

# Slovak Literary Review

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# Pavel 1941 Vilikovský

Prose writer, translator and journalist, Pavel Vilikovský is one of the most outstanding authors in contemporary Slovak literature. His works are distinctive in their themes and expression. It is possible to distinguish in them several separate storylines that gradually develop alongside each other, but also intertwine and mutually supplement each other. One important theme for Vilikovský is the question of identity and support for the idea of Central Europeanism. He is a master of gentle irony, and a continuous reflection on literature and contemporary society are also aspects of his work. →



Pavel  
Vilikovský  
***First and  
Last Love***

Extract translated by Clarice Cloutier →

There are many types of love and the kind about which Pavel Vilikovský speaks in his new novellas does not completely correspond to the image associated with that word. It may be, in fact, that no love motif is even noticed in the story of the successful photographer who doubts the meaning of his work in this quickly changing world. The same holds true for the story about the retired person who, when working on his volunteer project, has to come to terms with dramatic fates, such as those prepared for mankind by the 20th century.

Gabriel had not met the old man at the University of Continued Education, he was a family acquaintance. That was how he knew things that never made it into oral history. For example, he knew that he came from old, probably Lithuanian lineage, which was later Russianized, and his ancestral nobility had then become poor. He also knew that he had visited the Soviet Union, many years later, taking a special train excursion to recall the Revolutionary Labor Movement. The track led through the town where the man had been born, but the train had not stopped there, and even if it had, foreigners were not allowed to get off. The old man had only been able to look through the window, but even though he still had had good vision at the time, he could not see his mother's grave. And where his father was resting – maybe, finally, in peace – he had no idea.

Whether it was thanks to his noble roots or because of the way he had been raised, the boy had maintained an unusual sense of dignity in his conduct and behavior all the way into his old age. He was always smoothly shaved and his hair carefully combed. He never spoke in a raised tone, he did not use crude words, he did not like double-faced jokes and when he sat down, he did not cross one leg over the other. His highly-polished manners were probably the only thing that he had left of his family. When he had already been in the new country a while, he was able to trace out his sister with the help of the Red Cross. She was living in Yugoslavia, where she had married and given birth to two children, but in the confusion of World War II, he lost track of her once again and it was not until the end of the 50s, when the cold war was not as frozen, that she finally contacted him one day unexpectedly from New York. Not even the Red Cross knew where fate had blown her brother. According to unconfirmed accounts, he was most likely living in South America.

“At school, we continued along at a fast pace. We could study well, as there were only three students in the class. I made it to the 6<sup>th</sup> form. A rumor started up in Istanbul that the lycée and high-school which we had there would be moved. One to Belgium and another to some place called Czechoslovakia. Our entire high-school requested a transfer somewhere, anywhere, and we waited for what would happen. One day, a man showed up who did some testing with us and then went away. Then it was quiet for a long time, until suddenly news came that we were being organized into the twenty-first group and that we were supposed to appear in Istanbul on a certain date. I sold all of the unnecessary things I had, even my blanket from home – it was an excellent one, a stitched quilt – and I set out with this money and the needed gear. In Istanbul, we slept in clean sheets for the first time after a long period. And in the morning, we trudged to the station and had the goods from the American Red Cross with us. We were

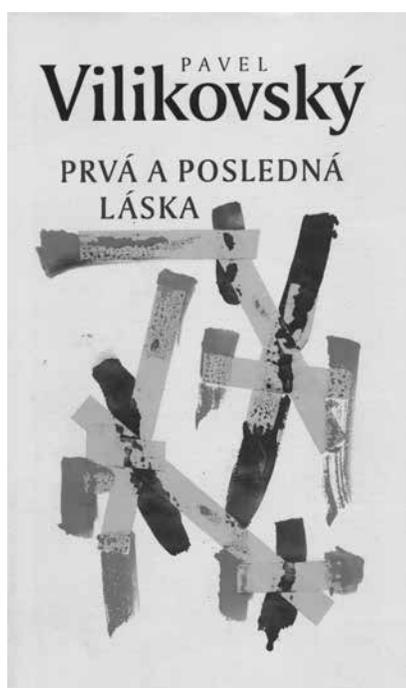
accompanied by an employee of the Czechoslovak Consulate. We had to call out 'Nazdar' [greetings] even though we did not know what we were calling out. The train cars were outfitted for summer, with no toilets and there was little room. I slept on a narrow bench and was held fast by a belt. We went through Greece and Bulgaria. In Sofia, we were welcomed with speeches, but nothing to eat. Then we went through Yugoslavia. Beograd was a destroyed city, mud up to your knees. There we waited for permission to continue on, but it was Orthodox Christmas at the time and no offices were open. Finally, they furnished us with a postal train car that had no facilities and we moved onward. The main thing was that we were alive. In Subotica, there was a military inspection and the inhabitants made us a dinner. Then we were transferred into two train cars sent to us by the Hungarians. We travelled through Budapest, Bratislava and at one in the morning, we arrived at our destination – Moravská Třebová. There was snow, it was cold and the road was long to the barracks where we would be housed. That was 1922. Thus began my life in Czechoslovakia.”

That was how the boy's multi-year odyssey ended. When he finished studying to be a geodetic engineer, he settled in the northern corner of Slovakia and spent his entire, long life there. No other person who had even been born there knew that regions so intimately as he, since he had measured its fields and meadows and forests as a land surveyor with his own feet. Soon after his arrival to his new place of work, he founded a family and given his previous experiences in life, it was no miracle that he very much clung to them; they were his only one, he had no other. In his free time, he enjoyed telling his children stories and not only the ones that he made up or the horrifying ones from a book. He continuously told his own life story to Gabriel in all its detail till the end of his life. He probably did not know that it was not real – or maybe he did know and that is exactly why he confided in him, without reservation.

The old man had had the fortune to escape what various colleagues of his from Russia had gone through when the Soviet KGP had carried them off to Siberia after the war to build labor camps, where the prisoners mined diamonds and precious metals. Gabriel had had a tip off for one of them. Engineer K. was in Siberia for ten years, then they returned him to his wife in Slovakia as a useless person. When Gabriel went round to visit him at home, he realized that he was also useless for oral history: his mouth was empty, toothless and wordless. They had numbed him into a shy, incomprehensible smile. Gabriel said that perhaps it was a defense reflex from the camp, but what the heck did he know about the Soviet camps. The man sitting in the armchair motionlessly, seemingly as fragile and breakable as straw, a bit like a salty grissini stick that had already

been nibbled at by someone before. He did not look at Gabriel, the whole time he did not take his eyes off his wife, and when she went into the kitchen to brew some coffee, he fidgeted, frightened in his chair, calling “Vierochka!” Then he got up on his fragile feet and off he went after her like a dog.

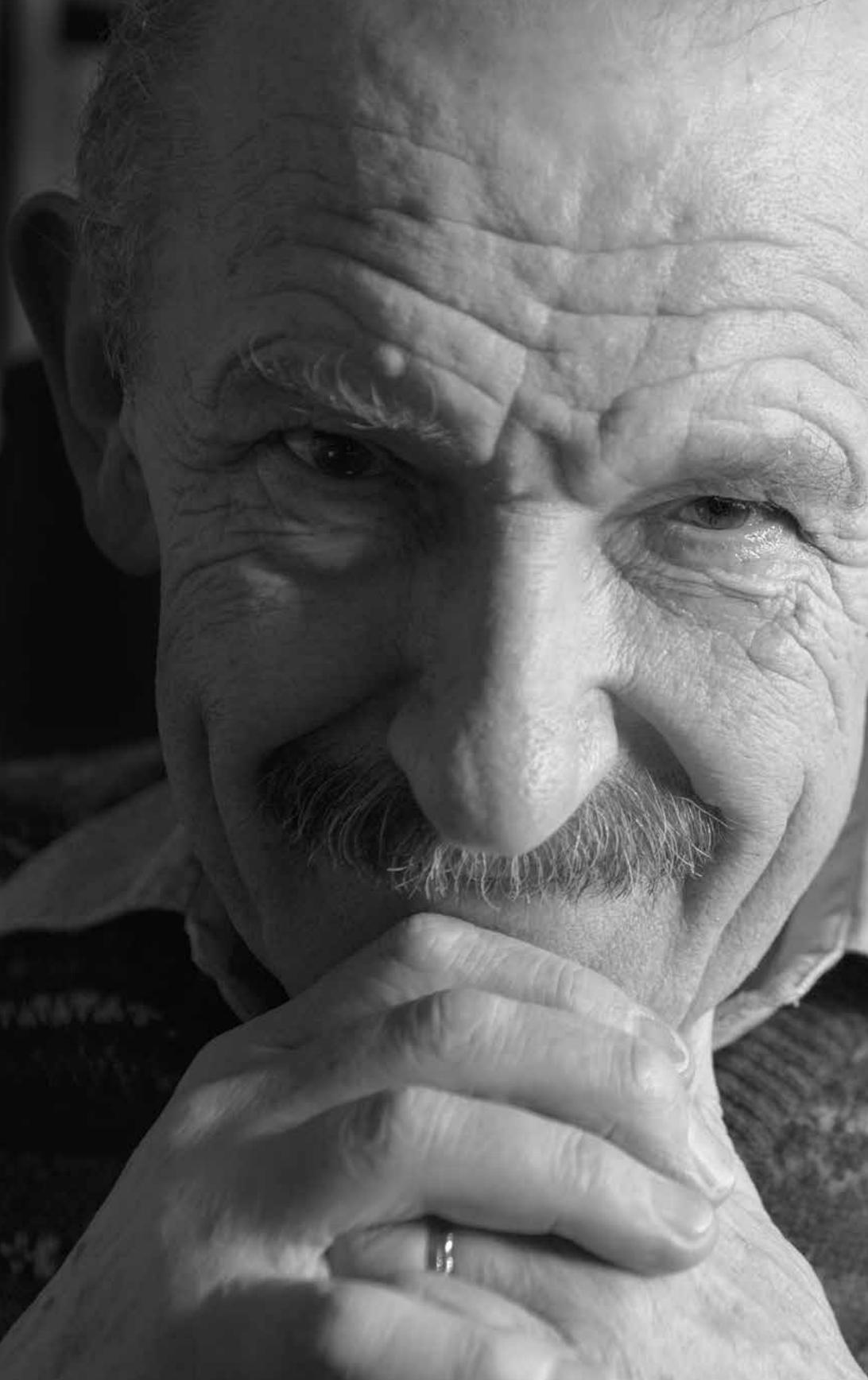
Vierochka was from Siberia, from a wealthy Irkust family. The young girl had enchanted the well-known Slovak businessman who was working in Russia at the time and after the Revolution, she came with him as his wife to Czechoslovakia where he later held an important function. When he died, she had earned her living as a teacher of Russian. She had not lived a long time with her second husband, Engineer K. Despite that, once they informed her of his code address, she could send him a kilo of sugar or warm underwear once or twice a year. If he actually got the packages, she never knew. One day they told her to pick up her husband at the station on a specific date, and so the heretofore childless Vierochka acquired her first and only child at an advanced age, an immaculate conception Soviet style. She had to take him to school, small and helpless as he was, and whoever she was teaching, there also sat Engineer K. in the corner of the office and trembled in mortal fear of the world, a world in which he could not see as far as his mother-wife. When Gabriel followed the situation, it was the sugar bowl that exemplified it all – Engineer K. scurried around Vierochka’s heels as he waited for her to show him where to put it. It was then that he noticed – as he had been evading the glance of the unknown person – then that he understood that a new chapter of his oral history was not in the making.



← Published by Slovart,  
Bratislava, 2013

# Dušan Dušek 1946

Dušan Dušek is a poet, prose writer, film scriptwriter, author of radio plays and literature for children and young people, as well as a university lecturer. In his works he repeatedly returns to the themes of childhood, home, family relationships, eroticism and adolescence. He hints at his attitude by presenting things from an unexpected angle, which often changes and even passes into the realm of fantasy and the unreal. Many of his works have been awarded prizes, as has his latest work *Melón sa vždy smeje* (The Melon Always Laughs), which was shortlisted for the Anasoft Litera 2014. These are tales about Adam, a writer, and his wife Cinnamon, who is a doctor. The book contains the author's works from short books published 1975-2003, where the main hero is time, stored in the memory as the one uncertain certainty, time coming back in memories like a boomerang, time taking away the colourfulness of crucial moments. →



Dušan

Dušek

***The Melon  
Always  
Laughs***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

Some books grow gradually like trees; their branches spread out, full of air, flying birds and fruit.

## Sleeping Pills

Deliverymen were unloading soft drinks in front of a cake shop that had been closed down and demolished the year before.

Later I was sitting in my room and all of a sudden I couldn't for the life of me remember which shirt I had on.

I just couldn't remember.

\* \* \*

That had already happened to me several times, always in the evening and always with the same shirt. It was one of my favourites: checked flannel. I lost the buttons so often I was beginning to believe that one day I would also lose its checked pattern and it would just be white. My wife said I was careless; where was she to keep getting new buttons? I don't know; they were nice, brown, shiny ones, I couldn't help losing them. She blamed me, because women don't lose anything like that, except hair perhaps, but there's plenty of that. And the more I lost, the more embarrassed and guilty I felt, over every single button; there was no one to forgive me. I had all kinds of shirts, but this one suited me best; however, I never knew which I'd put on and tucked into my belt. I switched on the lamp and once more saw that checked material, faded from wear and washing, another button missing on the sleeve, it was my fault again, never the shirt's or the button's or even the thread's.

This afternoon I saw a man in checked shorts drinking water from a bucket on the ground; he bent forward and stuck his head in it. Like a horse. He had scrawny legs; he could have been a boxer, at least from the way they stuck out of his shorts; I could easily imagine the missing soft leather boxing shoes; he already had spider veins on his calves.

It couldn't be helped.

I remembered the spiders, but at that moment the alarm went off – I could now hear its ticking and I couldn't stand that.

Maybe I even cursed; and maybe it was already morning, the bedclothes were rumped around us.

I asked, "What's that you've got on your nose?"

My wife replied, "A clothes peg. Don't you recognise it? Your socks do."

I was still half asleep – maybe three quarters.

"What's that alarm clock doing here? It's getting on my nerves again!"

"But it hasn't rung yet. Put a peg on too."

I'd been dreaming that she had put a peg on her nose and the Jozef Ruhla alarm clock beside the bed had rung.

“I won’t,” I said. “That alarm clock must go, buzz off right now. It keeps intruding – like a bad smell.”

And Zuza said to me, “You know the pictures hairs make in the tub after a bath?”

I covered my ears.

“You hear that! You hear that?”

My wife listened for a while.

“It’s ticking, isn’t it?”

“Now it’s stopped.”

“Adam, I’ll tell you something. Are you listening?”

“I’m asleep.”

And I said to him, “You’re not asleep. You’re not asleep, are you? You’re only breathing, aren’t you?”

He turned towards the wall and hid under the bedclothes.

“Stop nagging me!” he said. “It’ll ring any minute and I won’t get enough sleep again! Can you hear it?”

And I just said, “Adam, Adam dear, do you still dream about me?”

I would have liked us to talk, at least for a while, before I went to work, but he was asleep. I could hear him breathing – and then I heard the alarm clock, called Jo Ruhla, even though it was only ticking quietly and somehow tamely, as if it were afraid.

“Are you asleep?”

I was half asleep.

And Zuza said to me, “When you feel fonder of me, you understand me better and you’re less trouble.”

At that moment the alarm clock went off and insisted that we must get up; it rang and rang, until I hit out at it. It couldn’t be helped. It fell off the bedside table, because it didn’t have wings, the glass face broke, but at least it shut up.

“Bastard,” I said.

And immediately something moved in the clock, as if it had coughed – and it began ticking again.

“Do I have to get out of bed and give you another clout?”

\* \* \*

I had three rooms, fifteen patients all together, every now and then one less, an empty bed, that always made me want to cry. I promised myself I would buy flat mules with rubber soles; the leather ones clip-clopped too much. They reminded me of the ticking clock and Adam. He didn’t like it; he broke the glass on it, but it only ticked very gently, as if

a tiny bit of its glittering bell remained in every little tick. I had numbers six, seven and eight.

I opened the door; my eyes ran over the beds: they were alive. Four beds and four old women.

“Good morning.”

And one of them started up, “Doctor, Doctor!”

There was even more fear in her eyes than in her voice.

“What is it, grannie?”

The other three smiled at me – and I at the fourth.

“Who are you calling grannie?”

“Now, there, Mrs Hrnková.”

“Don’t ‘grannie’ me!”

I’d forgotten she didn’t like the familiar ‘grannie’. Mrs Hrnková had four gold rings on two fingers and had once owned a brickyard; she used to drive to balls with her husband in her own fiacre, but later she only had her husband and then only the rings she couldn’t take off.

“Well, what is it?”

“Help me, help me, for heaven’s sake, help me!”

“What’s the matter? Well, what do you need?”

“Nothing, just help me!”

“But, Mrs Hrnková...”

“We’ve lost our bus!”

Mrs Hrnková was a lady from a fiacre and now she had lost a bus.

“What bus?”

“It was standing in front of the house...”



← Published by Slovart,  
Bratislava, 2013

# Stanislav Rakús

1940

In his work writer and prominent literary theorist Stanislav Rakús not only presents his own view of the world, but also demonstrates modern narrative and compositional methods. His first prose works showed him to be a master of atmosphere and imaginative abandon. In each story he includes a dramatic moment that underlines the tragedy of the human lot. His first novel *Temporálne poznámky* (Temporal Notes, 1993) has an autobiographical background, but in it, as in *Excentrická univerzita* (Eccentric University, 2008), he also made use of his teaching experience, full of awkward moments and paradoxes. In 2010 he won the most prestigious Slovak literary prize, Anasoft Litera, for his collection of stories *Telegram* (2009), which was followed by a collection of short prose works entitled *Fáza uvoľnenia* (Phase of Relaxation, 2013), set in the nineteen sixties, when in spite of the gradually more relaxed conditions, there still remained unfavourable systemic and human problems. At present he is working at the Department of Slovak Literature and Literary Science of the Faculty of Arts, Prešov University, where he is a Professor Emeritus. He lives in Košice. →



Stanislav  
Rakús

# ***Phase of Relaxation***

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

Three books of short stories with a common denominator: troubles caused by intelligence. Although intellectuals are people with a great knowledge of literature, in practical life their less intellectual relations and acquaintances are always more successful.

Shortly after Dr Norkop had finished his lecture and signed a document, evidently a contract, I approached him in order to invite him for coffee and have the chance to talk to him for a while. He looked at his watch and then at his notes. When he found out his bus wasn't leaving for another forty minutes or so, he accepted my invitation. But he would have tea and not coffee, he said. He had recently had some unpleasant health problems and although they had now abated, he still wasn't completely his old self.

It was the first time I had ever met Norkop but I knew exactly who he was. For me, this thirty-something was the greatest literary authority of all the people lecturing during the methodology day at the recreation centre of the regional pedagogical institute. With laced-up shoes, shortish trousers, red cheeks, thin receding hair, glasses with thick lenses and a somewhat unpleasant tone of voice with weak 'r' sounds, he wasn't exactly how I imagined him, though. He was a lecturer from the Department of Slovak Language and Literature and I regularly read his reviews and other articles in literary magazines. They were marked out by their elegance, wit and almost aristocratic spirit and were honest and accurate in their criticism of weaknesses in the work being reviewed. This criticism was constructive and never mocking, however, and this helped assuage the severity of some of his stances.

We went into the empty coffee bar. Another lecture was going on but I had chosen to miss it because of Norkop. We sat down like two unequal partners. Whilst I knew a lot about him thanks to all the articles by him which I had read, he only knew that my surname was Filakovič – if he could remember it from when I introduced myself, that is.

We had studied the same subject, he in the capital, I in eastern Slovakia, in the place where he was now working. I had done military service straight after graduating, then worked at an apprentice school and then started at a night-school for workers where I was still working.

As soon as we had sat down, the same woman from administration who Norkop had signed the document for appeared. She had some other business with him to finish with him regarding his fee and travel expenses. Under the weight of all the new regulations she had forgotten that he had to send her a note of confirmation from his faculty. It all seemed complicated and bothersome to me and the time we would have together was passing fast. And I couldn't see the waitress anywhere. I didn't know whether she would bring us our tea and coffee or whether I would have to go to the counter to take it myself. If the clerk was going to stay any longer, I should perhaps ask her if she would also like something. Which would threaten the nature of our conversation, however, and that mat-

tered to me. Not that I had any clear idea at that moment of how to raise the subject I wanted to talk to him about. So I sat there quietly doing nothing, waiting impatiently for her to finish her annoyingly drawn out administrative business with him.

When she had finally gone, I went up to the counter, where I stood helplessly for a moment. I'd glimpsed the attendant as we'd come in but now there was no sign of her. Perhaps she was receiving stock or preparing something at the back. I didn't want to call her so I tried to get her attention by audibly clearing my throat. This worked well but though I quickly placed my order, she didn't say whether she would bring our drinks to the table or not. So I stood at the counter as the water heated up and she slowly put everything on a metal tray. Then I paid.

It was a difficult return journey back to our distant table for a clumsy person like me. The glass beakers full of boiling water and coffee were sliding on the tray and some water spilled from the one Norkop would soon be drinking from. I was afraid one might even fall over and scald my arm. Given the slipperiness of the tray, I should have made two journeys but then realized that the beakers were too hot to hold and using a sleeve to help me would have been embarrassing.

By the time I finally sat down, we did not have much time left because his walk to the bus-station would take him ten or fifteen minutes. Norkop kept glancing at his watch and although he did it delicately so as not to make it obvious he did not want to talk to me for very long, it was clear that he felt pressured by time. That led to me skipping my preamble and asking him straight what his thoughts about the relationship between the incomprehensibility of poetry and the communicative knowledge of the author were. It was evidently an inappropriate question, though, because Norkop paused for a long time after I'd asked it, stirring his tea with increasing vigour until, or so it seemed to me in the tense silence, the chinking of his glass beaker filled the whole room. When he'd stopped and had started sipping his tea, he asked me to repeat the question. Surprised by his response, I repeated it with an explanation which rather obscured the question. Norkop then embarked on an explanation of incomprehensible poetry, saying, amongst other things, that incomprehensible language can take you to places you can't reach using comprehensible and logical language. But although he expatiated on the factor of incomprehensibility in lyric poetry, he didn't actually answer my question.

Even before we had left the coffee bar and on our way to the bus-stop, we started to talk of other things. As we were saying goodbye, Norkop gave me his card, thanked me for the tea and said that we could meet again to

chat a little about literature. I didn't have a card so he wrote my name and address down in his notebook and then boarded his bus.

I had been reflecting on the question I asked him for quite a long time and went back to it soon after I came home from the training course. Although it mostly concerned poetry, it came into my mind when I was writing a short story called *Inspection*.

