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Ján Rozner

1922 – 2006

Ján Rozner was a leading Slovak journalist, literary, theatre and film critic and theorist, and translator from German and English. Following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 Rozner and his wife Zora Jesenská, a distinguished translator of Russian literature, both of them active proponents of the Prague Spring, were blacklisted and lost their jobs. When Jesenská died of cancer in 1972, her funeral turned into a political event and everyone who attended it faced recriminations. In 1976 Ján Rozner emigrated to Germany with his second wife. He died in Munich in 2006. →



Ján Rozner

Seven Days to the Funeral

Extract translated by Julia Sherwood →

A detailed description of the first week following the death of Zora Jesenská, the significant Slovak translator and persona non grata for political structures, *Seven Days to the Funeral* is much more than a lightly-fictionalized memoir. It is also a historical record of the so-called normalization period—a restoration of hard-line communism that followed the crushing of the Prague Spring—and of the devastating impact of politics on people’s lives. The book is also a moving love story of an unlikely couple: she the scion of one of the most illustrious Slovak families; he—scandalously, 13 years younger, the son of German mother and Jewish intellectual father.

Day One: Evening

It was around seven o'clock by the time he got home, somewhat later than in the previous few days, his head empty from hours of the intense effort to stay alert but also feeling hungry and, as a result, angry and irritable. He decided that this time he wouldn't just cut a few slices of bread, spread them with some butter and cheese, and proceed to chew on them the way he'd been stuffing himself at breakfast and dinner for over a week now. On his last visit to the supermarket he'd bought some canned meat; on the can it said that all you had to do was put it into boiling water, unopened, for five or ten minutes.

He filled a pot with water and set it on the gas stove. He laid out a plate and cutlery, and removed empty bottles of mineral water and fruit juice and two thick books from the bag he had brought home. Tomorrow he would take the books back to the library and choose another two. He left the bottles in the corner of the kitchen and carried the books into the living room. When he returned to the kitchen he found the water in the pot already hissing so he placed the can in the water and it was only then that he remembered he hadn't checked whether you were supposed to leave it there for five or ten minutes. But he didn't take it out. He sat down on a bench at the kitchen table, and when he thought he'd waited long enough he turned off the gas, quickly took the can out of the hot water, opened it, tipped half the contents onto a plate, and cut himself a slice of bread even though he could see small bits of potatoes floating in the unappetizing looking sauce among the pieces of meat.

The canned meat was lukewarm. It tasted disgusting and sticky like industrial rubber but that made sense, it made sense, fitting into everything else that had conspired against him.

Lately he'd taken to talking to himself—only short sentences though, mainly curses (directed at himself) and questions (so what else was I supposed to do?) meant to conclude a particular chain of reminiscences. This time, too, he felt the urge to give loud, succinct, and strong expression to his annoyance with the foul-tasting canned meat, which was why he followed each gulp with a loud and accusatory scream at the wall opposite: “Damned canned meat!”—“Fucking life!”

The screaming helped him to calm down a bit and made him realize how ridiculous it was for him to swear, especially using words he normally never used. But at least it was a way of unburdening himself to someone invisible. He was fully aware that it wasn't the fault of the disgusting canned meat and that there was nothing stopping him from tipping the contents of the plate into the toilet and making himself a sandwich with some

cheese from the fridge, but it was doing him good to berate everything that couldn't be tipped into the toilet and so, after swallowing each chewy piece of the disgusting canned meat, he continued insisting to himself, only now more calmly—as if he had discovered the immutable nature of things—and much more quietly, over and over: “Damned canned meat.”—“Fucking life.” The repetition turned his swearing into some feeble-minded child's game and as he continued mindlessly, he suddenly heard the telephone ring. He remained seated for a while, not interested in hearing what someone might want to say to him on the phone. What if it's something else though, he thought, as the names of three or four friends flashed through his mind but then again, as he began to walk toward the phone in the living room, he thought: this had to be it, irredeemably, definitively.

He crossed the living room, picked up the phone and spoke into it. Since a voice on the other end asked who was speaking, he introduced himself. The voice said its name was “Doctor Marton.” It flashed through his mind that there was a time when he used to hear this name more often, he thought it belonged to a urologist and for a moment he wasn't so sure he was going to hear the news he was expecting, but once the voice on the telephone started explaining: “I'm calling from the oncology ward, I just happen to be on night duty here tonight,” he was quite certain again he would hear what he'd been expecting.

Actually, he wasn't expecting it at all; it's just that sometimes it had vaguely occurred to him that this call might come, perhaps the day after tomorrow, in a week, or in a couple of weeks. But he wasn't expecting it just yet...

However, the voice on the other end of the phone didn't continue with the news he was fearing but proceeded instead to give him a detailed account of how he hadn't been able to find his name in the telephone directory, and that's why he had to call at least three people who he thought might know him, but none of them had his number, and only then had he remembered a fourth person from whom he finally got the number. That was why he hadn't called earlier.

The voice on the other end of the phone paused, so, just to say something, he offered: “Yes, my name isn't listed in the phone book.” Then the doctor moved on to the crux of the matter: “The thing is, your wife's condition has deteriorated. The situation is critical.”

Again, he just said “yes,” as if to encourage the doctor to say more but the doctor digressed once again: “I'm sure you remember that before we admitted her we told you that something like this couldn't be ruled out... that you had to be prepared for it.”

What does he mean by “we,” he thought, annoyed; he had talked to the chief physician and nobody else was present at the time. But out loud he

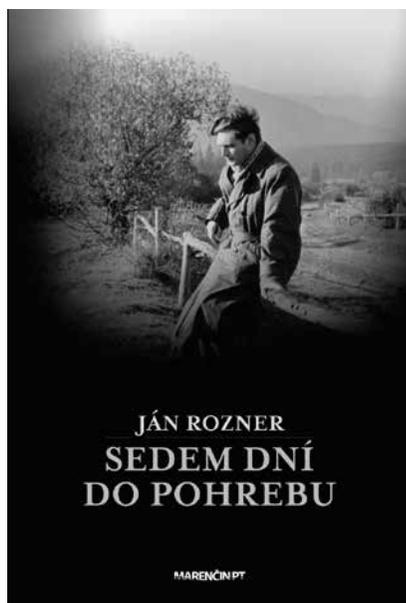
just said “yes” again and then finally, as he’d been expecting, the doctor moved on to the reason why he was calling: “And that’s why it would be a good idea for you to come straight away.”

Again, he repeated mechanically, “Yes, I’ll be there straight away,” to which the doctor added: “It would be a good idea for you to bring someone along.”

He didn’t understand why he should bring someone along just because his wife’s condition had deteriorated, but again he just repeated his “yes” but this time the voice on the other end of the telephone quickly went on, like someone who had inadvertently forgotten to mention something important: “Obviously you have to be prepared for the fact that your wife is already dead.”

Now the voice at the other end of the line had nothing more to announce, and he repeated his “yes, I’ll be there straight away” and put the receiver down.

For a moment, he stood by the telephone without moving, as if the last sentence had to be chewed first and then swallowed, like another chewy piece of the disgusting canned meat. But he hadn’t swallowed it yet. He focused on something that had nothing to do with the content of the telephone conversation. Like an editor or a dramaturge editing other people’s texts he reviewed the doctor’s last few sentences, as if proofreading a manuscript on his desk. Where’s the logic in this—first he tells him about the situation getting critical and then he ends by saying the critical situation is over. And then this “obviously you have to be prepared...” Obviously! He didn’t mind that it was an ugly word but it bothered him that in this sentence it didn’t make any sense. Surely the doctor didn’t mean to say “obviously”; what was so obvious about it, surely he wanted to say “of course,” in the sense of “but”: “but you have to be prepared for...”; there would have been some stylistic logic in that.



← Published by
Marenčin PT,
Bratislava, 2009

Alta Vášová

1939

Having studied Mathematics and Physics, she first worked as a teacher. From 1968 to 1970, she worked as a dramaturge in Czechoslovak Television and then during the period of Normalization, wrote at home. From 1978 she was a scriptwriter for the Slovak film industry. Her published prose works are *Zaznamenávanie nepravd* (The Recording of Untruths, 1970), *Miesto, čas, príčina* (Place, Time, Reason, 1972), *Po* (Afterwards, 1979), *V záhradách* (In the Gardens, 1982), *Sviatok neviniatok* (Festival of the Innocents, 1992), *Osudia* (Destiny, 1995), *Natesno* (Only Just, 1997), *Ostrov nepamäti* (Islands of Unremembrance, 2008) and *Menoslov* (List of Names, 2015). She has written the scripts to the films *Román o base* (A Novel about Jail) and *Sladké hry minulého leta* (Sweet Games of Last Summer), libretto to musicals: *Cyrano z predmestia* (Cyrano from a Suburb), *Neberte nám princeznú* (Don't Take our Princess Away) and stage plays. →



Alta Vášová

List of Names

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

Alta Vášová's book *List of Names* contains twenty-six micro stories, each with a Christian name as its title, together placed in alphabetical order like a kind of telephone directory. All we know is the gender and age of each character, who range from early childhood to very old age. Nor do we learn much about the place where the stories take place. The prose works of Alta Vášová have always been multi-layered, moody, atmospheric and emotionally intense. *List of Names* is no exception.

Vierka, 14:

You know, they look tough, but in fact they are very fragile. If you leave a man who is in love, it will scar him for the rest of his life. It can do him serious harm. Even to the extent that he never recovers from it, said mother to daughter, older Viera to younger Vierka. In fact you can destroy him. Because someone sensitive... someone like that really does never quite recover from it.

She repeated this because she didn't trust her daughter. She knew she often only half-listened to her, just pretended to: she was preparing to tear herself away from her mother's warnings, she was preparing, for the moment unconsciously, but in a short time she really would leave her parents, in a couple of years' time, at the first opportunity. It would be certain to happen very soon. And she would return when the family was once more important, when she might not be able to manage by herself.

Vierka made a face as if she had understood. But what she had realized above all was that her mother had paid her attention at last. She had noticed that she was already grown up. She didn't want her to let any boy get too near her until she had found the right one. Maybe she had trusted someone when she was her age? No doubt she had as her name was Viera, which meant "faith". Then why had she given her the same name! Well, that couldn't be helped now, so she tried at least to soothe her mother. Soothe her, calm her down, like her mum had once lulled her. Don't worry so much, don't imagine I'll fall for that. That I'd trust just anyone...

Younger Viera hugged the older one, but she sensed she had not convinced her. Questions and doubts remained: she must have guessed that she didn't have many inhibitions. Ones that would protect her daughter.

She hadn't.

But unexpectedly something did stick. And her mother's words set her free.

Her warnings really meant that she shouldn't yield to love. She needn't just bow to it, respond kindly and compliantly. She could also flee from it, back away, avoid it as if she didn't understand. Rebuff insistence with impassivity. After all, why should she harm anyone, or even destroy them! If these adolescent boys are so fragile.

She was curious. If someone led her somewhere, she gave them her hand. If for no other reason than that she didn't know where they were going.

Very well, she would think about it. In future she would leave some meetings out of her life. Mum was probably right. That really would set her free. But that it should be a talk with Mum? Was it logical? No doubt it was really something else she wanted. She wanted to tie her down, not free her. Put her off relationships! She wanted her to have what she had not allowed herself. Study. And a carefree life for as long as possible.

If she only knew! But even if she didn't know exactly, she must at least suspect. Why else would she have brought it up?

When young Vierka was only just beginning to unravel the world of relationships, she noticed how they went in chains. One person loves another, that one a third, the third a fourth... Only on rare occasions did two people find each other. If they stayed together, then often without really wanting to. Like with Ivan!

They had gone around holding hands, for everyone to see. The rest was not so visible...

She couldn't keep it up; why should she. Ivan was furious. He stopped going to school. Goodness knows what had happened to him. Lost for ever! He disappeared completely. Just because she didn't want to any longer? If she'd been going out with him for a month, did she still have to? He was kidding himself that it would make her want to cry! That she would discover what she had lost.

But he didn't come back. And her mother intervened:

she reprimanded her as if she knew what had happened. She had a mysterious seventh sense that told her when to begin to counselling her. But then Vierka realized what had happened.

Some time later Ivan did turn up after all. He acted as if nothing had happened. As if she didn't exist. He just collected the things he had left in the classroom and cloakroom. They hardly said goodbye to each other. Mum was right. Probably she really had harmed him, just by wanting to see what it was like.

From now on she would be well-behaved. Truthful and well-behaved. From now on:

when she noticed that someone wanted to take it seriously and forever and that without her... when they claimed such definitive things... She wouldn't allow a boy who took it seriously, as if forever, to do anything! Only if she was in it with him. Only if they were both head over heels.

She would simply avoid love. She would detect it and not submit to it. After all, what if Ivan had really succeeded? If they had not saved him! How could she have lived with that?

From that time on Vierka felt like the queen of ice maidens. Cheerful, popular with the boys, always declining. From time to time she paired up with someone. Someone who thought like she did. Who was interesting and curious. And, above all, not in love. They happily explored old nooks, meadows and woods beyond the town, the river that ran through it, films and books they enjoyed and above all each other. Friends.

And they remained friends with Vierka. They didn't come to hate her. They didn't disappear from sight.

Why, she had only wanted to know what happens. How it is. That time, with Ivan. She returned his smile; she let herself be led... and they became a couple. For everyone to see, arms around their shoulders, around their waists, both of them fair-haired, tall: to be admired, envied, be bored with, all the time with him. And all of a sudden – Mum.

The older Viera had no idea what effect her words had on her. She supposed Vierka had taken no notice, that her words had gone in one ear and out the other.

But they had set her free.

ALTA
VÁŠOVÁ

Menoslov



F. R. & G.

← Published by
Fragment, Bratislava,
2014

Rút

1951

Lichnerová

Prose writer, art theorist and art historian, she studied at the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava and has since worked at both the Slovak Mining Museum and the Jozef Kollár Gallery in Banská Štiavnica. Her stories are often connected to the towns of Dolný Kubín, where she grew up, and Banská Štiavnica, where she now lives. Her first literary work *V Kremenisku* (In Kremenisko, 1989) aroused the interest of both critics and general readers. Since then her most important works have been the short story collection *Slepá rybka* (Blind Fish, 1998) and the novel *Anna Regina* (2006), about the remarkable wife of the cartographer and technical wizard, Samuel Mikovíni, a woman whose marriage took her to Banská Štiavnica. →



Rút Lichnerová ***The Feast***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

Ira and her children are scarred by the past. Šarlota sees gods in her children. Koronis falls in love with a party entertainer... The characters' fates are entangled, their stories, similar to ancient myths, unfold beneath the surface of interrelated images. This book addresses questions about the meaning of ownership and being, and shows the limitations, pitfalls and traps which exist for a person today. Knowledge comes together with sarcasm and irony; the plot draws to a tragic conclusion. Everything is more complicated, however; both in life and in literature...

Nina. Her fat bottom, her pink cheeks. She sweats from diligence. A large gold cross swings in her décolletage, letting those around her know that Nina's life respects Piškulík's guidance. It seems too blatant to Kora, but for Nina this tactic pays off. Even Belo can't do without her any more. Where's Nina? Why isn't she here? She's with the parrots? She's looking after Šarlota's parrots? If she's not with the parrots, where is she?

Nina?

Nina!!!

She wasn't with the parrots all that time? Where's she got to? In the cellar? What can she be doing in the cellar for so long?

This is the first cage. It's elongated, fairly low. There are four perches in it and four dishes. So far three are empty. The water dish is full. Šarlota first opens the door to the cage. Then she opens the little box she has brought here. She holds it to the little open door and waits. But the budgie doesn't move, doesn't come out of the box and doesn't go inside. Šarlota prods it with her finger to see if it is dead. No, it isn't. So she grasps it in her hand and puts it inside. The silky-soft olive-green feathers do not shiver, the yellow head does not move, the beak does not open. Šarlota closes the cage door and pokes a dandelion leaf through the bars. The frightened budgie sits on the perch and does not react to the outpouring of Šarlota's love. It looks sickly and there is no sign it could begin to talk, even though Šarlota keeps saying to it, Dear, darling! The budgerigar continues to sit motionless on the perch even when Šarlota opens the cage door.

Now Nina is standing behind Šarlota. She yawns. Šarlota turns round, sees Nina; she is with her, with Šarlota, she hasn't deserted her. Nina has a disgusted look on her face; this is for the budgie that doesn't want to come to life and Šarlota, who is poking it and for the time she has wasted. She must try hard not to waste her opportunity now!

This opportunity is Šarlota and Belo. Šarlota sees her as a parrot lover, Belo as an admirer of successful men. Nina can appreciate success. She weaves imaginary wreaths and decorates a successful man, Belo, with them. The proof of Belo's success is to be found in the piles of plastic bags full of rubbish that Nina sorts out in the cellar after dinner parties according to her own criteria. The amount of rubbish produced reflects the standard of living. The more rubbish, the higher the standard. It's time her standard of living was raised, she thinks when she looks at these bags.

Belo's hand finds itself on Nina's big bottom, on which half the world relies, or at least Belo's household. From early morning Nina has been putting beech logs on the fire in the hearth. The wood crackles and a pinkish light slips over the wall. The cross in Nina's décolletage glistens. Belo's hand does not push Nina up the stairs to the bedroom; it just grasps

that big fat bottom. Belo forgets Kora, who is not here, and also Šarlota, who could be anywhere. But Šarlota has no intention of bursting into the room where Nina and Belo are. She closes the front door and looks round the yard. She will detain Kora under any pretence to stop her going into the house. She will do her best to hold her back.

How easy it is to hold Kora back. She doesn't really have to try very hard. A naïve, trusting goose, that's Kora. She has a suspicion and feels guilty for having these unwelcome suspicions. Belo loves her, Nina is devoted to her. Šarlota is like one of the household's fixtures, always present.

Nina pushes Belo's hand off her bottom with a disapproving half turn. I'm divorced, but don't take it amiss! She throws Belo a wishful look. There's your wife. I would never do that to your wife. I'd be a swine to do that to her. How could I, her companion, do something like that to her?

That's Nina all over. She wouldn't take a step off the path approved by her confessor Piškulík.

In her profile on Facebook, in the column for hair colour, she has entered "highlighted". Highlighted leads people to believe that the person who has it does not save on the hairdresser. The extra expense at the hairdresser's is an indication of Nina's "better" lifestyle, which ranks her among "better" people.

In her profile she also mentioned that she only kept sexual contacts with one partner, and if she were to describe the dinner of her dreams, it would be one where she was licking it from her partner's navel.

This information had clear erotic overtones. Shortly after she posted it on her website she received responses from two lickers. One wanted to lick Hungarian goulash from Nina's bellybutton, the other was more refined: he would like to lick porridge with wild strawberries from her navel, which with the lapse of time after the publication of Nina's profile reminded someone of Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries*, about which Nina knew nothing.

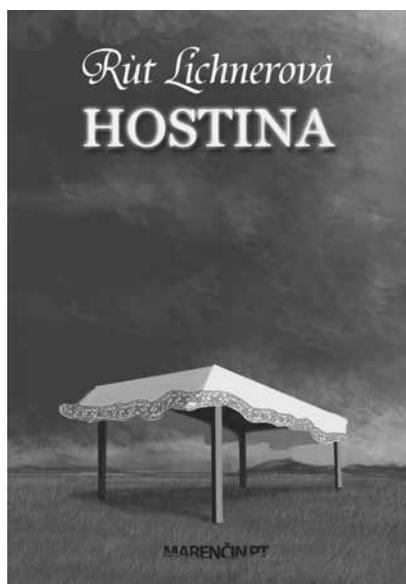
She noticed a couple more responses, to which she sent provocatively lascivious replies, but she turned down any suggestion for a meeting, which fact she confided to her confessor Piškulík, who did not see anything sinful in her behaviour.

He stared intently at her face. He couldn't see her rolls of fat through the cloth of the confessional, but he concentrated on the recesses of her soul, ignoring the rampant fat visibly spreading over this woman and did not connect it with the sin of gluttony. He knew that poverty found happiness in sausages and beer; that a full stomach strengthened family ties; satisfying food brought peace of mind, even if for only a short time, and that Nina was one of those who for the most varied reasons had found

herself in a shitty situation. He assessed her as one of those who would pull herself out of the shit.

She led him to believe despicable things about her drunkard husband. She confided in him that she couldn't stand drunkards, even though they too were living creatures and God's children. She said that she had lost the house, the car and the van, because her husband's partner had struck some bad deals and she, Nina, had been left to liquidate the firm, pay its debts, look after her son and daughter who were not yet of school age; that her husband had started another family in Germany and didn't send alimony. She claimed that it was only her love for her children that gave her the strength to work in hotels in Switzerland and Crete, in a vegetable warehouse in Austria and to arrange a repayment plan. At the moment she was employed by a family in Skalník. The family were well-off, as she had noticed from the indications. It was from them she had picked up this word "indications", a word that Piškulík liked; he remembered that for ten crowns he had once bought a paperback called *Indications of the Imagined*. He didn't know now what had made him buy it, but he had and he had stuck it in his bookcase. Now he remembered it. He encouraged Nina to talk about Belo, about the indications and all the circumstances that led to the feeling of guilt she had not yet earned and which only appeared as a tantalizing urge that Nina immediately nipped in the bud. It was a temptation the saintly woman resisted.

At this point Nina fingered the gold cross around her neck. Any other woman would have ended up in bed with him, she said. With me there was no bed. I have confided in Mrs Šarlota about this. She in turn told her daughter-in-law Kora, only Kora remarked that she didn't know what to think of it, which offended me. I have only stayed with them because of Šarlota. I'd like to know whether they would find anyone as chaste as I am.



