

Slovak Literary Review

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Contents

- 2 Ján Milčák ***A Feeling of Relief***
- 8 Dušan Šimko ***Marble and Granite***
- 14 Dušan Dušek ***Socks Before Take-Off***
- 20 Jana Juráňová ***My Seven Lives. Agneša Kalinová
in Conversation with Jana Juráňová***
- 26 Vító Staviarsky ***Rinaldo's Journey***
- 32 Ivan Kolenič ***Lovelier than Sin***
- 40 Peter Macsovszky ***Santa Panica***
- 48 Veronika Šikulová ***The Foulbrood***
- 54 Peter Šulej ***Together***
- 62 Lukáš Luk ***Honey Thieves***
- 72 Agda Bavi Pain ***Leaving Eden***
- 78 Peter Krištúfek ***Bodies***
- 84 Mária Ferenčuhová ***Immunity***
- 94 Marcela Veselková ***Scarcities***
- 100 Ján Púček ***Eye of a Needle***
- 106 Sona Uriková ***Hedges***
-
- 111 Zuzana Slobodová ***Slovakian Literature***
- 113 Jana Liptáková ***A Tasting of Slovak Literature***
- 115 Annelies Verbeke ***Anthology of the Month***
- 117 Barbora Németh ***And the Winner Is...***

Ján Milčák 1935

Prose writer, poet, author of books for children and adolescents as well as both radio and theatre playwright. Like most writers of his generation he started to publish stories in the *Mladá tvorba* magazine, and later in other literary magazines. In the 1970s, he established himself as a writer of radio plays for adults and young people as well as of fairy tales for children. Several of his radio plays have won awards and been broadcast in other European countries. As well as radio plays, he also writes plays for the theatre as well as short prose works. His work is characterized by a blending of the philosophical with the symbolic. He has had three short story collections published: *Devät' poviedok* (Nine Stories, 1978), *Rosa Canina* (1995) and *Pocit úľavy* (A Feeling of Relief, 2013) as well as a collection of poetry, *Songy* (Songs, 2007). →



Ján Milčák

A Feeling of Relief

Extract translated by John Minahane →

The stories are symbolically joined by the overlapping of the present with the past, of fantasy with reality, of feelings simultaneous with memories, of compassion with indifference and of love with estrangement. Creating a dreamlike atmosphere, the author tells the stories of characters weighed down by thoughts of death, guilt and the failure to find fulfilment. After this, however, the plot moves on towards a catharsis of suffering, after which there comes a feeling of relief.

The Cage

In the morning Lujza found the dead cat. It was lying stretched out on the settee. Just a little thing with an emaciated body, the skin in folds over the ribs. Its eyes were open; they were dry, they'd lost their glow. It looked like an animal that had perished in the desert.

She took the dead cat to the neighbour. She didn't want to admit that she was ill.

She woke Norbert. Regarding the cat she said nothing, just brought him the hot milk and bread-roll. There was more milk than on other mornings. She didn't break off any of the roll. Her husband and the cat, she was conscious, used to breakfast on the exactly the same food. She watered the geraniums.

"Did you dream about anything?" Norbert asked.

"Have you put on the warm slippers?"

"I asked if you dreamed about anything."

"No, nothing at all," Lujza answered.

His wife was lying. She had dreamt an endlessly long dream. Norbert was dressed in his graveclothes. He lay stretched out, his hands were crossed on his breast.

"It is time," the page said.

"Already?" Lujza asked.

"You are demanding! You are very demanding," the page cried.

"Demanding?" Lujza asked.

"I've never heard such nonsense, man being supposed to live forever."

"I don't want a man to live forever!" Lujza answered.

"It's time," the page said, with a grin.

"Where is the priest?" Lujza asked.

"Did he believe in God?" the page cried.

He lifted the papers, which were phosphorescent in the half-light. For a while he leafed through them.

"That isn't written anywhere here."

"It was the kind of time when some things weren't written down."

The page smiled.

"This is something essential," the page said.

"You have the official papers," Lujza retorted.

"Yes," the page acknowledged, "they are signed in his own hand by the Supreme One."

"It was that kind of time!" Lujza cried.

"Again time. And yet you want man to live forever."

She woke up. For a brief while she couldn't distinguish dream from reality. On the settee there was a vacant place left by the cat. She was conscious that she felt just as sorry for the cat as if Norbert had died.

"Yes, yes, I've put on the warm slippers," Norbert said.

She came up to her husband and tenderly stroked his hair.

"Eat up, the milk will cool, you'll be having it cold," Lujza said.

A breeze stirred the curtain intermittently. Birds were flying in the garden, noisily twittering. They sat on the branches, their wings trembling.

Norbert moistened the bread-roll in the milk and inserted it in his toothless mouth.

"Who're they singing to? There's no one at all in the garden," Lujza said.

"Who?"

"The birds, don't you hear them?" Lujza asked.

"They want to pair off, it's a warm morning," Norbert said.

Lujza shut the window. Norbert drank from the milk: it dribbled down his chin. He was sitting on the old worn cushion.

"You ought to buy a clock," Norbert said.

"Why? There's one hanging in every room."

"A different one, with the digits bigger."

"I thought you'd stopped being interested in time," Lujza declared.

"Quite the opposite, it's now that time interests me."

She waited for her husband to mention the cat. He was constantly looking at the window. It was white with blue panes and a brass catch.

"The neighbour's started digging in his garden," Norbert said.

"Take no notice of him," Lujza said.

"He's dug a hole under the pear tree."

"We all have our own business."

Norbert finished eating, looked into the mug and shoved it to the centre of the table.

"That hole is ready, now he's brought something."

Used plates, mugs and cutlery were lying in the kitchen, heaped on the board under the tall mahogany press. In the press there was a cage with a cupola, a wooden pole hung on glittery bars and an oval glass water-vessel. The cage was empty. It didn't belong in the kitchen; Norbert had brought it before they moved into the house.

The cage door was open.

When he bought the cage he'd spent infinitely long haggling over the price. He knew that he'd have to agree in the end, because the cage was copper, it had an unusual door with a high gothic arch and fretwork ornamentation. Such a magnificent cage he had never yet seen.

He brought it into the empty house and put it on the floor. He paced around it, couldn't stop, contentedly nodding his head.

Lujza had known nothing of the cage. The moment she walked into the room she was visibly irritated.

"What's that you've bought?" she asked.

Norbert was in a festive mood, he wanted to sing.

"An odd question," Norbert replied.

"What do you want it for? We both live in a cage," Lujza said.

"No, not that," Norbert said, laughing. "It'd be too small for us two. Your corpulent body wouldn't fit into it."

Lujza became angry. Her chin trembled. She blanched. Her face was lime-white.

"What's it doing in the middle of the room?"

Norbert was hopping about like a child. He was clumsy. He slapped his palms on his thighs.

"It's a house in a house," he said.

"It's a cage!" Lujza cried.

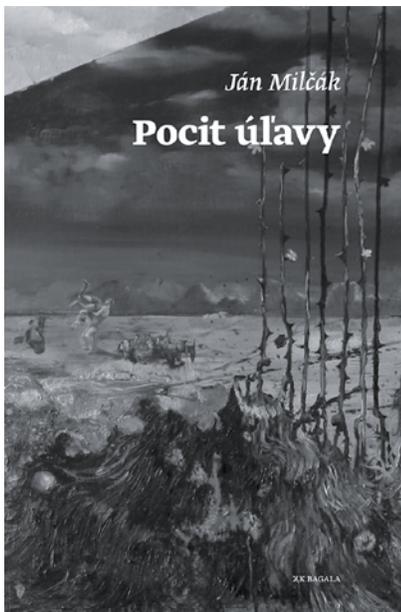
"OK, OK. Calm down," Norbert said.

"We both live in a cage," Lujza repeated.

"You're mistaken, the cage in the middle of the floor is empty," Norbert remarked.

When he bought the cage he was thinking he'd raise in it a little bird with yellow shiny feathers, the kind that sings every morning till the millet tinkles in his dish.

But the cage remained empty. He hadn't moved it to the living-room, as he'd intended.



← Published by
Literárny klub,
Bratislava, 2013

Dušan Šimko 1945

An author-in-exile, living and working in Switzerland to where he emigrated in 1968, Šimko's work addresses themes of searching for identity and historical roots. He has published his work in foreign magazines and had it broadcast on DRS 2 and Radio Free Europe radio channels. His first collection of short stories, *Maratón Juana Zabalu* (The Marathon of Juan Zabala, 1984), was published in the prestigious 'Rozmluva' London exile edition and positively received by critics. In his travel novel *Japonský diván* (The Japanese Divan, 1993), he draws upon his experience of two research stays in Japan. His book *Šiesty prápor* (The Sixth Battalion, 1997) about the wartime Slovak state was made into a documentary film. In 2000, his wide-sweeping novel, *Esterházyho lokaj* (Esterházy's Footman), was published. In 2009, his book *Gubbio—kniha udavačov* (Gubbio—Book of Informers) was published, a set of six tales on the theme of denunciation, collaboration and betrayal was shortlisted for the Anasoft Litera 2010 Award. His latest work is the novel *Mramor a granit* (Marble and Granite, 2015). →



Dušan Šimko

Marble and Granite

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

Stalinism is flourishing in Czechoslovakia; on the Letná hill above Prague a fifteen-metre high by twelve-metre wide statue of Stalin is being erected. Barbora, a restorer, escapes the grim reality of the dictatorship by going to the spa town of Kuks, near Prague. There she discovers the dreamy, surreal world of the High Baroque through her ardent study of neglected figures by the famous Austrian sculptor, Matthias Bernard Braun, commissioned at the turn of the 18th century by Count Franz Anton von Sporck. Together with an unnamed photographer, Barbora examines one sculpture after another, discovering their various stories and legends and becoming ever friendlier with her companion. The constable of the castle also becomes involved in the story and together they form an unusual triangle.

Stalin's Death

Barbora and the photographer went to have dinner at the pension where they were staying. In the dining room were three other holidaymakers, clearly pensioners. They had placed their enormous rucksacks in the corner and were busy slurping their soup from aluminium spoons. Some dance music was playing on the wireless. The cook stuck her head out through the hatch and said that the only thing on offer that evening was tripe soup with frankfurter. And she had hardly brought out the steaming soup and put it on the table when it suddenly went quiet, and a solemn voice came on the radio:

“We announce with great sorrow that the Leader of Nations, the great Joseph Vissarionovitch Stalin, today suffered a stroke with a haemorrhage in the left hemisphere of his brain...” After a long medical statement about the causes of the nation leader's death, there then followed some sombre funeral music. The photographer did not pause in swallowing his soup but Barbora put her spoon down next to her bowl and stiffened in surprise. The pensioners, two men and a woman, were also dumbstruck; the woman even started to sob out loud. The cook ran out from the kitchen mechanically wiping her swollen red hands on her dirty apron, sighing and repeating over again: “He's died. Our Stalin has died, died...”

The pensioners put their meal tickets down on the table, quietly stood up and left the dining room without a word. Barbora and the photographer remained sitting and the cook came up to them asking despairingly:

“Do you think he has really died? Why it's hardly possible, such a person...”

The photographer looked at her sternly: “He has died and what of it? We will all die at some point. Try to understand that, Madam.”

And he slammed his hand down so hard on the table the soup bowls jumped up. Startled by his reaction, the cook quickly retreated into the depths of the kitchen, shaking her head and angrily mumbling to herself.

“The devil take the daft woman!” sighed the photographer and, in an effort to divert attention away from the embarrassing intermezzo, then added: “It'll be interesting to see what the top brass and memorial builders now do. Their idol is dead so what next for the monument? The Generalissimo felled by a stroke and we can now look forward to a display like no other... You see how good it is to be tucked away out here in Kuks! All those endless funeral marches of fallen revolutionaries! Here in the woods, we won't hear anything.”

Barbora thought about the photographer's question.

“They should finish it off somehow, at least for the sake of all the stone masons and labourers who have been working so hard on it. I suppose they have some sense of pride. I know that you find the whole thing laughable but think of all the hard work they have put in.”

The cook was in the kitchen and not making a sound; only her husband’s angry voice could be heard from there. The photographer suggested to Barbora they leave the dining room, where they were now completely alone. Barbora stood up and they went out together. They didn’t feel like going to Prague and agreed that they would stay in Kuks depending on how things developed in Prague.

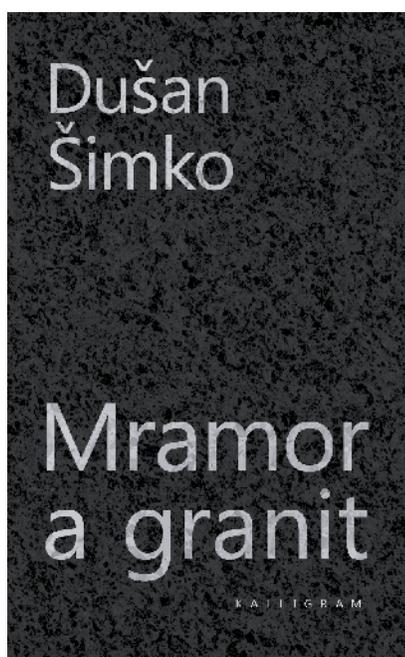
“We’ll go on listening to the radio here until it’s clear what kind of funeral parade the top brass decide on. I can imagine what they’re capable of—their Generalissimo has left them and it’ll take them a while to get over it. Even worse is they’ll be playing that dreary music till heaven knows when. If only they could all just march off to hell with that precious corpse of theirs!”

Barbora realized that the photographer was not afraid of asking the kind of questions that almost everyone else avoided asking. She did not know anyone who spoke so candidly. Since she got to know him, she had started to look at the people she was in contact with in a different light. The photographer openly expressed opinions no one else did—or which other people would only express in the softest of voices with their closest friends or family. Because of her stays in Kuks, she had the advantage of not meeting her colleagues often; and when she did, they talked only about how the latest work report was coming on or about what they would be doing at their chalet during the weekend. The photographer’s openness and sincerity thus made a strong impression on her and gave her the feeling that he was doing something forbidden, something both highly dangerous and naïve. The death of the Liberator would now unleash all kinds of questions which had been around for a long time even if most people pretended they didn’t actually exist. In 1949, a comrade from the accounts department at the directorate had been collecting signatures for the congratulatory sheets sent to Stalin on his seventieth birthday. Barbora had not signed because she was on leave at the time and after she got back, it was too late—the sheets had already been sent. But the accountant would still remind her of it with her reproachful eyes and Barbora had been avoiding her ever since.

Her walk to the office on the Malá Strana along the banks of the Vltava and across the bridge gave her chance to see what progress was being made on the megalomaniac structure going up there. The labourers and masons climbing up and down the scaffolding were as small as ants. For

Barbora it was a metaphor for the modern age, standing over the Vltava like an icebreaker trapped by icebergs. The complex of scaffolding that covered it gave the structure a fearsome quality in the dawn light.

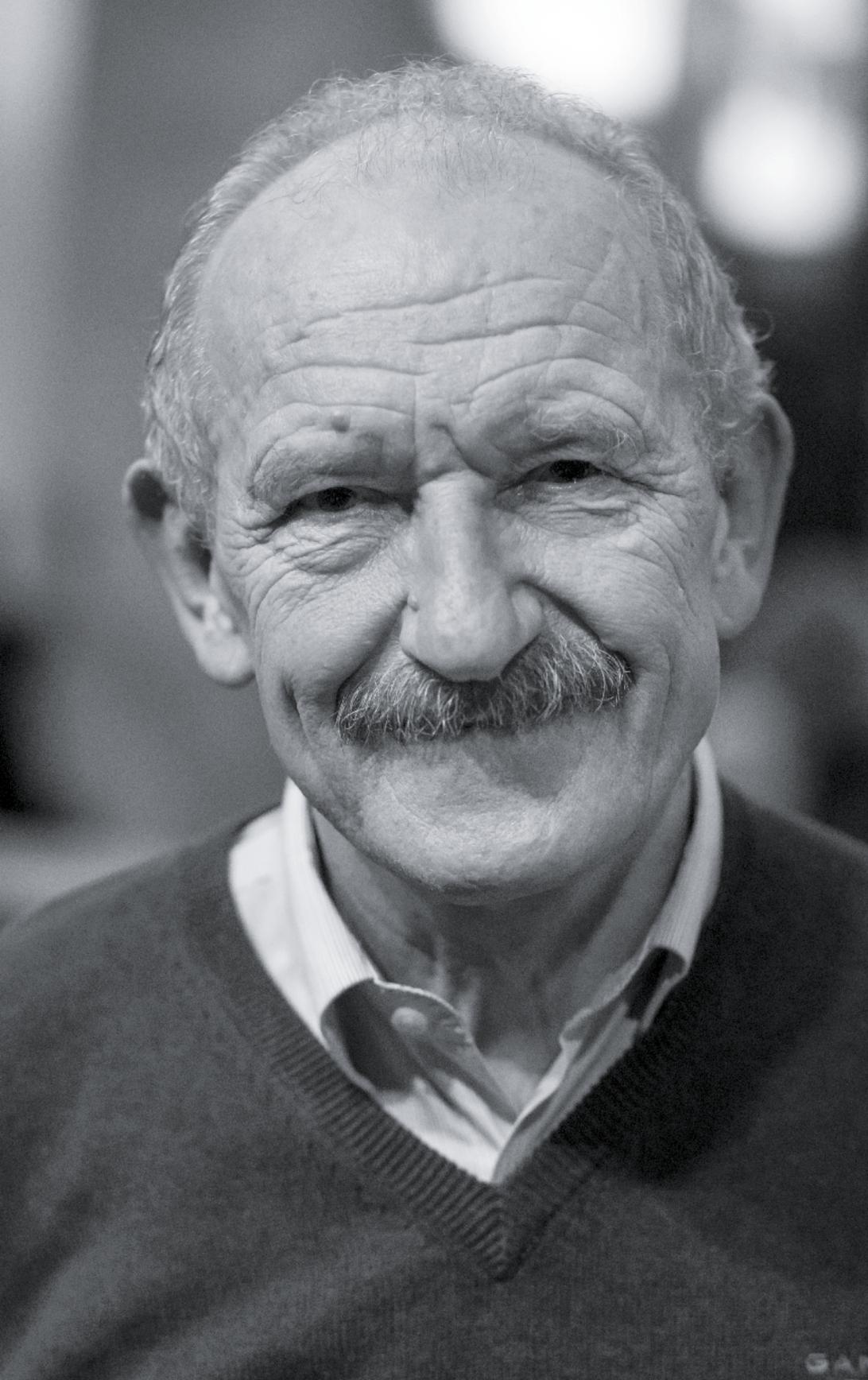
One night she had a dream in which the whole pedestal and monument on top came loose and slipped down the steep layers of slate on to the bridge Čechův Most, which then crashed noisily into the river. It all happened in slow motion: one arch after another broke off and purple wastewater started to gush out from a ruptured drain. Miraculously the bronze statues of the four geni placed on the tops of the columns managed to survive: though they leaned over perilously, they somehow managed to remain standing. The rest of the bridge and the stones from the monument, however, all sank beneath the lazy waters of the Vltava and the river started to rise. Soon it was breaking its banks and flooding the old town, a blood-red stream running down Pařížska Street and into the Old Town Square, taking people and cars with it as it went. In that moment of horror, Barbora wanted to scream with all her strength. But some unknown force was throttling her, and try as she may, she could not make a sound.



