dit ce qu'il savait de l'accident mais B. ne lui a pas paru affecté, au-delà de la surprise de l'annonce il a eu l'impression que cela le touchait peu, pour être précis la nouvelle semblait ne pas avoir percé l'épaisseur de sa vie occupée à se vivre, peut-être n'avait-il pas planté l'aiguille de la surprise avec assez de force et il se rappelle avoir dit à B. que parce qu'ils étaient sortis ensemble il avait pensé qu'il fallait le prévenir, mais là encore il a trouvé B. étonnamment détaché et la conversation a viré à des banalités puis ils ont raccroché, ensuite il a appelé J. et lui a dit Cécile est morte, mais J. ne se souvenait pas très bien d'elle, il a dû réfléchir un peu pour mettre un visage sur ce nom, cinq années avaient passé depuis la fin de leurs études et il a eu la sensation que J. ne comprenait pas pourquoi il avait cru nécessaire de lui téléphoner sans délai, et dans le silence ils ont raccroché, alors seulement il a regardé l'idée désorganisée de la mort de Cé-

cile se rassembler comme un nuage grisâtre à hauteur de ses yeux, filtrer la lumière de ce matin d'août, obscurcir la pièce, et soudain il a eu l'intuition que cette phrase, Cécile est morte, ne voulait rien dire, que les sons en elle ne tenaient pas ensemble et se dissipaient, l'idée de la mort de Cécile avait un corps gazeux éthéré, un simple geste de la main suffisait à en perturber l'apparence, à la rendre changeante et indescriptible, et il n'a plus jamais depuis lors réussi à en saisir la forme

# When Cécile

*Philippe Marczewski*

Translated into English by Holly James

When Cécile wakes up in the morning, does she still look to the east to find the light in the sky, does she feel the wind on her skin, lifting her up and carrying her away, is she hungry, is she thirsty, is she hot, does she cling to the branches of the poplar trees or the craggy rocks of the cliffs that graze the flesh, is it all still possible? sometimes he imagines her walking towards the sea, just as she did on that windy morning in September, when idle and aimless they'd strolled, a scattered cluster of them on a beach in Italy, their indolent youth weighed nothing then and their feet barely made a mark on the sand, the dust of gloom had settled on him, concealing his face, she noticed it, there was no explanation, only perhaps in the space of a second he felt all that this movement carried within, eternal as much as ephemeral, or perhaps it was just the wind sweeping away the skins that are shed on the path to adulthood, and Cécile said her moods were cyclical too, there was no explanation, no way to better understand, he smiled at her it had already passed, between them the dust had revealed the contours of a nascent complicity, at the water's edge they laughed again and that's how he sometimes imagines her, walking towards the sea barefoot on sand that would not retain the mark of her footprints, young and bright, she disappears then in the ebb of the tide, in a sequence of time too brief for him to grasp, the image of her on the beach as fleeting as her passage through life, no sooner deposited on the sand than swept away, already erased by the froth of the years, what remains then in his mind is the bloneness of her hair, her eyebrows and eyelashes framing her eyes, irises sometimes barely visible through the nar-

row aperture between her eyelids, her youthful face all bloneness and light and the pink in her cheeks, and he tries as he plunges into the dark molasses of memory to recompose the shape of her mouth and her smile and the dimples drawn on her face and her blonde, sunny laughter, is it still possible, a face like that, a bloneness like hers down to the eyelashes, emerging from sleep in the morning, draped in the wind that blows on her skin and carries her away, is it still possible that there's pink in those cheeks, and those dimples, clinging to the branches at the top of the poplar trees, to the craggy face of the cliffs? no, he knows it's impossible, he knows Cécile can no longer feel the wind on her skin, she's no longer hungry, no longer thirsty, she doesn't wake up in the middle of the night and will never wake up again, you don't wake up from that kind of sleep, she knows nothing now of the poplar trees or the flow of the tide and all that survives of her bloneness is a memory that's fading already, that's why he clings to those few images like a tenuous thread without beginning or end, a thread to hold on to that might break in time, that certainly will between age and forgetting, so he goes into battle, he has to capture what is disappearing, what has already ceased to exist, before he forgets the shape of her face and the pink in her cheeks, because he's already forgotten so many things as important as the colour of her eyes, he can remember their shape and how they lit up when she smiled and the irises you could barely see beneath the lashes but their colour has gone and if someone were to ask him today what colour they were he would say they were blonde, that's how he remembers them, her eyes were blonde because her eyelashes were blonde and her eyebrows too and that's how we forget things, that's how we forget people, that's how he's forgetting Cécile, and he'd like to freeze the gaping hole that is gradually forming in his memory and stop it from devouring her face because forgetting is an unfair, brutal thing, it's swallowing up the colour of her eyes the shape of her hands her scent and her words leaving only the memory of death

his memory is vivid of the death of Cécile, and the image of receiving the news is clear, though the sharpness is gradually eroding, he was sitting at his desk and the telephone rang, D. was crying, it was the first time he'd heard from her in months, she'd been trying to reach him for two days she said, her voice was slow and weak, sticky with grief, she was sobbing and the rest he doesn't remember, perhaps she said point blank, a cry, Cécile is dead, or perhaps she spoke of an accident first and only then did she say the words, Cécile is dead, he really doesn't know, he thinks she said there'd been an accident, that Cécile was in a plane with some others he knew, a small tourist plane, that they'd taken off from an aerodrome in the south and the wind had blown the plane from the sky and it crashed, all four of them died D. probably said, but all he remembers is that sentence, Cécile is dead, it was 10 August 2001, and the accident happened on the 8th he thinks, he's more or less sure of the dates but the minutes and hours that followed the news he doesn't remember much about, like looking into an opaque, milky broth, what he does know is he felt the need to tell someone else, of course he thought he should break the news but deep down it was simply a way of disposing of Cécile's death the way you might throw an unpinned grenade as far as you can, he called B. who'd been Cécile's boyfriend 10 years before, the first time he'd ever seen her in fact, and when B. picked up his voice took on a deeper tone and he said to him Cécile is dead and he said what he knew about the accident but B. didn't seem affected, aside from his surprise at the news it didn't seem to have moved him much, or to be more precise the news did not seem to have pierced through the density of his life, which was busy unfolding, perhaps he hadn't planted the needle of surprise with quite enough force, and he recalls telling B. he thought he should know, seeing as the two of them had gone out together, but again he found B. surprisingly detached and the conversation turned to banalities before they hung up, next he called J. and said Cécile is dead but J. couldn't really remember her well, he had to think for a while to put a face to the name, five years had

passed since they'd finished their studies and he had the feeling J. didn't see why he'd thought it necessary to call him immediately and they hung up the phone in silence, only then did the jumbled idea of Cécile's death gather at eye level like a greyish cloud, filtering the light of that August morning, darkening the room, and in that moment his intuition told him that the words Cécile is dead meant nothing, that the sounds it contained did not go together, they were dissipating, the idea of Cécile's death had an ethereal, vaporous quality, a simple gesture was all it would take to disrupt its appearance, turn it into something shifting, indescribable, and he has never since been able to grasp its form



**Mihaela ŠUMIĆ**

**Čovjek vuk**  
***The Wolf Man***

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**Croatian**

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## BIOGRAPHY

**M**ihaela Šumić (born in 1998 in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina) is a writer and translator. She has participated in several literary festivals in Bosnia and Serbia. Her first book, a poetry collection named *Nekoliko sitnih uboda* [*A Few Small Snips*], was awarded the Čučkova knjiga award for the best debut book published in 2020. Her second book, a short story collection *Herbarij svete smrti* [*Herbarium of the Holy Death*], received the Štefica Cvek regional literary award. In 2022, she published her second poetry collection, *Imenik Laure Carvalho* [*Laura Carvalho's Phonebook*]. Her first novel *Čovjek vuk*

# BOSNIA AND

[*The Wolf Man*] was published in 2024. She translates from English, Portuguese and Spanish. She has translated Fernanda Melchor's novels *Temporada de huracanes* [*Hurricane Season*], *Paradaís* [*Paradise*] and *Falsa liebre* [*False Hare*] and her short story collection *Aquí no es Miami* [*This Is Not Miami*]. Her translations of poetry have been published in several literary magazines and online literary sites.

## SYNOPSIS

In an isolated town called Selvanto, on the edge of the forest, shadows are hiding dark secrets, and whispers of the Wolf Man can be heard. When misfortunes strike and lifeless bodies start appearing, terrors and legends become intertwined, but there is a much darker truth behind the myth. Don Alirio, a local teacher, saw something a few years ago that changed him forever. While Selvanto's political elite plays power games, and the church hides its sins, Alirio is haunted by the memory of the terrible night when 11-year-old Sabina Ordóñez disappeared. What is really hiding in the heart of Selvanto? Is the Wolf Man a monster – or a reflection of the village's darkest secrets?

# HERZEGOVINA

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

In her novel *The Wolf Man*, Mihaela Šumić paints a portrait of evil in humankind. It is shown to leave traces, play games with our reason, take on the shape of myth, feed on our fears and prejudices and leap before the reader like the Wolf Man, ready to sink its fangs into us. Šumić's novel is an homage to García Márquez, but also to Latin American and Balkan societies and all the social and cultural similarities between them. Several factors have made her the perfect person to accomplish such a comparison: she is a Spanish translator and is fascinated by Latin American literature and culture; moreover, her knowledge of the political and social contexts in both those regions of the world drew her to the idea that a novel that plays with magical realism can illuminate, and make bearable, the most painful aspects of both of those societies. Reality that is burdened by crime, state corruption and a lack of the rule of law is cloaked in superstition, a naiveté that makes the world more bearable, passivity, trivial pursuits, alcohol and anything else that softens the symbolic sharp claws of the

Wolf Man that tear our humanity apart. Just as the archetypal fairy tales are cruel and harsh because they paint a non-fairy-tale human reality in fairy-tale colours, *The Wolf Man* by Mihaela Šumić is a contemporary non-fairy-tale-like fairy tale written as a novel about all of us.

► PEN Center of Bosnia and Herzegovina



# Čovjek vuk

*Mihaela Šumić*



Za sve što znamo o svijetu zaslužni su tragovi. Tragovi stopala, dlanova, prstiju, zuba, tragovi na stazama, u stijenama, u drvetu, na kostima, tijelima, na papiru, u riječima koje razgrćemo stoljećima, šutamo poput kamenčića na putu kako bismo otkrili srž praznine i začetak straha. „Za sve što znamo o svijetu zaslužni su tragovi”, ponovit će María Rosa Ibarra Sánchez desetljećima kasnije na otvaranju izložbe školjki u glavnom gradu zemlje koju je napustila prije nego što su i ona i ta zemlja bile sigurne u vlastito postojanje, zatim će pogledom tražiti iščezlo lice svoga oca u gužvi, tražit će ga u prelamajućoj svjetlosti na užarenom asfaltu, tražit će ga i u izgužvanim komadićima papira na podu kuće u selu, one iste kuće u kojoj je odrasla i u koju je godinama odbijala kročiti. Pronaći će samo tragove boli i krivnje koje su poput nemilosrdne vojske marširale tim pustim i nijemim prostorom.

Mnogo prije njezinog rođenja, u šumi u blizini sela pronađena su dva traga nalik velikim šapama, toliko velikim da su seljani dani-ma obilazili to mjesto, mjerili širinu, dužinu, poredili ih sa vlastitim stopalima, dlanovima, sa šapama psa, vuka, medvjeda, no u usporedbi sa tim strašnim tragovima sve je izgledalo toliko sićušno da nikome nije bilo jasno kako je jedno tako veliko biće neprimjetno tumaralo šumom i o kakvom se to biću uopće radi.

„To nije ni čovjek, nije ni vuk”, ponavljali su pomno obilazeći tragove u kiseloj zemlji, svaki put prislanjajući svoje dlanove uz tragove koji će uskoro postati prvi dokaz zlobe tog nepoznatog i nevidljivog bića, onog kojeg su nakon nekoliko dana počeli oslovljavati sa

„Čovjek vuk”, iako su se njegov i ljudski i životinjski oblik pažljivo skrivali negdje iza drveća, šiblja i niske trave.

Nisu joj znali ni ime kad su je pronašli mrtvu u šumi, tek nekoliko metara niže od tragova zarobljenih među šumskim stazama. Znali su da ju je nekoliko mjeseci ranije otac doveo Guillermu i Aniti Vaquero pred vrata, imala je možda četrnaest ili petnaest godina kad je počela raditi za njih. Rijetko su je viđali van kuće, ali tko god bi ušao u tu kuću primijetio bi koliko je sve čisto i uredno, a Anitina djeca, njih šestoro, bila su okupana i očešljana, što je do tada bilo sasvim nezamislivo. Čitavo selo znalo je za vrijedne ruke Anitine nove pomoćnice, žene su je molile da im je posudi bar na jedan dan, iako je nisu imale čime platiti, jer Guillermo i Anita Vaquero imali su novca, dva vinograda nedaleko od sela i restoran u gradu. Pričalo se da je don Guillermo radio u kraljevskoj tajnoj službi i da je, nakon rasturanja nekoliko organizacija koje su planirale puč, od tadašnjeg kralja Pilanga dobio nekoliko hektara zemlje i restoran u koji su dolazili samo imućni ljudi iz tog dijela kraljevstva. I zato Guillermo i Anita Vaquero i njihovih šestoro djece ništa nisu morali znati o životu na selu, za njih je to sve morao znati netko drugi, netko kome nisu znali ni ime. Bilo je 10 mnogo tih bezimenih djevojčica i dječaka koji su dolazili i odlazili, čistili, spremali, kopali, gradili, održavali vinograde, kosili oštru travu, izvodili životinje na ispašu, nekoliko koza i dvije krave koje je don Guillermo dobio kao poklon dobrodošlice od seljana koji su, čim su čuli da Vaquerovi plaćaju dnevnicu od dvanaest centi, brže-bolje svoju djecu odvlačili do dvorišta te ogromne kuće, njihove meke i mršave dlanove okrećali prema suncu, nebu i znatiželjnim ali ozbiljnim očima Guillerma Vaquera, stiskali njihova ramena i otvarali im usta da pokažu kako su zdravi, čvrsti, vrijedni i kako će sigurno biti dobri radnici u polju ili vinogradu ili bilo gdje, koji god posao im dodijele, bit će korisni i njihove ruke sigurno će vrijediti tih dvanaest centi po danu. Don Guillermo je klimao glavom i smiješio se, uvijek držeći zapaljenu cigaretu u kutu usana: „Može, ali ako se bude žalio na posao, vraća

mi dnevnicu od prethodna tri dana i neću nikad više da ga vidim ovdje.”

I seljani su to cijenili kod don Guillerma: bio je iskren i prije svega znao je kako se vodi posao, znao je s parama jer ih je, za razliku od njih, imao i nije se trudio da to sakrije. Ubrzo su skoro sva djeca iz sela radila za njega, sva osim sinova Estebana Cordera, koji su na njegovo inzistiranje odlazili da se školuju u grad.

„Vaša djeca rade za don Guillerma, moja će jednog dana biti don Guillermo”, govorio je ponosno pred umornim licima seljana koji su sada sami morali obavljati sve poslove, budući da su im djeca čitave dane provodila radeći za obitelj Vaquero.

Don Esteban Cordero bio je mudar, ali vrlo neprijatan čovjek. Često bi hodao kroz selo i dijelio savjete koje mu nitko nije tražio: konj se ne potkiva tako, nego ovako, ne može se kopati tu jer je zemlja suha i puna kamenja, treba ići malo niže, ne smije se cigla redati tako, nego ovako, jer će se sve srušiti, ovo se mora rješavati na jesen, a ne u proljeće. Neki su ga slušali, neki su se pravili da nije tu, neki su se svađali: „Šta je, Cordero, završio si školu pa si najpametniji?”

Istina je da je u to vrijeme Esteban Cordero bio jedini čovjek u selu koji je završio školu; otac mu je bio trgovac, imao je svoju trgovinu u gradu i želio je da on jednog dana naslijedi posao, ali nakon očeve smrti ponudili su mu za prostor pet tisuća u kešu i ubrzo nakon toga radnja je savrnjena sa zemljom, a na njenom mjestu počela je gradnja hotela. Esteban Cordero je za tih pet tisuća kupio dvije parcele i na svakoj izgradio po kuću za oba sina. Često se šepurio pred drugima u selu i isticao kako će njegovi sinovi sa svojim obiteljima živjeti u svojim kućama, a ne kao njihovi, oni će samo jednog dana dovesti ženu u te skućene, malene kuće u kojima više neće biti prostora ni za krevet, pa će svi spavati na podu ili, još gore, u štali, rekao bi to škiljeći i podižući obrve, a zatim bi samo nastavio svojim putem.

„Budala se svačim hvali”, netko bi odbrusio i uslijedile bi svađe i dovikivanja koja su trajala danima

Većina seljana je zbog toga izbjegavala Estebana Cordera, a sve što im je govorio otpisali bi kao bespotrebno mudrovanje čovjeka koji se smatrao boljim od svih njih, pa i onda kad je bio u pravu.

„Ako vaš don Guille nije u ovo upetljan, ubij me evo sad”, rekao je kad je don Guillermo Vaquero, sav zadihan i mokar, istrčao iz šume ponavljajući: „Čovjek vuk... Ubio ju je Čovjek vuk”, i prstom upirao u beživotno tijelo djevojčice koja je ležala na stazi, tek nekoliko metara niže od ogromnih tragova nalik šapama. Svi su potrčali ka njezinom tijelu, žene su se krstile i pokrivale oči, muškarci su je ćuškali nogama da se uvjere u to da je mrtva, bila je puna ožiljaka i modrica, a na vratu su joj se vidno nazirali tragovi zuba, tako duboki da bi joj još jedan ugriz probio tanku i meku kožu.

Nisu joj znali ime, znali su samo da ju je otac doveo u tu kuću da pomaže Aniti Vaquero oko održavanja kuće i djece, znali su da je bila vrijedna i uredna, i to je sve. Sahranili su je tu u šumi kao upozorenje na Čovjeka vuka, na njegovu zlobu i krvoločnost, na njegovo postojanje u gustoj šumi koja je opkoljavala selo sa svih strana.

# The Wolf Man

*Mihaela Šumić*

Translated into English by Ellen Elias-Bursać

We are indebted to tracks for all we know about the world. Footprints, handprints, fingerprints, toothmarks, tracks on paths, in rocks, in wood, on bone, bodies, paper, in words which we spend centuries prying apart, we shunt like stones along the path on our way to discover the crux of emptiness and the germ of fear. 'We are indebted to tracks for all we know about the world', repeats María Rosa Ibarra Sánchez decades later at the opening of an exhibition of shells in the capital city of the country she'd abandoned before she and the country were sure of themselves, then she'd look around, seeking the vanished face of her father in the crowd, she'd look for him in the light refracting off the searing pavement, she'd look for him in the crumpled bits of paper on the floor of the house in the village, the same house where she grew up and where she'd refused to set foot for years. She'd find only tracks of pain and guilt which like merciless armies marched through this deserted, mute space.

Many years before she was born, in the forest near the village, two tracks were discovered resembling large paws, so large that the villagers kept revisiting the spot for days, measuring the width and length, comparing them with their own feet, hands, with the paws of a dog, a wolf, a bear, but in comparison with the horrific tracks everything looked so tiny that nobody could figure out how a creature so huge could be rambling through the forest unobserved and what sort of creature this might be.

'Neither man nor wolf', they repeated, circling around the tracks in the sour soil, laying their hands each time next to the tracks which would soon become the first evidence of the malice of the unknown and unseen creature, the one which, after a few days, they began

referring to as ‘the Wolf Man’, though his human and animal form was out of sight somewhere beyond the trees, underbrush and low grasses.

They didn’t even know her name when they found her dead body in the forest, only a few metres below the tracks caught among the forest paths. They knew that her father, several months before, had brought her to Guillermo and Anita Vaquero’s door. She might have been 14 or 15 when she began working for them. Outside the house she was seldom seen, but whoever went in noticed how everything was pristine and tidy, and Anita’s children, all six, were washed and groomed, which until then had been utterly unimaginable. The whole village heard of the diligent hands of Anita’s new helper, women begged Anita to lend her to them for a day every week, though they had no way to pay her, while Guillermo and Anita Vaquero had money – two vineyards not far from the village and a restaurant in the city. Rumour had it that Don Guillermo had worked in the royal secret service and that, after the dismantling of several organisations which had been planning a putsch, he was compensated with a few hectares of land and the restaurant by the then king of Pilango; their only customers were the rich people from that part of the kingdom. Hence Guillermo and Anita Vaquero and their six children had no need of knowing anything about life in the village; somebody else had to know it for them, someone nameless to them. There were many such nameless girls and boys who came and went, cleaned, tidied, dug, built, maintained the vineyards, mowed the sharp grass, took the livestock out to graze – the several goats and two cows Don Guillermo had been given as a welcome gift from villagers; as soon as the local people heard the Vaqueros were paying daily wages of 12 cents, they hastened to drag their children to the yard of the huge house, turned their soft and skinny hands to the sun, the sky and the curious but penetrating gaze of Guillermo Vaquero, squeezed their shoulders and opened their mouths to show how healthy, sturdy, hard-working they were and how they’d

surely be fine workers in the field or vineyard or anywhere, and no matter what task they were given they'd be useful and their hands would surely merit the 12 cents per day. Don Guillermo nodded and smiled, always with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth: 'But if he complains, he'll give me back his wages from the last three days and I don't want to see him here ever again.'

And the villagers valued Don Guillermo in this regard: he was frank and most of all he knew how to take charge, how to handle money, because, unlike them, he had some and made no effort to hide it. Soon almost all the children of the village were working for him, all except the sons of Esteban Cordero, who, at his insistence, went to the city for an education.

'Your children can work for Don Guillermo, but mine will be Don Guillermo someday', he said proudly before the tired faces of the villagers who now had to do all the work themselves, because their children were spending their days working for the Vaquero family.

Don Esteban Cordero was a wise but very unpleasant man. He'd often walk through the village and dole out advice which nobody had asked for: don't shoe a horse like that, but like this; digging here is a bad idea because the soil is dry and rocky, so go farther down; bricks shouldn't be stacked like that but like this – otherwise they'll collapse; this should be done in autumn, and not in spring. Some listened, others pretended he wasn't there, some grumbled: 'What, Cordero, you went to school so now you're a know-it-all?'

It's true that at the time, Esteban Cordero was the only person in the village who'd finished school; his father had been a shopkeeper, he ran a store in the city and wanted his son, one day, to inherit the business, but after his father's death he was offered five thousand in cash for the premises and soon after that the store was levelled, and construction began on a hotel. With the five thousand, Esteban Cordero bought two plots of land and on each he built a house for his two sons. He'd often strut around the village and brag to the vil-

lagers that his sons with their families would be living in their own homes, not like the sons of the other villagers, who would be bringing their brides one day to live in the family's cramped little house where there would no longer be room even for a bed, so they'd all have to sleep on the floor or, worse yet, in the barn, he'd say, squinting and raising his eyebrows, and then he'd proceed on his way.

'Fools will brag about anything', someone would growl at him and quarrels and shouting followed that would last for days.

Most of the villagers avoided Esteban Cordero because of this, and they'd dismiss all he told them as the empty braggadocio of a person who thought he was a cut above the rest.

'If your Don Guille didn't do this, kill me now', he said when Don Guillermo Vaquero came running from the forest, breathless and soaked to the skin, stammering: 'The Wolf Man... the Wolf Man killed her.' And pointed to the lifeless body of a little girl lying on the path only a few metres below the huge paw-like tracks. Everyone came running to her body, the women crossed themselves and covered their eyes, the men nudged the girl with their feet to make sure she was dead, she was covered in scars and bruises and on her neck there were visible toothmarks, so deep that another bite would have broken through her thin, tender skin.

They didn't know her name, they knew only that her father had brought her to the house to help Anita Vaquero with the housework and children, they knew she was hardworking and tidy, and that was all. She was buried there in the forest as a warning about the Wolf Man, his cruelty and bloodthirstiness, about his existence in the dense forest that hemmed the village in on all sides.

# GEORGIA



**Tea TOPURIA**

**იაკობის ჭაბუკი**

**By Jacob's Well**

**Intelekti Publishing, 2023**

**Georgian**

**ISBN: 9789941315831**

## BIOGRAPHY

**B**orn in 1977 in the city of Sokhumi, Abkhazia (now a territory occupied by Russia), Tea Topuria is a contemporary Georgian writer and poet. She graduated from Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University with a degree in journalism. She works for several media outlets and non-governmental organisations and is currently a journalist at Radio Liberty. Her works have been published in literary periodicals and prose or poetry collections of Georgian authors.

She is a laureate of various prestigious literary competitions, and she has also been nominated a few times for the international Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. Topuria is the author of six books: a prose-poetry collection, *The Mint Threshing Floor*; a collection of short stories, *Two Rooms in Cairo*; a poetry collection, *Ecocide: Why don't dogs go to heaven?*; two books in children's prose: *Parade Vacations* and *Fairy Tales for Waking Up*; and two young adult novels, *One Long Day On Another Planet* and *The Invisible House*.

## SYNOPSIS

Once upon a time, there was a small nation that was invaded by a horde. Some of the children of this nation remained behind, enslaved by the suddenly appearing enemy, while others migrated and settled in a new land. Their lives, of course, took different paths. Moreover, those who stayed in the Great Plain knew nothing of the exiles, and the exiles had no idea what is happening in the Great Plain. Yet they are united by one crucial thing: despite their different geographies, the boundaries of their mental landscapes are remarkably similar – indeed, equally boundless. This is because the characters in their stories do not recognise the line between what is possible and what is impossible. These

categories, one might say, even vanish, leaving only magic, the omnipotence of thought and imagination, which permeates their everyday lives.

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

*By Jacob's Well* is a story that transcends time and space, a story about home, exile and alienation. At the same time, it's painfully relevant to the human experience today, in an era in which wars and hardships move hundreds of thousands in search of survival and hope for a better future. Both time and space in the novel are fluid, allowing every reader to relate to the plot. With

its distinctive style, elements of magical realism and an almost fairy-tale-like language, the author seems to convey an ancient story of exile.

Years of writing children's books allow the author to convey a complex plot through surprisingly simple language.

On the other hand, numerous mythological, biblical, folkloristic and historical allusions woven into the narrative add layers of depth and meaning for an experienced reader.

The language is indeed one of the key reasons for this choice: complex but enjoyable, dense but pleasant, the book has remarkable potential to be translated into several languages.

*By Jacob's Well* is like Pandora's box: through a fascinating fictional narrative, it masterfully mixes the pain of conflict and exile with hope and joy, which today's world may need the most.

The additional motivation for the jury to nominate *By Jacob's Well* was that it considered the novel a work of high importance, having a distinctive style and a universal, timeless context, being a simple yet multi-layered narrative and written in easily translatable language.

■ Georgian PEN Center



# იაკობის ჭასთან

თეა თოფურია



უაივნო, უეზოო სახლი ზედ ბაზართან აეშენებინათ. ელიაკიმს გამოთვლილი ჰქონდა – ათი ნაბიჯი! სწორედ ამდენის გადადგმას მოასწრებდი დღე-ღამის იმ დროში, როდესაც აქ სიჩუმე იდგა და არაფრის ხმა აღარ ისმოდა.

ბაზრობაზე ერთის ნაცვლად სამი დილა ჰქონდათ. პირველი შუაღამის მერე იწყებოდა. ამ დროს გლეხებს თავიანთი საქონელი სოფლებიდან გოდრებით ჩამოჰქონდათ და ვაჭრებს იაფად აბარებდნენ. ამავე დროს ჩამოდიოდნენ მოქარავნეები, აქლემებზე და ჯორებზე აკიდებული ტვირთით. ამას მეორე დილა მოსდევდა. ცხოველებს ქარვასლაში დააბინავებდნენ, დახლებს გააწყობდნენ და გათენდებოდა კიდეც. ეს უკვე მესამე, ნამდვილი დილა იყო, ახლად გაღვიძებული მუშტრით, დახლიდან დახლზე გადაძახილით, ალიაქოთითა და ყველა იმ წვრილმანით, ურომლისოდაც არსად არაფერს არც ყიდიან და არც ყიდულობენ.

ელიაკიმი ბავშვობაში თავს ასე ირთობდა – გაივლიდა ქუჩას, შემდეგ კი უკუსვლით უკანვე გამოივლიდა. ბაზრობასაც რაღაც ასეთი ემართებოდა საღამოს. მექარავნეები თავიანთ ქალაქებში ბრუნდებოდნენ, ვაჭრები – შინ და ბაზრობა უსახლკაროებსა და ძაღლებს რჩებოდათ. ისინიც დახლქვეშ შემორჩენილ უვარგის ხილისა თუ ბოსტნეულს დაინაწილებდნენ და იქვე მიწვებოდნენ გამოსაძინებლად. ამ დროს ჩამოვარდებოდა ელიაკიმის გამოთვლილი ის ათნაბიჯიანი სიჩუმეც. შემდეგ ისევ მოდიოდნენ აქლემები, ისევ მოჰქონდათ გოდრები და ისე იწყებოდა მეორე დღე.

ხეირიანად ჯერ პირველიც არ დასრულებულიყო.