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Peter Juščák

1953

A graduate of the University of Transport in Žilina, he is the author of several prose works, radio plays, features, documentaries and film scripts. He made his literary debut in 1986 with a collection of psychological stories *Komu ujde vlak* (Who Will Miss the Train). He published fictionalized travel reports *Milovanie so sochou Miriam* (Making Love with Statue of Miriam, 1995) and a novel *Som Ťukot* (I'm Ťukot, 1999) about his own journalist experiences after 1989. With his book *...a nezabudni na labute!* (...And Don't Forget the Swans!, 2014), which is a story of the life of Irena Kawaschová, he was a finalist in the Anasoft Litera 2015. →



Peter
Juščák

...And Don't Forgert the Swans!

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

The Second World War is drawing to an end as Red Army soldiers liberate Slovakia from Nazi occupation. The same soldiers, however, are also arresting thousands of innocent Slovak citizens on charges of spying for the enemy and then transporting them in cattle wagons to the USSR. They are forced to live and work in Siberian gulags, where conditions for life are appalling. Thus begins the moving story of Irena and her son, Ivan, who is born in one of the gulags. The novel is based on a true story.

Smoke from the kitchen passed through a small aperture in the dark antechamber, spiralled there and then went upwards and over the roof through another aperture higher up. The chimney was a weft of thin branches covered with clay. Through the smoke Irena could see the roughly smeared black clay together with pieces of meat on wooden stakes. Laughter and bumping could be heard coming from the living room together with Kata's raised voice and the gentle bleating of a goat. She smiled, knocked and went inside. Warm steam and a cheerful cry greeted her.

"Vanya, little Vanya, come. Mummy's here."

Katya wiped her hands on her apron and hobbled towards her.

"Come here, my dear. Let me give you a hug."

Katya embraced the emaciated pilgrim and Irena smelt the unmistakable scent of a woman who reminded her of the scent of home. She patted Kata on her soft back and felt slightly ashamed of her smells from the Pischak zone. The children had gone quiet; the goat in the corner by the stove was bleating again. Kata smiled and called out:

"Vanushka, where are you hiding? Your mummy is here."

Two boys were playing on the bed with some pieces of wood while a little girl stood watching them. She was clutching to her chest a one-armed doll made from an old glove. They all looked at the unknown woman and went on playing.

"You've perked up a bit, Irusha. I can see that twinkle in your eyes. Has something improved? Give me that coat and come and sit down."

In the middle of the table was a large wooden table. She sat down and repressed the impulse to go and smother her little son with love and kisses. She must give it time, allow them to get to know each other and become friends, otherwise the visit could be a disaster and end in tears. The children gradually grew bolder and after a while giggled about this strange woman coming here out of the blue and bringing with her her funny smells. There was no need to be afraid of her. Mummy Katya was smiling at her, hugging and stroking her. It was a sign that they could carry on playing up a little bit.

"Tea! Gosh I almost forgot. What a silly woman I am!" cried Katya. "Just give me a minute; it'll be right there."

"Katenka, Katya," Irena wanted to tell her everything but where to begin? With the green car, the buran which blew through the Steppe, with Shoto's report? Or with Paraska, the commander Golubovova and the camp politico? She took a deep breath in order to steady her voice:

"On May 9th we will again sing in Jahodné! Again they will all clap us!"

“You don’t say? In Jahodné?” replied Katya from amongst her pots and pans. “And here they have been playing funeral music for two days. I asked at the Soviet why they can’t play anything more cheerful. Official orders, they say. Why, I asked, and they said it is a secret they don’t even know themselves. Everything is a secret these days.”

“And what about our Ivan?” asked Irena, emboldened.

“Well just look at the young cub! He can run like the wind. And how he can talk. He’s like a little politico!”

Pashka, Vanya and Ala had all jumped down from the bed and were now hiding under the table, peeping out at intervals and going back under with a giggle. The strange woman was different and intriguing. She didn’t smell of home, didn’t have that maternal volume. She was as thin as a skeleton and her movements were jerky. When she spoke, her lips trembled and the muscle below her eye kept twitching. A peculiar woman, indeed! How about pinching her leg to see what would happen?

Irena didn’t comment on the pinch but carefully felt for the children with her hand. They quickly disappeared back under the table, however, and giggled about how they had outwitted her.

“What about your Shota? Has he been looking after himself?”

“I guess so. Who would do his work for him? He keeps up with the repairmen. He neither stands out nor shirks his duties.”

Kata bent down beneath the table and pulled out Ivan. For a moment she held him to her breast and then she handed him to Irena.

“Here, take him for a minute. You’ve warmed up now.”

Irena was burning with excitement. Long before, she could never resist her little Zlatka and was always holding her in her arms. When Johann’s mother asked for her, Irena handed her over jealously but always took her back a few moments later. But she was only her daughter and Johann was angry about her being spoiled saying how later on, she would be unmanageable. Irena held her ground, though. Who else could lavish love on her if not her own mother? And now, where was she, her Zlata? Better not to think about it, better to channel all her love into this little boy. And look at him now, how he was pushing her off with his little fists, frowning and switching those Shota eyes of his from right to left. He said nothing and furrowed his brow but he was not going to cry. He had a hard head, ‘Caucasian’ Jerofej would say.

“Mummy, Ivanushka, she is your mummy,” said Katya encouragingly.

“Mummy,” repeated the boy, stretching his arms towards Katya with supplicating eyes. His whole body tightened like a taut string and he tried to slip out of Irena’s arms but she wouldn’t let him go. Instead she suddenly started rubbing him with the palms of her hand and he glanced

at her curiously. Then she tickled his ribs the same way and his laughter filled the kitchen: do it again, do it again, he cried. The goat then joined in with a bleat or two and the other two emerged from under the table – they wanted to be tickled, too, they wanted to play with the funny woman, too, and laugh with the goat like Ivan.

She started unwrapping presents she had brought them from the zone: a cube of sugar for each of the children. Katya tut-tutted at so much extravagance but before she could cover their mouths, the sugar had disappeared and there was nothing to grumble about. More presents followed: a piece of fabric for Katya in return for her care of the child. Anushkina had sent a fur—more as a memento than for any practical purpose. Some embroidery from Tinda. A metal spoon from Irma, very discomfitting for Katya:

“No, no, my girl, I can’t take that! I know what life is like there—I have no right to have that. I have done nothing to deserve your only spoon—and a proper metal one, at that. We haven’t got any spoons in the village and I’ve no business standing out from anyone else here, Irusha. So take the spoon back. Hide it in your coat. You need it more than I do.”

Last of all, shoes for Ivan. Katya turned over in her hands a miniature copy of a pair of real prisoner’s boots, stroking them admiringly as if to check whether they were genuine.

“Gosh! I could not make these...” she confessed. “And how many little shoes, bonnets and gloves I have made for the zone over the years!”

The prisoner’s boots fitted the little fellow, were slightly too big, in fact, and rather funny-looking but he would grow into them. Ivanuska walked around proudly, the boots on his infant feet making him look like a sweet little dwarf. One step here, one step there, and the boots tip-tapped on the clay floor. Ivan marched proudly, slapping his feet down as loudly as he could, checking to make sure the others were all watching him. Pashka and Ala also asked for such beautiful boots which they only had in the zone. They started chasing Ivanusha around the room and their rapid stamping soon had them all racing pell-mell around the table. What could be done? The boots had to be shared. So Katya tied the laces for them and the children pattered their feet on the floor, went round the table, from the stove to the goat and then showed the boots to the goat’s curious eyes. If she bleated, they smiled; if she didn’t, they gave her curious head a gentle slap and marched to the other end of the room. There they bowed to the stern faces of the icons of the Holy Mother of God and the Son of God—as they had often seen their mother do—and then marched back. Such plain shoes from a labour camp but how much joy they brought!

Tagar then arrived and filled the room with his burly figure. The boys jumped on him immediately. First he hugged Irena, praising her on making the long journey from Pischak. There was no-one in the village who would send their wife so many kilometres through the taiga, not even if she nagged him the whole day.

“They’re playing us funeral marches the whole time,” he said, pointing to the window and sitting on the bench by the stove. There he patted the boys’ crewcut heads and ran his fingers through Ala’s yellow hair to make her even prettier. The setting sun was now shining in through the window flooding the room with its golden beams.

“The mighty one has died,” said Tagar nonchalantly and started taking off his leather boots.

“Koriabov?” shrieked Katya, putting her hand to her heart. “What happened to him?”

“Not Koriabov. He’s sitting in the Soviet, drunk as a judge, crying his eyes out.”

“Who then? Someone close?”

“Comrade Stalin, Katushka. They wouldn’t be playing funeral music for two days just because of Koriabov.”

“Gosh, how frightened I was,” she said with relief. “Two little children, his wife not well. And Koriabov drunk the whole time. If he was to die, God forbid, they’d immediately appoint Anatoliev. Then we’d really know about it!”

“Sta-lin?” asked Irena incredulously.

“So says Tagar, but it’s nothing. Have I not told you about Anatoliev? Listen—together with one of the politicians from the zone he was planning to turn our village into a Communist community of the future. They were going to knock down all the cottages and build one huge family block for the whole village. Then there would be one block for all commercial activity, one for all the children and one for teenagers. And a house of culture and public baths and all sorts. You should have seen the outcry at the meeting! How the women were yelling at him—it was a wonder they didn’t lynch him! Then the men started. Old Kubashev put it really well when he said: “We in the north don’t live like the gentlemen of Moscow because we have no wish to. We are building, we are fulfilling your plans but we don’t need your living improvements!” And Anatoliev? He said it was a really important experiment—delegations from all over Kolym would come and visit us, so he claimed. But he didn’t convince anyone. We said we’re not going to let them extend the zone amongst free people. Let them experiment in Moscow. And Koriabov also tried to reason with him. But rather than listening to reason, Anatoliev started threatening

the districts and said that they would approve everything in Jahodné and if not, he would go to Magadan. He called us ignorant idiots, Siberian fools and God knows what else he said. He said he would deal with us but when he was out hunting in summer he shot himself in the foot. In the foot, can you imagine? As if God had punished him. He lay there, screaming in pain, crawling along the river the whole night, bleeding. He said he had heard some voices but who knows what he heard. They didn't find him till morning. All month they were interviewing us – only at the end of it did they work out he'd actually shot himself. He then lay around at home for two months and things somehow settled in his head. He gave up his experiments – his politico didn't come back. But what can you expect from such a person? What will he think of next? May God grant health to Koriabov, let him drink what he likes. When we needed it, he stood by us. That's why I was so worried..."



← Published by
Kalligram, Bratislava,
2013

Víto 1960

Staviarsky

Having studied scriptwriting at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts, he has worked as a set designer, a nurse in a psychiatric unit and a police-cell attendant. He has also been a barman, shop assistant in a drugstore and freelance scriptwriter. At present he runs a market stall and during the winter writes. Both his debut novel, *Kivader* (2007), with its Roma setting and his collection of short stories titled *Záchytka* (The Drunk Tank, 2009), were nominated for the Anasoft Litera. He won this most prestigious Slovak literary prize with the novella *Kale topanky* (Lovely Pair of Shoes, 2012). His latest book is the short story collection *Človek príjemný* (Homo Iucundus, 2014). →



Víto
Staviarsky
***Homo
lucundus***

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

Narrative “morsels” for all lovers
of absurdity, black humour, irony,
grotesquerie and the gently morbid.

Lab Worker

I.

I didn't want to horrify anyone. You know what women are like. So I just put 'lab worker'. About fifteen women immediately responded, each, to my surprise, with bad teeth. They entered the coffee-shop carefully made up and full of expectancy.

"Lab worker?" they asked. "What kind of lab? Dental?"

"Autopsy."

"Oh?!?"

They turned pale and looked shaken. Some left without a word, their coffee unfinished; others exclaimed things like: "I might have known!" If they asked about teeth in my laboratory, I carefully described to them the prosecution process. At first I saw disappointment and then alarm in the eyes of each of them. I had been wasting my time.

I can't complain about being lonely. I have enough bodies around me; it is a big town and the suicide rate is steady. Six dead everyday—do you know how many mourners that means? They greet me in the street and I mistake them for the dead. Sometimes as I walk, I look at people's faces and try to guess what they will die of. They seem healthy, some of them, but I hear a voice whispering in me saying: "You will not die a good death!" And then a few days later I open the fridge and what do I see? My acquaintance lying in a sheet, all smashed up after a fall from the fifth floor.

Occasionally I get called in to do a forensic autopsy because they know I don't make mistakes. I am on first-name terms with all the police round here. I often think about my work and imagine where to cut first in order to take a sample. Sometimes, just to stay in practice, I cut up what I don't need to and spend long hours examining someone's insides. You would not believe how interesting the human body can be! You switch on a lamp and the radio, make a coffee and start to ponder. All the children, for example, are entrusted to me, nobody else. I like children. They lie on the table so quiet and so innocent; I cross their arms across their chest. And their little bodies, skinny legs, half-closed eyes, oh God!... I like the 6 to 8-year-olds best, the girls more than the boys.

Sometimes I just sit and smoke, scratch my cheek and daydream. At such times my colleagues downstairs drink and play cards in their little cubby-hole. They don't give a damn about their jobs and make fun of me. So I wait for them to leave and then I get down to work. My boss

advises me not to work too hard, to go home and relax a little. But then he stands behind me, puts his hand on my shoulder and looks at the child lying on the table. Sometimes he stays until evening, watching as I cut. He does not say anything—work is sacred, after all. But when we finish, lock the building and head home, he always has a lot to say, especially about children. For my boss is not just a scientist' but also a poet.

Cross-eyed Bertie accuses me of sucking up to the boss. How wrong he is! All cross-eyed Bertie ever does is drink himself stupid. And where is his respect for the dead? He can't cut straight and the scalpel keeps slipping in his hand. He can't even stitch up a torso properly. Or when he saws through a skull, he makes such a mess he has to call me to finish it. That is why I just give him the heavy work to do. He lugs the bodies across the room, places them on the table and passes me my instruments. But he'll get drunk before lunch and then with the rest of them, start throwing the liver around. Which he is not allowed to do because it always ends up falling down the other side of the table. Bertie is fat and when he stretches across the table to pick up the liver, he ends up sprawled over the open body and getting his coat stained. And even then he can't reach it. So he stabs it with a cleaver or scalpel and then dusts it off. Sometimes there's a piece missing off it, which I then look for and find under the table. Bertie doesn't care. They laugh at me for 'overdoing' things but when they stitch up a body they sometimes leave organs on the scales. Sometimes you find some kidneys lying in Bertie's locker all shrunken up between his bottles of rum. And he can't even remember who they belonged to: "What do the stiff's care?" that's what he says! Can you imagine!

Sometimes he tries to take organs home with him—he has got a Great Dane. So I go through his bags and take them out. Bertie always finds a way of getting round me, though. If I don't let him near the organs, he dresses the corpses and often cuts off their toes—it's easier to put on their shoes that way, he claims. He is even capable of cutting off their penis—it happened a few times early on. That's why I always check every male body with my hand. What if by chance some woman touched her man there, unbuttoned his flies and found only a wound? Can you imagine?! But you can't reason with Bertie. He just flies off the handle and drinks even more. When the boss goes off somewhere, Bertie walks around the building with a bottle in his pocket. If he runs out of rum, he can even drink lyzol. Seriously... But back to the advert! I decided to rewrite it. Fifteen immediately showed interest in teeth but would there be at least one who would want an autopsy lab worker? Is it such a dreadful job? I know not everyone has the stomach for it. Take Bertie, for instance. First thing in

the morning he goes to the toilet to vomit. In the evening, he then vomits up his booze. He sits for hours in his little cubby-hole with his feet on the table, scraping out tins before breaking into song. When we ask him why he does it, he says: “Because I’m going nuts!”

He sometimes comes with his dog but the dog daren’t enter the building and for hours waits outside whimpering pathetically. At first Berty tried to drag him in but the dog, tail between his legs and ears down, was having none of it. Berty then kicked him as hard as he could in the belly and started to laugh but the dog merely cowered, shook, howled but still refused to go in. Berty now ties him to a tree outside and always takes him something out for lunch—body parts, I suspect.

At the small-ads department, they said: “You’ll have a woman within a week”

“Do you think so?”

“A dead one, for sure. Ha-ha-ha!”

They laughed, it’s true, but what did I care. I waited for a few weeks, even a month, but no-one got in touch. Then in the middle of November, a letter arrived out of the blue.

“My names is Ilonka and I was very excited to come across your advert! And impatient! When can I see you? I feel so alone and was thinking I would never find anybody. Everyone is so dreary. Oh dear! An autopsy lab worker! Horrible! But I bet you’ve got a sense of humour, haven’t you? So how about 9pm on 7th December in the Chrysanthemum Bar? Do come, please. I’ll be impatiently waiting for you. I’m so curious I can’t wait, I really can’t. I’m mad with curiosity!”

II.

The way she welcomed me was what they call ‘hyper’. And she had friends in the band who immediately started playing the Funeral March when I came in. She was probably already slightly drunk and was jumping from table to table, blabbing to everyone: “His name is Frankenstein!” she announced.

“Löwenstein,” I said correcting her. “Franz Löwenstein.”

And again she went off, blabbing to all and sundry, running around laughing and saying things like: “Just look at that funny suit of his... And do you know what he does? ... Sh-sh-sh – listen to this... ha-ha-ha...”

Horrendous!

The Chrysanthemum was a night club in a rundown sidestreet. They were a real shower, the people there, artists mostly. For a moment I eyed

them with interest but they were all drunk and I hate drunkenness because it reminds me of Berty and his sidekicks. Some were already lying on the tables, others were flopping on the floor in an effort to be amusing. I was wondering what my boss would say if he could see it all. He is also an artist but has never been in a bar. He prefers to visit cemeteries at night, to sit on gravestones and write by candlelight. He has the key to a tomb and locks himself in there on Sundays.

A half-hour passed and still I sat alone in the black suit I wear to funerals. I had ordered a Fernet—I like its colour—when Ilonka suddenly ran up to me and waved to the band, which again broke into the Funeral March. She then invited me to dance but when I stood up, everyone burst out laughing. They surrounded us, holding hands to form a ring while we danced in the middle. I hadn't expected such a reception in my worst dreams.

"You look like a notary or the sexton in a church," Ilonka whispered to me as we danced. "And your eyes are so... Aspiring... Why are you shaking like that?"

I was trying to contain my anger. But then it spilled over. I tore myself away, pushed her off and ran back to the table.

"Wait," she said catching me up. She sat next to me and took my hand. "Why are you so offended?... What is it?"

I took her letter from my pocket and opened it in front of her. "What was this you wrote to me? 'I can't wait! I'm mad with curiosity!' But all you can do is make a fool of me!!!" I was furious and waved the letter around until it flew out of my hand and landed on the floor somewhere. Tears came to my eyes. I felt humiliated.

Ilonka motioned to the band to stop playing and pushed her friends away. Some then leaned over towards our table to eavesdrop; others even crept under it but she kicked them away with her heels in annoyance.

"I'm sorry. That's just me, I'm afraid..." she said in her defence. "Rather crazy... But I'm glad you're here."

It sounded nice and honest, as if a child had said it.

"Really?" I had softened my tone but still had my doubts.

"Seriously..." she smiled. She had white teeth without a single filling; white, strong, even. They glistened in the darkness. She wasn't interested in dental care but something else. But what? I didn't know.

"There are lots of people here," I said starting from the other end.

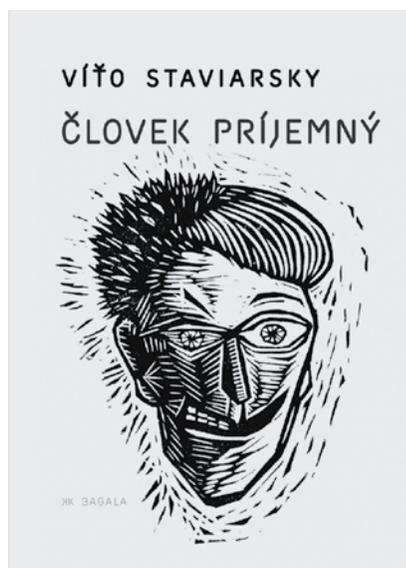
"Do you want to go somewhere else?"

"Where there would just be the two of us..."

"It's cold outside..."

“We could go to...my place...” I blurted and waited to see what she would say. She turned serious and surveyed me pensively, biting her bottom lip and weighing up the pros and cons. It probably wasn't an easy decision for her. I'm no oil painting, am rather sallow, yellow even, have a long nose and more bony than muscular...

“Let's go then!” she suddenly exclaimed, and grabbing a bottle from the table, she got up and starting walking towards the exit. It was proof that she was in earnest. I chased after her so fast I was lucky I didn't break my leg. And then left a tip in the cloakroom, though it is not a habit of mine to do so.



← Published by Koloman
Kertész Bagala,
Bratislava, 2014

Juraj Briškár 1964

A literature theoretist and aphorist, he first taught at the Department of Slovak Language and Literature in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Jozef Šafárik in Prešov. Later he taught at Szeged University before returning to Prešov University. He has published the books of aphorisms: *Mlčanie* (Silence, 1994), *Chôdza v Oriente* (Walking in the Orient, 1998), *Autumnal Furniture* (2002) and *Symetrické pozorovania* (Symmetrical Observations, 2011), as well as a book of essays called *Elementárne situácie v literatúre* (Elementary Situations in Literature, 2005). The prose work *Sprievodca nezrozumiteľnosťou* (A Guide to Incomprehensibility, 2014) is his literary debut and reached the finals of the Anasoft Litera 2015. →



Juraj
Briškár

A Guide to Incompre- hensibility

Extract translated by John Minahane →

A new-age tale of an observer in a foreign language environment. As he cannot understand what the people around him are saying, he sees the whole world from a different perspective, with words simply being noise and disruption to him. His perception of common everyday things becomes sharper and somehow new and surprising. The book is made up of his observations.

