

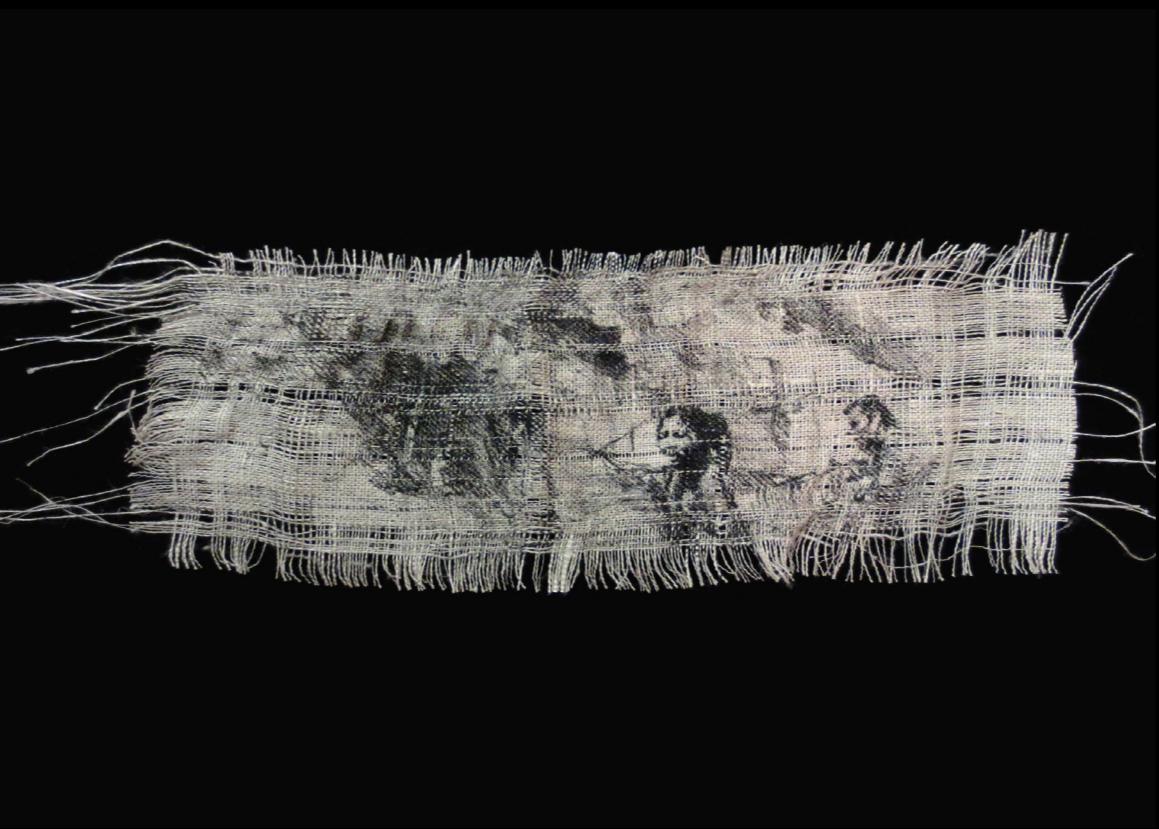
# THE MISSING SLATE

FALL 2015



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# THE GROUPTHINK OF MARITAL DISCOURSE

A Word from the Editor-in-Chief

When I started this editorial, I was in the middle of writing a short story titled '*Through the Crucible*', though it took me a few days to understand just what the crucible was, and who (or what) was passing through it. The story, like most stories worth pursuing, unspooled a series of questions I'd been internally battling for years and this piece felt like the result, the kettle screaming its fucking lid off. Each of them tied into the nature of marriage and its accouterments, versus choosing to remain single and successfully ridding oneself of the stigma. It's important to add that culture plays no part in this – the argument against singlehood is uniquely universal, or of a woman's successfully managing life's currents without a man on her arm, in spheres as diverse as politics to the entertainment industry, to literature, to everyday you-and-me social life.

In '*The Great Escape*',<sup>i</sup> Katie Roiphe argues that divorcees are thought of as poor, incapacitated creatures, suddenly unable to fend for themselves now that they are no longer under the protection of a man. "*I don't think we are nearly as quick to assume that divorced men are falling into a life of despondency*", she writes. "*We assume they will marry again, and until they do, we assume they're fine.*" No matter how many speeches are made in the defense of women – their rights, their liberties and their accomplishments – we seem reluctant to see a woman as anything too much more than a damsel in distress who needs rescuing from herself, binding her into a marital contract where, as Elif Batuman argues in the *New Yorker*, her "*carefully created and manicured identities were never the point; the point was for it all to be sacrificed to children and to men.*"<sup>ii</sup> The pressures of procreating soon after marriage is acutely felt in Pakistan where, if you risk being married in your late twenties or "*God forbid*", in your thirties, you're battling the biological clock that is surely drying up your eggs inside your aging, decrepit, soon to be hostile uterus. Wait too long, in other words, and you might never be a mother. Marriage, distilled into its basest and most distinct strain across all cultures and religions boils down to this almost pathological need to have children, never mind if it isn't what

the woman wants – and not all women want to be mothers – she (and her husband or her partner, as the case may be) must take one for the team and feed the Beast of Social Whim.

Sex in marriage is hardly seen as a pleasurable act between two willing and consenting participants, but as a means to a desired conclusion: having children. I know of several married couples who engage only when the wives are ovulating, taking the concept of Planned Parenthood to a whole other level. True, I am a hijabi and (in some circles) a practicing Muslim, and I do believe in the sanctity of marriage, but unlike many of my ilk, I don't believe that having children as the "product" of the union, is the sole reason for marrying, much less "the next step". It's too easy to disappear into the sinkhole that is childrearing; it gives us a convenient out against the realization, sudden and mind-blowing, that we do not really have anything to say to our spouses, so how about we talk about our kids, their schools, their first steps, their first words, and the list goes on, finding common ground in the organisms we have birthed together. I have nothing against having children – I'm the proud aunt of a menagerie of nieces and nephews, and while I enjoy them and love them to death, I can't help the sigh of relief when, at day's end, I can happily hand them back to their parents. It's the pressure women face that I object to.