ელიაკიმმა ბაზრის მწკრივები დაიარა, ხორცი და ხმელი სუნელი იყიდა და შინ მობრუნდა. გამურული ქვაბით შევიდა ბუხარში. მერე ცეცხლი დაანთო. რატომღაც ასეთი ჩვევა ჰქონდა. სხვა ყველა ჯერ ცეცხლს დაანთებდა და მერე ქვაბს შემოდგამდა, მაგრამ ელიაკიმი ერთხელ რომ შეეჩვია უკუღმა კეთებას, აღარც გადაჩვეულა. არც არავინ ჰყავდა, ბავშვობაშივე მიეთითებინა, ასე არ ვარგა, ისე უნდაო.

კარი ჭრიალით გაიღო და ზაფხულის ხვატს ასა შემოჰყვა. არ დაუგეტავს, ისე დადგა ზღურობლზე, ელიაკიმს უყურებდა. ერთიანად გაოფლილს, ტანსაცმელი ტანზე შემოჰკვროდა და ალბათ ყარდა კიდევ, მაგრამ ასა სულელი იყო და ჭუჭყს კი არა, ხშირად იმასაც ვერ გრძნობდა, რომ შიოდა.

ელიაკიმმა ერთი ხელით ასა შემოიყვანა ოთახში, მეორით კარი მიკეტა მის ზურგს უკან.

- გშია?

ასას არაფერი უპასუხია.

ხის სკივრს თავი ახადა, იქიდან პური ამოიღო. მიმხმარი ფქვილი ჩამოფერთხა, დატეხა და ყუა მიაწოდა.

- ჭამე!

ელიაკიმი ზორობაბელის ბოლო და ერთადერთი შვილი იყო, დანარჩენები დაბადებისთანავე დაიხოცნენ. დიდ ველზე ეს არავის უკვირდა. აქ ხშირად აჩენდნენ ქალები მკვდარ ბავშვებს და მერე ან მდინარეს ატანდნენ, ან იქვე მარხავდნენ, ეზოში. მამამისი ასაზე ბევრად ჭკვიანი როდი იყო, თუმცა შეეძლო წაღები შეეკეთებინა და ერთი ბავშვი ერჩინა. დედა ბოლო მშობიარობას გადაჰყვა.

ელიაკიმი გრძნობდა, რომ სხვებს არ ჰგავდა. სხვაზე მეტს ფიქრობდა და სხვაზე მეტი შეეძლო. მასწავლებელი არავინ ჰყავდა, მაგრამ რასაც შეეხებოდა ყველაფერს ალღოს

აულებდა. ხმა დადიოდა, ელიაკიმი ურდოს ნაბიჭვარიად. დიდ ველზე თითქოს არაფერი იმალებოდა. აქ ვინმეს თუ რამე მოადგებოდა პირზე, ამბობდა კიდევ, მაგრამ ტყუილ-მართალს ამ ნათქვამში მაშინაც კი ვერ არჩევდნენ, თუ ეს ტყუილი მათივე მოგონილი იყო.

- ჩვენზე მეტი ხომ არ გგონია თავი, დედაშენმა ურდოს ყარაულისგან გაგაჩინა, - ჯერ კიდევ ათი წლისა იყო, ასას დედამ რომ უთხრა. ასამ მორიგი სისულელე ჩაიდინა, ელიაკიმიც იდგა და გულიანად ხარხარებდა, - ხომ არ გგონია, დედაშენი მართლა მშობიარობას გადაჰყვა?!

მაშინ ელიაკიმმა გაიხედ-გამოიხედა, ვინმე ხომ არ გვიყურებსო და თავპირისმტვრევით გაიქცა სახლისკენ.

იმასაც ჰყვებოდნენ, რომ დედამისი სინამდვილეში სულელმა ზორობაბელმა მოკლა. ამის მომსწრე არავინ იყო, მაგრამ ამბობდნენ, რომ მამამისს თავიდანვე გაუკვირდა ჯანმრთელი ბავშვის დაბადება. ფიქრობდა, ხელი და ფეხი კი აქვს, მაგრამ, ალბათ, ჭკუასუსტი იქნებოდა. როდესაც პირველი სიტყვა თქვა, ზორობაბელმა დიდხანს უყურა ბავშვს ღია ფერის, აზრიან თვალებში, მერე ბუხარს ერთი ქვა გამოაძრო, ეზოში გავიდა და ცოლის თავზე დაუშვა.

ვიდრე ელიაკიმი პატარა იყო, ხშირად აკვირდებოდა მამას ხელებზე. წარმოიდგენდა, როგორ აიღო ქვა და როგორ ჩაარტყა ცოლს თავში. ნეტავ, რას აკეთებდა ამ დროს დედა? ალბათ, მარცვალს ნაყავდა და სისხლი ფქვილში აიზილა. მოასწრო რამის თქვა? შეიძლება ელიაკიმსაც დაუძახა. ის კი, ალბათ, ისევ თავის ქვეშაგებში თამაშობდა, თან იმ პირველ სიტყვას იმეორებდა დაუსრულებლად.

ხშირად ბუხარსაც აკვირდებოდა ელიაკიმი. სინჯავდა, სადმე ქვა ხომ არ აკლდა, ან რომელიმე უფრო გვიან ხომ არ იყო ჩაშენებული. ეჩვენებოდა, რომ ყველა ქვა მოფამფალე-ბულიყო, თითქოსდა, ახლა დაიშლება და ჩამოხვავდებაო. ხმამაღლა არასოდეს არაფერი უთქვამს, ყოველთვის ეშინოდა ამ ფიქრების, ერთხელ კი შერცხვა კიდევ.

ზორობაბელი წაღებს კერავდა. გაცვეთილი ჯღანი მუხლებს შორის მოექცია და მახათით უტრიალებდა. იქვე ეგდო მცირე და დიდი ჩაქუჩი. რკინის მძიმე მარწუხი, რკინის ფირფიტები, რომელთა შორისაც დაწებებულ წაღებს ჩადებდა ხოლმე, პირი რომ არ გახსნოდათ. ელიაკიმი მამის ხელებს უყურებდა და ფიქრობდა, რატომ დასჭირდა ბუხრიდან ქვის გამოღება, როცა გაცილებით ადვილი იყო, თავისი რომელიმე რკინისთვის წამოევლო ხელი. უცებ ზორობაბელმა თავი ასწია. შვილის გამოხედვა დაიჭირა, თვალი თვალში გაუყარა და უთხრა.

- მე არ მომიკლავს დედაშენი, შენ მოკალი!

ელიაკიმი შეკრთა, თითქოს ბანაობისას შემოუსწრესო, ხელიც კი გაექცა შიშველი სხეულის დასაფარად. აწრიალდა. ზორობაბელი ისევ დაჟინებული უყურებდა, თან თავის ჯღანს კერავდა მახათით. ელიაკიმი მუდამ უჩინმანინივით იყო დიდ ველზე. მის ნათქვამს თუ საქციელს ვერავინ ვერც ხვდებოდა და ვერც იგებდა. მაგრამ ისიც შემჩნეული ჰქონდა, რომ ყველაზე წყალწაღებული შტერიც კი ხანდახან უცნაურად დაბრძენდებოდა ხოლმე. მოულოდნელად ისეთ რამეს იტყოდნენ ან გააკეთებდნენ, ელიაკიმს თავი ჩვილივით დედიშობილა ეგონა და როგორც ახლა, ერთი-ორჯერ ხელიც კი აიფარა შარვლის უბეზე. მერე კიდევ უფრო შერცხვა და ჩამოუშვა.

ელიაკიმი გრძნობდა, რომ მამას არ უყვარდა. თავიდან ფიქრობდა, ურდოს ყარაულის ნაბიჯვარი იყო და ამიტომაც ეჯავრებოდა ზორობაბელს. ხშირად, ქალაქში სიარულისას, ყურადღებით აკვირდებოდა ყარაულებს. ისინი მეომრები იყვნენ. წვიმასა თუ მზეში სტუმრების კარგებს დარაჯობდნენ. სახე გარუჯული და ხორკლიანი ჰქონდათ. ელიაკიმი ცდილობდა, გამოეცნო, რომელი შეიძლება ყოფილიყო მისი ნამდვილი მამა. ერთს ყველაზე მეტად ამგვანებდა თავს და სადმე თვალს თუ მოჰკრავდა, მთელი დღით უფუჭდებოდა ხასიათი.

ოცი წლის იყო, როცა ზორობაბელი მოკვდა. ელიაკიმმა დილით იპოვა გარდაცვლილი. არ ავადმყოფობდა, მაგრამ მაინც არ გაჰყვრებოდა. დიდ ველზე არავინ ცოცხლობდა დიდხანს. პურის თეთრი ტილო დაბერტყა, მიცვალებული შიგ გაახვია და ცოტა ხანს დასასვენებლად ჩამოჯდა. თითქოს უზარმაზარი შოთი გამოუცხვიათო, ისე იდო ცხედარი იატაკზე და უცებ მიხვდა ელიაკიმი, მართლა არ მოუკლავს ზორობაბელს დედამისი. ვერ გაიგებდი, როგორ და რანაირად, მაგრამ მიხვდა, სწორედ ისე, როგორც დიდი ხნის წინათ, ზუსტად ასეთივე დილას დავითმა აღმოსავლეთისკენ გაიხედა და მიხვდა, რომ ცისფერი ჰორიზონტიდან ურდო უახლოვდებოდათ. ეს ნამდვილად მისი მამა იყო, ადამიანი, რომელსაც ცოლი მშობიარობისას დაეღუპა, შვილი კი, ალბათ, უყვარდა კიდევ, უბრალოდ, უშუალოდ კაცი იყო და მორჩა.

ელიაკიმმა ფქვილიან ნაჭერში გახვეული ზორობაბელი დედის გვერდით დამარხა და თავით ფიჭვის ნერგი ჩაურგო. ურდო საფლავზე ჯვრების დაყენებას არ ანებებდათ და მათ ნაცვლად ფიჭვებს რგავდნენ, ზამთარ-ზაფხულ მწვანე რომ ყოფილიყო. ნერგს ქვები შემოუწყო გასამაგრებლად და შინ წამოვიდა.

მიწიან ხელებს რომ იბანდა, გაიფიქრა, მამას ველარასოდეს შეხვდებოდა, ალბათ, საიქიოშიც ვერა, იმდენად უცხოები იყვნენ ერთმანეთისთვის.

# By Jacob's Well

*Tea Topuria*

Translated into English by Natalia Bukia-Peters

They had built a house with no balcony and no yard right beside the market. Eliakim had calculated it – 10 steps! That was exactly how many steps you could take during that one time of the day and night when total silence reigned here, and nothing else could be heard.

The market didn't have one morning – it had three. The first began after midnight, when peasants brought their goods down from the villages in baskets, selling cheaply to merchants. Around the same time, caravans arrived, camels and mules laden with goods. Then came the second morning: animals were settled into the caravan-serai, stalls were laid out, and dawn broke. This was the third – the true morning – with freshly awakened customers, shouts from stall to stall, hubbub, and all the minor commotion without which nothing is ever bought or sold anywhere.

As a child, Eliakim would entertain himself by walking the length of the street and then walking it back – backwards. Something like that would happen in the market in the evenings. The caravaners returned to their cities, the merchants to their homes, and the market was left to the homeless and the dogs. They would divvy up whatever spoiled fruit or vegetables had been left beneath the stalls, then curl up right there to sleep. That's when Eliakim's ten-step silence would fall again. And then, the camels would come again, the baskets would return, and a new day would begin before the first one had even properly ended.

Eliakim wandered the market rows, bought meat and dried spices, and headed home. He hung a soot-blackened pot in the hearth – then lit the fire beneath it. For some reason, that was his way. Every-

one else lit the fire first, *then* set the pot. But once Eliakim got used to doing things backwards, he never unlearned it. There'd been no one in his childhood to tell him: 'not like that – like this'.

The door creaked open, and Asa stepped in from the summer heat. He didn't close it – just stood there on the threshold, watching Eliakim. He was soaked in sweat, his clothes stuck to his skin, and probably stank too – but Asa was slow-witted. He didn't notice dirt, and often didn't even feel when he was hungry.

Eliakim pulled Asa into the room with one hand and closed the door behind him with the other.

'You hungry?'

Asa didn't answer.

He opened the lid of the wooden chest, took out a loaf of bread, brushed off the dried flour, broke it, and handed Asa the crust.

'Eat.'

Eliakim was Zerubbabel's last and only surviving child. The others had all died at birth. That didn't surprise anyone on the Great Plain. Women here often gave birth to stillborn babies – some were sent down the river, others buried in the yard. His father wasn't much brighter than Asa, but he could mend shoes and feed a single child. His mother died during her last labour.

Eliakim had always felt he was different. He thought more than others, and he could do more than others. He had no teacher, but whatever he touched, he grasped by instinct. Word went around that Eliakim was a bastard of the Horde. On the Great Plain, nothing stayed hidden. If something reached someone's lips, they said it. And still, no one could tell lie from truth – even when the lie was one they'd made up themselves.

‘Think you’re better than us? Your mother had you by a guard of the Horde’, Asa’s mother said – Eliakim was only 10 at the time.

Asa had done something stupid again, and Eliakim was standing there, laughing his heart out.

‘What – did you really think your mother died in childbirth?!’

Eliakim looked around to see if anyone was watching – then bolted for home.

They said that it was the fool Zerubbabel who had killed his wife. No one had seen it, but they said that from the beginning, he had been surprised a healthy child was born. He thought: *it has hands and feet, but it must be feeble-minded*. When the boy spoke his first word, Zerubbabel looked long into the child’s pale, thoughtful eyes – then pulled a stone from the hearth, went out into the yard, and brought it down on his wife’s head.

When Eliakim was small, he would often watch his father’s hands. He imagined how he had taken the stone, and how he had struck his wife in the head. What had his mother been doing in that moment? Probably grinding grain, and the blood had mixed into the flour. Had she managed to say anything? Maybe she had even called out to Eliakim. He was probably still playing on his bedding, repeating that first word over and over.

Eliakim would often watch the hearth. He would check if a stone was missing somewhere, or if one of them had been added later. It seemed to him that all the stones were loosened – as if it might all come crashing down at any moment. He never said anything aloud. He was always afraid of those thoughts. Once, he even felt ashamed of them.

Zerubbabel was stitching shoes. He had wedged the worn leather between his knees and was turning it with the awl. Nearby lay the small and the large hammer. The heavy iron clamps, the iron

plates – into which he'd press the glued soles so the toe wouldn't open. Eliakim was watching his father's hands and thinking: *why had he needed to take a stone from the hearth, when it would've been so much easier to grab one of the irons?* Suddenly Zerubbabel looked up. He caught his son's gaze, met his eyes and said:

'I didn't kill your mother, you did!'

Eliakim flinched, as if someone had walked in on him while bathing. His hands even moved to cover his bare body. He fidgeted. Zerubbabel was still watching him, stitching the worn leather with the awl. Eliakim was always like someone wearing an invisibility cloak on the Great Plain. No one noticed what he said or did, and no one understood him. But he had noticed this too: even the most hopeless fool would sometimes seem strangely wise. Suddenly, they would say or do something, and Eliakim would feel like a newborn – naked, like now. Once or twice, he had even covered himself at the pants' fly. Then he felt even more ashamed and let his hand fall.

Eliakim felt that father didn't love him. At first, he thought it was because he was a bastard of the Horde – and that's why Zerubbabel hated him. Often, when walking in town, he would watch the guards closely. They were warriors. In rain or sun, they stood watch over the guests' tents. Their faces were bronzed and rough. Eliakim would try to guess which one might be his real father. There was one he thought he most resembled, and if he happened to catch sight of him somewhere, it would ruin his whole day.

He was 20 years old when Zerubbabel died. Eliakim found him dead in the morning. He hadn't been ill, but even so, Eliakim wasn't surprised. No one lived long on the Great Plain. He shook the white bread cloth clean, wrapped the body in it, and sat down for a moment to rest. The corpse lay on the ground like an enormous *shoti* – canoe-shaped bread – as if it had just come from the oven. And suddenly, Eliakim understood: Zerubbabel hadn't really killed his

mother. You couldn't say how or in what way, but he understood it. Exactly as, long before, on a morning just like this, David had looked to the east and understood that the Horde was approaching them from the blue horizon. This was really his father – a man whose wife had perished in childbirth, and who had probably even loved his son. Just a grim man, and that's it.

Eliakim buried Zerubbabel beside mother, wrapped in flour-dusted linen, and planted a pine sapling above his head. The Horde didn't allow crosses on graves and in their place, pines were planted – green from winter through summer. He circled the base with stones to keep it steady, and then walked home.

As he washed his soil-coated hands, he thought: he'd never be able to meet father again – probably not even in the afterlife, for they had been too foreign to one another.

# GREECE



**Makis MALAFEKAS**

## **Deepfake**

***Deepfake***

Antipodes Editions, 2024

Greek

ISBN: 9786185267865

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Makis Malafekas** was born in Athens in 1977. He studied art history and social anthropology. He has presented seminars on the history of European comics at the Sorbonne and worked at the Paris School of Fine Arts. His articles have been published in 9 (*Eleftherotypia*), *Libération*, *Mediapart*, *LiFO* and other magazines and newspapers. *Deepfake* is his latest of six books (novels, poetry, essay, biography) and his third neo-noir novel. His works have been translated into French and Italian. He lives and works between Brussels and Athens.

## **SYNOPSIS**

Michalis Krokos is a writer and an expert on Athens' nightlife, observing its transformations with a mix of critique and resignation. It has been four years since his last book was published, and now he is searching for inspiration, wandering through the city and watching Johnny Depp's trial live. One day, prosecutor Sofia Charitsi contacts him with alarming news: Rebecca – a trans sex worker and dear friend with whom he has lost touch – is in danger. She may have seen something

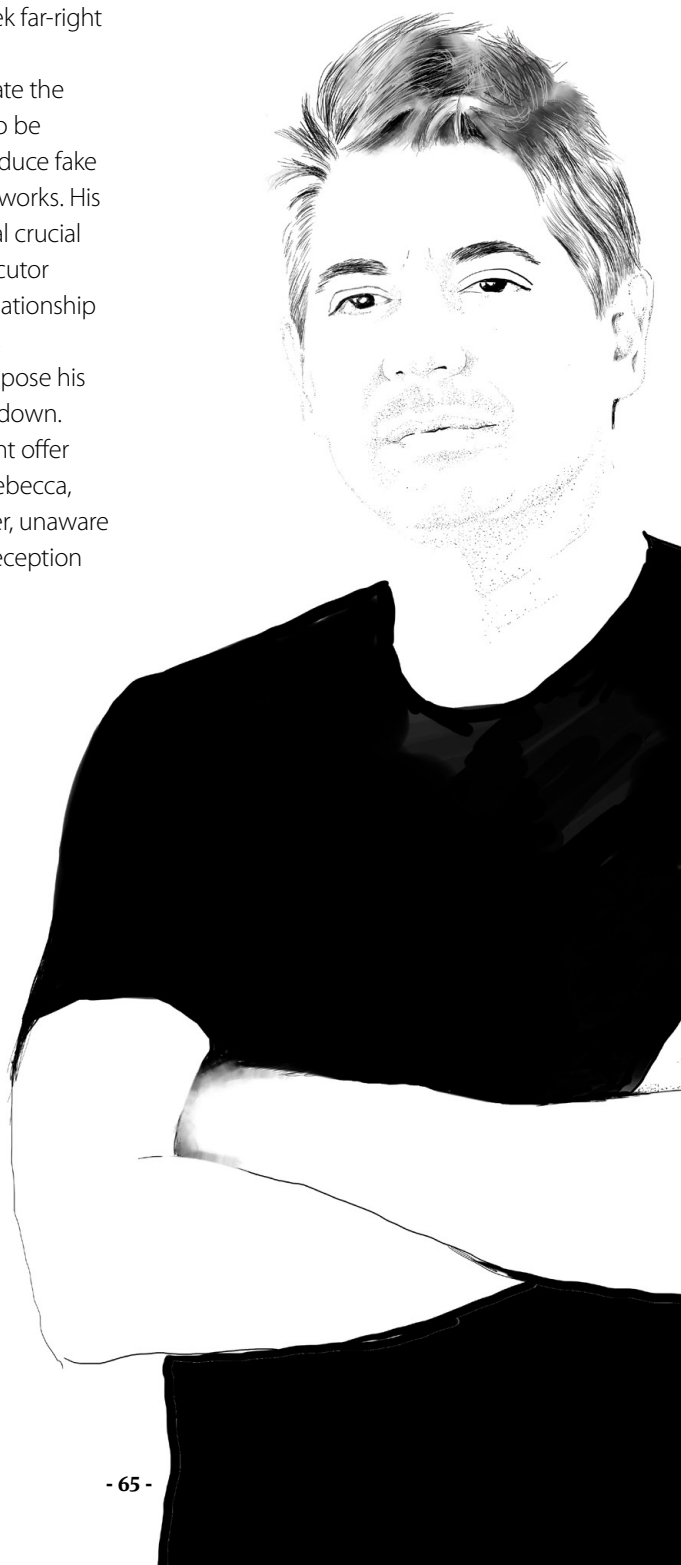
she wasn't supposed to, and now 'ONET', a powerful and ambitious Greek far-right group, is hunting her down.

To save her, Krokos must infiltrate the organisation, which happens to be looking for a copywriter to produce fake articles to fuel its influence networks. His task: to gain their trust and steal crucial documents. Meanwhile, prosecutor Charitsi –who was once in a relationship with ONET's leader, Alexandros Tsechlentidis – is working to expose his illegal activities and bring him down. Faced with a generous payment offer and his growing concern for Rebecca, Krokos agrees to go undercover, unaware of the web of blackmail and deception he is about to step into.

### **REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION**

The nominating committee for the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) met on 13 January 2025 and reviewed the nominations. After discussion among its members, the committee decided to nominate Makis Malafekas' novel *Deepfake* (Antipodes, 2024) for the EUPL because this novel meets both the formal and the qualitative selection criteria.

► *Hellenic Foundation for Books and Culture*



# Deepfake

Μάκης Μαλαφέκας



*Εντός του αντεστραμμένου κόσμου,  
η αλήθεια είναι μια στιγμή του ψεύδους.*

Γκυ Ντεμπόρ

*Do what you want, I'm going cheap.*

Depeche Mode

## 1

Τώρα όμως είχαν αλλάξει τα πράγματα. Το κίτρινο Ράνγκλερ του κουτιού, σηκωμένο, πειραγμένο, μπάρες, προβοσκίδα, όλα μέσα, κατέβαινε με φόρα την Ιπποκράτους κι εγώ δεν σκέφτηκα στιγμή να σηκώσω το χέρι μου και να φωνάξω «ταξι!» έτσι για τον χαβαλέ, όπως κάναμε με κάτι Ρενό και κάτι Τσινκουετσέντο που κυκλοφορούσαν κίτρινα σε μια φάση. Όχι, τώρα το μόνο που με ένοιαζε ήταν να περάσω γρήγορα απέναντι μη με πατήσει, γιατί ο μαλάκας δεν έκοψε καθόλου, παρά ερχόταν ευθεία πάνω μου, κανονικά, μέρα μεσημέρι, με τους δυνόμισι τόνους σίδερο στο χέρι κι ένα ανέκφραστο ύφος θανάτου στο πρόσωπο. Και στα δύο πρόσωπα. Όπως προσγειώθηκα δίπλα στο ψιλικατζίδικο της Δερβενίων, γύρισα να δω: δύο μούλοι πανομοιότυποι μπροστά, τεκνά εικοσιεφτάρηδες, μαύρισμα σατινέ και κοντό μαλλάκι με περιποιημένα τσουλούφια που μύριζαν απιβίτα ενυδάτωση και

αγορά ακινήτων και κοκτέιλ μπαρ με ψαγμένο μεσκάλ. Αλλά δεν ήταν το μαλλί το θέμα, ούτε το ύφος, ούτε το Ράνγκλερ. Στ' αρχίδια μου το Ράνγκλερ. Ήταν ότι η πλακίτσα με το κίτρινο αμάξι δεν με ένοιαζε πια, ότι δεν υπήρχε καν, ότι δεν είχε υπάρξει ποτέ. Ότι δεν είχα καμία διάθεση για κανένα χαβαλέ ούτε για μισό δευτερόλεπτο. Και ότι φοβήθηκα. Φοβήθηκα αυτούς τους τύπους με τις φάτσες «σε γαμάω μες στο γαμημένο σου το κέντρο, περνάω και σε σκίζω», και ξαφνικά ήθελα να γυρίσω γρήγορα σπίτι μου χωρίς να ξέρω το πώς και το γιατί.

Μάζεψα τα δυο ψωμιά Μαράτα που μου έπεσαν στην προσγείωση, προσπέρασα το ψιλικατζίδικο με τα πρωτοσέλιδα για τις ανύπαρκτες μεταγραφές του Βάζελου και τα πρώτα φιλικά, ανέβηκα στην Ασκληπιού από Ερεσού, έκανα να πάω σπίτι, αλλά την τελευταία στιγμή έστριψα Καλλιδρομίου, κατηφόρισα και μπήκα στην πρώτη κωλοκαφετέρια μετά το αστυνομικό τμήμα.

## 2

Μάλλον ήταν ταξιδιωτικός πράκτορας ο δίπλα, με μονόλογους σκέτη μαυρίλα και σπέσιαλ κόλλημα με τους γύφτους, που πρέπει λέει να τους στείλουμε στο Αφγανιστάν να καταλάβουν τι εστί βερίκοκο, μάλιστα έλεγε να τους στείλουμε «πίσω» στο Αφγανιστάν, αλλά σε μια φάση ρούφηξε για τρίτη φορά με θόρυβο τον πάτο του φραπέ του με τον αφρό και τα παγάκια και είπε κάπως θλιμμένα «λιώνουν κι οι πάγοι στη Νορβηγία, γάμησέ τα...» οπότε τον δέχτηκα πάλι σ' αυτόν τον κόσμο, τον ξανάβαλα δίπλα μου, μαζί μου, αφού εγώ αποφάσιζα για όλα.

Γιατί κάπου εκεί βρισκόμασταν. Κι εγώ και όλοι. Στη Νορβηγία με τους πάγους να λιώνουν στην πλάτη μας σταγόνα σταγόνα, τελειωμένοι όλοι σ' ένα μπαρ κάπου στο Αφγανιστάν, με ακριβούς καφέδες που δεν πίνονται και χαλασμένο κλιματιστικό δίπλα στην πόρτα να γουστάρουμε βερίκοκο. Χωρίς ρυθμό, χωρίς ειρμό, χωρίς κανένα στυλ.

Και τον ήξερα. Τους ήξερα πάνω κάτω όλους εκεί μέσα, τους πεντέξι. Τις φάτσες δηλαδή, από παλιά. Γειτονιά. Δεν μου ερχόταν κανένα όνομα στάνταρ, αλλά τις φάτσες τις ήξερα. Η γκαρσόνα, μπορεί Αριάνα, μπορεί Μπέσα, μπορεί και τίποτα απ' τα δύο, ήταν η Αλβανίδα που σέρβιρε παλιά στο Μοντιάλ με τα γαλλικά μπιλιάρδα που έκλεισε, τη θυμόμουν. Της την έπεφταν χύμα όλοι οι γέροι με τα σάλια και τα Ντιούαρς, κι αυτή γελούσε και τους έλεγε ότι μια μέρα θα φέρει τον αδερφό της να τους τα κόψει απ' τη ρίζα. Με έναν άλλον, χωμένο εκεί στο κινητό του στη γωνία, παίζαμε μπάσκετ κάποτε στο Στρέφη. Κουλός αλλά τίμιος, μάζευε ριμπάουντ. Ο δίπλα, εξήντα πέντε, σύχναζε για χρόνια στο χρωματοπωλείο της Μεθώνης, κάθε μέρα απέξω μαζί με δυο άλλους να την αράζουν για πάντα με τα φανελάκια στις πλαστικές καρέκλες. Μέχρι που το χρωματοπωλείο έγινε κι αυτό ένα-ωραίο-μπαρ, και τώρα απ' ό,τι φαίνεται την έβγαζε σόλο εδώ. Στη γωνιακή καφετέρια με τους μπάτσους και τα ναυάγια. Και άλλαζε θέμα από μόνος του με μικρές παύσεις ανά μισό λεπτό.

«Την Ολλανδέζα εκείνη που έφερνε τους λαθραίους, τη δημοσιογράφο υποτίθεται, αυτήν με το κόκκινο καπέλο που 'χε βρίσει τον Μητσοτάκη, τη βίζιτα, ξέρεις τώρα σε τι θέση την έχουν βάλει να κουνιέται και να κάνει...»

Δεν έμαθα ποτέ σε τι θέση είχαν βάλει την Ολλανδέζα να κουνιέται και να κάνει, ούτε ποιοι ήταν αυτοί που την είχαν βάλει εκεί, γιατί ένα περιπολικό ξεπάρκαρε με τη μία κι έβαλε μαζί και τη σειρήνα στρίβοντας Μαυρομιχάλη, κι έτσι ο τύπος σταμάτησε να μιλάει αφού ούτε κι ο ίδιος δεν άκουγε τι έλεγε. Την ίδια στιγμή βάρεσε μια ειδοποίηση μες στην τσέπη μου. Ακούμπησα το τηλέφωνο στην μπάρα. Μήνυμα από άγνωστο αριθμό. Χωρίς κείμενο, μόνο μια εικόνα. Ποιος έστειλε ακόμα mms τον Μάιο του 2022; Πάτησα και περίμενα να την κατεβάσει.