It was the first piece of prose I'd ever entered for a competition, one organized by one of the central literary magazines. I didn't expect it to be amongst the winners; success, I thought, was unlikely, and would have been merely fortuitous. And so I wasn't surprised nor upset when I didn't win any of the prizes.

But when I was unexpectedly informed by one of the editors that despite my story not placing among the top three, they still wanted to publish it, the situation changed.

I went back to the issue in which the winners and the competition judges were listed. One of them was a very eminent, authoritative but strict critic whose articles and reviews (and I often read them) were like dramatic texts. I palled at the notion of being one of those authors who he would castigate and demean. It was a terrible thought. But if such a prominent critic as he was hadn't objected to my story, then it can't have been bad. In fact all the judges were well-known people, respected in their field.

I wanted to make the most of this unexpected, for me almost dizzying, success and so decided to go through my text again very carefully, considering both its individual features and its overall effect. And then, once I'd finished, I would repeat the whole process a number of times and so give it a full, proper academic reading.

I then suddenly realized that I would be working very slowly and thoroughly in reading a text which had been very quickly and easily created. It occurred to me that this was one of the peculiarities of literary communication, rather like the question I had asked Norkop and not received an answer to in the coffee bar of the recreation centre of the regional pedagogical institute.

That question came to me as I was slowly rereading *Inspection*. The story had been accepted by an elite panel of judges and the editorial board of one of the national literary magazines. But as I was going through it, I discovered that there were passages which I, as its author, did not understand. It was as if I had written them while dreaming or in some kind of hallucinatory state. And if I had had to clarify and analyse them myself, I would have been unable to reach any firm conclusions.

As time went on it seemed that during the text's rapid composition, I had inserted them in order to reinforce the opaque, at times even obscure nature of the setting in which the story took place.

I wrote the story during a time of mental release and literary experimentation.

I had been teaching at the night-school for the employed when one of my external colleagues, the economic secretary of the theatre director had arranged a second job for me working part-time as an assistant dramaturgist.

I was analysing a play called *Tango* by Slawomir Mrožka. Although its themes and artistic purpose slightly differed from that of his earlier plays, my analysis and preparation of it forced me to study various other available material about the theatre of the absurd and absurdity in literature. The study interested me, especially the notion of likening the absurdist playwright to a dentist examining a tooth through a magnifying glass in order to better see any decay or infection. This hyperbolic approach seemed to me a logical and correct one as a means of observation.

My fascination with absurdity greatly extended beyond this, though, and I tried to use it in my short story *Inspection*, in which I returned to my time teaching at an apprentice school in a small town in the plains of eastern Slovakia. While writing it, I wondered what from that setting might serve as a basis for absurdist treatment or whether certain things are not absurd in themselves without needing to be exaggerated or distorted.

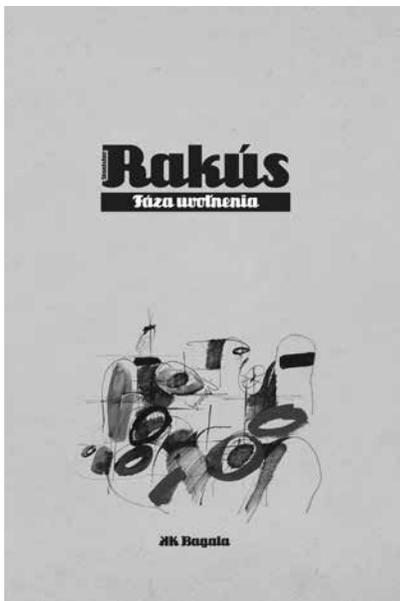
The apprentice school had originally not had any accommodation for me and so the principal asked volunteers from the parents' committee to clean out one of the school's ground-floor rooms, previously used for storage, and turn it into a bedroom for me. They furnished it with a table, two chairs, a bed, an old cupboard and a wooden locker with an enamel washbasin on it and a bucket alongside.

What struck me as absurd about it was that the only door to the room was from the classroom next door. During afternoon lessons, I could only leave my room via the window.

With the help of a chair, I would climb on to the window ledge and then adjust my position so that my legs were hanging down. I could then, without losing my balance, jump down to the grass beneath the window. I would then walk around the outside of the school building to the gate, pass through into the yard and then to the staffroom or to the classroom where I was teaching.

I had to follow the same process if I wanted to use one of the latrines in the yard. The school was in an old historic building and although it had running water, it had no flush toilets at that time.

It was even more difficult getting back into my room during afternoon lessons, though my slim body and long legs made it easier for me. Along the side of the school there was a narrow dirt track with grassy banks by the walls of the building and its many windows; only occasionally would you see somebody walking along it to or from the busier parts of town. The advantage of that was that I could usually get in and out of my room without being seen by anyone. For anyone who did chance to see me, however, it must have been surprising, even suspicious, to witness someone using a window rather than a door to enter this state building. What must they think of such a person especially since he wasn't dressed like a maintenance man? My other option was to wait until the break and use the door. Somehow, though, I lacked the courage to do it. As a rather shy new teacher, unable to adapt to the strict methods needed to keep discipline, I imagined being the target of derisive comments from pupils emboldened by the relative freedom of the break. It had happened once before: I had heard some pupils making remarks about me behind my back and then heard them bursting into uncontrolled laughter. Ever since then I had been afraid of walking past them again during the break.



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KK Bagala, Levice,  
2013

# Peter Pišťanek 1960

Acclaimed prose writer who paved the way of an innovative approach to the art of fiction. After a career in advertising, currently he is an editor and marketing manager of the *inZine* Internet magazine. Pišťanek is best known for his pulp-fiction-style trilogy *Rivers of Babylon I–III* (1991, 1994, 1999); he has published also several collections of short stories, and a special cook book of family recipes. His latest novel, *The Hostage*, has been just released. →



KARL MAY  
WINNETOU

I

Peter  
Pišťanek  
***The  
Hostage***

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

This poignant novel about a boy from a border village close to Bratislava maps the political situation of the 1950s and 1960s through the fate and perceptions of a child and his experiences with his friends, classmates and their parents, neighbours, local drunks, Communist functionaries, brickwork labourers and border guards.

It was around that time that Peter decided to try and grow up as quickly as he could so that he could start doing grown-up stuff with his grandad: playing cards at the regulars' table; doing men's talk about life and so on. Swearing from the heart about the state of society. Downing a shot of rum, chasing it down with a beer and then wiping the foam off your moustache with the back of your hand; slapping the well-formed rump of Auntie Zorka or that of the new one, Auntie Zdenka, who had taken over from Auntie Jarka in September. So far Peter had been excluded from all those delights. Instead he had to dress properly against the cold, wear his silly hat, go to school, speak politely, always say hello and thank you for everything. Like an idiot.

When they were playing in the yard, he always had to come in right after the news. None of the others from the brickworks had to, only him. He'd press his forehead against the cold window of the lit-up kitchen to make out the silhouettes of his friends in the deepening darkness. They'd go on playing not even seeming to miss him and he'd remain standing there stubbornly until he was too tired and sleepy to carry on. In the darkness below him the last shadows had long stopped moving; they were all at home having tea and bread and butter with salami – only he could see how they were actually having the best adventures of their life and know how he again was missing out on something unrepeatable.

Grandad was a man-mountain and it was good to be his friend. Being his grandson wasn't too bad either – having a few man-to-man secrets and so on. But being his friend must have been much better. Peter could see and hear how he would talk to those on the same level as he was. There weren't many: Batay the butcher, whose *Jednota* shop was right opposite Grandad's pub; the manager of the *Technokov* store, one Mr Mašíček; Dr Beluch, the local GP... and that was it: just enough for a round of *mariáš*. With them Grandad was just *pertú* but with everyone else he was *perzí*. That was how they differentiated between the informal and formal means of address. In the pub Grandad sometimes used the informal *ty* form with his customers, the permanently sozzled Kolár, for instance and similar tosspots when he was throwing them out of the pub, but no-one dared address *him* in that informal manner. Grandad was not the type to be spoken to like that; he kept his dignity. When his tall, thin and rather stooping figure moved through the local, it exuded a weighty and unspoken authority. He would remove a disorderly drunk from the pub in seconds, grabbing them first by the collar, twisting their arms behind them and then marching them summarily to the door. And once the drunk was out, he would not be back that same evening and would be

wise to lie low in shame for a few days at least. He'd be forced to go and stand at the station bar and do his drinking there standing up, a third-rate place where the beers and vodkas were poured out between the cod salad and the frankfurters, and which closed at six in the evening. What kind of pub was that – one that closed just as you'd got going? A section of its clientele, washed up from trains that came in from both the Bratislava and Malacky directions and then beached at the station bar, would then move next-door to Peter's grandfather's pub. But the offender had to go home – he was too afraid to try Achberger's place. Or he would have to traipse the full length of the village to its other pub, the *Konzum*. Only the punters there were not his drinking pals – they were another crowd altogether. He might know almost all of them; they were all old school-mates or what have you. But he didn't feel at home there – basically he just didn't *belong* there. So there was no alternative for him but to try his luck back at Achberger's place a few days later. And though he might look forbidding, in the end Achberger would let him back. And for the offender, that was a moment of the deepest emotion: suddenly he would be willing to promise old Achberger the earth. Being admitted back to the family of local habitués might even bring tears to his eyes. From feeling like a dog, rejected by its pack, left out in the cold and rain to then being welcomed back into the warmth of home – at that moment the ex-offender would give his life for Peter's granddad. And as he drank his first pint of beer after his reprieve, the golden nectar would mix with his hot tears of gratitude.

\* \* \*

When Peter was smaller, his grandparents most often scared him with tales of Bloody Leg. Bloody Leg would wait outside, lurking in the shadows, spying on children who didn't want to go home after dark. He was a disembodied, bloodied leg, rather like the chopped off leg of a giant. Like other children, Peter was afraid of people who had had limbs amputated. How much greater was his fear, though, of an amputated limb without a person attached.

In those days, loving parents would frighten their children with all kinds of things, houses of correction and orphanages being especially popular. If a child hadn't done something they should have, or done something they shouldn't have, they were immediately threatened with exile to one of these places. Peter's grandparents never threatened him with institutions, though, because at that time there was a real danger of him being taken into one – and the idea of him growing up in such a place was unbearable to them. But because his parents had emigrated, it was a genuine threat.

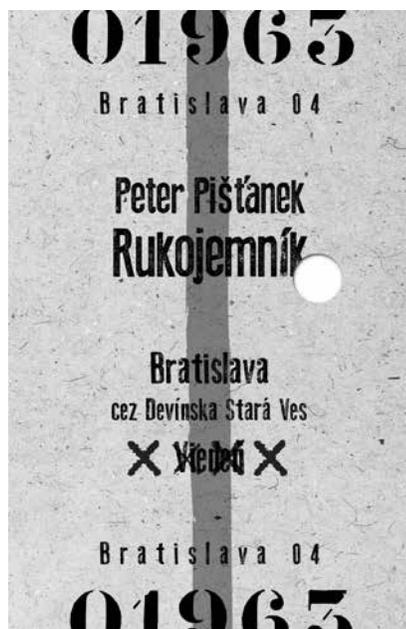
Fortunately, although Grandad was just a common village innkeeper, his time as manager of a café and restaurant had introduced him to many influential people and now he was happy to solicit their help. Against such important gentlemen – and comrades – Comrade Glanz was powerless. Peter’s other grandfather, Grandad Baranovič, also had connections and together they managed to prevent the worst. In the end the Socialist society did not send four-year-old Peter to a children’s home but entrusted him to the care of his grandparents, the Achbergers, despite the fact that they had already raised one traitor – Peter’s father. Perhaps the fact that Peter’s grandmother was at home and could look after him swung it in their favour.

That had all happened a few years before. Now Peter was in his fourth year as “a grass-orphan” and Grandma had made him his favourite cake – a Malakoff sponge – for his eighth birthday, with eight little candles rising up out of the whipped cream. For his birthday present, they gave him four tanker waggons for his model railway set: a white Leuna, a yellow Shell, a blue Aral and a green BP.

“Half a waggon for every year of your life,” said Grandma. She had been an accountant at the brickworks for many years and such statements came naturally to her.

Peter had a Roco model railway set from Austria which his parents had sent him and were gradually adding to. Now, on his eighth birthday, he discovered that the Piko East German waggons were compatible with it and even had the same couplings. And they could be bought here!

“What are those couplings?” asked Grandma.



← Published by Slovart,  
Bratislava, 2014

# Balla

1967

In a masterly manner prose writer Balla unfolds stories full of unexpected twists and turns. Making use of the natural flow of language and stream of consciousness, he depicts the intimate life of the individual, full of doubts and uncertainties in the world of today. The motives behind the characters' thinking and actions are often absurd; the protagonists suffer from existential anxiety arising from desperately empty lives. Balla upsets stereotypes, shocks the reader with touches of merciless irony and his own original philosophy, which is becoming more and more precisely formulated. →



Balla

# ***The Eye***

Extract translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood →

A new collection of short stories by the master of this genre, undoubtedly one of the best short-story writers in Central Europe.

Anyone who, unlike Menőczi, can't even remember the beginning of a sentence when they're half-way through it will subconsciously tend towards ever shorter utterances. This is the essence of style. Concise, succinct expressions hold sway. Just to keep up an ordinary conversation, Miz relies on a variety of ploys, memo pads and notebooks, in order to maintain the false impression that he hasn't lost his common sense. He jots down the beginnings of sentences on one sheet of paper and their endings on another and mixes up the two piles of papers, using the resulting *mélange* to keep conversations going. He looks at Menőczi and tries to remember what the other man knows about him. He knows that Menőczi is constantly on the move, that he keeps walking without ever making it home, because that's not where he's headed, going there only when he must, late at night. That is why he always turns sad as evening falls. Lying beside his sleeping wife at night, he replays in his head scraps of the previous day's conversations with complete strangers, learning individual sentences and words by heart so that he can quote them the next day in new encounters. In this way, very slowly, nights pass at the flat, which is inhabited by his wife and daughters, but where he personally feels like a guest, hoping that nobody will notice him and that he will be able to slip out again in the morning without paying the bill.

Miz was worried about Menőczi, who seemed to be profoundly unhappy about another Menőczi, who was increasingly taking over the first irrespective of surgery. Five years ago the first Menőczi was cheated by his brother out of his inheritance from their father. The matter ended up in court. The new Menőczi, the one growing inside Menőczi, couldn't care less. But the remnants of the first, original, authentic Menőczi, continue to resist. One day he assaulted a perfectly nice, civilized, young man during a game of chess; in fact, this wasn't a real assault because what he was actually furious about was himself and the reason he smashed his mobile down on the table top had nothing to do with the game or the young man: what made him furious was his despair over himself.

Menőczi sat in a chair opposite Miz.

Both men sipped tea.

First tea, then coffee.

They might as well have been sipping sake, Godet cognac, sangria or cumin brandy; around here you can sip whatever you fancy.

Menőczi watched every detail of what went on in the compartment, the girls as they came and went, as well as older women whom he left without a comment, deliberately expunging their memory despite their continued

existence, forcing Miz to bear them in mind because they had an eschatological effect on him.

Menőczy cited the case of his brother, who kept a high energy convector above his bed because he suffered from a rare and mysterious skin disease, which abraded the surface of his hands and fingers. "That's punishment for his greed!" Menőczy hissed. "You can see right into his flesh. It's a highly intimate disease. And the disease is laying him bare!"

Miz looked out of the window.

The station they were approaching wasn't Amsterdam. He had never left Central Europe. Someone else in his place will have suffocated here by now. What's that place outside the window? Is it Vrútky? Or Kralovany? You just have to replace the words: Rotterdam instead of Vrútky. Utrecht instead of Kralovany. But words are only words anyway. He stirred in his seat, thinking of the doctor.

Doctor: "I was on the night shift, writing prescriptions, a whole pile of them. My fingers above the keyboard reminded me of old tree branches. After my shift I went home, not quite sure who it was walking, who was this idiot. All of a sudden something hurled me against a wall. Then against a revolving door, through which I sank into a hypermarket. This is how people instantly acquire a new role. I kept silent. Shush, I said to myself. Be careful. Something took hold of me. A doomsday-like gloom. I shrank to less than three quarters of myself, if you know what I mean. Then I saw a Chevrolet outside the shop window. And today I saw the exact same thing. But today was worse. What was it exactly? Sometimes it really scares me. That's why I drink. But I can still drive, slowly; easy does it, I'm not an asshole. The car was a Chevrolet, of course. American cars are cheap. America lacks quality. It's evident from their wars. They keep fighting one war after another without ever winning: their wars never end, just sort of fade away, left hanging in mid-fight. Until the next war starts. You've got to think of something else, take my word for it, you shouldn't give a damn about something growing above your ear. If you knew the kind of cases I see! They would weep for joy if they had anything growing anywhere. Think of women and cars instead. Or take up smoking. I wish I could have a smoke now! The other day I went to visit someone and smoked a pipe. Then we changed the light bulbs. Do you have any friends? Do you write to them? You ought to. Or else they will write to someone else, telling them you don't write. This is what you should worry about, not some outgrowth on your head. Believe you me, my views aren't wrong. I'm a man of principle when it comes to this kind of thing. Principled people have principles. I wanted to have a nice chat about cars: that has a very therapeutic effect. Yes, a chat, nothing wrong with that. As a psychiatrist

I shouldn't be talking like this. But this is me. And that is you," he said, poking Miz's T-shirt with his finger. Then he ordered another vodka and a small beer.

Doctor: "Nietzsche said that God was dead. But Nietzsche was still alive when he said that. I would have believed him if he had said it after he died. Then I'd be forced to admit that he had some experience of God."

"We should be going home now."

"Let's go for a swim," suggested the psychiatrist, asking some women to come along. They'd all had quite a lot to drink and were pleased to be invited. They probably didn't have a bathroom at home.

"A swim, what a great idea!"

All the women were happy, including those whose bodies had been so deformed by motherhood, age or overeating that baring them was highly inadvisable.

The talk of water gave Miz goosebumps.

"Dive in – what are you waiting for?"

He saw a tangle of aquatic plants.

"Dive in – what are you waiting for?"

His legs had by now got entangled in the plants.

"Dive in – what are you waiting for?"

By this time the plants had dragged him below the surface.

Down below he found Menőczy waiting. This had happened over twenty years ago and Miz had never forgotten what it was like to be drowning in a lake near Komjatice. But he didn't drown; that, however, is not the point of this story. Menőczy, a cool chap in his prime, threw off his leather jacket, dropped it on the shore, dived in and swam towards Miz, who was already under water, but his rescuer somehow managed to grab him by the shoulder and drag him into shallow water. Miz drew the curtain aside and looked out of the restaurant carriage.

Liptovský Mikuláš.

Rotterdam.

He closes his eyes, tries to inhale.

He opens his eyes, pours himself a beer, his hand isn't shaking. His fingers are, though, every one of them.

It's not he who emerges, it is some *thing* that emerges: a memory.

The conductor found a fare dodger and immediately threatened to give him a thrashing. After banging his fist on the sliding compartment door he gave the passenger a slap in the face. Yet the fare dodger continued his journey because they wouldn't stop the express train just on his account.

That emboldened the passenger: Miz saw him walk into a café at the next station. Outside the café a snack bar attendant physically assaulted a customer who had complained about the quality of the hamburger. “You faggot, who do you think you are, you thirty-kilo good-for-nothing?!” the man yelled. The customer made himself scarce.

Miz was afraid. The reason wasn’t far to seek: there are people everywhere and you can never be sure what they’re up to. It’s quite baffling how a pretty woman ever finds the courage to leave her flat. Out there, monsters are always on the lookout, hoping for a bit of sex alongside the robbery. The odd murder has also been known to occur as some women squeeze their legs together too tight.

Miz told Menőczy what he had seen from the window. The latter committed everything to memory: the date, the time coordinates, every detail. Miz’s fear wouldn’t subside. People who positively radiate fear attract predators. The best thing would be to join their ranks. But how? Get a tattoo? Which pictogram would be the most suitable? Or perhaps Miz should stick a cigarette between his lips? No, not even ten cigarettes would help him. A tourist joined a woman at a nearby table. What a coincidence: there was a cigarette between his lips.

The mysterious structure above his ear is the mouth of a tunnel.

This is how Miz will escape from his soul, which has started materializing inside him, growing ever thicker and sinking to the bottom, only to rise up again, pushing him out of his own body like a skin eruption. It is getting rid of him in the form of phlegm.

Miz is coughing himself up through his mouth.

Miz is vanishing.

He sits curled up on a sofa, Laura watches him. What kind of a flat is this if Laura and Miz live there together? Miz doesn’t ask any questions. And when Laura begins to talk without being asked, Miz feels threatened and runs away. He throws up into a bucket, his materialized soul is expanding its territory, it has conquered Miz in a sophisticated war, in which, naturally enough, vast metaphysical systems have fought on the side of his soul. It will take some time for his victorious soul to eject him from himself via every orifice and to turn him inside out like a slimy glove.

“Oh, this isn’t serious at all. You just have to seek medical help,” the hairdresser advised Miz. “I’ve been to see a doctor, too. This is where I had it,” she said, pointing at her upper arm.

“Are you sure it was the same thing I’ve got?”

“Of course. It’s always the same thing.”

“I see. But what is it?”

“Are you scared of doctors?”

“No.”

Miz was almost shitting himself with fear.

And what’s that out there?

Is it Žilina again?

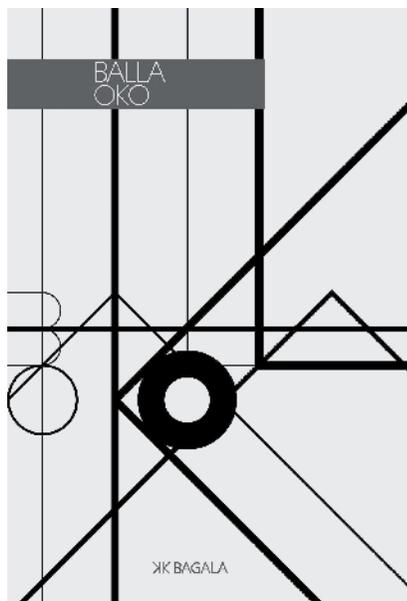
Or is it Haarlem?

Miz looks around. If it’s Žilina, Vrútky will be next, followed by Kral’ovany, and so on. He doesn’t care if they have found themselves in a time loop or a space loop, or some combination of the two. He suspects Menőczi has something to do with this. Suddenly he falls asleep but maybe he was already asleep. He feels the hairdresser raking through the hair above his ear, twiddling her fingers restlessly; the sleeping Miz can see the woman’s distrustful expression in the mirror. Could it be that he winked at her from the place behind his ear?

“Well then?”

A moment of silence, time for a cigarette.