← Published by
Kalligram, Bratislava,
2016

Dušan Dušek 1946

Writer of poetry, prose and film scripts as well as a teacher at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. Dušek often likes to return in his work to the idyllic childhood he spent in the spa town of Piešťany, as well as to his adolescence and the gradual discovery of the various secrets which it brought. A master of storytelling and bon mots, he is the author of many successful children's books as well as the scripts of a number of cult Slovak films. He has won many literary awards including the Dominik Tatarka Prize for his book *Pešo do neba* (Walking to Heaven, 2001), the Anasoft Litera Award for his novel *Zima na ruky* (Cold on the Hands, 2006) and the Tatrabanka Foundation Prize for Literature for the short story collection *Holá veta o láske* (A Simple Sentence about Love, 2010). In 2016 the Slovak president awarded him the Pribina Cross Medal. He has reached the final shortlist of the prestigious Anasoft Litera Award on several occasions, most recently for his latest work, the short story collection *Ponožky pred odletom* (Socks before Take-Off, 2015), shortlisted for the 2016 award and winner of the Readers' Prize. →



GAP

Dušan

Dušek

Socks Before Take-Off

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

A handbook of reminiscences—of childhood, classmates, first loves, first day at secondary school, first contact with the capital, of ostensibly banal, but underneath very important, moments in life. The dominant themes of his latest collection of short stories are memories and recapitulation of his life lived so far. Here you will find described his admiration for women and for the conjugal love which deepens over time as well as the joy he has from children, whom he sees as being the very freest users of language.

*A stinky old egg
No-one will eat.
Give it to Nan
She'll have it with meat.*

My wife told me this nursery rhyme; in the morning she said I'd been sneezing in the night so had thrown a blanket on me so I wouldn't be cold. I could remember that but knew nothing about sneezing.

About work she said: "These hands could do with another head."

Meaning that those hands of hers are of no use for such work.

I am my own child, my childhood—and now my old age in which I am my wife's child; finally she has the child to look after which she has always longed for and missed.

I asked her: "How does that nursery rhyme go, the one that starts *Oh you pretty cow/ Where's your mother now?*"

"*Beyond the wolves and deer/ She's busy brewing beer.* As far as nursery rhymes go, you can ask me whenever. But if you want to know who such-and-such is, don't bother."

My friend Vojto called his partner Consonant, which would also suit my wife, while he remained a Vowel, which could also be said about me: there are a lot fewer vowels than consonants. They live such isolated lives. The same goes for writers. As a doctor, my wife knows much more about life than I do—being a Consonant, it is inevitable that she does. On the other hand, as she herself has admitted, she cannot live without at least one vowel.

Then she suddenly said: "You shouted at me today."

I immediately asked my conscience when and why but my conscience was as clear as my consciousness. I wrote her a poem.

*With my face on the pillow
shortly after waking up
I watched my wife sleeping.
In the light of dawn,
Creeping in through the curtains,
I rejoiced in the line
Of her pure profile
And saw the silver curves
Of her forehead, nose and saintly mouth,
Which together with the shimmering square of
brightness on her cheek
Created a feeling of peace.
She was barely breathing;
I was barely breathing.*

After reading it, she said that she now liked me a lot more than at the beginning—and we're still not at the end yet. I asked her if she would patch a hole in my sweater; she put it on her pillow so that if she forgot about it, she would see it when she went to bed; I could feel how she wanted to please me.

My hands could also do with another head: I always wanted to write a novel but it always shrank on me and the novel became a novella or a short story or sometimes just a story.

It took me ten years before I fell in love with my wife in the street one day—and I had had her before my eyes from the first moment I came to Bratislava. And it took me nearly forty years before I finally took that slide to the actress Adela Hromková.

My wife asked me in front of the mirror: “Do you think I have combed my hair or not?”

“I don't know.”

“Bring me a comb then, please.”

She combed her hair.

“Now I know for sure that I have combed it.”

My eyesight changed: I could read better close up than before but worse from a distance. For a time I again had a pinched nerve in my right eye; the eyeball felt constricted, while somewhere in the background, where I could not see, there was a blank space where clear water sprang up like a source of light while the picture faded at the centre of my vision. It was like a blind spot, or like fog; I tried in vain to see through it.

It was the same with my memory. Fog was starting to enter—cotton wool turning into darkness.

In a wish to cheer me up, my wife pretended that she was also forgetting things. And so she would comb her hair twice or avoid the subject of my forgetfulness, sometimes even without words. However, at times when I was really annoying, she would come out with it, for example with the yellow coat, or pumpkin-coloured, more accurately. I told her at least three times that I could do with a new overcoat but each time she just looked at me without saying a word. Only later did I notice a certain anxiety in her expression.

My eyesight was poor and I was forgetting things.

After the fourth time, she said: “But you've got a new coat. I bought it in autumn—it's hanging in the wardrobe.”

“What new coat?”

She came out with it: “It's a pumpkin colour.”

Perhaps it was then that I raised my voice.

“Pumpkin? Anything else?”

She wanted to cheer me up: “Go and have a look in the wardrobe.”

I went and after a short search found the coat hanging there but had no memory of it.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you don’t like it?”

“What don’t I like?”

“When I remind you of something,” she said. “And you don’t like wearing new things so I thought I would just leave it to hang there—as you always do. I can’t believe you didn’t know about it.”

I slapped my forehead: “I didn’t know.”

“So try it on,” she said.

“I will. Later.”

“You’ll forget about it again.”

“So be it.”

I played up but only for a while. Soon the coat came in handy—when I went to see Adela Hromková. I put the slide in a cellophane satchet. I had no other purpose, I just wanted to finally give it to her.

Before I’d kept it in a paper envelope and had lost it several times—or at least mislaid it. And it had always turned up again. And at every opportunity, I would tell Adela how I was looking after it for her and how I would give it to her at the next opportunity. But I never had it on me those times we bumped into each other. In the slide she was standing in long grass wearing a short skirt with a thick lilac bush behind her. It could have been a picture from a botanical garden or from the Janko Král Park. She had long hair and dark glasses on the end of her nose. She was about forty years younger than she is now.



← Published by
Slovart, Bratislava,
2015

Jana Juráňová

1957

Gender expert, writer, translator and editor, she was a member of the group which founded *Aspekt* in 1993, a feminist cultural, educational and publishing organization for which she still works. She writes articles and prose for both adults and children, as well as theatre and radio plays. In her works of prose and drama she challenges traditional gender stereotypes and Slovak myths with a healthy measure of irony. She enjoys confronting the feelings and desires of her female characters—mothers, wives, daughters, girlfriends, rivals and ferocious enemies—with the world of men; she is one of the most prominent representatives of contemporary Slovak feminist literary discourse. Her books *Orodovnice* (The Supplicants, 2006), *Žilá som s Hviezdoslavom* (Ilona. My Life with the Bard, 2008), *Lásky nebeské* (Heavenly Loves, 2010) and *Nevybavená záležitosť* (Unfinished Business, 2013) were all shortlisted for Slovakia's most prestigious Anasoft Litera Award. Her newest book is *Cudzie príbehy* (Stranger Stories, 2016). →



Jana Juráňová

My Seven Lives

***Agneša Kalinová in
Conversation with Jana
Juráňová***

Extract translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood →

Agneša Kalinová (1924 – 2014) was a journalist, editor, translator, film journalist and famous personality from the *Kultúrny život* magazine and Radio Free Europe. The book is a document of the short but harrowing 20th century, depicted through Kalinová's memories of her childhood in the cosmopolitan and religiously diverse setting of interwar Prešov. She speaks of the sudden change in the social climate when it became mandatory to wear a yellow star on one's coat, hiding from fascists in a Hungarian convent, the situation after the war, the disappointment with Communism, her escape to Munich...

How did you discover the bug?

We had this beautiful old Art Nouveau lamp in the cellar of our tenement house. Laco's mother brought it over from Prešov after the war and at the time he thought it was old-fashioned. Now we remembered it and thought it would be nice to hang it in the hallway in our fourth-floor flat. Our friend, the philosopher Teo Münz, who used to double as our family handyman, agreed to install it for us. When he finished we sat down in Laco's study sipping coffee—a good handyman deserves refreshments!—and talking about the lamp. Suddenly the bell rang. Laco went to the front door, looked out of the little window and left without a word.

Teo and I went on chatting and drinking coffee until Laco returned. He was visibly worked up. With him came our neighbours' son Vlado Šmidke—his family, with whom we became very close after 1968, lived in the flat below us on the first floor—and the two of them started talking on the phone. It turned out that Vlado recently got a new radio and had asked a friend of his, a radio engineer, to retune it to western FM frequencies so that he could listen to Austrian music stations. And as they were tuning the radio they suddenly tuned into a conversation. At first they thought it was some boring radio play, something weird about lamps, but then Vlado's mother exclaimed—why, that's no radio play, that's Agi talking, I recognize her voice! Apparently the engineer had tuned into the bug in our flat. So Vlado ran up to the fourth floor, rang the bell and gestured to Laco to follow him. Laco went downstairs and listened in to my conversation with Teo.

When the two of them came back to our place we all started looking for the device as in the child's game 'getting warmer, colder, hotter...' Teo was helping us, too. We went up and down the room chatting while the engineer, who stayed downstairs in the Šmidkes' apartment, instructed us over the phone when the sound got louder or fainter, until we figured out that it was loudest somewhere behind Laco's writing desk. That's as far as we got that night.

The next day Laco stayed home alone and started exploring the floorboards in the corner behind his desk. He discovered some deep grooves behind the molding. He got hold of a pencil, stuck it down the groove—it went in almost halfway. He then asked Miro Šmidke, Vlado's father, to give him a hand. Miro, a former officer, wasn't working that day because he'd been sacked from the army for supporting Dubček in 1968. The two of them set to work, removing first the molding and then some of the floorboards. Underneath they found deep holes that had been made in the concrete and in the hollow there lay this bakelite apparatus about

the size of a man's palm, and four long cables. This horrible little black thing was just sitting there with four dirty-white snakes crawling out of it. When I got home they showed me what they had found. Miro went home to get his camera and took pictures of the thing. Our friend, the painter Imro Weiner-Král', had a photographic studio at home so we asked him to develop the film and make some prints for us.

Afterwards we started thinking, wondering what to do about it, where to put that thing. Eventually we concluded that if we got rid of it, they would just put it back, they would just crawl in there again and install another. 'This way at least we know where it is, so let's just put it back and make sure we don't discuss anything of importance in that room and leave it that.'

Was there anything you could have done in this sort of situation?

We could have dumped the thing in the Danube, of course, but we decided not to. But then we had to live with the constant feeling that there was someone lying under our beds eavesdropping on our conversations. The whole thing was starting to get on our nerves and we found it more and more repulsive. The TV set was in Laco's study; when people came to visit we used to sit around it and watch the news on Austrian TV, we had two comfortable armchairs there, a round coffee table, and a couple of chairs. Now we had to chase people out of that room, tell them 'don't sit there, let's go to the living room.' We felt we were betraying our friends' trust—they would come to see us and feel they could speak their minds, without knowing they were being recorded by the secret police. Laco decided to write a complaint to Gustáv Husák, who was then General Secretary of the Communist Party's Central Committee in Prague, and to deliver it in person to a friend from his student days in Prague, Slovak minister of justice Pavol Király. Then we remembered seeing an inventory number on the black bakelite box and decided to include it in the letter to Husák. It meant unscrewing the moulding again and taking up the floorboards. I remember that the Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova's speech in Prague was being broadcast on the radio as we were taking up the floor. But now there was nothing there. The grooves in the concrete were empty. Only two or three weeks had passed since we had discovered the bug. In that period we hadn't been away at all. We have never understood when and how they managed to get in, as Laco had been at home most of the time. It came as a real shock.

Laco did send off the letter to Husák anyway, and although he couldn't include the inventory number, he added a PS saying the object in question

had disappeared from our apartment. And as proof that he wasn't hallucinating or, God forbid, slandering the socialist state, he attached two photos of the bug. Laco was convinced that it was this letter that led to our arrest a year later.

* * *

They threw me into a cell, where apart from me there was one other woman, not much older, quite nice, normal, civilised. She said she was a teacher, that they had concocted some charge against her and that she was due to be released soon. The very next day I was taken to an office on the ground floor for questioning. About four people took turns to interrogate me. They started accusing me of all sorts of things.

For the first few days I was interrogated by the same three or four, incredibly stupid and furious secret policemen. They kept asking me over and over again whether I was the one who had written my husband's book of jokes, and if I had translated it. They kept getting everything wrong. They claimed Laco had written my articles for the weekly *Kultúrny život*. They had no idea what was an original text and what was a translation, or what it means to edit or to be responsible for a text. They kept trying to prove I had done something, to accuse me of something and I just could not understand what crime I was supposed to have committed. Some of our friends, who had also been brought in for questioning, told me later that as they passed by they could hear me screaming at the men behind the locked door. I find stupidity incredibly irritating; it drives me up the wall.



← Published by
Aspekt, Bratislava,
2012

Víto 1960

Staviarsky

A prose writer and graduate of scriptwriting at the FAMU in Prague, he has had many different jobs and now works, mostly during the summer, on a market stall—he writes during the winter. His first novella *Kivader* (2007) and short story collection *Záchytka* (The Drunk Tank, 2009) were both nominated for the Anasoft Litera Award. He then won this most notable Slovak literary award in 2013 with his novella, *Kale topanky* (A Lovely Pair of Shoes, 2012). This was followed by his short story collection *Človek príjemný* (A Pleasant Person, 2014) and the novella, *Rinaldova cesta* (Rinaldo's Journey, 2015). Staviarsky's work is characterized by its originality of language and the rarely touched—on themes of Roma life in Eastern Slovakia and characters with drinking problems. His basic method is taking a family or love story set in a Roma environment and then confronting it with an outside world of very different values. →



Víto Staviarsky ***Rinaldo's Journey***

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

A fourteen-year-old Roma boy, Rinaldo, lives with his mother and little sister on a rubbish dump near one of the big towns in Eastern Slovakia. Their village house having been burnt down, they live in the hovel of the alcoholic, Zoro Csonka, surrounded by a community of scavengers and waste collectors. Despite the rough justice of the environment he lives in, Rinaldo is able to keep his inner purity. In the town he sells brooms and dreams about running away to Budapest to be with his older sister. How can the not-yet-adult Rinaldo come to terms with the whole situation?

I was friendliest with Elenka. She lived alone on the tip and had been born there but her mother had run away from her when she was four. In the evening we would go together to collect birch rods. The copse in which the trees grew was not far away only you had to go downhill and then through some thick bushes. We had some go-karts made from prams and would race down the slope though Elenka was always annoyed with me when I won. She was afraid of going fast and would shriek as she went downhill. I like it when you're in your go-kart, though, and don't know whether you're going to crash into a tree or not. When it was getting dark one evening, I had to cut the switches quickly and threw them on the ground while Elenka gathered them up and put them on the go-karts. Then she wanted to surprise me with something and told me not to look while she went to hide in the bushes. A moment later she told me that I could turn round and I then saw her come out from the bush with her face made up and powdered. She walked up to me like a model swinging her hips.

"Am I cute?" she asked pouting her lips. But I only smiled and carried on cutting. For a while she was offended and said nothing, just went on helping me. But as we were walking back with full go-karts, she asked me: "Rinaldo. Be honest. Don't you like me at all?"

What should I have said? That she was too young for me? Instead I said nothing just went on walking.

"You don't like me, do you?" she said sadly.