As a Muslim, I firmly believe that marriage is one half of my faith, primarily for the reasons it was espoused to begin with: to prevent sexual indiscretions, but that in itself is a sticky slope. Are Muslim women better off married unhappily so long as they are "saved" from "sin"? The marital age in Pakistan is anywhere from 18 to 24. If you're 25 and single, you've got something to worry about, but there's "still time" to "fix" the situation. But if you are, God forbid, 30 or thereabouts, it's "*jaldi shadi karo takay bachay paida karsako*".<sup>iii</sup> I'm not saying that there aren't hundreds of women out there who have been waiting to get married, but a vast majority of us "have gotten picky", opting for singlehood and the accomplishment of individual goals that threaten to be consumed by a conscious coupling, designed to facilitate children.



*Goodboy* by Jen Yu

And that's important: the creation of one's own space in a marriage, the understanding by both partners that the other is an individual in their own right with their own needs, desires and dreams not necessarily entwined with a "we". Of course, that isn't to say that their shared goals as a couple aren't as important, or shouldn't factor into the equation, but space to develop one's own individual identity away from coupledom is just as important, and plays a significant role in both one's own sense of self and the health of a marriage.

So what am I saying? Am I advocating against getting married or against having children? To put it simply, I'm arguing for the importance of individualism, of not serving as the sacrificial lamb being led to the slaughter by a pervasive groupthink that evaluates your femininity based on how well you rear your children, stuck as we all are, in the Middle Ages. I'm saying if you're going to get married, do it for the right reasons and not as a way of "shutting everyone up". If you want kids, have them and if somewhere very deep down you can't say it aloud yet that you don't, well that's perfectly alright. Our lives are our own. It is infinitely

better for your child to believe they were wanted as opposed to thinking they popped out in the midst of their mother's conscious reawakening.

The crucible in my story was social opinion and the judgment it confers on anything considered divergent from mainstream thought, from sexual preference to procreation. Our lives are built upon passing through our own unique crucibles; the trick is whether you allow the experience to shape you or choose to shape your own experience, thereby changing the direction of the tide for others.

*Maryam Piracha*

Maryam Piracha  
Islamabad, Pakistan

*Endnotes*

i From '*In Praise of Messy Lives: Essays*', Roiphe, Katie; The Dial Press, 2012

ii '*Marriage is an Abduction*', Batuman, Elif; *New Yorker*, 2014

iii Loosely translated from the Urdu into "hurry up and get married so you can have children."

# PEELING THE ONION OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN WRITING

## Introduction to the Central European Issue

By Michael Stein

An older Czech friend of mine once recounted to me his youthful adventures in the East Berlin of the 1950's before the Wall made the city virtually impassable from east to west. He and his fellow students possessed only a smattering of German, along with a combination of teenage recklessness and obliviousness that allowed them to do what someone more cognizant of the Stalinist reality of the time would never dare to carry out. They tried their luck with the local girls until a policemen threatened them with arrest, consorting with

Defining Central Europe, and by extension, Central European literature, has long been a confusing and contentious affair. If you put together an issue of South American or African writing a map tells you plainly which countries belong in your magazine, and while you can have more amorphous groupings – Mediterranean writing, Middle Eastern, etc. – none of them face the kind of scrutiny and doubt that cause their very existence to be called into question. Africa plainly exists, Latin America too, but who knows,

**“If writers anywhere have been tasked with documenting the non-existence of the places they live their lives, then it has been the writers of Central Europe.”**

foreigners then being strictly forbidden, even for teenagers. They rode the U-Bahn, blissfully unaware of the meaning of the announcement that they were entering the Western sector. Realizing their mistake, they didn't rush back but instead went to a local cinema to see Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, not mentioning to their teacher that they had swapped a day of socialist sightseeing for a western imperialist western.

My favorite story of all, though, involved the simple purchase of a vegetable. The group of boys went into a grocer's to buy an onion, but had no idea of the German word for onion, and couldn't see one to point it out to the gruff woman standing behind the counter. “It's the vegetable that makes you cry” one of the Czech students did his best to explain to her. The woman took a look at the rows of vegetables behind her, then back at the Czechs, and with a stone-cold expression, replied, “But all these vegetables make me cry.”

perhaps Central Europe doesn't exist at all?

Yet if writers anywhere have been tasked with documenting the non-existence of the places they live their lives, then it has been the writers of Central Europe, whether born as subjects of the Hapsburg Monarchy, whether Czech, German, Austrian, Polish, Hungarian, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Communist, Anti-communist, and on and on through the region's near endless variety. And this doesn't just revolve around the debate over the existence of Central Europe itself.

When a North American or British writer wants to write about new empires that come out of nowhere brandishing stark and memorable symbols, of vanquished homelands and cities made unrecognizable by war, he or she is likely writing a fantasy or science-fiction book. For a Central European writer they need look no further than their own

history; in other words, what a western writer needs some form of genre fiction for, a Central European writer can perform through realism. It is one of the ironic gifts history has bestowed on the region's writers, often before having them killed, imprisoned or driven into exile.

And this is why my friend's story of the phantom onion (I don't remember if they got one in the end) makes me think of Central European writing and this issue of *The Missing Slate*. Because the work of Central European writers is often as densely layered and packed together as their respective countries are on the map. Peel off the social aspects of the writing and there's the historical layer, peel off

hospitals, along with a host of ever-present border guards. Add to that an evocative list of cities visited and mentioned: Łódź, Moscow, Istanbul, Dresden (on fire), East and West Berlin, Ljubljana, Iași, but also Calcutta, Rafah, Benghazi and Batanagar. These aren't the Central European writers of Kundera and Esterházy's generation. Their sensibilities were formed at home but they have also drawn from vastly different experiences and sources.