Doctor: “There’s someone peering out of you. In my opinion you’re not sick, you just have a third eye. What bothers me is another question: how come the gears of the universe have yet to grind to a halt? There’s always someone to make sure something is going on: causing a war or a coup d’état; a dictatorship breaks out here, democracy prevails there; then it turns out that tyranny nevertheless flourishes under the guise of democracy, the stock exchange crashes in one place, while at the other end of the world it turns out they don’t even have a stock exchange; in sum, there is something happening all the time!



← Published by KK  
Bagala, Levice, 2011

# Peter Krištúfek

1973

Writer and film director Peter Krištúfek uses dynamic narration to move his stories towards an unexpected or even absurd ending. He depicts everyday life from the point of view of the consistent individualist with unusual habits and pastimes, or in the thematically attractive setting of today's media, advertising and art. He reflects on basic issues from his mature point of view; he picks out the most momentous chapters from the past and compares standpoints. His prose works are exceptionally attractive for the reader, partly thanks to his own special wit and black humour, elements of tension and unexpected punch lines. →



Peter  
Krišťúfek

***Ema and  
the Death's-  
-head  
Hawkmoth***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Little Simon has to hide during the war. He is alone, and there's nothing left for him to do, just daydream. A novella you will read in one go.

It wasn't simple. Or cosy.

Simon had to stay closeted in the outhouse. The pigs were stinking pungently and the goats didn't seem much better. Néni Marika used to feed them early in the morning, and in the afternoon she would pour them some fresh water.

He could venture out only at night, and only into the part of the yard that was shielded by the wall. And only if the moon was not shining.

Marika-néni was afraid, because there were Hungarians living everywhere around, or Germans, all of whom were in the Deutsche Partei and were under obligation to inform.

If they noticed anything suspicious or unusual, they were supposed to notify the Gestapo immediately.

Since everything had happened suddenly and they couldn't drag a heavy load with them, Simon's Mama had scarcely been able to pack anything at all, except for a few items of clothing.

No toys, none of the model cars, not even one tin soldier.

During the long, empty, monotonous days he used to play with pebbles that he found at night in the yard, and Néni Sándorfiová had dropped him in a few magazines.

Pictorial, so that at least he'd have something to look at.

One of them was adorned with black-and-white photographs of soldiers. Germans, to appearances happy to be able to lay down their lives for noble aims.

On a double-page spread there was a line of tanks drawn up before a general with a sharply etched face. He had a skull and crossbones on his cap.

He was actually smiling in a smaller photo alongside.

A few pages further on, right at the top, there was a bright colour advertisement.

It was a painted image of a beautiful woman with thick dark hair sunning herself in a yellow swimsuit on a beach by the sea. Coquettishly she was leaning over and rubbing cream on her soft skin.

Simon spelt out the caption beside her: *Emma liebt die Sonne!*

And beneath that in small letters: *NIVEA CREME zur Hautpflege.*

## 2.

A big death's-head hawkmoth caterpillar was crawling into a fissure in the ground, a little way beyond the trough. She was preparing to pupate.

Simon knew her: his father had pointed out one like her on the deadly nightshade and once afterwards on the lilac, where she was feeding on flowers and leaves.

Long. Lemon-yellow and green. With blue and purple marks obliquely along the sides, fringed by white stripes. She had a little raised horn at the end of her body.

When he poked her lightly with a rod, she ground her mandibles horribly.

She was making her way deep into the earth.

Latin: *Acherontia atropos*.

Hungarian: *Halálfejes lepke*.

German: *Totenkopfschwärmer*.

Afterwards while lying down he watched the death's-head hawkmoth. How he twisted to get into cracks in the trodden clay on the stable floor, new, lovely and still somewhat crumpled, with a *swollen* body exhausted from its metamorphosis.

Simon followed it as he settled on the beam and waited for his wings to dry.

His father had told him that the death's-head has the habit of sometimes following a light and frightening people to death with his noisy flight and whistling.

He's a thief. By night he lands silently in a beehive. There are bees guarding the entrance, to see that no one steals honey. The moth knows exactly how to imitate the sound by which the guards recognise one another – it serves as a password. His whole body vibrates and he proceeds along a corridor by the sleeping bees, which would kill him instantly if they knew he was there. He wears the scent of the queen bee, so he passes through unperceived.

They don't see him – they don't see his grey-black wings, or the yellow marking in the shape of a skull. He's here and yet he isn't. They know that an intruder has got into the hive, because they're losing stocks from the cells, but they can't catch him. They don't notice his striped body or his dark eyes.

Unnoticed, he passes among the hundreds of bees.

It's dark. It's night.

Sometimes, though, they discover him – otherwise the game wouldn't be fair – but in that event the tale comes to an end. They sting him and wrap him up in wax.

Afterwards the beekeepers find him mummified in the middle of the hive.

The moth was resting on the wood with folded wings. A skull on his breast. The yellow stripes made one think of ribs.

Simon opened *New World* magazine. Right on the first page, catching the eye, was *The Latest from Home and Abroad*, richly strewn with photographs.

**1. General Field Marshal Rommel (first on the left) reviewing enemy fortifications on the African front.**

**2. Night firing on enemy objects in Leningrad.**

**3. From the fighting for the fortress of Sevastopol, which, as we know, the German-Romanian armies conquered last week (lower left).**

During the motionless and endless summer days, when the trembling scorching air even reached him in the outhouse and the animals, drugged with the heat, rolled their eyes in dull torpor, Simon spent much time looking at the brown-haired woman of the advertisement.

It was one of the few colour pictures that he had here.

He fixed his eyes on the sea beyond her round shoulders. It was murmuring, and he almost felt the damp breeze on his face. He felt the burning tang of salt and heard the sea-birds scream.

For several hours he was engrossed in this. He had counted all the grains of sand and the cloudlets on the horizon, obscured by those elegant letters: *Emma loves the sun*.

Just underneath the advertisement Simon noticed a picture of a weathervane showing the cardinal directions – according to the article this used to be in the medieval portolans, which at that time served as navigational maps for sailors. There's one like it depicted on the paving-stones of St. Peter's Square in Rome.

The cardinal points were designated by the names of winds.

North is Tramontana.

East is Levante.

South Ostro.

West Ponente.

Northwest Greco.

Southeast Scirocco.

Northwest Maestro.

And southwest is Libeccio.

Simon learned those names by heart, he liked them very much. They sounded like snatches of some forgotten Italian song.

And he dreamed of a fresh, cool wind.

On the magazine cover there was a smiling girl in folk costume with a bouquet of ripe corn ears.

**In these scorching days we breathe the promise of new bread in the wind ruffling the slender stalks that bless the peasants' fields. Slowly, intimately, movingly, the little strips of cornswathe commune with the venerable ribbons of meadow, and it seems to us the horizon leaves too little space for this music. It's a lullaby to the human being who is longing for just and merited sleep, but also an answer to all those questions which are rending his breast: Lord, what kind of a harvest will there be?**

Néni Sándiorfóvá used to go somewhere in town twice a week, because then she'd always bring home some good food. Chicken, or even pancakes.

She came to him when night had fallen on Biskupice and the myriads of relentless mosquitos were beginning to swarm from the bushes beside the Little Danube.

Silently she gave him the dish, stroked his head, and again closed the stable.

Due to her fear she spoke as little as possible. Although nothing was stirring in the vicinity, she did not want to let down her guard.

During the dark moonless night Simon looked up at the sky, standing in the yard's narrow rectangle. The exhausting heat had fallen away and the stars looked like refreshing bubbles winking in a glass of soda.

Suddenly he crouched down in the shadow of the house, because quick steps were sounding beyond the wall, but immediately they were lost again in the monotonous night symphony of the insects.

He saw that Marika-néni still had a light on behind the drawn blind.

Softly, through the half-open window, music flowed out from the gramophone. A male voice was singing a song about a sad Sunday.

*Szomóú vasárnap száz fehér virággal  
vártalak kedvesem – templomi – imával  
Álmokat kergető vasárnap délelőtt  
Bánatom hintaja nélküléd visszajött  
Azóta szomorú mindig a vasárnap  
Konny csak az italom – kenyerem a bánat  
...  
Szomorú – vasárnap*

But after a while the gramophone fell silent and Néni quenched the light.

Simon heard the martens scrabbling on the roof.

Somewhere in the distance an owl cried.

Afterwards he caught the sound of men's voices behind the wall and smelt cigarette smoke. Someone was laughing, saying *Lustig, lustig...*; a second voice said something incomprehensible in reply.

He felt more inclined to go back to his outhouse and lie down in his place on the straw.

In the morning he woke very early. The land was still resting and preparing by its immobility to bear the brunt of a new day.

The rays of the early morning sun were running down inside the crack in the outhouse's wooden wall. He could see them clearly in the whirling dust. The outhouse was suddenly full of light. He liked that.

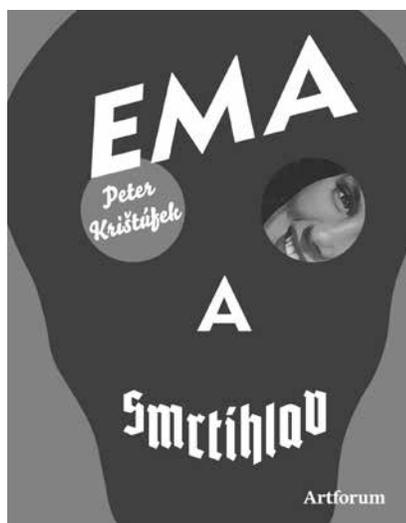
The death's-head was no longer sitting on the beam. Evidently he had flown off during the night.

The animals were continuing to sleep.

He gnawed off a bit of the crust he had left since the evening, yawned, propped himself up on his elbow, and discovered something very familiar on the opposite wall.

Right at the top there was sand and undulating sea. Under it a motionless blue space, through which turned-about birds were flying. A colourful little sun was hanging face down from the sand-yellow sky, and alongside there was a female figure who seemed to delight in denying gravitation. Everything was blurred and oddly curved.

Quickly he turned and inspected the opening in the wood, through which a steadily weaker sunlight was coming in. The sun was slowly shifting position, moving higher. The scene grew paler.



← Published by  
Artforum, Bratislava,  
2014

# Pavol Rankov 1964

Pavol Rankov is a prose writer, expert in mass communication and a master of dynamic narration, mystification and changes in storytelling perspective. He introduces the reader to a world of absurdity and total relativization and is forever finding attractive new plots. In many of his works it is possible to sense an emotional and mental affinity to magical realism. He portrays the eclectic, superficial and commercial society of today with detachment and humour. Fast-moving plots, mosaic composition, and in particular the characteristic emphasis on the final effect, the unexpected denouement, contribute to a considerable degree to the attraction and popularity of Rankov's prose works. →



Pavol  
Rankov

***On the  
Other Side***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

The master of the mystery short stories is back with a new collection. The stories are divided into two seemingly antagonistic parts, but be they a horror story, a parable or a chronicle, they are an exciting read with a surprising punch line.

## First Day at the University

*Modern universities (from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) differ from the historical ones mainly in their organisational structure – they are divided into faculties specialising in a particular field of scholarship.*

(<http://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Univerzita>)

Aurel was thrilled with his first day at the university. He walked through the building, reading the names of the different departments and offices. PHILOSOPHY. AESTHETICS. CULTUROLOGY. HISTORY. Branches of study he had dreamed of were suddenly inviting him to seminars and lectures. The office hours of the professors and associate professors were given on the doors of their studies. They were the very names that were familiar to Aurel, appearing under important articles and brilliant polemics in renowned monthly journals on culture and society.

Sitting on benches outside some of the doors, or casually on the floor, were little groups of students in corduroy trousers and flannel shirts, looking as if they had just popped in from a demonstration to save the rain forests. The corridors were full of long-haired girls smoking cigarettes. The noncommittal tone in which they were talking about their holiday adventures or exchanging experience of the demands of the optional subjects excited Aurel.

There was everything here – fields he wished to study, people he would like to associate with, women he longed to love.

The teachers he would be having in the first semester also made an excellent impression on him. They didn't lecture that first day. They elucidated the topics of the seminar papers the students would be handing in some time in the middle of December. Some of them commented with restrained irony on the shortcomings and mistakes to be found in the university textbooks, others showed exasperation over their shortage in the libraries.

Aurel realized immediately that very first day that what counted most at university was his own opinion. It was necessary to read the recommended sources, but you then had to evaluate them with critical detachment. A middle-aged senior lecturer who based his image on a thick beard and soothing baritone joked on this topic:

“I have my own opinion and I want you to have it too. That is, not my opinion, but your own.”

The students laughed and the lecturer continued: “And don't be afraid to say you disagree. We old ones are already bound by conventions and relationships, and so we are sometimes afraid to be critical. For instance,

not long ago I wrote a review on a colleague's monograph. There were many things I had to find fault with, but on the other hand I didn't want to offend my colleague. Do you know how I solved the problem? In my review I didn't mention either the title or the author of the book I was assessing.

Aurel needed to break free from the grip of the prejudices of his home town; he wanted to escape from the ever-present watchful eye of its closed society. To be himself and to show it. From the very first day instead of the stale smell of village conventions the university offered him the heady aroma of academic freedom.

Wallowing in this euphoria, he almost forgot that he still had to sign up to one of the groups for seminars on Statistical Methods. It was the only subject he felt uneasy about. He had never liked mathematics. Or, to be more exact, he had never been good at mathematics, which is why he had never liked it. Aurel hoped that Statistical Methods was the only mathematical subject he would come across at the university.

The Department of Statistics was on the top floor of the building. He didn't meet a single student on the stairs and the corridor was quiet and deserted. It seemed to Aurel that this contrast with the lively and creative atmosphere of the other parts of the building was not accidental. It said something about the status of statistics at the faculty. It was tolerated as a necessary evil. Statistics was just a mechanical instrument to support the creativity of philosophers and sociologists, a primitive servant of the higher sciences. Aurel's task in the seminars of Statistical Methods would be to suppress his creativity. He would once more become a little schoolboy solving problems according to a single valid formula.

With these thoughts in mind, he at last found the notice board where on a piece of paper there was written in large letters:

*Statistical Methods – first year compulsory subject. Max. 20 students in a group.*

“Eggheads,” muttered Aurel.

Underneath the paper with the big letters were several smaller sheets with printed tables of times and rooms for the seminar groups. Aurel discovered that there were only two groups of Statistical Methods that would fit in with his timetable of other subjects. In one of them there were already twenty students, but in the other there were still a few places free. Most likely because it was at 15.55 on Friday afternoons.

Aurel wrote his name in a column where there was an empty space. The euphoria he had felt all day faded away. Suddenly he was tempted to do something bad to these fossilised mathematicians. It occurred to him that he could tear down the lists of students' names. There would be chaos

if the statistically confirmed system that had worked for years should suddenly fail.

“How dare you?” a deep male voice was heard just at that moment.

Aurel stiffened. They had caught him, even though he hadn't yet done anything. He looked round cautiously. The corridor was empty.

“Don't tell me it isn't there!” continued the voice that Aurel now unequivocally located. Someone was shouting on the other side of the door right next to the noticeboard.

“I'm the author of this textbook and I know what I wrote in it. Or do you think I'm mad?” shouted the man in a voice that was already shaking with madness.

Aurel supposed that the person inside the room was telephoning someone. Probably a student who couldn't find something in the compulsory literature.

Aurel knew that it would be wiser not to risk meeting that infuriated man (an associate professor – as the name plate on the door declared). He should also leave quickly because he needed to urinate, but something kept him there. He was curious to see what degree of fury the associate professor was capable of when he discovered that a student hadn't been reading his textbook carefully.

“So you haven't found it?” yelled the voice on the other side of the door and continued: “I'll find it for you then. Aha, here it is! On page twenty-seven.”

For a moment there was silence. The professor needed to get his breath back. Aurel supposed that the student on the other end of the line was now apologising profusely.

“You can't see it? Here, where I'm pointing to it!” the statistician burst out angrily.

Aurel realised that the person the professor was cursing must be inside the study. He moved closer to the door in order to hear his – or her – voice. But there was silence; only the angry professor spoke up again after a while: “Don't play games with me, you... you, you nonentity! Do you know what I can do with you? I can ruin you, wipe you off the face of the earth. I'll tear you apart like a frog or a blindworm!”

Aurel pressed his ear to the door, but he didn't hear a word of what the poor student said. However, it seemed to him that he could hear the student's deep gasps. Maybe he was crying.

“That's it, I should tear you apart like a blindworm, because you really are blind. Look, here's the place. This is what you had to learn. How am I to hammer that into your stupid head? Huh? Like this?”

A loud thwack was heard from the room. The associate professor had probably banged the book down on the table. Aurel thought he heard another gasp. Now, however, he couldn't make out any of the student's words or gasps, because the statistician's shouting suddenly reached an unexpected intensity and the blows came in rapid succession.

"Like this? Like this? I'll hammer it into your head like this! Into your head! Into your stupid head!"

It occurred to Aurel that the professor might be hitting the student over the head with the book, but he didn't want to believe it.

Meanwhile the professor's shouts had gained a certain regularity. They matched the rhythm of the blows.

"In - to - your - stu - pid - head - in - to - your - stu - pid - head - in - to - your - stu - pid - head..."

The professor's voice began to show signs of exhaustion. Then there was silence.

Aurel supposed that the statistician's fit of fury had come to an end. He wouldn't have been surprised if a student with tears in his eyes had come out of the room with his hand pressed to his aching forehead.

And the door really did open. However it was not a mortified student that stood there, but a robust bespectacled fifty-year-old. He smiled at Aurel and said, "If you're a first year student, don't worry. We'll be opening another group for Statistical Methods. It'll be on Tuesdays at nine."

Aurel couldn't summon up a reply. He just watched as the man locked the room and left.

"Are you coming back?" he called after him.

"Of course, I'm only going to the snack bar," the associate professor said, turning round on the stairs.

Aurel once more pressed his ear to the door. But there was absolute silence inside.

Aurel felt a growing need to go to the toilet. He had already moved away from the door, but then he went back and knocked. There was no answer from the room.

Aurel knocked once more, but now he called out as well, "If you need anything, say so."

No reply.

"Aren't you hurt?"

As all was still quiet in the room, Aurel left to look for the toilets. He assumed they would be at the end of the corridor, but he was mistaken. He only found locked classrooms and teachers' studies. He had to go back.

When he passed the statistician's room he knocked once more. Yet he was so certain that no one would open the door, he didn't even stop. How-

ever, the door did open. There stood the hulking figure of the professor of statistics.

“Ah, it’s you? Do you want to put your name down for that Tuesday class of Statistic Methods? You probably haven’t noticed that I’ve already put the paper up on the noticeboard,” said the associate professor and he took a sip from the plastic cup of coffee he was holding in his hand.

Aurel tried to peep inside. He wanted to see what the student who had come into conflict with the professor was doing. Or, more exactly, what had happened to him.

“There’s a draught,” said the professor and quickly shut the door.

Aurel hesitated whether to go to the toilet or step inside. The urge to pee had already become a pain. It was just this pressure in his bladder that led him to act quickly.

He abruptly opened the door to the professor’s study and stepped inside.

“I didn’t hear you knock,” said the statistician, getting up from his table.

Aurel didn’t answer. He glanced around the room. Two armchairs beside a small table, a chair behind a desk, on which there was a computer and printer, over it a small shelf for books. Near the door there was a wash basin and behind the door a cupboard. Everything was perfectly tidy.

“Have you come to ask about the organisation of the classes on statistical methods?” asked the professor, taking a textbook from his desk.

Aurel still didn’t answer. He knew there were only two places where the professor could have got rid of the student’s body. Either in the cupboard, or he could have thrown him out of the window.



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2013

# Viliam Klimáček 1958

The dramatist, poet, prose writer, stage director, scriptwriter and actor, Viliam Klimáček in his works makes use of avant-garde linguistic resources, the approaches of trash genres, children's and students' slang and puns; he parodies the traditional requisites of books (mottos, epilogues, etc.) and turns traditional literary motifs and biblical myths inside out. He elaborates motifs of childhood, adolescence, love, eroticism, life and death, home and the world. His debut was a collection of poems, to be followed by novels, short stories and dramas. He has written over forty plays for the theatre, for which he won seven prizes. His latest novel so far is *Vodka a chróm* (Vodka and Chrome, 2013). It presents the parallel histories of one man and of one country during the "Gentle" or "Velvet" Revolution of 1989. The protagonist asks himself what his life would have been like if the revolution had not been gentle, but bloody. In a relatively short narrative Klimáček has presented a great story that nowadays appears to be a closed chapter, but nevertheless in the context of contemporary literary production it still comes across as fresh and interesting. →



Viliam  
Klimáček  
***Vodka and  
Chrome***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

A parallel history of one person and, at the same time, of one country. This is a relatively short narrative but a great story, and the casual contemplation of what it would be like if... is very refreshing.

IN NOVEMBER 1989 THE COMMUNIST REGIME COLLAPSED SO QUICKLY WE DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TIME TO CATCH COLD. At that time many of us succumbed to the illusion that history could be easily changed; it was just a question of wanting to, of having warm socks and a plentiful supply of paper handkerchiefs.

Like thousands of others, I jingled my keys in the Square of the Slovak National Uprising, and like them I looked around to see from which direction the police would attack. I couldn't believe they would leave us in peace. I expected water cannons, Tatra lorries fitted with blades to push back the crowds and armed police with riot shields. And maybe even tanks, like in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Why should the regime give up without a fight?

In Bratislava sparks were flying over the heads of the crowd and our excited bodies quivered subtly, as when a galvanic current runs through frogs' legs. We felt alive.

Now, over twenty years later, I sometimes wonder what my life would have been like if tanks had appeared in the Bratislava square as they had in Beijing and crushed us like the bodies of the Chinese students. Whether I would have survived at all and how I should have lived if November 1989 had turned out differently. If it had not been Gentle, but Bloody.

We know that the tanks did not arrive, that the comrades were already abandoning their sinking party, theatrically returning their membership cards and the cleverer ones among them were already calculating how profitable the transformation from ideologist to entrepreneur would be. And the cleverest were already at the borders of the republic that was still called the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, with lorries full of cheap computers from Taiwan, which would earn them their first million, because the baffled customs officers let them go without paying duty, for fear of holding up the development of the young democracy.

So what would it have been like if it had not come off? How would my life have continued? Would I have been courageous? Cowardly? Resigned? Would I have been dealing in toothbrushes as I am now? I must introduce myself. My name is Roman Šuster, I only add Dr on my visiting cards and my friends know that I am allergic to the title, as I am to cold. And in that November square I was the warmest dressed demonstrator.

When I was pushing my way towards the platform with two of my colleagues from the hospital, Kňažko didn't even have to ask for a corridor.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Milan Kňažko – an actor and leading figure in the revolution often asked the demonstrating crowd to make a corridor to allow ambulances, etc. to pass.