Deep-Sea Diving

A few days ago, while shopping in the sports section of a department store, out of curiosity I put on a pair of diving goggles. I was struck by how the hitherto familiar objects round me became distant, almost inaccessible, from that moment. Half in jest and half seriously I continued my shopping, but with this difference, that I slowed my movement down. In the half-empty, well-lighted salesroom I first of all walked round the shelves with oat flakes, then fish conserves, brightly coloured drinks and sachets of instant soups, as if they were underwater reefs studded with rare corals. After some time I thought it proper to get out from among those, communicate with the checkout staff by means of signs, slowly make my way to the exit, and afterwards, who knows, maybe drift on further.

That evening after dusk the same deep, and at the same time diffuse, picture of things came back to me. It took the form of a fever that kept mounting; it was difficult to ignore. At first I even tried to measure it, but in the end I gave that up. I was fascinated by the manner in which objects round me began to appear at these moments. They were somehow different from the usual, conciliatory and blurry. And the memory of this kindly softness remained with me afterwards, when my condition spontaneously readjusted. Things and people, however, had definitively changed for me. I cannot as previously trust the boundaries between the cold iron railings and the hands that hold onto them. Their blurry image accompanies me wherever I turn. I need only stand somewhere for a length of time, then I see something of its ambiguity before me. What is happening round about me seems to be very far away. The mighty many-floored buildings near me quickly lose their original shapes and take on some sort of simplified, liquid, aquarium-like consistency; they become less real and at the same disarmingly peaceful. It's as if I was not standing in an urban centre at evening when all the lights are going on; rather, I seem suspended in water deep below the surface. At such moments the sustained traffic of cars merely enhances the urgency of the images and sounds that press on me from all sides: monotonous music in the shops, passers-by with their softly incomprehensible dialogues, the gentle hum of the news channels coming from the electronics outlets, and the countless letters in that blurred, liquid city which translate the sound of words into mute language for the eye. Inscriptions on walls, the cold glass of display windows, glowing lightbulbs and neon ads on the streets, the soft surfaces too of objects, generously enlarge the dimensions of the visible around me. Thanks to empty tables and chairs, gleaming steel cutlery, shining white porcelain plates and polished brass buttons, light

no longer comes to me from above but is diffused in space and colourfully reflected from unexpected places. The monitors hung here, there and everywhere are entirely divested of the weight of paper and their screens light up before me more quickly than I, when leafing through heavy books upholstered with cloth, indeed with leather, could once have imagined.

From the Lives of Machines

If the little items of stationery in the newspaper kiosks could come alive, be born and give birth, if pens could have pastel pencils which would later grow up to be thick crayons, elegant though sharp engraving tools, or huge colour markers, they would live indistinguishably from their future users: they would care for their families, enjoy times together, learn from one another, and the most successful of them would rise high, among the gold-plated fountain pens on antique writing tables, where, surrounded by white paper, they would devote whole days of effort to important issues. If the drawers, keyholes and other things came to life, no hands would be needed any more. Machines in particular would proceed much more consistently than under their present scatter-brained management; they would go by the light of their own reflectors without lunch breaks, uncompromisingly. We may be convinced of that by simply observing an insect.

Even a brief look into the tall grass can provide a picture of uncommonly persistent activity, not relaxing even for a moment, whose agents give the impression of small deliberately fashioned spring-loaded mechanisms. Long before the arrival of human beings their world had developed a system of brief unambiguous interactions which contemporary technology, if it is to be equally effective, must reproduce willy-nilly. It is hard to imagine that an ant, inseparably linked to huge mandibles reminiscent of the scoops of a dredger, would hesitate over anything for long; and likewise the beetles and may-bugs that snarl as they crash into lamps are at work their whole lives long and do not have time for superfluous reflections and lengthy conversations about what they're actually doing. Their day is marked by feverish activity, and in the name of the clearly-marked goal everything is permitted: hence the individual fulfilling its specific task does not go to waste but serves the coming generations as a practical source of energy.

Modern industrial manufacture in its pursuit of efficiency imitates the reproductive capacity of the insect. It is able in a short time to bring millions of identical actors onto the scene who will manage to fulfil

markedly distinct functions, only to be almost immediately replaced by a further series of the same kind. Screens, planes, cars, fridges and lightbulbs snarl, buzz and whistle, along with the mosquitos and wasps. The purposeful structure of forms which can be reproduced well gives them uncommon assertiveness and extension, though on the other hand it makes long duration impossible. Machines and the insect undoubtedly exist alongside human beings in the same world, but it is also true that the spaces where they fulfil their ambitions only partly overlap. As observers with very different priorities, pedestrians are thus distinguished from security detectors and cameras by the manner in which they evaluate the same phenomena. While strolling families have time to marvel at the fragile beauty of the moment and comprehend the surrounding natural setting in its context (which to the insects that fly to and fro is and to all appearances always will be inaccessible), yet again the beetles hidden in the grass are proceeding onwards with the tireless perseverance of ticking clocks.

Letter to Larisa Dmitriyevna

My approach to words and things has quite naturally become impractical, but on the other hand it does not seem that I've lost anything important; on the contrary. In the moments when I'm cutting paper, writing something down, or just casually taking objects in my hands, I see clearly that though purposeful action and pragmatically orientated communication lead to their goals, they ultimately prove to be incomplete. As opposed to that, wandering the streets does not seem to have much justification purely in itself. Evidently it's in harmony with that centrifugal urge when even in correspondence I take any opportunity to unshackle myself from the theme and begin a discussion of something else which neither of us, my addressee or myself, could have foreseen. The result is that I've a growing number of letters which I got caught up in while writing, so much so that I never sent them. In others again, without any clear reason why, I answer questions in colloquial Czech, which allows me to hold forth with relish on "kippers and Hungarian sausage" in the Prague lingo and to address my correspondent now as "Jemelínek" and right afterwards as "Borivoj". There are further occasions when an opportunity arises to stylise the text in a 19th century spirit and title the addressee "amice", "my brother lord", or "eagle", "falcon" or "boeing". I discovered that to salute people first with one name and then immediately with another is

not just more interesting but also more truthful. After all, what reason could there be for one person being called Alphonsus and someone else Ervin? “Ernest!” my parents might have called to me when I was little, as I plunged ahead on my tricycle, and I’d have got used to it. When writing, therefore, I do not lay much stress on my own name and I’ll sign myself in all seriousness as “the whistling, highly strung, ready for everything teapot”, provided it is more suited to the whole.

I discovered that correspondence in the old Russian style can evoke a wholly distinct atmosphere. “Highly honoured Larisa Dmitriyevna”, I begin writing, and immediately I catch in the air the aroma of sour gherkins, vodka and smoked sturgeon, mixed with the pong of old coats as in a story by Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov, “the document which you request from me should already be lying quietly somewhere on your shelf, because a number of days have gone by since Mita, in foul weather, brought it to the post office. But if not, certainly an official person will entrust it willingly to your gentle hands. Before long I shall be in your county town to take part in a dispute at the Institute for the Study of Patent Remedies. I say this so that we may be able to exchange a word or two, if you should happen to be in the town on that day or the day following and not riding to hunt foxes somewhere on your estates. Now, permit me to indicate something in floral or headscarfed language. From the heights of his own idleness, with a view upon sharp meadows, erect as from a cabbage trough, greeting you with tubeteika is E. E. Em., proprietor of a silver spoon and a shining samovar.”

I have noticed that, however serious the subject of report may be, after a certain time Mita for some reason or other will appear on the scene. Now he’ll be chopping wood, making splinters fly, and another time he’ll be raking leaves in the garden, or just puffing on his pipe. Though he does not comment on the problems discussed, his presence in the correspondence shows features of a distinctive system, while at the same time having no cogent reason; it gives the impression of something inappropriate and cannot be excused in any specific way, or explained. It’s a peculiar thing, but in fact he seems to be gradually becoming the central character there. And now that I think of it, that’s just like me and the surrounding streets, like as two hairs: how much energy is invested so that the city around me may be lucidly arranged, so that everyone can quickly get to where he’s going without asking; what power and resources it has taken to build all those shopping centres, car parks, houses, to number them, to name streets. And I use them like a wanderer in the steppe where one can never see the end, just so as to have somewhere to roam, to ramble here and there. I observe the ducks, the wild geese

in the park. I ask the sparrows and pigeons the way, which I know well but it's just to talk to them for a moment; politely I turn to the stray cats, addressing them as Nadezhdas, another time as Sonias; quite without reason I choose side streets, walking first one way and soon almost in an opposite direction.



← Published by Modrý
Peter, Levoča, 2014

Ivan Kolenič 1965

He studied at the Secondary School of Industrial Art, specializing in sculpture and woodcarving. During his studies he became greatly interested in literature. He has had many different jobs, including work as a labourer at archaeological digs, a store keeper at a university library, a supervisor in a dormitory, an art lecturer and one of the editors of the *Kultúrny život* (Cultural Life) magazine. He writes prose and poetry and is seen as one of the group *Barbarská generácia* (Barbaric Generation). As a poet, he has always had the reputation of being a rebel and a tearaway, a poet who above all likes to shock and to provoke. Among his most important works are his debut poetry collection *Prinesené búrkou* (Brought by Storm, 1986) and the novella *Ako z cigariet dym* (Like Smoke from Cigarettes, 1996). His latest book *Až do nirvány* (As Far as Nirvana, 2014) reached the finals of the Anasoft Litera 2015. →



Ivan
Kolenič
***As Far As
Nirvana***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

As the novel's central character is a writer, it is not clear whether this is an autobiography in disguise or the fictitious descriptions of a dissolving world. It is up to the reader to decide what is reality and what is mystification.

My sexual partner is virtual pornography and Annie Handy. Nowadays I communicate only through FB with usernames that I don't know at all. Maybe they're real people, who can say?... I'm an incurable alcoholic, I've besmirched all beautiful friendships with my boozing; I don't know why I still buy mobiles when no one rings me any more. I feel a never-resting psychic and physical pain, and my ribs haven't healed yet: they were broken by that violinist from the Philharmonic, Harvan the Roma. He rushed up behind me while I was leaning against a bar counter and slammed his fist into my back, bending me bow-curved. Gypsy atavism. I'm not angry with him. I'm no longer angry with anyone. All over my body are the scars of failed suicides, everywhere planted pain and flowering sorrow, Jesus Mary, river, do you hear my lamentation?

And the river tranquilly hurtled on.

And the river...

I stripped off my leather jacket, cleared the railings and slowly, carefully began making my way down towards the water. Step by step, tread by tread along the ice-coated boulders. River, you will rescue me, you'll whisk me away into the flow, it'll just be an instant, a second, we'll fuse and YOU will be me and ME you, I'll swim while my strength holds up and then I shall inhale your waters... and the moment of bliss will come. You will liberate me, river.

I didn't hesitate. Leaping over an enormous rock, I dived head-first into the startled current. But oh, treachery! Beneath the surface another huge chunk of stone was hiding and my face smashed into it, my snout was ripped, I lost consciousness. Just the contemptuous freezing water and my swooning, I floated like a paper boat. Someone was speaking to me. They dragged the blue body out of the river. Ambulance. Don't go asleep, you mustn't sleep. Ghostly utterance. Take him quickly. Wrap him in a blanket. Do you hear? Don't go asleep! River, who am I? Who was I? Mortal shame... I wanted to tell them to burn all my notebooks with unfinished stories, to delete all my texts from computers, tear out and burn everything I have disgraced! Worthlessness has its Mass for the Dead in a bloody utterance. The friends are all dead, and a pitiless spirit of irony has left my liberation in shreds. I'm a collaborator.

(In my deep night the river stands still... I. Š.) For an instant I opened my eyes, my eyelids stirred just for a moment—otherwise I ignored everything. Failure, yet again. I was lying in a white sterile chamber which was not a mortuary. Maybe an operating theatre, maybe a cell of mockery. I am lying and water is dripping from me. I'm an emaciated, fished-out waste human. A dry-land animal, pulled from the Danube. Here's a bit of body trembling on a mess of vinyl and liquid is dripping from it all

over the room; the bad water of bad news leaks from every thread. I hear someone say that he's thoroughly fed up with drunks. I take a deep breath: "Is Professor Traubner here?" For a moment I faint. I open my eyes. The doctor bent down towards me, looking as if he'd come from the unusually posh launch of some art exhibition with leggy hostesses, or straight from the Opera Ball: in monkey jacket and dicky-bow, and his neurological rubber hammer going clop-clop. "You went a bit too far there," he said. "If you won't stop drinking I'll have you committed to a psychiatric ward!" It was something like that the professor said. He was whispering to his colleagues, but already I was roving in my own glass dimensions. I will not co-operate, I won't lighten the grave-robbers' work. They flung me on a chair with castors and the corridor walls moved and fled before me. I don't know any more.

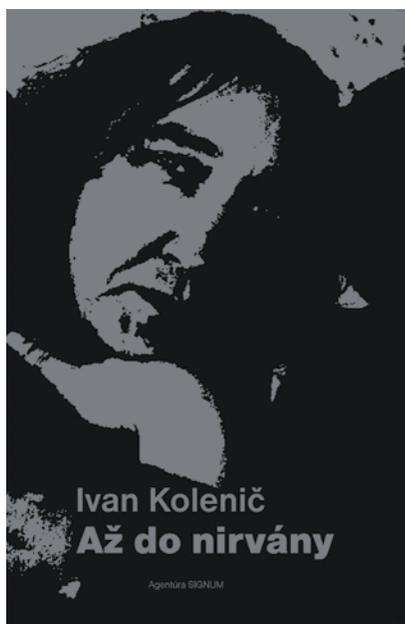
I had always yearned to emulate the purest men of the world, the great spirits of history, the beautiful, solitary madmen, pilgrims and anchorites, dishing out handfuls of mercy and tenderness with the love of drunken ravers. Always I had wanted to gain peace for myself, for you, for all. Or if nothing else a highly positive indifference: If I no longer had power, then at least not to do any injury, no, not even in thought! All of my efforts had been lost in morasses of scribbled petitions, and instead of the holy virtues, which did not radiate from me, I was in a hospital bed and a torn snout. They stripped the beast naked and tossed him into a burrow with frayed pillows. The nurse stuffed my personal effects into a closet, grumbling that to ruin such expensive gear was rank impiety. "I'll leave your documents in the drawer. Just so that you'll know where to find them, because even here they're all thieving swine..." She tucked me in and evaporated. I raised my head: In the room, sleeping, there were two weather-beaten dossers, a broken leg and a slit throat. I closed my eyes and wished the whole universe to blazes. I felt like the deceased who by oversight was still breathing.

All night I lay stretched out like in a coffin without a lid. I breathed shallowly and everything was painning me dreadfully, my entire corporeal frame and the whole world gave me agony. Shortly after daybreak, when the fat cleaning women had begun yelling in the corridors and consulting rooms and wielding their sodden rags, I rolled out of bed. Naked and hunched, grey as a cracked icicle, with shrunken balls and a buzzing in the pumpkin. The sick men were snoring. I reached into the closet, but my clothes were still wet and muddy, drowned in the spirit of winter. I therefore took the liberty of opening the closet where my colleagues in infirmity had hung their togs, and I put on gigantic corduroy trousers, an enormous vest and enormous shirt, an enormous sweater and a much-

restitched overcoat green as a dock-leaf, and instead of shoes a ghastly pair of stinking runners... I took my identity cards and made off. The cleaning women yelled after me, was I mad or what, trampling on everything? I legged it down the stairs, stopped the first taxi and flew off home. Home, home, home. Amidst whetted knives and crumbs beneath the radiator.

Uncle Ondriš, smaller and thinner than hitherto, was making scrambled eggs and Aunt Ruženka, larger and more obese than hitherto, was yawning in front of the TV set. I went taut from the reek of fried onion. Fleeing into the jakes, instead of the normal greeting I knelt down, stuffed my head in the bowl and puked like a partisan. I very nearly choked. As if sleepwalking, I pulled a bottle of wine from the fridge and drank nearly half a litre at one draught. The alcohol immediately set the merry-go-rounds turning in my ears; it made me a bit happier, my heart started pumping in apocalyptic rhythm, and my legs gave from under me. I collapsed into darkness.

And so I slept. I slept the whole day, the whole night and then again a whole day and another night, and actually a whole week. I twisted and turned in my damp bed, washed by cisterns of my own sweat, and with inexpressible exertion I kept crawling on hands and knees to the toilet to vomit and seek to empty myself right out, to fart out of myself the waste of leprous loathing, to extricate the insect of conceit from my nervous system—I was plagued by remorse of conscience, every pore of my skin was weeping, I swam through burning cloudbanks of causes and effects and I called upon broken-to-pieces Lord God to come to me, Him whom I'd drowned somewhere in shots of brandy, Lord God, who had refused to appear to me and sent me the message: "Not you, never you!" My ears grew to donkey-length and sin was preparing its mischief upon my tongue.



← Published by Agentúra
SIGNUM, Bratislava,
2014

Peter Šulej

1967

Poet, prose writer, publisher and journalist, he is the editor of the contemporary art and culture magazine, *Vlna* (Wave). He is a member of the so-called *text generation*, a group of experimental Slovak poets. As well as writing poetry and prose, he writes radio plays and is the co-author of four contemporary dance performances as well as one of the authors of the *generator x: hmlovina* (generator x: mist, 1999) and *generator x_2: nové kódexy* (generator x_2: new codes, 2013) projects. His latest poetry collection, *nódy* (nodes, 2014), is his seventh. →



Peter Šulej ***nodes***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

The poetry collection *nodes* above all reflects the state of the poet's country, its past and present, the book anticipating neo-conceptual tendencies in Slovak poetry. Interweaving texts, connecting them, turning them one hundred and eighty degrees and manipulating them in various other ways are all methods used by the poet in his latest collection.

i.
(prologue)

nodes
this is what nodes are
sets of paratexts nodes
stories immersed in stories
rules for rescue teams
segments of composed realities
nodes from behind every pavis
bunches of coloured banners in the wind
in a land that isn't good at connections
(let harsányi's thoughts be sacred)
an invisible land where even big-shots vanish
zamkovsky and his wife lúdmila built a cottage
little precious little information about the system
even if we need not go to the skies
monuments pantheons mausoleums temples
in order to understand fully
how invisible merely designated things
(tannins almond-essences acidities)
are to be grasped

1475 m.a..s.l.

(ambrose lost the hastings sword at the petynka pool
so much weeping so much grief
i told him he was enchanting and he vanished)
at some time then he must appear /
(he smiled)

/ in forty four almost a thousand years had gone
when they landed there whence they had embarked
during history's longest day
in full strength once again
they drew *caledfwlch* from the trunk of fate
with a sustained bombardment they woke up rollo
guillaume to montgomery
time and time for the legends
of the west

thus we were formed on its margin
by leavening to a statistical average
from linguistic chaos
one day like a supernova
we will gush forth

vi.
(children)

ah again again i've looked into
a land of stumbling dreaming eternal games
through the eyes of [animator(s) cook(s) rocking-horse rider(s)
pram-pusher(s) sleeper(s) au pair(s)...] (m./f.)
stood there like gesticulus at the crossroads
and days left gasping in the polka dot jerseymaillot à pois
stay behind us *with long legs*

in cadiz for the first time cyprian hush-shushed against the atlantic /
for legends sagas myths a foundation
/ uprose)

just released from zoomex
the noise-makers with peonza against the floor
were constantly testing the firmness of the universe
on wooden steeds the celestials
poets fortified with almasia
ever and anew leave the reptileworld
beaten

(he smiled)
at some time then he must appear
(i told him he was enchanting and he vanished
so much weeping so much grief
ambrose lost the hastings sword at the petynka pool)

the six century in the form of grandmother
rolling onto the toddler
bystrice plums on a tree in the orchard
rurale and she'd cook something occasionally

like the pumpkins on great rye island
without her / them
they grew

(swaddled in a manduka
he surfs the hallway runner
upon a tricycle)

i have examined all the courtyards in our district
autumn sad and winter cheerless
pushing you in your pram
with the name of a holy martyr
they gave me nothing but it doesn't matter

just that i was with you
is enough for now
for your deeds yet will be
written in the books
of chronicles
of those parts

coda

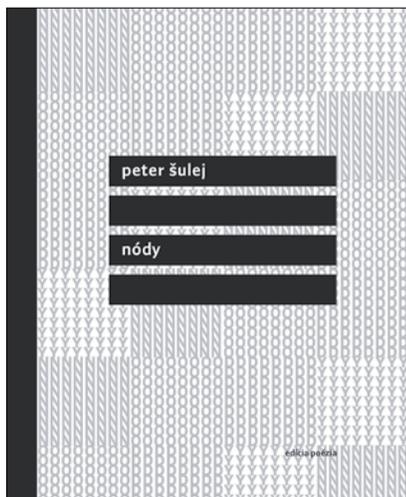
i have beginnings and sometimes i know the endings
(if you were here you'd see
how your fame is growing)
whither go all the threads of the road
of the ends of ethereal roots
in webs wove by spider feelers...
to the last mighty leap to

the first alluvial

the beginning of the weave

where the wanderer unties the nodes

to /i.