Yet like the hard-bitten Berlin grocer of my friend's story, contemporary writing coming out of Central Europe has its unmistakable humor, black though it often is. In reading work from Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary,

**“These aren't the Central European writers of Kundera and Esterházy's generation. Their sensibilities were formed at home but they have also drawn from vastly different experiences and sources. ”**

that and there's a mythological layer waiting.

And as with an onion this journey from one layer to another will often involve tears. The sorrow and tragedy are impossible to miss. There is, of course, The Holocaust, as in Hana Andronikova's *The Sound of The Sundial*; the Communist occupation, as in Jáchym Topol's *Nightwork*. In Sándor Jászberényi's “Taking Trinidad” the tragedy is both closer in time and more distant geographically, taking place in North Africa. Beyond that, there's a way of thinking, a way of being, a way of coping with reality that ends up becoming a way of writing that is unlike any other.

As is befitting a region occupied, scarred and still very much in the shadow of Germany and Russia, an unsurprising list of names and figures appear throughout these pieces: founder of the Soviet secret service Felix Dzerzhinsky, Hitler, Faust, Kalashnikovs, Soviet psychiatric

etc., one thing is unmistakable: sentimentality is not an option. Emotional experience comes at too high a price to be casually displayed, if revealed at all. And it's not only humor that is spun out of all the dark backdrops that these writers have at their disposal, but a whole range of imaginative responses from the surreal to the satirical to the coldly analytical.

The borders of Central Europe will remain as nebulous and questioned as they have always been, yet the borders of Central European writing have expanded immensely since the end of the Cold War – for many Western readers, unfortunately, the one and only defining point for the region. While the themes of the previous generation are far from going away today's writers have added new layers and continued a literary tradition of uncommon intensity and force.

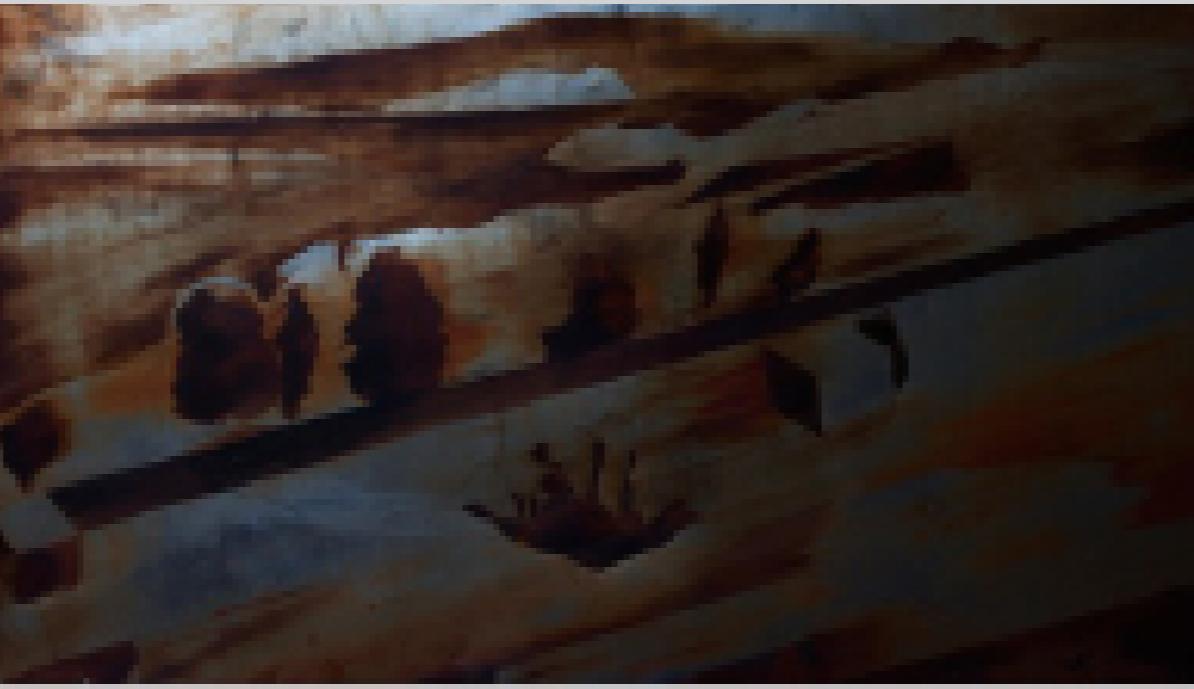
# ISLAND WITHOUT SIRENS

*For Alexander Kluge*

And suddenly you saw it, far below  
The coast road, after the twelfth curve,  
Stomach surging from hair-pin drive.  
En route for the South; so we sped on  
Perched above the drop, windows down.  
Sorrento with its villas, its fan palms,  
Had been swallowed by the plug-hole  
Of the mirror in a great green swirl.  
It hung in the haze, a hulk of bare rock.

The sea dead still. Not a trace of myth,  
But for the yachts decked out in chrome  
That glinted in the light. On a white hull  
We made out 'Nausicaa' in faded letters.  
How the rumour started, I don't know —  
But someone said this was it, so we parked  
In the middle of nowhere, on the open road.  
High above, an orange grove burst into flame,  
And below us, out in the blue, the island.

Disappointingly bare, we concluded. In the  
Scree of limestone baked hard by the sun  
Not even a twig left for the cormorants.  
And the silence stretched for kilometres,  
Making one think of test-sites, dead craters,  
The acoustics of bombed-out opera houses.  
Those fat spectral birds with the long necks,  
The singer in the finale hitting top C —  
They had all flown — and what remained  
Was moon rock that absorbed every echo.