At the sight of me, everyone stepped back of their own accord. I aroused amused wonder as a huge ball in an orange anorak, sticking out from under which were two sweaters and a padded ski suit. On my head I was wearing a balaclava my mum had knitted and my hands were hidden in warm mittens. It was chilly, but not so chilly as to make others feel it necessary to come dressed in a Siberian outfit like I was. What would be a practical joke for them was a matter of life and death for me.

My allergy to cold rendered me useless for a third of the year and the fact that I had come to the square at all could have been proof of my courage, if it had not been unbridled curiosity. We all felt that something extraordinary was happening – and if nothing out of the ordinary has happened in your life for thirty years, you don't want to miss it.

Especially if it's a question of civil disobedience. I was participating in making history, with the feeling that one day I would have something to tell my children, not knowing that I would never have any. And even if I had, they would have yawned through Dad's stories of the revolution dating from those boring times when the internet did not yet exist.

My colleagues from the hospital kept telling the crowd, "He's allergic to cold, let him through, please, he's an invalid, there's an invalid here, room, please!"

In this way we made our way right up to the foot of the platform and we could enjoy the speakers from close up. Among them were actors the nation recognised from television. They could be seen on the screen in Monday's drama productions and on other days in amusing shows filmed in Slovak cultural centres filled with workers from the local factories. I had had no idea how developed industry was in my country.

Actors who before had joked in front of the cameras of their own free will now protested indignantly from the platform that the regime had exploited their faces. That wasn't evident from the screen. They would laugh heartily at the jokes about mothers-in-law and drunken doormen that viewers had sent them and which they told brilliantly. And the wittiest were the winners.

I cannot judge to what extent they were exploited; I was then an unexceptional surgeon and even now, when I am just a dealer in dental hygiene, I am no great thinker. And I haven't got a television and I don't go to the theatre.

At the very end of the meeting, when the crowd was beginning to disperse, I suddenly felt an aura coming on. My attacks were always heralded by the smell of fermented gherkins. Don't ask me why. I don't know. No doubt it would be more interesting if I sensed myrtle in the aura, but

I'm not Saint Teresa, I don't have ecstasies; unfortunately, I am only Roman Šuster and fermented gherkins are more appropriate for me.

I clutched my friend's hand. "Shit..."

The cold had penetrated my cells and they began to produce an extreme amount of histamine. I began to suffocate. That's why those two had come with me.

My colleagues pulled out the resuscitation pack. "Quick, we must get to work!"

I collapsed right in front of the platform and although there was an ambulance a little way off, there was no need for it. Pity. I missed the chance of my life to have my own corridor at least for a moment. The speakers began to point at me.

"Is there a doctor here?" Kňážko's voice boomed from the clouds.

He was high up, right up in the sky, all the higher because I was lying on the cold ground.

"Is there a doctor here, please?"

In the last moments of clear consciousness I wanted to call out, "Fuck it, I'm a doctor!"

And I am dying from anaphylactic shock. My colleagues are already giving me an injection and the square is resounding with that unforgettable slow voice of the revolution. "Is...? There...? A... doc...tor...? Here...?"

In the last few seconds of clear consciousness I saw a bright orange ball separating from me and changing into a figure. It was my virtual twin, my Viktor.

I'd always wanted to be called Viktor. They say that before you die you see beneath your eyelids a speeded-up film of your life. I don't know whether that's true; I haven't died yet, but I've been dying several times.

I saw a story of a life quite different from my own. I saw a stream of the dispersing crowd bearing my twin away into the side streets, in quite the opposite direction to which my colleagues later took me.

In a couple of minutes parallel fate carries Viktor off straight towards the special police unit preceded by three armoured trucks. Before my colleagues could bring me round I had time to see his story; echoing in my ears were the shouted commands, people's panicky cries, interrupted by bursts of machine-gun fire from the trucks aimed at the crowd and killing men and women who had for a short while naively believed that truth and love could win in this beastly country.

When I once more began to make out their fuzzy faces, my colleagues helped me to my feet. For a while we just moved around on the spot. Kňážko was already introducing some political prisoner and I felt I was now capable of walking. I managed, so long as they supported me by

the elbows. But where in fact does a ball have an elbow? Wrapped up in a down anorak, my colleagues moved me along like a huge ball.

“I’m fine, really,” I assured them as I shuffled along.

We made for the nearest café. I drank some tea with rum. The aroma of rum tickled my nose and I half-closed my eyes, seemingly out of sheer bliss to be alive, but in fact anxious to see the last scenes of Viktor’s story.

In a matter of a few seconds I lived through his life from that Bloody November to the present day. I often recall those scenes, especially when I’m driving. It’s the best cure for micro-sleep, more effective than coffee and loud music combined.

Just now I am sitting at the steering wheel of a company car and I’m returning from a business trip. In Slovenia I’ve signed quite a good contract with the largest network of pharmacies, although the situation is not what it was. During the Balkan war they didn’t take anything, then for a short time there was a boom, and now things are falling off again. I can be glad that humankind still cleans its teeth. Old people because of the dentist’s bills, young people because of kissing.

I am driving a Mercedes and reflecting that at one time I had so many beautiful opportunities and I didn’t take advantage of any of them. I had wonderful friends. I met several remarkable women, I was enthusiastic about books and films, and I even wrote poems and produced two short stories that were published in a magazine for the modern woman. Clearly because, out of shyness, I pretended to be a female author.

Maybe one day I’ll write a story about myself, a novel about Roman, whose cells and then heart were destroyed by the cold. It will be a novel about Viktor, who did not have as much luck as I did in November ’89.

The café was filling up with people from the demonstration. They all had the feeling that everything was possible from now on. That they had already won. As a little “thank you” for my life, I bought my colleagues six Georgian brandies.

“Look, Kňážko!” someone called.

On the other side of the window the tribune of the revolution was in fervent discussion with the future Minister of Culture. They were both wearing knitted sweaters and looking very much like mountaineers. I understood they wanted to look different from the old communists with their inevitable synthetic suits.

“Milan, come and have a drink!” came the clamour from the café, but the man invited gave priority to an Austrian television crew.

That convinced me that we would win. Not the full square, but the cameras. Foreign countries only took an interest in us when things were

at their worst. Or when, once in twenty years, we woke up. If we are on television today, it's really true. We are not dreaming.

I quickly got used to freedom; she wasn't yet making demands on me. We had only known each other for a short time; our relationship was passionate and for the moment she didn't want anything from me. She was just satisfied that I liked her.

I soon began to forget Viktor, my twin in that parallel life, who would shortly be interned in the winter sports stadium, where the fate that awaited him was that of a future prisoner of the Slovak-Ukrainian-Belarusian Federation, a puppet state that in my lifetime was called Czechoslovakia and a few years later, only Slovakia.

A Federation divided off from Europe by a high fence, with only one newspaper, food rationing and state supervision of the internet. After all, who knows how it might have turned out?

I'D BEEN ACCEPTED TO MEDICAL SCHOOL IN SEVENTY-SEVEN. The first thing my alma mater did was to send me to work for three weeks in the Znojmo canning factory. There, together with other future students of medicine, we were to integrate with the working class. We were bottling gherkins.



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Marenčin PT,  
Bratislava, 2013

# Marek Vadas

1971

The mysterious and magical atmosphere of Marek Vadas's prose works, often connected with his experience of living in Africa, is what appeals to his readers. However, the setting for his tales of love, betrayal, hope and cruelty is not of primary importance. The author spins compelling stories, and sketches events that could happen anywhere in the world. In his works the narration flows smoothly, with comic elements and approaches that are often compared to magical realism, an influence of Vadas's perception of the Dark Continent. →



Marek  
Vadas  
***Black  
on Black***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Marek Vadas has been utterly bewitched by equatorial Africa. Not only does he constantly return there, but his view of life, reality and even himself has been changed by the local perception of time, reality and spirituality. In his new book of 35 short stories Vadas successfully tries to capture the secret and beauty of life – and death.

## Plastic

My father was a master among garbage collectors. Even from a distance he could determine whether some cast-off thing had any worth and whether he would be able, so to speak, to put it on the market.

From empty sardine cans and beer-bottle caps he used to make little cars, faithful models of the ones on the street, which he managed to sell in the pub before Christmas for 500 francs; that meant he could treat himself to a beer or, theoretically, a kilo of rice. In the pit behind the bazaar he was able, just with a fleeting glance, to discover cast-off parts which other garages might be willing to buy, and by briefly rattling a radio he would know whether something inside could be of use. At home too we have an absolutely perfect big radio that he fixed. He also collected cables, transistors and old batteries, but those were rare goods and made their appearance only a few times during the season.

Dad was always contented with everything. He never complained about the government or the rich. It was only the neighbours, sitting in the bar and seeking work there, who went on about such things to all and sundry. They didn't want to have any clever ideas. On occasion Dad too would sit with them and sometimes he'd order a small round for them, but most of the time he was not to be found in the pub, or at home either. He was taking care of his business. As he used to say with pride in his voice, he'd found a chink in the market and grasped his opportunity.

\* \* \*

A few days later Uncle Krištof came to visit us. Dad and he drank palm wine and talked men's talk. Suddenly I heard:

"You see, before long the young fellow will be taking over my business. That right, son?"

I've no idea why, but instead of nodding enthusiastically, I just shifted my weight to the other foot, perplexed, and looked at the ground.

Dad was stopped in his tracks. He came over to me and lifted my chin with his palm.

"Why don't you answer? You're surely not going to tell me you don't want to be a garbage collector?"

I looked away at an angle. I kept silent, even if I was imagining all those folding knives, watches, jewels and parade rifles that awaited me in my future work. Maybe my voice was overcome by those poisonous gases from the dump.

He leaned towards me, rolled his bulging eyes at me and roared:

"Ha! Young sir! And what would you like to be? Ha? A poet?"

In the word poet he invested all his anger and indignation, and with the **p** a shower of spit struck my face.

“What’s a poet?” I asked Jozef when I went to school next morning. Jozef is a few years older and he’s the wisest of my classmates, because he has attended each class two years in a row. He knows the answer to everything, and he is respected in the school accordingly.

He took from me the brawn baguette that I had for the break and explained to me that poets do nothing all their lives except write whatever comes into their minds. They fantasise. And they get money for that. However, they have to make the ends of their lines similar, which isn’t entirely simple. Not everyone can do that: to find the right word that rhymes and also makes sense. They also write speeches for presidents.

“Rabbits’ habits” I said immediately, and Jozef smiled broadly. My first rhyme was successful, because it made perfect sense and it scored with the public. To be a poet wouldn’t be too bad, just that I had to practice, to write out all the words and divide them in groups according to their similarities. I’d have them well prepared.

A few days later I had almost a whole notebook full, with densely inscribed pages. All the words I knew were in there. On one side, for example, were all the words ending with “ist”: journalist, pacifist, insist, artist, dentist, communist, persist, blacklist, and pianist. I underlined them with coloured pencil so as to separate them according to meanings. With this assistance it would be child’s play to compose poems. It was enough just to combine words properly. Right at the start I could see I had talent for poetry.

I didn’t understand why Dad thought so little of the profession of poet. A person sat at home and wrote instead of spending all day in the dump coughing in the rain, heating oneself in clouds of stinging black smoke and raking through rubbish. To say nothing of other employments.

For the moment I was going to keep that to myself. I decided I would present Dad with a *fait accompli*. I’d let him know as soon it was clear that I’d become a poet.

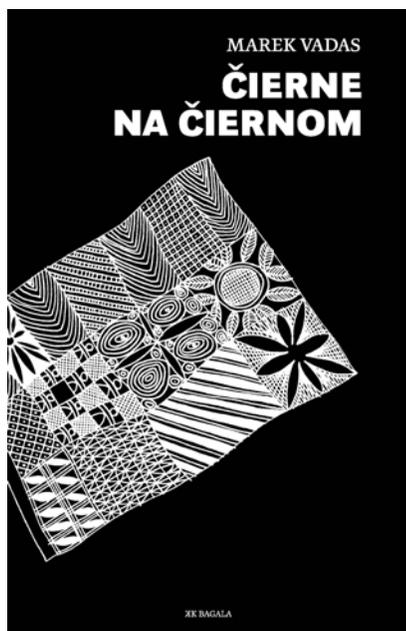
Pending that, I needed to devote myself to a presidential speech. Soon it would be the New Year and Independence Day, the 50th anniversary. I couldn’t have imagined a better opportunity to show off my capacities.

For my twelfth birthday I’d received from Dad, along with Coca Cola, a digital radio with an alarm clock. In the morning it would play a song for me, and I’d rush to school. A splendid way to rise! The radio only worked

for a few days, but during that time I was able to listen to a whole heap of foreign words which sounded well and were used by politicians in interviews with people from the radio. For example, 'electorate', to which I'd already allied 'fat' and 'certificate', or 'dispersal', which sounded like a washing powder and could go with 'vessel' or 'castle'.

I opened my spare notebook and wrote a letter with a presidential speech. It was shorter than I'd originally imagined it, but I managed to get some really good rhymes into it such as hunger – younger, gold – sold, or powder – louder, so that right at the first reading it would be clear to everyone that the author was a born poet, the genuine article. Mr. President spoke there about our young country, used many apt linkages of words that I had heard on the radio, and devoted a large part of his speech to rubbish and rubbish dumps. The citizens needed more rubbish, so that there would be enough for everyone and fights would not break out at the dumps. Only then, when there was sufficient garbage in every district, would all families have enough to eat. He would do everything to ensure that in the coming electoral period everyone would have as much rubbish as he needed at his disposal, so that all in the country were contented.

On the envelope I wrote: for Mr. President. For personal attention. I put it in the post and waited to see what would happen.



← Published by  
KK Bagala, Levice,  
2013

# Uršul'a Kovalyk 1969

A prose writer, playwright and social worker, she is currently the director of the Theatre with No Home, which features homeless and disabled actors. She lives in Bratislava.

Uršul'a Kovalyk has written and staged 10 theatre plays. She has published two collections of short stories and two novels, *Žena zo sekáča* (The Second-hand Woman, 2008) and *Krasojazdkyňa* (The Equestrienne, 2013). The latter has been shortlisted for the Anasoft Litera 2014. →



Uršula  
Kovalyk

# ***The Equestrienne***

Extract translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood →

A novel about the desire to realise one's girlish dreams in spite of totalitarianism; it is a celebration of friendship between women and also a bitter acknowledgement that the desire for power can destroy any relationship whatsoever.

I remember that moment as if it were today. I was standing by the stable gates. The stable was suffused with sunlight. Flies chased one another playfully around a flypaper. Rays of sun transformed their wings into semiprecious stones. Horses dozed in the afternoon heat, mechanically fanning their bellies with their tails. A soft velvety dust settled on their fur turning it into pure gold. Leila, July, Pearl and Lombard stood to the left, Hakim, Ambal, Yaga and Cecil to the right. I remember the personality of each and every one of them. I can recall exactly what would make each of them buck and what might scare them. There was nothing that gave me more pleasure than to press my lips against their soft horse nostrils. The sensation that I enjoyed most of all was lying down on Cecil's back. I would close my eyes and listen to him breathe. I heard the rumbling of his bowels and his powerful heartbeat. Sometimes he would move, which made his joints crackle. He would give a loud snort. Eyes half closed, I dangled my legs without a worry in the world. I lay on his back like a rag doll, just chilling out. Cecil was very gentle. As he slowly turned into his box, he would gingerly shift his weight from one foot to another. I felt completely secure again. As in my mother's womb. I spent hours gazing into Cecil's sad, obsidian-coloured eyes. He was a pensioner. Sometimes they made him pull a cart laden with straw or carry children after the races. His career as a vaulting horse was long over. Riders made use of his serene nature to calm down young, nervous mares. Whenever a horse was frightened, Cecil would be sent for. He was also used to help load horses onto the van. Young horses would buck until they saw Cecil. Unperturbed, he would slowly clamber up the ramp, give a brief rumble and start feeding. Romana and I used to groom him every day, scraping him clean and weaving daisies into his mane. I borrowed a book on farm animals from the library. For hours we would hold Cecil's head and memorize: forelock, bridge of the nose, lips. We would run our fingers along his smooth coat: withers, flank, hock, fetlock. We tried to commit every nodule on his graceful body to memory. We tried to guess where his spleen, heart and windpipe might be. We learned where his temple bone and the lower jawbone was. We rattled off in a whisper: "*Os temporale, os nasale, mandibula, musculus semispinalis capitis.*" It sounded like an incantation. Cecil squinted sleepily and allowed us to scratch his ears. We spent most of our time at the riding hall.

We pretended to the school nurse that we were down with a cold; we skived off young pioneer meetings and sneaked away from the Labour Day parade. We managed to get ourselves kicked out of the *Spartakiad* team

because of our dismal performance. We were hard to track down, like the tiny grey birds that used to peck oats from the feeders.

The summer holidays were drawing to a close. Instead of classes we all just mooched about at school. The teachers were deciding our end of year grades, school desks were being sandpapered down. The time had come for our first girls' outing. By now I had become expert at lying to Mum. Without batting an eyelid. My friend Arpi concocted a note in beautiful Slovak informing parents of a forthcoming two-day school trip, complete with a perfectly forged teacher's signature. Mum never even dreamed anything was amiss. She was happy to have the flat to herself for one of her sex romps. She bought me some tinned meat, bread and sweets. She filled a bottle with a raspberry-flavoured drink made with Vitacit powder. I packed a sleeping bag, thermals and warm socks. In the early afternoon Romana and I arrived at the riding school. We holed up in the attic, waiting for everyone to leave the riding hall. For the last evening feed to come to an end and for the stables to be locked. The doorkeeper was an old fellow, permanently pissed. As soon as everyone left he disappeared in his doorkeeper's cabin and opened a bottle of vodka. The sun sank lazily below the horizon, turning the sky bright orange. Baby swallows played tag. We lay on the unmowed lawn next to the paddocks, eating oversalted luncheon meat and watching the pink clouds slowly drift by. I lit up. The hot wind blew its promise of love into my hair. I passed the cigarette to Romana. She beamed with joy. She dragged on the cigarette cautiously. She peeled scabs off her legs and fed them to the ants. Somewhere a horse neighed. Its high-pitched voice silenced a thrush sitting on top of a pine tree. Everything went quiet. Only the wind gently brushed the meadow, and field poppies, reminiscent of baby wolves' bloodied eyes, frolicked in the grass.

I dreamed I was a swallow, flying just above the surface of a river. Its brightness dazzled me. I felt its warmth on my belly. The river was a stream of lava of glowing gold. I was flying fast. Straight ahead at first, then changing direction abruptly and shooting upwards vertically. Right into the blazing sun. It blinded me. I felt ecstatic. A wave of euphoria swept my body. I woke up screaming. A couple of days later Matilda appeared at Cecil's box. Her piercing blue eyes drilled into me with a force that took my breath away. She tucked her flaxen hair behind her ear and smiled in a peculiar way, as if reluctant to reveal her teeth. "*Not exercising today?*" she asked, patting the horse's neck. She was tall. In her skin-tight leggings and figure-hugging T-shirt, we couldn't fail to notice how beautiful she was. Romana and I exchanged looks but remained stubbornly silent.

*“My name is Matilda,”* she said and extended her hand to us. Grown-ups shaking our hands was certainly not something we were used to. Suspiciously we glanced back and forth at her hand and at each other. Matilda laughed. *“I’ve been watching you for a while now and I think you’re rather clever chicks!”* Eventually Romana took her hand. *“Your name is Karolína, isn’t it,”* Matilda asked me and all I could do was nod dumbly. I was intoxicated by her fragrance. Cinnamon mixed with some sort of fruit. My eyes rolled back in my head. I saw a queen hidden within her. A queen standing proud. An exquisitely ornamented headband made her piercing emerald eyes shine. They seemed to look right into my heart. *“We’re not exercising today, Cecil’s paddock has been overrun by unsaddled colts,”* said Romana as she gently pinched my bottom. *“And as you well know, we’re not allowed to ride, we have to do it secretly in the paddock!”* I came to my senses. Matilda slowly placed her arms akimbo. *“So how about if I got comrade director to let you use the riding hall... and, by the way, no more formalities, call me Matilda.”* Romana and I burst out laughing. Yeah, very funny. Sure, the director will let us use the riding hall. Comrade director enjoyed god-like status. Communist style, that is. People spoke of him with fear. Of his power. Without his approval nobody lifted a finger. He knew everything that went on. And anyone who defied him got the sack. He lorded it over the horses’ lives and the riders’ triumphs. He was a greedy son-of-a-bitch. Ensconced at the Regional National Committee. He ruled the riding hall with an iron fist. Rumour had it he had a TV set and a leather sofa in his office. He rode the wildest stud. And the stallion obeyed him. At the slightest touch of the bridle. It trotted like a meek little lamb. The same horse that wouldn’t hesitate to kick the brains out of our heads. The director straddled it proudly, like a general. Men like this are not aware of kids. To him we were nothing but vermin. The queen’s eyes blazed, turning the deepest marshland green. We went silent.

Matilda turned around and marched right up to the director’s office. *“Just you wait!”* she shouted, her clear voice darting around the stables like a fly. Two hours later we were standing in the huge riding hall. Cecil wore a strange harness. Matilda led him on a long white leash. *“This is a vaulting belt, girls,”* she pointed the whip at some leather grips protruding from Cecil’s back. *“Try it out at a walk first!”* Romana hobbled up to Cecil, tentatively grabbing the belt grips. For a while she limped awkwardly alongside Cecil. Then she stamped her feet and jumped onto the horse’s back. Light as a feather. Matilda told her how to exercise. When to flex her legs and where her centre of gravity should be. *“Excellent! Now try the same at a canter,”* she shouted and smacked her lips at Cecil. The horse

shot into the circle like a guided missile. His mane turned into white ribbons blowing in the wind. His nostrils flared. His eyes glistened. He snorted gently with the rhythm of the canter. He looked ten years younger. Romana moved her legs about, then swung them frontways and rearways, and to the sides. She seemed to be performing some weird dance. Her shorter leg lengthened miraculously and she was suddenly transformed into a vivacious healthy girl. I decided to have a go, too. The belt grips were really handy. Matilda explained in plain language how to vault on. It's a simple little trick. I had to run alongside Cecil for a while, matching the rhythm of his canter. Holding tight to the vaulting belt grips, I planted my straightened legs sharp into the ground and swung myself up. Shooting high above the horse's back, I spread out my legs gracefully in the air and gently touched down. It felt different. An even canter. Suddenly I was able to focus on my body. My lower back relaxed. My spine vibrated in time with the canter. I straightened up, raising my head high. "*Now, slowly raise your arms,*" came Matilda's instructions. I felt as if I were flying. I plucked up the courage to kneel on Cecil's back and... stood up. I stood on the horse for about three seconds. But to me it felt as if I were up in the sky watching the world down below, as if I were about to jump out of my skin before returning into my clumsy body. Then I fell off.