I felt sorry for her because she was my friend so I said I did and she immediately cheered up.

"Ah-ha, see what I found today," and she took some colourful beads out from under her t-shirt. "Do they suit me?"

They were just ordinary glass beads. I wanted to impress her so I took an opal from my pocket which Joker had given me and showed it to her.

"Wow!" she grabbed it from my hand and gazed at it in amazement. "It's gorgeous! Is it for me? Where did you get it from?"

"It is a precious stone. From Dubník near Červenica where we used to live. Joker said that it brings good luck. For those people who built the pyramids thousands of years ago opal was even more precious than gold."

"Who's Joker?" asked Elenka walking backwards with the stone in her hand.

"Something like a brother to me, but older," I said. "And my sister's ex-boyfriend."

When we were burnt out, Joker wanted to build us a wooden hut in the garden and said that we could go and live with him in the meantime, at least till we got through winter. But Mama and Monika weren't sure

about him because all he did the whole time was go down mines looking for opals, or pump iron—he wasn't interested in anything else. So instead we went to a homeless shelter. It was a pity. Things could have turned out differently. I reached out to take the opal back but Elenka snatched her hand away and ran off into the bushes.

"If you want it, come and catch me," she laughed.

I left the go-kart and ran off after her. For a while we played chase: Elenka would hide and then peek out from behind a tree and call my name before running off again. I thought I had her once but she slipped out of my hands and disappeared into the bushes. I spent a long time looking for her and branches of trees kept hitting me in the face. When I finally found her, she was standing at the edge of a meadow. I thought she couldn't see me and slowly sneaked up to her. But when I caught her, she didn't fight me off at all. She gave me the opal back and seemed sad.

"This is where Renatka is lying," she told me. "My little sister. She died when she was only two months old... And Rudy's here too. And Manya. She was a drinker and they found her frozen in the snow. They also put her here."

I looked at the meadow more closely and you could see that someone had been digging there a long time ago. The weeds and thistles had grown high. The sun was setting and a raven was croaking somewhere.

"People have said that ghosts sometimes cry here at nights. And they can pull you underground with them," Elenka whispered, shivering with cold. We quickly left the place; it wasn't nice being there.

"And why haven't they got graves?" I asked when we were back by the go-karts.

"I don't know. Perhaps no one was meant to know that they'd died."

It was heavy going on the way back, trudging up that steep hill. Elenka was tired now pulling the go-kart and had to keep stopping to have a rest.

"Rinaldo," she asked breathlessly, "Would you like to marry me?"

I looked at her in surprise. She was wiping her face with her sleeve and smudging all her powder, make-up and lipstick. I had to laugh.

"Not now. Later, I mean!" and she was nearly crying again. I went on up the hill and said nothing.

"Rinaldo, just tell me!" she screeched after me.

"I'm already taken!" I said and waited for her. And it was true: I had Ilonka in Červenica. We had been in the same class and when I was leaving I promised I'd be faithful to her. Elenka looked sadly at me and then suddenly her eyes widened in fear.

"Rinaldo," she yelled. "Look out behind you!"

When I wheeled round, Tono Makula was standing there. The way he just appeared out of the blue like that I guess he must have been spying on us. I had no time to move out of the way before he punched me so hard in the stomach, I fell to my knees gasping for air. In so doing, I let go of my go-kart and sent it careering down the hill before crashing into a tree.

“Run for help, Rinaldo!” screamed Elenka and she bolted into the bushes, Tono chasing after her. He had been after her for a long time, eyeing her up wherever she went, making grabs for her despite the fact she was skinny and had no breasts. I clambered to my feet holding my sore stomach; when I heard Tono’s laughter and Elenka’s yells in the distance, I was wondering whether I shouldn’t run to help her. But I was no match for Tono so instead I ran to the settlement. When I got there and explained what had happened, several men jumped up, one of whom took out a torch with a fifty-metre beam and ran out into the darkness. Elenka’s screams helped them find the two of them. She was lying on the ground with Tono on top of her, ripping her dress off as she fought him off, kicking and screaming. He wanted to rape her but the men stopped him at the last minute.

Víto Staviarsky

Rinaldova cesta



← Published by
Vít Staviarsky,
Prešov, 2015

Ivan Kolenič 1965

Poet, prose writer, former editor of the *Kultúrny život* magazine and member of the so-called 'Barbaric Generation' of poets. His first collection *Prinesené búrkou* (Brought by a Storm) came out in 1986. His provocative poetry first received the attention it deserved in the middle of the 1980s. He reinforced his reputation as a rebel and maverick figure keen to shock his audience with his next collection *Rock and roll* (1990). His *Na výslní* (In the Limelight, 2003) collection of poems is the statement of a man stricken both by love and by disappointment in himself and in his inability to change the people and the world around him. Kolenič's famous prose works include the novel *Mlčať* (Remain Silent, 1992) and the novellas *Porušenie raja* (Violation of Paradise, 1993), *Ako z cigariet dym* (Like Smoke from Cigarettes, 1996) and *Daj zbohom básneniu* (Bid Farewell to Poetry, 2004). In 2004 he won the Literary Fund Prize for his poetry collection *Putovný blázinec* (The Wandering Lunatic, 2004) and his novel *Až do nirvány* (As Far As Nirvana, 2014) was shortlisted for the 2015 Anasoft Litera Award. →



Ivan
Kolenič
***Lovelier
than Sin***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Four prose pieces by one of the cult authors of the middle generation—from the turn of the century, from the time of the crumbling dictatorship and the disillusion which followed from the winning of freedom, seen through the eyes of two young, uninhibited artists—a poet and a painter. Each of the pieces is a separate statement and yet they are unusually linked together through their authentic, unadorned atmosphere and the author's use of harsh realism together with intimate confession.

I'm standing in the glints of a square of creaking houses, with my ear pricked: echoes and falling soot, and a bib of dirty roadways. How sorrowful you are, decrepit street, scene a few metres long a few times over; no one will give you a chance to straighten your bowed back! Dogs growl hoarsely, boxers thumping at the windows. Such is the grace that endures a whole eternity; impressions are as dry as the skull of a corpse—you can easily get to hate them!

“Hallo there, biff-bang, hallo, hallo, dear vagabond...”

I will lose my reason if I'm going to straighten the tumbledown houses' spines; they are falling like chunks of beef on a weighing scales... something, something, something, I cannot describe it, but something has broken in me. Sonia, Nora, Eva, Ingrid: shrill posters, pinned to my tattered soul.

“Hallo, hallo there, waster...”

Perfumes, soapy scents and fragrance of lard. A rasping in the planet Head; I'm sitting on a low wall by the public toilets, I wish to subject my state to a thorough analysis... that despondent face, brrrrr, dear good-for-nothing, I've got dolefulness in the bowels: I fish a cigarette from my pocket and when I inhale the acrid smoke it induces me to vomit. All round me are the lingering stinks of dirt and urine. The grand-scale, pathos-filled snoring of the underworld—all that's missing are their majesties the rats. Again I've the retching urge. Thick blobs of spittle are massing in my mouth. I breathe in deeply till my lungs hurt: tears have welled in my eyes—absorb oxygen, absorb oxygen!

Destiny the extortionist. You lead me into the chambers of illusions. Well, have your belly-laugh...

It's half eleven. Sonia'll be coming in half an hour; what am I going to do? Here come two lads, talking about something in an incomprehensible language, I track them step by step, when they're sufficiently close I ask for a light, unnerved they gape at me, I discover that the one who flicks the lighter for me has a shake in his hand—the truth line on his palm is weeping.

How little suffices for someone to be frightened. If now I were to pose them some superficial, unusual and perverted suggestion, they'd call the police on me. It makes me feel bad that I evoke such an impression...

But the uniformity of principles is literally coming out their ears. They despise me; they would rather go on hunger-strike than have anything to do with a loafer.

Sonia found me pale as an owl, unwashed and irritated...; she found me making a thorough analysis of my state.

“Well, how you look...” pursing her full lips. “Have you been drinking?”

“A bit...”

“Aha, merry times ahead, again,” she said ironically.

“I feel...” catching my belly, “sort of bad...”

“I see that. You look like... Where were you all night? Phah, you stink like a gasworks! No doubt you were with that famous poet again. You know we were supposed to go...”

“I know!” I leaped right into her verbal bombardment. “Do you have money? I’m as hungry as a dog.”

Sonia fell silent, holding back tears; that offended me. Because I was the one who ought to be crying. I was on the alert, in vain, in vain; for reassurance I stroked her hair, and she, oh what’s it now, she twisted away...

“I’m not enjoying it any more,” she said, “you were last sober when... I can’t even remember. Do you want to ruin yourself completely? Why are you killing yourself like that?”

The condition does its own analysis. I’ve an aching head, cigarette in the beak.

“Leave it at that, Sonia, we’ll talk later. I’m unwell, I’m hungry...”

“So what am I supposed to do with you?” She took a few steps. “Come on, let’s not stand here by the jakes...”

“Don’t be angry!” I strode after her, clasping my forehead. “Looks like I’m catching something, I’ll be ill...”

She smiled laconically. Oh-oh. Our entire conversation was beginning to get on my nerves. I spat and rubbed out the spittle with the toe of my shoe. Sonia stood for a moment, nerves at breaking point—then she made a screw-yourself sign and saying “Call me tomorrow” took off through the park.

“Get stuffed,” I said after her and started walking in the opposite direction, and immediately everything desolated me.

I can’t stand forced partings. I raced after her and almost bit my tongue off when I saw the haughty circular movements of her arse; catching up with her, I put on the airs of a wretched cripple. I was planning to use an old manoeuvre.

“Wait,” and I reached for her shoulders, “you know very well that I...”

“That I need you, that I have inspiration, that I’m at rock-bottom, ratata,” she said, not even bothering to look at me. “Bed and money. That’s it. Then for a whole week I don’t see you. You ring and you’re as mouldy as a mattock. Artist, you! Give me a break.”

“Why don’t you want to understand me? I’ve found a new technique; how many times have I explained to you that...”

“Stop!” she screeched. “I know, the unconventional life, desire for freedom, genius. Do you think I’m stupid? So go and be free, why are you clinging onto me?”

Whack! She looked me right in the eyes. I nodded, to make her calm down; maybe she was right. She was right? We were standing on a knobbly pavement like refugees: every moment someone was bumping into us. Sonia caught my arm; och, how well she could do that...

“Let me go now,” she said, “we’d only quarrel. You’ve totally spoiled my mood, ruined my day. If you want to, come in the evening. Sober!”

“Will you give me money?” I asked gracelessly.

She shook an unbeliever’s head and rushed off into the heatwave of the street. I’ll let her go, there’s no point. I was trying to summon up some impression, but I discovered that I felt nothing; a celestial indifference. If just then the armies of the interested had come to execute me, I’d have thanked them and washed my neck so as, perish the thought, not to soil the executioner’s axe.

Hungry and thirsty, I dragged myself into the U Michala cafe. The sour smell of sweat and smoke cut through me like a fishhook; it was lunchhour, the pub was full. Thomas and Dedo and Helena were sitting in the corner at the bar; they were onto me like robbers after a looted emerald... would they ask me for the money I’d borrowed?

“Welcome, Picasso,” Dodo said, smiling.

“Hallo there, gang,” I said with a sigh, bringing a chair from the adjacent table, “sucking the juice again?”

“Where were you yesterday?” asked big-eyed Helena. “Your sweetheart was looking for you...”

“I know...”

“Will you have something?” Thomas came to my rescue. “You’re all shaking. Withdrawal, is it? And the pockets empty...”

I’d scarcely dilated my nostrils when he was signalling to the waitress: “We’ll have three more beers. And a soda...”

“Not for me,” checking his watch with a “yoy!”, Dodo said. “I have to go...”

He took his briefcase and went out—in a state of sobriety that I envied. Silence ensued; Helena winked at Thomas. He poured some liquor into mine.

“Did your joys fly away?” he grinned.

“Joys...” I was speaking like a dreamer, “flew away... Joys... Everything flew away...” I took a draught from the full glass and sparks came in my eyes.

Helena slurped coffee and eyed me sideways with her huge optics.

"I'm going over there," Thomas said and rushed off to the gents; the situation demanded a stupid response. My senses were relaxed from the alcohol, I wasn't ashamed to be a rascal: "Wow, Helena, I'd like to have it off with you..."

The girl was smiling. A chance? God, my sensuality crying to Heaven. "You'd like to...?" she said quite calmly.

I took a slug of beer. "Are you going to work?" I asked, as if from the other side of the universe.

"No," the resourceful businesswoman licked her lips, "I'm not working today."

Thomas came back, which put a freeze on me; I pretended innocence. Someone rushing by greeted us and disappeared.

Thomas swept back his fringe. I had an intermittently jabbing headache, and the condition thus diagnosed is known, if memory does not deceive, as post-hangover. Everything was blurred like a palette and shrill; reality was showing me its dentures. In this airy inebriation I could easily articulate even complex sentences. My thoughts were startlingly coherent.

"I must pop out next door to the shop." Helena rose. "You'll be here for a while, won't you?"

The lass had very nice curves. She caught attention: no one could tell that she sat at a checkout. Thomas nodded: he knew very well the thought that was drilling its way through my head.

When the wide-eyed being had vanished, I said: "Everything's not worth a fart".

"The blues again?" and his words were so unforced that I thought he felt sympathy for me. "Sonia was railing at you, you'd been on the raz, you had no money. And no one understands your work."

"By now I come across as an idiot. Always the same tune."

We spoke about painting as if it were a great, mysterious divinity of creation.

"I've got an empty cottage if you're looking for a place to paint. You can try it, provided you don't turn it into a pigsty and keep shouting till dawn when you're drinking. For a few weeks..."

"D'you mean it?" I chewed on the idea, but then suddenly wilted. Talk, talk, talk. "Your wife would throw us out like a couple of rags."

"I suppose so, yes..."

A painful silence, serenade of muteness. Thomas smiled, lit a cigarette; offered me one. He whispered like an old acquaintance: "Do you want to shag Helena?"

I looked at him with a narrowed eye—were they dating, or not dating, how was it? I'd like to know what he thinks of me. This Thomas, philosopher on a disability pension. Do I strike him as an adventurer? Am I a joke? Does he find my utopian ambitions ridiculous?

“Who wouldn't want to?” I threw down the words on the table like whips.

The doctor of philosophy revealed his teeth: “Who wouldn't want to... But it's no great marvel, you'll see...”

“You're going with her,” I said experimentally, “if you talk about her like that.”

“Everyone... Is going with her...”

Helena returned, broad-hipped, firm-thighed; she was carrying a full shopping bag; the goggle-eyed cashier that everyone... was going with...

“I just came to say goodbye,” the girl said. “I must take this home.” She turned her eyes on me: “Would you help me?”

I looked at Thomas. He was covering his mouth with his hand, his pupils dilated, as if to say: off you go, donkey, she's laying you down on the pillows herself!

“Come on, then,” I said to Helena, managing to finish my beer.

I let the girl go ahead of me; pretending I was leaving alone, I calmly greeted the regular guests.



← Published by
Agentúra SIGNUM,
Bratislava, 2015

Peter ¹⁹⁶⁶ Macsovszky

His literary debut came in 1994 with a remarkable collection of textual collages he titled *Strach z utópie* (Fear of Utopia) which immediately stirred the rather stagnant water of contemporary Slovak poetry and won him the Janko Král' Award. He is the author of several other collections of experimental lyrical texts such as *Cvičná pitva* (Practice Post Mortem, 1997), *Súmračná reč* (The Speech of Dusk, 1999) and *Tovar* (Goods, 2006); he has also published a prose work called *Frustraeón* (2000). Under the gynonym Petra Malúchová he authored the controversial collection of poetry titled *Súmrak cudnosti* (The Dusk of Chastity, 1996). This was followed by the prose works *Lešenie a laná* (Scaffolding and Ropes, 2004), *Hromozvonár* (The Thunder Ringer, 2008) and *Mykat'kostlivcami* (Shaking Skeletons, 2010). His latest poetry collection is called *Santa Panica* (2014). The author uses methods from conceptual art, the technique of textual assemblage and collages—together these form a complex experimental approach unique to him. In 2016 he won the prestigious Anasoft Litera Award for his novel, *Tantalópolis*. →



Peter
Macsovszky
***Santa
Panica***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

Poetry stripped of poeticism? Welcome to an absurd world of parody and sarcasm in which the author ridicules all the cheap, shabby rubbish the media bombards us with, subjecting to his critical glare the whole contemporary world of infotainment. *Santa Panica* is urban poetry dealing with a globalized world and the localized individual, with our isolation in this border-free European space and with our feeling of deracination.

IV.

(fear drills)

*I saw what I saw because I happened to be
where I was when I saw it.*

LINDSAY HALE

Fear of Panic

A conversation is also that someone speaks. I am not writing literature and certainly nothing of worth. To be subdued does not mean being a shy mouse. I know that I do not have the face of an angel. These figures reflect increasing interest.

A conversation is panic. Also that someone speaks is panic. I am not writing is panic. Literature is panic. And certainly is panic. Nothing of worth is panic. To be subdued is panic. Does not mean is panic. Being is panic. A shy is panic. Mouse is panic. I know is panic. That is panic. I do not have is panic. The face is panic. Of an angel is panic. These is panic. Figures is panic. Reflect is panic. Growing is panic. Interest is panic.