← Published by drewo
a srd, Bratislava, 2014

Márius Kopcsay 1968

Writer, publicist, screenwriter and musician, Márius Kopcsay is a master in describing the fates of ordinary people and their everyday problems and misadventures. When telling his witty, ironically-inclined stories he uses modern language, not avoiding slang or harsh expressions. In 1988 he made his debut with the story collection *Kritický deň* (Critical Day), for which he received the Ivan Krasko Prize. He continued with the story collection *Stratené roky* (Lost Years, 2004) and the novel *Domov* (Home, 2005). Also with which he reached the final of the Grand Prix for East European Literature. Also successful were his later works including the story collection *Zbytočný život* (Useless Life, 2006), the novel *Mystifikátor* (The Hoaxer, 2008), the novella *Medvedia skala* (Bear Rock, 2009), the story collection *Veselé príhody z prázdnin* (Funny Incidents from the Holidays, 2011) and the novella *Jednouholník* (Monogon, 2014). In 2007 he was awarded the Anniversary Prize of the Association of Writers' Communities in Slovakia, and five of his books have reached the final of the prestigious Anasoft Litera. →



Márius Kopcsay ***Monogon***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

The main character Augustín Nevoľný longs for a career in music. He wants to create his own compositions and release albums. But how can that be achieved in a society where the respected ones are those who build their careers methodically and do not in any way deviate from what's "normal"? The hero undergoes a mid-life crisis, gets lost in the current of memories, and deals with his sexually and emotionally unsatisfactory relationship and his unfulfilled dreams. But what if the fault is not in the main character but in the whole of society, in the whole world?

The Unwritten Review

The holidays came and Augustín strolled seemingly aimlessly through Bratislava, although in fact he was doing a lot of invisible work. That work was taking place inside him, in his noddle, his cranial cavity. He was composing music for his new album, which in his never published or created discography held (and still holds) a place of honour, because it was the first album presenting his own special style of music, which he had developed step by step and which in fact he then adhered to for the rest of his life. And which no one understood, because no one except Augustín himself had ever heard it.

His first unpublished album, which Augustín at the age of eighteen had gradually put together—that is, he always like to arrange his songs in largish groups, or even monothematic programmes, as he had seen with, for example, the group Progress 2—brought to a close his searching and maturing, and that not only in the composition of music.

Augustín felt clearly on track and mature, freed of the past, of the sudden twists and turns of his adolescent years, as well as of his student loves, although it should be said that his walks often took him through Prachárenská Street, the home of Veronika, a grammar school classmate, who had at one time been the object of his unfulfilled desires.

Up to this point Augustín had not known any desires other than unfulfilled ones. Nor in fact for a long time afterwards. Although in the third year of grammar school he had gone out with a girl from the vocational school—he had always had a soft spot for shop assistants and waitresses—he had never got further than a couple of kisses and squeezing her tiny breasts.

He had managed a similarly fleeting and partial fulfilment of his dreams in the musical sphere during the brief career of his grammar school group composed of piano (Augustín Nevolný), double bass (Ďuro Líška) and percussion (Peťo Kmet). The band didn't even have time to invent a name. That was because its members had got together when they were in the last year and after the school-leaving exams, shortly before the holidays began, they played their third and last concert at a party in the school gymnasium.

By the way, that was the best of their public performances. Some of the compositions that resounded loudly and freely through the school gymnasium in the summer twilight really were almost how Augustín had shaped them in his mind and how he wanted to hear them. Even the audience reacted enthusiastically, especially to the composition with the working title of “from C” (it was in the C minor scale and really did have nothing to do with Michal David's C-shaped plastic chain links).

All three of them agreed to meet at the very beginning of the holidays in the fallout shelter where they usually practised. Peťo Kmeť was to bring a high-quality tape recorder to record their performance. However, Augustín was the only one to turn up in the shelter, not counting the tipsy school caretaker, who kept his private bar here hidden from his wife. So, with some disappointment Augustín played on the school drums and then left to walk through the streets of Bratislava—once more continuing to perfect his musical repertoire only in his head, as he was used to doing.

He sensed rather than realized that it would be some time before another of his musical ideas could materialize because he would no longer have a group and even for quite a few years to come any keyboard instrument—not counting the out-of-tune piano handed down to him from his sister. The amateur synth he played in the band didn't belong to him. It had been lent to him by their drummer Peťo Kmeť.

Night was falling on Bratislava's hot streets, accompanied by the intensive whistling of swifts, a flock of them chasing each other across the darkening sky, sometimes really high up, other times flying with loud cries over the roofs of the old blocks of flats. Their regular loud swooping, together with the rhythmic booming of the trains passing not far off created a strange melody that blended into a concrete musical motif in Augustín's head.

Without knowing how, he found himself once more in the vicinity of Prachársená Street with the secret, but nevertheless to a certain extent identified and admitted idea that he would meet Veronika and in the state of his freshly acquired maturity, he would communicate with her in a somehow different manner, more grown up than in his adolescent years, when he had composed songs for her that she didn't want to hear and tried to give her a kiss, which she had refused to accept.

In order to give the unexpected coincidence a rather more realistic chance, he walked up and down the street a couple more times, pretending he was watching the birds. However, instead of Veronika he met a former classmate, Miška Aladárová, who he had also been in love with, but when he was still only in the eighth grade, at a time when she had looked more like a girl than a man, while now the opposite was true, but even so, out of something like pity for her unfortunate transformation, or a feeling of affection for the whole world, he wanted at least to share with her his latest experiences, the pleasure his band and its recent concert had given him, but also his disappointment that the group had not managed to get together for the agreed recording session in the shelter.

Miška, however, was in a hurry to get somewhere; she just smiled, waved to him and said he could tell her next time. Even this tiny signal he considered to be an encouraging sign and improvement (therefore progress)! She had spoken to him! Even that was success compared to the time when he used to pursue her with love letters in a sweaty hand and she had asked her classmates to tell him she must study and she didn't have time to collect any post.

However, the main reason why that evening in the holidays the world appeared to him in pleasant summer hues was his album. The euphoria he felt was so strong that he yielded to the temptation to buy cigarettes and light up as he strolled along the purple summer pavements. He had never belonged to the group of smokers in his class; he did not go to the park to smoke and certainly not to the toilets, but now his status of school-leaver or practically university undergraduate and author of a groundbreaking musical project gave the cigarette in his hand the appropriate legitimacy.

Ah, what reviews there would be if that first unpublished album of Augustín's had not remained only in his head...

"The first album of the group Augustus, the creative spirit of which is Augustín Nevoľný, reflects the maturing of the author, who after a longish period of searching has arrived at his own original mode of musical expression. Here he synthesises his early rock period, influenced by Pink Floyd, Deep Purple, Supertramp and other bands his classmates with beggars, satchels and hair parted in the middle used to listen to, with the later electronic era, which he resisted for a long time. However, other classmates with side partings and tapering trousers lent him so many records by groups such as Kraftwerk, Depeche Mode and OMD that these two styles eventually symbiotized to become Augustín's mature musical style and the whole of his successful debut is in this spirit. It is worth noting that it was the Brno group Progres 2's project Změna (Change) that provided the final inspiration for Augustín. This blended elements of the art rock that the group had played before with electronic music. And so, as Augustín himself has said, he realized then for the first time that the two genres can be synthesised."

It would be such a beautiful review, he would have boasted about it today to the station waitress in Papiernička, who had clearly taken a bit of a fancy to him, but in such cases it is impossible to tell whether the source of her fondness was just the takings coming from a bottomless drinker, or whether the public house employee really did accept the gigantic spiritual dimension of his personality.

His spiritual elephantiasis, it could be said.

“Go on, jus’ one fuckin’ more,” the waitress said to him with a smile in her mischievous eyes, waving a glass of cognac under his nose. Everything here was as it had been years ago, only the advertisements had multiplied.

STAN offers you breakfasts, announced a cheerful slogan from a faded poster above the waitress’s head. The poster showed a young, dynamic man pouring alcohol from a bottle labelled STAN into a young lady with painted lips and striking breasts squashed into a red tank top.

This poster had it sequels. STAN keeps you fit. A guy is bending a heavily made-up young lady over his knee and spanking her turbulent round bottom with his manly hand, while she pours spirits from a bottle of STAN into his manly lips.

STAN offers you sex. A woman holding a bottle between her black-stockinged legs in an obscene gesture.

STAN offers you the world. An azure sea made up of bottles of STAN.

Can you offer anyone the world? This thought flashed through Augustín’s mind, and under the influence of the advertisement and the waitress he knocked back “another fuckin’ ” cognac, or in fact two, and on the way home, or wherever he should have been going, travelled not only by train, but also in the parallel outer space of his soul. He travelled in all possible directions, in all possible dimensions and at the same time filled so many little pages of an even smaller notebook! These are not only the small, but also the bright sides of his existence that is otherwise immersed in gloom.

Mum

One flaw was that Augustín’s first unpublished album didn’t have a name. Because his compositions didn’t have names either. That is, they did, but only such ridiculous ones as, for example, the already mentioned composition “from C”. He didn’t have lyrics to go with them; he only composed music. After a couple of attempts he self-critically assessed his song writing and gave up. Those few attempts have been immortalized to this day in a heap of notebooks in a linen basket weighing about 50 kilogrammes.

You’re beautiful, why don’t you want me,
Everyone has someone, as you can see,
I’m always lonely, it’s nothing new,
For the only one I want is you,
You’re beautiful, but oh so strange,
La, la, la.

When recalling his lyrics now, almost thirty years later, the corner of Augustín's mouth curved in a little wry smile, but a large bald man in a puffed-up anorak with an enormous sports bag spread himself out across the next four seats beside a girl with mother-of-pearl nails glued to a smartphone. The man cast Augustín a hostile glare and opened a tin of beer.

Many people are incapable of such self-reflection and are still turning out things like this; they can even be heard on the radio, as Augustín observes every morning when his partner, Silvia, is listening for the weather forecast.

Clear, partly cloudy, 25 degrees.

I don't want to be alone here, that's why I have you, dear. You're like a fresh breeze, like coffee with milk, when we're alone, I love you so-o-o-o.

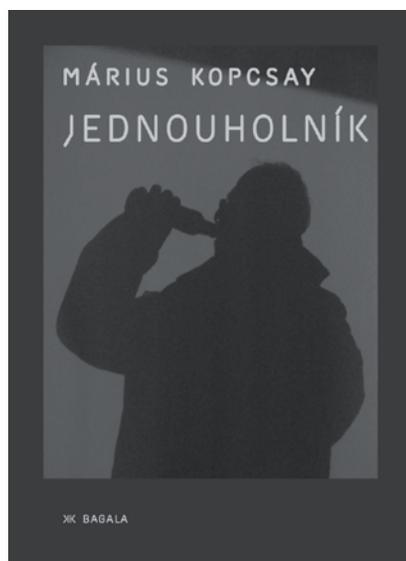
So the album didn't have a title, it didn't have lyrics, but it held together, that is, it held together in the head of Augustín, whose mother was waiting for him when he returned from his long walk along Prachárenská Street.

"Where have you been so long? Which way did you go? I don't even know what you're doing when you just wander around town. This came for you."

Mum handed him a piece of paper she had fished out of the letterbox and not been ashamed to open, even though it was addressed to him.

Dear Comrade Augustín Nevoľný, this is to inform you that you have been accepted to study the chemistry of bread, rolls, cakes and dumplings. Report for summer work at the Trebišov canning factory on 2nd August.

...



← Published by Koloman Kertész Bagala, Bratislava, 2014

Agda Bavi

Pain 1969

Controversial writer, scriptwriter and musician, he publishes prose and poetry under various pseudonyms and aliases both in domestic and international magazines and journals. His novel *Koniec sveta* (End of the World, 2006) won the first prize for East European literature in the Bank Austria Literaris 2008, its preface serving as the theme of the film *Babie leto* (Indian Summer). His first book was a cult collection of poems titled *Košť & Koža* (Skin & Bone, 2002). He published collection of poetry titled *Euröpain* and story collection titled *More. Love. Čajky*. (More. Love. Chicks.) in 2014. →



Agda Bavi Pain

More. Love. Chicks.

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

Košice is a city where Roma, Slovak, Hungarian and Czech words naturally blend into one sentence—at least this is the image of his birthplace which the writer Agda Bavi Pain creates in his new book *More. Love. Chicks.* Two threads run through the stories, one describing socialist youth in 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia hungering for all things Western, the other describing the first Mafia clans after the Velvet Revolution and their appetite for settling scores.

New Money

I had to come to terms with her state: I had to measure up to it.

“Do you really not know what to buy?” she said reproachfully, slamming on the table the make-up she took from the full shopping bag.

Of course I didn’t know.

I walked out of the courtyard of the Andrassy Palace up to the square with the tram stops. It was where I did it the first time.

Unwittingly I settled my gaze on two heavy carrier bags next to the fat old woman in front of me. I looked away immediately but noticed how passers-by had registered my gaze with suspicion. Then once I had passed over this walking lump of fat and seen her accusing, back-turned face, her hand hastily trying to transfer her shopping to the bags in her other hand, I finally realized that my plan merely lacked execution of the deed.

In a fraction of a second I saw myself snatch the bag from the woman, dash between some people and then run for my life away from her screeching voice and some self-interested do-gooders chasing after me. Then turn into a narrow side street and come out on the other side, not breathing hard, before heading in the opposite direction at a slower pace, covered by the noises of onrushing bodies.

It did not always go well and sometimes I had to abandon my quarry. At other times at home my woman berated me for my stupid purchases and extravagance. In the end, though, she always praised me—that was before I realized she knew everything. Then she would appreciate my attempts at devotion by relishing one handful after another.

I had to measure up, little one.

“Now listen to me, please. I won’t talk for very long.”

Not long meant she would finish talking just before it struck midnight and that she would stop just at the point when I thought my nerves simply couldn’t take it anymore and my death was all but inevitable. God would then change his mind about summoning me at the very last moment.

She spoke about love: “I love you. But if you leave me, I’ll get over it. Someone else will come”; about communication: “There are so many things I’m afraid of telling you about” and about herself, mainly about herself: “I’m expecting” she said one evening.

“I can see,” I said jealously.

She was paralytic.

If I feel like it, I make coffee for her in the morning. And for myself, especially for myself, only for myself. She had long known what I meant when I asked her in passing one day:

“Have you got any black pantaloons, by any chance?”

She’d had them ready for a long time.

“You wanted to say pantyhose” and she handed me an unopened package from her handbag.

“Yeah, pantyhose. What did I say?”

“Pantaloons.”

“Pantyhose,” I repeated. “Have you got any older ones?”

“Pantaloons?”

“Give me a break!”

And then she poured all that money out onto the table just like that—out of the blue. Long after she had seen me for the first time.

“Let’s see you.”

She spun me round in front of the mirror just before I left the house. I had to give her a twirl or two.

“Let me have a good look at you just in case something happens.”

“I understand,” which I did, though I had no idea that only she understood everything. I couldn’t be afraid of anything if I was to be afraid about her. Afraid of nothing, not even myself. I knew what I was capable of.

Every crown counted.

For some time I had to invent a phantom to explain my occasional nights away, my late arrivals home, my two or three-day disappearances in search of a good quarry. I introduced everyone to Ďusij Varecha, to him and his imaginary abstract essence; to everyone except to her so that they could unanimously confirm his existence and my bulletproof alibi. They all liked him and became friends immediately. She didn’t have to ask me anything.

“I was having a coffee with Ďusij,” I said.

“Tell me about him,” she said.

I could think of nothing more agonizing than having to invent evenings spent together. But I had to—for the good of our relationship.

“Quiet. Be quiet everyone, I’m calling my wife!” and I silenced those around me when I phoned her.

“Be quiet, please. My husband is calling!” and she would in turn silence her guests.

“Hi. Have you got anything?”

“Nothing. And you?”

I had only her. And one pair of socks in which, after a raid that morning, I had found a crumpled hundred crown note. It was scratching my heel. Not long before, I had poured from the sock just a few farthings rattling in my shoe like in a piggy-bank. Now I had a note—a small fortune! We could finally eat.

After a midnight slap-up, we were jumping around in front of the lift. “You go in the sink or in the bath!” she commanded. Once inside she quickly threw off her skirt, pulled down her knickers and peed into the bowl while I had to go in the sink.

My mates and I went on sitting by the bar like fruit machines. Insert a coin, pour us a shot, life is fun. Let’s play your song. We were thinking about money, about a magical printing-press which would print out bank notes. About supernatural numbers and values which mathematicians had not even dreamt of. With no good-willed, fun-loving sponsor to be seen anywhere, my precious time came after midnight, as I walked through the station park. Better to steal than not steal and thus steal from one’s family. Family: me and her. Come on, a family must have at least three members. And how often there are five times that many of us sitting at this bar.

“And where has the good person disappeared to? Where to, I ask nicely?!” I ask aloud nicely at night. “Where is that pure soul, that big heart, that open account, loads of money, generous pockets?! Where is it? Screw it!”

No, I have no family. I don’t want to have a family: that’s why I need money, in this state—my sixth month—I need a lot of money.

It was a shame about the peace being disturbed, a shame about crime being committed just for money. It was a shame about that money. But we enjoyed it when she joined forces with me so that we could stand on our feet together: both of us on our own feet, that is—the third was on his belly on the ground.

“Come to work, Princess! Or you too will be lying down!”

I urged my chosen one to search the victim who we had sought out at the railway station. We both liked the look of him. Her task was simply to run up to him in that part of the park where I was waiting behind a tree so that I could jump out, cock the hammer and send a good-looking man with a suitcase to the ground. I spared her such a fate, the fatso, what with that big belly of hers. I was in a hurry. With those black tights over my head, it was always unbearably bloody hot with the shuddering stink of my breath after a long session in the bar.

She had to frisk his whole body and give me everything, including his documents, so that I could warn the young man nicely not to call the

police or my chums would be on to him. I would take my pregnant witch with me as a hostage; with our stolen goods we would then retreat as quickly as possible. It's true that she looked good—weighed down by the fruit of my love. My love for money.

I played songs to her outside her door: Jingle Bells, SOS, the Wedding March and similar fanfares. She then opened the door and I went on letting the music play:

“Wait—let the piece finish.”

I brought her a flower.

“I wish you had brought me some bread instead. The flower will soon die,” at least that is how she said it.

“I'll buy you some bread for Christmas.”

Kiss-kiss. But she didn't touch her coffee, her mouth was dry, coffee in my mug. She had overdone it the day before, she felt bad, my head, my stomach, my dear. A vodka to clear the head, a beer to settle the stomach—soon she was looking better. She could speak: she hadn't just lost her senses.

I was sitting down. She saw me furtively fingering through the money in my mind but she also saw that I hadn't even touched it. I would rather have stroked her smooth round belly. Rather a nice round belly than the shapeless pillow where she stored all the pilfered money she had been carrying under her shirt.

She had wanted to make me happy but my fixed smile persuaded her otherwise.

We sat on the sofa, each at the opposite end with the pillow in between us. A pillow like a wardrobe dividing a bedroom, like a bookmark, hatred out of love.

We looked at the blank tv screen. At its blackness like at a dark mirror. It was less painful that way. Our expressions in the screen were defused somehow, reproachful but tame.

“What did we need that dosh for?”

“Did?”

“Yes?”

“I don't know.”

“Do we still need it?”

“What dosh? What is money for anyway!?! What's come over you?”

She had come over me. And I was running behind her, right behind her.

„Story collection *More. Love. Chicks.* is exciting like folk tales or mythology of an unknown country, where inhabitants are speaking Babylonian language and the sun never sets. Dive into the stories and enjoy the ride through “East coast”, its dark underworld, skirmishes with police and politics, mass concerts, demonstrations as well as the magic and charm of eastern culture. Agda Bavi Pain is focusing attention on sensuality, animality, instinctiveness, brutality, to look under social and personal mimicry, where everyone is naked in his sincere shame.”



← Published by Koloman
Kertész Bagala,
Bratislava, 2014

Richard Pupala ¹⁹⁷²

A student first of journalism and art history, he then did a degree in Theatre Studies at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, earning money first as a barman at the legendary U-Club, and later as a journalist. Now he works as a scriptwriter. His book *Návštevy* (Visits, 2014) is his literary debut and is a collection of tragicomic stories of varying lengths which could have been played out in practically any Slovak household or family. The book was a finalist in the Anasoft Litera 2015. →



Richard Pupala *Visits*

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

Each of us exists in many different forms at the same time: rather than living our own lives, we are somebody's grandchildren, children or friends; whether we like it or not, we are also witnesses... And one more thing: our lives are inevitably mirrored in the eyes of others—it would make no sense otherwise. A visit is not just an illustration or symbol of this. Every story which someone wants to tell us is in some ways a visit...

Living space

Roman was waiting for Lena in the hall in T-shirt and shorts with the information that Charlie had died.

Charlie was lying in the middle of the kitchen, on his side, in all his rabbit splendour: his head tilted backwards, ears lying flat along his back, paws outstretched. Roman went to stand over him, as if Lena might overlook him. He did not understand how it could have happened. Lena crouched down to the dead animal. “Poor thing”. She looked up at Roman. Then she cautiously touched Charlie above his nose. That’s how he had found him.

Lena’s finger left a white speck on his fur.

“We must call Sisa,” Lena announced.

Sisa had been given the bunny rabbit on her thirteenth birthday and had quickly lost interest in him; they should have bought it earlier, at an age when girls will abandon dolls for a living creature with enthusiastic responsibility. Roman had come up with a name for him. Lena brought packed hay home from the supermarket along with seeds enriched with vitamins and trace elements. Once a week they changed his litter in an old laundry basket that served as Charlie’s bed. They should have got a cage for him that he couldn’t leave whenever he felt like it, but they realized that too late. At first it seemed an endearing sight when he hopped freely about the flat. However, Charlie soon marked his territory and turned the laundry basket into a toilet, where he would leave his droppings. He became an unpredictable inhabitant of the flat, spending most of the day lying under the sofa, from which he made excursions into the surroundings. He didn’t allow himself to be caught, so they couldn’t trim his claws. He nibbled the corners of the carpet and preferred licking whitewash to the calcium in the pellets he was given. In return for the freedom they allowed him, from time to time he rewarded them with the sight of his outstretched body while they watched the television in the evening—a delightful scene with the illusion of a beloved pet, which he was not. A year earlier Sisa had gone to live in a university hall of residence and ever since Roman had lost yet another job and stayed at home, he had been the one to look after him.