*Artwork by Suleman Khilji*

# INSEL OHNE SIRENEN

*Für Alexander Kluge*

Da plötzlich sahst du sie, tief unterhalb  
Der Küstenstraße, nach der zwölften Kurve,  
Mit flauem Magen von der Serpentinenfahrt.  
Denn südwärts ging es: dicht am Abgrund,  
Die Fenster offen, sausten wir dahin.  
Sorrent mit seinen Villen, Fächerpalmen,  
Hatte der Seitenspiegel, dieser Ausguß,  
In einem grünen Strudel längst geschluckt.  
Sie trieb im Dunst, ein rauer Felsenkegel.

Das Meer hielt still. Von Mythen keine Spur,  
Bis auf die Yachten, die dort chromverziert  
Herüberblitzten. An der weißen Bugwand  
Stand dann »Nausikaa« in blonder Schrift.  
Wie das Gerücht aufkam, ich weiß es nicht —  
Doch hieß es: Das da ist sie, und wir parkten  
Im Nirgendwo, am Rand, auf offner Strecke.  
Hoch über uns lag ein Orangenhain, entflammt,  
Und unter uns, voraus im Blau, die Insel.

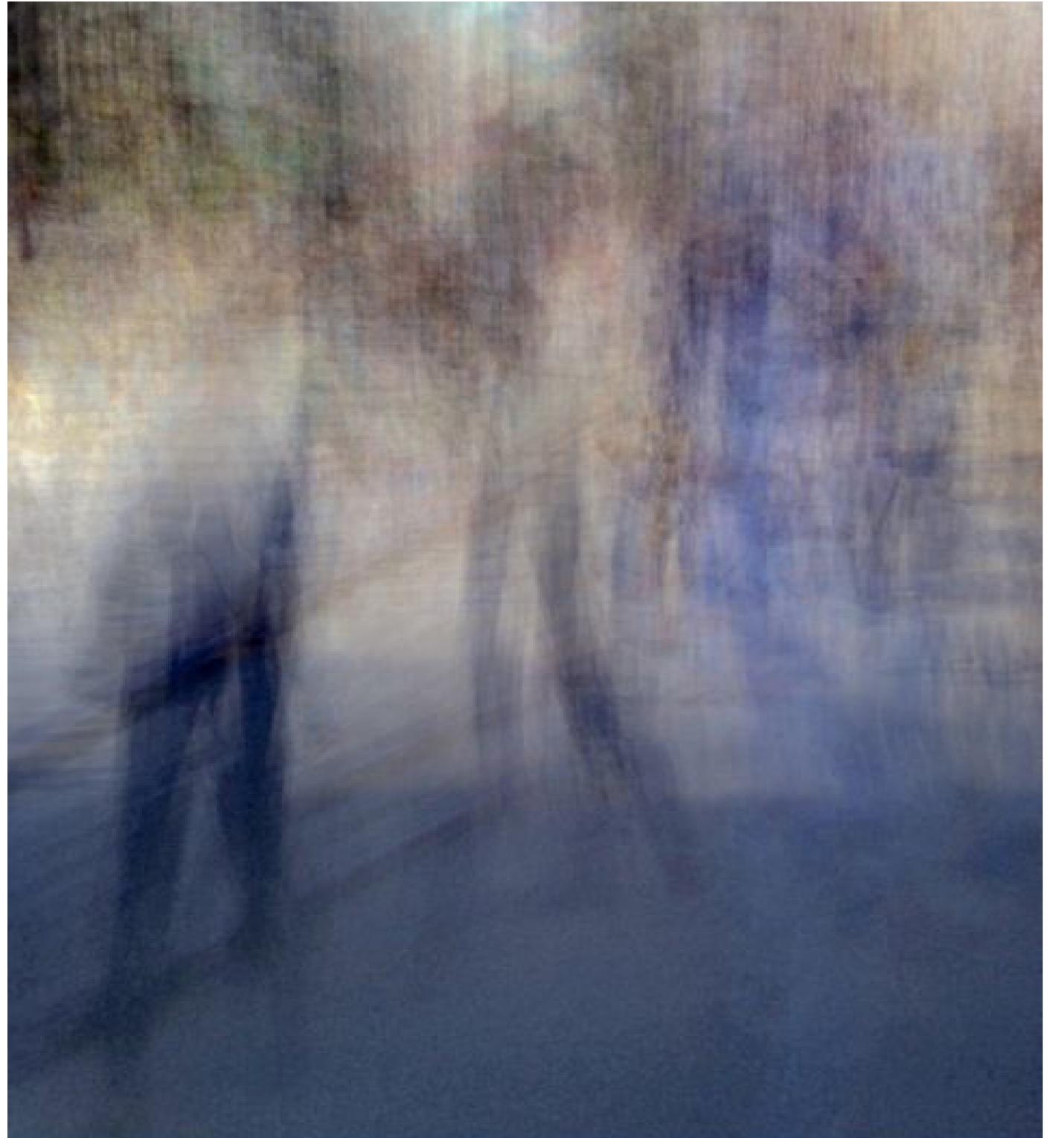
Enttäuschend kahl war sie. In dem Geröll  
Aus Kalkstein, von der Sonne hartgebrannt,  
Wuchs nicht ein Ast mehr für die Kormorane.  
Daher das Schweigen, kilometerweit zu greifen,  
Daß man an Testgelände dachte, tote Krater,  
An die Akustik bombardierter Opernhäuser.  
Die fetten Geistervögel mit dem langen Hals  
Der Sänger in der Schlußpartie beim hohen C —  
Sie waren fortgeflogen, und geblieben  
War Mondgestein, das jedes Echo absorbierte.