We were learning. How to do a half mill, a flag or scissors. Matilda explained the difference between compulsory and freestyle exercises and showed us the technique for mastering *djigitovka*. Practising every day, we were so exhausted we kept falling asleep on the bus on our way home. My Mum would hardly recognize me. Her spiteful, ailing child was growing into a confident sportswoman. I couldn't give a damn about her lovers. I only went home to eat, sleep and shower. I became adept at copying other people's work at school and scraped through with one C at the most. Once I even managed to get As and just two Bs. That was the time my Mum shackled up with a shady moneychanger. He gave her vouchers for Tuzex, the foreign currency shop. She bought me a Walkman. A blue Walkman with orange headphones. That day the first summer storm thundered over our housing estate. As soon as the rain stopped I went out, a cassette from Arpi in my Walkman. I was transported into another world. I thought I heard some steps behind me and turned around to check if someone was following me. The sound of a machine running mingled with human laughter. A mad human scream nearly shattered my eardrums, a guitar solo carried me into another dimension. I walked around the estate. The rain had turned it into a mirror. Puddles stared blindly into the sky refracting sun rays back into the universe. As if sending des-

perate messages from our socialist world. Everything suddenly appeared to me in a new light. Even the grubby building site had something to be said for it. I walked faster, driven by the beat. As the second track started I saw a huge lorry dumping tons of sand. Dust floated in the air. It reminded me of a sandstorm our geography teacher had told us about. Tipped upwards, the body of the lorry looked like a prehistoric bird's open beak. Sand slid into a hole. Builders leaning on their shovels smoked roll-ups while I savoured Pink Floyd.

It really rocked. I'd never experienced anything like that before. Listening to *The Dark Side of the Moon* on horseback put me in the same state as the joint Arpi once gave me. As the horse ran music reverberated through my body. I was a medium, receiving and transmitting at the same time. Cecil caught the vibe. He plugged into the drumbeat, galloping as if he could hear it. I had the feeling I was absolute perfection. My muscles worked effortlessly. Meticulously. Without the slightest hesitation. My body turned into a machine that ran all by itself. I stopped thinking. I felt the horse's warm body moving between my legs. I was becoming more and more aware of the pleasure generated by the movement. My hairless pussy rubbed against Cecil's hide. It kept growing. Swelling. It was getting bigger and moister. It went all gooey and hot. It kept expanding. It engulfed Cecil and the riding hall. A million hot tongues licked my clitoris. Pleasure slowed down my movements. I buried my pelvis in Cecil's back. Deeper and deeper. I felt a tremendous shiver inside my pussy. A spasm went through my body. It was out of this world. That's when the song finished. Cecil came to a halt.



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# Tomáš Horváth 1971

Prose writer, dramatist and literary theorist, Tomáš Horváth is a master of “propelling” composition. He often writes in the code of detective or spy fiction. His text gives the impression of being a collage or mosaic and the reader can decide which storyline to follow. He is an author of the grotesque, a master of digression, shocking revelations and ironical detachment, who loves to play with various prose forms, building up in this way his own version of the story. He repeatedly makes it clear to the reader that any fact described in literature is after all only a, literary, fact and that writing is only a game. →



Tomáš  
Horváth  
***The District***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

*Farby strachu* (Colours of Horror), an anthology of Slovak horror and mystery short stories, features 20 authors from the mid-20th century till today including Horváth's story *The District*.

In the room where I sleep, suspended over my bed, there's a wine-red wall-hanging with two oriental palaces, which I wander in before sleep; I roam through hundreds of meandering corridors and halls, I pull bunches of frayed threads out of the tapestry and drop them on the floor. It's a competition: which of the bunches will hold out the longest, hovering over my face.

Above the tapestry I notice a fissure in the distemper. I've never seen it before, but maybe I just overlooked it. In a couple of days it's already a crack. I won't mention that to anyone. At night I huddle up in my quilt, huddle into myself. Something will come from that side through the crack in the wall, at any time it *may* come. I'm no longer protected. Crack in the wall, crack in me. I'll ask Granny who's behind that wall.

Nobody. The house ends there. No neighbour. I ponder: what if Nobody comes for me?

All day I cycle about in our district, I'm forbidden to go further. I rush through various little streets, between two- and three-storey brown and greyish apartment houses, sunk into the screen of shadow created for them by the flourishing trees that surge up alongside the pavement. House doors and parked cars flicker at my retinal periphery.

Right there, at the periphery of my vision, some sort of movement slithers. Somewhere in a chink between houses. I stand on the pedals, accelerate, spurt; the bicycle under my bottom is whisking from side to side. It seems to me something in the district is coming to life.

Suddenly there's a cry that carries right through the district: "Lu-u-u-unch!" With a violent backward movement of my right foot I jam the pedals, the rear wheel locks, I tumble off. The street around me spins. A black smudge remains on the asphalt after me.

I race up the flights of Sunday's deserted stairs to the third floor, which is bathed in sunbeams, falling through the hailstone-coarse glass of the rectangular corridor vents. I know all the doors on the corridor, Grnáč, Šaray, Doupovec. My heart is trying to burst through my rib-cage; I am terrified that one of those doors will open – and wearing the benign chequered shawl of Mrs. Doupovcová, a murderer will stand there.

I'm expecting a similar shock when like a lunatic I press the button on the black circular bell by the door with a red doorstep: it opens – and there instead of Granny, a murderer in a black cloak. He has even stolen her smoker's voice, hoarse from Mars cigarettes: behind the door I can hear her: "Well, who is it, who is it?" To me that ball-shape on the door always looks as if it's laughing at me. The white door really opens, I breathe out a sigh: opposite me is Granny's cotton T-shirt, forged in narrow bands of red, yellow, white and brown. Right at that moment I imagine that Granny

has already died. And this here is only my memory: that I am listening, emotionally touched (but only in my fantasy), to Granny grumbling and giving me orders to wash my hands and telling me the vegetable soup will be cold by now but she isn't going to heat it, hoho, no indeed, my own fault, time I learned. Is it possible that one day I will remember this moment which was then real and even then I wanted to give it the status of a memory? Precisely now, when Granny is standing opposite me, with her face under those yellow curls tanned from the "Sparhelt", so corporeal, so fully present – one day this will be a memory. Right now it is a memory already.

"Lu-u-u-unch! Quick now, on the double!" From the bathroom I race to the kitchen with a senseless detour round the table in the hall – I pretend to be a runner doing his finishing sprint in a crazily slowed-down camera sequence, with the blinking sign R on the screen.

Straightaway, with stomach filled, I get on my bicycle. I run down the stairs behind the cycle, in a fit of intoxicating happiness: only the first half of the day's playing is over, the second is still before me. I immerse myself in the right-angled topography of the district's streets, whose plan I will never get into my head without something left out. Always it manages to surprise me with an unexpected turning or a sudden backyard with a couple of garages.

It's in just such a yard that I suddenly hear strange footsteps. Before me are the doors of three garages with moulting paint: deep red, pea green and pale blue. The steps are behind me: I'm in a trap. I turn round.

There is unimpeded passage out of the yard: the bushes by the pathway, catching the light through a gap between houses, are a vision of escape. The footsteps coming this way must be from one of the adjacent yards – no time to waste! I race towards the narrow gap between the pebble-dashed walls, banging my right elbow against one of them. I'm out, I'm out clear of all that. I still hear the steps behind me, but they're somehow such strange, unnatural steps: as if someone was deliberately scuffing his shoes along the asphalt. As if some physically handicapped person was trudging along like that. I pick up speed. It won't be difficult to escape from steps as lame as those. I take a glance at my right elbow: it's torn from the facing on the wall, which has drawn a weeping bloody weal, reminiscent of a burst cherry sticking out of the yellowy dough of a fruit sponge.

I'm just passing through the little square where there's a shop that has fish salad and cod. From there I usually connect with our own Trenčianska Street. When I slow down, everything round me too goes quiet: once again I can hear those footsteps behind me. At an equal distance – but

that's not possible, that they could have managed to follow me as fast as I was going; especially when they're shuffling. I cannot precisely localise the place that they're coming from, any more than that uncertain movement at the periphery of my vision: they sound as if from nowhere, from somewhere or other below the threshold of my hearing.

The district has not allowed me outside itself, I have not managed to overstep its boundary. As if invisible ropes were tied to the rear mudguard of my little green battered Spurt, so that whenever I strained too hard against them, all the more forcefully they flung me back among those timeworn houses from the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the '50s shadowed by trees, since few of those houses go beyond three storeys' height. In the end I always found myself right where I wanted to get away from.

I cannot say that I'd never before gone whizzing round that particular house, because they were all identical, but when I turned towards it a strange sight greeted me: I happened to be standing on the boundary strip in front of our own yard, off to the side. Three circles of tarmac-damed path: two smaller circles were connected with the larger circle, one of the former passing under Granny's windows. I raised my head – and indeed, behind the glass doors on Granny's balcony the curtain was undulating. The balcony door opened – I went off from the bounds into the yard and slowly trudged in the direction of the basement flats. A fat, almost bald-headed fellow in a T-shirt was just coming out on our balcony. I'd never seen him in my life. I changed direction, I wasn't going to the door. I pretended I was a child who was just aimlessly cycling about like this. Then I noticed: the round brass knocker wasn't on our door. It wasn't our door at all. That's not my yard. But it's just like it. Till you get to that door, to the fact that it's missing a rusty doorknob.

\* \* \*

In the evening I'm lying in the bath. Nearly every evening I lie in the bath, in almost boiling water, covered in foamy snowy spires; I shut my eyes, the glaring yellow light of the bulb over the mirror is searing through them. It's just that misted mirror, which the steam in the bathroom strikes, that I'm afraid to look in. (I'm always afraid to look.) With a gaze deformed by the lashes of my narrowed eyes, in the misty drizzly remoteness of the mirror I discern a dark contour. It's frayed away into fragments; it only shines where the sliding drops have made a pathway. It isn't me.

When the foam subsides, alternately I rise and fall back with a splash into the green water, I'm crossing La Manche; when I surface and catch

hold of the white tiles, I bathe in the light of news-camera flashes, I'm giving interviews on every side.

In the darkened vestibule before the bathroom, where there are tall cabinets with clothes that have a special scent and a small cupboard for toiletries, from the two-winged fixed mirror of pale brown wood my two doubles bow to me – idiots, cripples. A double always bows. He holds his bent arm in front of him, turns away his misshapen fingers, twists his mouth to the right, pulls out the lip, thus showing the tips of a few teeth: his facial expression is such as to suggest some terribly mischievous *purpose*.

The apartment is dark. Only from the streetlamps a muddy yellowish light falls through the windows into the rooms; the massive table in the middle of the hall fringed by six upholstered chairs (“the family council”) looks like a huge, sleeping, vicious animal. Shadows steal through the hall, and the headlights of a passing car flicker on the ceiling. With time the apartment has changed to the Nautilus. And I was its prisoner! The heart of the mechanism was in the bathroom; the apartment was controlled behind the console, with its knobs and rudder, on the white washing machine with its glass eye on top. In our dramatic situation, trapped under a ceiling of ice, we would get oxygen in a moment: I admired the way Granny – Captain Nemo, my jailor – coldbloodedly commanded this situation, always with apron round waist and a Mars between fingers thickened from soaking in the sink and rheumatism, with the ceramic ashtray, the chamber-pot as it was called, alongside on the kitchen table.

I look through the glass of the window at the dark underwater landscape –flooded houses and cars, mostly various makes of MB and an old battered Octavia. Once there were people living here. Only the streetlamps still heroically perform their role: they illuminate a dead landscape.

Right over there, below the most distant door of the long brown house opposite, is where the darkness is most concentrated. When I gaze at it for a long time, the condensing dark gradually gathers to a figure whose face cannot be seen. Despite that, I know by the posture of the head that the figure has eyes trained straight at our window. Here I'm protected, on the third floor, but what about tomorrow in the streets on the bicycle? I'll have to be fast.

\* \* \*

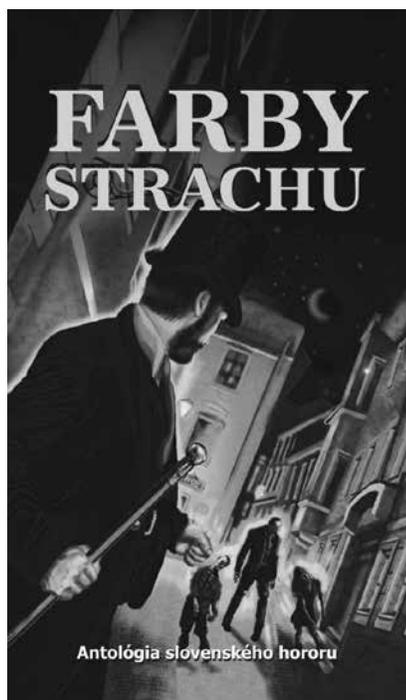
I wake up with the cooing of doves on my face (Dudoolku! Dudoolku!). Pressing in on me through the open window is the swift morning air, bearing, however, a concealed promise of the future, when towards

noon it will begin to heat up in the glow of the radiant sun. Under my quilt, I am following Granny in her striped T-shirt through the window. She's standing on the balcony and beating the green balcony rail with the handle of a yard-brush – she's knocking off the dust.

In the shadow of the trees, on the newly-discovered street, I notice a black stain on the asphalt. A mark after a fall. It follows that there is another child who also goes cycling here. I wander freely through the streets, to see if I can spot him.

I squeeze between the houses into some small backyard, where there are only battered dustbins of buckled tin, three garages, and one wretched tree. I detect it leaning against a wall beside a cellar window: a pale blue bicycle, a Sobi 20. That cycle brings to mind the Eska folding bike, but without that odd appendage, some sort of a catch, on the crossbar. Judging by the bicycle and how the setting of the seat is fixed, that child must be bigger than I am. I'll come in closer, I'll stop, but I won't get off, just with one foot propped against the wall, leaving the other on the pedal. The bike isn't even secured with a chain. And then I hear them.

Those steps once again. Those sickly ones. The little yard is passable, and I shoot off and whizz along the footpath trodden in the grass to the children's playground. Abandoned rusty climbing frames, a broken slide sharp as a razor, bars erected for swings with no swings, the boarded-up supervisor's hut, and a red graffito *Kiss* sprayed on the white wall. But I'm going in the the right direction.



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2011

# Ivana Dobráko- vová 1982

Ivana Dobrákovová studied translating and interpreting at the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. Her literary debut was a collection of short stories entitled *Prvá smrť v rodine* (First Death in the Family), which was shortlisted for the Anasoft Litera Prize and won a Ján Johanides Award in the category Best Fiction by a Young Writer. The second novel by this young author, *Bellevue* (2010), nominated for the Anasoft Litera Prize, describes the experiences of a young Slovak woman in France, where together with other young people from all over the world she is caring for old and sick people in a centre for the physically disabled not far from Marseille. Dobrákovová's third book *Toxo* (2013) was shortlisted for the Anasoft Litera 2014. She translates from French and Italian. She lives in Turin. →



Ivana  
Dobráko-  
vová  
***TOXO***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

An attempt to problematize feminine identity and closely connected phenomena. An awareness of one's own identity does not mean being natural, but it is a continuous process of finding and losing oneself.

## Return from Turin

The first time I saw her was in a café, she was standing by the counter drinking coffee, and I wanted to turn on my heel and leave the establishment, give my head a shake and forget about her, because how many cafés does Borromini Square have where someone can drink white coffee without looking at such repulsive creatures, such botches of Nature, as that woman was, but just then I was spotted by that waitress who knew me so well she made me contribute every month to the stray cats and dogs in that refuge of theirs, even though I'm allergic to animal fur and maybe to animals in general, she noticed my presence and screeched across the floor at me, the usual? *latte macchiato*? and by then I couldn't leave and pretend that I'd never even stepped in there that day. Circumspectly I came nearer to the counter, and so inevitably also to that woman, I scanned her from behind: small figure, black hair cropped short, curved spine and dreadfully emaciated legs which were outlined even under the loose trousers, but when I came level with her and leaned against the counter, my nausea was magnified still more, the skin on her face was so oddly stretched, as if it wasn't a good all-round fit, and on her nose she had big glasses in a white frame, through which she cast an inimical look at me as soon as she sensed I was looking her over. Yes, of course, she must be well used to curious and disgusted looks, like all handicapped people, though in her case it wasn't clear what exactly her disability was, one had the feeling that something wasn't right in her as a whole, as if the handicap had naturally spread out over the whole body and could not decide in which part to settle down, whether in the legs, on the back, or perhaps – as if that body was about to be prematurely and spontaneously expelled from the womb, but at the last moment it clung to the mother within and hung on, hung on tooth and nail. I directed my gaze at the glass of *latte macchiato* which the waitress placed in front of me, I was hoping we'd get talking, we'd toss in a few words about those bastards of hers for which she couldn't find new owners and time would flow faster, but she went off somewhere to the rear and I and the woman remained at the counter alone. I could hear her slurping, the impacts of the spoon against the cup, and, alas, I could not help also noticing her tic, that woman scrunched up her nose, if that's the name for it, every five seconds she bent it into folds, *hoisted it upwards*, and after this moment she was obliged from time to time to push the glasses back on her nose so they wouldn't fall. I hadn't even properly stirred the *latte macchiato* and I was starting to drink it in gulps, just to have it behind me, when I felt something on my tongue, I fished a short black hair out of my mouth and that was too much for

me, quickly I pulled out my purse and threw a few coins on the counter, shouting at the waitress, who assuredly didn't hear me, but that didn't matter, I almost ran out of the café, up Corso Gabetti with limber stride and no turning round, I had a hankering to spit out, to puke all that coffee out, but in that district everyone knew me, I couldn't behave there like an utter pig.

I thought it was a once-off incident, that the woman had only strayed into our district by chance and I wouldn't have to confront her ever again and look upon that misjudgement of Nature, but awareness, or rather certainty soon came that no, this was no coincidence, she inhabited these parts just as much as me and my husband, her den too was concealed somewhere in those tall run-down houses in the vicinity, a musty bedsit, as I imagined it, or maybe double bedsit, because that woman also had a mother, a bent old woman with a permanently frozen smile, and a dog, a yellow mongrel, she used to drag both of them out on walks and snap at them incessantly. I'd already been living in the district about a year, after the wedding I'd moved to my husband's bachelor apartment, where by then I felt almost at home, after a bitter struggle against my husband's ingrained bad habits and obsessions, where I finally found my own spot, took ownership of a few square metres, and just when I felt like being merciful even to that inhospitable district, she too appeared, but how was it that I only bumped into her after a year, when previously too I'd been going out, doing the shopping, to the park? Now I was meeting her at every moment, mostly in her impressive trio with the mother at death's door and the hysterical bitch, they marched down the street and everyone knew them, everyone greeted them, called to her, *ciao, Franca, come stai?*, so without wanting to I also learned her name. Franca, I was forced to concede that the thing even had a name, Franca, and so an identity, Franca, that this wasn't a piece of rubbish, Franca, which could be thrust into a black plastic bag and tied with a piece of string and flung into the dustman's lorry when it was going round. Always when I saw her I felt aggravated, a ball of something swelled up in my throat, my mouth went dry and I trembled all over, oh no, not her again! I avoided her as best I could, I fled as soon as she appeared in my vicinity, I didn't want to look at her, I diverted my sight from that horror, but at the same time I had her face constantly before me, that ghastly fixity, that spasm, I used to say, such people should not be allowed to live, that sort ought to be swept away somewhere so that they don't ruin the day for us, the normal people, we, who after all can't do anything about the way they look, the kind of monsters they become, the hard time they have in this world, and besides

they bring misfortune, that's a concrete-hard fact, she emits evil, I said to my husband at supper, evil radiates from that woman, I feel it, if you only knew, she gives me goosebumps on my spine, why does she stand in my way, why does she vex me with her existence, why doesn't she barricade herself in her double bedsit and turn on the gas? In such conversations tears sometimes gushed from me, my husband patted my hand encouragingly, now now, calm down, it'll be OK, but I saw in his eyes, I saw very plainly that he was more than appalled at my utterances, that such things after all must not be uttered, that only now was he beginning to realise what a Nazi he had taken as his wife.

And with the passage of time it only worsened, I saw her everywhere, she was lurking at every crossing, in every shop or café, ever more frequently I found myself scanning the street for no reason, training my gaze over all nooks and corners of our district, so then crawl out, you swine, from that filthy burrow of yours, I know that you're here somewhere, I'd let out a threatening mutter from beneath my nose, and when later at suppertime I began to rush away from the laid table and look out the window to see if she wasn't about just then, because I felt her presence, as if I had a radar working in me that measured every move she made, my husband shook his head and pulled me away from the radiator, this doesn't look like premenstrual syndrome, this looks a lot more serious, and at that moment I realised that for two months I hadn't had the curse. Needless to say, she was there when I went to buy the pregnancy test, she was there in that pharmacy, she was standing in the queue holding the lead on her bitch, which began to bristle as soon as I came in, she was there and looked unpleasantly at me when I pulled my queue ticket out



← Published by  
Marenčin PT,  
Bratislava, 2013

# Zuska Kepplová

1982

Zuska Kepplová studied dramaturgy and screenwriting at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava and is a doctoral candidate at the Central European University in Budapest. In 2005 she won first prize in the short story competition *Poviedka*. In 2011 she published her first book, *Buchty švabachom* (Sweet Buns with Gothic Script), which earned her a nomination for the prestigious Anasoft Litera Prize 2012. The characters in the book are new nomads, immigrants with the unlimited possibility of returning, yet restless in the search for a place they can call home. Where is it? With whom? Dexterously written and smoothly readable, Kepplová's debut is a faithful attempt to capture the experience of adventurous twenty-somethings who have left home to get a taste of the world. This volume is a skilful reflection on contemporary themes such as the city, double-citizenship (or rather "homelessness") as well as post-socialism and feminism. Her latest book was published in 2013 with the title *57 km od Taškentu* (57 km from Tashkent). →



Zuska  
Kepplová  
***57 km from  
Tashkent***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

Two short novellas about people who, in spite of not living in their homeland, have the chance of planning what the world of tomorrow will look like.

## FRE\_DOM

### **Majka (to Vera)**

I stood in the doorway to the Admin Office and watched Mick reading the newspaper with his feet up on the window sill. The news from the world: while in the States two young people had got married during a marathon, in Cuba they'd begun constructing underground shelters, resulting in an acute shortage of cement and fuel all over the island.

The objectionable woman in the Admin Office shouted at me to wait outside, so I took a step backwards into the corridor. Through the half-open door I saw her go over to Mick and lean over his shoulder, her huge breasts touching his back. She was helping him with some words in the articles. Mick had learned the basics of Slovak quite well in a short time. Allegedly so he could read the newspapers and chat to people about politics in the pub.