“Darling, something terrible has happened,” Lena announced cautiously over the telephone.

Roman was standing next to the armchair where she was sitting and he was stroking his tummy with a slow, deliberate movement. Lena broke the sad news to her daughter.

“Daddy found him in the kitchen. His time must have come.”

But along with Charlie, Sisa had received a picture book about breeding and she remembered that dwarf rabbits could easily live for eight years. Charlie was not yet even five.

“He wasn’t old, apparently,” Lena told Roman and turning back to the telephone suggested he might have been ill.

It occurred to her that they could bury him in the little garden in front of their block of flats and she caught hold of the hand Roman was stroking his tummy with. It irritated her. She asked her daughter whether they could bury him in the garden.

“It’s all the same to you?”

With a reproachful expression that should have been directed at her daughter, she looked at her husband. “He was your rabbit. You wanted him!”

Sisa tried to assure her mother that she did care. If they wanted, they could bury him in the garden. And she reminded her mother that she wouldn’t be coming home that weekend.

“Are you going to the cottage?”

After all, she had mentioned it last time.

“Okay. You arrange it with Daddy.”

Lena abruptly stood up and handed the phone to Roman. She took the shopping bags and returned to the kitchen. She shut the door and opened the window. She sat down at the table. From the bag at her feet she pulled out a packet of L&Ms. She lit a cigarette and stared at the dead rabbit. At one time they had gone out onto the balcony to smoke, but one day they had broken the habit and they now had ash trays on the kitchen table as well as in the living room and on the chest of drawers in the hall.

Snatches of Roman’s conversation with their daughter reached her from the hall. He laughed at something, and that something was just between the two of them. An unfair feeling of grievance gnawed at her. When Sisa was little he used to go with her to the sand pit and later he took her on trips. He read to her before she went to sleep. Lena was left with the practical sides of family life and nothing had changed in that respect. Roman got on better with Sisa and Lena realized painfully that she was no longer able to get closer to her.

Roman appeared in the doorway.

A shapeless T-shirt flopping over his belly and shorts. Lena couldn’t remember when she had seen him in anything other than what he wore around the house.

“Did you let her go?”

He didn’t see anything wrong with it. She would be there with other girls, friends from the university.

“Yes. And they will be studying all weekend.”

Lena stubbed out her cigarette and gazed at her husband. “Did Zdeno call you about a job?”

No, Zdeno had not called.

Roman pointed to the rabbit and asked where they were going to bury it.

“It’s all the same to me,” Lena retorted and stood up to put away the shopping. “And it’s all the same to you two.” She pulled a white plastic bag out of the bottled fruit cupboard and handed it to Roman.

“Take him away.”

The slow way he lifted the dead animal and put it into the plastic bag, carefully turning over the edge infuriated her. “Really very nice.” She lit another cigarette on the balcony. And watched her husband flip-flopping along to the dustbins. The parcel in his hand reminded her of cakes wrapped up in the delicatessen. Roman disappeared under the roof of the dustbin shelter and when he emerged, now without the parcel, Leo went inside. He joined her for a cigarette. “Why didn’t Zdeno call if he promised to?” she asked.

He gazed from the balcony and smoked.

“Take him out somewhere for a beer. Why don’t you take him out for a beer? He’s your pal, isn’t he?”

She was none too fond of Roman’s old friends and it would never have occurred to her that she would suggest he should go out into town with them, especially now they had to be more thrifty than ever. Didn’t he understand that nowadays he couldn’t find a job by staying at home?

“Shall I call him?”

She heard him mutter quietly to the block of flats opposite that did she really think he wasn’t trying hard enough.

She went inside.

There was hardly enough space in the narrow bedroom for the double bed, bedside table and a wardrobe that prevented the door from being opened properly. Lena sat on the edge of the bed in her bra and panties. The bedroom was the only place she could retreat to. She stretched out her bare foot and pressed it against the wardrobe with all her strength, as if she wanted to push it away.

Originally their bedroom had been in the larger of the two rooms, but when Sisa had grown up a little they decided to turn it into a room for her. Now that she was spending most of the year in the hall of residence they could change the room back. She had already discussed it with Roman. He had agreed. He had nodded. It was clear to her that it would be up to her to begin the move. Actually, she had wanted to do it the previous weekend. But in the end she hadn’t done it. The weekend had passed. When she thought about it now, she had a feeling that it might have something to do with what had happened to the flat. It no longer belonged to her as it had

before. Every morning Roman stood in the doorway while she called the lift. And he was waiting for her when she came home. Apart from Saturday shopping he didn't leave the flat. What did he do all day? At first she had been in the habit of calling him from work, so he wouldn't feel alone. He was watching television. He was dozing. Or he had just washed the dishes. But these were not answers to Lena's question. Something had happened.

Roman took over all the housework. The flat was clean, the carpets vacuumed, the ashtrays emptied, the covers on the furniture straightened. She could be satisfied, but she wasn't. She was confused by it. If it hadn't been for the smell of cigarette smoke, she would feel like she did when returning from a holiday; she smelt smoke and Roman.

What was he doing now? she wondered. Was he smoking on the balcony? Or was he standing somewhere and just waiting for her to come out of the bedroom?

She imagined him standing in the middle of the kitchen, where Charlie had lain a short while ago. She sat on the bed for a little longer and then forced herself to get up. She put on an old summer dress that she could no longer wear when she went out. She left the bedroom and prepared the supper.

They ate wordlessly in front of the television in the living room. The news, an advertisement, a serial.

During the meal Roman broke the silence and said he had called Zdeno. He stared at the telly, as if he wasn't talking to Lena, but to one of the characters in the serial. He was to call him the next day, said he really would. Maybe they would meet in town.

He gazed at his wife. He bent over towards her. It looked to Lena as if he wanted to stretch out his hand and touch her, but he didn't do it, as if he sensed she didn't want him to. He knew it was hard, he said slowly, but together they'd manage. He'd find some work. He must find some. She must only trust him more.

Lena felt his face was too near her. A moving mouth.

Roman fell silent. She registered all that came from him, all those slow, sluggish words as sounds without any real meaning. With surprisingly calm certainty it occurred to her that he would never find a proper job again. She stood up and took the plates into the kitchen. She looked at the clock on the wall, but it was only half past eight, too early to go to bed. She really would have liked to run out of the flat and walk about the housing estate until she got tired.

She went back to her armchair in the sitting room.

"Charlie didn't die," said Roman.

Lena didn't know what he was talking about. It took a while before Roman went on.

“He attacked me.”

The words fell from him gradually, in little heaps. They were quite clear. His hand lay on his belly and when he was not talking the hand moved and attracted Lena’s gaze: it was part of a kind of mechanism.

He said that Charlie had been attacking him more and more often. From under the bath, from under the sofa, in any room he entered. When he had wanted to stretch out on the sofa that afternoon he had been waiting for him in the middle of the living room.

Roman pointed to the middle of the room.

“You can’t imagine it.”

Charlie had rushed at him and grabbed him by the leg. And then again. He wasn’t the slightest bit afraid. Only when Roman kicked him did he scurry under the bath. “I took the tube from the vacuum cleaner.”

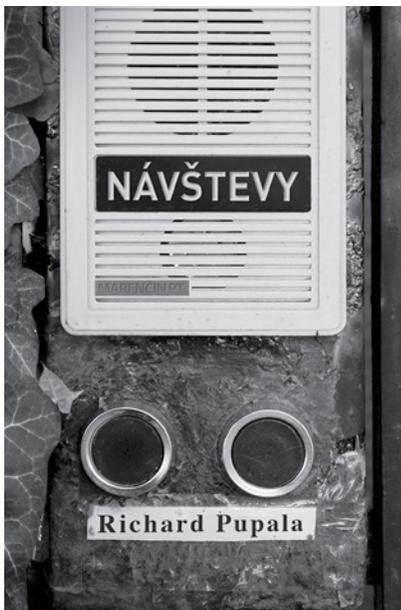
“You killed him.”

“I was absolutely furious, Lena. Furious. I was shaking all over.”

He had pulled Charlie out from under the bath and removed the clumps of dust from him. He had brushed his fur. Laid him out on the kitchen carpet and waited until Lena came back from work.

“I don’t know what got into me.”

Lena couldn’t sleep. She knew that Roman, lying beside her, was not asleep either. He was breathing irregularly and Lena could hear him swallowing. The night dripped away with the ticking of the alarm clock and the moment one or other could have spoken up, that moment was suddenly gone, suppressed by the silence. Lena’s eyes were closed and it seemed to her that Roman was growing bigger and filling the space. Before she fell into another day out of an instinct of self-preservation she determined they would change the rooms next weekend.



← Published by
Marenčin PT,
Bratislava, 2014

Michal Habaj 1974

Poet and literary researcher at the Institute of Slovak Literature at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, he is author of the monographs *Druhá moderna* (The Second Modernism, 2005) and *Model človeka a sveta v básnickom diele Jána Smreka* (A Model of a Person and the World in the Poetry of Ján Smrek, 2013). He has written the following collections of poetry: *80-967760-4-5* (1997); *Gymnazistky. Prázdniny trinásťročnej* (Grammar School Girls. A Thirteen-Year-Old's Holidays, 1999); *Korene neba. Básne z posledného storočia* (The Roots of Heaven. Poems from the Last Century, 2000); *Básne pre mŕtve dievčatá* (Poems for Dead Girls, 2004); *Michal Habaj* (2012) and *Caput Mortuum* (2015). Using the pen-name, Anna Snegina, he has published two collections of poems titled *Pas de deux* (2003) and *Básne z pozostalosti* (Poems from the Remains, 2009). He is one of the co-authors of the experimental poetry projects *generator x: hmlovina* (generator x: mist, 1999) and *generator x_2: nové kódexy* (generator x_2: new codes, 2013). He was also actively involved in the international project *The European Constitution in Verse* (Brussels, 2009). →



Michal Habaj **Caput Mortuum**

Extract translated by John Minahane →

What is the role of a poet today? What are the limits of poetry in addressing the present without losing sight of the past and the future? Can we run away from history? Habaj's newest collection speaks to us from a world we would not like to experience but one which offers no alternative. It is our world. Our present, past and future come together in the telescopic sight of a sniper aiming right at the heart of humanity. These poems of speculative posthumanism speak of upheaval, destruction and the end of human culture and civilization, of ruins which we cannot see yet because we still mistake them for images of heaven and hope.

Freedom

*Night's echo
covers everything
that breathes.*

*We're beyond the horizon,
and now the wheels
are turning only in heads.*

*The pilgrims squeezed the bones
that moan in the wind
into a grain of rice.*

*From the sand dunes
freedom blows.
It has the face of a worm
that eats up everything
in the name of profit.*

*The skeletons of states
blow in the wind,
hung on a cross
as a windbreak.*

*Mary,
you're asking the way,
but in your heart
the snake
goes sinuously in time
backwards.*

*The stairways have been moved.
The pilgrims have been carted
off to execution.*

*While they were dreaming,
someone screwed off their heads,
filled them with sand
and sold them to museums.*

*I call on you therefore
to halt forthwith
the construction works
on Koliba Hillside Residence.*

*in the opposite event
expect the worst:
mild shifts in the understanding
of quite specific
concepts and realities:*

peace, pain, life, death.

*my poetic project
will announce itself one day at dawn
with the song of the first birds,
before the cranes are stirring
or hammers strike, or drills and iron-cutters snarl.*

*google, please, these names:
Villon, Byron, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont,
Whitman, Marinetti, Majakovskij, Tzara, Breton,*

Habaj

*now you know what I mean when I speak
of the relativity
of good and evil
love and hatred
life and death*

*I'd like to see your eyes
widened by knowledge of truth.
it's just a moment, but an eternal one.*

*that's the advantage of poetry:
unlike your precast concrete
it never loses concentration,
it lurks like a bird of prey
till it catches its kill.*

*you will never be safe
from the poem
that's written for you.
you won't survive this poem,
your building won't survive this poem,
your name will crumble in dust.*

*this poem will find you
dead or alive,
in the Bahamas or Cyprus,
bankrupt or not.*

*but have no fear,
the time of judgment and prophecy will be fulfilled
long after
the cranes for the last time turn their scraggy necks,
the cutters sing their requiem,
the hammers drive the last nail into the coffin.*

*here am I playing with keyboards
while you're hard at work.*

*in the beginning was the word: whoreson,
in the end a poem,
thank you for the inspiration,
O investor, O developer, muse.
inscrutable are the ways of God,
I have told you:
good and evil are relative.*

*and this poem?
it is only an expression of divine awareness,
of universal wisdom,
of the central intelligence in the cosmos;
today it lays the path for my anger,
tomorrow for your humility, when in the morning
you'll rise, distribute your wealth, enter
a monastery with a prayer upon your lips,
joyfully communing with eternity.*

*now you know that I wanted to warn you:
you're the same Buddha as me.*

*so you see:
you're an investor,
you're a muse,
you're a buddha.*

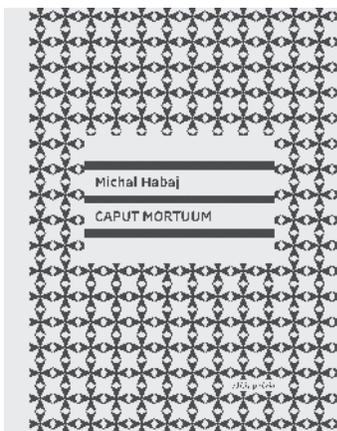
and all this you owe to my poem.

*but now you are dead
and it remains for you
to be born again.*

*I accompany you as a bard of despair,
beware of images
of residences, beautiful women,
expensive alcohol, and instead focus
your attention on this poem.
its doors are open wide to you,
you need only go in
and jump from the highest storey.*

*come,
I'll cover you with a white sheet,
a white leaf of paper,
with the poem
that has brought you thus far.*

*it was a bloody investment,
worthy of redemption.*



← Published by drewo
a srd, Bratislava, 2015

Michal 1976 Hvorecký

Prose writer and publicist, who spent several years on research stays in the United States, Belgium, Germany, Austria, and Hungary. His debut collection of short stories, *Silný pocit čistoty* (A Strong Feeling of Chastity), appeared in 1998. In 2001 his next collection of short stories, *Lovci & zberači* (Hunters & Gatherers), was published. Hvorecký has also written novels: *Plyš* (Plush, 2005), *Eskorta* (Escort, 2007) and *Dunaj v Amerike* (The Danube in America, 2010). In 2013 his authentic “self-portrait” *Spamäti* (By Heart) appeared. →



Michal Hvorecký ***By Heart***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

An authentic portrait of the author, going from his childhood in Bratislava, through the story of his extended family up to the birth of his son, taking in his travels around Slovakia and beyond, from Michalovce to Palermo and on to Kabul. If you want insight into the thoughts of one of Slovakia's leading writers as he travels, read *By Heart*.

I was born in Bratislava at the end of 1976. I come from a family of teachers. Several of my relatives taught German, music, biology and other subjects and fields of study. My grandmother and mother taught deaf and hard-of-hearing children and my aunts educated disadvantaged children. Thanks to this, at one period I was growing up among children who were hard of hearing, there being about ten of them in the class and they often came to our house as well. For some the teacher filled the role of a mother. And a father as well.

My brother works in the field of cognitive sciences in Prague. Uncle Kamil Roško, a trumpeter used to play in the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra and taught three generations of trumpet players. When I was still a small boy he would take me into Reduta through the rear entrance, so I became familiar with concert halls and musical instruments from an early age. His sons, my cousins, played the violin and flute. Many other relatives were involved with music too, some even professionally.

I imagine myself in childhood as a hard disk on which various people, closely or distantly related, recorded their knowledge and skills, thus enriching me. I started university much later than my peers. This approach angered my parents, but it enabled me to gain some very varied experience in the meantime. Even now I can't understand why it is the custom in Slovakia to go to university at eighteen and begin working at twenty-three.

I did a lot of different jobs. I washed dishes in a restaurant. Served in a shop. Stuck up posters for a rock club. Worked as a copywriter. Organised events with alternative and electronic music, as well as company congresses. I was in charge of boat tours on the Danube.

I studied aesthetics in Nitra. After the depressing teaching of literature at secondary school, it seemed a miracle to me that I was free to interpret. In the lessons I listened both to Moby and Richard Wagner, I read comics and Balzac, I watched B-horror films as well as Visconti's classics. And I studied in detail the history of visual art, films, theatre and literature.

* * *

My grandfather, Jozef Hvorecký, born in 1919, came from Bytča. During the period of the Slovak state he was active in the Resistance and towards the end of the war he was in hiding underground. He studied economics in Vienna and his degree certificate bears the Nazi eagle. After the bombing of the city the department was moved to Zagreb.

Grandad was a left-winger, a communist. He became a member of the Board of Commissioners and later deputy head of the planning committee in Bratislava and Prague. He devoted his whole life to solving

economic problems, finally becoming a professor and teaching to an advanced age. He was awarded the Order of Labour. He wrote many books and textbooks with titles such as:

Current issues in the theory and practice of macroeconomic planning

Czechoslovak-Soviet economic cooperation

What do you know about the USSR?

Socialist competition—the main instrument for the participation of Soviet workers in the development of the economy

Your grandfather was Red! You've got communist cadres in your family!—that is what many people reproached me with as a teenager. But could I help it?

I was greatly relieved when I didn't find his name among the secret police agents. I guessed he would not be there. Grandad was a hard worker and an honourable man. He sincerely believed in the communist utopia, in a more just world. He couldn't stand corruption or the pulling of strings and he didn't take bribes. People even used to laugh at him for that, because others around him were growing rich, profiting from nepotism, building large houses and chalets, and he had hardly anything and didn't even miss it. He had a passion for books and hunting. He had a collection of hunting trophies on show in his study, which reminded me more of a forestry museum than the workplace of a top-level left-wing economist.

When I was little these royal stags, wild boar, stuffed pheasants and black grouse used to scare me, especially at night when they cast strange shadows, the bed squeaked, the parquet floors creaked and the old furniture made cracking noises from the heat.

He would write by hand or type and behind his back he had a wonderful library full of German, Russian, Czech and Slovak books, from which I derived my first knowledge of literature. I remember he liked Kafka and Camus and recommended them to me.

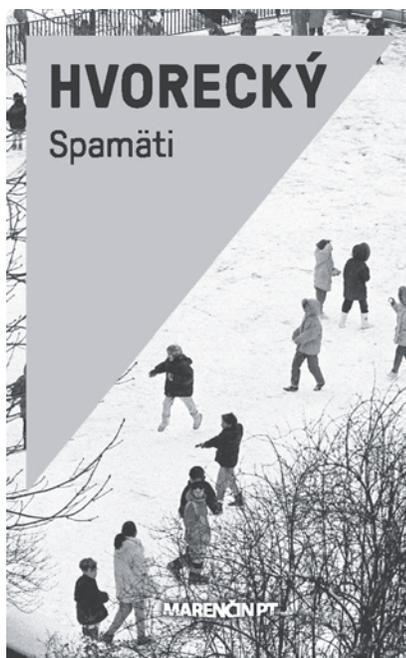
From 1973 he worked in Moscow as an economic adviser to the embassy. When I went there as an eighteen-year-old I was surprised to find how many people still remembered him and praised him. Apparently he had helped the institution to find its feet economically and arranged for the reconstruction of the building the embassy occupies to this day.

He found it hard to accept the Velvet Revolution. But there were those who even committed suicide, some from his neighbourhood. Grandad didn't believe in planned privatisation. In his estimation it would end in catastrophe. However, he died in 1990. He was a non-smoker all his life, but he was struck down by a terrible form of lung cancer. I felt devastated after his death. I didn't even have the strength to attend his funeral.

He was very close to me. We looked like each other. In childhood photos I look like his twin.

I would love to talk to him today and ask him many things. To what extent did he contribute to the fact that at the time of the Expo in Brussels in 1958 Czechoslovakia was among the leaders in innovation and was developing rapidly? What was the impulse behind the economy in the sixties, when elsewhere in the world they were talking about our third way? How did he perceive the country's decline after the period of "normalisation" and the increasing stagnation in the eighties? Was there much in his books that he had had to invent, withhold or lie about? Or had very likely wanted to?

He will no longer tell me. At least I can read what he wrote.



← Published by
Marenčin PT,
Bratislava, 2013

Tomáš Varga 1980

While at secondary school, he worked for the school radio and played on the on the traditional Slovak music instrument *fujara* in a rock band. Later he studied Social Work and now works with victims of violence. Before finding work in his specialized field, he worked in a factory, as a security guard, a hotel entertainer, an outdoor instructor, a teacher's assistant at a primary school, a fakir's assistant on the island of Rhodes and a carer in an English nursing-home. His novella *Grázel* (Shyster, 2013) is his first published work and reached the final of the Anasoft Litera 2014. →



Tomáš Varga ***Shyster***

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

In the novel *Shyster* the stories are so incredible they could easily have happened. The adolescent son and his hilarious father deepen their relation by testing which of them can withstand more. Their entanglements with conmen and prostitutes are not only highly entertaining but also show that a father can be both strict and loving.

At Levice station, I got off the bus and climbed into a little lorry which stank of diesel and mouldy work coats. My father was sitting at the wheel.

“How long have you had a truck licence, Dad?”

“What’s that to you? Have you brought some old clothes? Get changed—and look sharp!”

My father put the lorry into first gear and it roared away. There was another, older man in the cabin, with hedgehog eyes, looking around nervously. He didn’t shake my hand, just stared out of the window and fidgeted on his seat. I didn’t like the edginess coming off him and knew I’d have to be on my guard with such a person.

He said nothing the whole way.