~ Durs Grünbein, trans. from German by Karen Leeder

# NIGHTWORK

By Jáchym Topol

Translated from Czech by Marek Tomin



Artwork by Jeremy Freedman

*This excerpt is taken from Nightwork (Portobello Books, 2014), and appears with kind permission from Portobello.*

I sat down on the pavement, had a little rest. That's what surprised people most. And what would

you do, sir, you with your fake doctorate, from Bucharest most likely, if someone ran your child over before your very eyes? You'd become aware that you had another child and you'd sit down for a moment. Drunk, they said. Your honour! Allow me to laugh. I had my first bout of delirium tremens

out in the fields. That was the time when my little girl floated away, I really do have bad luck, that's for sure. Then I went somewhere, I was out in the countryside. Now imagine this, Your Munificence. Suddenly, in a single second, every church spire in this adorable vale, they are but a stone's toss from one another, broke off and headed straight for my heart. And then imagine, Professor of All the Human Sciences, that all the sickles on all the little monuments and posters scattered over our glorious countryside by the wise and firm hand of the Party went flying into my little heart, and all the hammers pounded my head, I had an awful racket in my head as a result, I felt like I was standing next to a cascade of crockery, smashing on the ground.

An enchanting place, these Czech lands of mine, really, and I swear: they combine Catholicism and Communism in the most degenerate way possible. And I'd like you to write an essay about this bipolarity for me, to be handed in before the next lecture, five pages will suffice, Comrade Political Commissar, and that's an order. But the main thing you should keep in mind: What do these two dogmas that rule the world say to a human being toiling away under a low, murky sky? They say: Guilty! Guilty of existing. Always, and under all circumstances. Choose your own punishment. Do it! Mine is alcohol. I must admit I feel somewhat confined. I'd be quite interested to know how long I've been here. So he managed it then, Mr World Shaker! Got rid of me, now he'll get his hands on that business of his, grab the boys, or what's left of them, I might add, in order to dispel heavy gloom with a bit of light cynicism, and he'll scarper. Half the nation is pushing its way to the borders. And I'm lying here all comfy like this, resting, lucky me! They probably strapped me in so I wouldn't squash my belly, or rather wouldn't hurt whoever's in there, no wonder, I'm not important, but a little soldier or a prostitute might fall out of me, they'd come in handy to them.

Well, all right then, I messed up. Forget the cops, I know I'll have to stand in front of a different court of law, the one that's been in session from the first second, from the moment the first living cell came into being, since the Earth's first morning. Bottle after bottle, you drank your brain away. But it's not too late yet. Five minutes to twelve isn't twelve, esteemed Jury. I'll get out of here. This isn't a Soviet psychiatric asylum, this is a bona fide Central European establish-

ment for gravid, homicidal alcoholic women, damn it. I'll crawl after them on all fours, if need be. After my kiddies. Instinctively, like a she-wolf.

Investigating officer! An alcoholic, an insomniac just wants some peace and quiet after a busy day, they call it the oceanic feeling. Not many people know that. And we all know that every day is very busy indeed, especially in this landlocked country, don't we, Mr Bubble and Mr Squeak, dear Hum and dear Drum, dear neighbours.

I want a different life, Mr Science Maestro used to say to me. We have children together, so what are you going on about? He moved out, Mr World Changing Inventor. I gave birth to his children and just as the big four-zero creeps up on me like an octopus, he ups and leaves to devote himself fully to his work. Well that's fucking hunky dory. Is that what you do to someone? That's exactly what you do to someone. Waiter, one more over here. Make it snappy!

When that son of mine sat down next to me on the pavement, he said: Mummy. He was shaking all over, but he was radiating such strength, it warmed me.

He'll pack them off to the scummy country side again. He wants to emigrate, most likely, seeing as that racket with the comrades didn't come off. I'll sell it to the army, he says. Where do you think you are? If the army wants something, it takes it.

Oh well. And to top it all there are aeroplanes flying over Prague. Probably not bombers, I should be so lucky. More likely they're full of goggle-eyed boneheads from Siberia, so nervous with fear they keep tripping over their Kalashnikovs. If we had what it takes they'd be stumbling over their own guts soon enough. The Czechs. All those tricoloured flags everywhere. National pride. Jesus Christ! If I was at least a tiny bit sane and not tied to this bed, obviously, I'd crawl under it to hide in shame. Or fear, more likely. How can anyone leave a defenceless woman to face an attack by an army with missiles? Hello! Cretins, anybody there?

Nah, they're not bombers. There'd be the noise of explosions by now. If an atomic bomb exploded over Prague right now my heart would burst with joy. When I was a little girl I saw Dresden on fire. From the window of our flat in Prague. I saw the light of a blaze burning in the sky. I'll never forget that. And now I'm going to pray for a teeny-weeny miracle. That when I wake up these straps will be undone and the door open. Maybe it'll happen.

# FROM THE SKY, THE EARTH<sup>†</sup>

By Zsuzsa Selyem

Translated from Hungarian by Erika Mihálycsa

Hours passed. I went for a walk. Walking would help, I thought. It did. Except that my mind kept straying from what I wanted it to settle on: the plane passenger and the blind man. Straying to the issue if reckoning with one's power is part of being grown-up for, so I thought, every grown-up has power, even when they have no inkling about it. The only exceptions being those consumed by anxieties, in the grip of an antique mother well into their old age, now they indeed have no power at all. But I'm wrong there. They, too, tie down their tyrannical mothers, torture whoever is even more helpless than themselves: the less they want to, the more they do. Then a mother with her child in her lap caught my eye, sitting with face turned towards the sky. Is she blind? Why do the blind turn their heads upwards? Is it for hearing better?  
\*

All this I will delete: the plane passenger will not be me but another guy called Siniša. Their acquaintance can't go back a long time, since the conditions of blind living are not self-evident to him.  
\*