"Look here," he pointed to another article. "What's that you say? I can't believe what I see!" The woman laughed: "We say 'I can't believe my eyes!'" I liked hearing him read aloud from the newspapers. So did the woman from the Admin Office. We had never heard our mother tongue spoken with a foreign accent before. He read:

For McDonald's from the south of Slovakia

Several kinds of fast food such as hamburgers, salads, French fries, various desserts, hot and cold beverages – and note this, Plzen beer (an exception said to be allowed by the firm of McDonald's in only one of its 11 804 branches – the one in Prague) will be available to the public every day. Everything, of course, blessed by the continual strict control of hygiene and the quality of the food and service.

At this point he raised his eyes meaningfully and cried: "An article like this shouldn't be among the domestic news. It's a PR article, an advert!" He continued with the last sentence:

The Majcichov Agricultural Cooperative will supply the Prague restaurant with milk for the preparation of special products – milkshake cocktails and ice-cream sundaes.

The woman just said that she had never eaten a hamburger. The next time she visited Prague she'd be sure to go to that restaurant. "Have you been to Prague?" Just then Mick noticed that I was still standing outside the door. "Come in!" he called.

"It's rude to listen outside the door, didn't anyone teach you that?" the woman reproached me. He added that we should knock and resolutely step inside, that we should stop being timid. He switched to English and raised his voice. In the second person it wasn't clear whether he was

talking to me or whether I just represented everything that aggravated him about this country. Just as McDonald's represented what he didn't like about America.

He concluded by asking whether I read the papers and when I shook my head, he banged the paper down on the desk and swung round in his chair. He made a few gestures and thanked me for giving him an idea. He asked the woman to xerox and make copies of the article. Mick gave out these papers in the class and wrote a couple of questions on the board. Silence fell over the class, no one knowing how to relate these questions to the event of the restaurant opening in Prague. The discussion took some time to get off the ground as no one knew how to confront Mick's zeal for discussion. "Why, why do you think anyone needed a McDonald's here? Why?" he called to the person who ventured to speak.

Mick used to gesture wildly, put his hands to his head and make grimaces. Maybe they should have thrown him out, because at the end of the year we didn't know the grammar and he often came late to class or he moved it to the pub opposite the university. But no one then had any idea how *native speakers* taught, maybe it was just meant to be like that.

### **Vera (to the painter, Mr Maliar)**

In Bratislava I very much missed the whole sector of services from express manicure/pedicure and Chinese snack bars to the psychoanalyst. All those little people, little chats and the wealth of paid love they gave me; I missed all that there.

In New York I had built up a relationship with my pedicurist. Just imagine, she spent her adolescent years looking at calloused soles. At her age we'd been listening to loud rock music and rebelling against work; she watched the Chinese titles of a film out of the corner of her eye, while scraping and smoothing my feet with automatic movements. "Massage?" she would ask and run her fingers over my calves, my big toe brushing against the nipple under her Hello Kitty T-shirt. I think I even dreamed about her once. She would kiss the toe knuckles I had worn the skin off running on a treadmill in my trainers, while all the time she kept one eye on the television.

And then there was the girl in the snack bar. She mistook me for some actress. She stared hard at me when she was putting sesame chicken on my plate – my little passion, my little deep-fried transgression that I eat under the picture of a waterfall in the corner, quite hidden from the world of healthy eating. Just then they were shooting some film out in the street and the girl was sure some star had come in for sesame chicken. I smiled, her interest flattered me, so I told her I was from the catering company and I had her wrap up one portion, allegedly for Woody Allen.

Another time I told her I'd been sent again to get that wonderful chicken. I invented strange stories about him; I always summed up his aberrations and manias in a couple of sentences. I said Woody usually ate raw food, just lots of shoots, but then he would suddenly shut himself up in the catering caravan, no one was allowed to see him and there he would eat a portion of sesame chicken fried in a saucepan full of oil! Woody liked to obey prohibitions, but every now and then he was naughty, so he could foster a feeling of wrongdoing that had to be suppressed by industriousness. That's what I admire about Henryk, that he can be disciplined without it bursting out of him anywhere. What I like about you, Mr Maliar, is that you can be undisciplined and you don't reproach yourself in any way.

In actual fact these were my own oddities, which I first disclosed to my psychoanalyst and on the way home from seeing him I got into the habit of rewarding myself with my sesame delight, while also taking away one portion for the fictive Allen. That was before I discovered that my psychoanalyst was following me. During our sessions, when I talked to him about my Lolita passion for my pedicurist, he became addicted to me. He spent the whole week dealing with patient after patient without showing the slightest interest, until at the end of the week he could at last listen to me talking. Then he would steal out of the office and follow me through the streets. While I was eating in the snack bar, he would sit in the coffee bar opposite and keep an eye on me over his open newspaper, then run out into the street to follow me, only turning round when he reached the door to my house. From there he popped into the beauty salon, where he used the toilet, from whose door he could get a glimpse of the pedicurist squeezed into a child's T-shirt.



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KK Bagala, Levice,  
2013

# Juliana Sokolová

1981

Sokolová studied philosophy at the University of York, UK, and currently lives in Košice, Slovakia, where she was born. She grew up in Košice and in Misrata, Libya. She writes primarily in English. Her book of poems, *My House Will Have a Roof*, was published by Fra (Prague) in 2013. →



Juliana  
Sokolová  
***My House  
Will Have  
a Roof***

A surprisingly mature début of an English-writing Slovak poet labelled the “poet’s poet”.

**Silver grey alufoil**

*The silver grey alufoil  
wrapping the flowers  
hanging head down  
at the edge of the market*

*infinity felt as reverberations  
of love  
light refracted through the silver grey alufoil  
across the marketplace*

*and along the long wall of the Dominican church*

*the silver grey alufoil  
wrapping the flowers  
hanging head down  
at the edge of the market  
the first gesture  
of the November to come  
amidst the late summer vegetable stalls*

*The approaching seriousness  
made itself felt  
at the edge of the market first*

**Steppe**

*February too, as if in response,  
has shown its magic –  
the beauty of the barren, snowless  
night –*

*barren and vast  
like a steppe*

*the low window  
so close  
to the frozen ground*

## **Floriánska**

*the sharp clarity  
shared by numbers and breath*

*speaking of absolutes possible  
only for half of the year*

## **On train to Sergiv Posad (Someone else's childhood)**

*trees  
everywhere, trees  
in this country*

*(where trees and people look  
so different from each other)*

*birches and domes  
birches and domes*

*cycling along the railtracks  
on a dusty path  
near Nina's dacha*

*in the heat of the summer month,  
someone else's childhood*

## **Lungs**

*in the bar  
the words and the smoke were sinking in through my skin  
my skin, like the clothes before it, soaked  
as in tandem they travel  
towards my lungs*

*lungs, the joint speaking and breathing organ  
the proof that language  
has its origin in  
breathing*

### **Cavity**

*the last breath I carry  
inside the cavity  
of my body  
is not my own*

### **December (Botanic garden)**

*Walking in dark landscapes  
with people I barely know  
  
trying to need  
as if I didn't need*

### **Yard**

*The snow  
that means  
we're leaning away  
from the sun*

### **Waiting**

*Waiting for a miracle  
is better than  
waiting*

### **August**

*I carry the snow inside me*

### **The rains that speak of something else**

*The flashes of forgiveness  
brought by the evening rain*

*The rains that speak  
of something else*

*the rains that speak of something else entirely*

## **Row house**

### **I**

*Inner courtyards  
admitting of rain*

*rain water flowing  
down the grey concrete of the staircase*

*waking in the middle of the night  
wrapped only in thin cloth  
walking downstairs  
for a glass of water*

*rain water  
washing down the steps*

*Crossing the weather  
in all seasons*

### **II**

*Snow falling onto the courtyard--  
the moment of opening the bedroom door  
and stepping out,  
the feathers of snow caught on each step*

*The buildings that mean  
you must live*

### **III**

*Siberia,  
a train through the Siberian tajga*

*the boat from Yokohama left at the shores*

*the train cutting its way through the vastness of this continent  
as if each time looking anew for the route of least resistance  
through these frozen plains,  
like a river searching for new routes in the mud of its own estuary*

*looking out,  
looking out into the tajga,  
the land of Dersu,  
Dersu's land,  
Dersu  
cutting reeds  
on the frozen lake  
in the fastly consumed sunlight*

*the boy's boxer's body  
sat on the train  
for the second day now  
through the plains  
through the plains, through the tajga  
of Siberia*

*on the way to Europe,*

*on the way to  
Venice, Roma, Finland.*

*Thinking of Hokkaido,  
and the thick white storm around the roofs  
of the peasant houses  
and the island's pale light filtering through the high-set windows*

*on the way to Rome  
on the way to Venice*



← Published by Fra,  
Prague, 2013

# Monika Kompaní- ková 1979

Kompaníková is the author of a collection of short stories, *Miesto pre samotu* (A Place for Loneliness, 2002), which won Ivan Krasko Prize as the best début of the year; a novella, *Biele miesta* (White Places, 2006), and a novel, *Piata lod'* (The Fifth Boat, 2010) that won the Anasoft Litera 2011. In 2013 she published her first book for children, *Hlbokomorské rozprávky* (The Deep Sea Tales). →



Monika  
Kompaní-  
ková

# ***The Deep Sea Tales***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Imagine a world deep under the sea. Like in a pot full of well-salted plankton soup, there are fish, octopuses, mermaids, jellyfish, crustaceans, molluscs, enormous mammals, submarines and one or two bathyscaphes. And at the very bottom is the seabed. At the northern edge of the Pacific Ocean, at the bottom of the deepest trench, more than ten kilometres down, a place where no sunbeams nor even a Japanese pearlfisher can ever reach, there is nothing. And yet – that's not quite the case.

## The One-Eyed Monster

The disco ended. The wild dancing had stirred up the sea, but now it calmed down again, the surface fell, the waters washed away from the flooded islands in the Indian Ocean.

First to wake was the copepod, the “oar-legged” creature. She stretched out all her little oars and rowed away, bumping against little legs, fins, tails, moustaches and tentacles of the creatures lying all around. On her way she woke up a grumpy red crab, who – worn out from the dance – just dragged his big claw along the sandy bottom. She also woke up a sea cucumber, a whole cluster of sea urchins and two small nautiluses, who, half asleep and all tangled up, banged into a chimera. The chimera with quiet dignity rose in the water and swam off, no one knows where. The arthropods, “jointed-legged” creatures, who’d been sleeping under the chimera’s fin, also woke up, as did little fish, cephalopods or “head-legged” creatures, and comb jellies. The hermit crab did some sweeping up and crawled deep into his shell. Gradually all of them somehow hobbled off and were lost in the darkness. They were feeling “in bits”, aching all over, their heads were spinning, their little lights were only weakly glimmering, their limbs were not obeying. But in spite of this they were happy, because they had never before known such a festival at the bottom of the sea.

They left only their tracks on the sea floor. But by the time Biba the fish and Rado the sea-sea-snake woke up, the sand had gone over the traces and there was nothing left on the seabed to remind anyone of the festivities.

All that remained was the beautiful teeth in Biba’s jaws. Teeth that were sharp, and as straight as the masts of a yacht.

“I’ve never in my life seen lovelier teeth, Biba,” Rado said, and Biba just contentedly spread her mouth wide, to let the plankton flow in.

They were lying together at the foot of a dune, with sand scattered over them, leaning one against the other. Silently and fuzzily they were looking round them, pondering whether the celebrations, the lights and the dance were only a beautiful dream or had really happened.

In the silent darkness suddenly a tiny white thing appeared, a clearly shining dot. The dot grew bigger, the light came closer.

“Do you see what I see?” Rado asked.

“I don’t see anything, I’m sleeping,” Biba said, turning over onto her other side.

“Whatever can it be? It’s got a strange colour.”

“Hmm, indeed,” Biba said, but she didn’t move from the spot: she couldn’t, all of her was hurting. That dance had been real after all.

“Shouldn’t we get out of here?”

“Buzz off, Rado, leave me alone! The sea is full of strange things.”

Biba shut her eyes and stopped glowing. The sea-snake fearfully watched the light coming closer and growing bigger. Whatever could it be, he pondered silently. What kind of animal has such a white light, shining harshly and with no interruption? The lights that animals have are flickering, pulsing. And what living creature gives out such a smooth purring and buzzing? The bigger the light grew, the louder it buzzed. Vrrrn, Vrrrrrn, Vrrrrrrn.

“Biba, it’s coming close, wake up Biba!” Rado whispered, filled with dread. All around was the black-black darkness; the currents had settled down and all the deep-sea creatures had crawled away somewhere. The water seemed to have turned cold and heavy. Only this mysterious creature was approaching and buzzing ever louder. VRRRRN, VRRRRRRRN, VRRRRRRNNNNN, VRRRRRRNNN.

“Biba, Bibushka, wake up now,” and Rado nudged Biba with the end of his tail. “It’s quite close now, and I’m scared!”

“Shhh, be quiet, Rado, and shut your eyes,” Biba could not be disturbed.

Rado didn’t know what to do. He was shivering all over with fear. The light was so close that it was lighting up both himself and Biba the fish; he could feel that light on his skin and he had a feeling that his own little lamp at the end of his tail was itself, against his will, beginning to shine. They ought to crawl off somewhere, he thought, but he couldn’t move: the strange light nailed him firmly to the seabed, and fear paralysed him.

At that moment the white light suddenly went out. The buzzing stopped and the darkness and silence once again poured over the bed of the deep-sea channel. A strange darkness and a still stranger silence.

“Biba,” the sea-snake whispered in a trembling voice. “Biba, it’s here, it’s still here, I can feel it, but I don’t know where we should vanish to, Biba.”

“Rado, no panic, I can’t see anything here,” Biba said calmly. Her eyes were shut, her fins limp.

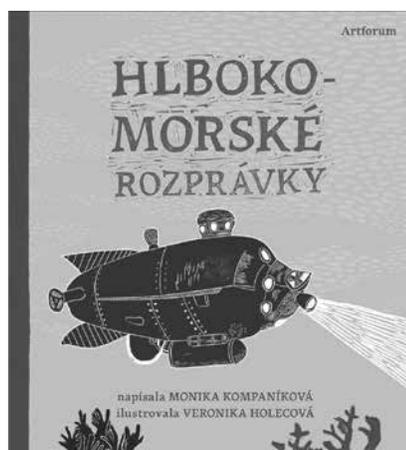
“It’s here, I’m telling you Biba, it’s still here and it isn’t an animal, I feel that!” Rado insisted.

“You’re gibbering, Rado! Now let me alone, I’m in pain all over. Chrrrrr.”

Ooh-ah-ah-ah-ah! Rado yelled when the light once again unexpectedly shone out, and not somewhere in the distance but directly in front of them, within three fins of their jaws – so it was quite near, so near that the light entirely blinded them. By now Biba could see the light even through closed eyelids; there was nothing for it, she had to wake up, whether she wanted to or not. The buzzing shook the whole dune, it was so powerful; the dune began rearranging and scattering its sand. The entire seabed was shaking. Ooh-ah-ah-ah-ah! Biba the fish was shouting too, but she was unable to move. The light was shining straight into her eyes, the earth was trembling, and a huge creature was reaching out something like tentacles to them, some sort of frightful hollow pipes, feelers and claws.

“What’s... what is that, Biba?” Rado cried, trying to coil himself round Biba.

Both of them saw one enormous circular eye, bigger than the largest medusa they’d ever met, and something was moving inside that eye, some other creature. It was looking at them and blinding them, and they were unable to move. Biba wanted to cover her eyes with her fins, but they were too short, so she turned her back. Rado saw that that thing had an arm sticking out of it and there was a needle at the end of the arm, a sharp point; it was going to skewer him, it was going to skewer Biba. Suddenly a quacking and hissing began and he saw how sand was disappearing from the seabed, he saw approaching the hollow pipe that was drawing the sand into it and he felt that it wanted to pull the two of them in too, the enormous sucking thing, the creature that sucked in and filtered the sand. A monster of immense proportions, more terrible than the most terrible devilfish. Weakened by his extreme fear, Rado felt like a bundle that someone was violently untying. Against his will his tail came close to the pipe, his tail-lamp clinked against its cold hard edge, the needle at the end of the second arm was going to pierce him...



← Published by  
Artforum, Bratislava,  
2013

# Alexandra Salmela

1980

Salmela was born in Bratislava where she studied Dramaturgy. She now lives in Finland, has two children and has won several awards for her first book written in Finnish, which was shortlisted for the *Finlandia*, the country's most prestigious literary prize. Thanks to her, the organisers of the competition changed its rules to allow entries from people who are not Finnish citizens. Because the Slovak Anasoft Litera Prize has also changed its rules, her novel *27 čiže smrť robí umelca* (27 or Death Makes an Artist) could be shortlisted for the prize in 2012. Her latest work is a children's book, *Žirafia mama a iné príšery* (The Giraffe's Mother and Other Monsters, Artforum, 2013). →



Alexandra  
Salmela

***The Giraffe's  
Mother  
and Other  
Monsters***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Twenty-one short tales of the fantastic in which Alexandra Salmela imaginatively describes the problems of children coming to terms with the incomprehensible world of adults. Martina Matlovičová, an acclaimed young illustrator, enlivens the tales with her pictures, stretching the young readers' imagination even further.

## Magnetic Knight

Freda's Dad was to be dubbed a knight. For his first tournament he made careful preparations: he wound the curving armour plates round himself, sewed up his cloak and fastened on his sword. All he was missing was a squire.

"You'll have to make do with the bicycle," Mama said pitilessly. "And you'll take Freda as your page."

Freda jumped for joy. She threw an old towel over her shoulders and thrust the ladle in under her belt.

"Now off to the tournament at a gallop!" Dad commanded.

Freda clambered up onto the carrier and Dad pressed on the pedals. In his heavy armour he made his way forward as slowly as a snail. When the road began slanting upwards towards the hill, Dad puffed: "We'll make a shortcut."

At a crossroads there was a warning sign: DANGER OF MAGNETISM! ENTRY FORBIDDEN TO KNIGHTS!

Dad never noticed it, and clattering and rattling he took the side-path straight into the scrapyard.

The evil giant machines jolted awake. Grinning from ear to ear, they came forward to hurl themselves upon knights.

"I'll get you, you pieth of thweet cake!" one of the evil machines lisped, and it sucked the iron Dad, bicycle and page and all, into its magnetic gob.

Dad flew into a rage: he just simply couldn't be late for his knightly dubbing! He pedalled so furiously that the magnet slipped out of the monster's jaws. However, it remained stuck to the iron shirt, and since it attracted scrap metal like the moonlight draws nightmares, in a little while Dad too looked like a gigantic metal spectre.

The scrapmetal dad came whizzing in to the lists, with Freda on the carrier behind him looking like his waving pennant. They had such a frightful appearance that all the knights began squealing and ran away.

Freda fell on her knees imploringly: "We have come in peace! I am Freda the page and there is the future knight Sir Dad. In an enchanted swamp we were attacked by a magnetic monster."

The knights stopped their squeaking, but for safety's sake they kept a sufficient distance from Freda's dad. They were afraid of the magnet. Only after the scrap merchant had taken it away on his lorry did they finally dub Dad a knight.

As a reward for her gallantry Freda received a wooden horse, on which she proudly galloped home that evening. Sir Dad came panting behind her, toiling on his bicycle.

## Mountain Track

Every Spring Alice and Mama used to pack their bags. They'd go off to the mountains and they wouldn't leave until their soles were worn. Mama's Mountain Rule Number One was to respect the peace of the forest, and she taught it to Alice too.

But once Mama went a bit mad:

"Oh-oh-oh, what a big hollow tree!" she whooped, and clambered up on it.

"Mama, don't! It could be someone's little house!" Alice cried, gesticulating.

"Exactly, my little house," Mama said, pinching her face like a squirrel. Suddenly, all that could be seen of her was her astonished face. Then she disappeared completely.

Alice peeped into the tree-trunk, but she couldn't see either Mama or the bottom. A deep tunnel gaped in the trunk.

Mountain Rule Number Two says: never stray from your companion. Alice took a deep breath and leaped into the hole.

The tunnel was as slippery as a bobsleigh track and as winding as a tangled cable. Alice whizzed through the mountain like a shot, spun about like a top, did cartwheels and double somersaults and whizzed along head-first on her tummy with waving arms as if she wanted to fly. Finally she fell on something soft and springy.

"I'm not a trampoline, and this is the emergency exit from my home, not a mountain ski-track. I said the same to the one before you," grumbled a bear. "Now she's groaning in front of the cave and I can't sleep."

Mama had a broken leg.

"Ouch, it hurts. But that was exciting. Ow-ow, what a laugh, oh-oh-ouch!" she whooped, and she howled.

Alice urged her to be silent:

"Sssh! You're waking the whole forest! Autumn's beginning and Nature is settling down for the winter sleep."

Alice threw Mama on her back and began descending into the valley.

"Wouldn't it be easier to climb upwards? We could slide again," Mama suggested.

"I'm a gazelle, I leap from rock to rock, and I'm not going to let myself go like a log in a stream," Alice said. "When your leg heals I'll take you to the lunapark."

And she did too. The mountain ski-track in the lunapark wasn't nearly as wild as the genuine mountain track, but Mama was crazy about it. When she returned to the mountains with Alice in Spring, it never even crossed her mind to disturb the forest's peace.

## Master Builders

Janka and Majko lived in a gingerbread cottage in the middle of a thousand-year-old forest, where no one ever set foot. One day, however, strange giants appeared. They circled around the children's cottage performing suspicious acts.

"They're eating our home," Majko gasped incredulously.

And they were indeed: all that was left of the cottage was half a wall and the fireplace with its crooked chimney.

"Excuse me... Certainly you don't mean to, but you're eating our little house," Janka pointed out to them politely.

The ravenous creatures didn't even look at her.

"We're going to erect an ivory tower on this thistle-patch," they chuckled. "We'll cut away the thicket and we'll build a marble plaza and a golden road here."

The children looked at each other in horror – the greedy guzzlers were planning to destroy the whole forest. They must be got rid of. But how? Obviously they could push them into the oven, but what were they going to do then with an oven full of giants? It simply wouldn't be possible to bake anything. They needed to send the devourers somewhere very, very far away. Janka lifted her eyes to the sky.

"The most distinguished master builders are competing on the moon, to see who can build the highest tower in the cosmos," she said, as if casually.

The giants pricked up their ears.

"They're digging the foundations already," Majko said, pointing to the lunar craters.

"How is it that they didn't invite us?" the giants wondered.

"Maybe they don't consider you their equals," Janka needed them.