The lorry stopped in some bushes close to the building site in a place out of view. Mario the Magyar was already waiting there together with a tall, pock-marked friend. Mario was a young lad in a baseball jacket who looked like a character from a Romanian crime series. An experienced thief, he supplied Dad and Lacko with stolen goods. He treated my father like God and did everything he wanted him to. Father had no regard for him, however, but knew he had his uses.

“What are you sitting there for? Have you opened it yet?”

Mario jumped to his feet. He was holding a metal jemmy in his hand and waving it in front of his face.

“Of course, Pišta! We’ve opened all the doors and are waiting for you. We didn’t know what to do next.”

All the doors had had their locks broken but their jambs were damaged.

“Did you have to fuck up the frames like that? Is this your first time or what?”

He was in a foul mood. I had no idea why.

We took out all the tools: spanners, hammers, axes, saws for wood and for metal. Father gave orders and saw we got to work. First we removed the doors and windows and loaded them on to the back of the lorry. Then we sawed up the wooden rafters the roof was nailed to, ripped out the cables and bit by bit dismantled the roof. Then we started work on the partitions. It went surprisingly quickly; the building really was an assembly kit. The bloke with hedgehog eyes jumped with fear every time he heard something suspicious and then took a gulp from his hipflask. He was no handyman and Dad eyed him with the contempt he’d show towards some rotten food. He had to keep badgering the man. I couldn’t understand where he had found him—at the station bar most probably. Mario and his pock-marked friend could doubtless feel that Pišta was not in his element and were working like devils. I kept quiet and toiled away next to Dad, removing the large screws that were holding the roof

together. But I didn't like it there at all. I didn't like the group we formed, didn't like my father's mood and didn't like the tense atmosphere. I looked at those two worthless dropouts whispering to each other in Hungarian and glancing up at Dad every minute. I kept an eye on that untrustworthy station bum with the animal eyes; I never once turned my back on him.

Suddenly we heard the sound of a car. We all stopped working and crouched on the ground. Father stubbed out a cigarette and, comically bending forward, ran to the lorry. Next to it stood an old station wagon. The sound of the engine ceased and the lights went off. The gipsy, Lacko, stepped out of the car and exchanged some words with Dad though we couldn't hear what they said. I turned back to my work and had removed two more screws when I heard a quarrel break out. Mario, his pocked friend and the Hedgehog Eyes all stood and looked in that direction. In the darkness beyond the weeds, we could see two figures standing opposite one another.

"Fuck it!" I heard, though did not know who from. "I tell you, just keep out of it!!!"

At that moment I saw Dad receive a punch to the belly and then double up. A moment later he jumped back up and thumped Lacko twice in the face. Lacko disappeared beneath the car and Father went after him. I ran up towards them. Father noticed it, left the gipsy and walked some steps towards me.

"Go back. It's ok."

"Are you sure?"

"Do what I tell you, all right? Go back!!!"

He spoke slowly and emphatically.

We stood about thirty metres away and I could see how Lacko picked himself up from the ground and was now pointing at Dad. They didn't move and their silhouettes looked menacing against the evening sky: one tall, thin and bent forward after a blow to the belly, the other small and robust with an index finger pointing threateningly. The station wagon formed a dark, indeterminate mass. The two stood there like paper cut-outs for what seemed an age. Adrenalin, anger and fear were consuming me.

Finally the car door slammed, the engine started and the gipsy Lacko left without a word.

Father came back to us.

"So what is it, for fuck's sake? Don't just stand there gawping, we've got to finish the job!"

Of the building, four walls remained. We had to take off the crossbeams, lay them on the ground, break them up and load them onto

the lorry. Time was short. The wind was picking up and dusk making things less distinct. We had all had enough and wanted to be done with it.

Mario climbed up, sat across a crossbeam and loosened it. His friend did the same on the other side. It was a bad move. There was a terrible cracking sound. I jumped backwards and crashed into a heap of chipboard panels. I then watched as the wall, together with Mario on it, fell to the ground. There was a thud and a terrible yelp. For a moment it was chaotic; then we all jumped in, grabbed the heavy wall and lifted it. Father slowly dragged the howling Mario out from under it. We then let the partition crash back to the ground. Dad let fly.

“Stop bleating, for fuck’s sake!! Do you want someone to come out?” Mario clenched his teeth and finally stopped howling. “Why did you loosen it from beneath you? Don’t you think or what?”

“Sorry Pišta.....bazmeg! Oww!!”

“Everything’s fucked up...” I said. Father shrugged his shoulders, lit Mario and himself a cigarette and nodded his agreement.

There was nothing to be done. The work brigade was at an end. Mario’s leg was shattered. He sat leaning against the wheel of the lorry, holding a bottle of vodka and a packet of cigarettes. In silence we threw all the tools and material into the back of the truck.



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Literárny klub,
Bratislava, 2013

Ivana Gibová 1985

Ivana Gibová graduated in Slovak language and literature at the Philosophical Faculty of Prešov University, where she currently works. Her stories have been published in the journals *Romboid*, *RAK* and *Enter*. She has won awards in a number of literary competitions and is the holder of the Debut 2011 Award. In 2013 her story collection *Usadenina* (The Sediment) appeared, followed by a further book, the ego-documentary novella *Bordeline* (2014). There she describes the story of a young woman with a personality disorder. →



Ivana
Gibbová
***The
Sediment***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Love is possible even when it's impossible; the absurd is normal; one can also make love to characters in books and live in a text. Short light-hearted stories about defects, journeys, books and people, efforts and failures, feelings and insensitivities, faults in the system; about what happens in the heads and beds of above-average men and average women; and principally about the fact that “everything is otherwise, and even that otherwise is otherwise”.

The Sediment

I'm sitting in the kitchen and waking up. I love good coffee, but every morning the person in my kitchen pours me some sort of instant mix, and although daily I explain that I don't want such coffee, that I want real coffee, the person keeps pouring the same instant and persuading me it's Brazilia Santos. Worse still, that same person sips the instant with the conviction that they're drinking Brazilia Santos. One can see gratification on the person's face, probably because digesting coffee like that is not difficult.

The entire kitchen is garnished with unwashed cups from morning and afternoon coffees. It's hard to move among them, and the person has the habit of manually piling them under the table from time to time. Most of them contain the mouldy remnants of instant coffee grounds, which is perhaps a sign of a certain disproportion. The person, however, because of some kind of sulkiness is unwilling to wash cups, and so I don't intend to either.

Apart from the dirty cups, the impression of the kitchen is also spoiled by the tastelessly sticker-covered fridge. The labels appear in a number of layers; some are scratched and gouged from attempts I've made during my time to remove them. When after many attempts I've been unable to do it, my nerves haven't let me try any more and I've overstacked them with new stickers. That has made no difference to the fact that the old ones are still there, but at least they cannot be seen.

I finish drinking my coffee and look at the person. At that moment I decide that from now on I'm going to make my own coffee, and instead of labels I'll begin to use magnets. When it comes to it, maybe it would be better to get rid of the fridge altogether.

After breakfast, taking my regular morning outing, I sit on the riverbank and relax, because up to now I've been cycling. I savour the countryside and a cigarette and I worry, because I'm sitting on a stone on the edge of the bank and in front of me there's just water. It's muddy, it reminds me of the morning's instant slop. I'm afraid someone's going to approach from behind and shove me, though the water is shallow and I'm here alone. Well, I may be alone, but I'm sitting not safely! I'm also worried about the ducks on the other bank. One of them separates from the flock and is coming close to me, which makes me uneasy. The bird has a treacherous look. Under these circumstances I cannot continue to enjoy my stay in the countryside undisturbed. I take the bike and drag it onto the road. Earlier I'd carried it down as far as the water, because I was afraid someone might steal it from me. Quickly I put out my cigarette and sit on the bike. Needless to say, I take the cigarette butt with me: I'm not the kind of pig that would throw it in the water.

I'm sitting in the train and waiting for it to move. I need to change my shoes, because at work I was going around on high heels for half the day. Putting one hand in the bag, I pull out the trainers I was wearing this morning by the water, while with the other hand I untie the bows on my formal slip-ons. I remember the treacherous duck and at this present moment she merely makes me smile. Peripherally I catch sight of somebody's legs coming through the door. From the shoes I deduce that it is the ticket inspector. Unobtrusively I raise my eyes and though I do not look him right in the face, I am certain he's looking at me. Equally I am certain that he's captivated by my sexually attractive ankles in attractive tights. I remember that I can't stand the word tights. The door closes. The train moves and after a while the ticket inspector appears again. Unconcernedly I hand him my ticket, not looking him in the eye even now. This game of mystery amuses me. I remember one ticket inspector from ages back whom I played it with. He grasped the rules quickly, and after some minutes he struck up a conversation where he used this witty sentence: "This is how I'm positioned on the career ladder – I go round with this hole-punch, here and there I make a little hole..." At that moment I had won and the inspector no longer interested me.

As I anticipated, my new playing partner sits crossways opposite me, on the lateral seat. For the entire journey I'll be making an impact on him and I'm convinced that he won't hold out. Casually I touch my thighs, fleetingly curl my hair on my fingertips, lick my lips, and I'm absolutely sure of the effect of these actions on the ticket inspector. All that time I don't look at him even once, that's part of the game, until a moment before alighting from the train, when I'm feeling pleased at how I've amused myself, I hurl a fleeting supercilious glance in his direction and I'm quite abashed: suddenly I feel like an idiot, I've a lump in my throat that I want to vomit out. The ticket inspector is an unattractive older man; his eyes are sad, and over them he has glasses with thick lenses. There are two things in the world that move me: grannies selling flower-bunches and powerful glasses on old men.

I'm sitting in the tram and I'm clearly aware that everything is a matter of adjusting the mind. Absence of system creates unclear situations in the human existence. Obstacles arise. I have a clear awareness of everything. It occurs to me that considering all the time I spend in transport vehicles, I haven't seen very much clearly.

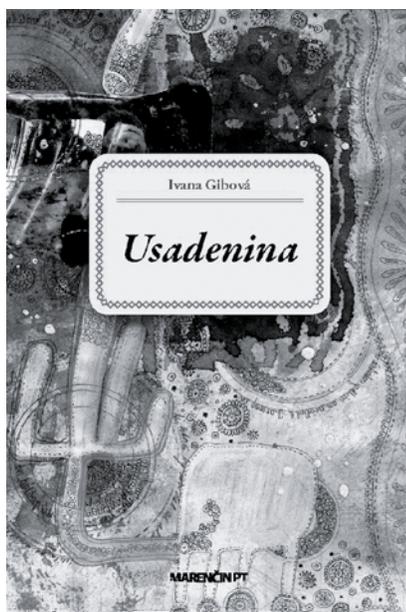
In the tram I'm alone, I look at my ill-defined image in the door; my God, I feel hot, I shouldn't have brought a jacket, it's hot, I'll arrive there and everyone will see that I'm in a jacket! I look at the reflection of my legs. They look worse than at home in the mirror, they look outlandish.

It's those trousers, they're not at all right, they make me look like... they look as though they're too small for me. My face is shining, I need to put on powder; there's no other traveller here apart from me, but what if someone gets on at the next stop? All evening I'll be a bag of nerves, I'd better get off at the next stop, I'll cross at the road junction, I'll go home and change.

At home I look in the hallway mirror: I should put a shirt on, white, yes, bright jeans, braces and a brooch, the old one, and I mustn't forget to powder myself. I check the timetable for when the next tram goes. In the doorway I'm still making sure that the travelling suitcase belonging to the person is definitely not to be seen in the hallway.

I get into the tram, I'm alone, déjà vu, I look in the windows, at my image, for a second the memory of those thick glasses flashes through my mind. Immediately I suppress it and continue observing myself. It's better, the shirt is informal and attractive. I'm content with myself, but I shouldn't go braless, I come across as cheap; hurriedly I get off, rush home, stop in front of the mirror, comb my hair, put on more powder, go to the wardrobe. I can't find a white bra, I rake through the dirty linen as well, there it is, I pull it out, it's not dirty, but even so I feel resistant to it, what if there's some person at hand when I'm undressing, naturally, I'm hoping for that... I'm particular about smelly linen; I choose a clean black bra from the wardrobe. Going through the kitchen I take a quick slug of coffee, I spill some on the white shirt, I curse, I change into a black shirt, the braces don't go with it, I take them off, I rush to the tram stop.

If I do that once more, it could happen that I'll suddenly go crazy. On entering the tram, quite spontaneously I burst into uncontrolled laughter. I remember the duck. I'm not well. It would serve me right if the unknown person for whom I've changed three times wasn't there.



← Published by
Marenčin PT, 2013

Erik Šimšík 1987

Erik Šimšík works as dramaturge at the Creative Mornings event and is the co-owner of the Goriffee company importing selected coffee and tea from farmers in Rwanda. He made his literary debut in 2013 with a collection of experimental poetry called *Monorezeň & Stereozemiaky* (Monosteak & Stereopotatoes). A year later, his collection of three novellas, *Hegemónia* (Hegemony, 2014), was published and nominated for the Anasoft Litera 2015. →



Erik Šimšík

Hegemony

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Hegemónia (Hegemony, 2014) is a collection of three novellas *Dávaj pozor na obličky* (Take Care of Your Kidneys), *Malasaña* and *Hegemónia*. In the stories there is a person who both exists and does not exist, someone who tries to work out the meaning of existence. The world is a mere backcloth to the characters' stories. These characters confront one another and are caught in emotional crises in which their self-awareness destroys their inner worlds. They are not important or famous, nor are they either good or bad. They are just ordinary people who are afraid, make mistakes and might even be your neighbours.

Martin is sitting in the park. His workday is done. People are walking, Martin is sitting, the sun is shining; he has noticed that people are much given to walking on Monday. It's Monday, people are walking round the sitting Martin. Tomorrow perhaps will be Tuesday, for a while it's been mid-spring, the animals and plants are alive, Martin is alive also. He looks at his blood-suffused hands, feels his pulse: quite definitely he's alive. Martin would like to make a living from music. He loves music. And who doesn't love music, he asks himself. Assuredly such people could be found. He need not go far for an example. Petra doesn't love music. Petra doesn't like listening to music and she absolutely can't imagine making music herself. Whereas Martin can imagine that he's making music, that music is making him. But music is not made easily.

Something to do with music-making can also be found in Martin's experience. Martin has experience, that is indisputable. It would be disputable and controversial if Martin in his thirty years of life had no experience at all. Experience makes him a person, he reflects. People just potter about in space and they all attribute some intentionality to their action and behaviour; all of them are lying, Martin reflects.

Martin isn't pottering about in space. He's sitting in a park on a bench. The bench is enveloped by Monday. Martin doesn't like Monday. He doesn't like it when all the others are lying. All of them prefer Friday to Monday. Martin isn't an exceptional person in his preferences or his aspirations, or in his perplexity, he only thinks that. It is possible to find millions like him, something that Martin does not admit.

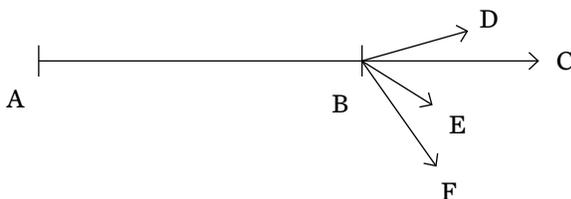
Martin doesn't like his work, so he doesn't like Monday. He considers the cherished regard for Friday as a criterion whereby people may be divided into those who like their work and those who don't. Martin works as a manager in a large corporation. Martin feels like killing himself when he thinks of big corporations, when he thinks of himself as part of a big corporation, when he thinks of others who find Martin, as part of a corporation, pleasing. Many times he has detected indications of envy in the glances of others. What they envy him for, he doesn't know. Generally he thinks that they envy him his hatred of the corporation, but he can't be sure, there is always the insidious possibility that they envy him his place in the corporation, and that fills Martin with greater disquiet than his work in the corporation. The most contented with Martin as a corporate manager is Petra. Petra always delights in waking Martin when it's morning and he has to go to work. Martin doesn't tell Petra about how he stops in the park on the way and silently hates his work. He wants Petra to be happy. So that Petra may be happy, Martin must be a hypocrite, occasionally a liar. That, however, in no way detracts

from Petra's happiness. Petra's happiness would be detracted from only if she were to learn that nothing is as it seems. And in reality, in Petra's and Martin's life there isn't anything which is as it seems, just as there isn't in the lives of their families and acquaintances. That fills Martin with mild optimism: in this precarious situation he does not find himself alone. Nonetheless he loves Petra, Martin persuades himself; on account of her it's worth suffering, Martin persuades himself. Every day the persuading gets harder and harder. Martin imagines an abscissa. At one end of the abscissa is Martin and at the other is Petra.

A: Petra _____ B: Martin

Once all of Martin's attention was on point A: that was at the beginning of the relationship with Petra. At that time Martin was doing well with the persuading. The persuaded Martin, orientated towards point A, that is to Petra, was much happier than Martin orientated towards point B, that is to Martin. Currently Martin's attention is gradually shifting from point A to point B, that is from Petra back to Martin. It is only with immense effort and doses of strenuous persuading that attention is shifted back again to Petra. At present Martin is happier when Martin's attention shifts to point B, that is to himself. Present is in sharp contrast to past, when any time his attention was focused on himself, he felt dissatisfied.

Ever since Martin first traced the abscissa, depicting Martin's relationship to Petra, he has not been able to rid himself of the thought that either the sketch was bad or he and Petra do not form the single whole that he calls AB, rather they form two independent points A and B, between which there are at least three hundred and seventeen other points. Martin has to get past each one of those with immense effort in order to get closer to Petra. And even if he happens to come up fairly close, he need only have a slight lapse of concentration and suddenly Martin is much farther away than he was. Hence Martin is beginning to consider another direction for his attention. That is, not directed from Martin to Petra, but going from Martin back to Martin.



And this change did not stop with the shift of attention from Petra back to Martin: the attention is arbitrarily shifting on further. Martin is aware that beyond point A, i.e. Martin, there is not, after all, a vacuum, and so other points ought to be there, for example C, D, E, or F, on which Martin could concentrate at a time when he didn't want to concentrate on Martin. Those points are hitherto relatively indefinite, but Martin very clearly senses them out there. The contours are inescapable. These points are distinguished by the lesser effort required to reach and satisfy them, Martin imagines. Each one is closer to point B, Martin, than point A is. Martin has a clear sense that there are many more of those points than his sketch took in. Very many more.

Hitherto these thoughts have only been germinating in Martin. Thoughts are a gradual process which has to mature. For the moment Martin's attention, bordered with persuading, is still always launched towards Petra. Mostly with the aim of taking Petra to bed. And yet the existence of those other points is constantly more and more alluring to Martin, insofar as possibilities of sex are also afforded by points C up as far as X. Unlimited potential.

Petra's attention is focused solely on Martin. Petra has no reason to direct her attention anywhere else but at Martin. Petra is not aware that there's no AB but only A and B and between them an infinitely long road, filled with Martin's persuading. She hasn't sensed Martin's incapacity to get even halfway down this road. Petra thinks that Martin is already at the end of the road, that is, right beside Petra.

It's on Monday that Martin is most troubled by his musical career. Martin's musical career does not exist, what exists is only his corporate career, and that troubles Martin. Evidently he'd be less troubled if a musical career existed alongside the corporate. But only the corporate exists. Martin feels a spasm somewhere in the neighbourhood of his stomach. It's not a good feeling. Martin likes clear, colourful, positive feelings. Certainly not something like a spasm in the neighbourhood of his stomach, creeping outwards into the bowels and climaxing in a jabbing pain at his anus.

Martin thought at first that the jabbing in his anus had some explicable reason, for example haemorrhoids or cancer. Martin visited specialists of various kinds and each doctor said the same: Martin is perfectly healthy. Martin began to take note of when he feels pain. Most frequently he has pains on Monday, when he thinks about his musical career. Martin also has pains right now.

Even when he has no other comfort, Martin always feels glad that some people are worse off than himself. For example, those who dream

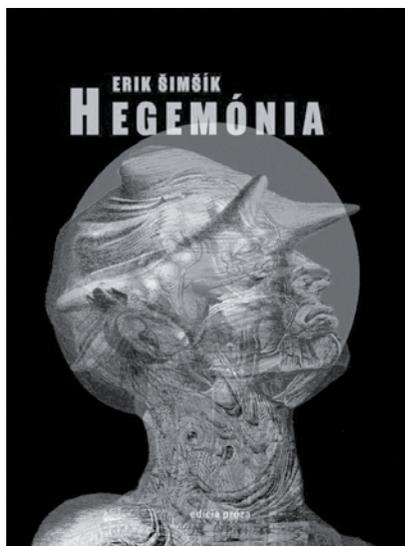
of a career in a corporation and not in music. Or those who don't dream about anything at all. Martin considers dreams important. Dreams are an important defence mechanism, which he can thank for the fact that reality hasn't yet swallowed him whole. Martin likes to look forward, to dreams. At the same time, he is aware that with ageing many dreams dissolve between the fingers, always leaving only an aftertaste behind.

But Martin takes comfort, because again he has remembered those people who have no dreams at all. The kind who've grown old even in their youth. From their youth they're prematurely aged. When he looks closely Martin sees wrinkles and drooping skin. Everything they do is wrinkly. Martin feels revulsion when he crosses such people's paths and immediately he makes himself scarce.