Karel arrives at the airport. Yes, it is him, Karel: of medium height, around 35, short black hair and matching eyes now blue, now green, now completely dark, the only reason I will not write occasionally black is that I like the phrase more than I fear it and I couldn't care less if people find this unbelievable, the only thing that matters is that Karel sees spiffingly with his eyes of changing colour, to the point of embarrassing people even. He is travelling to Istanbul: we know more or less where that is but what if I say, he takes off from Ljubljana, or from Iași for that matter? Does he need a visa or anything of the kind to land in Istanbul?  
\*

I have only three matches left. And three cigarettes left, but that would be no problem, I still have an unopened pack of Karelia. So much the worse, there will be no smoking tonight.  
\*

Karel doesn't need a visa from Ljubljana (or Iași), but there are some conditions he had known about but forgot. The customs officer is sitting behind a glass sheet, Karel greets him with a 'Good morning', and reaches out his passport and plane ticket. The customs officer is a burly, (in parenthesis: fat) man who is eyeing the polite man in front of him with a dose of suspicion, as according to his standards this can't be pronounced well-dressed. What he sees is stubbles on the face, a rust-colour T-shi-

rt, a zipped black sweater. Polite but not well-dressed. The loafers whom he suspects to be polite out of arrogance make the customs officer nervous. Or, as he puts it to himself: penniless but playing the billionaire to me. He answers the greeting with such delay that it seems he was the first to say hello and Karel the one who didn't even bother to answer.

\*

It's over, I have no matches left. I was wrong, I only had two not three because I had already lighted one in the park and put it back into the box with the others, so I wouldn't have to walk with it to the first wastebin.

\*

The customs officer checks the passport, leafs through it and asks: 'What is the purpose of your travel to Istanbul?'  
\*

'I'm going to an exhibition.'

'Hm. Health insurance?'

'I haven't.'

'How much money do you have on you?'

'None. I paid for the plane ticket and it will be refunded as soon as I get to Istanbul.'

'Are you aware at all of the conditions of travel? I cannot let you pass, you would be returned from Istanbul if you haven't 30 euros per day. Read this through', the customs officer points at a printed form on the wall of his glass cage, 'you need to have 30 euros for every day spent abroad, in addition to the health insurance of course. I'm very sorry', he adds, calmer now, but this of course merely means that this exchange is over as far as he is concerned. Next please. There is no-one queuing after Karel. It is early in the morning, the small Ljubljana (or Iași) airport is completely empty.

'I must be in Istanbul tonight.'

Karel is looking at the customs officer with his eyes of changing colour with what seems like definitive calm. 'There, under the stairs, you can get a health insurance', answers the customs officer, surprised at his own words and indeed, you can buy insurance, Karel finds some local currency in his wallet, the whole thing turns out to be unexpectedly cheap. Karel walks back to the customs officer's window, this puts the stamp in his passport, draws Karel's attention to read the conditions of travel next time before he starts off, withholds the passport for ever so short a while, then releases it. 'Thank you', says Karel like one who has been wished a pleasant flight.  
\*



Artwork by Jeremy Freedman

Karel finds his place on the small plane directly above the wing, takes his book out and opens it but in the end just places it on the empty seat beside. It is early, he has hardly slept for the last few days, he leans back and shuts his eyes of changing colour. He can't sleep. He looks out: clouds beneath. I wonder why Siniša objects to the word installation? He said so yesterday, the radio was on, it popped up there, they were not even paying attention, I just left it on and we started talking, Siniša was telling me a story but at this word he raised his head that he holds high up anyway, and said: what's the use of this word, installation.  
\*

Now that I can't sleep either I'm getting angry with myself for not bringing a box of matches. Karel I can't understand, Siniša even less, I have no idea what is the use of installation. He was explaining how after a while the pictures started climbing off the walls of the exhibition room and stretched until they had as many dimensions as they needed. Four, because they didn't want to live for ever.  
\*

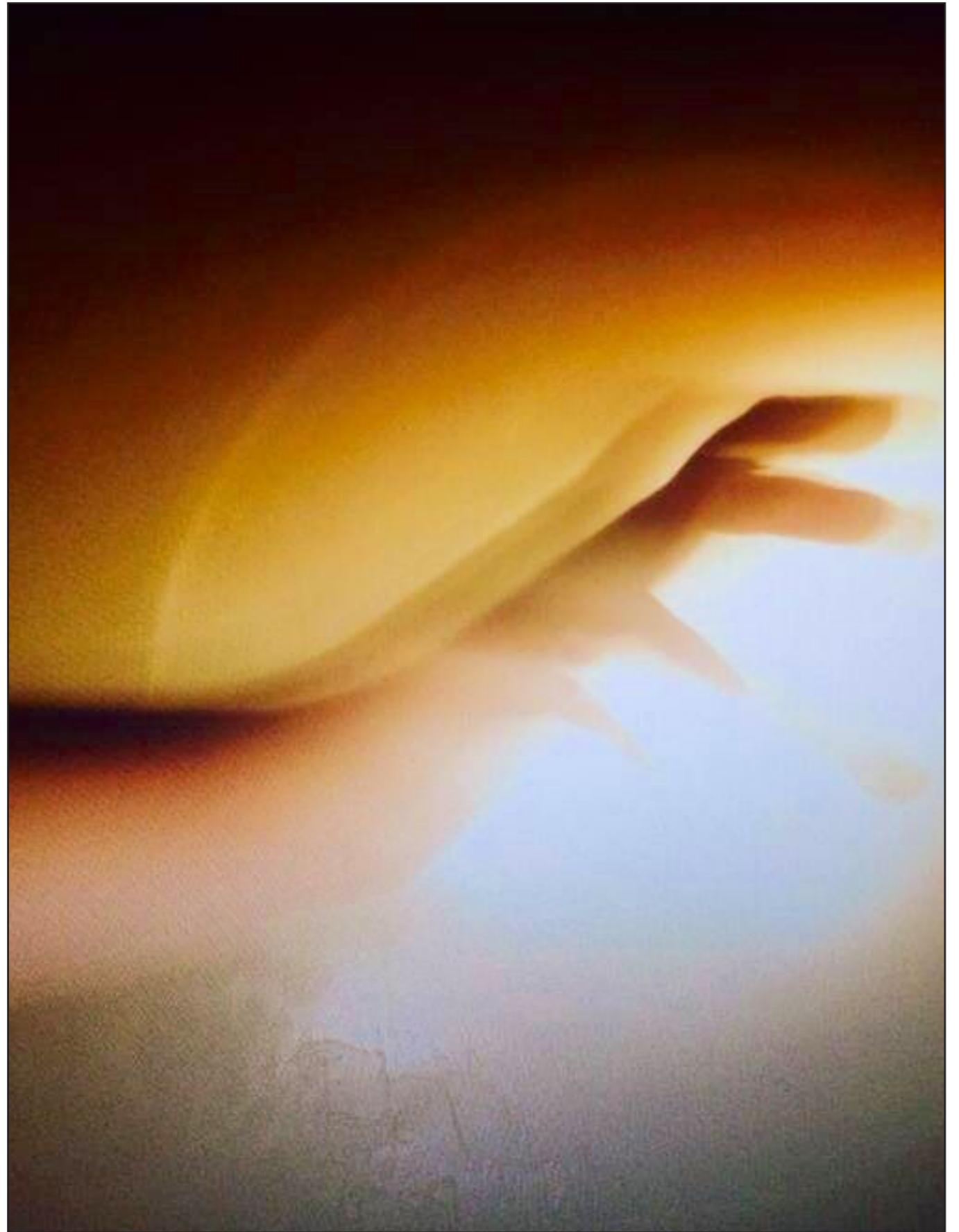
Karel has been collecting struck-off matches ever since he first saw Siniša light somebody's cigarette. They were standing in front of some building