«Σίγκναλ να βάλεις, να μη σε βρίσκει κανένας», είπε ο δίπλα. «Όλα τ' άλλα τα παρακολουθούν».

«Όλα τα παρακολουθούν, έτσι κι αλλιώς», είπε η Αλβανίδα μαζεύοντας το άδειο του ποτήρι. «Πρέπει να βγεις τελείως απ' το ίντερνετ άμα είναι, και να μην παίρνεις ποτέ μαζί σου το τηλέφωνο».

«Ναι, όλα τα παρακολουθούν», μουρμούρισα κι εγώ, και μετά είπα κάτι σαν «αλλά θα μπω και στο Σίγκναλ, ποτέ δεν ξέρεις», όμως αυτό βγήκε πολύ χαμηλόφωνα, βασικά παίζει και να το είπα από μέσα μου, γιατί τώρα η εικόνα είχε ανοίξει. Μια φωτογραφία κακοφωτισμένη, σε πολύ χαμηλή ανάλυση, που έδειχνε την πόρτα του σπιτιού μου. Όχι την είσοδο της πολυκατοικίας, αλλά την εξώπορτα πάνω, στον τρίτο όροφο. Την κλειδαριά, το μπρούτζινο χερούλι και το κουδούνι με το μισοσβησμένο όνομα Μιχάλης Κρόκος. Έμεινα έτσι λίγα δευτερόλεπτα να την κοιτάζω ανέκφραστος προσπαθώντας να καταλάβω τι και πώς και ποιος, σκέφτηκα ότι μπορεί να ήταν η φίλη μου η Ματίνα που είχε τα κλειδιά για το Airbnb, αλλά αυτή γιατί να μη με πάρει κατευθείαν τηλέφωνο, σκέφτηκα τη γειτόνισσα της διπλανής πόρτας, τη Λαμπρινού με τη γάτα που νιαουρίζει όταν ξεκλειδώνω, αλλά αυτή δεν μπορεί να είχε τον αριθμό μου, κι ύστερα πάτησα να κάνει κλήση τέλος πάντων να τελειώνουμε. *Ο αριθμός που καλέσατε δεν αντιστοιχεί σε συνδρομητή. Ε;*

«Τι τα θες, τι τα ρωτάς... Γάμα τα όλα...» μονολόγησε ο δίπλα ακολουθώντας με το βλέμμα του κάποιον στον δρόμο, ίσως τον τελειωμένο με το καρότσι που έψαχνε στα σκουπίδια, ίσως την εικοσιπεντάρα με το γυαλιστερό μοβ κολάν που διέσχιζε την Καλλιδρομίου περνώντας από δίπλα του.

Ξανακοίταξα τη φωτογραφία. Ναι, δεν υπήρχε καμία αμφιβολία, ήταν η πόρτα μου και το κουδούνι μου και το όνομά μου. Μάλιστα. Τέλειωσα με μια αργή γουλιά το νερό που είχε έρθει με τον καφέ, πλήρωσα, βγήκα πάλι έξω στην ντάλα φορώντας τα μαύρα μου γυαλιά κι άρχισα να ανεβαίνω αργά και σταθερά προς Ασκληπιού χωρίς κανένα απολύτως προαίσθημα, ούτε κακό ούτε καλό.

# Deepfake

*Makis Malafekas*

Translated into English by Kostas Kaltsas

*In a world which really is topsy-turvy,  
the true is a moment of the false.*

Guy Debord

*Do what you want, I'm going cheap.*

Depeche Mode

## 1

Now, though, things had changed. The brand-new yellow Wrangler, lifted up, modded out, side bars, front bumper, the works, was barrelling down Ippokratous Street and not for a moment did I think to flag it down with a shout of 'taxi!', just for a laugh, like we used to do with all those yellow Renaults and Cinquecentos in the old days. Nope, only thing I cared about now was crossing the street quickly before he ran me over, seeing as the asshole wasn't even slowing down, was coming straight at me, just like that, in broad daylight, with 2.5 tonnes of steel under him and this blank deathly look on his face. On both their faces. Landing next to the convenience store at the corner of Dervenion Street, I turned to look: two identical bastards in the front, 27-year-old studs, satin tans, hair short but with these neat cowlicks that reeked of Apivita moisturizer and real-estate deals and cocktail bars that served the most esoteric of mez-cals. But the issue wasn't the hair, or the attitude, or the Wrangler. I didn't give a shit about the Wrangler. The issue was that I didn't even care about the yellow-car gag, not anymore, it wasn't even a thing, had never been a thing. The issue was that I was in no mood

for a laugh, not for a second. The issue was that I was scared. Scared of those two guys with their ‘I’ll fuck you up right in your goddamn precious downtown, drive through and tear you a new one’ scowls, and all of a sudden I just wanted to hurry home and couldn’t even tell you why.

I picked up the two supermarket loaves of sliced bread I’d dropped on the pavement, walked past the convenience store with its newspaper headlines about Panathinaikos’ non-existent player transfers and first few friendlies of the football season, turned uphill onto Asklipiou via Eressou, about to make for home, but at the last second took another turn at Kallidromiou, headed downhill and entered that first crappy café past the police station.

## 2

The guy next to me was probably a travel agent, with his doom and gloom monologues and special hang-up about gypsies, who, he said, we should ship to Afghanistan, let them know what’s what, in fact we should ship them ‘back’ to Afghanistan was what he said, though at some point he stuck his straw in his mouth and slurped noisily at the remains of his frappé, now down to foam and ice cubes, and said, a little sadly, ‘Plus the ice is melting all over Norway, we’re all fucked...’, so I let him back in, into this world, sat him back down next to me, with me being the one who called all the shots.

Because that was just about where we found ourselves. Me and him and everyone. In Norway with the ice melting down our backs one drop at a time, done for, all of us, in a bar somewhere like Afghanistan, with our expensive coffees that taste like shit and a broken AC by the door, finding out what’s what and digging it. No rhythm, no rhyme, not a modicum of style.

And I knew him. I knew more or less everyone there, all five or six of them. Knew their faces, that is, from way back. From around the neighbourhood. Wasn't too sure about anyone's name, but I knew the faces. The waitress, her I recalled, Ariana maybe, or maybe Bessa, or maybe neither, was the Albanian who used to waitress at the Mondial, the French billiards place that had closed down. She'd get hit on by all those drooling old men with their tumblers of Dewars in hand, and laugh and tell them one day she'd get her brother to come round, chop their dicks off at the root. This other guy, face buried in his cell phone over in the corner, we used to shoot hoops together at Strefi. Couldn't hit the side of a barn, but played hard, crashed the boards. The guy next to me, 65 or so, he hung out for years by the paint store in Methonis, him and two other guys in their undershirts chilling outside every day on plastic garden chairs. Till the paint store too turned into a nice-bar and he, from the looks of it, wound up here, riding solo. At the corner café next to the cops and human wreckage. Talking to no one in particular, pausing to change the subject every 30 seconds.

‘That Dutch woman trafficking those illegals, the so-called reporter, the one in the red hat that insulted Mitsotakis, that slut, do you know what post they’ve appointed her to now, to lord it over us...’

I never did find out what post the Dutch woman had been appointed to, to lord it over us, nor who it was that had appointed her to it, because a police cruiser pulled out sharply into the street, siren already blaring as it turned down Mavromichali Street, and the guy fell silent, seeing as he couldn't even hear himself talk. At that moment my phone vibrated in my pocket. I set it down on the bartop. A message, the number unknown. No text, only a single image. Who on earth would still be sending MMS in May 2022? I hit the button and waited for the image to download.

‘You should get Signal, so no one can track you’, said the man next to me. ‘They monitor everything else.’

‘They monitor everything anyway’, said the Albanian girl, picking up his empty glass. ‘What you need to do is just get off the internet, never take your phone with you anywhere.’

‘Yeah, they monitor everything’, I muttered, then added something like, ‘But sure, I’ll get onto Signal, you never know’, though that came out too softly, in fact I might have actually just thought it, because in the meantime the image had popped open on my screen. A photograph, poorly lit, the resolution too low, showing my apartment door. Not the building entrance but my front door, upstairs, on the fourth floor. The lock, the brass handle, the doorbell with that faded ‘Michalis Krokos’ on the nameplate. I stared at it expressionless for a few moments, trying to figure out what and how and who, thought it might have been my friend, Matina, who had the keys for Airbnb purposes, but why wouldn’t she just call, thought of my next door neighbour, Mrs. Labrinou, her cat meowing at me every time I unlocked the door, but no way did Mrs. Labrinou have my number, then I went ahead and hit ‘call’ just to get it over with. *The subscriber you have dialled is not in service.* Huh?

‘What’s the point, don’t even... Fuck it, fuck it all...’ said the man next to me, talking to himself, his gaze tracking someone out in the street, maybe the wreck dragging his cart, sifting through a dumpster, maybe the 25-year-old in the shiny purple leggings who walked past the man, crossing Kallidromiou.

I took another look at the photo. Yep, no question, that was my door, my doorbell, and my name. Okay then. In one slow gulp, I drained the last of the water I’d been served with my coffee, then paid and, sunglasses on, walked back out under that high noon sun, and commenced my slow and steady climb uphill, towards Asklipiou, feeling no premonition whatsoever, neither good, nor bad.

SPECIAL  
MENTION

# IRELAND



**Sheila ARMSTRONG**

**Falling Animals**

*Falling Animals*

Bloomsbury, 2023

English

ISBN: 9781526635839

## BIOGRAPHY

**S**heila Armstrong is a writer from the north-west of Ireland. She is the author of *How To Gut A Fish*, a collection of short stories, and *Falling Animals*, a novel. She has been nominated for the Irish Book Awards, the Society of Authors Awards, the Kate O'Brien Award, the Edge Hill Prize and the RSL Ondaatje Prize. She was chosen as an Arts Council

Next Generation Artist

and an An Post Best  
New Irish Writer.

She is working on  
her second novel.



## SYNOPSIS

On an isolated beach set against a lonely, windswept coastline, a pale figure sits serenely against a sand dune staring out to sea. His hands are folded neatly in his lap, his ankles are crossed and there is a faint smile on his otherwise lifeless face.

Months later, after a fruitless investigation, the nameless stranger is buried in an unmarked grave. But the mystery of his life and death lingers on, drawing the nearby villagers into its wake. From strandings to shipwrecks, it is not the first time that strangeness has washed up on their shores.

Told through a chorus of voices, *Falling Animals* follows the cross-hatching threads of lives both true and imagined, real and surreal, past and present. Slowly, over great time and distance, the story of one man, alone on a beach, begins to unravel. Elegiac and atmospheric, dark and disquieting, Sheila Armstrong's debut novel marks her arrival as one of the most uniquely gifted writers at work in literary fiction today.

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The jury nominates *Falling Animals* because the novel draws attention to the need to emphasise our shared humanity and to celebrate and acknowledge our interdependence. The jury appreciated the unusual multi-voiced, prismatic approach taken by this

original, early-career writer. The book is written in a cool, detached tone, while at the same time evoking a strong emotional response.

In *Falling Animals*, the cast of characters is conspicuously international – in the global world we live in, even a small village in the north-west of Ireland can offer 'outsiders' a home. The local Irish characters are 'everyman' and 'everywoman' – a homeless man, a bus driver, an old woman. Armstrong shows these characters warts and all, highlighting their frailties and faults, but nevertheless presenting them in a sympathetic light.

The writing has a deep sense of place and atmosphere, with descriptive passages depicting the Irish west coast with cinematic intensity and clarity. The lyrical tone combines with vibrant and sensitive pen portraits to create a mosaic of diverse and complex inner voices, reflecting a broad slice of contemporary society. The pain that lies beneath the surface of so many apparently 'normal' lives is brought to the fore in this poetic, polyphonic and compelling novel.

Many consider the world to be on the brink of a philosophical, ecological and moral crisis. Although this book does not provide any easy solutions to these challenges, it attunes readers to our interconnectedness and suggests that some form of solace can only be achieved through compassion and shared experience.

► *Literature Ireland*

# Falling Animals

*Sheila Armstrong*



The collector

## **Pages 1–5**

First, there is a seal with no eyes.

It is a spring tide, the beach is shrinking to a silvery half-moon, and the sheets of rock above the tideline are turning black with the unfamiliar spray. Out over the deep water, the dawn light is stretched out and thin; only the iron tip of a shipwreck is visible above the waves. Further out, the tent pole of a lighthouse props up the sky, and from there, the horizon curves into a horseshoe, all the way around the world and back to the dark anchor of the eyeless seal.

A white van is making its way down the narrow, green-spined road to the deserted beach. In the soft, unsteady sand, each turn the driver makes must be a slow and careful adjustment, as the shifting forest of dunes is precarious at the best of times. Harsh winters have lashed chunks out of them, and each day the shoreline morphs and changes further. A recent summer storm has left debris above the tideline: the delicate shells of sea urchins and clumps of orange-brown seaweed, as thick as matted hair.

The driver left with the early August dawn to get to the beach before the first walkers appeared. He drives cautiously; a few wheel-spinning moments in the dunes had set his heart pounding. There will be a man with a tractor to pull him out if he gets stuck –there is always a man with a tractor around, collecting oysters from the

half-submerged traps – but Frank is booked in for a drop-off at the incinerator before lunch, and a delay would mean more paperwork.

He tries to park as close to the carcass as he can. Through the wind-screen, the seal looks so pristine it might have just pulled itself out of the ocean to rest, propped up in an alert position, empty eye sockets staring blankly out to sea. Closer up there will be flies, he knows from experience, squirming things to pull the seeds of life from death. The county council usually ignore these strandings, if they hear about them at all; they are happy to wait for the animal to quietly decompose or leave on the next tide. But this seal, a casualty of the storm, has wedged itself firmly between two small mounds of rock above the shoreline and seems determined to cling on. The village overlooking the beach is teeming with tourists, with delicate stomachs and a tendency to complain, so Frank has been sent to collect what the sea will not wash away.

A gust snatches the van door out of his hands; he lets it close on top of himself, using his hips to catch the heavy force of the swing. He pulls his kit out of the van, a tarpaulin unfurling to whip in the wind like a thick, black spinnaker. Gloves. Face mask. Shovel. Bungee cords. Disinfectant. The hydraulics wheeze as the rear ramp lowers; it catches on one side, but he stamps on it with his boots until it is level with the beach. He weighs the tarp down with some metal straps and goes closer to inspect the carcass. A pair of red-beaked gulls lift their heads and scream at him as he approaches, clattering their way into the air, disappearing behind swathes of marram grass further up the beach.

Up close, the seal's skin is sleek-dark, but swollen, like a burnt sausage; islands of black floating on cracks of red lava. The empty, gull-pecked sockets are deep tunnels shaded with garnet. He reaches out a boot and taps the bulky body – once, twice, and again with the other foot – to get a sense of the weight and heft of it. Thankfully, the days following the unseasonable storm have been scorching hot, so the sun and salt have dried the carcass out. Many years hauling

fallen livestock has taught him that cattle and horses are prone to leakage. Sheep with heavy winter wool are the worst, like a kitchen sponge that looks bone dry but spills out foulness once lifted. Frank considers just loosening the seal enough for it to roll back down the beach, to feed the crabs and little lives of the ocean. But the council expects an invoice from the incinerator, so a seal he must produce.

As the shrouded sun appears above the cliffs, he begins to tease the sand around the seal with his shovel. He breathes through his masked mouth as he works, testing and loosening, peeling the carcass away from the sand. As he suspected, the underside has begun to blister and rot. If the sand is fouled deeply enough, he will need to take a layer of it away with him too. Sandhoppers emerge as he disturbs the scene, their small, fingernail bodies unfolding and leaping Olympic heights into the air. Crabs too, greedy little things still grabbing clawfuls of flesh as his spade comes down a hair's breadth from them. He splits one cleanly in two; its brain doesn't immediately realise it is dead, and both claws still extend and return to their half of the alien mouth.

He goes back to the van and gathers up the black tarp. Lays it out alongside the carcass. Levers the hind flippers up with the blunt edge of his shovel, kicks the heavy material further underneath them. The seal rocks and settles on the tarp, and its empty eye sockets catch the rising sun as it batters its way out from under the clouds. The redness of them surprises him – bright crimson rather than brown and old, as if a heart was still beating slowly somewhere. He heaves one end of the tarp until the seal is face down, rolling the carcass up like a fat cigar. The seal's skin is as crisp as the surface of an iced pond; his gloved palms leave grooves of damage in the blubber. He folds the tarp over the ends and secures it with bungee cords. The wrapped shroud marks a gully in the sand behind it as he drags it over to the van. The weight seems concentrated, as if there is ballast deep in the seal's stomach and the layers of fat and skin around it are all to protect a cold, iron core.

[...]

## **Pages 8–9**

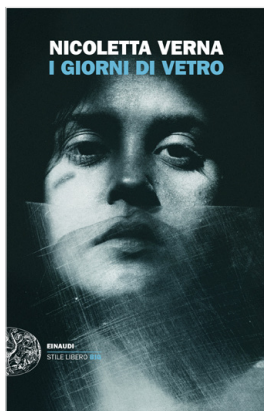
By the time he is ready to leave, the tide has slipped away further, and the marks left by his van's wheels are clear and stark above the tideline. Frank tries to return across the beach along the same path, lining the wheels up with the tyre tracks, but it is impossible; the new ruts are deeper than the old with the added weight of the seal. In the front of the van, a pine air freshener bobs on a length of elastic, but the smell has long been used up, breath by breath by breath.

Behind him, all along the exposed beach, black dots of birds search the glint and melt of the stranded clumps of seaweed. The sand uncovered by the tide becomes wind-rippled, like a bared sheet of muscle. At the southerly edge of the beach, silt-rich drainage water seeps from the cliff down a rocky channel and into the ocean. It is barely a trickle in the summer, but in winter it floods and seethes with run-off, cutting out a new shape every time it gushes across the sand like a floodplain. Along the edges, a line of translucent sandhoppers are leaping from the space where a seal's carcass once lay, slow and careful jumps, from one pile of seaweed to the next, searching, moving in a black procession towards the dunes.

At the top of the stream, where the water disappears into vertical cracks in the sheer cliff, there is a sagging of marram grass, a clearing that has been flattened by the unexpected weight of a body. The man in the dunes is sitting serenely, legs crossed at the ankles and fingers interlaced, as if he is simply resting, two half-lidded eyes staring out to sea. The gulls are still circling, cautious after the van's departure, unsure if the intruder with the shovel will return. But they will eventually grow brave again, brave enough to investigate, as the morning light falls strangely on a day-old face.

LAUREATE

# ITALY



**Nicoletta VERNA**  
**I Giorni di Vetro**  
***The Days of Glass***

Einaudi, 2024

Italian

ISBN: 9788806261368

## BIOGRAPHY

**N**icoletta Verna is from Romagna but lives in Florence, where she is a fiction editor at the publisher Giunti. She has taught communication theory and technique at various Italian universities and institutes. Her debut novel, *Il valore affettivo*, which received a special mention by the Italo Calvino award jury, the Opera Prima Severino Cesari Prize and the Massarosa Prize, has reaped great success with critics and readers. *I Giorni di Vetro* won the prestigious Premio Manzoni for best historical novel. She is also the author of essays and volumes on media and mass culture - *Le onde del futuro. Presente e futuri della radio in Italia*, written with Giovanni Cordini and Peppino Ortoleva (Costa & Nolan 2006); *Radio FM 1976-2006. Trent'anni di libertà d'antenna* written with Giovanni Cordini and Peppino Ortoleva (Minerva 2006).

## SYNOPSIS

Redenta is born in 1924 and considered unlucky by her local community. Despite the town's pessimism, Redenta survives polio, while Senator Matteotti is found dead, marking the

beginning of the fascist regime. Her life goes through periods of radical violence, amid fascism, war and male prevarication. Redenta's childhood is marked by the promise of marriage to her beloved friend Bruno, who

mysteriously disappears. Though she does not stop waiting for Bruno, she is chosen as a bride by the hierarch Vetro, who inflicts unimaginable sadism on her, despite this cannot extinguish the instinct of salvation in her: of others, before herself. Redenta's life intertwines with that of Iris, a rebel in the group led by the legendary Commandant Diaz, bringing hidden secrets to light.

#### **REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION**

The jury chose Nicoletta Verna's novel because her writing is full of strength and personality. She writes a dark, severe novel, but with an internal light that populates every page: human beings, with their passions, loves and insecurities, are the ones who illuminate the story and prevent us from succumbing to the ferocity of evil.

► *Fondazione Circolo dei Lettori*



# I Giorni di Vetro

*Nicoletta Verna*



1.

Era molto meglio prima, quando io non c'ero e non c'era nessuno dei miei fratelli, né i vivi né i morti. C'era solo mia madre che si rivoltava sul materasso del camerino e urlava: – Ammazzatemi, o sta dlla Madona, – e la Fafina risponde va: – Sta' zèta, ché chiami il diavolo, – e andò avanti così per tre giorni e tre notti, finché mia madre lanciò un grido feroce e venne fuori Goffredo, il primo dei miei fratelli morti. Quando gli diedero lo schiaffo per farlo piangere lui non pianse, allora la Fafina scossò la testa e disse: – È segno che a Dio Cristo lassù gli bisognava un angiolino. Ne vedeva tanti, di bambini nati morti, e quello era uguale a tutti gli altri, anche se era suo nipote.

Mia madre lo guardò avvilita. – Perché? – chiese.

– Perché hai mangiato troppo cocomero. Il cocomero fa acqua nello stomaco e il bambino s'è annegato, il purino.

Lei se lo tenne un po' accanto, nel letto fradicio di sudore e di sangue e di liquidi persi nel parto, poi arrivò mio padre dalla villa del Tarascone, a petto nudo, e si avvicinò in silenzio. Contemplò il bambino senza grazia, come se fosse un animale. Gli prese il muso e lo girò verso di sé, lo scrutò un attimo quindi lo lasciò andare.

– Nemmeno i figli sai fare?

– Mi avete sposata, Primo. Adesso mi tenete così, – disse lei puntando gli occhi sulla cicatrice che lui aveva sullo sterno, proprio sotto al cuore.

– Lo so, böja de Signor.

Di sera lui sparì al casino di Borgo Piano, ché tanto mia madre era a letto e non poteva venirlo a sapere, poi tornò a casa e si sdraiò accanto a lei, con il bambino ancora nella culla, coperto da un lenzuolo. Mia madre gli aveva messo un berrettino rosso che la Fafina aveva fatto all'uncinetto.

– Come l'hai chiamato?

– Goffredo.

– Dove lo mettiamo?

– Con il mio povero babbo.

– Bene, – disse lui girandosi dall'altra parte, e del figlio morto nessuno parlò più.

Il secondo fu Tonino e nacque di luglio. Finché fu incinta, mia madre non toccò il cocomero e bevve solo cinque sorsi d'acqua al giorno, per non farlo annegare. Ma Tonino nacque morto lo stesso.

Lei lo lavò e lo vestì per bene e disse alla Fafina: – Chiamate don Ferroni a benedirlo –. Poi prese il coltello che usavano per scuoiare le bestie e andò a piedi fino al campo del Tarascone, sotto al sole, mezza nuda. Cercò un cocomero, ci conficcò la lama e lo divorò, per quanto ce n'era, mandando giù i semi. Quando finì aveva una pancia così grossa che pareva un'altra volta gravida.

Per ultima toccò all'Argia. Venne fuori il giorno del Corpus Domini, viva, con gli occhi spalancati, mentre sotto casa passava la processione. Mia madre la guardava come se fosse il Santo Gesù Bambino, non sfiorandola nemmeno per paura di bagattare anche lei. Mio padre disse che era meglio un maschio, che dopo quei due

maschi morti proprio la femmina doveva campare? La Fafina rispose che la donna di razza fa prima la ragazza, e che se non gli andava bene poteva anche cavarci dal mezzo, per il bell'aiuto che dava, e si sedettero a tavola, con la bambina nuova nella culla. Ma di notte l'Argia smise di respirare, senza un pianto, e la mattina era rigida e fredda sul suo piccolo cuscino, con gli occhi appena socchiusi. Il giorno dopo seppellirono l'Argia e, nel tornare a piedi dal cimitero, mia madre disse alla Fafina: – Bisogna parlare col dottor Serri Pini.

La Fafina non rispose, continuò a camminare spedita e a testa bassa fino al portone, sulla curva del borgo di Santa Maria. Un attimo prima che mia madre salisse in casa disse sottovoce, quasi a sé stessa: – Va' da Zambutèn, no da Serri Pini, – e scappò via di corsa.

Mia madre la ascoltò, come sempre, perché la Fafina era la più intelligente di Castrocaro, più del sindaco e persino più del prete, e tutti le davano retta.

– Lo so perché venite, – disse Zambutèn aprendo la porta. La fece sedere al tavolo di ebano che gli aveva regalato il senatore Bellini quando l'aveva guarito dal delirio notturno.

– Se lo sapete, ditemi cosa bisogna fare.

A Castrocaro c'era il dottor Serri Pini con mia nonna Fafina che era la sua infermiera, e poi c'era Zambutèn. Per le cose da cui si poteva guarire, la gente andava da Serri Pini. Per tutte le altre, che erano le più, chiedeva a Zambutèn. Lui era un erudito di piante e radici e intrugli che Dio sa cosa, e aveva abitato per tre anni al monastero di Sant'Antonio, a Montepaolo, dove i frati gli avevano insegnato gli enigmi degli speciali. Cosa più importante, gli avevano regalato un bastone che era appartenuto al santo in persona, e se toccava con il legno dove qualcheduno aveva la malattia lo faceva star bene. Aveva guarito anche donna Rachele, che dopo avere avuto Bruno si era ammalata di malinconia, e il Duce era venuto in persona da Milano, una mattina, a ringraziarlo con dieci casse di albana di Predappio.

– I figli vi muoiono perché vostro marito non ha abbastanza sangue, – dichiarò.

– Lo sapevo, che era colpa sua.

Zambutèn sfiorò con il bastone di sant’Antonio il ventre ancora grosso di mia madre.

– Non è una roba facile.

– Non me ne importa. Ditemi cosa c’è da fare.

– Dovete aspettare che vi venga il mestruo. Il primo mestruo dopo la bambina morta è quello buono. Dovete stare seduta su un pitalle d’argento e raccogliere il sangue, quindi dovete farne bere dieci gocce a vostro marito, diluite nel sangiovese –. Mia madre lo ascoltò in silenzio.

– Dopo dodici giorni lui deve prendervi, e anche il giorno dopo e quello dopo ancora. Poi non dovete guardarvi più. Voi dovete dormire in un letto e lui in un altro. Vi nascerà una figlia che avrà ancora addosso la scarogna, ma camperà.

– Come, la scarogna?

– Non avrà fortuna, però avrà pietà. La pietà le farà vedere più cose di quelle che vediamo noialtri. E potrà campare.

Mia madre non capì niente, ma lo lasciò parlare.

– Farete altre due bambine, che avranno la salute. Se sgraveranno, faranno delle bambine anche loro.

– Tutte femmine?

– Tutte femmine.

– E per avere un maschio?

– Eh, un maschio.

Zambutèn si alzò per accompagnarla alla porta. – Cosa vi devo? – chiese lei prima di uscire.

Lui non rispose. Ai poveri, le cose che non si potevano guarire Zambutèn le guariva per niente.

I miei genitori non è che erano poveri, o almeno non erano piú poveri degli altri. Mio padre custodiva la villa del conte Morelli al Tarascone, su per la via che passava sotto la fortezza, e mia madre vendeva i lupini al mercato di Santa Maria con il carretto. A Castrocaro c'era chi lavorava alle Terme e aveva già il gabinetto, è vero, la turca di ceramica bianca dove buttando l'acqua col secchio tutto finiva giú che neanche ti accorgevi di avere fatto qualcosa, mentre loro andavano nel capannotto del cortile, assieme agli altri del ri-one, con un odore che scendevano giú le lacrime, e si mettevano a cova sul buco e poi si pulivano in fretta con un panno. Però non erano poveri: riuscivano a pagare tutti i mesi l'affitto della casa sulla curva di via Nazionale e non avevano quasi debiti, mio padre si comprava le sigarette e andava all'osteria la sera e delle volte persino al casino, di nascosto, e mantenevano nel cortile il maiale che gli aveva regalato il conte, aspettando di ammazzarlo per Sant'Antonio. Non erano poveri ma non erano nemmeno ricchi, e mia madre non sapeva come fare a rimediare il pitale d'argento che le aveva detto Zambutèn.

Di mattina presto prese la corriera e andò a Forlì, che la chiamavano il Cittadone perché quando ci arrivavi vedevi l'inizio ma non la fine. Trovò un bottegaio e una ferramenta, però quella roba così non la teneva nessuno. Alla fine incontrò una di Castrocaro che faceva la serva. Le disse che la sua padrona andava a comprare l'argenteria in un emporio dietro a Porta Cotogni che si riforniva a Bologna, e mia madre si avviò. Si specchiò nei cristalli contemplando avvilita il peso e il puzzo della sua miseria, e chiese al commesso se aveva un pitale d'argento.

Lui razzolò fra gli scaffali.

– Questo non è proprio un pitale, è una confettiera.

– Una che?

Le spiegò a cosa serviva. Lei pensò: «Andrà bene anche per pisciarci dentro», e domandò: – Quanto costa?

# The Days of Glass

*Nicoletta Verna*

Translated into English by Katherine Gregor

1.