Fear of being judged by others. Avoiding situations. With low self-assurance. And fear of criticism. Expressed in complaints. Blushing. Tremors in the hands. Compulsion to urinate. Any of these manifestations will be a first-order problem. The symptoms may escalate to attacks.

Panic Drill

Bastions may not be secure. The visual bestiality of scenes heightened by strongly expressive language with a plasticity and subdued colour is evident. That is to say collapse itself does not mean the end. Why is it important to be an active citizen? Over the grey reality something is always shining. Are you looking for a scratcher post mini 40 cm with mouse?

At the fishponds: a hut with a weir. The water-bailiff's dwelling.
Name of a fisherfolk's restaurant. Castle (chess). In the Balkans
the superior of a monastery. It's named after the fishermen
who guarded the bastions in the 18th century. Bastion and environs
breathe a spirit of art. The building is a combination
of the architecture of the Middle Ages and modern art.

Equally as the methods of rapid relief. May be used.
At the onset. Quickly it enters the fray. Deep breathing.
With symptoms. Of fits of panic. Foodstuffs which are.
High sugar and caffeine. Which may evoke. Limitation
from sweets. One of each. All over the world. They have
known. In their lives and women. Are twice as a probable.

When I reverse a white light shines behind. Hello
shines the apple always. Even when I switch off it shines
a bit for me. The active citizen on the other side is their enemy.
The case gave the media an opportunity for a panic drill.

Fear of Utopia

When is there a need to assess the plans for the rubbish
economy. We will clarify the facts. That I am not writing
does not mean that I have no interest. By what right
do you wish to condemn your neighbour.

The expiring nymph who is wept for
by an impotent satyr with dog
on an abandoned seashore...
We know that the author of this scene
had an ability to discover visions
in the structure of gobs of spit...

(He couldn't stand children. Crying. Men. Cough.
Bells peal. Or monks sang. And when there was
rain. It runs down from the sky. Piero loved to look
at that. How it reflected on the rooftops.)

It is situated right by the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin and ahead of them a long queue forms. But they were also seeking places linked purely with this film – the apartment on Via Margutta 51 or the hairdresser’s on Via della Stamperia 85.

And he crumbled to earth. He went scared of lightning and when the thunder roared that would wrap himself in his cloak. Quickly he shut doors and windows and crouching in the corner of the room. She eased

into a storm. Fear of storms is a natural occurrence. It stimulates instincts. How to cope. Consider the aesthetic element. To glimmer beauty on the ascent. Explain the small chances of lightning. Frightful to train. A person in trust.

V.

(procession)

Shops that rent masks for our self-torturing being

VÍTEŽSLAV NEZVAL

Discordances

Smileys change the way of working of our brain. People justifiably feel they have been deceived. If you want something which you have never yet had do something. To judge the facts does not mean to condemn. I believe that everyone has their guardian angel. It is unheard-of to demand the ruin of one’s fellow-man.

Smilers are changes the way of working of our brain. People justifiably feel swindled. If you want something that you’ve never had to do something. Let us take the facts I do not condemn. I believe that everyone has their guardian angel. That is unheard-of. Therefore they demand the destruction of their fellow-man.

Smilers are changes the way of our brain to work. People justifiably feel swindled. If you want something you've never had to do nothing. Let us take the facts to condemn. I believe that everyone has a guardian angel. That is unheard-of because they demand the destruction of their neighbour.

It is unheard-of thus to demand the ruin of one's fellow-man. I believe everyone has their guardian angel. To judge the facts does not mean to condemn. If you want something you've never yet had do something. People justifiably feel they have been swindled. Smileys change the way of working of our brain.

It is unheard-of by this means one demands the destruction of one's neighbour. I believe everyone has its guardian angel. Review not to condemn the facts. If you want something else never did anything. People justifiably feel swindled. Smilers are changes the way of functioning of our brain.

It is unheard-of by this means one demands destruction of one's neighbour. I believe that everyone has a guardian angel. Review not to condemn the facts. If you want something else never did anything. People justifiably feel swindled. Smilers are changes the way of our brain works. Change the adjustments back.

Prehistoric Fish

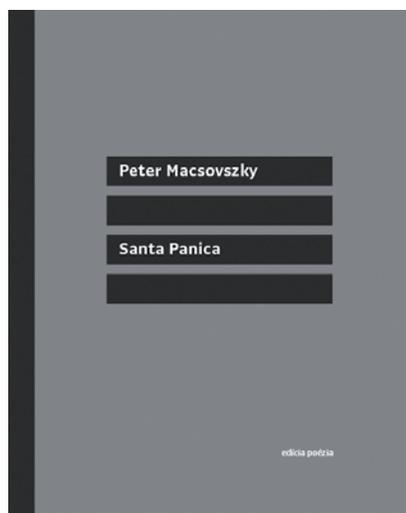
I know what I want I just need to help a little.
What should I do when I find that I have no signal?
The human face has an origin in a primeval fish. Included
with that is fine music at the sending of the angel.

I know that what I am just they need to help
a little. What should I do when I've found that
I have no signal? The human face was discovered
in a prehistoric fishes. Included with that is fine
music with despatch of an angel.

I know that I am to help a little. What to do when
it finds that that is no sign for me. It was discovered
on the face of man in a prehistoric from fish.
He furthermore sent his angel so that from the fine music.

I know I am short. So then if an indication exists
that it has none. It seemed prehistoric fish
in a man's face. And angel fine music.

I am all right. It is. If proofs is that that is not.
To portray from a prehistoric fish in a man's face.
Music angel.



← Published by drewo
a srd, Bratislava, 2014

Veronika Šikulová

1967

The setting of the author's works is the winegrowing town of Modra with a unique atmosphere, smell of ripening grapes, apples and walnuts. We follow the stories of several generations of its inhabitants, forming a minor history alongside the major history going on in the world around. The author made her literary debut in 1997 with her short story collection *Odtiene* (Shades), for which she won the Ivan Krasko Award. She has since had four more collections of short stories published: *Z obloka* (From the Window, 1999), *Mesačná dúha* (The Moon Rainbow, 2003), *Domček jedným ťahom* (A House in a Single Stroke, 2010) and *Diera do svetra* (A Hole in the Sweater, 2012). In her first novel, the three-generation saga *Miesta v sieti* (Places in the Net, 2011), she tells the story of a family using authentic documents such as letters from the front and prison, as well as their everyday correspondence. She used a similar autobiographical approach in her book *Freska v dome* (Fresco in the House, 2014) and in 2015 won the Anasoft Litera Award for her novel *Medzerový plod* (The Foulbrood, 2014). Her newest prose book is *Petrichor* (2016). →



Veronika
Šikulová

***The
Foulbrood***

Extract translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood →

The novel *Foulbrood* is a free-flowing narrative made up of small episodes in which people, tales, objects and circumstances all enter. The novel's central theme is coming to terms with the gradual decline of the mother who suffers from an incurable illness as well as the effort to make the most of what little time remains before she departs this world.

She leaves her little girl to her son and her fate and dashes out of the house, the taxi must be out there waiting for her, she's off to a concert. Is she a bad mum? Shouldn't she go back? What about her daughter? What if... And what if... She is going. She's not going and that's it! Where's that cabbie? She stands in front of the gate watching out for the cab, which is late. Someone up there must be trying to give her a signal that she should go back home!

But she did tell him that she had to be in Bratislava by seven o'clock. A friend of her son's strides confidently towards their gate with a bottle of Coke, some crisps and computer games in his arms. Quite an organic party that'll be! The cab shoots round the corner, twenty minutes late.

"Where on earth have you been, didn't we agree a time?" she asks, worried.

"I'm so sorry, had to take this doe rabbit to my cousin's to have her knocked up. Here, take this box and hold it in your lap to make sure she doesn't jump out. Don't worry, she won't piss on you, it's lined with plastic."

Reluctantly she puts the box with the doe in it on her lap, praying it doesn't piss all over her.

"So who's going to hold it for you on the way back from Bratislava?"

"Nobody, that's the thing, I gotta take it back home first so she doesn't get all stressed out. She's freshly mated."

The freshly-mated, stressed-out doe is hopping about in her box and there's a suspicious smell. Tarted up, and getting all crumpled by the box, our heartless mother, no less stressed out than the rabbit doe, is headed for a concert.

"If your rabbit pees all over me or whatever, I won't be able to go to the concert. You're sure it's lined with plastic?"

"Sure I'm sure! Well, not plastic but I've stuffed a rag inside! You won't believe the amount of piss that can come out of a rabbit, young lady."

"It's not funny!" She looks at herself in the rear-view mirror and can't believe her own eyes. What a mess!

They roar up and down Pezinok's narrow streets, stressing out the doe and eventually arrive at the taxi driver's house. The cabbie picks up the rabbit mother-to-be and disappears into the depths of the house. She sits in the cab looking at her watch as it becomes increasingly obvious that she will not just be sorry to have gone to this concert but that she's certain to miss it.

Where's that fellow? She'll tell him to take her back home, she'll kick her son away from the computer, bin the crisps and put her little girl to bed.

Dammit, she's not going to make it! She gets out of the car. The cabbie's neighbour is out in the street. She leans on the car, dressed up to the nines and dolled up.

"That moron is only fit to drive rabbits but not people, eh?" says the neighbour, trying to chat her up.

"What do you mean?"

"That fucking idiot, we go mushroom picking together, agree to meet at six in the morning and blow me if he isn't still kipping at eight!"

Oh, great, she thinks. The door opens, the cabbie's wife and kids spill out with slices of bread in their hands.

"He's just going to have a shower and he'll be all yours. He got all grubby, just finished painting a fence at his cousin's. Don't worry, young lady, he can drive like Fittipaldi when he wants to!"

"I'm not worrying, but I'll be late for the concert. Can't you take me?"

"I'd take you to the end of the world, love," the neighbour offers. "No charge! So? Coming?"

"No thanks," she says, turning down the offer, brandishing guns and knives at him in her imagination.

"Come and have a cup of coffee, young lady, everything'll be fine, you'll see," says Mrs Cabbie trying to comfort her.

"I don't want any coffee, I want to go to the concert!" she says, standing up for her consumer rights.

The cabbie's wife goes in, probably to tell her husband to get a move on, but a minute later she's back offering her some walnuts!

"Come on, my dear, have some walnuts! Our own produce! They're nice and greasy like schnitzels! Stick some in your handbag, something to nibble."

She imagines herself cracking walnuts in her high heels on the fluffy carpets winding around the corridors of the Reduta concert hall.

She stuffs the walnuts into her bag, though she just feels like throwing them at everything in sight. At the neighbour, the cabbie's wife, the knocked-up rabbit doe, and the cabbie...

At that moment the freshly—showered Fittipaldi emerges, gives his neighbour a wink as if he'd just chatted up some bird, and off they zoom towards Bratislava.

They career around other cars: these must be the last hours of her life she thinks, her poor little kids happy that their mum's gone while she might end up with bandaged legs somewhere in A&E, she feels sorry for herself and angry that she decided to go to the concert, but nothing can stop the cabbie, he keeps going on about rabbits, how he started

breeding them, about them having babies, about his family and how they always have rabbit meat for Sunday dinner and lie to the children that it's chicken, about their walnuts that are as huge as horses' balls and about his cousin, how he'd done up his house but then his wife has gone and left him for a neighbour and how she ought to be sorry now.

By the time they get to Reduta they're the best of friends.

"You had to wait so long, just pay me half..."

"I didn't mind the wait," she says, pressing the money into the cabbie's hand.

"No, no," he says.

"Take it!" She won't give up.

She's almost sorry she might never see the taxi chap again.

After the concert she gets a lift home from a girlfriend. Her son and his friend are shocked, they had no idea how short concerts are, they surprise her with the boyish care they lavished on her little girl, and she surprises herself by resolving that from now on she will always let her son babysit as he made such a good job of it, and the little girl is happy too, fast asleep and not screaming.

She pours herself a brandy, then another, and one more after that and, thoroughly sloshed, sits on the terrace sobbing about her mother.

The next morning she finds three huge walnuts in her handbag.



VERONIKA ŠIKULOVÁ
MEDZEROVÝ PLOD

← Published by
Slovart, Bratislava,
2014

Peter Šulej

1967

Poet, prose writer, publisher and journalist, editor of *Vlna* (Wave), a contemporary culture and art magazine. He is also a member of the so-called ‘text generation’, an experimental branch of contemporary Slovak poetry. In 2014, he published his seventh collection of poems, *nódy* (nodes). As well as poetry and prose, he also writes radio plays and is the co-author of four contemporary dance performances as well a member of the creative team behind the *generátor x: hmlovina* (1999) and *generator x_2: nové kódexy* (2013) projects. He is the author of two collections of scifi stories: *Misia* (Mission, 1995) and *Elektronik Café* (2001). The novel *Spolu* (Together, 2015), shortlisted for the Anasoft Litera Award, is a loose sequel to his novel *História* (History, 2009) and the second part in a planned trilogy. →



Peter Šulej

Together

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

Conjugal life as a threesome? The main character, Daniel, a reporter, news presenter and DJ, has left his young tearaway years far behind. Now something of a sceptic and yet still a dreamer, he realizes that the modern age marginalizes such people as he is. He seeks refuge in memories of childhood and of his charismatic grandfather who travelled the whole world. He meets Andrea, a self-confident femme fatale with lesbian tendencies, an art historian with her own perception of time. One day Michaela appears on the scene—young, submissive, devoted. Almost immediately she fills the missing space in their relationship mosaic and becomes a part of their triangular love game.

Grandma, who is the Apricot Sprite?

A very good tree spirit—and the husband of the Dream Fairy.

The Dream Fairy? I only know the Tooth Fairy but I don't know if she really exists.

So who was it that took your milk teeth away when they fell out, then?

I'm not sure if it wasn't Mummy. He looks doubtful.

No, of course it wasn't. It was the Tooth Fairy because that's her job and the Dream Fairy also has a job.

Oh. And he ponders for a moment. But how did the Apricot Sprite get here?

How, how? He came with the tree.

But Grandma, I'm not five anymore, do you understand? With the tree? Do trees walk? How can they when they have roots?

No, Danko, they don't. But seeds can travel long distances....

And where did the apricot travel here from?

Oh, such difficult questions! Ask Grandad, he roamed round those backwaters once long ago.

Backwaters?

Somewhere far away in Russia, perhaps even in Asia—I don't know everywhere he once ventured. Ask him.

Please just tell me one more thing. Are they supposed to be good?

Yes, they are. And not just *supposed to be*, but really are good. The Dream Fairy battles against Satana and the Apricot Sprite helps her with it.

And is Satana bad?

Bad? Oh she's the worst. She's an absolute monster and steals from us the dreams which the Dream Fairy sends. But quiet now and quickly into bed....

He obeys and quickly snuggles up under the quilt stuffed with the goose feathers which Grandma patiently picked one winter after another. He squeezes up to her.

I'm a bit scared.

No reason to be. The Apricot Sprite has his clothes ready and they are like a knight's armour. And not any old armour but the hardest in the world. Now close your eyes and go to sleep.

The next day he went to his Grandad. He was putting cheap Partisan cigarettes into his silver box.

Are you better? he asks him.

Yes, the Apricot Sprite and the Dream Fairy have made me better, he says gleefully.

Oh my! He sighs and chuckles to himself but the boy notices nothing and goes on:

Grandad, Grandma said that you once went to where the apricot and the Apricot Sprite came from.

Hmmm. Well if Grandma said so...

But where is it? She said in Asia somewhere.

Are you asking where the apricot comes from?

Well, yes, actually yes, says Daniel hesitantly

From China. You know where that is, don't you? Daniel shakes his head. He doesn't know where China is. The next day he finds a large map of the world in the living room with China in the middle so that he will always know....But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Grandad shakes his head in disbelief.

Do you really not know where China is? he asks him. And then he gets up to bring down a large atlas of the world.

Look. Note the page number. Northern China. The home of the Apricot Sprite.

And have you really been there? asks the boy without stopping.

A long, long time ago, I passed nearby. There is a dreamy mystery and vagueness about how he speaks which makes the boy even more curious.

So did you go there on your own and did you just, like, pass by China? The boy can't quite get his head round it.

No, I wasn't on my own. There were several of us but just one fellow from Bystrica and his brother—and I was there with my pal. He speaks in the Bystrica dialect, using the local declensions and assimilation. They ended up staying in China. And that fellow started building houses there. Perhaps he will come back here one day and build you a house. He says it though he knows very well that László, Lacika, Laco died in the USA of a heart attack a few years after the end of the Second World War. His body was later brought back to the Lutheran cemetery behind the church on Lazovna Street. If he is up to it, he goes there once every year to stand by his grave in silence and pay his respects. Perhaps he will come back one day in another body with another mission; half the world believes it so there may be something in it. But he is not going to trouble his grandson with such thoughts.

Does he travel here like the Apricot Sprite?

Exactly like the Apricot Sprite. Only those Communist whores have to leave! He murmurs the last few words to himself so that Daniel and especially Grandma don't hear them. He has to be careful because Grandma can hear everything and always rebukes him for such outbursts: what did he establish the party for, why pave the road for the Communists if that's how he feels about them? It is pointless to explain to her that today's Communists have nothing in common with those from before the war, that all those old comrades of his were full of lofty ideas, wanted to change the world for the better and had no idea how it would all end up.

Now they all steal like magpies, he likes to tell her but she doesn't listen and always says they are one of the same, all cut from the same cloth.

Grandad, have you ever seen him?

Who? he asks in surprise, his mind on other things.

The Apricot Sprite, of course.