talking and smoking and when Tamara asked for a fire Siniša produced a box of matches from his pocket and struck one with his head turned towards the sky. He could hear that several lighters had overtaken him but stood there motionless, the little fire almost burning his fingers. Luckily Karel blew it out in time.  
\*

There is no border you could pass without paying some fee. It is not even the fee but the terror of having to conform to who knows what law. Installation: why does this very word trouble Siniša. And not, for instance, See you! Come to think of it, Servus is so much better. There was a time when I'd rather just mumble under my breath at parting, but then he would surprise me by saying, See you. He would say it calmly, kindly, while shutting the door after me with face held upwards. Even so, I couldn't bring myself to say See you to him the next time.  
\*

Servus humilissimus, this is the title of the Istanbul exhibition. Karel didn't want to swindle, there was not one match in the installation that somebody had lighted merely in order for the globe-like thing to take shape. The matches turned with their burnt-off ends outwards would stand for the continents; in contrast, oceans were burnt inwards.

# REALITY OF ONLINE ACTIVISM



Artwork by Savannah Hocter

*Battling the cacophony of voices*  
By Gimel Samera

History is rich with tales of significant events where individuals rallied together in support of a crucial cause or to combat prevailing ideologies they felt needed to change. Just ask your parents or your grandparents to take you for a stroll down memory lane, to their generation's most notable remonstrations. They may tell you of the time when Martin Luther King, Jr. fought against racial inequality through non-violence or recount the rise of feminist demonstrations in the 1960s. They may tell you of the time when they, too, fought against social injustice with their protest songs, die-ins, or strikes. We like to fight for freedom – whether it's our own or for others. If anyone violates or so much as threatens to put a dent in it, humanity's quick to raise its defenses and retaliate. As for this tech-savvy generation's activists, times have certainly changed in the way we voice our dissent. In the Internet age, we're not only wag-

munity effectively utilized social media to draw attention to renegade agendas. It is not a new fact that the Internet provides numerous outlets for online advocacy. Think of how the process of signing petitions has evolved over time. Rarely does anyone need to walk from door to door, collecting signatures, and it's been years since anyone's received emails asking to sign their name at the bottom of the page, as well as encouraging the receiver to forward it to their contacts. Now, there are websites that specifically cater to this form of protest. Moreover, social media users are increasing by the day, and with its ability to reach people on the opposite side of the globe, it doesn't take long to rally hundreds or thousands of supporters to your cause. It can rapidly mobilize protestors, expose corrupted powers both on a national and international scale, and unite like-minded people across different geographical locations. All it takes is one