It was much better in the old days, before I came along and before any of my siblings, whether they were dead or alive. There was just my mother, tossing and turning on the mattress and screaming, ‘Kill me, for God’s sake!’ and Fafina replying, ‘Quiet or you’ll summon the devil.’

This went on for three days and three nights, until my mother let out a savage scream and Goffredo, the first of my dead siblings, came out. When they slapped him to make him cry, but he didn’t cry, Fafina shook her head and said, ‘It’s a sign that Christ our Lord needed a little angel up there with him.’

She saw so many stillborn babies that this one was just like any other, even though he was her grandson.

My mother looked at him, disheartened. ‘Why?’ she asked.

‘Because you had too much watermelon. Watermelon creates too much water in the belly and the baby drowned, poor thing.’

She held him at her side for a little while, on the bed drenched in sweat, blood and fluids discharged during labour, until my father arrived from the Tarascone villa, bare-chested, and approached without a word. He gave the child a compassionless glance, as though he were an animal. He pinched the baby’s nose and turned his head, examined him, then let go of him. ‘Can’t even have children, can you?’

‘You married me, Primo’, she said, staring at the scar he had over his breastbone, right below the heart. ‘Now you get to keep me as I am.’

‘Don’t I bloody know that.’

In the evening, he headed to the brothel in Borgo Piano, since my mother was in bed, anyway, so had no way of finding out, then he came home and lay down next to her, the baby covered with a sheet, still in the cradle. My mother had put a little red beret on his head, which Fafina had crocheted.

‘What did you call him?’

‘Goffredo.’

‘Where are we going to put him?’

‘With my poor father.’

‘All right, then’, he said, turning over, and no one ever talked about the stillborn child again.

The second one was Tonino, and he was born in July. For her entire pregnancy, my mother didn’t touch watermelon and had only five sips of water a day, so she wouldn’t drown him. But Tonino was stillborn anyway.

She washed and dressed him carefully, and told Fafina, ‘Call Don Ferroni for a blessing.’ Then she took the tanner’s knife and walked to the Tarascone field, half naked, in the sun. She looked for a watermelon, stabbed it with the knife and devoured the lot, seeds included. By the time she’d finished, her belly was so bloated she looked pregnant again.

Argia arrived last. She came out on Corpus Christi Day, alive, eyes wide open, while the procession was passing outside the house. My mother kept looking at her like she was Baby Jesus, not even touching her for fear of breaking her, too. My father said a boy would

have been better, that after those two dead sons, why did a girl have to make it? Fafina replied that a well-bred woman's first child was always a girl, and that if he didn't like it he could get lost, seeing he was of no use to anyone, and they sat at the table, with the new baby in the cradle. But, without crying, Argia stopped breathing that night, and by morning was cold and stiff on her small cushion, eyelids slightly open.

They buried Argia the following day and, walking back from the cemetery, my mother said to Fafina, 'I have to talk to Doctor Serri Pini.'

Fafina did not reply, but, head down, rushed on ahead to our front door, which was on the bend of the main road in Borgo di Santa Maria. Just before my mother went upstairs, Fafina said under her breath, as though to herself, 'Go see Zambutèn, not Serri Pini', and hurried away.

My mother took her advice, because Fafina was the cleverest person in Castrocaro, more so than the mayor or even the priest, and everyone listened to her.

'I know why you're here', Zambutèn said as he opened the door.

He sat her at the ebony table Senator Bellini had given him after he'd cured him of sleep delirium.

'If you know, then tell me what to do.'

Castrocaro had Doctor Serri Pini – my grandmother Fafina was his nurse – and Zambutèn. People went to Serri Pini for things you could cure. They turned to Zambutèn for all the others; there were more of those. He was learned about herbs, roots and Heaven only knew what concoctions, and had spent three years at the Sant'Antonio monastery, in Montepaolo, where the monks had taught him the mysteries of the apothecaries. Most importantly, they had given him a wooden stick that had belonged to Saint Anthony himself,

and he could heal people by touching them with it on whichever part of the body was diseased. He had even cured Donna Rachele, who'd got sick with melancholy after giving birth to Bruno, and the Duce had come from Milan personally one morning in order to thank him with 10 crates of Albana di Predappio wine.

'Your children die because you husband doesn't have enough blood', he declared.

'I knew it was his fault.'

Zambutèn lightly touched my mother's belly, still swollen, with Saint Anthony's stick.

'It won't be easy.'

'I don't care. Tell me what to do.'

'You must wait until your next bleed. The first bleed after your child's death is the right one. You must sit on a silver chamber pot and collect the blood, then make your husband drink ten drops of it mixed with Sangiovese wine.' My mother listened to him in silence. 'He must take you twelve days later, and the day after that and again the next day. Then you mustn't look at each other anymore. He must sleep in one bed and you in another. You'll give birth to a daughter who'll be jinxed, but she'll live.'

'What do you mean, jinxed?'

'She'll be unlucky, but she'll be merciful, and mercy will allow her to see more things than the rest of us. And she'll live.'

My mother didn't understand any of it, but she let him talk.

'You'll have two more girls, and they'll be healthy. If they give birth, they'll also have daughters.'

'All girls?'

‘All girls.’

‘What about a boy?’

‘Ah, a boy.’

Zambutèn stood up to see her out.

‘What do I owe you?’ she asked before she left.

He did not reply. When it came to incurable conditions, Zambutèn treated the poor for nothing.

It’s not that my parents were poor, or at least no poorer than anyone else. My father was the caretaker at Count Morelli’s villa in Tarascone, up the road, at the foot of the fortress, and my mother sold lupin beans from a cart at the Santa Maria market. True, there were those in Castrocaro who worked at the thermal baths and already had a toilet, a white ceramic squat bowl where everything went down nice and clean when you poured a bucket of water over it, as if you’d not done anything, while my parents, like the other people in the district, used the hut in the courtyard that had an eye-watering stench, and they’d sit on the hole before quickly wiping themselves with a cloth. But they weren’t poor: every month, they managed to pay the rent on their apartment on the corner of Via Nazionale and had almost no debts, my father bought cigarettes and went to the tavern in the evening, and sometimes even to the brothel in secret, and in the yard they kept a pig the count had given them, and were waiting to slaughter it for the Feast of Saint Anthony. They weren’t poor, but they weren’t rich either, so my mother didn’t know where to unearth a silver chamber pot like Zambutèn had told her. Early in the morning, she took the bus to Forlì, called the Big City because when you arrived there you could see the beginning but not the end. She found a shopkeeper and a hardware outlet, but neither stocked that kind of merchandise. Finally, she bumped into a woman from Castrocaro who worked as a servant. She said her mistress bought silverware from an emporium past Porta Cotogni,

where they got their supplies from Bologna, so my mother headed there. She looked at her reflection in the crystals and, dejected, considered the burden and stench of her poverty, and asked the shop assistant if they had a silver chamber pot.

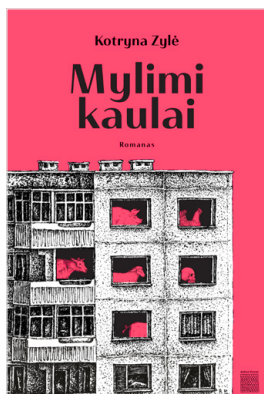
He rummaged through the shelves.

‘This isn’t exactly a chamber pot, it’s a *bonbonnière*.’

‘A what?’

He explained what it was used for. *It’ll do for pissing into it*, she thought, and asked, ‘How much is it?’

# LITHUANIA



**Kotryna ZYLĖ**  
**Mylimi Kaulai**  
*The Bones of the Beloved*

Aukso Žuvys, 2024  
Lithuanian  
ISBN: 9786098335255

## BIOGRAPHY

**Kotryna Zylė** is a writer, illustrator, designer and author of seven books. She has received multiple awards for her books and is well known to readers of Lithuanian children's, young adult and adult literature. A distinctive feature of her creative work is her incorporation of Lithuanian folklore and mythology into modern life.



## SYNOPSIS

*Mylimi kaulai* [*The Bones of the Beloved*] is a novel that recounts the life story of Ona, who keeps the bones of her three men in her closet at home, encompassing 63 years of her life. Although mythology and nature's primordial essence are foregrounded in the novel, it is subtly permeated by the Soviet legacy, inseparable from life in a standard apartment block, and overcasted with the shadows of the present day: the pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The novel captivates us with its vivid imagery, unique metaphors and lively, ironic and aptly witty language.

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The Lithuanian Culture Institute has brought together a jury drawn from Lithuanian literature critics and experts:

- Dr Neringa Butnoriūtė, literary critic and literary scholar;
- Dr Dalia Satkauskytė, literary critic and literary scholar;
- Dr Jūratė Čerškutė, literary critic and literary scholar;
- Audrius Ožalas, literary critic and journalist.

The jury made their choice from books that were nominated by publishers, and Kotryna Zylė's novel *The Bones of the Beloved* was a choice that the entire jury agreed on with no argument.

The jury decided that Kotryna Zylė's book *The Bones of the Beloved* would be the best to represent Lithuania in the EUPL contest because the novel has an attractive scope, an engaging and original plot, and, most importantly, it is full of the endlessly inventive motifs of Lithuanian folklore and mythology, which create a magical space in the novel. The book's language is very vivid, as the author herself is also a vivid person full of great and interesting stories about Lithuanian mythology.

► *Lithuanian Cultural Institute*

# Mylimi Kaulai

*Kotryna Zylė*



## **Motė. Onos gimimas. Rugsėjis**

Gimiau rudenį, ketvirtadienio vakarą, penkiaaukščio rūsio partyje, kaip ir visi Pašilų vaikai. Tam reikalui laiptinėje, prie pašto dėžučių, Vanda samčiu užmušė juodą vištą ir čia pat ant duonkepio užkaitė sultinio puodą. Tėvas, parėjęs po pamainos, kaimynai, grįžę iš darbų, visi žinojo, visi sujudo, mat negavo kaip įprasta išsivanoti ir išsiprausti, nei laumėms tūnakt nieks nepaliko muilo ir karšto vandens, buvo svarbesnių reikalų.

Motė šukuoja plaukus ir pasakoja, kartoja, visad nuo pradžių. Klausausi, įsivaizduoju baltą kaip marlę savo motiną, klausiu, kokia oda, koks jos kvapas, o Motė glosto man galvą, šypsosi, pažiūrėk į save, sako, visa tavyje ir pasiliko. Ir tėvas taip sako. Rytą vakarą, kitų diedų pašiepiamas, nešioja mane ant pečių, kad ir kur eitų, vežiojasi troleibusu pasitupdęs šalia vairuotojo sėdynės. Sako, niekad nepaleis, sako, mama jam sapnuojasi ir jie tada džiaugiasi, šoka, dainuoja kartu apie jūdviejų spurgelį – mane. Tu esi stebuklas, sako man tėvas.

Motė meta sruogą ant sruogos, timpteli, pina. Klausau, necypteliu. Dar, dar pasakok, prašau. Tada tęsia, kaip mama balo ir alpėjo, o Vanda, dar visai mergaičiukė, raudodama gailėjo vištos, Motė skubino, prigrasė, kad nėra kito būdo pagerbt Laimą, tik toks. Gal ne laiku tą vištą užmušė, gal ne taip, kaip mokyta, gal ne samčiu, gal išsigando ir viską supainiojo, mamos neišgelbėjo, klausiu, ar tikrai viską teisingai padarė? Motė sako, kad dabar nebesvarbu.

Vanda pirmąkart virė tą sriubą, paskui jau mokėjo, žinojo, visoms motinoms ruošė, visoms, kurios gimdė po mano mamos. Kaskart ant to pačio duonkepčio, pirmam aukšte, tik įėjus iš lauko. Tupim čia žiemomis, kai moterys kepa duoną, o tada kaimynai leidosi ir kilo, vis koks užklysdavo vienmarškinis, su rankšluosčiu, nenugirdęs, kad ypatingas vakaras, kad į pirtį nevalia. Trypė nuo mūsų buto durų per keturis aukštus iki pat pirties išklotus apynius ir žolynus. Vis galvoju, jei ne ketvirtadienį būčiau gimusi, jei kitą dieną, darbo laiku, kai visi išėję, nebūtų trypę, suerzinę Laimos, gal mama dar būtų gyva.

Motė stojasi, sunkiai eina iki krosnies, pati tokia panaši į duonos kepalą, nesuprasi, kur po lengvu drabužiu baigiasi minkštos pritvinkusios krūtys, kur prasideda pilvas. Tik pirty gali pamatyti, kiek odos ir mėsos sluoksnių dengia vienas kitą, kiek klosčių. Sunku ir įsivaizduoti, kad gilumoje dar yra skeletas, kaulai, gal ir visai smulkūs kauleliai, kas ten žino, nors turėtų būti geležiniai, kad atlaikytų tokį kūną. Kitos moterys ją prausdamos giria, gėrasi. Krūtys amžinai, be pabaigos pilnos pieno, mažiukai vis čiulpia pripuolę pirty, užuodę.

Motė vėl patempia plaukus, kieta turi būti kasa, toks laimingas vaikas esi, sako, nebegalvok daugiau, nešiok motinos atminimą ir būk sau.

### **Šventasis. Onai 9. Liepa**

Tupiu laiptinėje, tykau pamatyti, kokie žmonės atsikraustė, ar bus gyvulių, gal net vaikų. Berniukas, vos pamatęs mane, išsišiepia, skruostuose įsisega duobutės, aš Lukas, sako. Lukas ir mama, daugiau nieko. Gražus toks, įrudęs saulėje, laibom kojom, kaip žiogas.

Vakare susitinkam rūsio pirtyje. Man gėda, Lukas turėtų eiti su vyrais, bet motina viena, tai ima su savim. Vėliau leis vieną, kai susipažins, apsipras, o dabar tempia už rankos, muilina, liepia nespiginti akim, žiūrėti į grindis.

Sėdžiu pažemėj apsikabinus kelius, suskliautus kojas, kad nė kas nešvystelėtų, sugaunu Luko žvilgsnį. Žiūrės jis į grindis, kai aplink siūbuoja krūtys, liula užpakaliai. Muilinasi kampe vis dirsčiodamas. Motina patempia už ausies, rikteli ir išstumia apsuktą rankšluosčiu. Apsipilk kieme iš šulinio. Paskui abu lips į antrą aukštą, naujus namus, daiktai dar neišpakuoti, tiek ryšulių palikta laiptinėje. Pasistiebusi žiūriu pro rūsio langelį į kiemą. Berniukas praneria tarp mašinų, prie šulinio, įsilipa į gyvulių girdymo lovį ir, nusimetęs rankšluostį, apsipila lediniu vandeniu. Galvą guldau, kad ir kitų laiptinių kaimynai dėbso prie langų, balkonuose, visiems smalsu naujakuriai. Lukui nė motais, rankšluostis lieka rankoje, plikas, kaip pagimdytas, praeina pro pat mano nosį langelyje. Prie įėjimo dar pasisveikina su karvę parvedančiais kaimynais ir dingsta prieangyje.

### **Tėvas. Onos vaikystė**

Mano lizdas tėvo troleibuse. Kiek save atsimenu, aš vis ten. Stotelių pavadinimai žymi vasaros atostogas, bjaurias liūtis po pamokų, skubėjimą Kūčių, sniegui aklina užmūrijus šoninius veidrodėlius. Kabinos palubėje siūbuoja motinos rištas šiaudinis sodas, mano guolyje patiستا žvėrim trenkianti kailinė tėvo liemenė. Iki man gimstant jis nevairavo, dirbo konduktoriumi. Likęs vienas su manimi, dar kirminėliu, pasitarė su Mote, o gal ji jam prisakė griežtai, kad vaiką reikia laikyti greta. Tada ir sumanė vairuoti. Gavau gūžtą ten, kur įprastai sėdi bilietų tikrintojas ar savo pamainos laukiantis šoferis. Kiti vairuotojai į tokį tėvo sumanymą žiūrėjo kreivai, snarglelis gali primaigyt ko nereikia, blaškyt, bet Motės žodis paskutinis, o ir be jo tėvas mane į pasaulio kraštą ant kupros neštųsi. Jam prie vairo auginti dukrą tebuvo vieni juokai ir džiaugsmas. Rami tupėjau ir augau, Motė jam taip ir žadėjo, sakė, kad būsiu tokia. O ir kodėl ne, skaičiuoju stoteles, vaizdai prieš nosį keičiasi, tai ir nenuobodu. Mano atmintis pilna šaligatvių, pievų, pro kurias suka laidų linija, gamyklų, pavienių daugiabučių rajonų, liūdną penkiaaukščių vienkiemiuose.

Keleivius abu žinom atmintinai. Pasijuokiam, aptariam, pasilabinam. Visi mėgsta tėvo septintuką ir mane – kukulį didelėm akim, greta vairuotojo. Vis gaunu saldinių ar lašinių pačiulpt, pasiseilėt, vis kas nors bruka morkų ir bulvių krepšius mums su tėvu, sūrį, ką tik suspaustą, sako moteriškės, labai skanu, o jei dar ožkos pieno, tai ne tik maistas, tikras vaistas augančiai dukrelei, tik duokit. Išaugtų drabužių ryšuliai nesibaigia – augu aš, auga ir jie – prašėm ar neprašėm, visad atsiranda kokioj stotelėj.

Tėvas pamainas derina su mano pietų miegu, vėliau – su pamokų tvarkaraščiu, yra net keitęs maršrutą, svarbu, kad laidų linijos visad suktųsi man pakeliui. Visi jį mėgsta, mat vienintelis leidžia, jei kam reikia, kelias stoteles pasivežti ir gyvulį, nors šiaip tai griežtai draudžiama. Piemenėliai turi ganyt tik aplinkinėse pievose, kur gyvena šeimininkai, o senukai ir moterytės, laikančios po vieną ožką, irgi tik aplink savo balkonus ir žaidimų aikšteles, ne toliau. Betgi visko nutinka. Užklumpa lietus jau genant namo ar išėjus toliau pritrūksta sveikatos pargint, būna, įsižaidę piemenys užsivėlina, tai tėvas sustojęs švilpteli, kad tik greit liptų daug nesirodę, paramina, jei koks keleivis ima piktintis ar bliaut garsiau už gyvulius.

Sykį su mumis yra keliavus karvė, jau vėl vakarą, kai nebelabai buvo kam pamatyti. Tada išsirangiau iš savo lizdo, glosčiau šlapią snukį. Piemenė man į puodelį pričiurškė pieno, trenkiančio tešmeniu, šilto. Nelabai tokį mėgstu, bet tada, įsitaisiusi ant galinių sėdynių, išmaukiau iki dugno ir užmigau iškart, išsitiesusi per visą galą.

### **Šventasis. Onai 12**

Laiptinėje turiu tik Luką – senių namas, jaunesni pasistatė šalia dvylikaaukštį su liftu, išsikraustė visi, kurie buvo su mažiukais. Mano tėvas nesiryžo, o Luko mama tada, namui pralaisvėjus, ir paėmė tą dviejų kambarių butuką.

Mes vis erzinau naujojo dvylikaaukščio gyvulius, pargintus vakarais įbaubinam sustoję po balkonais. Dar vis yra tokių, kurie taip ir neiįprato, pastėrę dairo, lenda atgal į kambarius net vasarą ir atsigerti pasiganę vis grįžta prie mūsų lovio. Nors kuo toliau, tuo daugiau ramių jauniklių, jau atvestų naujame name.

Myliu Luką, neišmanoma nemylėti ir jis mane myli, bet nesikalbam apie tai, svajojam abu apie jaunuosius, tariamės, kokie galėtų būti, kokie bus, tik kol kas esam save vienas kitam paskolinę. Kartais sako, On, nepyksti, nusišypso, ir tie jo skruostų grioveliai, tos duobutės, kad jas kur, rodos, galėčiau mylėti kad ir iki gyvenimo galo.

Lukas ypatingas, tas ir taip aišku, bet dar dėl blynų, sūrių Luko sausblynų. Tuos blynus kepa jo motina, bet sako, per juos sūnus gydo, tik kaip ir kodėl – neišduoda. Yra, kas mano, kad motina raganauja, kiti sako, kad ji juos užkalba, o gal pats Lukas, bet kam rūpi kodėl, svarbu, kad tie išsyk numušą karštį, galvos skausmus, šluoja iš pilvo parazitus, gelbsti, kai niekas nebežino, ko griebtis, tereikia suvalgyti. Visad eilė lūkuriuojančių, prašančių, visus vakarus po darbo Luko mama sukasi virtuvėje, maišo tešlą, kepa ir kepa. Kad Lukas maišytų ar ką užkalbinėtų nemačiau, bet motina sako, kad visas gydymas iš sūnaus. Tai ji taip sako, o aš Luko niekad ir neklausiau.

## **Piemenėliai. Onai 14. Spalis**

Ilgoji pertrauka, stoviu troleibuso stotelėje, laukiu tėvo, jau kelintą kart šią dieną sukančio maršrutą. Ryte išlipdama pamiršau sumuštinį, pasitirinu tvarkaraštį, kaip tik netoliese, tuoj turėtų važiuoti pro mokyklą, kol praneš stotelės pavadinimą, išoksiu ir pasiimsiu.

Purškia lietis, pradinukai mokyklos kieme varo ratais be jokio tikslo, bėga ir rėkia, kiek leidžia gerklė, juos gauda ir erzina vyresnių klasių bernai, irgi šiaip sau, iš neturėjimo ką veikti. Už tvoros – tušti Piemenėlių namai, namas, sudalintas atskirais įėjimais, su-

skirstytas ne klasėmis, o šeimų kambariais, netikrų brolių ir sesių gaujomis. Iš kur tie vaikai randasi, tiksliai nežinau, yra tokių, kurie atsimena tėvus, bet kiti – pamesti vos gimę, tėvas yra sakęs, kad ligoninės slaugės juos ten nuveža, pradžioj į mažylių pusę, o paskui, jau paaugintus, – į atskiras krūvas, kad būtų lengviau prižiūrėti. Kiekviena tokia turi savo Kerdžių, šeimnininkę ir auklytę, susikuria savotiška šeima. Kad turi ne tėvus, o Kerdžių ir šeimnininkes, turbūt nėra labai smagu, bet šiaip Piemenėliai – tikri laimės kūdikiai. Mokosi tik kelis mėnesius metuose, žiemą, visą kitą laiką po apylinkių pievas gano kaimyninių daugiabučių karves ir avis. Žiemomis ateina į mūsų klases, ir tie jų mokslai juokingi, mokytojai džiaugiasi, jei sudėlioja sakinį, rašo bent kiek įskaitomai, kartais atsiminę pakabina nosinę. Jei pataiko, tai jau jiems ploja atsistoję, aštuntokams!

Dabar nė vieno nėra kieme, liko dar pora savaitių ganyti, tai ir braido po lietų kažkur pievose, bet jau greit susimaišysim. Iš pradžių būna sunku trintis kartu su naujai atsiradusiais, mokytojai iškart praneša, kad baus už muštynes ir taip toliau. Galiausiai apsiprantam, gal net susidraugaujam, bet ateina pavasaris ir viskas, papūsktu jiems į uodegą, išvaro į ganyklas ir tiek tematysi. Ir man nieks nerūpėtų, jei vietoj matematikos lygčių galėčiau šildytis kojas karvių blynuose.

### **Šventasis. Onai 14. Balandis**

Krizenam Luko kambary, jo motina išėjusi pas kaimynes. Ką tik išgėrėm senio Martyno rūgščiojo, jis mums kartais įpila pūslę, duoda išsinešti, tik liepia niekam nesakyt. Luko tas alus sakytum visai neima, o mane – greit, nors galiausiai abu svirduliuojam, turbūt iš kvailumo, ir dar, kad viskas čia – mirtina paslaptis.

Godžiai siurbiam pasikeisdami, skubam pabaigt. Sakau, noriu nusičiurkšt, jis sako, ir aš, einam abu, kuris pirmas? Tavo namuose tu-

aletas vyrų ar moterų, žvengiam, vonia bendra, abiem gi tinka, abu galim eit, kuris labiau nori. Jau netveriam, tiek rūgščiojo pilvuose, abu eikim, Lukas nusišypso ir aš iš pasiutimo sutinku. Tik sakau, tada šviesos nedekim, gerai, nedekim, sako, tu gali pirma, aš čia greta, man nesvarbu. Gerai, sėdu tamsoj, čiurškiu, girdžiu, jis irgi, tik nesuprantu, į ką, garsas duslus, lyg į plastikinį butelį barbėtų, ar ką. Šūkteliu tamsoj, kad viskas, jau padariau, jis atitaria, kad irgi jau, abu prunkščiam, kokie drąsūs, kokia nesąmonė, kutena pilvą pagalvojus – jis plikas ir aš be kelnių, greta, bet nieko nematom, tik nutuokiam, o tas irgi muša karštį į žandus.

Apčiuopom susirandu kriauklę, paleidžiu vandenį, įsijungia švieša, Lukas įjungia. Prieina, plaunasi rankas patenkintas, duobutės žanduose. Matau kampe plastikinį bakelį, pilną, jau beveik sklidiną. Kiek ten privaryta ir kam, jei šalia tupykla?

Jis pagauna žvilgsnį, trukteli pečiais, sukikena, On, aš tau pasakysiu, bet tu niekam niekada, prisiek dantimis, visais iki vieno, išbyrės, jei prasitarsi. Šluostausi rankas, pasižadu, koks skirtumas, tegul tik pasako. Tie mano sūrūs blynai, sako, motina juos maišo iš šito, jis mosteli ranka į myžalų baką, čia tas mano stebuklas, tu nesijuok, sakau tau, veikia, negali ginčytis, kai buvau mažiukas, motina sykį pabandė išgerti kažkur paskaičiusi, išsigydė pati, o prieš tai iš lovos nesikėlė, tada kitiems pradėjo duot, pradžioj tik saviems, kol nusprendė, kad negalima gailėt, čiagi dievų dovana, turime dalintis, paaugau, ką žinau, visai jau buvo smarvės, tai kad neišsiduotų, pradėjo kepti blynus, sūrūs, ir tiek, visiems gerai.

Žiūriu išplėtus akis, o gomury randasi skonis, kuris man visai nepatinka. Tėvas ne sykį taip gydėsi ir pagijo, neturiu kam pasiskųst, prisiečiau visais dantim, o dar Lukui, tylėsiu per amžius. Ona, sako, nesiraukyk, veikia gi, linkteliu, nusijuokiu taip sausai ir einam iš vonios.

# The Bones of the Beloved

*Kotryna Zylė*

Translated into English by Jayde Will

## **Big Mater. Ona's Birth. September**

I was born on a Thursday evening in the fall, in the basement sauna of a four-storey apartment block like all of Pašilai's children. In the stairwell near the mailboxes, Vanda killed a black chicken with a ladle to mark the occasion and boiled a pot of broth right on top of the bread oven. Father, who had come home after his shift, the neighbours, having returned from work, everybody knew, everyone was in motion, as they didn't get to beat themselves with birch branches and rinse themselves off as usual or leave any soap or hot water that night for the fairies. There were more important things to attend to.

Big Mater brushes my hair and tells stories, she repeats them, always from the beginning. I listen, I imagine my mother white as a cheesecloth, I ask what her skin was like, how she smelled, and Big Mater strokes my head, smiles, look at you, she says, it all stayed in you. And my father would say that. Mocked by the other grown-ups, he carries me on his shoulders everywhere he goes morning, noon, and night, and drives the trolleybus with me sitting next to him in his driver's seat. He says he will never let me go, he says he dreams about mom, and they are so happy, they dance around, sing together around their little sweet bun – me. You are a miracle, my father says.

She places one plait on top of another, pulls, and braids. I'm listening, I don't make a peep. More, tell me more, please. Then she starts up again, how mom went pale and fainted, while Vanda, just a little girl still, cried and felt sorry for the chicken, Big Mater egged her

on, arguing that it was the only way to show respect to Laima, the goddess of childbirth, only that way. Perhaps she killed the chicken at the wrong time, perhaps not quite as she was taught, perhaps not with a ladle, perhaps she became frightened and mixed everything up, she didn't save mom, I ask, did she really do everything right? Big Mater says that now it's not important anymore. Vanda made that soup for the first time, once she learned it, she knew it, she prepared it for all the mothers, everyone who gave birth after my mom. Each time on that very same bread oven, on the ground floor, just as you come inside. We sit there in winter, when the women bake bread, and the neighbours come up and down the stairs, someone in only a t-shirt and towel would always end up there, having failed to hear there's a special evening, and that they couldn't use the sauna. They stepped on the hops and grasses spread across three storeys, from the door of our apartment down to the sauna. I still think that if I hadn't been born on Thursday, if it had been on a different day, during work, when everyone was gone, they wouldn't have stepped there, displeasing Laima, and maybe mom would still be alive.

Big Mater gets up, she moves with difficulty to the stove, herself resembling a bread loaf, you have no idea where her soft, swollen breasts end, and where her stomach begins under the light fabric of her clothing. It's only in the sauna you can see how many layers of skin and flesh overlap, how many folds there are. It's difficult to even imagine that within their depths is a skeleton, bones, perhaps even tiny ones, who knows, though they must be made of iron to support such a body. Other women flatter it and praise it while rinsing her off. Breasts forever full of milk without end, the little ones, having gotten a whiff of the milk, run up to her in the sauna to suck on them.

Big Mater once again pulls my hair, the braid has to be tight, you're such a happy child, she says, don't think anymore, carry the memory of your mother and just be.