Oh! No Danko, only Grandma can see him—and not just him.

But you also pick the apricots.

Yes, but he only reveals himself to a few chosen people. And every tree has its own sprite. You know what, run to Grandma and ask her to explain.

When he finds Grandma, she is skinning a rabbit. She quickly disappears round the corner so he can't see anything but his stomach still heaves. He can't stand the sight of blood—he will have to wait. From the kitchen comes the sound of the radio: it is the request show for people celebrating their birthday or nameday. He sits on the steps and listens to all the various congratulations. Grandma eventually appears carrying a bowl full of rabbit meat.

So there you are! Don't worry, I saw you, you little rascal. But her voice is kind and conciliatory. You're scared of blood but you'll eat some rabbit, won't you?

All he can manage is a barely noticeable nod of his head.

I'll stew it the way you like it. That'll put you back on your feet.

Grandma, Grandad told me that he has never seen the Apricot Sprite.

It's true—he hasn't. Only people who believe in him ever see him.

Ah-ha. But do believe in him, or in the Dream Fairy or in Satana and the others? Because Grandad said there are others.

You know what—they don't care what people think. They have their own life and people have theirs. And she starts to chop an onion.

And the others?

Which others? Oh give me peace, you can see what I'm doing. And I'm blubbing now because of the onion; you're distracting me and I've forgotten to put some crust in my mouth. Give me a hankie. She quickly wipes her tears away and slips a thin slice of bread between her teeth to filter out the onion aroma.

Daniel waits for her to pour the chopped onion into the sizzling oil and then starts pestering her again.

Grandad said there are other spirits.

So you're not going to give me any peace. Well, since you ask, every tree has its own spirit, she says, confirming what his grandfather said. And now leave me to cook otherwise I'll be in the kitchen till the cows come home. You can go and look for those spirits.

And so it happened. Although it took Daniel nearly thirty years, he finally found it. All right, it is the Lilac Sprite—given it's a lilac tree, it can hardly be the Apricot Sprite. But he has found it and God only knows where it has come from. In fact, it may actually be native. It is the Lilac Sprite who is protecting him.

Wonderful, says Daniel out loud.

There is a moment's silence and then Andrea unromantically whispers: I wanted your semen to trickle down my thigh³. Don't fall in love with me, ok? she says more seriously and then adds with urgency:

Promise me, please!

That was Satana speaking not Andrea. And yet Daniel still sobs noiselessly and feels the tears coming to his eyes. She couldn't see or hear anything. The Lilac Sprite has mercifully closed his eyes; she can only have felt it. She pats his belly and gaily announces:

No sadness please! Time for a bath! Andrea is back in her body—Satana has gone. The Lilac Sprite's clothes are ready and are also a protective shield.

Sorry? asks Daniel and can't believe his own eyes. The tip of her chin is pointing towards the park fountain.

You're not being serious. But before he finishes his sentences she runs naked through the park and jumps into the fountain. The water is spurting out of it according to some preprogrammed algorithm.

Daniel collects their things and walks up to her. He hears the waking birds slowly beginning their dawn oratorio. The windows of the houses round about are all dark—they don't need to worry about anybody watching them. And yet he still has a strange feeling and for a moment he hesitates. But when this nymph of his rises up from the water and he sees her beautiful breasts, he realizes that he has found himself in a three-dimensional remake of *La Dolce Vita* in which he is playing the main role. And though the water is not very warm, their lovemaking soon has their whole bodies tingling with heat. So much so that in the end, Daniel must revise his opinion of what is romantic.

Darts become their regular activity, the park their bedroom and the fountain their bathroom.

3 I wanted (...) down my thigh. Ivana Gibová, Shirt from the book *The Sediment*.

* * *

Andrea told him about her male friend on their ‘first date’, so it was more pragmatic than romantic. She introduced them to each other (they met by chance in the street and there was no way of avoiding it). This was the very next day after their premiere of sleeping together, making love, becoming intimate—he himself did not know how to name it precisely. He felt passion, interest, attentiveness... he felt himself becoming more and more immersed, so that to use the word ‘sleeping’ was probably inadequate; it would after all be better to substitute it with ‘making love’. Andrea explained to him that although she and her friend lived—or rather just spent their days—together, for years and years there had been nothing between them; they were more like pals, they were brother and sister, just housemates, no intimate sharing, absolutely no sex. She emphasised the end of this sentence by saying it in English.



← Published by
Marenčin PT,
Bratislava, 2015

Lukáš

Luk

1972

Lukáš Luk is the pseudonym of the author whose first book was a contemporary novel *Príbehy Považského Sokolca* (Tales of Považský Sokolec, 2010), which immediately reached the final ten in the Anasoft Litera Award. Another of his works, *Záhada Považského bula* (The Mystery of the Považie Yokel, 2013) was also among the ten Anasoft Litera finalists. In 2015 he published a book entitled *Zlodeji medu* (Honey Thieves). The writer carefully guards his anonymity. As he himself says: “I realise that using a pseudonym presents a problem for the presentation of the book and no doubt this deprives me of many things, but this secrecy suits me and gives me a feeling of pleasure that is hard to define. I don’t want it to sound childish, buck-passing, or certainly not cowardly, but for the present I value this feeling most highly.” →



Lukáš Luk

Honey Thieves

Extract translated by Magdalena Mullek →

In Central Europe the first kingdoms are taking shape; nomadic tribes are settling and Christianity is becoming the established religion. At first all this evokes the image of a serious, historiographical text. But is it possible to view the key events in the history of Central Europe with detachment, amusement and irony? It certainly is and you will discover what an important role in our history was played by nuts, honey and roast geese.

A dove flew out of the branches of a sprawling old oak. It had been startled by the sound of two axes cutting into the trunk of the massive tree. The woodcutters took a moment to synchronize their strokes, and soon the axe blades of the two bearded men dressed in long habits were cutting deeper and deeper in a steady rhythm. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. The hollow-sounding whacks suggested the presence of a large cavity inside the oak. An old tree with a crumbling soul cannot keep resisting the strength of the wind, and it is only a matter of time before its weakened trunk succumbs to the ravages of nature and gives up its dominant position in the canopy in order to make space for the next set of warriors in the silent struggle of branches for their share of sunlight.

The younger of the woodcutters soon lost his rhythm. After a few more strokes he gave up. Winded, he staggered away to wipe the sweat off his face on the sleeve of his grey robe. The older worker guffawed, spat into his hands, and resumed the laborious toil with more verve and greater speed than before. His effort and determination paid off. The huge branch growing only a few feet above the ground gave its last convulsive shudder, and under its own weight it started to crash to the ground with a deafening roar. The older man leapt aside to avoid being killed by the collapsing oak limb. The falling branch hadn't completely landed in the soft grass yet when a strange yellow light flooded the forest clearing. An astounding amount of golden honey poured out of the hole left by cutting off the bottom branch of the hollow tree. The honey flowed down the wrinkled trunk of the maimed tree, spilling onto the grass below. There was so much of it that it rolled down the gentle slope all the way to the feet of the stunned woodcutters. They were so dumbfounded by the miraculous honey that for a moment they just stared at it. Then they tossed aside their axes into the nearby bushes, and, as if on command, they plunged into the sticky golden mass the way exhausted pilgrims plunge into a lake after a long march across the desert. They rolled around in the honey, rubbed it all over their beards and hair, and all the while they squealed like little children. They couldn't get enough of the surprising treasure. Over and over they scooped it up in their hands and stuffed it into their mouths and down their habits. The honey smelled wonderful, it glowed, and it jingled like a herd of sheep grazing on a slash-and-burn field.

Suddenly there was banging off in the distance. At first the sound was muffled, but it grew louder and louder, until it drowned out the joyful cries of the two men as well as the ringing of the miraculous honey. The image of the forest clearing with the oak, the woodcutters, and the honey

slowly faded, and the younger of the honey-hunter brothers from the settlement in the hills found himself back at home in his log cabin, on his sheep-skin-covered pallet. His bleary eyes tried to focus on the figure standing next to his bed whose fists were pounding on the oak boards.

“Get up, we’re going to the fortuneteller,” thundered the voice of the disturber of his dreams, in which he recognized his older brother. “Pack up three honeycombs of dark honey and a bag of mead. We need to get there before sunrise.”

Magic and fortunetelling had made their way onto King Stephen’s blacklist. It was well known that the benevolent king yearned to match the pomp, the courtly manners, and most importantly the widespread Christian faith of the lands ruled by the arrogant and pretentious kings and princes who looked down their noses on his court from the direction of the setting sun. The ambitious unifier of peoples nomadic and settled couldn’t have cared less about the language of worship in the shrines of his kingdom. He was grateful for every chapel and for each itinerant monk. All that mattered to him was that to the outside world his country should have a Christian ring. Trying to reform the wild Pecheneg and Székely tribes and force them to practice the Christian faith was no easy task, especially when the ruler of the land owed many a victory in battle to their tribal chiefs. The Slavs hadn’t fully embraced God’s word either. In remote locations they still offered sacrifices to their pagan idols. Indeed, being the builder of a single Christian home for so many quarrelsome heathen children, who were often caught halfway between pagan delusion and the bliss of Christian life, was not an enviable job.

Old Kvasomila, who was well versed in the magic and incantations of her ancestors, threw a handful of dried leaves onto the fire. A bright yellow flame flickered up from the coals. Then she threw seven pieces of doe droppings, a belladonna root, and a dried bat wing into a small ceramic pot with a long wooden handle. She pulled a few hot coals from the fire with an iron rake and added them to the pot. Her one-room hut filled up with acrid smoke. The younger of the honey-hunter brothers was sitting on a three-legged stool in the middle of the room, and, docile as a sheep, he watched what the old hag was doing with the smoking pot. The older brother stood by the door, just in case the latest victim of the ancient enchantments decided to make a run for it.

The toothless hag came up to the poor wretch and started to mutter strange incantations, all the while circling his head with the smoking pot. The recipient of her dark arts started to cough, and his eyes popped out.

But the enchantress wasn't discouraged. Quite the opposite. She sped up the circular motion and then suddenly stopped the smoking pot right under the poor man's nose, letting out a piercing screech. The unexpected shriek had the desired effect. It startled the young honey hunter, who took a deep breath and groaned. His eyes rolled back into his head; he fell off the stool, threw up the entire contents of his stomach, including a cake from last Christmas; and finally he fell into a peaceful slumber. Then Kvasomila reminded the older brother to enact his plans quickly, because her magic would only last for fifteen days.

9

The garden at the monastery of St. Hippolytus had an unusual tree growing in it. Its branches spread far and wide, and it had been too large for the space enclosed by the stone walls of the garden for some time. Its leafy arms stretched well past the footprint of the herbularium as if it were trying to shelter half the world beneath its branches. Brother Ignatius, the caretaker of the medicinal herbs, would have loved to chop down the massive tree because every autumn the monster's fallen leaves poisoned the entire garden with their toxic bitterness. Needless to say, he could do nothing of the sort because other than the icon of St. Hippolytus and the book of accounts of the monastery vineyards, the massive tree was the most valuable thing hidden behind the monastery's walls.

The reason for the monks' extraordinary reverence for the strange tree was that every year at the beginning of summer small green balls appeared on its branches, as if the tree had woken up from its agony and in short order wanted to delight the world with sweet tasty fruit. But the outcome was lamentable. Instead of tasty sweet pomes, the tree produced hard green balls the size of quail eggs. Don't even think about taking a bite of one! The awful bitterness would make you pucker, and amidst spitting up slime you would most certainly let out a smattering of offensive words, despite the fact that the Venerable Abbot Philip could be nearby.

But things changed as late summer turned to autumn and gaggles of wild geese started to crisscross the sky. The ugly green skin of the bizarre fruit split open, revealing a brownish egg-shaped body with a hard shell. If the autumn wind blew down a few of the dried fruits and you cracked one of their wrinkly shells, you would discover an odd gnarly seed of exceptional taste. Chewing on it would tantalize your tongue with flavors of hazelnut, honey, spice, but also frog's leg and mare's milk. The fresher the fruit, the spicier the skin. The meat, on the other hand, tasted like milk. Eating a few handfuls of the peculiar nuts would satisfy as well as two roast quail. This attribute made the tree invaluable to the annual

cycle of monastic life. Every year on Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of the forty-day fast, the most pious brethren received forty nuts, which were to be their only sustenance until the celebration of the Easter Vigil. One nut for each day of the fast. It would seem that the remarkable tree with bitter leaves had a mysterious connection with its human caretakers, because just one nut a day delivered enough nourishment to the belly of a pious mortal that even though he was weakened by the fast, he didn't drop like a fly, and on the fortieth day he still had the strength to sing the celebratory *Sanctus*.

Brother Ignatius, the apothecary of St. Hippolytus as well as its grower of medicinal herbs, was just raking the fallen leaves beneath the walnut tree when he heard loud banging on the monastery gates. He removed his gardening apron, brushed off his hands, and ran out of the garden to the wicket. He opened the small window on the heavy oak gate which was reinforced by ironwork to find out who was disturbing the peace of the monastery at the same time that all of the Benedictine brothers except Ignatius, for he was the one on duty, were sitting down in the pews of the chapel to chant for over an hour.

A peasant he had never seen before was standing in front of the gate, holding the reins of three fully loaded donkeys, which were panting beneath their heavy cargo. When the visitor noticed that someone was looking at him through the small opening in the gate, he took off his fur cap and asked to see the Abbot. The pagan was told he'd have to wait a while, so he wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand and led the worn out donkeys to shade by the monastery wall. Fatigued, he sat down and waited patiently.

The Venerable Abbot Philip ordered Ignatius, as the brother on duty, to summon several strong novices from the refectory. They were to help him carry the sacks of mead and stacks of honeycomb wrapped in goatskins down to the cellar. And brother Maurus was to prepare a novice habit – the Benedictine monks of the Monastery of St. Hippolytus had a new brother to look forward to. That is, if he passed his probationary period.

All personnel matters of the monastery fell under the authority of the abbot, and the weight of the decision to accept a new member of the community rested squarely on his shoulders. He always had to consider carefully whether the prospective entrant into the spiritual condition was driven by an honest desire to devote his earthly years to contemplation, or was driven instead by some mercenary motive. Most of the time the abbot could easily distinguish a disingenuous bum needing to hide from the world for one reason or another from a reflective fellow looking for

spiritual tranquility behind the monastery's walls. With a raised finger he always warned prospective entrants that the members of his order spent their days in prayer and work, therefore any loafing in one's cell was completely out of the question. When it came to accepting new members, an assurance from a trustworthy person who had known the candidate for some time was always helpful. Usually a clergyman or a respected member of the community would vouch for the applicant. Alas, the newcomer's economic contribution was not to be overlooked either – after all, the monastery did not live on heavenly manna. Consequently, any type of entrance fee was always welcome, be it a one-time or a regular donation.

That day's decision to admit a new member into the ranks of the Benedictine monastery beneath Bison Mountain was unequivocal. Right after Abbott Philip arrived, the sweaty highlander started to tell him with great zeal about how, ever since he was a little boy, his younger brother had wanted to wear a monk's habit and serve the Order in the silence of the monastery. They came from a well-known honey-hunting family, which understood the gravity of his decision. Which was why he had taken the liberty of bringing several bags of delicious mead and a few honeycombs of the best forest honey for the monastery's use. As the honey hunter spoke, he was untying the bags of mead from one of the donkeys and placing them at the surprised monk's feet. He didn't give the abbot the slightest chance to object. As he kept talking, he took the load off the second donkey, until the stunned Philip was surrounded by a mound of honeycombs carefully packed in goat skins, which gave off an intoxicating sweet and spicy aroma of forest flowers and pine sap.

The business proposition at the end of the honey hunter's speech was straightforward: If his younger brother was accepted into the ranks of the Order, a caravan of donkeys laden with precious honey products would arrive at the monastery around the same time each year. The Venerable Abbot Philip wiped the narrow trickle of clear saliva from the corners of his mouth and chased away the first bee attracted by the irresistible aroma. With an unconsciously-raised right index finger he quickly counted the honey parcels, and then he asked the honey hunter when he was planning to bring over his pious brother. The honey hunter spun around and leapt to the third donkey. He loosened a few leather straps and pulled a large canvas sack off the donkey's back. It made a loud thud as it landed. Smiling apologetically, the honey hunter untied the hemp rope, and out of the bag appeared a limp arm and a disheveled head with its eyes rolled back.

For twelve days the young highlander amazed the inhabitants of the monastery beneath Bison Mountain with his humility and a certain mystical aura of pious stupor. His tame gaze into the unknown and his quiet whispering gave the impression that after many years the monastery walls had once again welcomed an exceptional candidate for wearing the habit. He sat submissively on a bench in the refectory while the novice Maurus cut his long wavy hair and used a sharp razor to shave the top of his head as a sign of his affiliation with the Order.

For twelve days he ate no more than a few crumbs of dark rye bread for dinner and sought out dark corners where he gave himself over to quiet contemplation. During chant he sat in pews with the other postulants and bowed his head respectfully before the older members of the Order.

For twelve days he labored assiduously in the monastery's orchards, working to the point of exhaustion cutting dry branches from fruit-bearing apple trees and thoroughly covering the cuts with thick ox blood mixed with soot and ashes. For twelve days he chopped ash logs in the woodshed, making shingles for a new roof for the scriptorium and the belfry.