Martin ponders whether he himself isn't prematurely old, since he doesn't manage to realise his dreams. He's living in an unfulfilling relationship, a kitschily furnished apartment and a corporate career. Martin's dreams are a small floating house in the Pacific and the production of music. Martin is going to commit himself to radical change. But not everyone who's committed to radical change really attempts it, really makes it happen, really wants it. Martin knows very precisely why his musical career does not exist. And he is by no means in error when he attributes the key role in the thwarting of his musical career to the music teacher at his elementary school. The music teacher at elementary school blocked the music in Martin. The music teacher filled two lines of her pupil's book with the worst of all marks, a 5. With two simple movements she managed to perform an amputation which even an elite team of neurosurgeons might have envied. Amputation of all Martin's ambitions, interests, expectations connected with music. A cold-blooded and precise, but not permanent amputation. All of the music came back to Martin, like a boomerang to the sound of clamorous vocals. Gradually. First only the prickly feelings when listening, later a sincere love of his favourite performers, and in recent years an irrepressible desire to create music. Music has filled the hollows in Martin's body and will absolutely never depart. It is mostly only as a non-participant that he listens to that music hidden in the hollows. To its sound, melody, rhythm. Only occasionally does he try to respond to the music, to complete its creation. Two years ago Martin sang for the first time since those days of music education in second class at elementary school. So then, sometimes Martin contributes song. Only if he is alone. Martin thinks people don't understand his music. And indeed they don't understand: very few understand that somebody's goal is to create music. Creating music, for Martin, is a much more important goal than Martin's career

in the corporation. Most people absolutely don't grasp that. They regard it as a joke and start to laugh. Especially Petra or Karol, if Martin were to venture to tell him. Petra and Karol especially wound Martin the most by their laughter. Thus it happens that the musically blocked Martin dominates the striving Martin, whose only joys in recent years have been sex and creating music.

Thus far Martin hasn't worked his way to the point of creating. Martin is unhappy. Martin finds one quick solution: he leaves the park to go and buy himself a new guitar and twang on the strings to drown out his discontent.



← Published by drewo
a srd, Bratislava, 2014

Peter Balko

1988

A graduate of Film and Drama Studies at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, he won the main prize in the *Poviedka 2012* (Short Story 2012). He is co-author and assistant director of the film *Kandidát* (2013). Together with Lucia Potůčková and Maroš Hečko, he published a collection of poems called *Metrofóbia* (Metrophobia, 2012). His debut novel *Vtedy v Lošonci. Via Lošonc* (Once in Lošonc, 2014) is set in his birthplace, Lučenec, where he organizes the Medzihmla literary festival. Thanks to this novel he was a finalist in the Anasoft Litera 2015 and won The Readers Prize. →



J. BALDU
Vtedy v Lošonci
VIA LOŠONCI
PHOTON

Peter
Balko

***Once in
Lošonc***

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

Lučenec – Lošonc, a place where nationalities, cultures, fates, relationships, and the past and the present all overlap. Everything is written in a style both disarmingly boyish yet adult in its reflection and perception. This duality creates a tension which forces us to go on reading until the end. Balko's writing is precise, radiant yet mysterious.

10 Favágó

“You have to build a house with your own bare hands otherwise it will fall in on you sooner or later. Plant a few trees, make love to your wife, invite some friends round for homemade wine, make a swing for your daughters and tell yourself that life is beautiful.” That is what my grandad used to say every Sunday when he was lying in the bath, listening to Koós János and going underwater. One day he stuck it out underwater for a full twelve minutes, carrying on until Grandma burst into tears and started looking for his coffin boots.

Jano Krajči was the handsomest man in Lošonc. He had beautiful large hands, a comb in the back pocket of his trousers and when someone annoyed him he would kick them in the balls. He did not go to the pub nor to church. He said that he could get drunk at home and that the only thing he believed in was love.

When in 1938, the first Vienna Arbitration awarded Lošonc to Hungary, Grandad was five years old. Together with his father, he moved to his grandparents’ in Mýtna, which lay on the Slovak side of the barricade. In a two-generation house with a long verandah and garden going right back to a haunted forest, there lived more animals than people. They all slept together on the ground in a damp little room with a huge clay stove. The only one who had the privilege of sleeping on the soft hay in the kitchen was the goat, Františka. Her intelligent beard and piercing glare gave her the position of the family aristocrat who read Hungarian poetry and used the latrine.

Less than a year later, when the stink of war and decomposing bodies had penetrated into every home, Františka passed into eternity. A group of villagers had lured her into the meadow above Mýtna where they then stoned her to death and ate her, raw and unmourned. Grandad was one of those to witness the dreadful scene from afar. For years afterwards the bloody mouths and bloodthirsty expressions on the faces of the villagers deprived him of sleep and inner peace. He took what was left of Františka home and buried it in the garden. He then carved her name into a wooden cross, hung it with a wreath of dandelions and placed alongside it Františka’s favourite collection of the poems of Sandór Petöfi, *A Szeptember szerelem*.

Grandad’s mother and brother, Laco, both signed the Magyarization charter and stayed in Lošonc, where Grandad visited them regularly. This was especially when the situation had calmed down, no-one was shooting anyone, neighbours weren’t slitting the throats of

each other's cocks and the Germans were neither poisoning wells nor throwing naked soldiers into mass graves. Janík, or János as his friends called him, usually went to Lošonc in summer, sometimes for the whole two months.

In the sizzling August of 1941, Lošonc experienced the highest temperatures in its chequered history. Fires spread like an epidemic and turned everything that stood in their way into dust. The corn and sunflower fields, the high heads of which usually formed a graceful ruff around the sad town, were withered and inflammable. Decaying fish and eels accumulated in dried-up river beds, hills changed into dusty steppes and forests were full of dead trees with bowing crowns. Hunger and unrest was everywhere, the water in wells stank like the claws of partisans and a strange disease spread among people which was to become known in Slovak history as the 'blue plague'.

Hungarian officials knew that Lošonc needed a miraculous new lease of life and so in the very eye of the war hurricane and galloping epidemic, they organized the legendary football match between the Hungarian team, Debrecín and the Austrian team, Graz.

News of the match in which the great Mátyás Popó (nicknamed Fecske), father of Pelé and holder of the Golden Sausage award for the greatest player in the history of Hungary, would be playing, spread far beyond the limits of Lošonc and tickets were sold in no time. It was obvious that the capacity of the old stadium, in the middle of which a huge sycamore tree stood, would be insufficient. Thousands of pieces of turf were thus carried to the main square in the town and cascading tribunes, snack bars and coffee kiosks erected roundabout. Within a month and a day a new stadium had been built in the middle of Lošonc with the largest capacity of any in Upper Hungary. It was appropriately named Újvilág – the New World.

On that memorable day, there were reputedly one hundred and one thousand people crammed into the stadium. People sat on each other's knees or stood on each other's heads, hung from lamp-posts and perched on stilts; some of the local landed gentry even followed the match from a miniature airship. When the players ran out on to the pitch, the stadium roared like a drunken siren, sending out a wave of sound which rippled around the whole world. It was said that when the American president, Theodore Roosevelt, heard the roar, he was so startled he spilt boiling tea on his groin. After which he always walked around bow-legged like a jockey.

Those who saw the match with their own eyes were unanimous in saying that it was the greatest match in the history of modern football.

Debrecín thrashed Graz 7:1, with Mátyás Popó scoring all eight goals. It was a celebration of sport and of Lošonc's rebirth; the town had shaken off the depredations of the blue plague and, now rejuvenated, could continue in its struggle for survival. When Grandad witnessed the artistry of the legendary Swallow, his ingenious passes, superhuman ball control and lethal shots together with his success in winking at every pretty woman in the crowd and combing back his brylcreemed hair, he vowed both on his family and Františka's grave that he would become the best footballer in Lošonc.

The war ended and the town and its people started to recover from the Hungarian lobotomy as they learned to walk, speak and think again. Smoke once again started to issue from the steam mill which had once supplied the whole of Slovakia with wheat. Grandad and his father moved back to Lošonc, where life was slowly returning to its old ways. Grandad did not forget his vow and within a few years, had advanced from the youth to the senior team where, together with the other old and experienced matadors who played and quaffed at first league level, he spat out his chewing tobacco, combed his hair back and bared his rugged, hairy and sweaty chest during training. All the women in Lošonc loved them like fallen kings and admitted them to their bedrooms when their husbands were on night shifts.

Grandad played in defence and was fast, tall and reliable. He had an unfootballer-like humility about him but when necessary, could be as sharp as Sunday goulash. After unintentionally breaking the legs of both the opposing strikers in the match against the dreaded Hajnáčka—and then personally attending to their injuries—he was accepted by the old matadors as one of their own and became a darling of the fans. From that day onwards, he was always called Favágó.

Even today Grandad is breathless when he recalls the famous derby between Lošonc and Opatova in which his older brother, Laco, played in attack. The match would finally decide who the footballing kings of the southern country really were. The stadium was full as pies, bottles of hooch and an electrifying excitement were passed from one spectator to the next and anyone not in a white shirt was classed as a hooligan.

Just before the end of the game, Opatova's fastest winger (and the only player with coeliac disease on the pitch), Béla Tarr, crossed the ball and both Krajči brothers ran to clear it from in front of their goal. The goalie, however, flew between them both with elbows sharper than the nipples of a gypsy girl. He broke Grandad's nose and knocked out three

of his front teeth; Laco came out of it with a fractured jaw. Neither of the brothers finished the game.

Lošonc won 2 :1.

When the match was over and the players, limping to the changing rooms, had become engulfed by crowds of news reporters and amorous widows, a quiet girl with long chestnut hair ran on to the pitch to pick up Grandad's missing teeth. At the time no-one could have guessed that it was the start of the biggest love in Lošonc's history.

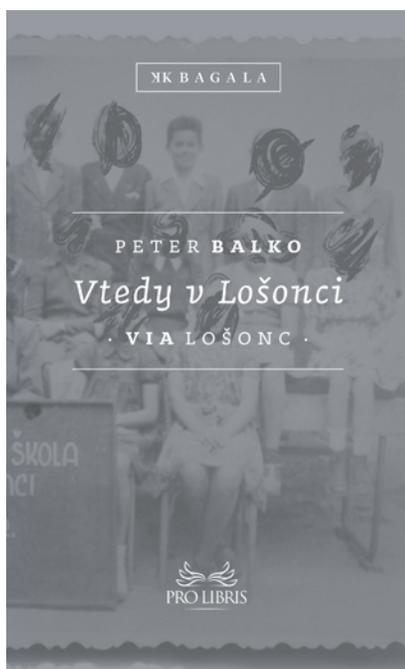
A few days after the memorable derby, there was a big dance held at the prestigious Szüsz coffee-house in the town. Grilled corn was being sold out in the street; in front of the café stretched a long line of elegantly dressed citizens and in the salon, with its high windows and ornamental ceiling, Dany Ruby, the famous gipsy bandleader heated up the loins and groins of his audience. The architect, Ottó Jabak, had given the place a Secessionist charm as well as secret catacombs leading to private chambers where big burly gentlemen would entertain themselves with light ladies of easy virtue. Half-naked women draped themselves over the banister rails of the spiral staircases, men swung from the crystal chandeliers and rivers of spilt alcohol converged to form an ocean of southern debauchery. Grandad was, of course, there. And with his broken nose and missing front teeth, he was the best-looking man on the dancefloor.

When a fracas broke out by the bar, he was the first to intervene. A few seconds later he was standing on the terrace outside facing a wiry little man with a crooked mouth and clenched fists and surrounded by chanting drunks. He did not need to undo his cufflinks, roll up the sleeves of his newly-washed shirt nor remove his short tie with its Malevič motif before laying the man out with one hook. Then, like a Lošonc James Dean, he lit up an unfiltered Sparta and carried the beaten man to hospital over his shoulder. A few days later, there was an article in the town's Timravín hrtan newspaper about how a local footballer had floored the Salgótarján lightweight boxing champion, Kornel 'Talpa' Szabo, with just one punch.

When Grandad returned to the dance, he found there more than two hundred drunk men and just one girl. All the other girls had left at the end of the evening under the protective wings of their fathers, older brothers or domineering husbands. The young woman in a long white dress came up to him shyly and gave him a bloodied handkerchief in which he found his three missing teeth. She had a pretty name which the footballing Woodcutter had never heard before.

My grandmother, Liana Krajčiová, née Skuhrová, is now seventy-six years old.

My grandfather, Jano Krajči, is eighty-one.



← Published by Koloman
Kertész Bagala,
Bratislava, 2014

Zuzana 1988 Šmatláková

Zuzana Šmatláková studied Slovak Language and Literature at the Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava. Her prose work has been published in the *RAK* and *Romboid* magazines as well as in the Pravda literary supplement. From 2008 to 2011 she won four consecutive prizes in the *Poviedka* (Short Story). In 2009 the Šest' pé youth theatre group staged her story *Krajina* (Country), which they then presented at various festivals and in 2010, performed at the Slovak National Theatre as part of the *V Národnom ako doma* (In the National like at Home) project. →



Zuzana Šmatláková ***Exit***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

The debut collection of Zuzana Šmatláková has a magical atmosphere and blends mythological and balladic elements to rework ancient tales into new forms. Her characters, led by a mysterious, irrational force, leave their homes, lives and partners in search of some escape, some *Exit*.

Catatumbo

London – Luton 16.00 London time. I am sitting on a bench with just one rucksack on my knees and looking hopefully at the information board. The hall is full of people and becoming fuller every moment, with confused travellers shifting from one foot to another and filling the atmosphere with dissatisfied murmurs. Already in the past two hours no plane has taken off. No one knows anything, everyone is getting irritated and I am beginning to feel thirsty. But I won't get up and go to any of the shops, because I am alone here and there is no one to keep my seat.

I was by myself as well when I flew from home. No one went with me, even to the airport and it is probably best that way. I left my latest boyfriend at home gazing at the ceiling, and almost without explanation. He no doubt thinks I've gone out of my mind, but even that is better than the truth. I couldn't tell him that, on the advice of little Carlos dressed in a blue sports jacket two sizes too big, I had booked an air ticket to Caracasa, just like that, almost from one day to the next; he certainly couldn't understand. I just packed my things and casually remarked as I went out of the door that I was setting out on a new journey.

Ondrej is already the third man in a row that I have left in a deserted flat, but he is the only one I have warned in advance. Even when I moved in with him I told him that it could easily happen that one day I would pack my case and leave him. Just as, on account of him, I had left the one before him. I don't know why it is, I don't understand myself, but always after a certain time I take my things and leave. Leave the space we share and my job, for somewhere new and always for someone new. In my lifetime I've seen more men cry than is healthy and I keep telling myself: This is not the way. I would rather live a quiet life. But in spite of all that I am now sitting in a crowded airport terminal hugging a rucksack and I just can't wait to leave this continent and for the first time in my life set foot in the land Carlos comes from; I just can't wait to see the kind face of Soledad at the reception desk of a small family hotel near the river, kind Soledad with bad English will have arms and legs, will be of flesh and bone, will give me the keys to my room and speaking in the same accent as Carlos will wish me a pleasant stay. I shall put my rucksack down on the bed and step out to find that fabulous place that Carlos recommended, the place he said I really must visit.

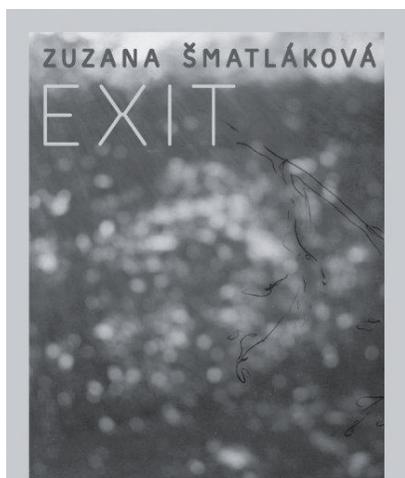
He didn't make much of an impression on me at first, hardly saying a word; he just smiled and introduced himself by his full name—maybe he thought I had to register his personal data or something like that. But I never know beforehand who is coming, I haven't time to memorize

the details; at the beginning I politely ask everyone where they are from and what made them choose to come to this little town and they usually answer that it is on the route, that they planned to visit Vienna or Budapest and decided to spend a few hours here with me. Carlos said something like that too, that he didn't really know why he was here, that it was just by chance. Whatever their answers are, I tell them to follow me and I will show them the town and tell them something about its history and culture; most of them are surprised to hear about our Easter customs and they take snaps of the communist buildings, they gaze in dazed astonishment at the Blue Church and when I show them the photo of Emil Gallo in Šafárik Square they let out little gasps of surprise and swallow my every word about the photographer Bielik, immediately followed by an account of the Velvet Revolution. Then they pay up and ask the way and when I turn down the last invitation for coffee from some foreigner, I set off for home.

But that day Carlos waited until everyone else had gone and suddenly appeared from behind me, a small man in an anorak that hung from him. He had been quiet all the way, mingling with the others, but now he approached me and with a calm smile, exactly as he had always smiled when our eyes met on the way, he told me that chance did not exist and he now knew exactly why he had come here. To meet a woman who had fire in her soul. That's precisely how he put it and that struck me as really ridiculous, but that was probably because of his accent, so I shook my head; he continued to smile and said I ought to visit his country and find a certain place at the mouth of the Catatumbo River. Then he said that sometimes people have to leave the place where they were born to discover why in fact they are in the world, to come to know themselves far from their homeland. I kept insisting that it was very kind of him to take an interest in me, but I was convinced that he could know nothing about me, that he was perhaps telling me what he told every woman he met. Thank you, Carlos, I said and was about to leave, but with a pleasant smile on his face he said, "You have a storm inside of you" and I was left feeling confused. Chance does not exist, he repeated and in his broken English he uttered a sentence of which I understood only the personal pronouns and the word *purge*. Then he walked away and waved, setting off in the opposite direction to me; he looked back a couple more times and disappeared somewhere round a corner.

You have a storm inside of you, I repeated silently to myself and wondered how he could see something that only two men in my life before him had seen and a third was just then becoming aware of. Poor Ondrej, I really felt sorry for leaving him like that, almost unprepared, but I think

Carlos was right—I can change suddenly, like in summer when a storm arrives unexpectedly. It never makes sense to anyone else, but when like this time for example I had taken everything into consideration, I realised I couldn't stay in that town any longer; it is full of people who give me odd looks. I even had to give up things I liked doing because of them—because the town is really small and you keep bumping into the same people wherever you go. All those hostile looks from women and downturned mouths, as if they were playing at being sad clowns, and I really haven't the energy to explain to anyone that they have no need to regard me as an enemy, that I won't step twice into the same river and I certainly would never return to a flat I had once left; there would be no point in that, just as there would be no point in answering Ondrej's messages telling me to come home. I won't step into the same river twice and so on, I would write, Ondrej would catch at it, he likes to philosophise, maybe he would regard it as a straw he can catch at, but even from here I can see that it is his fate to succumb to that river.



← Published by
Koloman Kertész
Bagala and
Literarnyklub.sk,
Bratislava, 2013

Interview with Ines Sebesta, Translator of Slovak Literature into German

Interview by Daniela Humajová

Translated by Jonathan Gresty

How did you get into translating Slovak literature?

↓

I had started to translate from Bulgarian in 1990 for German radio but for a number of years it was just a sideline activity. I studied Horticulture in Bulgaria and it was there I got to know my husband, who was a student from Slovakia. Between 2004 and 2008, I had three literary translations from Bulgarian published. Because Slovak is a lovely language and has always appealed to me, I decided I would also like to translate Slovak literature so in 2009 I enrolled at Humboldt Universität on a course of Slovak and postmodern Slovak literature. Before then I had come across Daniela Kapitáňová's novel *Kniha o cintoríne* (Samko Tále's Cemetery Book) at the Frankfurt bookfair where it was offered to me by staff of the Centre for Information on Literature. I liked the book immediately—its style and theme both really interested me. So I contacted the author and the publisher who I'd been working with for a few years at that point. And as they had no objections to it, the novel's German translation came out a year later. That was the start.

Do you follow the publication of original titles in Slovakia? What are you most interested in and which factors influence you when you choose books to translate?

↓

Unfortunately I don't have opportunity to come to Slovakia very often but I regularly visit the big bookfairs in Leipzig and Frankfurt, where I look for new books, take catalogues and read what I can find about Slovak literature. I'm in contact with the Centre for Information on Literature in Bratislava and visit events organised by the Slovak Cultural Institute in Berlin. There I'm lucky enough to be able to go to various events and readings and to meet

some Slovak writers—I've met Michal Hvorecký, Pavol Rankov and Agda Bavi Pain, for instance, as well as various fellow translators. Personal meetings and conversations are always interesting and inspiring. A few months ago, I met Jana Juráňová when she was presenting her book, *Mojich 7 životov* (My Seven Lives), which has now been translated into German. I really like her stories and enjoy translating stories generally. I like how each of hers has a new theme and often a specific narrative style. The trouble is, though, it is difficult to find a western publisher willing to publish collections of stories—everyone wants novels, which is a pity because in German-speaking countries, there is a great short story tradition. I especially enjoy translating humorous books—with them, my work is even more fun than usual. Of course I can't often choose myself which books I translate but receive commissions from publishers. I'm still translating books from Bulgarian but hope that amongst the books I translate in future, there will be more from Slovakia.

Which works by Slovak authors that you have translated into German have become your favourites and why?

↓

As well as *Kniha o cintoríne* (Samko Tále's Cemetery Book) by Daniela Kapitaňová I have also translated the historical novel *Stalo sa prvého septembra (alebo inokedy)* (It Happened on September 1 [or Another Time]) by Pavol Rankov. To be honest, I'd say they are both my favourites, partly, perhaps, because they were both so difficult—in their different ways. *Kniha o cintoríne* (Samko Tále's Cemetery Book) seemed quite simple at first. It contains a lot of lexical repetition and the range of vocabulary used by the author is not very rich. The apparent simplicity of the text, however, is what makes it so difficult. The naive hero and narrator, Samko Tále, speaks in a very infantile and elliptical way with various strange solecisms. To identify all these together with all the book's puns and hidden references and then translate them into German while preserving the humour of the original was a huge challenge.