**The Saint. Ona is 9. July**

I am sitting in the stairwell, I quietly watch to see what the people who moved in are like, whether they have animals, maybe even children. The boy, right after catching sight of me, grins, dimples clinging to his cheeks, I'm Lukas, he says. Lukas and his mom, that's it. He's handsome, sun-tanned, skinny legs, like a grasshopper.

In the evening we meet in the basement sauna. I'm embarrassed, Lukas should go with the men, but his mother is alone, so she takes him with her. Later they let him go alone, once he gets to know people, settles in, but now she's pulling him by the arm, soaping him up, telling him not to stare, to look at the floor.

I am sitting on the ground hugging my knees, my legs pressed together so nothing shows, I catch Lukas's glance. As if he'd look at the floor while breasts wiggle and behinds jiggle around him. He soaps himself up in the corner, throwing occasional glances over his shoulder. His mother pulls him by the ear, shouts, and pushes him out wrapped in a towel. Pour some water from the well in the yard, she tells him. Afterwards, both will climb up to the first floor, into their new home, their things not yet unpacked, there's so many packages left in the stairwell. I look through the little basement window into the yard standing on my tiptoes. The boy shoots out from between the cars and over to the well, climbs into the water trough and, having thrown off his towel, pours ice-cold water over himself. I bet the other neighbours in other stairwells are scolding him from their windows, balconies, everyone is interested in the newcomers. Lukas doesn't care, the towel remains in his hand, and, naked as the day he was born, he passes right under my nose pressed against the little window. He greets some neighbours who are bringing a cow home near the entrance and disappears into the vestibule.

## **Father. Ona's childhood**

My nest is inside father's trolleybus. As far back as I can remember, I was always there. The names of the bus stops mark summer vacation, horrible downpours after class, the Christmas Eve rush, the side mirrors completely caked in snow. The straw mobile mother made sways from the ceiling of the driver's cabin, with father's fur vest smelling of wild animal laid out in my lair. He didn't start driving until after I was born, he worked as a ticket conductor. Having been left alone with me, still a little baby, he consulted Big Mater, or maybe she ordered him to keep his child close to him. So he got the idea to become a driver. I got the roost where the ticket conductor or the next driver waiting for his shift normally sits. Other drivers treated my father's behaviour with derision, that snotkin will push buttons she shouldn't, she'll steal your concentration, but Big Mater's word was final, and, even without it, my father would have carried me on his shoulders to the ends of the Earth. For him, raising a daughter from behind the wheel was all joy and laughter. I sat quietly and grew up, Big Mater had promised that, said it would be like that. And why not, I count the stops, the images changing under my nose, it's never boring there. My memory is full of alleyways, meadows lined with overhead cables, factories, the occasional district of high-rise apartment blocks, cheerless four-storey apartments in sparsely populated areas.

We both know all the passengers by heart. We laughed, talked, said hi to one another. Everybody loves father's Nr. 7 and me – a dumpling with big eyes next to the driver. I always get candy or fatty cuts of cured pork to suck on, drool over, someone always thrusting bags of carrots and potatoes at me and my father, cheese, freshly pressed, the women say, very tasty, and if it's goat cheese, it's not just food, it's real medicine for your growing daughter, just give it to her. The bundles of clothes they've grown out of are endless – I am growing, and they grow as well, regardless of whether we asked for them or not, they always appear at some stop.

Father arranged his shifts around my afternoon nap and, later, around my school schedule, he even changed his route, it was important that his cable lines follow me. Everybody liked him since he was the only one who allowed, if necessary, passengers to take their animals a few stops, though this was strictly forbidden. The shepherds were only permitted to let their animals graze in the meadows that surrounded their homes, just as the old men and women who kept a goat grazed them beside their balconies and playgrounds and no farther. But all sorts of things can happen. You get caught by the rain just as you're herding them home or, having set off, you may lack the strength to bring them home, it happens, the little shepherds lose track of time horsing around, so father stops and whistles for them to get on quickly so no one sees them, calms down the passengers who get angry or bleat louder than the animals.

Once, a cow travelled with us, it was already late in the evening when no one else was on board to see it. Then I climbed out of my nest and caressed the cow's wet nose. Its shepherd girl milked a cup of milk that smelled of udder, it was warm. I don't really like it like that, but then, laid out on the back seat, I gulped it down and fell asleep right away, stretched out all along the back.

### **The Saint. Ona is 12**

Only Lukas lives in my stairwell – it's a building full of old people, younger people built the eleven-storey high-rise with an elevator next door, everyone who had small children left. My father wouldn't budge, and that was how Lukas's mom, after space in the building freed up, took over a two-room apartment.

We constantly rile up the animals that are brought back in the evening to the new eleven-storey building, we stop under their balconies and egg them on. There are some that never get used to

it, looking around all scared, they run back into their rooms, even in the summer when, after grazing, they still return to our water trough to drink. Though, in time, more docile calves are born in the new building.

I love Lukas, it's impossible not to love him, and he loves me, but we don't talk about it, we both dream about our future spouses, we talk about what they might be like, what they will be like, at the moment we are only lending ourselves to one another. Sometimes he says, Ona, don't get mad, he smiles, and the creases on his cheeks, those dimples of his, that little devil, and it seems I could love him until the day I die.

Lukas is special, that's obvious, but also because of his crepes, Lukas's savoury crepes. His mother makes the crepes, but says her son heals through them, only she doesn't reveal how or why. There are those who think his mother is a witch, others say she puts spells on them, or perhaps Lukas does, but who cares why, what's important is that they stop fevers, headaches, get rid of parasites from your stomach, they save, when no one knows where else to turn, all you have to do is eat. There is always a line of people stopping by, asking, every evening after work, while Lukas's mom busy in the kitchen, mixing the batter, frying and frying. I never saw Lukas mix batter or cast spells, but his mother says that the healing is from her son. She says it, but I don't ask Lukas about it.

### **The Little Shepherds. Ona is 14. October**

It's a long break, I am standing at the trolleybus stop, waiting for father, who has already completed his route today for the umpteenth time. I forgot my sandwiches when I got off his trolleybus this morning. I check the schedule, he's not far away at all, he should be driving past the school any minute, while the name of the stop is announced, I will jump in and grab them.

It's pouring rain, the elementary school kids in the schoolyard are running aimlessly in circles, running and shouting, as much as their throats will allow, the boys from older classes catch them and tease them, just because, out of having nothing to do. Behind the fence, stands the empty house of the Little Shepherds, a building with separate entrances, divided not by class, but by family, gangs of pretend brothers and sisters. Where these children have come from, I don't know exactly, there are some that remember their parents, while others were abandoned almost as soon as they were born, my father says that the hospital nurses take them here, at the beginning, to one side of the house for the little ones, and then, after they grow a bit – into separate batches, so they are easier to take care of. Each of them has their own Herdsman, a woman of the house, and a nanny, they form a particular kind of family. When they have a Herdsman and woman of the house, but not parents, it's probably not a lot of fun, but in general the Little Shepherds are truly lucky kids. They only study a few months out of the year, in winter, and the rest of the time they put cows out to pasture alongside sheep from the neighbouring high-rise apartment blocks in the surrounding meadows. During winter, they come to our classes, and that education of theirs is hilarious, the teachers are overjoyed if they cobble together a sentence, or write legibly, or occasionally remember to use an ogonek. If they hit their mark, then the teachers stand up and applaud them, these eighth-graders!

Now there isn't anyone in the yard, there's still a couple weeks left to herd, so they're wading through the rain somewhere out in the meadows, but we'll mix together soon. In the beginning, it's hard to get along with those who just appeared, the teachers announce right off the bat that they'll punish us for fighting and so on. Finally, we get used to one another, maybe even become friends, but then spring comes and that's it, they're off, they bolt for the pastures and that's the last you'll see of them. And I wouldn't mind if, instead of math equations, I warmed my legs in cow pies.

## **The Saint. Ona is 14. April**

We bust a gut in Lukas' room, his mother has gone to the neighbours. We've just drunk old man Martynas's sour beer, he sometimes pours it into a 1.5-litre plastic bottle, gives it to us to take with us, just he orders us not to tell anyone. It's almost as if the beer doesn't affect Lukas at all, but for me it's quick, though in the end, we both get dizzy, perhaps out of sheer foolishness plus everything we're doing is a deadly secret.

We suck it up greedily, passing it back and forth, hurrying to finish. I say, I want to take a pee, he says, I do too. Let's go together, who's first? Is the toilet at your place for men or women, we laugh, the bathroom is for everyone, it's fine for both, we can both go, whoever needs to go more. We can't stand it anymore, there's so much bitter liquid in our stomachs, we both go, Lukas smiles, and I agree in a fit of mania. I say, only, let's not put the lights on, alright, let's not, he says, you can go first, and I will be next to you, it's fine with me. Alright, I am sitting in the dark, I pee, I hear him peeing too, just I can't figure out into what, the sound is hollow, as if he's peeing into a plastic bottle or something. I call out to him in the dark that I'm done, I already finished, he replies that he's done too, we both snort, how brave we are, what nonsense that was, it gives me butterflies in my stomach just thinking about it, he was naked and I was without pants, near to one another, but we didn't see anything, only sensed it, and that makes my cheeks flushed and hot.

Groping around, I find the sink, turn the water on, the lights go on, Lukas turns them on. He comes over, washes his hands, satisfied, dimples on his cheeks. I see a plastic canister in the corner, almost full. How much piss was in there and why, if the pot was right next to it?

He catches a glimpse, shrugs his shoulders, giggles, Ona, I'll tell you, but don't you ever tell anyone else, swear on my mother's grave, may it crumble down to the last grain if you tell. I dry my

hands, promise, who cares, just as long as he tells me. These are my savoury crepes, he says, that his mother adds it to them, he waves his hand towards the canister of piss, this is my miracle here, just don't laugh, I'm telling you, it works, you can't argue with it, when I was really small, my mother once tried to drink my pee after reading it somewhere, she healed herself. Before that, she couldn't get out of bed, then she started giving it to other people, at first just to people she knew, until she decided that she shouldn't be so stingy, it's a gift from the gods, after all, we need to share it, I got bigger, what do I know, there was already a stench, so to hide it, she started making crepes, savoury ones, and that was that, everyone is happy.

I look at him with my eyes wide open, and a taste accumulates on the roof of my mouth that I don't like at all. My father has treated himself this way more than once and been healed, I can't really knock it, I swear on his mother's grave, and, plus, it's Lukas, I will keep silent till the day I die. Ona, he says, don't make that face, it works, I nod and laugh dryly, and we leave the bathroom.

# NORWAY



**Maria KJOS FONN**  
**Margaret, er du i sorg**  
***Margaret, Are You Grieving***  
Aschehoug, 2024  
Norwegian  
ISBN: 9788203453205

## BIOGRAPHY

**M**aria Kjos Fonn (born in 1990) is one of the most powerful young literary voices in Norway. Her first novel *Kinderwhore* was nominated for the Norwegian Book Prize (the Brage Prize). Her first children's book, *Memoria*, was published in 2022. Kjos Fonn is also a frequent op-ed writer on issues like politics, feminism and society. She lives in Oslo.

## SYNOPSIS

Margaret is six years old when her mother takes her own life. She gets help from her father, her imagination and various children's games to push away the grief and shock, but the pain doesn't disappear. It's just hidden away. As an adult, Maria begins to study medicine, and faced with illness and death, her childhood trauma is revived. She has always been able to rely on her childhood fantasies to help her cope, but now they change form and become more unpredictable. They no longer lead her away from but straight into the pain, and things start to crack. *Margaret, Are You Grieving* is an honest and fearless portrait of a young woman who is drawn towards life and death simultaneously.

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

Maria Kjos Fonn has quickly become one of the most important and powerful literary voices of our time. Her ability and willingness to courageously show how people struggle on the margins has earned her great critical acclaim and nominations for several important awards, including the Brage Prize. Life and death, addiction, mental illness, neglect and suicidal behaviour – the author doesn't shy away from life's darkest themes, but she approaches her characters with great wisdom, and with a devil-may-care humour that makes it bearable to read. It feels so real that you'd think it was autobiographical, but it's not; rather, in addition to her compassionate empathy, Kjos Fonn has an intellectual and knowledgeable approach to her material. The reader of Kjos Fonn's novels is left deeply affected and with a stronger understanding of how life unfolds at the very edge of an existential abyss – and this is precisely where literature is at its very best.

► NORLA



# Margaret, er du i sorg

*Maria Kjos Fonn*



Den første du har elsket, vil alltid være den siste. For min egen del forelsket jeg meg i Tezcatlipoca, herren over himmelen og natten, for det var i hans makt å rive ned og bygge opp. Jeg skjønnte, altfor tidlig, at det var i min makt å få ting til å forsvinne – kråkefjær, blått og rosa glitterdryss, min egen mor. Og fordi jeg visste hvordan dette foregikk, hvordan man kunne fjerne biter av verden slik en kirurg skjærer bort en svulst, havnet jeg selv på utsiden av det hele. For det er ikke sant, slik de ville ha meg til å tro, at jeg føler et overveldende kontrolltap, at verden er grunnleggende kaotisk og uforutsigbar, at jeg trengte å utvikle patologisk skyldfølelse for å gi meg selv en illusjon av mestring og mening. Det er ikke sånn, det er verre: Skylden er helt berettiget. Barn av selvmordere føler ikke avmakt, men makt.

Vi står i kø utenfor disseksjonssalen. Hjertet mitt er helt i ro, som om det ligger og flyter i formalin. Noen av de andre er hvite i ansiktet. Ved siden av meg står en gutt med en fuktig hinne over ansiktet, leppene bevrer når han ler.

Det er vel ingen som kommer til å besvime, sier jeg.

Læreren åpner døra, og lukta slår ut. En skarp dunst av sprit. Nesten berusende. Jeg rygger ikke. Svimler ikke. Går rett inn.

Den kjølige lufta prikker mot huden. Nummer hjernen. Jeg ser på hendene mine. Etter at jeg filte neglene i dag tidlig, har det kommet en liten rift i tommelfingerneeglen. Skjønner ikke hvordan jeg kunne overse den. Jeg tar på et grønt forkle, nitrilhansker.

Formalinet hindrer nedbrytningen, men noe brytes ned uansett. Folk hvisker om den kjemiske lukta, ser bleke ut. Som om de ikke var forberedt. Alle vet at lukta kommer sterkere tilbake når du tror du har vennet deg til den. At den skyller over deg igjen og igjen mens du prøver å holde pusten, men puster du ikke, ender du opp som hun på stålbenken.

Jeg er uberørt.

Vi går sammen i grupper. Jeg melder meg til å skjære først.

Liket er dekket av våte håndklær. Noen brekker seg. Jeg støtter meg ikke til bordet engang. Det er bare et press i tinningen, eller noe tåkete, en hinne over øynene. En slags hodepine. Brystet blottlegges. Håndkleet ligger fortsatt over ansiktet hennes. Men jeg kan se det likevel. Rosehåret. Det lille flashet eller glimt når hun smiler.

Synene bryter i hodet mitt, lyser opp, løser seg opp.

Nei. Den døde kroppen ligner ingen jeg har sett før. Absolutt ingen. Jeg må bli kvitt bildene som ruller på netthinnen og trykker på pause. De blir uskarpe og skjermen blank.

Det er en gammel dame som ligger der. Hun sovnet sikkert inn en kveld og våknet ikke igjen, døde av alderdom, rett og slett. En helt naturlig død. En gammel dame som hadde testamentert kroppen sin til forskning og undervisning.

Og nå er det min tur. Jeg vet ikke hva man bør tenke, har ikke tenkt å tenke i det hele tatt. Skal bare jobbe. Dette er et skolefag. Tre kvarter. Førtifem minutter. Jeg skal gjøre det jeg må.

Jeg tar fram skalpellen, lager et snitt i midtlinjen. Et T-snitt under kragebeina. Kroppen er tung og ugjennomtrengelig, som gummi. Stritter nesten imot mens jeg skjærer løs hud og muskulatur og bretter hudflappene til side. Klipper opp ribbeina, løfter ut forsiden av brystkassen.

Rart, egentlig. Hvor god kontroll jeg har på disse instrumentene. Jeg er Jack the Ripper, borer gjennom alt kroppen er, alt den noen gang har vært. Hvor er hjertet, hvor er det jævla hjertet.

På do lar jeg vannet renne, vet ikke om det er varmt eller kaldt, hendene blir røde. Ser ansiktet mitt i speilet, noen hårstrå er på avveie, setter opp håret på nytt. Smiler til meg selv. Børster rouge over kinene, som liksom har fadet litt i fargen, eller falmet, hva sier man? Så river jeg boksen med tørkepapir av veggen, hiver den i gulvet, slår neven mot speilet, trækker på papiret på gulvet, trækker og sparker, men det revner ikke. Liket er intakt, ikke en flenge i huden. Ikke en åpning over brystvevet inn til det feige, innskrumpede hjertet.

Jeg har hørt om mordere som etter å ha drept, ikke føler seg ferdig med det. De er for speeda på hat, eller kjærlighet, det at døden har inntrådt, er et antiklimaks. De har ikke drept nok, den tunge, slappe kroppen er en ny provokasjon. De må trække på liket, pisse på liket, kutte det i biter for å holde på følelsen. Bare en syk ting jeg hørte på podcast.

Går det bra? spør Ola da vi møtes til lunsj. Han ser på meg, avventende, vaksomt.

Med hva da? spør jeg og tar et lommespeil opp fra veska, drar lyserosa lipliner og lager kontur langs leppene, stryker på leppestift i samme farge. Dus, med blå undertone.

Disseksjonen, sier Ola. Om du tenkte på ... Hva da?

Om du tenkte på mora di.

Jeg skal bli kirurg, sier jeg. Jeg tåler å se død.

Bra. Det går bra. Det er bare en eller annen slags kjemisk eim som sitter i porene, under svetten som rant bort i sluket da vi dusjet etter at vi lå sammen på hybelen. Etterpå ba jeg ham gå, det var blodflekker på lakenet igjen, det er normalt å blø to-tre uker etter en abort, men det må gi seg nå, jeg må bli ren igjen, få rene hender. Karmene

rundt vinduet over senga er i ferd med å oppløses, jeg vet ikke hva som er vegg, hva som er glass, hva jeg stanger hodet mot og hva jeg kan stupe ut av med hodet først. Det lukter kadaver av huden min. Og håret. Det sitter i håret! Formalin, eller jeg vet ikke hva.

Folk legger igjen spor overalt. DNA. Hårstrå, fingeravtrykk, blod.

Det er umulig å slippe unna med noe som helst.

Ola synes jeg burde høre mindre på podcast.

Fellesbadet er klamt etter dusjingen, jeg begynner å skrape vekk skitten under neglene med en neglefil. Skraper og graver. Må få det vekk, få vekk alt. Håret er fuktig, må føne det så det ikke blir flatt, og jeg må nappe brynene, det er noen hårstrå utenfor linjene. Leppene er inntørkede og har en blålig teint. Jeg møter blikket mitt i speilet, øynene er lukket.

Et ansikt. En seng. En plastpose som er revet opp. Fra Rema 1000.

Ikke tenk på det.

# Margaret, Are You Grieving

*Maria Kjos Fonn*

Translated into English by Alison McCullough

Your first love will always be your last. Personally, I fell in love with Tezcatlipoca, god of the sky and the night, because it was within his power to both tear things down and build them up. I understood, far too early, that it was within my power to make things disappear – crows' feathers, pink and blue glitter, my own mother. And because I knew how this was done, how one could remove pieces of the world as a surgeon cuts out a tumour, I ended up on the outside of everything. Because it isn't true, as they would have me believe, that I feel an overwhelming loss of control, that the world is fundamentally chaotic and unpredictable, that I had to develop a pathological sense of guilt in order to create for myself an illusion of mastery and meaning. It isn't like that, it's worse: the guilt is entirely justified. The children of people who die by suicide don't feel powerless, they feel powerful.

We line up outside the dissection room. My heart is utterly calm, as if it lies floating in formalin. Some of the others are white-faced. Next to me stands a boy whose face is covered with a film of dampness; his lips tremble when he laughs.

I'm sure nobody's going to pass out, I say.

The tutor opens the door, and the smell wafts towards us. The sharp reek of pure alcohol. Almost intoxicating. I don't back away, feel no light-headedness. I walk straight in.

The cool air pricks my skin. Numbs my brain. I look at my hands. Since I filed my fingernails early this morning, a small nick has ap-

peared in the nail of my left thumb. I don't know how I could have overlooked it. I put on a green apron, nitrile gloves.

The formalin inhibits tissue breakdown, but some things break down regardless. People whisper about the chemical smell. They turn pale. As if they weren't prepared. Everyone knows that just when you think you've got used to it, the stench returns even more strongly. That it washes over you, again and again, as you try to hold your breath. But if you don't breathe, you end up like the woman on the steel table.

I am unmoved.

We are put into groups. I volunteer to make the first cut.

The cadaver is covered with wet towels. Someone gags. I don't even lean against the table for support. There is only a pressure at my temples, a certain haziness, a film over my eyes. A kind of headache. The chest is revealed. A towel remains over her face, but I can still see it. The rose-coloured hair. The little flash, or glimmer, when she smiles.

The visions fracture in my head, brighten, dissolve.

No. The dead body looks like no one I've seen before. Absolutely no one. I need to get rid of the images rolling across my retinas, press pause. The images blur, and the screen turns blank.

It's an old woman, lying there on the dissection table. She likely fell asleep one night and didn't wake up. Simply died of old age, a completely natural death. An old woman who had bequeathed her body to teaching and scientific research.

And now it's my turn. I don't know what you're supposed to think, I haven't intended to think anything at all. I'm just going to get down to business. This is a subject of study on my course. Three-quarters of an hour. Forty-five minutes. I will do what I have to do.

I take the scalpel, create an incision at the midline. A T-incision below the collarbone. The body is heavy and impenetrable, like rubber; almost resists as I cut the skin and muscles free and fold the flaps of skin aside. Cut through the ribs, lift off the front of the ribcage.

It's strange, actually. Just how well I'm able to control these instruments. I'm Jack the Ripper, drilling through all the body is, all it has ever been. Where is the heart, where is the fucking heart.

In the bathroom I let the water run, unaware of whether it's hot or cold. My hands turn red. I look at my face in the mirror, see a few strands of hair out of place, so put up my hair again. Smile at myself. Brush rouge over my cheeks, whose colour appears to have faded to pasty, or peaky, or whatever the word is. Then I rip the paper towel holder off the wall, throw it on the floor, slam my fist into the mirror, stomp on the roll of paper towels on the floor, stamp and stomp and kick, but nothing rips. The body remains intact, not a tear in the skin. No opening above the breast tissue into the spineless, shrivelled heart.

I've heard of murderers who, after killing, don't feel that they're done. They're too amped up on hate, or love; the fact that death has occurred is an anticlimax. They haven't killed enough – the heavy, limp body is a new provocation. They have to stamp on the corpse, piss on the corpse, hack it into pieces to hold onto the feeling. Just a sick thing I heard on some podcast.

How's it going? Ola asks when we meet for lunch. He looks at me, expectantly, watchfully.

With what? I ask, taking a mirrored compact from my bag and outlining my lips in pale pink lip liner before applying lipstick in the same shade. Subdued, with a blue undertone.

Dissection, Ola says. I was wondering whether it made you think about...

What?

Whether it made you think about your mother.

I'm going to be a surgeon, I say. I can handle seeing death.

Good. Things are good. There's just this kind of chemical odour that remains in the pores, beneath the sweat that ran down the drain as we showered after we'd slept together in my room. Afterwards, I asked him to leave, there were bloodstains on the sheet again – it's normal to bleed for two to three weeks after an abortion, but surely it has to stop soon, I need to be clean again, to have clean hands. The frame of the window above the bed is rotting, I can't tell what's wall, what's glass – what I can hit my head against and what I can jump out of head first. My skin reeks of cadaver. And my hair. The smell gets into your hair! Formalin, or whatever it is.

People leave traces of themselves all over the place. DNA, strands of hair. Fingerprints. Blood.

It's impossible to get away with anything these days.

Ola thinks I should spend less time listening to podcasts.

The shared bathroom is dank after my shower. I begin to scrape away the dirt from under my nails with a nail file. I scrape and dig. Have to get rid of it, get rid of all of it. My hair is damp, I'll have to blow-dry it so it doesn't end up flat, and I need to pluck my eyebrows, there are a few stray hairs outside the lines. My lips are dry and have a bluish cast. I meet my own gaze in the mirror, and my eyes are closed.

A face. A bed. A plastic bag, torn open. From a discount supermarket chain.

Don't think about it.

# ROMANIA



**Bogdan CREȚU**  
**Mai puțin decât dragostea**  
***Less Than Love***

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## BIOGRAPHY

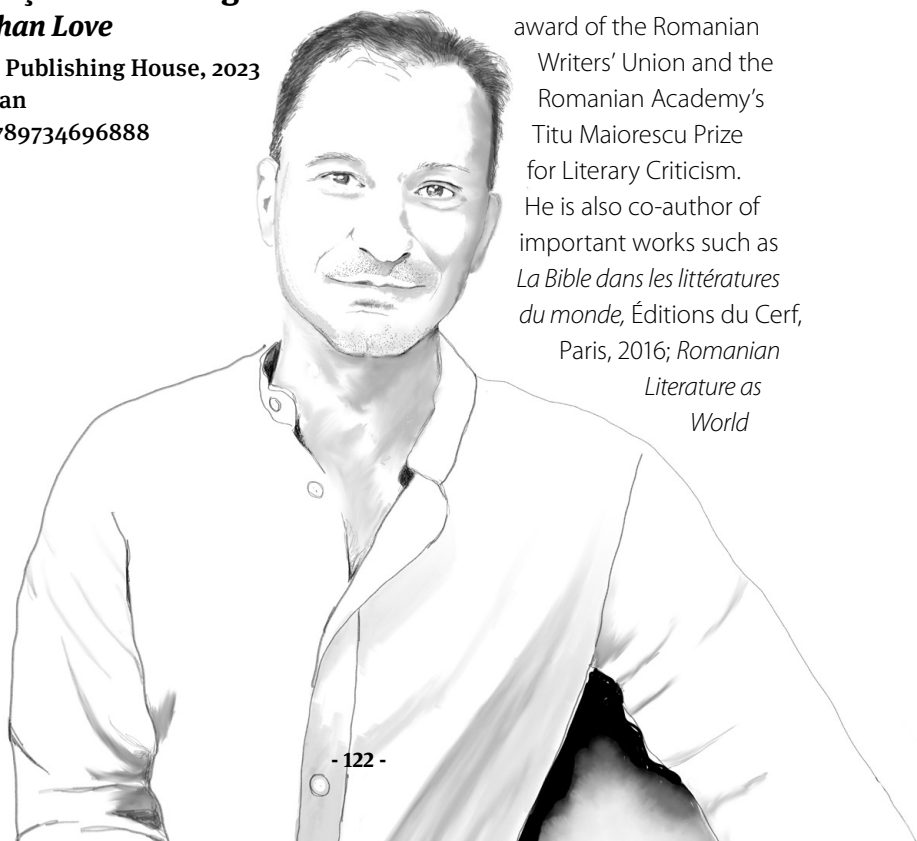
**B**ogdan Crețu is a novelist, literary critic and professor of Romanian literature at 'Alexandru Ioan Cuza' University of Iași, Romania; he was director of the Institute of Romanian Philology, Romanian Academy, Iași (2013–2022). He has published eight books of criticism, including *Negative Utopia in Romanian Literature* (2008) and *The Unicorn at the Eastern World's Gates: D. Cantemir's Bestiary – A Comparative Study* (2013; second edition in 2021), for which

he was bestowed the debut award of the Romanian

Writers' Union and the Romanian Academy's Titu Maiorescu Prize for Literary Criticism.

He is also co-author of important works such as *La Bible dans les littératures du monde*, Éditions du Cerf,

Paris, 2016; *Romanian Literature as World*



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## SYNOPSIS

When Vlad and Maria meet, they discover that their lives have unsuspected connections with each other. Vlad cannot forget the experience of the unhappy love for Sara, back in the final years of Ceaușescu's dictatorship. The two lovers find out that they are placed on opposite ends of communism: she is the daughter of a former torturer, who tortured Vlad's father in Stalinist prisons in the 1950s. Is love still possible? They hide in a mountain village, but they are caught, and because Sara is pregnant, her father accepts their relationship. But Sara disappears from everyone's lives, to punish her father and end the evil he committed. In parallel, the story of Maria, the daughter of a poor family, unfolds, with an alcoholic father and a mother who becomes a housekeeper in the house of Sara's parents after her escape. As she is very attractive and lives in a brutal, post-communist world,

Maria is the victim of a series of acts of harassment that culminate in the rape of her husband. *Less Than Love* is a book about how totalitarianism alters everything, from love to family, about compromise, about fear, but it is also a plea for memory, trying to recover relevant sequences of a past that still marks the present.

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The author shines a light on Romania through the prisms of both communism and post-communism as historical frames. His emblematic characters, the daughter of a former torturer and the son of one of his victims, make up a problematic couple, requiring a discussion – and at the same time presenting a polemic – about the limits of love, freedom, survival and betrayal. The tragedies produced by communism are traced psychologically to post-communism. That is precisely why the novel *Less Than Love* is emblematic both for the Romanian space and for the whole of Eastern Europe. Stylistically, the novel *Less Than Love* focuses on a polyphony of voices and the art of cross-narrative. It deserves a large international readership.