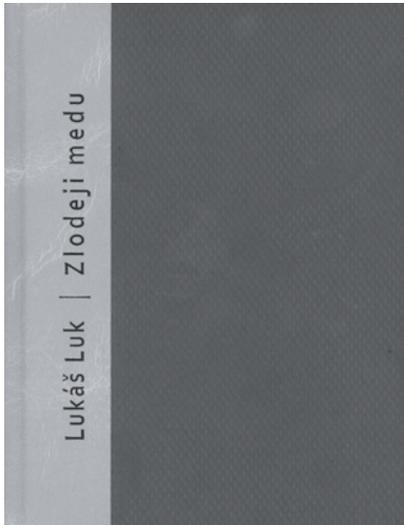
And for all twelve days Abbot Philip watched the new postulant with delight, as he was almost certain he would soon be sending news to the royal court about the existence of an extraordinary Benedictine brother who had been spared all human frailties, including bodily needs. A brother who, it would seem, topped all of the ecstatic hermits. A brother who, judging by his appearance and demeanor, was on his way to becoming the first Ugrian saint, which King Stephen couldn't wait to get.

But on the thirteenth day an inexplicable thing happened. The brethren, worn out by the day's labors in the orchard and the workshops, gathered in the refectory to have their well-deserved meal. After a long prayer, kettles were brought from the kitchen full of strong horseradish soup, which prevents illness, reinvigorates tired limbs, and purifies the body of unclean forces. The postulant from the mountains gulped down a bowl full of the potent horseradish broth, and together with the other brethren he waited for the Abbot to say a short prayer of thanksgiving. The Abbot wasn't even a third of the way through the Glory Be when the young man stirred forcefully. He shook his head nervously, gave out a loud belch, and gaped at the brothers sitting nearby as if he were seeing them for the first time. Then he jumped up from the bench, started to flail his arms, and swore like an honest-to-goodness pagan.

First he cursed his own brother for some unknown reason. Then he sent a certain seer named Kvasomila to the depths of hell for supposedly making him drink magical brews and inhale the smoke of bitter herbs.

In his rage he called on the god Perun to smite the two scoundrels, and he asked the goddess Morena to sow leprosy under their skin. Then his face lit up and he carried on about someone named Medna, raving about the smell of her gorgeous hair and her snow-white breasts, which he was prepared to caress with his trembling hands. Finally, he lashed out at the brothers sitting nearby to let him out at once, because he had to go find Medna. He had to go see her. “And you can keep these scratchy rags!” The madman thundered as he started to take off the postulant’s robes, resolved to run away from the monastery the way nature had made him. The few brothers who had not yet covered their ears in shock quickly restrained him and prevented further scandal.

Brother Ignatius, who had been summoned immediately, ran to his shop and gathered a bunch of dried oregano, a few sprigs of lavender, and a handful of St. John’s Wort from the drawers. Briefly steeped in boiling wine, these herbs were sure to calm the frenzied mind of the young wretch. Too bad the monastery’s apothecary didn’t have an herb for gloom, which had befallen the Venerable Abbot Philip.



Lukáš Luk | Zlodeji medu

← Published by
PETRUS, Bratislava,
2015

Agda Bavi

Pain

1969

Controversial writer, scriptwriter and musician, he publishes poetry and prose under various pseudonyms and monograms in both domestic and foreign magazines and journals. His novel *Koniec sveta* (End of the World, 2006) won The East European Bank Austria Literaris Award in 2008, its preface serving as the basis for the film *Babie leto* (Indian Summer). He made his literary debut with an occult book of poems called *Kost' & Koža* (Skin and Bone, 2002). In recent years he has published a collection of poems called *Euröpain* (2014) and two collections of short stories *More. Love. Čajky.* (More. Love. Chicks, 2014) and *Východ z raja* (Leaving Eden, 2015). His work is characterized by a rich linguistic variety; his language never seeks to deaden but instead revives within itself its hidden and forgotten qualities. →



Agda Bavi Pain

Leaving Eden

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

This book contains twelve suggestive stories that dip deeper into history and into the author's creative past. Fallen angels, crazy partisans, divine assassins, new-age suicidal saviours, wretches octemally with the goodness of wild animals within and false heroes who mistake crime for good deeds and thus harm the innocent—all of these appear in his stories. When reading them, you will meet the gunfire of a post-apocalyptic battlefield, the bloody orgies of vampires, slippery laboratories and showy coronation pageants. Do not look for easy solutions: instead submit to the playfulness of Pain's remarkable language.

The Last One

Where could a bear have come from, with plains all around? No hills anywhere, just solitude. Before the war there were mountains and valleys but the Russians and Germans had levelled everything and the land was good for nothing. And we had to get used to it. And a new costume soon caught on—work overalls, polyester trousers with a hole in the seat and rubber boots; before we had worn floral patterns and gone around like aborigines. There was a different fashion then and black stars glistened on the colourful togs of our violinists. According to the new *Gipsy Code*, heaven on earth awaited them at the other end of the world, beyond the great river. And they went wherever they were sent with a song and a smile and star on the left side of their backs so that they could immediately be shot if, God forbid, their wild black legs tried to make a run for it.

Koščurik talks about how he escaped from the concentration camp—or from the Guards, whichever you want to believe. You may choose, he says with a smile. After the uprising, his body was daubed all over: one number on his forearm was lost in that jungle like a snake. He testified to everyone that he had been in a camp; they all then testified the same: it was him!

Afterwards he joined the partisans for a while—disguised in an enemy uniform so that he wouldn't be easily spotted.

When he was coming back with stolen food from the village one day he captured two German soldiers who had captured his comrade, Déges. Round the corner they were then captured by another German but fortunately Kár then captured all of them (he is dead now) so that by the end, they made quite a crowd. The sides were evenly matched and the sniff of blood was in the air. Our boys fired all their cartridges into the air while the Germans emptied the magazines of their machine guns and pistols. Everyone then could freely go their own way or duke it out in a fistfight. Koščurik can't remember any more. Could they have all then got drunk together (his mind is a blank)? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe he just deserves a smack in the gob for lying the whole time.

From time to time he bangs heads with his war comrades and then they reminisce about how they liberated Prague, Rome and Berlin from the curse of the Reds, the proletariats, the protégés, the Bolshevik Jews, from all kinds. How they captured people, pillaged and served up shit. How they hung out people to dry. How, how, how! How they attacked and escaped, how they had lice, syphilis-induced impotence and malnutrition. How in a deserted village over the border, while looking for something to bite into, they scoured every cottage and then gathered in front of the

church, the meeting place of those who sicken, thirst and hunger. Drunk with fatigue and firewater, sitting on the steps before the prayer-house, they were suddenly joined out of nowhere by a little white dog, a poodle or Chihuahua.

“But will we find a pot big enough?”

“You just hold him and I’ll chop his head off. You can then skin him—you know how to.”

So said Karol Ferovič Kulcsár, better known as Kár (because he never thought things through). It’s good, though, that they didn’t kill the dog; they did bad enough things when they were sober. Everyone joined the uprising for a different reason. One of them wanted to get away from his parents, another from his wife; Škultéty saw it as an opportunity, someone else as an adventure and young Koščúrik as a free-for-all with no shortage of shagging, robbing and streams of blood. And yet it was strange especially because during the war we all did pretty well for ourselves.

“Oh, they were great times. There was no shortage of lolly!”

“Danubian dollars! *Fuckinloadsamoney, yes, please!!*”

“Now, there’s never any money! But there always used to be, ooh there did!”

“Oh aye – there did, there really did! I’ve seen it!”

They pour something into their mouths and filled their throats to the brim. The worst thing it is possible to drink. Hooch now has the value of gold, is worth more than salt, paraffin and any Turkish spices. What can you do with gold and salt anyway? The only thing worse is having no one to drink with. That’s why Grandad got married—to that young bride hanging on the wall by the door like a picture, next to the violin. To that harridan who later screamed at him saying that his violin also had two holes and he should have married that instead if he didn’t like her ample shape. Koščúrik calmed her down.

“First we met, then we got close and now we just bump into each other.”

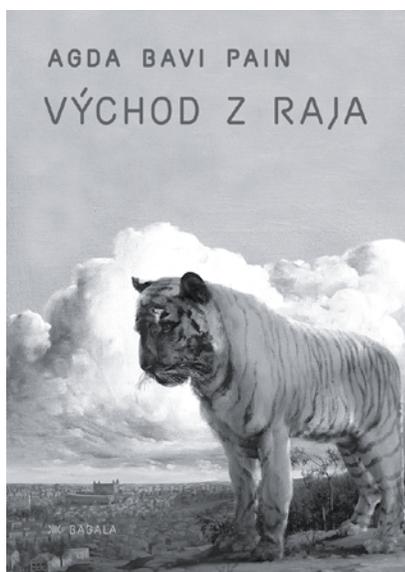
He didn’t even hug her while she lived. She miscarried and died. It was a boy.

Whether out of sorrow or joy, the veterans all get pissed. In the chalk circle is a circle of thirsty heads. They are always glad when those twatty customs officers let them through (as if there was a time they hadn’t let them through). Children, we have our routes.

Inside going out. And on the borders, we always have a green light—it is what they call a green border. What can we do when there’s no work? Until recently we would go into town at least once a month for benefit but then they cancelled the trains. So now we’re home and smuggle people

inbetween times. Slitty-eyed, barefoot, headless, all kinds of creatures; hard work. We sweat, we fume and all day have no one to talk to. We pocket our cash and leave those Indians in the woods far from the border. We are not kids anymore even if we do look at that dying old man like curious little children, not sure what will happen next. He sometimes greets us with the words: “My children!”

As Mama said, they are all his children.



← Published by Koloman
Kertész Bagala,
Bratislava, 2015

Peter Krišťúfek 1973

Prose writer, poet, scriptwriter and director of movies and documentary films. In his work he uses cinematic narrative techniques; reading his novels is often like watching a film. His debut collection of prose *Nepresné miesto* (Inexact Place, 2002) won him the Ivan Krasko Prize. An extract from his novel *Šepkár* (The Prompt, 2008) was published in The Best European Fiction 2010 anthology. His novel *Blíženci a protinožci* (Twins and Antipodeans, 2010) about the relationship between a writer and a prostitute reached the final shortlist for the Anasoft Litera Award. His third novel, *Dom hluchého* (The House of the Deaf Man, 2012), describing the turbulent history of Slovakia in the 20th century, has been translated into several languages and was also nominated for the Anasoft Litera Prize. He followed that with the conceptual *Atlas zabúdania* (The Atlas of Forgetting, 2013) and the novella *Emma a smrťhlav* (Emma and the Death's Head, 2014). His latest work is the novel *Telá* (Bodies, 2016). →



Peter Krišťúfek **Bodies**

Extract translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood →

This novel about bodies and corporeality in various forms is divided into the five Ts necessary when giving first aid: *Ticho* (Silence), *Teplo* (Warmth), *Tekutiny* (Liquid), *Tíšenie* (Relieving Pain) and *Transport*. These umbrella terms refer to human corporeality, to taking care of our bodies and our fixation with them, often to the exclusion of our intellect and soul. Its stories are of various intimate relationships in which the body serves as the basis for perceiving the incorporeal connections of life. The author likens the book to minimalist music in which the melody line is suppressed but feeling and atmosphere are highlighted. In *Bodies*, the story is somewhere in the background; it is the feeling and experience of one's own body in different situations which is more important.

Now it really was high time for her to get up, gather her clothes, have a wash, all that with her head empty and eyes stinging. A sort of mini expulsion from Paradise—albeit with the prospect of being readmitted again before long.

On the way from the flat—she felt that in this respect she was almost like a cat, driven by some invisible urge to do certain things regularly under certain circumstances—Barbara mused that lovers didn't have to be as considerate with each other as they did with their partners in a regular relationship. They could more openly demand the satisfaction of their desires. In the normal, everyday world you have to show consideration, understanding and civilized empathy, keeping in mind everything that had happened before and that would happen later, whereas in that other, secret world there are just a few straightforward rules to follow and one clear goal, namely unalloyed pleasure. No superfluous issues arising from spiritual kinship or conversational topics, no evermore humdrum days. Just bodies.

This is what makes clandestine physical relationships so passionate and tempting, giving them a long-lost primal *authenticity*. This is why lovers are so reluctant to accept their transformation into husbands and wives, into housemates and partners, complete with missing toothpaste tops and yesterday's discarded socks, with questions about what to have for dinner and who will pick up the kids. The thought of the future made her almost physically unwell, whereas the present made her light-headed. She took deep breaths of the September air, into which autumn had already thrust its little claw after a long summer. It filled her with happiness.

Filip caught himself contemplating various bodily fluids, something he'd never done before. Bodily fluids. Sitting in a ramshackle armchair behind the warehouse he whiled his time away by browsing Internet pages on anatomy and pathology. Cerebrospinal fluid, aqueous humour, blood, sperm, snot, various liquids, *love juice*. Quite something! But none of it came anywhere near explaining what he was going through. It would have been quite strange if it had. He snapped shut the lid of his laptop, leaned back and half closed his eyes.

A body blow. Entering a female body. As a male, it affected him in a different way. He found it difficult to put himself into Barbara's shoes. The fact that he was wondering about this at all again struck him as strange, thoughts like these had never occurred to him with other women. He smiled.

He remembered the fun they'd had the night before. He was taking Barbara's pictures with his digital camera through the frosted glass shower screen. Lucia, Filip's sister, had always regarded the bathroom as the most important part of the flat and considering their father's age this was actually true: she had got rid of the bath tub and had a corner shower installed instead, the only modern thing in this dilapidated hovel. The shower enclosure was made of a large sheet of frosted glass, offering a semblance of privacy and intimacy. From outside you could both see and not see what was inside.

Barbara let the stream of hot water wash over her body. Filip came into the bathroom and watched her as unobtrusively as he could. When she noticed him, she pressed her lips to the glass, faking a kiss. Filip pressed against it from the other side. They laughed. He ran off and came back carrying his little Lumix. He loved that camera because he never had to think whether or not to take it along, it was so tiny it took up almost no space at all in his coat pocket. Barbara pressed her breasts against the glass. Like her, they were large and round. Now they resembled some strange, flesh-coloured fruit with its dark stalk accidentally removed, with a spot left where it had been. She turned around displaying her back, long and graceful, the water cascading all the way down into the hidden parts of her body. She leaned down, pressing her bottom against the glass. She had always thought her buttocks were too large but now to Filip's delight, she seemed to have forgotten that, and showed them off, complete with the dark bushy part between her legs, divided by a disappearing groove. He bent down, got on his knees and snapped a few pictures. But Barbara quickly collected herself, peeling her bottom, to him so proportionate and lovable, away from the glass, turning off the water and wrapping her body in a towel adorned with curlicues of baroque flowers and leaves. She gave a little embarrassed laugh.

She looked gorgeous with her wet hair and her water-dampened face, just as lovely as every other woman Filip had seen in such a situation.

It was great to be together but at the same time they were both relieved not to be *saddled with* each other. They both cared deeply about their solitude, their privacy. They didn't feel like having to grapple constantly with the presence and mannerisms of another person, both of them having outgrown the age when one expects unconditional harmony. No, the constant presence of another person would have been burdensome. Things felt right just as they were now. Neither of them thought about the future, both of them being familiar with the pitfalls and ravages of the past. Or, at least, they could easily imagine what the other's past had

been like. They were not keen on replays. Actually, future didn't exist either, it wasn't meant to and it wouldn't exist. There was just the present stretching away into eternity with no clear outcome. One day followed by the next, one meeting followed by another. Without any of that *and they lived happily ever after*.

There was no other way.

Events were on their side, since his father's flat had to be cleared out and sold within a month as part of the inheritance—a process invariably accompanied by irreversible changes and the destruction of old, familiar places. Filip had already taken part in a meeting with *the other party*, in other words, with Lucia and her husband, to discuss who would take what pieces of furniture and other fixtures. Legal language is infectious, it makes no allowances for emotions. There were some things in the flat that both parties wanted and other things neither wanted but eventually they came to an agreement. No immortality. No unlimited time.

His father's flat stood for a fading and uncertain world, as uncertain as Filip and Barbara's relationship, for which there was no standard label. And suddenly it happened again here, the proverbial body blow, only in quite a different sense of the word: this time as a vague threat, illness or virus.



← Published by
Artforum, Bratislava,
2016

Mária ¹⁹⁷⁵

Ferenčuhová

Poet, translator and film theorist. She studied film at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava and 'Sciences du Langage' at the 'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales' in Paris. She has had five poetry collections published: *Skryté titulky* (Hidden Titles, 2003), *Princíp neistoty* (The Principle of Uncertainty, 2008), *Márnivé bublinky* (Vainglorious Bubbles, 2010), *Ohrozený druh* (Endangered Species, 2012), *Imunita* (Immunity, 2016) and an academic monograph about documentary film titled *Odložený čas* (Deferred Time, 2009). She has translated novels by the French writers Amélia Nothomb, Philipp Sollers, Jean Echenoz, Laurent Binet as well as Samuel Beckett's play 'Eleutheria'. →



Mária Ferenčuhová ***Immunity***

Extract translated by John Minahane →

“*Immunity* is built on the metaphor of resistance, be it social or individual, as an appropriate reaction to the alien and unfamiliar. The author’s existentially civil, urban poetry is especially sensitive towards social phenomena. In this book, immunity takes on a strongly physical even physiological character. Long-term fascination with the moment when that which is alien breaks through—and subsequent defence against its effects—gain a biological, even medical, form here. The poet works innovatively with the tradition of writing as therapy, though moves it closer to poetry as a means of self-diagnosis, of analysing her relationship to herself, to her body, to her own identity as well as to her relationship to the people closest to her and to stories and destinies developing in parallel. Her verses are unusually ruthless in their expression, are crushing in their unpitied cogency.”