Pavol Rankov's novel was completely different but also very challenging because it chronicles an important period in history and includes a lot of factual information, events and famous people. I had to study these subjects while I was translating and in the process learned a lot about the period in Slovakia and Central Europe generally. The author dealt with Slovak history in an entertaining way and was able to make the period described understandable for younger generations. The novelist often surprises the reader with his humorous, sometimes grotesque ideas despite the fact that the novel's theme—it is about the Stalinist years, after all—is serious. The novel is suspenseful right up to the last page as well as being humorous; the author keeps us guessing throughout. Slovak readers may be

familiar with Antonín Sochor or Štefánik but readers from Western Europe are unlikely to know who they are. I decided with the editor and publishers that we would not include footnotes explaining who these people are but would include a glossary at the end of the novel. It seems that this was a good decision.

I hope that readers in Germany and Austria are now enjoying it as much as I did.

Another very different book which has made a big impression on me and which I've really enjoyed translating is the novella *Tri ženy pod orechom* (Three Women Under a Hazel Tree) by Václav Pankovčín. It may be difficult to get a readership in Germany for this very distinctive book though; I've translated half the book now but still haven't succeeded in finding a publisher. In their broad range of themes and narrative styles, these three novels may be considered representative of contemporary Slovak literature.

How would you describe your cooperation with publishers? How do you persuade them to publish the works of Slovak authors?

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I wish I could say otherwise but cooperation is not always easy. The most difficult thing is finding someone willing to publish East European authors—it seems to be getting more difficult every year. In the past it was possible at bookfairs to propose a project to an editor; now you're lucky to get a publisher's business card from an intern. Publishers look at sales figures and for authors using 'small' languages like Slovak, such figures are very low. I once proposed publication of a Slovak novel to one of the big German publishers. The female editor thanked me but said that she already had two East European authors included in their spring publication catalogue—one from Poland and one from Belarus. She said that unfortunately she couldn't afford any more that year. Another editor once said to me: I'm sure you think I've got something against Slovak literature but it's not true. We just don't have the capacity. From 2004 to 2007 the situation was better and we hoped interest in Eastern European culture would grow. But it didn't.

When I have a book which I really like and would like to translate, I prepare a translated extract, plot synopsis and blurb, short biography and bibliography of the author and then send it to a publisher and wait. As translators we are also literary agents in some way. It was good for me when I started to collaborate with the Wieser Verlag publishing house in Austria; I've done both my Slovak translations with them. And now I'm hoping our collaboration will continue in the future. In finishing I would like to thank LIC (Centre for Information on Literature) for their support. It has been a big help both to me and my publisher.

Astrid Graf-Wintersberger **I am Gone!**

Women who are—voluntarily or involuntarily—on the run

Translated by Andrea Reynolds

There are place names who could be with reason called a „no brainer joke”: take for example „Fucking” or—in the case of Isabella Straub’s book the town „Oed”, which means something like *wasteland* or stands for the most boring place you could imagine. Manager Greta has been pulled out of her glossy life only to end up in this boring place called Oed. Arriving there she has to admit that she has not only been literally derailed in connection with the broken down train on her way to a meeting, but she realises that her upcoming promotion was in no way a professional climbing up the ladder, but turned out to be an exit.

* * *

For Rosa who grew up close to the main station, trains became the symbol for her life motto „I am off!”. Already during secondary school she had understood that to bunk off was the „foundation for creative life”. Together with her friend Son she spends her evenings in Bratislava Cafés, drinking red wine, dreaming about Paris—and not attending school the next morning. Later Son and Rosa actually get to Paris thanks to the fact that her American uncle living in Paris needs a dog-sitter for his depressed dog. But even her life together with Son, the poet, forces Rosa to run away, to escape to the Austrian town of Krems, to her new lover Corman. She leaves a plain letter behind: „I fell in love with another man.” Jana Beňová impressively expresses the helplessness of her heroine: the persistent longing for change where the *Where to* is much less important than *the journey* and *the run*.

- STRAUB, Isabella (2015): *Das Fest des Windrads*, Aufbau Verlag / Blumenbar
- BEŇOVÁ, Jana (2015): *Abhauen!*, Residenz Verlag

Christian Schacherreiter

Three Biographies of Love During the Period of Dictatorship

Translated by Andrea Reynolds

Pavol Rankov's novel „It Happened on September 1 (or Another Time)” is convincing because of its content's density, but lacking some sense of style.

The author and information scientist Pavol Rankov (*1964) published this novel in Slovak in 2008. He was honoured for „It Happened on September 1 (or Another Time)” with the European Union Prize for Literature and the book has been translated into eight languages so far.

Thanks to the Klagenfurth publisher Wieser Verlag this novel has now been published in German (translated by Ines Sebesta) and if the editors had taken into consideration that there are punctuation rules in the German language regarding subordinate clauses and infinitive word groups—the joy about this book would have been unalloyed. „It Happened on September 1 (or Another Time)” is in its style not a masterpiece. The language of the German translation seems simple and probably responds to the Slovak original. But regarding its content this novel presents a density which is very rare to find.

Pavol Rankov gave his novel the subtitle „Historical novel of the years 1938 until 1968“. He dedicated a chapter, an „episode” in Rankov's words, to each year. At the beginning of his novel he pictures an elusive social idyll. On the 1st of September 1938 the people of the Slovak town of Levice are peacefully united enjoying their time at the outdoor swimming pool: „Adults with and without children, young people and old people, (...) Hungarians, Slovaks, Czechs, Jews, Roma people (...)”. Political controversies typical for this period are present in the town of Levice, but the opponents are still somehow getting along with each other: democrats, monarchists, communists, fascists.

A year later this has changed entirely. German troops invade Czechoslovakia. Beside the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia there is all of a sudden a Slovak state of Hitler's mercy and parts of southern and eastern Slovakia have been cut off and now belong to Hungary. In the

novel there are three boys who have been pulled out of their every day life. Not long ago they competed at swimming at the pool, now they are becoming part of world history. Based on these three biographies—Peter is of Hungarian origin, Jan is Czech and Gabriel a Jew—Pavol Rankov shows how strongly political crises during the 20th century affected the everyday and private lives of people. Friendship and love do not exist independently from the social circumstances people are living in.

With 1945 the horrific and deadly episode of the Nazi-era was over, but for a long time afterwards the gates to freedom and democracy would still not be open for eastern Europe. Stalin seized eastern European countries. Well-meaning communists hoped to realise their socialist utopia. But as we all know very well—the reality was quite different.

→ [RANKOV, Pavol: Es geschah am ersten September \(oder ein andermal\), Wieser Verlag 2015, 518 S.](#)

Sausan Jamil Hassan

Mothers, a Novel

by Pavol Rankov

Translated by Khalid El Biltagi

Arabia News: “Is a historic novel just a fiction story?” With this question posed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Slovakian author Pavol Rankov presents his recently issued novel “Mothers”, translated by Ghayath Al Mousely for Dar el Hewar Press. The author builds his story using a thrilling narrative game, and poses an important issue; the structure of oral history, and the extent of its accuracy and credibility so as to be relied on as a research reference or document. It is based on narrations from memory, which is the main key to oral history, since humans are forgetful by nature, individual memory can shape facts, and the stages of a nation’s history may not be consistent with the stages of the narrator’s life.

The novel narrates two stories; one is the contemporary story of student Lucia who submits her research titled: “The Methods and Characteristics of Succeeding in Motherhood Amidst Exceptional Social Conditions” to her supervising Assistant Professor Voknar, these exceptional conditions include prison, concentration camp or moments of escape, exile, or others.

Lucia chooses one of these cases to present her research in the form of a narrative text: a motherhood experience in one of the Soviet Union camps under Stalin’s regime, with all this era’s aspects and practices of dictatorship, as well as totalitarianism whose target is to completely eliminate personal identity and assimilate the individual into a compact collective body. A person’s life, destiny, dreams, and ambitions are tied to the future of communism, so that serving this future would become the utmost purpose and the sole meaning that life holds.

Suzana is an old woman who tells her story to Lucia in 2012, which is the date of the first part of the research she presents to the Assistant Professor: 6/2012. Lucia was also pregnant at the time, which is why her professor advised her to postpone her studies until she had given birth and take care of her child instead, so her research wouldn’t be affected by her emotional state.

In 1945, Suzana was taken from her home to prison after someone had reported that she spent an intimate night with a Soviet soldier called Alexy, which led to him being killed by German fire. She was imprisoned following a formal trial, without much chance to prove her innocence, or to say that she was in love with victim and was pregnant with his child.

The journey of torment and torture in its worst forms starts for her in Kolak Prison, which was headed by a strict, vicious woman who was careful to be as cruel as possible to the prisoners, who were of different nationalities and imprisoned on various charges; they were political prisoners and criminals.

She would try to convince them that they were working for the progress of the nations of the Soviet Union so it would prove her devotion to her job to the political command in hopes of getting promoted. She did later receive a promotion to become a senior officer.

Suzana, whose pregnancy hadn't exempted her from hard labor, finally gave birth, neither did the fact that she was breastfeeding help. When the child reached 3 months of age, warden Erena as she didn't have children of her own starts bargaining with Suzana for her child under the pretext of prison rules which prohibited prisoners from keeping children. Children were sent to one orphanage after the other, so that even if the mother was released she could never find the child. Suzana was thus forced to give up her child, while the other woman became his adoptive mother and her child grew up knowing only this mother until he was seven years old.

He was raised to believe in communism; to glorify the party and the leader, and working on fulfilling the Soviet Union's goals; when Stalin died he cried just like the rest of the prisoners. Suzana was a woman of faith and the only thing that was with her all her life from her arrest until her death was a Prayer Book.

It was a struggle for her to raise and teach her son in the office of the warden, being torn between installing faith and belief in God in him and teaching him, his adoptive mother's principals and ideals according to which communism was the only guarantee to humane conduct.

Suzana and a group of women receive pardons after Stalin's death, and she returns to her hometown in Czechoslovakia to start the journey of getting her son back amidst the shifting societal attitudes toward her; understanding, rejection, varying according to people's views of her loyalty—or lack of it—to the Soviet Union.

After this bitter journey which had shaped her destiny without her being able to have a choice in her own fate, she discovers that it was her mother who had informed against her; she had also informed the

Germans about Alexy as a precautionary step, driven by fears that they would discover her daughter was having an affair with a Russian soldier.

Suzana forces her mother to confess that it was she who informed against her and that she had received a reward for it. The mother is taken to prison and commits suicide one year later, while Suzana gets her son and stolen motherhood back.

The author narrates his story in many chapters, each one with a title, once in Russian, then in other languages; German, Polish, Slovak, and English; an indication of the Soviet Union's power over the countries and nations under its rule.

It is a violent world filled with pain, prosecution, and the complete merging of the individual into a group which has control of its members and their destinies; a situation in which the setting is a major and necessary component to the narration's agonizing atmosphere, where the prisoners' life purpose is to get a larger portion of food in a freezing prison where the temperature can reach 30 degrees below and in which the characters develop and grow.

Some characters have an immediate dominating presence, like the warden Erena, others develop silently, resonating with the reader like the narrator Suzana. The rest of the characters all appear to be in their natural place, serving the narration well. All these characters function equally, creating a living animated picture through their behaviour and the small details of their lives, without too much sophistication or theorizing. They deliver to the reader the main message intended by the author; criticism of this period in Czechoslovakia's history while in the clutches of the Soviet Union, and in which each citizen was imprisoned by communism from childhood.

As for the Master of Education who ends up in the house of the old woman Suzana after disagreements with her own mother, she goes into labour after leaving us—especially we Syrians—with a shocking title: *Motherhood in Exceptional Social Conditions*. These exceptional conditions occur amidst a fierce war tearing our country apart, forcing Syrian mothers from death to the sidelines which are no less brutal, and the stories are plenty.

→ RANKOV, Pavol (2013): *Al'amhat*, Dar Al Hiwar Publishing and Distributing, Lattakia, Syria, 287 S.

Ahmed Omar

The Millennial Bee

Translated by Khalid El Biltagi

Peter Jaroš's "The Millennial Bee" resembles Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy with the abundance of its characters; he narrates it through three generations stretching from the late 19th century till the 1920s. This historical family novel tells the story of Martin Pichanta's family, and that of his good wife Rogina, who ignores her husband's affair with his mistress Gelika. She occasionally beats her, to the amusement of the townspeople.

The eldest son, Samo, befriends the "Millennial Bee" in Martin's beehive and starts conversing with it and visiting the hive without being by the bees, which is why he is nicknamed "the bee" and from which the novel derives its name. The bee tells him: "I have been a queen for a thousand years Samo, I am an eternal queen, my workers relay your news to me hour after hour, and I advise you to marry me so that you will—like me—live for a thousand years." The villagers' lives are full of humorous "cooking" situations; at one time Stazka cooks shoe – flavoured milk and no one notices. Her brother brings his Hungarian lover Yulcha whose pining for home drives her out of her mind; she cooks a turkey along with its intestines. And a pig survives after eating a live chicken, but the worst ending awaits the lover of the Jewish woman, who commits suicide by hanging himself, followed by Samo who has three children raised to believe in social communism, he hopes for the fall of the Hungarian empire which included Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, and Slovakia.

The father Martin Pichanda dies after swallowing a piece of glass having mistaken it for frozen wine in a bottle that fell crashing to the floor. Hardships increase for his widowed daughter Christina, but farmer Metron who would like to have children leaves his wife to have an affair with Christina, which results in two children. He announces his marriage to her after the death of his wife Matilda, who went mad with jealousy, receiving mercy from no one in her insanity and destitution but from her husband's mistress, Christina.

As the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne Franz Ferdinand is assassinated by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip, the first world War starts and the Hungarian authorities starts confiscating the people's grain, Samo's mill stops working and the first grandson is taken to the front to fight the Russians, followed by the second grandson who is killed there.

The first grandson hands himself over to the Russians hoping to be treated well for being Slavic like them. They keep him captive but let him go once the Bolshevik Revolution starts, which he also joins. He hears Stalin's speech and has the honor to shake Lenin's hand, then Czechoslovakia announces its independence in 1918 and their father imprisoned for calling for an independent Slovakia, is released and goes home, happy. However, in the film based on this story, he is killed by a Hungarian fanatic who is angered by the fall of the Hungarian empire.

The author himself appears sometimes as a narrator without introduction, the novel is filled with secondary characters, illustrating Slovakian rural society after federal independence, with events centered around food, sex, offspring, and death.

The author adds some odd scenes like major's loyal dog's escape to follow of Pichanda's his owner's roaming soul, breaking his iron chain and disappearing without trace; the pan maker leaving wine in the pans as if by magic; the millennial bee speaking to Samo the protagonist and befriending him, always giving him advice.

These occasional mystic situations—which shows an era of Slovakian history through the tale of a family don't turn into a literary pattern in the novel.

Slovakian novelist Peter Jaroš was born in 1940, and is one of the most prominent contemporary Slovak writers, and the most interested in the history of his country, and as portrayed through his novels. This was clear in "Make Me a Sea" published in 1963, "The Farmyard" published in 1970, "The Marriage of Dogs" in 1990, and others.

Jaroš received many awards during the former socialist regime, the most important of which was the Klement Gottwald Award, and an award from the Slovak Writers Guild. *The Millennial Bee*, published in 1977, remains one of the most important Slovakian novels. The film based on the novel also received many local awards and the novel was translated into several languages.

→ JAROŠ, Peter (2005): *Al nahla al Affia*, Mousli Ghias Publishing House, Homs, Syria, 380 S.

Donald Rayfield

Peter Pišťanek Remembered

Peter Pišťanek, the finest of modern Slovak novelists, died of a drug overdose on March 22, just before his fifty-fifth birthday. I discovered his work ten years ago, as an external examiner for Rajendra Chitnis's doctorate on Slovak prose. I was duty-bound to read the Pišťanek works Chitnis discussed: I rolled on the floor, helpless with laughter. Pišťanek's irreverence, obscenity, wit and ingenuity would, I was sure, find a British publisher. After a year's wait I gave up, wrote to Pišťanek and found a translator, Peter Petro, who shared Pišťanek's own background in Bratislava's semi-dissident demimonde, and his mix of languages (Viennese German, Hungarian and even Romany enriched Bratislava Slovak). We then published his most striking novel *Rivers of Babylon* and its two sequels with the Garnett Press.

No one has evoked so well Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, when thugs and secret policemen metamorphosed into racketeers and "businessmen of the year". Pišťanek portrayed sex and violence as graphically as a manga novelist, and as convincingly as if he had experienced every sado-masochistic ploy of his anti-heroes. Yet when he came to London to launch *Rivers of Babylon* at Foyles, despite an endearing resemblance to Uncle Fester of the Addams family, he was all charm and self-deprecation. For all his dark satire, he was a reticent man, but with an uproarious sense of humour.

His passion in London was not literary, but for a rare Spanish brandy, traced to a stockist in Ealing. His literary admirers found that he was an expert in Scotch whisky and had visited every distillery in the Highlands and islands. Even a successful Slovak novelist can't sell enough books to make a comfortable living: Pišťanek made his main anti-hero Rác an enthusiastic brandy and whisky drinker, so the Bratislava distributors for Hennessy, Rémy-Martin and Macallan happily paid for placement with crates of their products. Food, unimportant to his heroes, was a preoccupation for Pišťanek: if his book, *Recipes from the Family Archive*, finds an English publisher, his study of brandies will prove as appealing as his fiction.

Pišťanek was in Communist days a drummer in a rock group (a life he celebrated in his novella *The Musicians*): this was then one of the few careers that allowed young Slovaks to travel abroad, if only to Bulgaria.

Becoming a writer was harder, even after the Velvet Revolution. Pišťanek's exposure of the underbelly of Slovak life and his satire on sacred Slovak pretensions (which he called "narcissism") caused a scandal. His novellas sympathized with the underdog: in the Young Dôňč, he offended patriotic readers by taking as his hero not the wise beekeepers and chaste maidens of conventional Slovak novelists, but rather, a subnormal child of alcoholic peasants who spends his first wage on a Bratislava whore. Pišťanek's genius became manifest in *Rivers of Babylon* which, with its sequels *The Wooden Village* and *The End of Freddy*, formed a trilogy in which the thug who takes over the money-changing and prostitution rackets in a hotel transmutes into an oil oligarch. Pišťanek's plotting has the ingenuity of Quentin Tarantino, the irony of Evelyn Waugh and, in the later novels, an obscenity that makes *Last Exit to Brooklyn* seem mealy-mouthed.

The third novel, *The End of Freddy*, showed another side to Pišťanek, who wrote in Czech whenever the novel's action moved to Prague. Slovaks always felt like the underdogs in Czechoslovakia; although the two languages are mutually intelligible, Slovak films used to be subtitled for Czechs, while Slovaks had to watch Czech films without assistance. This homage to the Czech language provoked Pišťanek's readers as much as his low-life characters did. Pišťanek loved to torment authority: his scurrilous trilogy of Tales about Vlad were such a thorn in the flesh of Vladimír Mečiar, the Slovak prime minister, that nobody would have been surprised if the author had been drowned in the Danube.

Rivers of Babylon has now been translated into several European and Asian languages. Pišťanek was beginning to get, via the English versions of his novels, an international reputation; the Slovaks, more sophisticated with every year, came to value their *enfant terrible*. Pišťanek was full of plans: a fourth novel in the *Rivers of Babylon* series, in which the terrifying Ráčz would lust after an aristocratic title and plot to get it by murdering his former enemy, the newly restored Hungarian Count Feri (after becoming the count's adopted son). Pišťanek's own childhood was reflected in the childhood of his other unsavoury hero, the car-park attendant and pornographer Freddy Piggybank: he planned to expand on this with an autobiographical novel about growing up in a brickworks to the sound of locomotives.

A decade ago Pišťanek's now defunct online magazine and radio programmes won him fans half his age: they have grown up to be his most appreciative readers. Pišťanek recently published a new novel, *The Hostage*, which was to be adapted for film. His marginalization seemed over. But the depression that plagued him returned.

→ Posted by www.timescolumns.typepad.com, May 2015

And the Winner Is...

Anasoft Litera 2015

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 as the first edition in the previous year. 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 in Bratislava and nearby cities, and also in libraries and bookstores all over Slovakia. The winner is selected in the second round, and announced in September at a gala with a live radio broadcast.

This year the jury has been considering 188 prose works.

The shortlisted works were:

Vtedy v Lošonci (Once in Lošonc) by Peter Balko.

Sprievodca nezrozumiteľnosťou (A Guide to Incomprehensibility) by Juraj Briškár.

... a nezabudni na labute (... And Don't Forget the Swans) by Peter Juščák.

Až do nirvány (As Far As Nirvana) by Ivan Kolenič.

Jednouholník (Monogon) by Mária Kopcsay.

Návštevy (Visits) by Richard Pupala.

Medzerový plod (Foulbrood) by Veronika Šikulová.

Hegemónia (Hegemony) by Erik Šimšík.

Menoslov (List of Names) by Alta Vášová.

Letný sneh (Fleeting Snow) by Pavel Vilikovský.

And the winner is...

***Medzerový plod* by Veronika Šikulová**

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Ján Rozner *Seven Days to the Funeral*

Alta Vášová *List of Names*

Rút Lichnerová *The Feast*

Peter Juščák *...And Don't Forget the Swans!*

Víto Staviarsky *Homo Iucundus*

Juraj Briškár *A Guide to Incomprehensibility*

Ivan Kolenič *As Far As Nirvana*

Peter Šulej *nodes*

Márius Kopcsay *Monogon*

Agda Bavi Pain *More. Love. Chicks.*

Richard Pupala *Visits*

Michal Habaj *Caput Mortuum*

Michal Hvorecký *By Heart*

Tomáš Varga *Shyster*

Ivana Gibová *The Sediment*

Erik Šimšík *Hegemony*

Peter Balko *Once in Lošonc*

Zuzana Šmatláková *Exit*