► *The Romanian Cultural Institute*

# Mai puțin decât dragostea

*Bogdan Crețu*



I-a luat câteva secunde ca să-și dea seama. El era. Tatăl Sarei. Domnul Iacoban. Iancu Iacoban, Îngerul cu pulan, cum îi spusese.

— Într-un fel, ai ajuns aici datorită mie. Nu aici, în arest. Că asta e simplu. Aici, în viață. Pentru că eu l-am lăsat pe tac-tu să trăiască atunci când nu era tac-tu. Eu l-am ținut în viață. L-am scos din moarte. E ca și cum l-aș fi născut. Tu pe toate astea le-ai aflat, deși bine ar fi fost pentru toată lumea să rămână îngropate acolo, în zarcă <sup>(1)</sup>. Și nu doar că le-ai aflat, dar i le-ai mai povestit și fetiței mele. Ca să ce? Ca s-o întorci împotriva mea. Adică vii tu, fiul unui nenorocit pe care eu l-am salvat, c-am zis să fac o faptă bună, că eram de-o vârstă, da?, și vii tu acuma și ce faci? Îi bagi tot felul de tâmpenii în cap fetiței mele și-o iei de la mine și fugi cu ea. Tu, un nenorocit. Adică vrei tu s-o târăști și pe ea acolo unde e numai locul tău. Că de-alde tine și de-alde tac-tu e locul vostru să rămâneți acolo, jos. De unde eu am zis să-l scot că mi s-a făcut milă, că parcă mă vedeam pe mine bătut și pișat pe mine de frică și pe mama plângându-mă. Și-am zis să fac o faptă bună, că mă simțeam bine să fac o faptă bună și nu doar așa, o dată, ci până la capăt. Adică să-l țin în viață pe nenorocitul ăla, că asta, mi-am zis, atârnă mai mult decât toate relele pe le-am făcut pe lumea asta. Și-acuma vii tu, ratatul rataților, mucos și căcănar ce ești, flămândul lumii, și, în loc să cauți să-mi mulțumești, tu ce faci? Tu-mi strici fetița, măăăă?

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<sup>(1)</sup> Zarcă comes from Zarea, the name of the old prison in Aiud where the treatment of political prisoners was especially harsh, to the point of extermination.

A urlat ultimul cuvânt. S-a arcuit deodată, s-a ridicat de pe muchia patului, și-a dat seama ce face, s-a controlat. S-a așezat la loc, a gâfâit. Căuta să se stăpânească. I se umflaseră venele pe gât, respira greoi, şuiera ca după un efort peste puterile lui. L-a cuprins un scurt tremur, a sărit iar în sus, până a dat piept în piept cu Vlad și a izbucnit sălbatic:

— Băăăă, futu-ți Cristoșii și morții lu' mă-ta și lu' tac-tu și lu' tot neamu' tău. Băăăă, tu-ți dai seama ce-ai făcut, biserica mă-tii de bandit? Ți-ai băgat pula-n fetița mea, băăăă!

S-a lăsat o liniște de mormânt. Vlad încremenise. Iacoban, deși cu un cap bun mai mărunț, i se părea uriaș. S-a așezat din nou. Și-a pus mâinile pe genunchi, a tras adânc aer în piept, a măturat cu privirea prin toată camera, a fixat-o asupra lui. A continuat cu o voce răgușită, joasă:

— Eu puteam să-l omor pe taică-tu, bă. Puteam să-l omor și nu-mi făcea nimeni nimic. Că el era dușman al poporului. Și mai bine-o făceam, că acum n-ar mai fi ajuns fetița mea în halul ăsta, batjocorită de-un bagabont. Dar lasă, lasă... Știi ceva? Știi ceva, băăă?

Se precipita iar. A început să scuipe salivă. Și-a șters gura cu podul palmei drepte și a zis privindu-l cu ură:

— Știi ceva? Io pe tine te pot omorî acum. Nu te mai scoate nici dracu' din ghearele mele. E acilea, între mine și tine. Ce i-ai făcut tu fetei mele o să-ți fac și io ție. Cu piciorul de la pat. Ce zici? Ți-ar plăcea?

S-a întors deodată cu spatele, a făcut câțiva pași până la ușă, s-a bătut cu palmele peste coapse. S-a plimbat așa, smintit, câteva minute. A revenit. S-a așezat.

— Dar ce rezolv? Cum mai scot io copilu' de-acolo de unde l-ai pus tu? Ia să-mi zici tu mie! Tu l-ai băgat acolo, tu să-l scoți. Auzi? Că m-ai nenorocit.

I-au dat lacrimile. A început să plângă de-a binelea. Parcă cerea ajutor:

— Ce vrei tu, bă, căcat cu ochi? Să fii tu tata la copilu' fetei mele? Asta vrei tu, bă? Să fii tata la copilu' fetei mele? Păi, ce-ai să te faci, bă? Ești tu în stare să ai grijă de ea cum am avut eu? Vii tu și strici totul? Adică, cum ar veni, tot voi ne futeți pe noi acum, nu?

Bolborosea, abia de se mai deslușea ce spune printre hohotele de plâns. Un gălgâit de om înecat cu propria vomă îi ieșea din gâtlee. Vlad s-a socotit pierdut. Omul ăsta chiar era în stare de orice. Nu știa cum să reacționeze. Se simțea la cheremul lui, cum fusese și tatăl lui cu 30 de ani în urmă. Dar parcă-i era și milă. Era disperat. O iubea pe Sara. Amândoi erau disperați. Amândoi o iubeau pe Sara. Fiecare-n felul lui îi voia binele.

— Viața mea... Ce-ai făcut tu din viața mea... Poate că așa trebuia să fie. Blestem. E blestemul ălor de i-am chinuit. Se răzbună acum prin tac-tu. Adică prin copilu' lu' ăla de i-am salvat viața, care-mi face mie viața un chin acum.

— Să știți că pe Sara eu o iubesc, a rostit Vlad pe un ton hotărât. Și ea...

— Ce faci tu, bă? O iubești? Auzi la el, o iu-beș-te. Păi, ce crezi tu, bă, căcat cu ochi, că oricine are, așa, dreptul să iubească pe cine are el chef? Când vrea el? Că vii tu din neamu' pulii, făcut de unu' care l-am ținut io în viață, și-mi zici mie acum că o iubești tu pe fii-mea, că așa ți s-a sculat ție pula. Și ce crezi tu, bă, că e iubirea asta? E așa, că se dă cu rația, ca s-ajungă la toată lumea?

— Eu și Sara ne iubim și mai rău faceți dacă... a spus controlându-și glasul Vlad.

Ce mai avea de pierdut? Ce-i mai puteau lua? Ce-i mai puteau face? Să-l omoare-n bătaie? L-ar fi făcut fericit. Mai bine așa decât fără ea.

A decis să se poarte ca și cum ea ar fi fost acolo, în secția de miliție. Să fie demn. Demn de ea.

— Da, da, a continuat domnul Iacoban. A venit vremea să plătesc. Credeam că am scăpat cu obrazul curat, că mi-am spălat păcatele cu banditu' ăla de Păcuraru. Dar uite că nu e așa. Și acuma plătesc. Plătesc.

— De ce nu vreți să stați de vorbă cu mine și cu Sara? Să ne ascultați?

— Auzi, bă, la el, îmi ține el lecții acuma. Că ce să fac eu. Să-l ascult pe el, că el o iubește pe fii-mea. Că de-aia i-a sucit mințile și-a lăsat-o borțoasă. C-o iubește. Cine ești tu, băăăă, să-ți permiți s-o iubești pe fii-mea? Cine îți dă ție voie, băăă, s-o iubești tu pe fii-mea?

N-avea de ales. Nu e o opțiune. E fatalitate. E mai mult decât dragoște. Cum să-i spună asta omului ăluia din care ieșise dintr-odată la suprafață fostul torționar?

S-au mai scurs două-trei minute lungi de liniște. Domnul Iacoban a oftat lung. Era incredibil cât aer putuse să-nghită. Dacă s-ar fi sufocat și-ar fi căzut pe mozaicul dușumelei, nu s-ar fi mirat.

— Ești dușmanul meu. Da-da, tu ești dușmanul meu cel mai mare. Din toată viața mea. Asta te face important. Te simt aproape. Pot să-ți spun ce-am pe inimă.

A amuțit. Era același om care urlase ca o brută înainte? Și-acuma devenise subit capabil de subtilități? Vorbea pe un ton urban, de om calculat, cizelat.

— Ia, stai jos. Stai jos aici-șa.

I-a netezit așternutul în celălalt capăt al patului, i-a ridicat perna.

— Așează-te acilea. Stai jos și-ascultă-mă.

S-a sucit până și-a găsit o poziție convenabilă. Stătea mai mult pe-o bucă, sucit către Vlad. Și-a împreunat mâinile și le-a prins între genunchi. Părea emoționat.

— Vouă vă e mai ușor. Da-da, e mult mai simplu pentru voi. Pentru că voi sunteți victimele. Ați îndurat, încă îndurați, dar asta vă dă putere. Nedreptatea care vi se face vă-ntărește. Că ce mare lucru să fii victimă? Stai acolo-n colțul tău și suferi. Și cu frica aia te-nveți cu timpul. Ajungi chiar să depinzi de ea, să-ți lipsească. Da, da, știu eu cum e, am observat cu atenție: te simți cu vremea protejat de ea. Ce, nu ți-a povestit taică-tu? Sau s-a rușinat? Pentru că e și asta ceva interesant, domnule, foarte interesant. Ăl de-a încasat-o simte rușine mai mare decât ăl de-a lovit. E lucru' dracului. Dar să știi de la mine, pentru că eu m-am uitat cu atenție la ăi de-i băteam. Ușor-ușor pielea se tăbăcește. Omul se deprinde cu durerea și o duce mai bine. Suportă mai mult. Și știi de ce cred eu că se-ntâmplă așa? Pentru că când ești tu cel slab, îți pui viața-n mâinile ăluia puternic. Na, mă, de-aici, fă ce vrei, pe mine mă doare-n paișpe. El să decidă. E treaba lui ce face cu viața ta. Ține de inspirația și de talentu' lui. Tu te-ai desprins. Iei pumni, palme, bocanci în țurloaie și nuiiele la cur și suferi. La început ți se pare că e mai mult decât poți duce, dar te înveți și cu durerea. Treptat îți dai seama că se poate trăi și așa. Care e răspunderea ta? Te doare-n cot. Toată răspunderea o are ăla de te chinuiește. Ăla de te bate sau te pune la zid. Tu nu mai răspunzi de viața ta. Gata, te-ai eliberat și de ultima obligație de pe lumea asta. Dacă scapi, lumea e a ta. Vei avea întotdeauna dreptate. Știi ce-am mai observat? Că eu îmi făceam treaba acolo, da' luam notițe, băgam la cap. Că măcar cu atâta să mă aleg din anii ăia, să ies pregătit pentru viață. Băgam tot la cap. Și-am văzut că deținutu', oricât de tare l-ai fi bătut, când ieșea nu-ți purta ură. Adică, vezi, domne, așa ne-a fost soarta, tu ai dat, eu am încasat. Putea să fie și invers, ce, parcă nu s-a mai văzut? Dar el se simțea cumva apropiat de tine. Că te văzuse zilnic, vorba ta o auzise, chiar dacă-l înjurai și gamela aia cu zeamă de l-a ținut în viață tot tu i-ai dus-o. Aaa, că l-ai bătut.

Păi, l-ai bătut, că asta era treaba ta, să-l bați, și treaba lui era să o ia pe coajă. Dar nu l-ai omorât, deși puteai să-l omori, nu-ți făcea nimeni nimic. Că au mai fost și demenți de le plăcea să vadă sânge și să simtă că ei decide cât mai are ăla din fața lor de trăit, asta e altceva. Dar nu toți am fost la fel. Mie nu mi-a plăcut să lovesc, încercam să rezolv cu vorba bună. Că oameni suntem, nu? Și nu se știe când ne mai întâlnim. Când n-am avut încotro, am bătut, dar am căutat să nu rup oase, să nu dau la mir. Altfel, îi luam cu vorba bună, mă omule, uite, putem s-o rezolvăm mai simplu sau putem să ne muncim amândoi până ne iese-ochii din cap. Da' să știi că ție s-ar putea să-ți iasă și sufletul. Și sufletu' iese greu, al naibii de greu, mă băiatule, nu e lucru simplu. Că și asta am observat eu, că nu se moare atâta de ușor, domnule. E lucru' naibii, e multă muncă, nu-l poți omorî pe unu' cu una, cu două, cât ai bate din palme. Așa că io-i luam cu vorba bună și cei mai mulți cedau. Că la bătaie erau învățați să reziste, da' la vorba bună nu. „Bă, tu ești cel mai al dracului“, îmi zicea tovarășu' șef Goiciu, „tu îi faci din psihic“. Și creștea inima-n mine. Că nu era oricine ăia de-i făceam eu din psihic. Era oameni învățați, boieri mari, burgheji, oameni cu carte, de fusese ei stăpânii înainte să răsturnăm noi lumea.

S-a-nmuiat deodată. Și-a schimbat poziția ofensivă, și-a sprijinit palmele pe genunchi, a scos din buzunarul hainei un pix și-a început să-l frece între degete. Chipul i s-a luminat, a arătat dintr-odată ca un bunic blând, care spune povești. A oftat din rărunchi.

# Less Than Love

*Bogdan Crețu*

Translated into English by Monica Cure

It took him a few seconds to realise who. It was him. Sara's dad. Mr. Iacoban. Iancu Iacoban, the Big Stick Boogeyman, as he was called.

'In a way, you're here 'cause of me. Not here under arrest. 'Cause that's obvious. Here, alive. 'Cause I let your dad live before he was your dad. I kept him alive. I saved him from death. Just as if I had given birth to him. You found out about all this, though it woulda been better for everyone if it had stayed buried there, in the *zarcă* <sup>(1)</sup>. And not only did you find out about it, but you also told my little girl about it. To what end? To turn her against me. That is, you, the son of a wretch who I saved, 'cause I decided to do a good deed, 'cause we were the same age, right?, now you come and what do you do? You fill my little girl's head with all kinds of nonsense and you take her from me and run away with her. You, a wretch. That is, you wanna drag her down with you where only you belong. 'Cause for the likes of you and the likes of your dad, your place is down there. From where I decided to pull him out 'cause I felt sorry for him, 'cause I could almost see myself beaten up and pissin' my pants in fear and my mom cryin' for me. And I said I'd do a good deed, 'cause I felt good doin' a good deed, and not just like that, one time, but all the way. That is, to keep that wretch alive, 'cause that, I said to myself, counts more than all the bad things I did in my life. And now you come, the biggest loser in the world, a snot-nosed turdsucker, piss-poor, and, instead of tryin' to find ways to thank me, what do you do? You ruin my little girl, huuuuuh?'

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<sup>(1)</sup> Zarcă comes from Zarea, the name of the old prison in Aiud where the treatment of political prisoners was especially harsh, to the point of extermination.

He yelled the final word. He suddenly sprang up from off the edge of the bed, realised what he was doing, and controlled himself. He sat back down, gasped. He struggled to rein himself in. The veins in his neck bulged, he was breathing hard, wheezing as if he had just overexerted himself. A tremor went through him, he jumped up again, until he was chest to chest with Vlad and he broke out wildly:

‘FFFuckin’ Jesus Christ and fuck yer mom and dad and yer whole goddamn family tree. Heyyyy, you realise what you done, you fuck-in’ punk? You stuck your dick in my little girl!!!’

A silence like the grave fell. Vlad froze. Iacoban, though he was a head shorter, seemed like a giant to him. He sat down again. He placed his hands on his knees, took a deep breath, gave the entire room a sweeping glance, and fixed his gaze on Vlad. He continued in a deep, hoarse voice:

‘I coulda killed your father, you know. I coulda killed him and no one woulda done a thing to me. ‘Cause he was an enemy of the people. And I shoulda done it, ‘cause then my little girl wouldn’t’ve end up like this, mistreated by a lowlife. But alright, alright... You know what? Heyyy, know what?’

He was getting worked up again. He started spitting. He wiped his mouth with the back of his right hand and said to him with hatred in his eyes:

‘Know what? I’m gonna kill you now. Not even the devil can tear you away. It’s right here, between you and me. What you did to my little girl I’m gonna do to you. With the leg of this bed. Whaddya say? You’d like that?’

Suddenly he turned his back to him, he took a few steps toward the door, he slapped his thighs a few times. He walked like that, crazed, for a few minutes. He came back. He sat down.

‘But what would that fix? How can I get the kid outta where you put it? You tell me! You put it there, you get it out. You hear? ‘Cause you destroyed me.’

He had tears in his eyes. Then he started actually crying. He seemed to be asking for help:

‘What do you want, huh, you little shit? To be the father of my little girl’s kid? Is that what you want, huh? To be the father of my little girl’s kid? Well, what do you think you’re gonna be, huh? You got what it takes to take care of her like I do? Think you can come and ruin everything? That is, so to say, you’re the ones still fuckin’ us now, eh?’

He was babbling, Vlad could barely make out what he was saying through his sobs. The gurgle of a man choking on his own vomit escaped his throat. Vlad considered himself lost. This man really was capable of anything. He didn’t know how to react. He felt at his mercy, as his father had been 30 years earlier. But Vlad almost pitied him. The man was desperate. He loved Sara. They were both desperate. Both of them loved Sara. Each of them in their own way wanted what was best for her.

‘My life... What did you do to my life... Maybe it had to be this way. A curse. It’s the curse of the people I tortured. They’re getting’ revenge through your dad. That is through the kid of the guy whose life I saved, whose makin’ my life a livin’ hell now.’

‘You should know that I love Sara’, Vlad pronounced decidedly. ‘And she...’

‘You’re doin’ what, huh? You love her? Listen to him, he looves her. Well, you think, you little shit, that anyone, just like that, has the right to love whoever he feels like? Whenever he wants? Just ‘cause you, from some fuckin’ trash family, spawned by a guy I kept alive, come and tell me now that you love my girl, ‘cause that’s what your dick got up to tell you. And that’s what you think, huh, that this is love? That it’s like that, that it’s rationed out, so everyone gets some?’

‘Sara and I love each other and you’ll make it worse if you...’ Vlad said, controlling his voice.

What else did he have to lose? What else could he take from him? What else could he do to him? Beat him to death? That would've made him happy. Better that than living without her. He decided to act as if she were there, at the police station. To be dignified. Worthy of her.

'Yes, yes', Mr. Iacoban continued. 'The time has come for me to pay. I thought I had gotten off scot-free, that I washed away my sins with that hoodlum Păcuraru. But turns out I didn't. And now I'm payin'. I'm payin'.'

'Why don't you want to talk to me and Sara? To hear us out?'

'Would ya listen to him, now he's lecturin' me. Tellin' me what to do. That I should hear him out, 'cause he loves my girl. 'Cause that's why he messed with her head and got her knocked up. 'Cause he loves her. Who the hell are you to love my girl? Who the hell gave you permission to love my girl?'

He had no choice. It wasn't an option. It was an inevitability. It was more than love. How could he say this to that man from whom the former torturer had suddenly surfaced?

A few more long minutes of silence went by. Mr. Iacoban gave a deep sigh. It was incredible how much air he could swallow. If he had suffocated and fallen onto the patterned floorboards, Vlad wouldn't have been surprised.

'You're my enemy. That's right, you're my biggest enemy. Of my entire life. That makes you important. I feel connected to you. I can tell you what's weighing on my heart.'

He was stunned. Was this the same man who had just yelled like a brute? And now he had suddenly become capable of subtleties? He spoke in the urbane tone of a calculated, refined man.

'Here, sit down. Sit down right here.'

He smoothed the bedding on the other side of the bed, lifted up his pillow.

‘Take a seat here. Sit down and listen to me.’

He turned around until he found a comfortable position. He sat more on one side as he twisted to face Vlad. He put his palms together and stuck them between his knees. He seemed emotional.

‘It’s easier for you. That’s right, it’s much simpler for you. Because you are the victims. You suffered, you’re still suffering, but this gives you power. The injustice being done to you strengthens you. How hard is it to be a victim? You just sit there in your corner and suffer. And you get used to that fear over time. You end up even depending on it, missing it. It’s true, I know how it is, I observed it carefully: eventually you feel protected by it. What, didn’t your dad tell you? Or was he ashamed? Because that’s something interesting too, yessir, very interesting. The one who takes it feels more ashamed than the one who deals it. It’s a devilish thing. But trust me, because I watched the guys I was beating carefully. Little by little the skin gets thicker. A person gets used to pain and can stand it more easily. He can handle more. And you know why I think that happens? Because when you’re the weak one, you put your life in the hands of the strong one. Fine, go on, do whatever you want, I couldn’t care less. Let him decide. It’s his business what he does with your life. It depends on his inspiration and talent. You let go. You take the fists, the slaps, the boots to your shins and belts to the ass and suffer. At first it seems it’s more than you can take, but you get used to the pain. Slowly you realise that you can live like this too. What responsibility do you got? It’s all the same to you. All the responsibility goes to the person torturing you. The guy that beats you or puts you up against the wall. You no longer got to answer for your life. It’s done, you freed yourself from the final obligation in this world. If you get out alive, the world is yours. You’ll always be right. Know what else I noticed? ‘Cause I was doing my job there, but I was taking mental notes. So that I’d at least get that out of all those years there, and come out with life experience. I filed everything away. And I saw that the prisoner, no matter how hard you beat him, when he got out, he didn’t hate you. That is, man, you see, that was our fate, you dealt it, I took it. It coulda been the other way

around, what, as if that were unheard of? But he'd feel somehow connected to you. 'Cause he saw you every day, he heard your voice, even if you swore at him, and you were also the one who brought him that metal bowl of broth that kept him alive. Ahh, but you beat him. Well yeah, you beat him, 'cause that was your job, to beat him, and his job was to get clobbered. But you didn't kill him, though you coulda killed him, no one would do anything to you. Maybe there were also freaks that liked to see blood and to feel they're decidin' how much longer the guy in front of them gets to live, that's somethin' else. But we weren't all the same. I don't like hittin' people, I tried to get things done by talkin' nicely. 'Cause we're all people, right? And who knows when we'll run into each other again. When I had no choice, I beat people, but I tried not to break any bones, not to stick it to 'em. Otherwise, I talked nicely to him, look, man, we can do this the easy way or we can both work until our eyes pop out. But you should know that maybe it'll be your soul that pops out too. And it's hard to get a soul out, a helluva job, my boy, it ain't an easy thing. 'Cause I noticed this too, that it ain't so easy to die, no sir. A helluva job, you gotta really work at it, you can't kill a guy just by snappin' your fingers. So I'd talk nicely to them and most of them gave in. 'Cause they were used to puttin' up with beatings, but not someone talkin' nicely to them. 'Man, you're the baddest motherfucker', comrade chief Goiciu would say to me, 'you finish them off psychically.' And it made my heart swell with pride. 'Cause the guys I finished off psychically weren't nobodies. They were educated people, big landowners, the bourgie, people who read books, who were bosses before we turned the world upside down.'

Suddenly he softened. He relaxed his aggressive posture and set his hands on his knees, he took a pen out of his pocket and started to rub it between his fingers. His face brightened, he suddenly looked like a kind grandfather who liked to tell stories. He sighed deeply.

# SLOVAKIA



**Lukáš CABALA**

## **Spomenieš si na Trenčín? *Will You Remember Trenčín?***

Artforum, 2023

Slovak

ISBN: 9788081504013

### **BIOGRAPHY**

**L**ukáš Cabala lives, writes and works in Trenčín. He runs the online second-hand bookshop Čierne na bielom [Black on White]. To date, he has published three books of prose: *Satori v Trenčíne* [*Satori in Trenčín*], *Jar v Jekaterinburgu* [*Spring in Ekaterinburg*], and *Spomenieš si na Trenčín?* [*Will You Remember Trenčín?*] along with the children's book *Jeseň v lese* [*Autumn in the Forest*]. Two of his novellas were nominated for the Anasoft Litera Prize and the first was also voted Book of the Year by readers of the *Knižná revue* literary magazine. Each title is artistically illustrated. The famous Czech illustrator and graphic artist Jindřich Janíček, the Czech magical writer and illustrator Anna Cima, who lives in Tokyo, the children's book illustrator Csilla Dózsa and the open-air painter Juraj Toman, who is from Trenčín, have all worked with Cabala on his books. Lukáš Cabala is currently working on a wide-ranging novel, along with some new children's books.

## SYNOPSIS

Lukáš Cabala's books contain magic realism along with a love of art, as well as showcasing his love of Trenčín. His latest book loosely continues his previous two, but also works excellently as a stand-alone novel.

Cabala blurs the boundaries between yesterday, today and tomorrow, or between here and there. He uses small fragments of story, both funny and serious, to create a map of the area and paint a comprehensive mosaic of his characters' lives and fates. It is illustrated with beautiful paintings by Juraj Toman, which enhance the book's atmosphere and work as an equal partner to the story.

## REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

The prose writer Lukáš Cabala is a breath of fresh air in contemporary Slovak literature; adding his native town to the atlas of fictional worlds is particularly original. The novel *Will You Remember Trenčín?* is, in addition to a remembrance of the past, a tribute to and a celebration of Trenčín but also of the infinite world of literature, and of unbridled imagination that allows us to see even entirely normal things

as miracles. The author uses subtle humour, irony and a dose of magic realism to create a world in line with his own rules. He bends time and space, teaching the reader to see the world beyond traditional structures. The scope of this novella makes it one of the best Slovak literary works of recent years.

► *Slovak Literary Centre*



# Spomenieš si na Trenčín?

*Lukáš Cabala*



## Útek

V jednu noc si Vincent čistil zuby v hornej kúpeľni. Dvere mal privreté. Muselo byť ozaj neskoro, možno pol druhej alebo dve nadržanom. Výnimočne sledoval film do konca a nerozdelil si ho na dvakrát. Zrazu z ničoho nič na chvíľu vypadlo svetlo. Možno prúd na pár sekúnd stratil niť alebo zaváhala žiarovka. Keď sa zažalo, okamžite cítil, že čosi nesedí. Pri dverách, otvárali sa smerom dovnútra, stála nízka stolička. Kúpeľňa patrila k najmenším miestnostiam v dome, neboli v nej žiadne výklenky ani skrinky. Nedalo sa v nej skryť. Stolička stávala pod oknom pri záchode. Mával na nej roztvorenú knihu. Prečo je zrazu tu?! Striaslo ho. Vypľul zvyšky pasty a rukou sa snažil nahmatať si srdce. Každú chvíľu môže skolabovať, napadlo mu. Odsunul ten odporný kus nábytku, trhol dverami a čo najrýchlejšie vbehol do svojej izby. Najprv zatiahol posuvnú stenu s knižnicou, vzápätí zabuchol a zamkol. Počul akési tiché kvílenie a dosť dlho mu trvalo, kým pochopil, že ten zvuk vychádza z jeho hrdla. Sadol si na posteľ a kolená pritisol k hrudi. Takto sa prepadne sám do seba. Nevedel si odpovedať na najdôležitejšiu otázku svojho života. Čo tam, dokrista, robila tá stolička? On ju tam nedal. A nik iný to tiež nemohol spraviť, veď by za sebou predsa nedokázal dvere zavrieť tak, aby stolička zostala tesne pri nich!

Snáď zaspí alebo trebárs upadne do bezvedomia, na tom teraz nezáleží, len nech je už ráno. Nech už počuje Lauru trieskať dverami.

„Nechápem, prečo mi to hovoríš,“ ohradila sa pri raňajkách, hneď, čo slnko ukončilo jeho temné utrpenie. „Ty tiež nemáš rád, keď ti opisujem pavúka veľkosti topánky, ktorého som zabila vo vani.“

„Dnes tu musíte prespať.“

„Tak to absolútne nehrozí!“

„Necháš ma tu samého?“

„Najradšej by som sa ti vysmiala, že sa chováš ako dieťa. Lenže po takomto niečom tu ani náhodou nebudem nocovať.“

Obom dolievala čaj, na tvári skormútený výraz.

„A nemohlo sa ti to iba snívať?“

„Bodaj by.“

Laura spratávala tanieri a príbory do drezu.

„Príď ty k nám a je to vyriešené.“

„Čo povedia susedia?“ spýtal sa po krátkej pauze.

Najprv sa zasmiala. Až o chvíľu si všimla, že sa pýta vážne.

„Čo si sa zbláznil? Mojim susedom som ukradnutá. Ani neviem, ako vyzerajú.“

Zostala stáť pri okne a hľadela do husto zarastenej záhrady.

„Ja neviem... Ale aj tak to predsa nie je dlhodobé riešenie,“ lakte mal na stole, jednou rukou si hnietol čelo.

Vincent čakal, čo povie. Nehýbala sa, ruky pred chvíľou zvesila k telu.

„Laura?“

Nijako nereagovala. Iba srdce nástenných hodín tlklo v pokojnom rytme.

„Laura!?“

Opatrne vstal. Pomaly sa pomedzi lavicu a stôl vybral k nej. Najprv sa iba jemne dotkol jej ramena. Napokon ňou trochu zatriasol. Pozrela na neho s akýmsi údivom v očiach.

„Mne sa zdalo... Vincent, ja som ťa práve videla na záhrade!“

Hľadal stopy po skrytom smiechu. Ale nič. Len akýsi tieň sa jej rozlieval po tvári. Otočil zrak k oknu. Drobný dážď dopadal na listy všetkého rastlínstva a na dno betónového bazénu.