Lubica Schmarcová

REMEDY PICTURES

Procedure

You look, you listen.
Aptly you choose the models.
You will extract a sample.
You'll chop off, rip out,
squeeze, drain, crush,
by persistence you will win:

you submerge in water.

Thence proceed manually
or make a simple machine.
Extract a drop,
pour, shake, extract,
pour out, shake.
Once again pour out.

Many times more.

By diluting and shaking
the seen
create the picture.

Sweeten, settle, serve.

Nitric Acid

1
The colourless solution
after sitting mostly will turn yellow.
In a strong concentration it is fuming;
in light and air it oxidises
to a poisonous reddish-brown gas.

2
No greater anger exists than mine.
No other greater spirit exists.

Nor indeed greater pains,
thoughts that devour, unrest.
What is that gigantic
hum of molecules in me?

3

Vainly you try to dilute
your spittle. One day the tears
will rip your cornea.
You're stuck in time, your tongue
corrodes metals, your nail
is extracting gold from teeth,
and till fatigue you seek reasons
why nothing
could have been otherwise.

Gold

1

Noble, constant, solid,
nonetheless tractable.
He suits every woman. All want him
to hang on their necks,
to feel his touch on their hands.

He comes from a well-known family,
where laudable qualities
come down from father to son.

We have three daughters who welcome him
with radiant smiles.

2

Two days I've been thinking of a leap from a height,
the body smashed on concrete,
soft tissues burst asunder,
gelatine, blood, bright and muted colours.
Of an auger piercing the right corner
of an eye.

3

I don't understand what's happening.
He was at a work meeting,
we were to go for supper;
he'd said it was about the perfect project.

I found him scrunched up in a wardrobe
in mother's costume;
he even wore her perfume and her watch.

4

Lofty goals, destructive thoughts,
illness after failure and humiliation,
overall improvement at evening,
pains at night,
pains so powerful
that they drive him towards death.

5

Gold
cures syphilis, asthma
and deep depression.

Gold
has a bent towards malignities,
a craving for sweet things,
for milk, bread, alcohol.
Gold has a loathing for meat
in all forms.

Gold is beaming with relief,

gold is actively
hallucinating.

Meadow Buttercup

1

Tufts stick out on the upper part.
Along the lightly-grooved stems
they go up to the flowers.
Poisonous even in solitude.

2

Usually worse in cold, in a draught,
in a change of weather.
Worse with alcohol.
Overall worse at evening,
worse with a wetting.
Worse with a touch.
Painful, cold places along the body.

3

I didn't use to have such a life. It turned bitter on me,
thinned out along with my hair.
In August I'd be fishing out my medals,
today I cannot bear them.
Teeth in the glass; don't forget
the tablet; it's good
that I'm here alone,
that nothing affects me,
that even now
in these old flats
the heating's on.

4

Blisters on fingers,
scabs, hard horned calluses.

5

With these,
with these hands on you I'd... !

White Hellebore

1

Perennial with a short bulb
and mighty roots.
Densely set bright flowers,
afterwards capsules – alkaloids, acridities,
resins and organic acids –
not to be touched! Process industrially.

2

In reality only cool
breath and tongue, cobalt blue thoughts:
he simulates illnesses, curses,
kisses without clinging
and despairs at the impossibility
of salvation.

3

He's seven years old.
He repeats movements,
piteously prays, in anger turns
his eyes away, scratches his friends,
rips curtains and with wire
cuts furrows in plaster,
so that his scream has channels
when it strikes
against the wall.

4

I didn't want to be here.
But I am, needed
and much older than the song
that rends my lips.

Bittersweet Nightshade

1

A folded and, lower down, ligneous
stem, dangerous right at the point where
it's toughest. Heart-shaped leaves;
the drooping flowers
with conspicuous pistil,
given pollen, mature
to an oval berry.

2

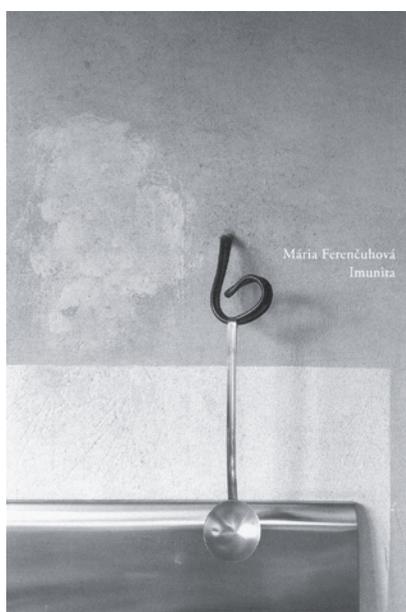
We didn't have much, ten
of us huddled in a three-room flat,
ourselves and the kids in the living room,
we took turns in the kitchen,
a dumpling caught in my throat,
daily I bound up the vein
in my father's leg,
and when the little ones fell ill
I covered my mouth with a nappy.

3

Mattresses unventilatably stank.
Marriages inexplicably
lasted.
I went with them all
right to the edge, I nursed
one and all.
I buried them all
in the rain.

4

To this day I sometimes choke
with non-consent,
it makes my lips swell.
But come the first crop
I lean firmly
on earth, resolved
from all sides to sprout again.



Mária Ferenčuhová
Imunita

← Published by
Skalná ruža, Tajov,
2016

Marcela ¹⁹⁸¹ Veselková

Poet, prose writer and economist, she is a graduate of the University of Economics in Bratislava and Central University in Budapest. Her literary debut was a collection of poems called *Najzvláštnejšie je nelúbiť ťa* (The Strangest Thing is not Loving You, 2005), which was shortlisted for the Eastern European Literature Grand Prix and won her the Ivan Krasko Prize. In 2013, her second collection of poems, *Identity* (Identities, 2013), was published and received with great acclaim from both critics and readers. Her prose debut is the book *Nedostatky* (Scarcities, 2015), in which she deals with the question of how people from economically disparate countries perceive the problem of insufficiency. →



Marcela Veselková **Scarcities**

Extract translated by John Minahane →

What do Gothic cathedrals and capitalism have in common? Could Kundera have been a good economist? Can *The Cherry Orchard* be seen as a play about the European debt crisis? How does a crisis affect relationships? The author combines prose passages with essays, their common theme being the current effects of the global economic crisis. Observing from the periphery, the author presents a view quite different from that of the countries at the heart of the Eurozone. The central theme of the work is the search for identity in a world in which everything must be precisely defined and categorized and each person's value depends on how well they can fit into existing structures.

Chapter 27

In Bratislava Helen took Martin to an exhibition of photographs from the 1950s. They were looking at the boys eating apples when a woman that Helena knew came up to talk to them.

“Helena says that boys grow fastest in the Spring, but in 1950s Czechoslovakia that was when their growth was slowest. By Spring there was a lack of foodstuffs, she says.”

“I see you’ve also got the neoliberal take on the exhibition,” her acquaintance said, winking at Helena. “Did she tell you as well that those boys got the chance to study for free? That they had guaranteed health care free of charge? That the state gave their parents apartments with hot water, flush toilets and central heating?”

“Nothing was for free,” Helena objected, “and the price was too high. Compare Slovak high-rise apartments, health care and education with the equivalents in western Europe. From here you can see to Austria. In the interwar period the real GDP per person in Czechoslovakia was more than 80 per cent of the Austrian, now it’s only something over 50 per cent.”

“You forgot to say that today every eighth inhabitant of Slovakia is threatened with poverty. Twice more than before the fall of communism.”

“So far as I know, that’s still below the average for the EU.”

“A single mother or an unemployed person doesn’t care if it’s above or below the EU average. We’re talking about people who don’t know if they’ll be able to pay their bills. A holiday for their child they can only dream about.”

“That’s all fine, but compassion isn’t political economy. History shows us that capitalism and economic growth are the best means for raising the standard of living. If the GDP grows 3 per cent yearly, the size of the economy will double over 24 years. So if you want to help the poor don’t worry about income inequality, worry about the growth of GDP.”

“I’ve been listening to this nonsense for 25 years. Wait patiently while the haves get rich, and afterwards maybe there’ll be something for you too! But somehow it doesn’t work, does it?”

“I agree.” Martin joined the discussion. “In 35 years of deregulation, though the rich have got richer, none of that has trickled down to the middle and lower layers. The 85 richest people today own as much as three and a half billions of the poorest. That’s half of mankind, for God’s sake.”

“Do you remember that article from Deirdre McCloskey that I sent you?” Helena asked. “If you took the property of the 85 richest and divided it between three and a half billions of the poorest, each would get something over 400 dollars. The following year, of course, he or she would get nothing, because Bill Gates wouldn’t conjure up another 76 million

dollars within the year. Let's say that the whole of the confiscated sum was invested and the investment brought in 5% for everyone yearly. Do you know how much each person in the bottom half of humanity would receive? Something like 20 dollars. Confiscation won't pull the poor out of their misery."

"But no one here is talking about confiscation, only about fairer taxation," Martin objected. "Economic inequality leads to political inequality. The rich have got all the means to influence legislation in their favour and thereby reproduce inequality."

"What does fairer mean? Something like Hollande's 75 per cent tax on incomes of over a million dollars a year? Everyone knew beforehand what would happen. The owners of capital and the highly qualified would flee the country and France would lose precisely those people who create economic growth."

Helena's acquaintance shook her head: "I don't understand why you go on like that whenever progressive taxation is mentioned. How do you explain that Europe and the USA had their fastest growth precisely in the period of the greatest redistribution? You mentioned Austria. Progressive taxes after the Second World War, and today one of the highest GDPs per inhabitant in the Union."

"I hope you're not trying to tell me that progressive tax rates at a time of high mobility of capital would turn Slovakia into an Austria. If you really want to help the poor, cut corporation tax, so as to attract the investors who create the jobs. Abolish the minimum wage or lower the insurance obligations for the low-qualified—let them have more opportunities to find a job."

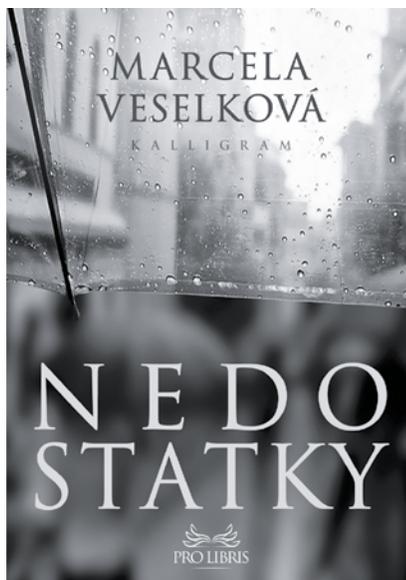
"Great! Your idea of helping the poor is to have them drudge for a wage that will not allow them to buy anything of what they've produced. Sometimes I have the feeling that the right in Slovakia to a man and woman has sprouted from right-wing ideology in its very worst form. I think of it like Lorenz's imprinting. Like those geese that follow boots, when boots are the first thing they've seen after hatching. That's like you in 1989, neoliberalism was the first thing you saw and you identified it with freedom, with some better social order, and it's still going on and the most vulnerable are the ones who are paying for it."

"Yes, that's us, incapable of any kind of personal rethinking. In contrast to you." Helena was not smiling, but Martin simply glowed. He cheerfully continued the conversation with her acquaintance. Sometimes he looked at Helena, as if he wanted to know whether she was still listening. Helena wondered whether he was simply glad that someone agreed with him, or whether he enjoyed hearing all she had ever said to him about communist Czechoslovakia being challenged.

A few days previously Martin had read her a text by the Spanish writer Javier Marías: “The only Spain of 1600 that we know and that interests us, is the Spain of Cervantes: the Spain of a fictional book about other fictional books, with an anachronistic knight-errant surfacing from it ... What today we call the Spain of the year 1600 does not exist, even if one must assume it did exist; just as the only France of the year 1900 that exists for us is the one that Proust decided to include in his novel.”

Helena looked over Martin’s shoulder at the images on the wall. Fictional Slovakia. In social science this was called data erosion. The photographer decided what Slovakia of the 1950s was like when he decided which photos to include in the exhibition and which not. And again, Helena, Martin and Helena’s acquaintance had decided what 1950s Slovakia was like when they filtered out certain facts in accordance with their views of the world. Helena was aware that her Czechoslovakia did not interest Martin, and further, her acquaintance’s Czechoslovakia did not interest Helena. And so she left Martin to talk and went off to look for a photograph shown in advertisements for the exhibition.

Anton Šmotlák, *Girls of the People*, 1959. Helena stood before the photograph so long that a little knot of people began forming around her. There were two young women in bikinis in the photo. They were smiling into the camera and splashing water on themselves. At first the exhibition’s curators had not believed that the photo really came from the 1950s. The bikinis seemed suspicious to them, because they weren’t sold in Czechoslovakia at that time. But when certain grandchildren recognised their granny on the advertising banner and brought her into the gallery, the curators learned that the girls had sewed two-piece bathing suits for themselves as in the picture. All Martin would have seen in the photo was girls bathing. Helena was looking at scarcities.



← Published by
Kalligram, Bratislava,
2015

Ján Púček

1987

Having studied dramaturgy and scriptwriting at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, he now works there as an internal doctoral student. His work has been published in the *Dotyky*, *Romboid* and *Fragment* literary magazines and also broadcast on Slovak Radio. As scriptwriter and director, he has worked on several documentary, animated and fictional student films. Since 2013, he has been editor of the literary and cultural *Fragment* magazine. He writes film scripts, prose and poetry and debuted with the short story collection *Kameň v kameni* (Stone in Stone, 2012), in which the reader discovers the micro-world of one village. The collection won him the Ján Johanides Award for the best prose work written by author under 35, the Tatrabanka Foundation Young Author's Prize and first place in the Debut of the Year Readers' Poll in the *Knižná revue* literary magazine. He followed this up with the *Okná do polí* (Windows on the Fields, 2013) short story collection. His latest work is the short story collection *Uchom ihly* (Eye of a Needle, 2015). →



Ján Púček

***Eye of
a Needle***

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

This concise history of one family covers the whole of the twentieth century, sharpening its focus on the Second World War, anti-fascist resistance, five and a half years in German camps and prisons, a happy return home followed by a new beginning, foundation of a small textile works and then nationalization. These events together form the backcloth to acts of love in its many different guises.

All he had now was a chipped razor with a mother-of-pearl handle and a German inscription *Facharbeit Solingen*. High quality steel. That was one reason why he was surprised he had managed to break a bit off—as if some little creature had taken a bite out of it. Just the razor. Nothing more. For five and a half years. Of course, there was more he had lost, more he had forgotten.

Perhaps he should have brought more back with him from that trip. Little mementoes that he would store in boxes among the postcards and shells and coffee spoons, among the train tickets, photographs and foreign coins. But from some trips mementoes are not carried in bags, but go straight into dreams; the more we try to forget them, the more importunate they become. Like the razor. If he tried to sharpen it, if he tried shaving with it, he would cut his throat.

Five and a half years. He had lost a lot, but he had also learned a lot. It would never have occurred to him that he, a bricklayer, would one day knit. And suddenly he was operating a knitting machine and even knitting by hand, the short thin needles flitting fast in his fingers, as if he had been knitting for as long as he could remember. Anything but sawing wood. Anything but those narrow, bent shovels.

He knitted socks, scarves and sweaters for German children, for those little pale tin soldiers that immediately began to melt when exposed to the hot sun, sobbing: “*Mutti, Mutti, wo bist du?*” All of it in dull earthy colours, so the young would get used to their future uniforms as soon as possible: brown, black and grey, as if no other colours existed.

They put him in a low, brick building, along with dozens of others equally thin, equally shaven; he no longer knew whether it was in Terezín or in the Neukölln district of Berlin; they sat him down there and he knitted, knitted as if his life depended on it.

It was in Gollnow. It must have been in Gollnow—he’d spent the longest time there, two and a half years. Or was it in Dresden? Or had it happened at all?

He learned to view the world in quite a different way, most days with his eyes shut. When he had to open them, he squinted to cut out and frame little segments, letting in only what he really wanted to see. When the tiny furry pussy willow buds appeared before Easter he let them in. Or clouds. Framing clouds was what he liked best. Huge, fat whales, scarcely visible wisps of seaweed, storm clouds. He hated clear skies—at such times he was forced to look around him. He felt that two eyes were

too many for that predominance of horror. If he had had only one eye, he would have seen only half of it. Only half as many dead. He would have wept half as much.

They called that bit of open space between the prison barracks a playground. Spielplatz. Was it in Straubing? Where was it in fact? A bitter name for the scene of bitter games. The ground there already refused to soak up more blood. Every evening a gang of prisoners—good God, how many times he had been one of them—was summoned to spread sand over the playground, the sand turning a dark red almost before it touched the ground.

There was a variety of games. Sometimes a shot just rang out and someone fell to the ground. Those really were brief, very brief games, just a bit of fun. At other times more people assembled in the playground. They lay down on the ground between the wheels of a truck and those who wanted to win had to roll, to the left, to the right, just as the driver dictated. To the left, to the right; he would never forget the sound of cracking bones. Something like the sound of grapes in a wine press, he thought.

Viťa, a Ukrainian screw, who occasionally slipped a crust of stone-hard bread into his pocket, whispered in his ear: “Don’t worry. That’s only for Jews.”