"Now then, we'll show them!" the ogres roared, highly insulted. "How do we get to the moon? Tell us!"

"Well, it has to be from the desert. You must sow a seed in the sand, cultivate a tree from that, and then climb up along it to the moon," the children explained obligingly.

Without a word of farewell the giants rushed off to the desert and set about planting trees. Not even one of them ever reached as far as the moon, but the ogres have not given up. Faithfully they're watering their trees and planning the splendid tower that will make them winners of the master builders' competition. And what about Janka and Majko? In the peace of their thousand-year-old forest they're repairing the gingerbread cottage and listening to what the chirping birds say about the crazy giants.

## Sailors On The Mississippi

Dessie desperately wanted to be a sailor. For days on end he stood by the bank of the river and watched the boats. He used to wave at them, hoping that one of them would take him on board. The sailors and the tourists nodded to him in greeting, but there was one mustachioed captain who always used to shout at him ill-temperedly. Now, once again, he yelled like a wild bull:

“Get lost, snotty-nose! You’re disturbing the free flow of river traffic!”

Dessie drew back among the rocks in fright and whispered sadly to the turbid river water:

“All I want is to be a sailor and sail on the river.”

With that, two winking, bulging eyes came up out of the waves, followed by the whole of an enormous crocodile.

“No problem. Here you are, come aboard!” said the friendly green reptile.

Dessie hopped on his back, which was as wide as a pontoon and as long as a barge. The crocodile swam against the current and to cheer Dessie up taught him a lively song from his home territory:

“We’re sailors on the Mississippi,  
we sail through whitewater each day;  
our hearts are light and we are free,  
and we sing hip-hip-hip-hurray!”

When that bad-tempered mustachioed captain heard this, immediately he made his boat turn round.

“You again? Don’t you know that this river isn’t called the Mississippi? It’s my river and you have no business sailing there!” the captain snapped at Dessie.

“Anyone who likes can sail on this river. Even a reptile,” the crocodile said, mischievously baring his teeth at him.

“A s-s-speaking monster!” the captain stammered, and he fainted with fright. His own crew had to come to his assistance, or he would have flopped into the water.

But it was not possible to save his captain’s peaked cap, which fell straight onto the crocodile’s head. And so the crocodile became a captain and Dessie was his steersman. To this day they sail the river together and they take on board the children who are standing on the riverbank and longing to be sailors on the Mississippi.

## Cosmos Dwellers

Tomi and Juri were circling the Earth in a silver egg. Juri was steering and Tomi, glued to the window, was watching for cosmic beings. When a comet buzzed past or a satellite whizzed by, Tomi immediately wriggled into his spacesuit and dragged Juri out for a meeting with the extra-terrestrials. But however quick they were, they never even caught a moment's glimpse of an alien. Disappointed, Tomi rose upwards in front of the spaceship entrance, while Juri floated about gathering shiny cosmic space stones.

"If you really want to meet cosmic beings, we'll have to go further," Juri said, pointing the nose of the ship towards the distant stars. It wasn't long before the radar began peeping. In front of them, in the distance, a whole flock of cosmic beings were flying!

"Do you think they're as nice and interesting as you?" Tomi was wondering.

"I don't know. Maybe they're more than people," Juri replied.

Tomi and Juri stepped into open space, but they were still attached to the capsule by long safety ropes.

"They won't dare come any closer to our ship," Juri said. "Shall we disconnect ourselves?"

Tomi hesitated. Suddenly the infinite cosmic emptiness began to scare him.

"There's nothing here," Tomi murmured.

"There are stars though," Juri said.

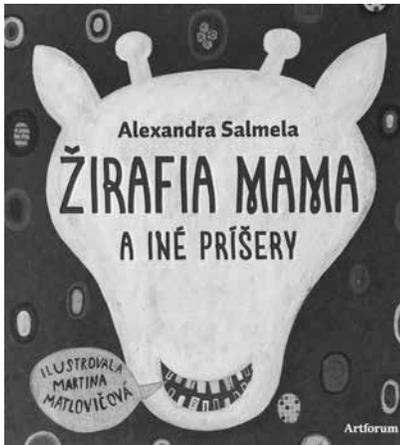
"Yeah," Tomi acknowledged. "But now I wish I had solid ground under my feet."

"In that case you must return to Earth. You can bring the space stones home. I'll continue the journey on my own," Juri decided.

The cosmonauts embraced.

"You're very brave, Juri," Tomi whispered.

"You're a lot braver," Juri said, untying the safety rope from his belt.



← Published by  
Artforum, Bratislava,  
2013

# Maxim E. Matkin

Slovak author writing under a pseudonym. Hitherto nine of his novels have been published, all of them bestsellers. His first novel *Polnočný denník* (Midnight Diary) originally appeared in the internet magazine *InZine*, and following an enormous response it also appeared in book form in 2002. Matkin's most recent novel is *Úplne najviac* (Absolutely the Most, 2013). From the blurb we learn that Matkin likes reading, sleeping, recreational drinking, and lolling on the couch at home with his pets, and that together with the book's heroine he believes that "people are more good than bad; most things turn out well; we can if we want to, we may if we can, and if we neither may, can nor want to, there is some higher and beneficial meaning behind things". Matkin also contributes the "Maxim E. Matkin Psycho-consultancy", focused on relationships, in the woman's magazine *Žena* (Woman). →



Maxim

E. Matkin

# ***Absolutely the Most***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Absolutely the Most presents heroes who are like you or like people you know: a young woman seeking revenge; a man plagued by his own erotic desire; a father who is swept up in the chaos of reality and thoughts; a teacher who falls under the spell of a Ukrainian labourer; a girl who wishes to heal the world; a doctor for whom it turns out that nothing is as it seems. All of these are longing for love and each of them acts in a way that makes love more remote, even while he or she seeks to bring it closer. All of them finally meet in a windowless room, where they wait for a miracle. The question is whether it is possible to believe in the existence of miracles and whether we have the capacity to recognize them when they actually occur.

The first time she saw the man was when she looked away for an instant from the rapidly spinning numbers on the petrol pump. He was standing by the filling station building, holding a cage with two doves and shouting into a telephone Pick it up! Pick it up! He might have been about forty, and he was wearing folk costume.

Dita went into the building, and a minute later when she came back out, the little fellow in costume stepped into her path.

“Excuse me, please, I need your help,” he said.

“Mine?”

“Yours.”

“You really picked out me?” she asked him, and she decided that whatever the story she was now about to hear might be, she would not open her purse. Her merciful-naiveté programme was currently inaccessible and she had no plans for that to change.

“Forgive me, I have no other option,” he said. You’re the only one whose car isn’t full, and you’re the only one who looks like you know how to step on the gas. And I need to hunt down my partner.

“Did she take your car?” Dita grinned.

“Something like that.”

“Did she have some reason?”

“No.”

Dita raised her eyebrows, amused.

“She went off without a reason?” she asked.

The little man gazed straight into her eyes. His own were glowing blue and he knew that. Quite clearly, Dita thought, whatever this lad did, he assuredly had experience of getting his fellow human beings where he needed them.

“Do you think I deserve her leaving me here?” He posed the question rhetorically. “I can feel that’s what you’re thinking. But we won’t sort that out now, we’ve got no time. You see, other human lives are at stake. There are people, innocent people, who will suffer a lot if you don’t hunt her down in that car.”

“Why do you think I have any interest in some innocent people who will suffer?”

“I see it in you.”

“What do you see in me?”

“That you’re a good person.”

“You’re wrong,” Dita declared, going round him and striding with firm step to her car.

He was quicker to the car than she was. He fell on his knees, shunting the cage with the doves to one side, as if he wasn't sure whether in the immediate future he might not be required to feign some kind of fit, crawl along the ground or dance the "odzemok".

"Aren't you off your head?" Dita asked him.

"I am not. It's just an emergency."

"OK, fine. You've got an emergency. But I too have my life. Nothing of what you've put to me has convinced me that I ought to load you into my car."

"Here's my identity card," the little man said and, still on his knees, he pulled it out of his pocket.

Remarkable to say, he looked better in the photo than in reality. There are people like that and situations like that, where they look their best and most attractive in an ID card photo, and that is indeed a sad fact of life.

She took the card in her hand. Bohumír Kyzek. Born June 20, 1973 in Bánovce nad Bebravou. He looked older. And he also looked as if he had a less crazy name.

"I understand your fears," Bohumír started up ingratiatingly. "I guarantee you that I'm not a murderer or anything like that. I will not rob you, rape you, beat you up, or sell you for your organs."

She looked at him.

"I swear on my good health," he added persuasively.

"Just you try thinking about any of the just-mentioned," she roared, "and I'll squash the marrow in every one of your bones."

Bohumír threw up his hands emphatically.

"I surrender," he said. "But now, for God's sake, let's start up and get going!"

She looked at him. A pure loony.

He placed the cage with the doves on the rear seat. Like a flash he sat in the front passenger seat, fastened his safety belt, undid it again, disentangled it from the buckles of his own very flashy belt, fastened it again, caught the handgrip over the door, cast a glance ahead of him at the front mirror and exhaled deeply, as if he had a difficult exam in a subject he hated behind him.

Dita pulled out and trod the pedal down to the floor.

"Just to shorten the journey I'll tell you a joke, would you like that?" Bohumír asked inopportunely, and without waiting for an answer continued. "A woman quarrelling with a man shouts at him: 'I was mad when I married you!' And the man answers, 'But I was in love, so I didn't notice!'"

Dita looked at him wonderingly.

“Doesn’t matter. So, another one,” Bohumír carried on unflinchingly. “If you think that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, you’re aiming too high.”

Dita didn’t bother with polite laughter, so her travelling companion fell silent.

“Are you from Terchová?” she asked, when her speed in the left lane stabilised in the second penalty zone.

“No, why?” Bohumír pronounced.

“And from Zemplín?” Dita proceeded.

“Why should I be from Zemplín?”

“You’ve a shirt from Zemplín and trousers from Terchová.”

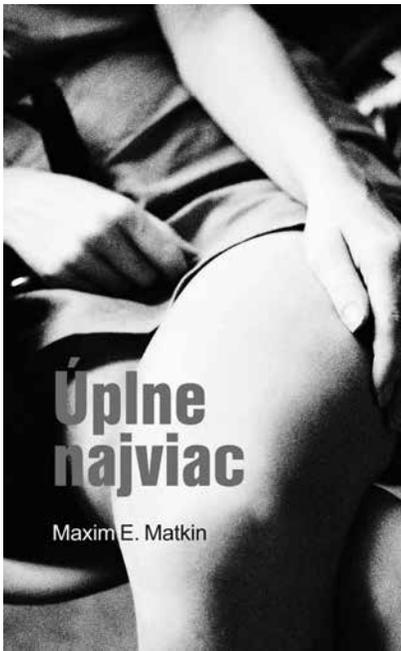
“That’s my working kit.”

“Do you work in an open-air museum?”

“I do weddings,” he announced to her with dignity.

“In Terchová?”

“I do weddings everywhere! Everywhere! And for everyone! From North to South! It’s only Hungary I don’t do, I don’t speak Hungarian. And I don’t do the easterners, because they get drunk right away and pull out their knives.”



← Published by Slovart,  
Bratislava, 2013

# Juraj Červenák

1974

Currently the most successful and award-winning Slovak writer of fantasy, historical adventure and historical detective stories. After nearly 20 titles published, in 2013 he attempted the genre of historical detective story with the novel *Mŕtvy na Pekelnom vrchu* (Dead Man on the Hellish Hill) that became an instant success. Its sequel, *Krv prvorođených* (Blood of the Firstborn) followed in 2014. →



Juraj  
Červenák  
***Dead Man  
on the  
Hellish Hill***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

A historical detective story about the first case to be tackled by Captain Stein and the notary Barbarič, who are investigating a crime in the Habsburg Empire during the reign of Rudolf II. At the end of the 16th century in the Christian borderlands a war was raging with the Ottoman Empire. The Turks were trying to penetrate to the rich mining towns in Upper Hungary. War veteran Stein is sent to Štiavnica to discover the traitor preparing to show the enemy a hidden way into the well-fortified town.

## Chapter Six

*Barbarič questions a recent widow and adds several new suspicions to those already aired.*

Žofia Velická was a mature woman, nearer to forty than thirty. However, she had never given her husband a child (Barbarič remembered rumours of two miscarriages) and that was certainly evident from her appearance. A sixteen-year-old could envy her her figure and complexion, and even now there was a spark in her blue eyes, though they were swollen and red from crying.

She refused to lie down, so Obert had settled her in a fur-lined rocking chair, and covered her with a blanket. The servant had first handed her a glass of water, but when Barbarič returned she was turning a glass of wine between her fingers.

“Won’t you have a drink with me, sir?” she asked the notary when he had handed his wet hat and cloak to the steward and stepped into the chamber. He moved cautiously, as if trying not to wake a sleeper.

“Well...”

“Why do I ask. Verona, pour the guest a glass.”

“To the memory of unfortunate Mr. Konrád,” ventured Barbarič when the maid handed him a crystal goblet of sparkling red wine. “May God rest his soul.”

He was afraid this might set off another flood of tears, but Žofia only nodded absent-mindedly and emptied her glass in one go. She gestured for it to be refilled. Verona looked disapproving, but under the circumstances did not dare argue with her mistress.

“They killed my Rarach,” Žofia said, still staring into space. Barbarič raised his eyebrows, but before he had time to ask, she added: “He tried to defend me. He got his teeth into the first blackguard, but they immediately went at him with sabres...”

She fell silent and drank some more. Barbarič watched her out of the corner of his eye, wondering whether she had just temporarily lost her senses, or whether she was really grieving more for the dog than for her husband. She looked at him. He quickly dipped his gaze to his wine.

“How exactly did Konrád die?” she asked.

“I’d prefer to spare you the details. At least for the moment. Later perhaps...”

“Just tell me.”

He took a deep breath. “It was no accident.”

“Murder, then,” she said, her tone of voice unchanged.

“How?”

“They smashed his head in, probably with a miner’s axe. The axe haid-  
uks use...”

“I know.”

“Then they threw him into a pit. You know the place up on Hellish  
Hill...”

“Barbora’s tomb?”

He nodded.

She breathed in sharply. “The filthy vermin.”

“They got what they deserved. The whole band of them. Only the  
captain was taken captive, and even he said his farewells a short time ago.  
He’s marching straight to the gates of hell.”

“He hasn’t far to go from here.”

He knew what she had in mind, but he didn’t intend to go into that.

“Too soon, sir,” she added.

“Soon?”

“They sent them off too quickly. For the murder of a nobleman they  
should have suffered on the scaffold, in full view of the whole town.”

Barbarič wriggled in his seat. “It’s not absolutely certain it was them  
who killed your husband.”

“How come? Who else?”

“There was one more with them. A renegade, a despicable traitor who  
is used to leading the Turkish raiders into the nearby villages. For the  
moment he’s escaping justice. As soon as the weather improves the guards  
and hussars will set out to look for him. They’ll get him, there’s no doubt  
about that.”

“So it was he who dumped Konrad in the grave?”

“It’s possible. But we’re considering other possibilities too.”

“What *other possibilities*?”

Barbarič took a sip from his glass and coughed, as if the wine was too  
strong for him. “The haiduks could have got involved in the whole unfor-  
tunate business simply by chance. Mrs Žofia... We both know very well  
that your husband had more ill-wishers than friends.”

“That’s hardly surprising.”

Barbarič blinked. With a bitter, doleful smile Žofia lifted her glass.  
“May God forgive him all his sins and save him from the fiery pit. He had  
much to account for, Mr Barbarič. A long, long list of sins. And I can’t re-  
member the last time he went to confession.” She took another generous  
mouthful of wine.

Barbarič observed her from under puckered brows. “If you know any-  
thing that could be connected with Konrad’s death... I’m listening.”

“I warned him. I kept telling him not to go roaming through the woods alone. He took no notice. It was as if something drew him there.”

“To Hellish Hill?”

She nodded. “You never know what you might come across there. But no doubt you’re very familiar with the legends about the hill.”

“I am and I don’t give them much weight. I’m a man of reason; I studied logic in Prague.”

“Have you ever been to Hellish Hill after dark?”

“Fortunately I’ve had no cause to.”

“Then it’s useless boasting about reason. You have no idea what powers live in its bowels.”

“Mrs Žofia,” he said with a forbearing sigh, “the only thing inside Hellish Hill is the old Herrman gallery. Nothing else. But even if there were some truth in those strange old wives’ tales, they have got nothing to do with Konrád’s death.”

“You can’t be sure of that until you find out what exactly happened to him.”

“There are certain suspicions. Quite of this world.”

“What are they?”

“Didn’t Konrád mention strangers who were snooping around your land?”

“Mention? Mr. Barbarič, recently he talked about nothing else. He kept grumbling that our forests were swarming with trespassers. He claimed they were searching for gold-bearing seams, digging, breaking rock and taking samples to the mine owners in the town. That’s why he was outdoors so often even at night: he was going round the estate armed on the lookout for spies.”

“Clearly it wasn’t just his imagination. The haiduks had saddlebags full of gold ore. They found them on Skalka hill.”

Žofia stiffened, her glass almost slipping from her fingers. “Gold on Skalka? What are you talking about?”

“Someone has uncovered a vein there.”

“Who?”

“We don’t yet know. The haiduks dispatched him. When the weather improves we are going to take a look at the body.”

“Two murders in one day?”

“Terrible, I know.”

“Good God... Gold? You’re not joking?”

“I’d hardly think it’s a suitable time for jokes. Have you any idea who could be behind this secret mining on Skalka?”

“You know very well the answer to that, sir,” she said, glowering at him. “You were present at the lawsuits against our family; you know in detail the history of Konrad’s disputes with Karl Herrman. That was one more of my husband’s various obsessions. He imagined that Herrman devoted all his time to forging secret plans and conspiracies just to annexe our land to his own property.”

“Herrman wanted to buy your estate from you, that’s a generally known fact. I’ve heard he made you a generous offer not long ago.”

“Yes, why make a secret of it? We could have used that money to buy a house in Upper Square, hire more servants, pay our debts...”

“Did you hold it against your husband that he turned down the offer?”

In a flash Žofia’s surprised look turned to one of indignation. “What are you implying, sir? That for me my husband’s death did not come amiss? That I’m only pretending to grieve for him and that all those tears were only feigned?”

“I would not presume to say that...”

“And you know what? To a certain extent you’re right. Verona!”

The servant filled Žofia’s empty glass. She looked enquiringly at Barbaric, but he shook his head.

“I’ve had quite enough of this miserable, solitary existence in the hills,” Žofia Velicka confessed, when she had drunk from the glass. “We could have exchanged this life for one of comfort in Štiavnica. We could have been townfolk. Does it seem shameful to you that I longed for something like that?”

“To me? I’m a town person. Living in some isolated spot near the forest is unthinkable for me. I can understand you perfectly.”

“Especially after Herrman’s last offer I begged Konrad to take the money and move to the town. He just wouldn’t listen. I implored, I shouted, I threatened. During one quarrel he hit me so hard my nose bled.”

“What did you threaten him with?”

“I know what you’re getting at, but you’re mistaken. In spite of everything I didn’t seek to take his life. And even if I had, I certainly wouldn’t have killed him on that spine-chilling spot and I wouldn’t have thrown him into Barbora’s grave. How would I manage it anyway? Can you imagine me following my husband to Hellish Hill at night? And where would I get a miner’s axe? I’ve never seen one in my life, to say nothing of holding one in my hand.”

Barbaric lowered his eyes. “Please accept my apologies. I shouldn’t have. After everything you have gone through today.”

“That’s not the point, sir. I’m not frail. I have lived through all kinds of things. Wrongs you couldn’t even dream of. But I won’t allow you to suspect me of evil intentions towards my own husband.”

“I ask you once again to forgive me.”

The threshold creaked. The notary and the yeoman’s wife looked round. Stein was standing in the doorway.

“Mrs Velická,” he said, taking off his hat, “I am Captain Joachim Stein. I see you are already feeling better.”

Žofia narrowed her eyes. “The man with the gun. You stopped my captor.”

“And it was very foolhardy of him,” Barbarič said, scowling. “Shooting at a horse carrying a hostage.”

“The risk of quick decisions,” Stein retorted. “They may be hasty, but if they resolve a seemingly impossible situation...”

“Mrs Žofia could have been seriously hurt.”

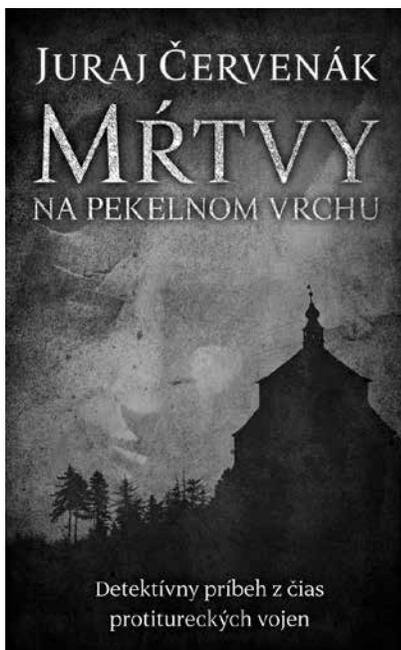
“Don’t judge so harshly, sir,” she rebuked him. “I only suffered a few bruises. An acceptable price to pay for not being dragged away to who knows where by that villain. Can I ask what brings you here, Captain? We haven’t met before. You must be new to Štiavnica.”

“He got here this morning, sent on the orders of Count Pálffy,” Barbarič answered her question. “He has a certain...military mission here.”

“Has it got anything to do with the events on Hellish Hell?” asked Žofia. “Or directly with the murder of my husband?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out now,” said Stein, and without asking leave sat down beside the notary.

“Verona, a glass for the Captain.”



← Published by Slovart,  
Bratislava, 2013.

# Peter Krišťúfek with *The House of the Deaf Man* in Great Britain

Interviews by Dušan Zupka

Translated by John Minahane

October 2014 saw publication of the English translation of Peter Krišťúfek's novel *Dom hluchého*. Titled *The House of the Deaf Man*, the translation was published by Parthian with financial support from SLOLIA.

To mark the event, Krišťúfek undertook a book-launching tour around the British Isles together with Publisher, Richard Davies (Parthian) and Dušan Zupka (LIC).

The book was christened on October 15th in the Slovak Embassy in London, with the Slovak ambassador to Great Britain, Miroslav Wlachovský, giving an introductory speech. A lively discussion then followed in front of a large audience with the novel's translators, Julia and Peter Sherwood, chairman of the British Czech and Slovak Association, Michael Reynolds, and journalist, Zuzana Slobodová, all contributing.

The next day Krišťúfek presented his book at London's Free Word Centre together with partner organizations PEN English and Literature Across Frontiers. Also there were the Albanian author, Fatos Lubonja and Welsh writer, Francesca Rhydderch. Together the three authors discussed the common themes of their books.