Obaja museli mať pocit straty kontroly. Sú veci, s ktorými sa nedá robiť vôbec nič. Nemôžu predsa zavolať políciu. Keby mohli aspoň vysadiť lieky s vedľajšími účinkami, ibaže nemali aké. Tie, čo Vincent nepravidelne užíva proti rôznym bolestiam, nie sú natoľko silné. A Laura v tom čase ešte žiadne nebrala.

Do toho hustého ticha dvakrát zazvonil zvonec a jeho ozvena zarezovala vo vstupnej hale. Vincent sa vybral ku vchodu. Laura na chvíľu zaváhala, potom sa za ním rozbehla. Pred brámkou nikto nebol, poštárka mizla na konci dlhej ulice.

„Možno nezvonila ona,“ navrhla Laura.

„Veru nie, tak rýchlo by sa nedostala ku križovatke,“ súhlasil, lenže v tom momente vytiahol ruku zo schránky a držal v nej čiernu obálku s červenou známkou.

„Poďme na záhradu.“

„Tam nejdem, tam si ty.“

Ježišmária, pomyslel si v duchu. Do domu vchádzali obozretne. Laura za sebou zavrela dvere, no ešte predtým stihla pred bránu vytiahnuť stojan s nápisom „Otvorené“. Sadli si na gauč v oválnej miestnosti a Vincent nahlas čítal list, čo vypadol z rozrezanej čiernej obálky:

*Vážený pán Vincent Karela,*

*dňa 10. septembra, v piatok, sa na chate v Opatovskej doline uskutoční stretnutie členov Trenčianskeho knižného okrášľovacieho spolku. Stačí sa po príchode zahľásiť na recepcii. Seansa sa uskutoční v noci zo soboty na nedeľu.*

*Vaša účasť je dôležitá!*

L. G.

Laura vyprskla: „Odkedy si v Okrášľovacom knižnom spolku?“

„Presne odteraz.“

Medzitým sa začali trúsiť zákazníci. Vincent s Laurou pozorovali, ako miznú na horných poschodiach, a čakali, či sa vrátia. Napätie postupne vyprchávalo. Krátko po obede Laura odskočila do školy pre Olivera.

„Hranolky sú malí Simpsonovci,“ vravel chlapec, kým stúpал po schodoch.

„No tak čo, dostal jednotku, zastavili sme sa v McDonalde. Nie som dobrá matka, ja viem.“

„Si výborná matka,“ ubezpečil ju Vincent a vzal Oliverovi školskú tašku z pliec.

„Hádaj, kto dnes u nás spí?“ spýtala sa syna.

„Kto?“

Ukázala na Vincenta. Zatváril sa previnilo a pokrčil plecami.

„Naozaj?!“ zvýskol Oliver a začal pobehovať dookola. „A to ako? Ako je to možné? Prečo bude u nás spať? To je úžasné!“

„Lebo sa v noci sám bojí.“

Oliver sa rozosmial, vbehol do kuchynských dverí a o chvíľu sa z ďalších vyrútil.

Pred zotmením zavreli, nasadli spolu do auta a vybrali sa Nad tehelňu do Laurinho bytu. Vošli do vstupnej haly, Laura odomykala vchodové dvere a Oliver sa hrabal v schránke.

„Pošta, pošta!“ kričal chlapec. V ruke držal čiernu obálku s červenou známkou.

# Will You Remember Trenčín?

*Lukáš Cabala*

Translated into English by Magdalena Mullek

## **Escape**

One night Vincent was brushing his teeth in the upstairs bathroom. The door was half-closed. It must have been really late, maybe one-thirty or two in the morning. He had watched a movie all the way to the end instead of splitting it in half as usual. All of a sudden the lights went out. Perhaps the current had lost its thread for a few seconds, or a light bulb had hesitated. When they came back on, he immediately sensed that something was off. A low chair stood by the door, which opened into the bathroom. The bathroom was one of the smallest rooms in the house; it had no nooks or cabinets. There was nowhere to hide in it. Normally the chair was under the window by the toilet. He kept an open book on it. Why was it suddenly here?! Shivers ran down his spine. He spat out the rest of the toothpaste and tried to feel his heart. It occurred to him that he could pass out at any point. He moved aside that revolting piece of furniture, yanked at the door, and ran into his room as quickly as he could. First he pulled over the moving wall with a bookshelf, then he slammed the door and locked it. He heard a quiet whimpering, and it took him a long time to realise that the sound was coming from his throat. He sat down on the bed and pressed his knees to his chest. This way he'd disappear into himself. He couldn't answer the most important question of his life. What, for Christ's sake, was that chair doing there? He hadn't put it there. And no one else could have done it, because they couldn't have closed the door behind themselves in such a manner that the chair would stay right by it!

Maybe he'd fall asleep, or fall unconscious, it didn't matter, just let it be morning already. Let him hear Laura slamming doors already.

‘I don’t understand why you’re telling me this’, she said to him at breakfast, as soon as the sun ended his dark suffering. ‘You don’t like it when I tell you about a spider the size of a shoe that I killed in the bathtub.’

‘You guys have to sleep here tonight.’

‘No way!’

‘You’d leave me here alone?’

‘What I’d like to do is make fun of you for acting like a child. But after something like this, there’s not a chance that I’d spend the night here.’

She poured more tea for each of them, with a downcast look on her face.

‘Could it have been a dream?’

‘I wish.’

Laura cleared the plates and utensils into the sink.

‘Come to our place, that’ll take care of it.’

‘What will the neighbours say?’ he asked after a brief pause.

First she laughed. It took her a moment to realize that he was serious.

‘Have you lost your mind? My neighbours couldn’t care less about me. I don’t even know what they look like.’

She stood by the window, looking at the densely overgrown garden.

‘I don’t know... Besides, that’s not a long-term solution.’ His elbows were propped up on the table and he was rubbing his forehead.

Vincent waited to see what she’d say. She hadn’t moved, except for having hung her arms by her sides a little earlier.

‘Laura?’

She didn’t react. Only the heart of the wall clock beat in a steady rhythm.

‘Laura??’

He got up cautiously. Squeezing between the bench and the table, he slowly made his way toward her. First he gently touched her arm. Then he shook her a little. She gave him a puzzled look.

‘I thought... Vincent, I just saw you in the garden!’

He looked for signs of suppressed laughter. But there were none. Only a shadow spilled across her face. He turned his gaze toward the window. Tiny raindrops were falling onto the vegetation and onto the bottom of the concrete pool.

Both of them must have felt a loss of control. There are things you can do absolutely nothing about. Calling the police was out of the question. At least if they could stop taking medications with side effects, but they weren’t on any. What Vincent took occasionally for various pains wasn’t that strong. And Laura wasn’t taking anything at the time.

Into that dense silence the bell rang twice, and its echo resonated throughout the entryway. Vincent headed toward the door. Laura hesitated, but then she ran after him. There was no one in front of the gate; the mail woman was disappearing at the end of the long street.

‘Maybe she wasn’t the one who rang’, Laura said.

‘I don’t think she was, she couldn’t have made it to the intersection that quickly’, Vincent agreed, but when he pulled his hand out of the mailbox, he was holding a black envelope with a red stamp.

‘Let’s go to the garden.’

‘I’m not going there, you’re there.’

Jesus Christ, he thought. They cautiously walked into the house. Laura closed the door behind her, but before doing so she had dragged the ‘Open’ sign in front of the gate. They sat down on the couch in the semicircular room, and Vincent read aloud the letter that had fallen out of the cut black envelope:

*Dear Mr. Vincent Karela,*

*On Friday, September 10, a meeting of the members of the Trenčín Book Beautification Society will take place at the chalet in Opatovská Valley. Simply sign in at reception upon arrival. The seance will take place at night from Saturday into Sunday.*

*Your attendance is important!*

*L.G.*

Laura exclaimed: ‘Since when are you in the Book Beautification Society?’

‘Since now.’

In the meantime customers started to trickle in. Vincent and Laura watched them disappear on the upper floors and waited to see if they’d come back. The tension slowly dissipated. Shortly after lunch Laura went to pick up Oliver from school.

‘French fries are the little Simpsons’, the boy said as he was going up the stairs.

‘So what, he got an A, we stopped at McDonald’s. I’m not a good mother, I know.’

‘You’re an excellent mother’, Vincent assured her as he took Oliver’s backpack off his shoulders.

‘Guess who’ll be spending the night with us?’ she asked her son.

‘Who?’

She pointed at Vincent. He put on a guilty expression and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Really?!’ Oliver squealed with delight and started to run around. ‘How come? How’s it possible? Why will he spend the night? That’s amazing!’

‘Because he’s scared at night by himself.’

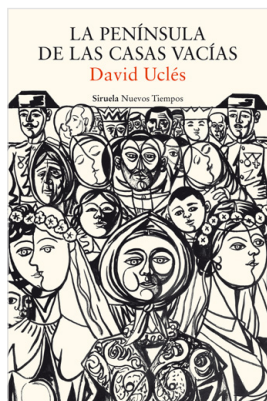
Oliver burst out laughing, ran through the kitchen door, and a moment later darted out a different door.

They closed the shop before dark, got in the car, and went to Laura’s apartment in the Brickyard neighbourhood. They walked into the building entrance, Laura was unlocking the door, and Oliver was rifling through the mailbox.

‘Mail, mail!’ the boy shouted.

He was holding a black envelope with a red stamp.

# SPAIN



**David UCLÉS**

## **La península de las casas vacías**

***The Peninsula of Empty Houses***

**Ediciones Siruela, 2024**

**Spanish**

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### **BIOGRAPHY**

**D**avid Uclés (born in 1990 in Úbeda, Spain) is an author, musician, illustrator and translator. He has worked as a Spanish, English, French and German teacher in various countries. He won first prize in the International Short Story Prize 'Cristina Tomi' in 2021 for 'La filosofa en el café y el pintor en el prostíbulo' and won second prize in the Pedro Zarco Prize in 2020 for his story 'Bicardio Reis'. He

has written for various magazines such as *Actúa*, *Quo* and *Esquire*. As an author, he has published *Emilio y Octubre* (Dos Bigotes, Madrid, 2020), his first foray into magic realism, and *El llanto del león* (Ediciones Complutense, Madrid, 2020), for which he received the Complutense Literature Prize in 2019. In 2022, he received a Montserrat Roig scholarship and has recently received a Leonardo scholarship from the BBKA Foundation.

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Peninsula of Empty Houses* is a historical journey through the whole peninsula, a sort of Iberian 'Macondo', getting to know its different peoples and cultural voices along with the most important episodes of the Spanish Civil War.

This novel recounts the demise of an entire family during the Civil War, starting in Jándula, an imagined Andalusian village, and criss-crossing through a bleeding Iberia.

Covering an eventful period in Spanish history – the Second Republic, Civil War and exile –, the novel stands out for its narrative style, from the surreal to the magical, and always in a deeply researched, moving and, most importantly, respectful way. In that sense, it is a direct scion of Javier Cercas' *Soldiers of Salamis*.

*La península de las casas vacías* is an ode to the rural world, echoing Irene Solà's *When I Sing, Mountains Dance*, as natural, telluric and fantastic energies of the countryside go hand in hand. The use of 'magical neorealism' allows the author to play with time and space, highlighting the most powerful scenes of that time, intertwined with the stories of the protagonist family.

### REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION

An author born in 1990 has succeeded in showcasing a new perspective on one of the most moving conflicts in contemporary European history, demonstrating his enormous narrative sharpness by retelling the Spanish Civil War through the lens of magical realism. The jury was impressed by the originality of this novel and the quality of its writing. The execution is impeccable and coherent and does not exclude uncomfortable episodes committed by both sides. The novel is the result of 15 years of an exhaustive documentary journey through Spanish geography, but it is important to emphasise that although the book focuses on a specific Spanish episode, it relates to any country, time or place because the story is universal. The reader will be struck by how easily magical realism fits into a novel about war. The novel's critical acclaim and its great commercial success has made it possible for new Spanish generations

to encounter a still unknown historic episode. We believe that readers from other European countries could also benefit from this moving, witty and tender novel that can help bring us closer to an experience that continues to mark the Spanish and European present. These turbulent times in which we are witnessing the questioning and regression of some of the rights and freedoms obtained after the Second World War, which are the basis of European values, reinforce the timeliness and relevance of this novel.

► *Acción Cultural Española*



# La península de las casas vacías

David Uclés



Pages 17–18

## Prólogo

Altiplano de Glières, Francia; marzo de 1944

*En mitad del cielo, una nube deja de moverse. Se distingue bien de las demás porque flota solitaria. Carece de contorno y es de un tono más pardusco. Se ha detenido sobre el cuerpo de un miliciano andaluz que yace bocarriba en el manto de nieve que cubre el valle. Solo destacan el rosa tibio de la piel del soldado desnudo y el púrpura de sus heridas, en especial el de la cicatriz del hombro, recuerdo de una batalla que no recuerda.*

*El miliciano no está muerto, duerme con la boca abierta y los pies entre gladiolos. Cuando abre los ojos, la nube despierta también y retoma el movimiento, pero no en dirección nordeste, hacia donde los vientos sa- boyanos suelen barrer el cielo, sino hacia el suelo. El joven observa que está cada vez más cerca. Se incorpora con la intención de huir, pero no puede caminar. Aprecia despavorido que su propia sombra, proyectada sobre la nieve, no tiene piernas. Antes de echarse las manos a las pantorrillas para comprobarlo, se las lleva a los oídos. Un sonido agudo y familiar lo envuelve. Alza la vista y reinterpreta las señales. No se trata de un nublo, sino de un obús. Se lanza de nuevo al suelo y cierra los ojos. Escucha el fragor de la explosión. No lo ha alcanzado, aunque sabe que las heridas graves no duelen al instante.*

*Vuelve a abrir los ojos y se reincorpora, feliz de sentir las piernas. Se palpa el resto del cuerpo y se calma al hallarse de una pieza. El paisaje es ahora otro: la noche ha caído y, pese a que no hay luna ni fuego y a que todo debería estar sumido en una untuosa oscuridad, la nieve deja entrever el verde de los abetos, intenso y refulgente, así como el marrón franciscano de los troncos.*

*Recuperado, decide adentrarse en el bosque. Pisa la linde y, a traición, recibe un disparo en el cuello. La bala le destroza la yugular. El miliciano grita de dolor. Sabe que la herida es mortal. Se lleva los dedos al agujero para intentar taponarlo. Lo que toca no parece sangre, es rugoso y menos adherente. Aprecia que de la herida le sale arena fina. Por mucho que aprieta, la tierra no deja de manar. Nota que se le desinfla el cuerpo, que se le escapa la vida. Y desfallece.*

El miliciano andaluz está soñando. Encadena una pesadilla con otra. En los últimos años, sobre todo durante la guerra civil de su país, ha visto tanto dolor y tantas muertes que estas han empezado a aparecérselo mientras duerme. Teme que, si ve morir a más gente, el sueño se le haga perpetuo y nunca despierte. Angustiado, a la mañana siguiente pide a sus compañeros que lo dejen abandonar el frente. Los milicianos se encuentran en los Alpes, luchando contra las tropas fascistas en la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Sus camaradas aceptan facilitarle la retirada.

El miliciano les hace prometer que, si muere en el camino, cumplirán su última voluntad: que el nombre grabado en su tumba sea el de su padre: Odisto Ardolento. Dice que lo mataron en la guerra civil íbera y nadie pudo encontrar su cuerpo. Les explica que así lo honraría. Sus compañeros le dan su palabra, aunque insisten en que no morirá. Pero se equivocan: al día siguiente, tras más de setenta días en los Alpes resistiendo los ataques enemigos, decenas de ellos pierden la vida. Hitler los sorprende desprevenidos. Los nazis llegan rasurados y cubiertos de talco para camuflarse entre la albura de la nieve, que enseguida teñirán de burdeos.

Al atardecer, el crepitar de la batalla da paso al fragor del fuego, roto por los mugidos de una vaca que corre ciega campo a través. Nuestro hombre, ahora sí, yace muerto y sin gladiolos en los pies, llevándose a la tumba el nombre que quiso que grabaran en su lápida. Aquella noche murió la última persona que podría haber dejado en herencia el apellido de Odisto, el protagonista de esta novela, cuya familia pasó de contar con una cuarentena de miembros en 1936 a desaparecer apenas tres años después. Nunca más nacería un Ardolento.

He aquí pues la historia  
de la descomposición total de una familia,  
de la deshumanización de un pueblo,  
de la desintegración de un territorio  
y de una península de casas vacías.

## **Pages 31–33**

### **3. El alumbramiento**

Delante de la puerta del cortijo, una escultura de santo Domingo Savio, tallada en la madera de un nogal centenario, bloqueaba la entrada. La habían colocado los familiares de María para augurar un venturoso parto. La figura del patrón de las embarazadas medía una vara y media; daba la impresión de que sus ojos roídos por la carcoma se movían, pero tan solo eran las sombras inquietas arrojadas por las llamas de las velas. En Jándula, cuando la embarazada dilataba y el alumbramiento comenzaba, todas las mechas del hogar prendían solas; por eso habían sacado afuera los cirios, para que no se agotara el oxígeno en las estancias y para evitar un incendio. Además, en las juntas de la puerta habían colgado ramas de laurel, que protegía de lo malo, y puesto una palangana

con agua en cada rincón de la pieza donde la gestante iba a dar a luz, para devolver al ambiente la humedad que se perdería durante el parto.

Dos mujeres más ayudaban en la faena: la partera y la madre de la embarazada, Pura, que además se encargaba de rezar el rosario. Lo hacía ayudada de una rama de olivo. Con cada avemaría, arrancaba una hoja sin separar los ojos de la única vela que habían dejado dentro: el cirio bautismal de María. Aguardaban a oscuras a que prendiera espontáneamente en el momento en que el bebé asomara la cabeza. Tres años hacía de la llegada de la luz a Jándula, tarde con respecto al resto del país, que, desde las postrimerías del siglo anterior, ya disfrutaba de sus ventajas. Aunque el precio no era muy elevado y podía pagarse en reales o en fanegas de trigo, Odisto, cálido y telúrico, no quiso invertir en ella.

Dos padrenuestros, trece avemarías y dos glorias después, el cirio bautismal se encendió. María sentía la mitad del cuerpo entumecida y la otra mitad dolorida. Sabía que aquel sería el último alumbramiento porque las venas que le bajaban del estómago hacia la vulva se le habían marcado como a las ancianas y tenían ya un tacto rugoso como la madera. Aquello solo podía significar que el campo se estaba quedando yermo. La partera intentaba convencerla de que no para que empujara con mayor contento. La joven se llamaba Ana. Aquel era el segundo parto en el que ayudaba a María. Con la pequeña Mariángeles, su labor fue ejemplar, razón por la que la familia decidió contar de nuevo con su presencia. En la ciudad podría haber tenido un gran futuro, pero a ella le gustaba Jándula, sus casas encaladas de tejados rojizos, decoradas con macetas y enredaderas; sus callejas desiguales y trazadas al tuntún; aquellas huertas donde descansaban las cuestas que ascendían hacia las montañas vecinas; las plazoletas limpias, siempre llenas de gente; las rinconadas con sus fuentes solitarias; los campos que hacían linde con las laderas de Belerda... De igual forma, le satisfacía su trabajo y ayudar a las mujeres, y estaba dispuesta a ejercer de partera día y

noche. Siempre vestía de rojo para que las manchas de sangre fueran más discretas. De entre los familiares de Odisto, Martina era la que más se entusiasmaba al verla. Cada vez que la partera pasaba por la huerta le llevaba una docena de jeringuillas vacías. A la pequeña le encantaba pinchar con ellas a los burros en los lomos. Las clavaba, absorbía la sangre de los animales, y estos disminuían de tamaño hasta desaparecer. Algo parecido sucedía con las mulas del rabadán Alfanhuí cuando bebían en el río Ferlosio, uno de los más caudalosos de la región, límite natural entre la vega de Granada y la sierra jiennense. También a Josito le gustaba pasar tiempo con la partera. Tenía un extraordinario interés por conocer el misterio de la vida, pues los mayores lo llamaban «alumbramiento» y el pequeño tenía en sus ojos el mal de la ceguera. Estaba convencido de que, si asistía a un nacimiento, quizás podría llegar a ver algo de luz. Por eso, aquella noche de parto se ocultó en el dormitorio.

La madre, en el centro de la sala, en una tumbona con las piernas atadas al techo.

La abuela, concentrada en el rezo, con los pies enterrados en hojas de olivo.

La partera, con su vestido rojo, de rodillas masajeando los labios de María.

Y Josito, en cuclillas junto a la cómoda, con las orejas hacia la vulva de su madre.

De pronto, por uno de los gritos de María, el ciego dio un respingo y derribó la cómoda llevándose las manos a las orejas. El mueble cayó contra el suelo de piedra y se partió en tres. El bebé, del estruendo, se asustó y volvió a introducirse en la matriz, haciendo fuerza con la frente contra el cuello uterino. La madre, al notarlo,

empujó tan fuerte que se desmayó. Pero Ana consiguió que volviera en sí con una solución de limón, betel y café.

Pura, a quien el ruido había sobrecogido en mitad de una jaculatoria, sin más alternativa, desvió la mirada del cirio, que había empezado a parpadear, y se adentró a oscuras en el dormitorio. Temía que fuera un animal el causante del estruendo. Cuando vio que se trataba de su nieto, le arreó un bofetón, lo cogió de la cintura y lo aupó hacia la ventana del cuarto para sacarlo del cortijo. La puerta principal debía seguir a cal y canto hasta que el parto terminara. Josito, desconsolado por no haber podido ver la luz en la vagina de su madre, se quedó sentado en el suelo gimoteando. De golpe, sintió un aliento de humo y el silencio de las llamas. Las velas se habían apagado al unísono. La parcela se oscureció y los ojos de santo Domingo volvieron a parecer exánimes. El bebé había muerto.

Nadie en la huerta de al lado se percató de lo ocurrido, salvo la pequeña Mariángeles, que en el cortijo de Juliana, con todo el cuerpo abuzado en el poyo de una ventana, esperaba con impaciencia el final del parto. Para no caerse, con una rara precaución, la niña había atado los cordones de sus zapatos a una alcayata del alféizar donde a veces colgaban las jaulas para las perdices. Observaba con miedo la oscuridad en la que había quedado inmerso el cortijillo, que, como el desgastado vientre de su madre, había perdido toda la luz. Odisto fue el siguiente en percibir la negrura y en oler el humo de las velas muertas.

**Pages 169–171**

**35.**

**Las doce madres**

La primera medianoche empezada la guerra en Iberia,

... Inga envolvió en papel de estraza un pan *pumpernickel* que había horneado cuarenta y cinco horas seguidas, el pan más duro de toda Westfalia, para que su hijo se defendiera hasta con el centeno si la Legión Cóndor era enviada a Iberia.

... Fiorella escondió bajo los faldones del uniforme y del abrigo militar de paño de su hijo un hatillo con varias trufas blancas, para que las empeñara en caso de necesidad y pudiera pagarse un barco de regreso a Turín.

... Amandine rellenó las botas de su hijo con grillo de Périgord, pues la caminata desde la Dordoña hasta la base del Batallón fascista Jeanne d'Arc, y de allí a Talavera de la Reina, le perjudicaría los pies. También le empapó las lengüetas con óleo de *aglandeau*.

... Estela empacó con cuidado en el morral de su hijo menor una *francesinha* altísima, envuelta en cuero para que no se manchara con la salsa de cerveza rubia. Le dio permiso para que la compartiera con los Viriatos o los compañeros que hiciera en el camino.

... Petra mató un cerdo aprisa para poder prepararlo y conservarlo en tarros con aceite Cévapi. Tres de sus hijos iban a dejar Yugoslavia y a unirse a las Brigadas Internacionales. Como sabía, debido a sus dotes de vidente, que uno de sus hijos no volvería con vida de la guerra, decidió ahorrarle el sufrimiento y metió polvo de amigdalina en una de las salchichas.

... Beata envolvió dentro de las coles blancas del *golabki* las balas que su hijo le enviaba cada dos días. Juntos escondían el armamento escacharrado que venderían a los republicanos a precios desor-

bitados, en una estafa histórica que ayudaría a rebajar la deuda económica de su país.

... Irina repasó en el fuego el doble de tiempo una tanda de blinis. Quería que adquirieran un tono más gris para que, bajo el sol persistente de la península, su hijo recordara en el color tostado de la harina de sarraceno los nublitos soviéticos.

... Sinéad terminó de hornear un pastel de ruibarbo para que lo llevaran consigo sus dos hijos gemelos, rubicundos guerrilleros de la Brigada Irlandesa de más de tres mil hombres

que, si morían por Dios, nada temían. Con los tallos más duros hizo dos cruces que les colgó del cuello para que no olvidaran que no iban a una guerra, sino a una cruzada católica de donde, si morían, ascenderían directos al cielo.

... Emily celebró el Pacto de No Intervención firmado por su país y preparó anguilas en gelatina y *shepherd's pie*. «Inglaterra no es amiga del fascismo, pero tampoco lo es del bolcheviquismo». No vería a sus hijos varones morir, al menos no todavía.

... Olivia, que trabajaba de secretaria para Roosevelt y tenía a sus hijos alistados en el ejército, se alegró de que no fueran a la guerra. Si bien, años más tarde, no dejó de repetir la muletilla que pronunció el presidente: «Fui miope al no ayudar a Iberia».

... María del Rosario estiró las hojas de mazorca para envolver los últimos tamales que comería su hijo antes de fallecer en el cuerpo de voluntarios Benito Juárez García, a casi dos mil leguas de Bella Flor, México.

... Miruna rellenó una *Ciorbă* con balas rusas, entre las alubias, el tocino, el jamón y las zanahorias. Había cocido aquella hogaza largo tiempo para que aguantara el peso y no se descompusiera. Hizo prometer a su hijo que se acordaría de cuál de los panes era el que llevaba la munición. Marcó una pequeñita cruz en la base del elegido.

El candil al cielo

—¡Gonzalo! ¿Oyes? ¡Es preciosa!

—¡Sí! ¡La hemos lanzado bien fuerte! ¡Qué bonita!

—¡Me encanta! ¡Puedo correr por aquí?

—¡Sí! Estamos en la terraza central, está todo despejado.

—¡Qué bonita es!

—¡Va, corre antes de que acabe!

En Jándula, si lanzabas un objetopreciado al cielo, el narrador lo hacía desaparecer y a cambio ponía una música en los oídos del lanzador, una pieza clásica. El objeto debía rozar las nubes más bajas y captar la atención del escritor. Aquella tarde casi primaveral, los dos hermanos lanzaron un candil. Los recompensé con el *Andante festivo* de Sibelius. Josito soltó el palo de lazarillo y corrió por la huerta para sentir el viento y creerse libre de la oscuridad, mirando al cielo y sonriendo, riendo a carcajadas. Gonzalo se sentó en el suelo y se echó a llorar con las manos en los ojos aprovechando que su hermano no lo escuchaba, ya que el volumen estaba muy alto. Lo había invadido una profunda tristeza por la muerte de su primo, a quien apenas había podido llorar, y por el exilio de su padre. La guerra les había abierto una herida que aquellos hermanos no conseguirían cerrar nunca, que supuraría hasta que se apagara la memoria de los hombres. Les puse la pieza dos veces.

## El caligrama del funcionario civil

Desde  
hoy,  
Franco asumirá todo el poder.  
Y el  
pueblo  
lo  
acatará  
felizmente.  
No habrá igualdad.  
La mujer no podrá votar.  
No existirán los cementerios civiles.  
La religión será una asignatura indefectible.  
Las mujeres no deberán usar nunca maquillaje.  
Los gitanos no serán considerados pueblo íbero.  
Todo íbero será siempre profundamente católico.  
Las faldas, largas y amplias, deberán cubrir las piernas.  
Las piscinas se separarán por sexo, así como los colegios.  
Estará mal visto comer en mangas de camisa en los restaurantes.  
Los escotes estarán prohibidos, y los pantalones para las mujeres.  
Se censurará/expurgará todo contenido político, cultural y escrito.  
Los niños mayores de dos años deberán llevar traje de baño en las playas.  
El director de los periódicos será nombrado por el Ministerio del Interior.  
La mujer deberá dedicarse al hogar y al matrimonio, y no emprender una carrera.  
A los homosexuales se les aplicará, si no la muerte directa, la terapia de la lobotomía.  
Castigaremos a los proxenetas, violadores e invertidos en los campos de concentración.  
Se reinstaura la pena de muerte para delitos comunes y políticos con carácter retroactivo.  
El judaísmo, el liberalismo y la democracia serán tres de los enemigos del nuevo régimen.