“Why must we watch it?” Ján asked and Viťa just shrugged.

“Just so you’ll see. And don’t ask,” he hissed, prodding him in the back with his fist.

Be quiet. Don’t ask anything. Those who don’t ask stay alive.

He ate potato peelings. He also found a shrivelled apple core; he ate seeds and hoped a tree would sprout inside him to fill the hole in his belly. He spent whole days lugging timber for fortifications and after lunch he knitted. His teeth began to come loose. His hair fell out. All that was left on his knobby head was a ridiculous mossy growth.

He remembered the plum tree that grew below the veranda in Holíč; those dusty, deep purple fruits as big as a child’s fist. He saw a cloud that looked like a horse, its thick mane blowing in the wind over the prison yard.

He would wake up in the morning not knowing whether he would live to see the evening. In the evening he fell asleep with no idea whether he would wake up in the morning. There was a wheezing sound in his chest under the thin skin; that high-pitched tone kept rousing him from his sleep.

He learned to shave without a mirror, by memory, with that razor whose edge was to become chipped not long after. Daisies flowered

outside the fence, the sky was high above. Is there really someone sitting up there and looking down on everything? Is he at least biting his nails?

Tons of quicklime were delivered and no one asked them to slake it.

Five and a half years, that's nothing if you can learn to knit. And unlearn eating. He often thought of that joke about the horse from Skalica they tried to teach not to eat. They very nearly succeeded; it would have learned, if only it had held out for one more day. But it didn't.

"Vita's dropped dead," one of his fellow prisoners told him.

"How? Dropped dead?"

"Just normally. How do people die? A bullet in the head, quicklime. That's all. How else do people drop dead here?"

Halberstadt was the name of the next stop. Or was it Buchenwald? Who knows? It no longer seemed true. Years later, when he wanted to write it all down, when he wanted to record step by step all the camps and prisons he'd got a glimpse of in five and a half years, he could hardly remember anything. Only their names remained in his memory—all the rest blended into a thin gruel. Toil. Death. Hunger. All those games on the dusty spielplatz.

It was as if it were no longer true; he was left with nothing—only that old rusty chipped razor. Now he tries in vain to sharpen it; he tries in vain to figure out how he'd managed to break that little bit off the steel blade and to lose it once and for all.

All he has left is a useless razor. And sharp forgetting.

JÁN
PÚČEK

Uchom ihly



— F. R. & G. —

← Published by
F. R. & G., Bratislava,
2015

Soňa Uriková 1988

Soňa Uriková studied dramaturgy and scriptwriting at the Academy of Performing Arts. She has won a number of literary prizes (Poviedka, Jašíkové Kysuce, Medziriadky). Her collection of stories *Živé ploty* (Hedges, 2015) being her first published work. →



Soňa Uriková **Hedges**

Extract translated by Heather Trebatická →

Stories based on the contrast between the idyllic illusion of everyday life and certain shocking secrets which inevitably shatter it because they have to. The author creates grown up characters who show great resilience and above all are able not only to feel pain, but also to cause it. Provoked by circumstances, her characters act instinctively; led by their desire to shake off their pain, they do not hesitate to harm those they think deserve it.

I'll shoot a rose for you

I inherited a good aim from great grandad Palo, or so I'm told. He was a renowned marksman and he earned a medal in the First World War. Ever since I was little I have loved running my fingers through the diablo pellets that father had in his workshop. When he was shooting at the sparrows that pecked at the hens' grain, I would stand beside him and I learned how to load an airgun. The first time he allowed me to shoot with it was when our bitch was in heat. She was the only pure-bred dog out of a large number of village mongrels, which is why we took her to town to mate with a fat, lazy cocker spaniel.

Dogs hung around our fence and Dad only had to shoot in the air and they would all scatter. Dirty Belo with permanently inflamed eyes hadn't belonged to anyone for a long time and he wasn't afraid of anything. He kept jumping at the fence and our bitch nervously shifted from paw to paw while tied to the kennel.

Dad brought the airgun, loaded it and handed it to me. I was going to shoot into the air, so I looked around to see whether I would also scare the sparrows on the barn roof. However, Dad lowered the barrel and said that even if I did hit Belo, an ordinary pellet would do him no harm. I aimed at the restless dog and fired. He let out a little howl, drew his front paw under him and made off with his tail between his legs.

Dad watched me, first in amusement and then with surprise. I gazed imperturbably at the defeated dog and when Dad took the airgun from me with a word of praise, I simply remarked that it tended to shoot to the right.

I then nailed to a wooden board a picture of a wild boar from a children's colouring book, set it up on a chair opposite the barn door and learned to shoot more accurately. When Dad saw how good I was at it, he took the airgun to a hunter friend of his to be cleaned and to get it balanced right. After that it almost fired by itself and Dad, very proud of me, gave me a large box of pellets for my birthday.

When the village held its annual fete, all the children hurried to the merry-go-rounds and swings. Dad would leave me at the mobile shooting gallery and he knew he could have as many as ten beers, because he was sure to find me in the same place. There I used to meet Božka, a friend who had a wrinkled furrow between her large breasts. Sometimes men would jokingly stuff some money down there and then she would put it away in a separate tin that she didn't show her husband.

While I was shooting at tin ducks, she would give me advice about life. She claimed that was more valuable than crepe roses. I was never interested in them anyway—what use to me was a bit of twisted paper? Božka was a great feminist. She told me to only wear trousers to school, because it was more difficult for boys to reach into them than up a skirt.

The boys at school were either afraid of me, or they laughed at me. Božka said the latter were also afraid, but they couldn't admit it. None of my classmates dared approach the shooting gallery while I was there. They watched from a distance as I loaded with my eyes closed and shot down one tin after another.

Whenever Rasťo, who lived down by the station, came to the shooting gallery, Božka would go off with him and leave me to keep an eye on it. I went and stood behind the counter with a broad smile. The boys sent Adam to me, because they knew I liked the dimples in his cheeks. I allowed him to shoot about ten times, but he didn't hit his target even once. He threw the airgun down on the ground and went off in a huff. I couldn't understand how anyone could get so worked up about a paper rose.

A year later a woman I didn't know was in the shooting gallery. She only allowed me to buy five pellets, then she shooed me away. But she found time to say that Božka would never be working in the shooting gallery again, because that winter she'd been found murdered near her caravan. All the village boys crowded round the old woman. She smiled at them and shouted after me that a girl shouldn't be shooting ducks anyway.

For my birthday my father gave me a brand new shiny airgun and a cleaning kit. Mum threw up her hands, saying what on earth was I going to be and those who came to congratulate me wanted me to show them what I could do. Dad pointed to the highest branch on a tall walnut tree. There were two nuts there, still in their green jackets. He promised me a hundred crowns if I hit them. I slowly took aim, and then I shut my eyes tight, which made everyone burst out laughing. I pulled the trigger and my aunt gasped. The two nuts had landed in a pot of goulash and splashed her blouse. I put the hundred crowns down on the table in front of her, telling her to buy a new one and I went to shoot behind the barn.

Not long after this I discovered I had another strange talent. At school we had a PE lesson together with the boys and as there were too many of us to fit into the small gym, we went outside to play football. I scored twice in Adam's goal and converted a penalty kick. The PE teacher was a neighbour of ours, so she told Dad and Mum just rolled her eyes when

he drunk hugged me and showed how happy he was to have such an all-round marksman in the family.

I used to go to an old overgrown playground with a ball and target in my rucksack and an airgun hanging over my shoulder. Dad signed me up for the school football team. We didn't play according to any complicated tactics and I didn't really enjoy the game itself. My speciality was kicking penalties. I converted them coolly and without hesitation; the boys in the goal often burst into tears and the spectators laughed at them, while even the visiting team applauded me. After the match Dad's mates used to buy me fruit juice and sweets. I would leave them lying around in the changing room and go outside. The boys wouldn't take them directly from me, but a couple of minutes later there wasn't so much as a chewing gum wrapper left.



← Published by Koloman
Kertész Bagala,
Bratislava, 2015

Zuzana Slobodová

Slovakian Literature

The Times Literary Supplement

Where Karpinsky does triumph is in his overall concept. It is courageous of him to focus on internationally little-known modern Slovak writers, to demonstrate their inventiveness, playfulness and lyricism. Every tale, with the exception of the opening one, is first-rate. Vincent Sikula paints a touching portrait's of a man's failed attempt to look after his mentally disabled sister who lives in an eternal childhood. Milo Urban vividly brings home the pointlessness of fighting against old age. And there is something deliciously mystifying about Dusan Mitana's satirical tale in which an impotent tyrant is cuckolded with the help of the breeze...

The book helps to undermine the age-long Slovak inferiority complex, voiced by Rudolf Sloboda: 'Nothing we have is world renowned... Everything is provincial here'. Sloboda also jokes that Slovak writers would be 'better off taking up banditry'. Anglophone readers now have a wealth of evidence with which to disagree with him.

→ [The Dedalus Book of Slovak Literature \(2015\)](#),
Editor: Peter Karpinsky, Dedalus Books

Jana Luptáková

A Tasting of Slovak Literature

The Slovak Spectator

Small nations and their authors only rarely find themselves in the focus of foreign publishing houses. This is also true for Slovakia, thus making the publication of an anthology of Slovak literature in English an even more noteworthy event for the country. The British publishing house Dedalus Books published the Dedalus Book of Slovak Literature this August.

“The reasons for publishing books from Slovakia and other small countries are that the UK is part of Europe and you have to know your neighbours, that means their culture,” publisher Eric Lane said when introducing the anthology at the Bibliotéka book fair held in Bratislava in early November. “The best way to show your interest in your neighbours is to translate their books into English.”

It was Peter Karpinský, a teacher at the University of Prešov and a prize-winning author, who had already selected stories for 5x5, an anthology of contemporary Slovak literature published in Slovak in 2012, who selected the authors and works for this English language anthology. But Karpinský said making the selection for the Dedalus anthology was significantly more difficult.

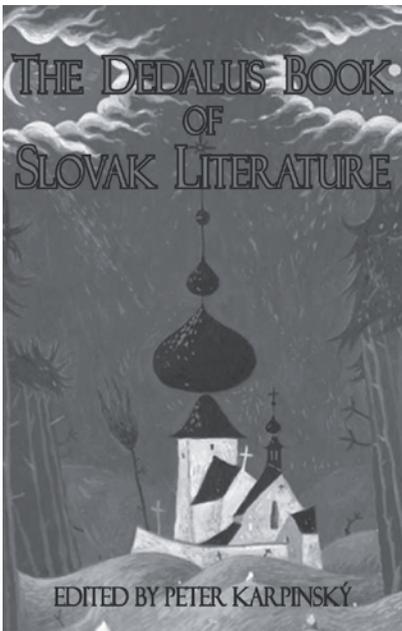
“Here it was more challenging because Mr Lane wanted to publish a broadspectrum anthology from the 19th century to the present,” said Karpinský. “This is 200 years of Slovak literature, which has a huge number of men and women authors who are worthy of consideration and discussion.”

Karpinský had to make a wide and smart selection in order to introduce foreign readers to Slovak literature, as thus far such an extensive selection had not been published.

Another matter they had to take into consideration was the challenge of translating the selected works and choosing translators to make them comprehensible for foreign readers. Additionally, the selection had to be made in a way that the stories and their settings would be interesting for foreign readers.

“It is really only a tasting of Slovak literature,” said Karpinský, meaning that readers as well as literary agents need to find out more and that even though Slovak literature is not as vast as in the UK, it is nonetheless interesting and well worth reading.

- [The Dedalus Book of Slovak Literature \(2015\)](#),
Editor: Peter Karpinský, Dedalus Books



Annelies Verbeke

Anthology of the Month

Translated by Paulína Hornáková and Heather Trebatická

Short stories after the Gentle Revolution

I must thank Gert Brouns of the Limerick bookshop in Ghent for giving me the book *Hrob a 13 ďalších poviedok* (Het graf en 13 andere verhalen/ The Tomb and 13 Other Short Stories). This collection of short stories was published this year by a small publishing house, Douane, and it is part of the Slovak Library Edition. The publishing house also focuses attention on “new Russians” and a Polish and Ukrainian Library will soon be coming out. We have something to look forward to!

The text on the back of the jacket is, however, rather awkwardly written: “For readers who want a change from Dutch photorealism, where everything is shown and there is nothing just alluded to.” As if Dutch literature was a great enemy of Slovak literature, as if it were not above all the American market that dominates everything here. The writers in this excellent collection, who are also referred to on the back of the jacket as “people who are examining themselves”, have understood this very well and on occasion they explicitly fight against this in their stories. For example, in the title story Balla writes: “No one lowered his eyes, no one said in a firm voice, like in American films, that things happen that way, the plane did not take off, did not disappear over the breathtaking landscape...” And in the surrealist detective story *Prízračné pátranie po páchatelovi tieňov* (Ghostly Hunt for the Perpetrator of Shadows) by Tomáš Horváth we find the words: “No, the investigator himself was not the murderer. And he did not meet his unborn twin at the end of the corridor; no mysterious twin exists. He has no idea what he will see at the end of it.”

In the short story *Kytica od sudcu* (A Bouquet from the Judge) by the author Silvester Lavrik we even find the beautiful appeal: “Let us be gentle to the story and let us try to enter it with cap in hand and an open heart.”

Long-distance relationships and money laundering

It is also worth reading The Tomb collection on account of the excellent literary quality of the stories and the authors' powerful styles, which are often very different from each other. Each of the authors published their work for the first time in the period following the Gentle Revolution in 1989.

Three of the stories are told from the perspective of children or teenagers. Richard Pupala describes a boy with a mentally retarded brother and an alcoholic mother. Márius Kopcsay focuses his attention on unhappy Schmuck. Monika Kompaníková, on the other hand, gives an excellent description of the first sexual experience of two young people. In all three of these stories the harsh setting is in contrast with childlike innocence. They remind us of the fact that childhood also has its own troubles. "We quietly pick the dry leaves off us," writes Pupala.

The communist past appears in the works by Václav Kostelanský and Viliam Klimáček. But there are also critical remarks about present-day life. Zuska Kepplová describes the difficulties involved in long-distance relationships. The main character in the story *Návrat na Dunaj* (Return to the Danube) by Michal Hvorecký assumes that money laundering is behind the artistic project in which he is participating and which is financed by European funds. This story has a splendid ending, with the artist in a terrible panic, having found himself by chance at the helm of the ship.

The tone of magical realism and the surrealistic images of some authors are reminiscent of the great Czech creator of animated films, Jan Švankmajer. Thus in Horváth's story a forefinger is found in a lift instead of a button.

In the tragicomic story *Žit's Petrom* (Living with Peter) by Ivana Dobrákovová there are the erroneous ideas of Michal, the main character's husband, which redraw reality. According to him, a man called Peter has moved in with them and so they must reckon with his presence. With a view to the fact that others have already stayed with them – an invisible Lucia, Marek and an imaginary Arab family, and that the psychiatric treatment has not been of much help, his despairing wife decides to play along with his illusion. But then she is accused of adultery with Peter.

Hrob a 13 ďalších poviedok (The Tomb and 13 Other Short Stories) is an exciting and needed introduction to Slovak literature.

→ [Het graf en 13 andere verhalen \(2016\)](#),
Editor: Abram Muller, Uitgeverij Douane

And the Winner Is...

Anasoft Litera 2016

Text by Barbora Németh

The notable 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 March, 10 titles are selected for the short list and these titles and their authors are presented during 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 191 prose works.

The shortlisted works were:

Veľká láska (The Big Love) by Balla

HoneymOon by Jana Beňová

Nevďačná cudzin(k)a (Ungrateful Foreigner) by Irena Brežná

Ponožky pred odletom (Socks Before Take-Off) by Dušan Dušek

Reflux by Zuska Kepplová

Hostina (The Feast) by Rút Lichnerová

Tantalópolis by Peter Macsovszky

Pentcho. Príbeh parníka (Pentcho. The Story of a Steamboat) by Jaro Rihák

Slobodu bažantom (Freedom to Pheasants) by Vanda Rozenbergová

Spolu (Together) by Peter Šulej

And the winner is...

***Tantalópolis* by Peter Macsovszky**

**Centre for Information on Literature
Literárne informačné centrum**

Nám. SNP 12
812 24 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
Tel.: + 421-2-204 73 506
Fax: +421-2-529 64 563
E-mail: lic@litcentrum.sk

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Contacts:

Daniela Humajová (Editor-in-Chief)
daniela.humajova@litcentrum.sk

Barbora Németh
barbora.nemeth@litcentrum.sk

Eva Tomkuliaková
eva.tomkuliakova@litcentrum.sk

Photographs of the writers:

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Ján Milčák *A Feeling of Relief*

Dušan Šimko *Marble and Granite*

Dušan Dušek *Socks Before Take-Off*

Jana Juráňová *My Seven Lives. Agneša Kalinová
in Conversation with Jana Juráňová*

Víto Staviarsky *Rinaldo's Journey*

Ivan Kolenič *Lovelier than Sin*

Peter Macsovszky *Santa Panica*

Veronika Šikulová *The Foulbrood*

Peter Šulej *Together*

Lukáš Luk *Honey Thieves*

Agda Bavi Pain *Leaving Eden*

Peter Krištúfek *Bodies*

Mária Ferenčuhová *Immunity*

Marcela Veselková *Scarcities*

Ján Púček *Eye of a Needle*

Soňa Uriková *Hedges*