On Friday 17.10., publisher, Richard Davies presented the novel at the New Under the Sun festival in the Cameo Club in Cardiff. Animated discussion between the author and readers and literary critics there followed.

Finally, on Sunday 19.10., Krišťúfek presented the English edition of his novel to a packed audience in the Rombalds Hotel as part of the Ilkley Literature Festival in Yorkshire. Each presentation was followed by a sale of the book with an autograph-signing session by the author. Publication of *The House of the Deaf Man* was covered by the local press and radio (Western Mail, Radio Leeds).

# Interview with Richard Davies (Publisher, Parthian) on the *House of the Deaf Man*

*What were the reasons why you decided to publish the *House of the Deaf Man*?*



At Parthian we aim to publish a carnival of voices which includes work in translation, so the opportunity to visit Slovakia with a trade delegation organised by SLOLIA and Literature Across Frontiers in 2012 enabled us to gain a vital insight into the range of Slovakian writing. After this visit a follow-up meeting was organised at the London Book Fair in 2013 with Dušan Zupka of Slovak Literature Centre (LIC), who updated us on recent successes in Slovakian writing including a novel by Peter Krištúfek called *Dom hluchého*. I was particularly looking for a sense of place and an engagement with politics and history in any novel we were going to invest in from another culture so the resumé provided of *The House of the Deaf Man* seemed to match this requirement. The author's CV was impressive. It was his third or fourth novel, and he had obviously tried something different in scope and scale to his earlier work. We were provided with a sample translation which read very well in English and it had a good cover in the edition we were shown (which we have adapted for the English version). LIC also suggested an excellent translating team who might be interested in the project. At this stage everything pointed to a successful project and all the build-up led to the decision to make a modest offer to the author for English rights, which was accepted. So two years from Dušan Zupka's meeting a group of English and Welsh publishers at Bratislava station we are about to launch *The House of the Deaf Man* in the British market, with a five-day two-country tour with Peter Krištúfek to include readings in London, Cardiff and Ilkley.

And now reading *The House of the Deaf Man* for the first time, all six hundred and fifty pages of it, I'm delighted with the book, it's a fascinating and absorbing book and was exactly what we were looking to publish. We're very much looking forward to getting as many people to read it as possible.

*What are the chances of a book about the history of Central Europe attracting the attention of UK readers?*

↓

With the tour, author interviews and reviews we expect to generate some interest in the book. I think there's always an interest in other cultures in the British market but ultimately it all depends on how good the book and the writing is. I think Peter Kristufek has tackled a sweep of central European history in an engaging and innovative way through the prism of a family caught up in the maelstrom of the twentieth century in a small town in Slovakia – a lot happens. The detail of it all is likely to be new to a lot of readers but it is the quality of the writing and the excellent translation (which reads as if it hasn't been translated) which will make the novel sing to British readers.

*The novel combines the uncovering of family secrets of the main protagonist with a detailed historical sketch of the region throughout the 20th century. Is this authorial approach common in contemporary Welsh literature?*

↓

I don't think Welsh novelists have quite the historical incident that Peter has been dealing with in *House of the Deaf Man* – compared with Slovakia not much has really happened. We were invaded by the Normans in the twelfth century and that's it. Thankfully no Russian tanks, the American airforce were friendly and the Luftwaffe only bombed Swansea twice (they did flatten it though). So the great Welsh novels such as *Border Country* by Raymond Williams, *Feet in Chains* by Kate Roberts and *The Dark Philosophers* by Gwyn Thomas have dealt with more domestic issues and industrial strife. There's a novel called *The Life of Rebecca Jones* by Angharad Price which features history and family, but not really politics, on a small farm in north Wales: written in Welsh it has been translated into English, German and Romanian and is seen as a modern classic. The author is still in her thirties so may go on to write a work of a greater historical sweep yet. This year the novel we're pushing for translation is a super natural private eye crime thriller with surfing, which is a different genre entirely.

# Interview with Julia Sherwood, translator of the *House of the Deaf Man*

*What do you regard as the novel's main strengths?*

↓

Probably its great historical sweep and the fact that the author does not gloss over some, let's say, less heroic, aspects of Slovak history and shows his characters with all their human flaws. Another great asset of the book is the use of period material – newspaper clippings, quotes from books and poetry – all this gives the story a ring of authenticity. And last but not least, the fact that this huge amount of material is presented in an accessible, readable manner.

*What were the greatest challenges you encountered while translating the novel?*

↓

I'd have to say that the single greatest challenge was the sheer length of the novel: neither Peter nor I have translated anything this long before.

The historical context presented another serious challenge. Many historical events are only alluded to as the primary audience – Slovak readers – is more than familiar and will pick up even the smallest hints. However, we had to assume that the UK audience knows next to nothing about this small country in the centre of Europe and its complex history. It would have been impossible to provide an explanation of every event (such as the Slovak National Uprising) or every historical figure (such as Jozef Tiso, president of the wartime Slovak Republic). Apart from everything else, footnotes (which we don't think are appropriate in fiction anyway) or lengthy explanations would have made the novel even longer. So sometimes we slipped in a brief explanation to clarify the allusion or make it more explicit, making it as inconspicuous as possible. But in many cases we had to leave it as it is and hope that the readers will guess from the context or look it up in a history book or Wikipedia – we just had to make sure we used the standard vocabulary.

*What rules did you apply in transcribing personal names and place names?*

↓

In general, we don't subscribe to the “domesticating” approach to translation, where even personal names are changed – e.g. Jano to John

etc., and it would be completely inappropriate in a book that is so profoundly embedded in the country's history. We have kept most personal and place names in their original form, for example, we kept the -ová ending in female surnames, e.g. Zuzana Kabátová. There were some exceptions: for example, one of the characters, the mother of the narrator's best friend, is referred to as Pani Natália (Rošková) but Mrs. Natalia sounds unnatural in English so we went for Mrs. Roško, which is how a young boy would refer to their friend's mother. Since, apart from the narrator's birthplace, the fictitious small town of Brežany, the book is full of references to actual street names reflecting the topography of Slovakia's capital, Bratislava (and sometimes also Prague) we kept the original form of most street names, even when they are named after people, e.g. Zochova Street – in case a reader decided to look them up on Google maps. The only exception were streets named after famous people – e.g. Masaryk Street, Malinovsky Street, Štúr Street. And we also insisted on keeping all the original diacritics.

*Is it possible to strive for remaining true to the language of the original while sounded natural and readable in the target language?*

↓

We had to grapple with this in the case of quotes from an awful tendentious political poem Vitezslav Nezval wrote on Stalin's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Nezval was otherwise a great poet so we could not let even his worst work sound like complete doggerel, it had to have a ring of poetry to it. Peter spent hours playing around with the twelve lines. Another thing that is notoriously difficult to translate is humour but we also had fun looking for solutions. For example, after Stalinism was officially denounced by Nikita Khrushchov, Ján Kostra, a Slovak poet supposedly renamed his poem Na Stalina (Ode to Stalin) Nasrali ma (I've Been Done In). Irony also poses a problem as it is very culturally conditioned: what sounds as subtle irony in Slovak sometimes falls flat in English. In such cases we had to find another solution or be more explicit.

*Do shifts of meaning occur and how have you dealt with that?*

↓

We are very lucky to be working in a team: I do the first few drafts and then Peter revises the text. Sometimes things are expressed in Slovak in a way that is quite easily translated into English but the meaning it conveys may change ever so subtly. Peter would immediately pick up on every instance when something jarred and we would discuss it extensively until we found a way of rendering it in English that didn't draw unnecessary attention to itself.

# Zbigniew Machej

## A Novel with Brio

Translated by Adam Zdrodowski

*Úplne najviac* (Absolutely the Most) is the first novel by Maxim E. Matkin I have ever read. All I knew about the author was that earlier – before *Absolutely the Most* – he had written and published, under this pseudonym, eight novels that went on to become bestsellers in Slovakia, though mostly overlooked by the local literary critics. My Slovak friends consider Matkin a popular writer, or sometimes an author – or even authoress – of so-called literature for women: this male – but in fact somewhat feminine (the surname refers to “mother“ in Slavonic languages) – pseudonym allegedly hides a woman, or perhaps even two. In fact, however, I am not much interested in this matter as gender categories are not that essential for the literary value of *Absolutely the Most*; on the other hand, one would quite like to know who uses the pseudonym Maxim E. Matkin.

I believe that the author of *Absolutely the Most* is – as Jerzy Pilch, an ingenious Polish prose writer, would say – a genuine writer and his or her gender is of lesser importance. A genuine writer is, according to Pilch, one that makes you see things clearly. One has certain intuitions, even convictions, but is unable to express them. A genuine writer can express them for you. Probably the Slovak audience is so keen on reading Matkin because this writer perfectly articulates what is so important for the reader, and what he or she is incapable of articulating or unable to do as aptly and succinctly as the author of *Absolutely the Most*. And it is precisely Matkin’s simplicity and speed that characterize a genuine writer and clearly demonstrate that Matkin’s writing is not spurious at all. Matkin is also endowed with the instinct of a genuine storyteller. Moreover, the simplicity and elegance of his narration possesses an elegance thanks to which, in *Absolutely the Most*, even drastic or vulgar scenes do not strike us as out of place or repulsive.

Matkin’s protagonist is a collective and bourgeois one. The category of bourgeoisie in describing literature does not seem outdated to me, as the majority of today’s population lives in cities. In nine novella-like chapters in *Absolutely the Most* Matkin paints a collective portrait of several inhabitants of Bratislava, their ordinary lives, focusing on love, dramas, obsessions, complexes, traumas, misunderstandings, paranoias: their everyday struggle to maintain their human, morally integrated identity

in psychological balance. He does it with bravado and with the flair of a psychotherapist who, despite the brutal pragmatics of everyday life and grim past experiences, still ingenuously believes that people tend to be good rather than bad, and that it is better for a novel to have a happy ending. The author of *Absolutely the Most* – like every good writer – is a sensitive social psychologist. Characterizing his protagonists, Matkin skillfully balances the sensibility of the past era of communist normalization – the vague echoes of which can be heard here and there in the novel (for instance, in the nostalgia for the Russian language) – and the brutal cynicism of dehumanized, profit-obsessed capitalism with its banks, huge shopping malls and local branches of international corporations. Moreover, the small gallery of big city characters is generationally well-balanced and psychologically and socially representative.

Matkin's collection of characters appears and unfolds at the pace and with the dynamics we know from action movies. Even though each character is presented rather briefly, they all seem credible and fully formed thanks to witty dialogue and quick plot changes. It is due particularly to the dynamic pace of the novel set in the trivial, absurd, reality of our contemporary world that Matkin's protagonists reveal their real, ambiguous, dynamic natures. The author of *Absolutely the Most* endows his characters with a well-balanced combination of the mediocre and the the bizarre, and is careful to preserve the equilibrium between the typical and the unique. It is thanks to this balance, along with skilfully employed humour, irony, and satire with a social edge, that Matkin's protagonists become recognizable, even familiar, and his prose is credible, good-natured and – last but not least – popular with the readers.

In *Absolutely the Most* Matkin subtly and wittily touches upon the difficult social issues of our economic transformation in its state of permanent crisis, as well as upon the notorious civilizational ills that affect Slovak society as well. To the rather bleak questions posed by these problems he gives the answer that is both banal and esoteric, and was once given by Paracelsus: the essence of every cure, the basis of any therapy, should be love. Matkin, being a genuine writer, a brutal lyricist and a sensitive psychotherapist, conveys this message without maudlin sentimentality

and with an irony that sometimes gets very bitter, and yet simultaneously does it with a good-natured, empathic humour as if he were handing his readers Edward Bach's flower remedies.

*Absolutely the Most* is, then, not only a novel of manners with a social edge, but also, to a certain extent, a psychotherapeutic tale with didactic ambitions. Matkin seems to refer both to the models of picaresque novel, the Enlightenment era philosophical tale and the popular 20<sup>th</sup> century detective novel in the vein of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot cycle. As we may remember, these are precisely the literary models – both high and low – that were drawn upon in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by such outstanding central European writers as Witold Gombrowicz or Milan Kundera. *Absolutely the Most* has also some characteristics of a good script and seems also to allude to the TV formats made popular in the last decade, like *Sex and the City* or *Desperate Housewives*. Reading the chapters of Matkin's novel feels a little like being inside *Desperate Housewives*, with the setting changed from the suburbs of an American metropolis to the outskirts of Bratislava. Matkin's probable models – whether cinematic or literary – do not seem to me particularly important. What matters is the pleasure of reading. *Absolutely the Most* is above all a well-written, intelligent and funny novel, and Matkin – let me say it once more – is a genuine writer with the temperament and intuition of an excellent storyteller.

Among the novels published in Slovakia in 2013 *Úplne najviac*, despite its mainstream character, occupies a most singular and strangely unclear position. Unfortunately, Matkin's novel has been ignored by literary critics and honorable awards committees, though it definitely should have been shortlisted for the Anasoft litera prize, as it is certainly at least as good as most of the books selected this year. I am convinced, however, that Matkin does not suffer from an inferiority complex on this account. Everyone who bought the book – and that certainly speaks well of everyone who did – has already cast their vote for Matkin. Thanks to novels like *Absolutely the Most* literature in Slovakia has something to hope for the future.

Alejandro Hermida  
de Blas (*Universidad  
Complutense de Madrid*)

## **On the Spanish Edition of Miroslav Válek's Poetry**

Slovak literature remains one of the most unknown of all Slavic literatures, and so any initiative to translate and promote it deserves appreciation. Ediciones Xorki have already published three books translated from Slovak: two contemporary narrative works (*Uršula* by Rudolf Sloboda and *Nuevos Estropiciuentos de Claudio* by Peter Pišťanek) and a beautiful edition – with classical illustrations by Ľudovít Fulla – of a selection of the *Cuentos Eslovacos de Tradición Oral* compiled by Pavol Dobšinský in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Now it is the turn of a book of poetry, *Del agua (Seduciones)*, by Miroslav Válek (1927–1991). The choice of author could not have been more appropriate, since he is one of the most interesting modern poets in the Slovakian language. Although stigmatised in later times because of his association with the communist regime in Czechoslovakia – he was Minister of Culture in the Slovakian autonomous government for nearly two decades – his poetry, with the exception of the book of poems entitled *Palabra*, was never put at the service of the regime. It was mainly connected with the pioneers of the interwar period in an effort to renew the socio-poetic utopia of the so-called “left wing avant-garde” obliterated by Stalinism. In other poems, particularly those from his first and last periods, Válek is closer to the classic modernistic tradition, which updates, not without irony, amorous discourse. In either phase, his influence on the Slovakian poetry of the second half of the century has been immeasurable, establishing a modern counterpoint with the more sober and timeless diction of Milan Rúfus.

The book that has now been translated had remained unpublished in Spanish, as it was not included in the Cuban-Slovakian translation of the *Poesía* by Válek, which came out in 1987 (a translation that was not avail-

able in Spain). *Del agua (Seduciones)* – the translation of the title having the phonetic ambiguity of the original *Zvody* – was published in Slovak in 1977. It corresponds to the last period of the author's work and is characterised by a greater formal classicism and which, in a way, means a return to his intimist origins following his ambitious visionary compositions of the Sixties. Of the fifteen poems – untitled and numbered with Roman numerals – which make up the cycle, some are somewhat modified sonnets, some are a series of quartets and others have no regular strophic structure; however, they all make use of rhyme, something that this translation (achieved by the collaboration between professor Valeria Kovachova, of Slovak origin, and the poetess Izara Batres) tries to reproduce to the extent that the linguistic differences between the Slovak and Spanish languages will allow. Therefore this is a poetic but not a philological translation; certainly a wise choice, because it enables the reader to grasp the aesthetic value of the verses. On the other hand, the rigour of the editing is guaranteed by its bilingual format and by the substantial foreword by professor (and also poet) Ján Zambor, one of the most knowledgeable experts on Válek's work.

Let us hope that this book will at last reveal to the Spanish public the work of this important European author who wrote in the language of a very small country.

→ VÁLEK, Miroslav (2013): *Del agua. Seduciones*, bilingual translation and editing by Valeria Kovachova Rivera de Rosales, in collaboration with Izara Batres, with foreword by Ján Zambor, Ediciones Xorki, Madrid, 71 pp.

Sherif Bakr  
(*Al Arabi Publishing*)

# On the Arabic Edition of Ursula Kovalyk's Novel

I first heard about Ursula's book *Žena zo sekáča* (The Second-hand Woman) from my friend, translator Dr. Khalid El Biltagy. During one night in Cairo when we were having a drink and talking things over, he told me about this Slovak book that he liked so much. He said that the nearest translation for the title is "Friendship for Sale" and he gave me a brief account of it. I loved it instantly.

We took the necessary steps to acquire the rights for the Arabic translation. That was when I first got in touch with Ursula. We exchanged mails and became friends on Facebook. I heard from Khalid that she thinks that her English is not good enough and that her partner helps her write e-mails (though when we met my idea changed completely).

She was very generous, understanding, and agreed to give us the rights of the translation free of charge. The conditions that we were experiencing here in Egypt were very obvious to everyone, as this was after the revolution. They were (and still are) very bad.

We started working on the translation with Khalid, who loved his work and did it with passion. There were a lot of similarities to Egypt and a few strange concepts that were interesting to meet with.

We had a discussion about the book's title. We sat with the marketing and publishing team, along with the translator. We considered using "Friendship for Sale" or "Woman for Sale". After a lot of discussion and debate, we decided that "Woman for Sale" is more marketable. "Friendship" would give a broader and more general meaning more like a self-help book or such. However, "Woman for Sale" would be, as I stated, "sexier".

We printed the book and launched it at the Cairo International Book Fair. At that time with all the focus on the political area, it was very difficult to get it the right publicity. Some newspapers cancelled the culture

page. On TV all the shows, especially in the morning (which were the only ones interested in books and book presentations), were all politics.

We managed to get some online reviews and used our most powerful tool, Facebook.

After meeting representatives of the Centre for Information on Literature (the Slovakian foundation that supports literature abroad) at the Frankfurt book fair in 2012 we discussed the possibility of Ursula coming to Cairo (preferably during Cairo International book fair) to promote the book and Slovak literature. I was wondering if Ursula was brave enough to come to Cairo. Many foreigners did not want to come to Egypt at that time because of the unstable situation. They were watching the media which was showing street fights and bombings: a very chaotic situation. To my surprise, she understood that the media is always over reacting and focusing on the negative, highlighting the situation exaggeratedly.

We agreed on the dates, I started arranging the schedule. We had a “get together” with her on the first night on a very nice rooftop bar in downtown Cairo, together with some authors, critics and artists. I met Ursula for the first time. My first impression was that she looked very young and spoke perfect English. At least, she expressed her ideas without Shakespearean language! We had a nice time in a semi-open-air rooftop in Cairo in early February when the weather was very nice compared to Europe.

Next day we went to the book fair as we had a presentation at the Culture Café in an open environment. We managed to get Ursula a TV interview about her work and the Slovak literature scene, with the help of Dr. Khalid El Biltagy interpreting from Slovak.

The presentation was attended by critics, authors, students of Slovak language and His Excellency the Slovakian ambassador in Cairo. We had the chance to present the novel and had some good questions from the

audience that proved how little people in Egypt know about Slovakia and Slovakian culture.

The second day at the book fair we had a big presentation for our new translation of the complete Works of Kafka, published with the cooperation of the Czech embassy in Cairo. Ursula came to the event, which had very good media coverage. We used it and Ursula gave some interviews for the newspapers and an interview for a YouTube news channel.

At night we had another event at Kotob Khan, a very nice bookshop in Maadi. A critic moderated the discussion. He prepared a complete analysis of the novel in the light of the Arabic literature, showing the similarities and the differences. We had a more intellectual interaction from the audience, followed by book signing.

I think Ursula got to see the best of Egypt even in those troubled times. She may give her own testimony on what she saw and how she felt during her stay. We tried to give her an honest overall view of Egyptian society and, most importantly, the Egyptian people.

I see that this visit and this book is exactly why we do such books and events. We want to bridge the two cultures and to show people that we are all the same, while having our differences. We should all respect these differences and work more with our similarities to help us understand one another.

# And the Winner Is...

## Anasoft Litera 2014

Text by Ina Martinová

The prestigious literary prize Anasoft Litera, given in Slovakia to the best prose work published during the previous year was established in 2006 by the NGO ars\_litera. It bears the name of its general partner and sponsor, the Slovak IT company Anasoft. According to the statute, the five member jury, which changes every year, considers all the prose works (novels, novellas, collections of short stories) by Slovak authors published in the previous year as the first edition. By the end of April, 10 titles are selected for the short list and these titles and their authors are presented during the week-long Anasoft Litera Festival, and also in libraries and bookstores all over Slovakia. At this point avid readers start reading the shortlisted books to make their own bet on the winner. The winner is selected in the second round, by the end of October at the latest, and announced at a gala with a live radio broadcast.

This year the jury has been considering nearly 200 literary works.

The shortlisted works were:

*To decko je blázon* (That Kid is Crazy) by Jaroslava Blažková

*Toxo* by Ivana Dobráková

*Melón sa vždy smeje* (The Melon Always Laughs) by Dušan Dušek

*Nevybavená záležitosť* (Unsettled Business) by Jana Juráňová

*Krasojazdkyňa* (The Equestrienne) by Uršula Kovalyk

*Informácia* (Information) by Maroš Krajňak

*Záhada považského bula* (The Mystery of the Považie Yokel) by Lukáš Luk

*Grázel* (Scoundrel) by Tomáš Varga

*Prvá a posledná láska* (First and Last Love) by Pavel Vilikovský

*Obrazy zo života M.* (Scenes from the life of M.) by Svetlana Žuchová

And the winner is...

***Prvá a posledná láska* by Pavel Vilikovský**

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**Photographs of the writers:**

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Pavel Vilikovský *First and Last Love*

Dušan Dušek *The Melon Always Laughs*

Stanislav Rakús *Phase of Relaxation*

Peter Pišťanek *The Hostage*

Balla *The Eye*

Peter Krišťufek *Ema and the Death's-head Hawkmoth*

Pavol Rankov *On the Other Side*

Viliam Klimáček *Vodka and Chrome*

Marek Vadas *Black on Black*

Uršula Kovalyk *The Equestrienne*

Tomáš Horváth *The District*

Ivana Dobrakovová *TOXO*

Zuska Kepplová *57 km from Tashkent*

Juliana Sokolová *My House Will Have a Roof*

Monika Kompaníková *The Deep Sea Tales*

Alexandra Salmela *The Giraffe's Mother and Other Monsters*

Maxim E. Matkin *Absolutely the Most*

Juraj Červenák *Dead Man on the Hellish Hill*