# The Peninsula of Empty Houses

David Uclés

Translated into English by Maureen Shaughnessy

Pages 17–18

## Prologue

Glières Plateau, France; March 1944

*In the middle of the sky a cloud stops moving. It floats there on its own, standing out from the rest. The cloud lacks contours and is dark brown. It hangs suspended over the body of an Andalusian militiaman lying face up on a blanket of snow that covers the valley. Only the pale pink of the soldier's bare skin and the purple of his wounds show, in particular the scar on his shoulder, a memory from a battle he doesn't recall.*

*The militiaman isn't dead, he's sleeping open-mouthed with his feet in the yellow flags. When he opens his eyes, the cloud awakens with him and starts moving again, not to the northeast, as the winds of Savoy usually sweep through the sky, but rather toward the ground. The young man watches as it moves closer. He sits up with the intention of fleeing, but he cannot walk. Terrified, he now beholds that his own shadow, projected onto the snow, has no legs. Before he can move his hands down to his calves to check whether it's true, he must cover his ears, engulfed by a familiar piercing sound. He looks up and reinterprets the signs. It isn't a storm cloud, it's a bombshell. He throws himself back on the ground and squeezes his eyes shut, hearing the roar of the explosion. He hasn't been hit, although he knows serious wounds don't hurt right away.*

*He reopens his eyes and sits back up, glad he can now feel his legs. He pats the rest of his body and is relieved to find he's still in one piece. The landscape has changed now: night has fallen and even though there is no moonlight and no fire and everything has been plunged into an oily darkness, the snow seems to suggest the green of fir trees, deep and radiant, and the Franciscan brown of tree trunks.*

*Feeling better, he decides to move deeper into the forest, but at the edge of the thicket, through an act of betrayal, he receives a gunshot in the neck. The bullet rips through his jugular. The militiaman cries out in pain. He knows the wound is fatal. He presses his fingers against it to try and plug it. It doesn't feel like blood coming out, it's rough and less sticky. He realises that fine sand is pouring from the wound. As much as he presses, the sand continues to gush out. He feels his body deflating, his life draining away. And he collapses.*

The Andalusian militiaman is dreaming. One nightmare leads to the next. In the last few years, especially during his country's civil war, he has seen so much pain and death that they've started to invade his dreams. He fears that if he sees any more people die, the dreams will become perpetual and he'll never wake up. Distressed, the following morning he asks his comrades for their permission to leave the Front. The militiamen are in the Alps, fighting against the fascist troops in the Second World War. His comrades agree to expedite his leave.

The soldier makes them promise that if he dies along the way they will carry out his last wish: to engrave his tomb with the name of his father, Odisto Ardolento. He says that his father was killed during the Iberian Civil War and his body was never recovered. He explains to them how this act would be a way to honour his father. His comrades give him their word, although they insist he won't die. But they are wrong: the following day, after more than 70 days in the Alps resisting enemy attacks, dozens of them lose their life.

Hitler takes them by surprise. The Nazis arrive freshly shaven and covered in talc to camouflage themselves in the white of the snow, which will soon be stained to dark red.

At dusk, the crackle of the battle gives way to the din of the fire, interrupted by the lowing of a cow that runs blindly back through the field. Now our man does lie dead, no yellow flags at his feet, and he takes to the grave the name he wanted engraved on his tombstone. That night the last person died who could have passed on the surname of Odisto, the protagonist of this novel, whose family had over 40 members in 1936, and just three years later had been wiped off the face of the earth. Never again would there be another Ardolento.

So there you have it  
the tale of a family's entire decomposition,  
the dehumanisation of a people,  
the disintegration of a land  
and a peninsula of empty houses.

### **Pages 31–33**

### **3. The Illumination**

A sculpture of St. Dominic Savio, carved into the wood of a 100-year-old walnut tree, blocked the entrance to the farmhouse. It had been placed there by María's family to augur a fortunate birth. The figure of the patron saint of pregnant women measured one vara and a half; its wormwood-eaten eyes gave the impression that they could shift, but this was only a trick of the flickering shadows cast by the flames of the candles. In Jándula, when a pregnant woman began to dilate and the 'illumination' started – as births were known – all the wicks in the house lit up on their own. For this reason the altar candles had been taken outside: to ensure every room had fresh air

and to prevent fires. Moreover, bay leaf branches had been strung along the doorframes to guard off evil, and a bucket of water placed in each corner of the room where the expectant mother would give birth, to replenish any moisture lost during labour.

Two women were there to help in the task: the midwife and the pregnant woman's mother, Pura, who was also in charge of reciting the rosary. She did so with the help of an olive branch. With each Hail Mary, she removed a leaf without taking her eyes off the only candle left inside the room: María's baptismal candle. They waited in darkness for the candle to ignite spontaneously when the baby's head emerged. Three years has passed since the arrival of electricity to Jándula, much later than the rest of the country, which had already started to reap its benefits by the close of the previous century. It wasn't expensive, and could be paid in reals or bushels of wheat, but Odisto, who was warm and telluric, did not wish to invest therein.

Two Our Fathers, thirteen Hail Marys and two Glory Bes later, the baptismal candle ignited. Half of María's body felt numb, and the other half in pain. She knew it would be her last 'illumination' because the veins from her stomach to her vulva had withered to those of an old woman, as coarse as wood, meaning the field was growing barren. The midwife, a young woman named Ana, tried to convince her otherwise, rousing her to push with greater contentment. It was her second delivery for María, and her role at young Mariángeles's birth had been exemplary, which is why the family had decided to call her back. Ana might have had a great future in the city, but she preferred Jándula: its whitewashed houses with red tile roofs decorated with flowerpots and vines; its small, uneven streets that aimlessly zigged and zagged; the gardens sloping uphill into nearby mountains; its pristine little squares, always teeming with people; the solitary fountains tucked into street corners; the fields that bordered the Belerda hillsides... Ana was gratified by her job and by helping out women, and she was willing to work night and day. She always wore red to conceal the stains on her clothes. In Odis-

to's family, Martina was the most excited to see her. Every time the midwife walked by their property, she took along a dozen empty syringes for Martina. The young girl delighted in pricking donkeys on the back. She stuck them in and drew out the animals' blood, shrinking the beasts until they disappeared altogether. Something similar occurred with Shepherd Alfanhuí's mules when they drank from the river Ferlosio. It was one of the mightiest waterways in the region, separating the Vega de Granada from the Jaén mountain range. Little José enjoyed spending time with the midwife, too. He had an extraordinary interest in understanding the mystery of life because the adults referred to giving birth as 'the illumination', and the boy had been cursed with blindness. He was convinced that if he witnessed a birth he might see some flicker of light. Therefore, he hid in the bedroom that night.

Mother stretched out in the middle of the room, her legs tied to the rafters.

Grandmother focussed on her prayers, her feet buried in olive leaves.

Midwife kneeling in her red dress, massaging María's labia.

And little José squatting next to the dresser, his ears pricked up toward his mother's vulva.

Suddenly, startled by one of his mother's cries, the blind boy jumped, knocking over the dresser as he put his hands to his ears. The furniture fell and broke into three pieces against the stone floor. Frightened by the racket, the baby pushed its forehead against the mother's cervix and slipped back into the womb. When the mother realised what was happening, she pushed so hard she fainted, but Ana was able to revive her using a solution of lemon, betel and coffee.

Pura, who had been startled by the racket in the midst of her prayers, had no alternative but to avert her gaze from the candle, which had started to flicker. She entered the darkened bedroom, concerned that some beast might be causing the uproar. When she found it was just her grandson she slapped him, grabbed him by the waist and hoisted him up to the window in an attempt to remove him from the farmhouse. The front door had to remain tightly shut until the birth was over. Little José, disappointed by not having seen any light from within his mother's vagina, sat whimpering on the floor. He suddenly felt a puff of smoke and the silence of the flames. All the candles went out at once. The plot of land grew dark and the eyes of St. Dominic again became lifeless. The baby had died.

No one beyond the farmhouse noticed what had happened except for little Mariángeles, who was next door at Juliana's lying face down on a windowsill, waiting impatiently for the birth to occur. Employing rare precaution so as not to fall, the girl had tied her shoelaces to an eyehook screwed into the sill, used sometimes to hang partridge cages. She fearfully observed the darkness that now enveloped the small farmhouse from which, like her mother's exhausted womb, all light had vanished. Odisto was the next to notice the blackness, and to smell the smoke of the extinguished candles.

## **Pages 169–171**

35.

### **The Twelve Mothers**

At midnight on the first night of the Iberian war,

... Inga wrapped in brown paper a loaf of pumpernickel bread she had baked for 45 hours straight, the hardest loaf in all of Westphalia, so that her son could defend himself with rye bread if the Condor Legion was sent to Iberia.

... Fiorella hid a bindle of white truffles under the folds of her son's military uniform so he could pawn them off in case he needed to pay his way back to Turin by ship.

... Amandine filled her son's boots with *grillon du Périgord* to keep his feet from aching on the long walk from Dordogne to the Jeanne d'Arc fascist battalion base, then on to Talavera de la Reina. She also soaked the tongues of the boots in aglandau olive oil.

... Estela carefully packed a giant *francesinha* sandwich into her youngest son's rucksack, wrapped in leather to keep the blonde-beer sauce from staining through. She gave him permission to share it with the other Viriato soldiers, or any companions he made on his way.

... Petra quickly slaughtered a pig and then prepared *ćevapi*, preserving it in jars with oil. Three of her sons were leaving Yugoslavia to join the International Brigades. She knew from her gifts of clairvoyance that one of them would not live through the war, and decided to save him the suffering by adding some amygdalin powder to one of his sausages.

... Beata tucked bullets into the *golqbk* white cabbage leaves, sent by her son every other day. Together they hid the damaged armament to be sold to Republican Iberia at an astronomical price, in a historical scam that would help to reduce their country's economic debt.

... Irina kept a batch of blinis cooking in the pan for twice as long. She wanted them to darken so that, under the persistent sun of the Iberian peninsula, her son would recall Soviet storm clouds from the toasted colour of buckwheat flour.

... Sinéad finished baking a rhubarb pie for her twin sons to take with them, red-headed guerrillas from the Irish Brigade of more than three thousand men who had no fear of dying for God. With the hardest stalks she made two crosses, which she hung from their

necks so they wouldn't forget: they were not going to war, but rather on a Catholic crusade where, if they died, they would ascend directly to heaven.

... Emily celebrated the Non-Intervention Pact signed by her country and prepared jellied eels and shepherd's pie. 'England is no friend of fascism, but no friend of bolshevism either.' She wouldn't see her sons die – at least not yet.

... Olivia, who worked as a secretary for Roosevelt and whose sons had enlisted in the Army, was pleased to hear they would not be going to war. Years later, however, she wouldn't stop repeating the president's catchphrase: 'I was near-sighted by not helping out in Iberia.'

... María del Rosario laid out corn husks to wrap up the last tamales her son would eat before dying in the Benito Juárez García volunteer brigade, almost two thousand leagues from Bella Flor, Mexico.

... Miruna layered a *ciorbă* with Russian bullets between the beans, bacon, ham, and carrots. She had baked the loaf for a long time so it wouldn't rot or crack under all the weight. She made her son promise he would remember which loaf of bread held the ammunition, marking the bottom of the loaf with a small cross.

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**64.**

### **The Oil Lamp to the Sky**

'Gonzalo! Can you hear that? It's lovely!'

'Yes! We tossed it so high, as high as we could. Amazing!'

'I love it! Can I run around here?'

'Yes! We're on the main terrace, it's all clear.'

‘It’s so lovely!’

‘Go on and run, before it ends!’

In Jándula, if you tossed a valuable object into the sky, the narrator would make it disappear and in exchange play classical music into the ears of the person or people who did the tossing. The object had to graze the lowest clouds to catch the writer’s attention. That spring afternoon, the two brothers tossed an oil lamp into the sky. I rewarded them with *Andante Festivo* by Sibelius. Little José dropped his guide stick and ran around the yard to feel the wind and imagine he was free from darkness. He looked up at the sky, smiling, and burst into laughter. Gonzalo sat down on the ground and started to cry, covering his eyes with his hands. He was relieved to know his brother couldn’t hear him; the volume drowned out his sobs. He was overcome by such immense sadness at his cousin’s death, having hardly been able to cry over the fact, not to mention his father’s exile. The war had opened a wound that these brothers would never heal from; a wound that would weep until the memory of mankind faded. I played the piece for them twice.

## The Calligram of the Civil Servant

Starting  
today,  
Franco will assume all control.  
And the  
people  
will  
happily  
obey him.  
There will be no equality.  
Women will not be able to vote.  
Religion will be irreproachable.  
There will be no civil cemeteries.  
Gypsies will not be considered Iberians.  
Women will not be able to use makeup.  
All Iberians will be profoundly Catholic.  
Skirts, long and loose, must cover women's legs.  
Swimming pools will be separated by sex, as will schools.  
Low necklines will be prohibited, as will trousers for women.  
We will punish pimps, rapists and fags in concentration camps.  
Homosexuals will either directly be killed or undergo a lobotomy.  
Newspaper directors will be named by the Ministry of the Interior.  
All political, cultural and written content will be censured/expurgated.  
Children over the age of two will have to wear bathing suits at the beach.  
Judaism, liberalism and democracy will be three of the new regime's enemies.  
The death penalty will be retroactively reinstated for common and political crimes.  
Women will have to dedicate themselves to the home and to marriage, not their careers.

# UKRAINE



**Halyna MATVEEVA**

**Ключ соль**

***The Key of G***

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**Ukrainian**

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## BIOGRAPHY

**H**alyna Matveeva was born in Kharkiv. She graduated from the O. M. Beketov Kharkiv National University of Urban Economy with a degree in power engineering. She has worked as an engineer, furniture designer, hairdresser, beauty manager, janitor, wedding chauffeur, theatrical costume restorer, website editor and compiler of children's literature collections. She has taken creative writing courses offered by Litosvita. Halyna Matveeva is the co-founder (together with Natalka Marynychak) of the creative workshop 'PROauthor's Residence' (2019) and the author of two children's books of poetry. Her short stories have repeatedly appeared in anthologies of Ukrainian writers' short prose. However, true recognition came with her recently published novels: *Almost* (2018), *The Female Doctor* (2019) and *The King's Dream* (2023).

## SYNOPSIS

The events in Halyna Matveeva's novel *The Key of G* span a time frame from the late 1990s to the first year of the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine. The book's main characters – violinist Semen Shteyngart and pianist Inna

Kholodina – are Kharkiv musicians whose relationship, formed during their conservatory years, runs much deeper than friendship. The book is not only about music, although there is plenty of it, but also humour, quarrels, love, secrets and losses. Just like in life.

### **REPORT OF THE NOMINATING ORGANISATION**

Kharkiv, a bohemian, laid-back, yet business-driven Ukrainian city is now a frontline stronghold. In her novel, Halyna Matveeva captures the city's transformation and its people. It is a finely crafted story about a generation coming of age alongside their country, facing ever more complex choices with each passing year. The novel's protagonists are Kharkiv musicians, and music is more than just a backdrop – it resonates throughout the text, highlighting both the fragile aesthetics of human existence and the enduring power of friendship, love and devotion to one's city and country. Together, they are thrust into adulthood by history itself. Despite its profound themes, this novel offers a sharp, ironic and effortlessly engaging read.

► *Ukrainian Book Institute*



# Ключ соль

Галина Матвеева



## Pages 173–176

Доба для себе. Чи я вже готовий їхати — сповнений нових навичок і нової лексики? Дорогою додому купив піцу, бо у квартирі тільки чай, кава та сіль.

Тримаюся за рутинні справи, як-от догляд за Інчиним інструментом. Майстер-настроювач заповідав зволожувати повітря біля «G.Schwehten». Наливаю воду у мисочку для соєвого

соусу і ставлю на підлогу біля піаніно. Кумедно виглядає, наче для кота. Відтягую вбік сіру підковдру, що слугує для світломаскування, впускаю день до кімнати. Минулого літа ми з Інною все ж таки купили постільну білизну для харківського житла: два двоспальні комплекти — один у білу та жовту смужку, другий сірого кольору, і ще два для доньки (ясно ж, із поні та з дрібним малюнком, де зелений чергувався з пурпуровим). У крамниці ми довго роздивлялися, що воно зображено на дитячій білизні, поки Ніколь не сказала, що це котики.

Дитячим простирадлом вкриваю піаніно. Фотографую і надсилаю Інні. Підписую: «G.Schwehten — котик». Телефон негайно здригається від вхідного дзвінка. Інна.

— Привіт! Як там удома? — питаю.

Сьогодні це мої перші гучні слова. Луна в кімнаті, луна у слухавці. Певно, зіпсувався динамік, бо останнього тижня телефон падав і нещадно вдарявся...

— Привіт! А як там удома? — здається, усміхнена.

Не помітив, як розвів «там» і «тут». Тепер Інна знову там, у Варшаві. Вдома. А я тут. Сідаю на диван і розповідаю про все, на що дивлюся:

— Тут складно купити скотч. Завісив вікна підковдрами. Нам треба серйозно поговорити: навіщо в кухонній шафці два кілограми солі?

— Ти рибу збирався пекти, — одразу згадує Інна.

— Справді? Який же я... — Узагалі цього не пам'ятаю.

Лягаю, дивлюся у стелю. Виє сирена.

— Це?.. — стишується Інна там.

Удаю, що пливу на спині, загібаю правою рукою, притримую телефон лівим плечем. Всміхаюся:

— То я ще не снідав, це мій шлунок. Будеш зі мною піцу?

— Буду, — видихає вона. — Зараз каву собі зварю. А тобі?

— І мені вари, що його жаліти, те серце!

Уже пройшов медкомісію, що вже там. Інна важко зглітує.

Питаю:

— То ти вже п'єш? Натщесерце?

— Ах-ха... — вдає, що сміється.

Там, у Варшаві, чийсь жіночий голос (може, хтось із Інчиних родичок завітав) питає в моєї дружини, що трапилося і чому вона плаче? Тоді я поспіхом майже кричу:

— Равлику, із сирним бортиком не було, я взяв із підгорілим. Тобі смакує?

— Так! Сім-Сіме...

Трошки помовчу, не можу розмовляти, бо вдавлюся.

Вривається голос Ніколь: «То тато? Тато? Так? Дай!»

Далі у слухавці зважене:

— Алло-о!

— Привіт, Нікольсю! — повертаюся у вертикальне положення, тримаюся за телефон.

Донька каже:

— У мене закінчився білий маркер, отой, що і по склу, і по тканині.

— І що ти таке намалювала? — Не уявляю, що там вона могла зафарбувати.

— Це буде тобі сюрприз, коли приїдеш! — радісно повідомляє вона.

Миттєво відповідаю:

— До-о-обре! — Й одразу ж забігаю наперед із питанням, аби не відповідати, коли приїду, — А ружові шкарпетки знайшлися? Ти минулого разу казала, що загубила...

— Нє... А що ти робив учора?

— Учора?.. Грався в лікаря.

І позавчора, і тиждень тому...Їхав зранку містом і несподівано подумав, що зупинку кровотечі можна відпрацьовувати на стінах будинків, на асфальті, на металевій огорожі парку. Вкладаєш у долоню всю свою лють і притискаєш її до діри від уламку снаряда. Тримаєш міцно, допоки ненависть не припинить цебеніти. Про всяк випадок можна ще перелічити

заподіяє ворогом зло. Все? Відпуская поволі. Кажі собі, що дім устоїть, дорога відновиться, огорожа загоїться зеленим гіллям. І йди повертати смерть туди, звідки прилетіла...

— Тату-у-у! — кричить Ніколь звідтам.

— Що?

— Ти де подівся? — питає невдоволено.

Кажу:

— Я тут.

### **Pages 185–187**

Хайям випускає дим через ніздрі, як казковий дракон, передає мені цигарку, завбачливо ховаючи її в долоні.

— Ні, — кажу.

— Що і за життя не кутив? — дивується Хайям. Він завжди випускає слово «цивільного», і дивна річ — це додає розмові оптимізму.

Витягую із себе слова і посмішку:

— Я таке дороге вино завжди пив, що мені на цигарки не вистачало.

— На скільки дороге? — Хайям затується. Сморід нітрилу, крові та домішок диму створюють ілюзію стоматологічного кабінету.

Замружуюся, відповідаю:

— Як «САТ 7». За пляшку.

— Клас... — Хайям із повагою зітхає, плює в долоню — і ледь вловиме жевріння недопалка зі шкварчанням зникає.

Кліпаю очима й не відчуваю різниці — так і так темно.

— А хіба можна запам'ятати оті всі ноти? — пошепки питає Хайям.

— Можна.

Зрештою він вимикає режим лагідного дурника і радить:

— Не грузи себе, Демо, чуєш? Їх потім заберуть. Усіх наших заберуть, доправлять до моргу, повернуть родичам, поховують як годиться.

— М-мм...

— Нормально ми спрацювали сьогодні. Трохсотих всіх Дойч повіз на Харків.

— Так.

— Демо, а чого ти обрав на скрипці грати, а не, скажімо, на флейті?

Я вже й не знаю, коли Хайям відчепиться із цією невідкладною психотерапією.

Відповідаю:

— У флейту слина набирається, потім калюжа під ногами на сцені.

— Бляха, ти естет!

**Pages 236–237**

«Трьохсотий»?

Прокидаюся від шурхоту біля вікна. Відчайдушне тріпотіння. Певно, метелик втрапив поміж тимчасових фіранок з підковдр і не може виборсатися. Б'ється. Ого, як гучно! Великий, мабуть. А раптом птах? Ні, тоді було би чути крик.

Сідаю. «Трьохсотий». Випручується з тенет. Треба встати з дивана і прострибати до вікна. Але сиджу. Міркую: осінь, нічний метелик у фіранках. Які в нього шанси вижити? Тріпоче. Шерхає по склу.

— Що? — Інна підводиться, кладе долоню на мою спину.

— Чуєш? «Трьохсотий», — кажу та водночас уявляю, як зараз кумедно поскачу через кімнату до вікна: рятувати рядового метелика. — Чи на світло прилетів увечорі, чи...

— Хто? — не розуміє Інна. Її долоня повільно рухається вздовж мого хребта.

— Метелик. Чуєш? По склу.

— Як він сюди потрапив? — дивується вона.

Інна нічних метеликів побоюється. Коли ми у студентські часи засиджувалися влітку допізна, і випадкова совка починала метушитися поруч, Інна лякалася, ніби то кажан.

— Я вікно вчора не зачиняв, аби трохи провітрити.

За кілька місяців харківська квартира набула сумного запаху, наче з неї нещодавно винесли мерця, який перед тим довго хворів.

# The Key of G

*Halyna Matveeva*

Translated into English by Nina Murray

## **Pages 173–176**

Twenty-four hours to myself. Am I ready to go – filled with new skills and new vocabulary? I pick up a pizza on my way home: there's only tea, coffee and salt in the apartment.

I hold on to my chores such as looking after Inna's instrument. The tuner left me with a strict admonition to keep the air around the G. Schwechten. I pour water into a soy-sauce dish and put it on the floor next to the piano. This looks funny, as if it's for a cat. I pull aside the grey duvet that serves as the black-out curtain and let daylight into the room. Last summer, Inna and I finally bought bedding to keep in Kharkiv: two queen sets, white-and-yellow pinstripe and grey, and two for our daughter, one of them, obviously, with ponies. The other had a very small green-and-purple pattern, and we spent a long time at the store trying to identify the figures, until Nicole decided they were kittens.

I use Nicole's sheet to cover the piano. Then I take a picture of it and send it to Inna. 'G. Schwechten – a kitten', I text. The phone instantly shudders with an incoming call. It's Inna.

'Hi! How's everything at home?' I ask.

These are my first words today. There's an echo in the room, and in the receiver. The phone must be damaged after being dropped regularly and without mercy for the last week.

'Hi! How's everything at home over there?' She sounds like she's smiling.

I missed the moment when I divided things into 'here' and 'there.' Now, Inna was, again, over 'there' in Warsaw. At home. And I was here. I sit down on the couch and describe to her everything I can see.

'It's hard to find masking tape at the stores. I covered the windows with the duvets. We need to have a talk about this, too: why do we have five pounds of salt in a cupboard?'

'Because you were going to bake fish,' Inna instantly recalls.

'I did? Wow, that was ambitious.'

I have no memory of this idea. I lie down and look at the ceiling. The siren starts wailing.

'Is that?' Inna asks, quieter now. Over there.

I pretend I'm doing a backstroke, swing my right arm behind me, hold up the phone with my left shoulder. I smile and say, 'I haven't had breakfast yet. That's my stomach. Want some pizza?'

'I do,' she sighs. 'I'm about to make some coffee. Would you like some?'

'Yes, please. To hell with my heart, it'll just have to manage.'

I passed the medical exam. Back there. Inna swallows hard. I ask, 'Are you drinking it already? With no food?'

'Ah-ha!' she pretends to laugh.

Over there, in Warsaw, a woman's voice (a relative must have stopped by) asks my wife what happened and why she is crying. I rush in, almost yelling, 'They didn't have any with the cheese crust, so I got the stone-baked. Do you like it?'

'I do. Sim-Sim...'

I have to say nothing because if I do, I will choke. Nicole's voice breaks in, 'Is that Daddy? Daddy? Yes? Give me!' Then I hear a deliberate, 'Hello?'

'Hi, Nikki!' I return to a vertical position and hold fast onto the phone. My daughter says,

'I've run out of the white marker, the one that goes on fabric and glass.'

'What did you draw with it?' I try to think of all the surfaces she could have covered.

'It'll be a surprise for you when you come back!' she declares, triumphant. I respond, instantly,

'Deal!' and rush to follow up with a question to avoid having her ask me when I'm coming back. 'Did you find your pink socks? Last time you told me you lost them.'

'No-o. What did you do yesterday?'

'Yesterday? I played at being a doctor.'

As I did the day before, and the week before. I was riding through the city one morning when it occurred to me that stopping a bleed could be practised on buildings, the asphalt, the iron rods of the park fence. You just concentrate all your rage in the palm of your hand and press it against the hole made by a mortar shell. You hold it there until the hate you feel stops dripping. If you want to make sure, you can also list every evil the enemy has perpetrated in your mind. Done? Then slowly let go. Tell yourself the building will stand despite the shelling, the road will get repaved, the fence will grow over with ivy. Then go on your way, to send death back where it came from.

'Daddy!' Nicole calls from over there.

'What?'

‘Where did you go?’ she asks, displeased.

‘I’m here,’ I say.

### **Pages 185–187**

Khayyam blows the cigarette smoke out through his nostrils like a mythical dragon and passes the cigarette, prudently cupped in his palm, to me.

‘No,’ I say.

‘What, even in life?’ Khayyam asks, surprised. He always omits ‘your civilian’ and yet somehow that makes the conversation more optimistic.

I make myself smile and say,

‘The wine I always drank was so expensive I didn’t have any money left for cigarettes.’

‘Like, how expensive?’ Khayyam takes a drag on the cigarette. The stench of synthetic rubber and blood, mixed with smoke, creates the illusion of being in a dentist’s office.

I squint, then say,

‘Like a Gen7 CAT <sup>(†)</sup>. For a bottle.’

‘Nice.’

Khayyam sighs with respect and spits into his palm: the all-but-in-visible glow of the cigarette fizzles out. I blink and see no difference: it’s equally dark with my eyes closed or open.

‘Can you really ever memorise all those notes?’ Khayyam whispers.

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(†) CAT = combat application tourniquet.

‘You can.’

Finally, he turns off his kind idiot mode and offers advice,

‘Don’t obsess, Demo, you hear me? They’ll pick them up later. They’ll get all of our guys back, to the morgue, to their families. Give them proper burials.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘We did alright today. Deutsch took all 300s (²) to Kharkiv.’

‘I know.’

‘Demo, how come you chose the violin instead of, say, for instance, the flute?’

I really have no idea when Khayyam might quit his emergency therapy session and leave me alone. I say,

‘Drool pulls inside the flute, then makes a puddle on the stage between your feet.’

‘You fucking aesthete!’

### **Pages 236–237**

‘300?’

A sudden rustle by the window wakes me up. Something is frantic, fighting in there. Must be a moth trapped between our temporary duvet-cover curtains. Its wings hit the folds of fabric. It’s loud – must be a large one. Could it be a bird? No, there’d be screaming, too.

I sit up. He’s a 300 alright. He keeps fighting. I need to get off the couch and hop to the window, but I keep sitting. It’s autumn, he’s a

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(²) ‘300’ is military slang for wounded.

moth trapped in the curtains. What are his chances, I wonder. He flutters, scuffs against the glass.

‘What’s going on?’ Inna sits up, her palm on my back.

‘Can you hear him? He’s 300,’ I say, picturing how I comically hop on my one leg across the room to the window, to save a random moth. ‘Must have come to the light last night, or something...’

‘Who?’ Inna asks. Her palm slowly rubs my spine.

‘The moth. Do you hear him? Against the glass?’

‘How did he get in here?’ she wonders.

Inna is a little scared of moths. Back when we were students, sitting up late in the summer, and an owlet moth would come fussing, Inna jumped like she’d seen a bat.

‘I left the window open last night, to get in some air.’

After these few months, the apartment in Kharkiv has developed a sorrowful smell, as if someone had been ill for a long time and finally died.

‘Ah, right’, Inna puts her feet down on the floor next to my one. ‘And what are we supposed to do with it now? How do we let it out?’

‘I’ll check.’

I almost added, ‘him over’. I have to push off with both arms and hop across the room. How else? The poor thing is fighting hard in there, and not giving up. And we could all have kept sleeping. Sleep is the best way to deal with another black-out. Alright, here I go.

Crash! Ding! Bang!

It’s the porcelain soy sauce dish with water for the piano bouncing off my toes and dancing across the floor.

I lean against the G. Schwechten, catch my breath, and look for the wounded moth. I pull the duvet-cover aside and see the problem.

‘What’s there?’ Inna asks, from a safe distance.

‘The masking tape. There’s no one here’, I turn back to her, still holding on to the lid of the piano, and report, ‘It’s not a moth. A piece of tape has come loose.’



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