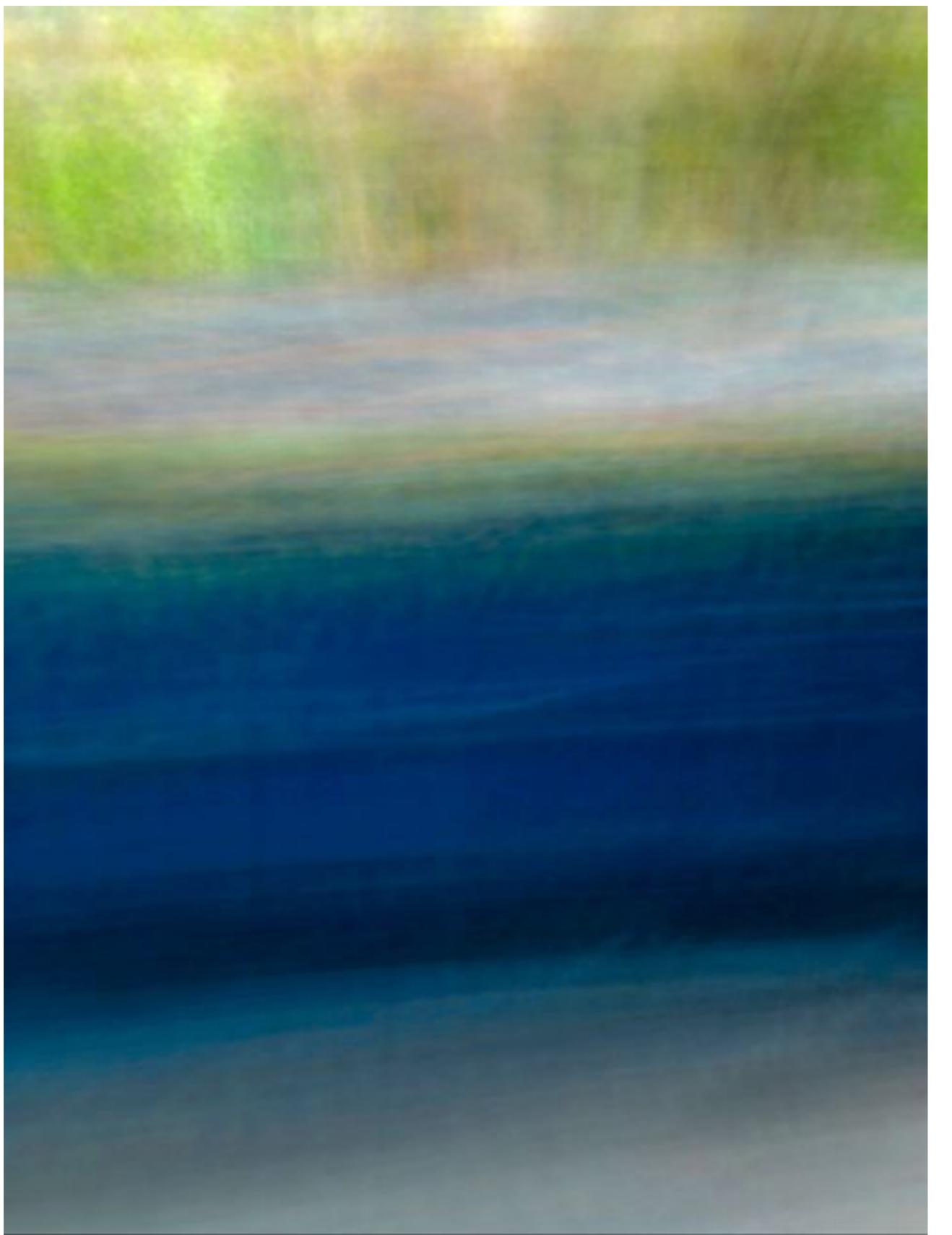
**“Negotiating ‘freedom’ is an intense and self-defeating exercise in absolutes. It means pitching up an idealized utopian free-point and then taking an axe to it bit by bit until it becomes ‘acceptable’.”**

ing our battles on the streets but we're also picking up picket signs and protesting our grievances on digital soil, and why not?

While traditional methods of public demonstrations have not become obsolete with the advent of social media, online activism seems to be the new standard. Scroll down your social media news feed, and you'll learn about the student protests happening in Taiwan and how they're utilizing the Internet to propel their activism. Or you might have that one friend who'll post a lengthy status, discussing the SOPA strike and how the battle isn't over. Or you'll read about the Arab Spring as part of research for a class essay, and study how the com-

status, video or photograph to go viral. We're encouraged to sign a petition, share a viral video, participate on a trending topic on Twitter, be a part of a movement's Facebook group, or post an outcry as a status for our immediate contacts to see. It's not just about sticking pins onto our jackets or backpacks anymore. By changing our display pictures to match a movement's slogan, we're making a statement, drawing attention, and pressing others to join in.

In the case of the SOPA strike, it would be fair to say that online activism proved effective. However, as numerous as its merits are, using the Internet to promote a social cause is not without its faults. It's easy to get sucked into the



*Artwork by Jeremy Freedman*

hype of a campaign and be unaware of its objectives and background. It's important to remember that it's in our nature to gravitate towards participating in the current hype if only to avoid feeling out of place. It's one thing to sign a petition or to keep sharing and re-tweeting a video, but it's another matter altogether when it involves financial or personal risk. From behind our computer screens, we only do so much and later, revel in self-gratification.

In 2012, Invisible Children initiated the "Stop Kony" campaign that demanded the arrest of the notorious Ugandan warlord, child kidnapper and leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony. After launching its half-hour video on YouTube, it received more than 35 million views in less than a week. In four days, the campaign was mentioned approximately 2.5 million times on Twitter. In less than 24 hours, about 300,000 people took the KONY2012 pledge and the organization received a huge sum of donations. But as viral as the campaign was, it barely escaped controversy. Critics attacked the expending of the funds raised, specifically how the majority of resources went to filmmaking and advocacy instead of on-the-ground humanitarian work. There was the accusation of manipulating facts in its video, simplifying an issue that was actually more complex than the demand of Kony's arrest.

Despite the accusations, the campaign inspired activists from all over the world to create Facebook groups in their respective countries, as a way of stimulating participation from geographically grouped people. One such group existed in the city I stayed in. The organizers would encourage their members to add their friends to the group. I still remember the supercharged comments and discussions that took place. Sometimes, it would get heated and blame shifting would occur when members weren't as enthusiastic as they were supposed to be and it increasingly became evident that some of the "young activists" were in it for the thrill. It was treated as a badge to show that they were making a change in the world. Let's not forget the excitement that built up around the "Kony 2012 Cover the Night" campaign. Activists were asked to drive around cities, putting up bright red posters emblazoned with messages of peace

and the need to fight for a common cause. However, the campaign flopped. Invisible Children may have succeeded in mobilizing young people online, but it failed to turn their activism into real world reforms. From the comments of activists, it looked like they were far more excited about the prospect of going out into the streets at night, putting up posters than getting Kony arrested. In a few months, the hype died down and members began to slowly leave the Facebook group. Invisible Children did not meet its objective: at year's end, Joseph Kony was not arrested and very much still-at-large. By signing up to these groups, users receive what Kevin Lewis, a professor of sociology at the University of California, calls: "reputational benefits."

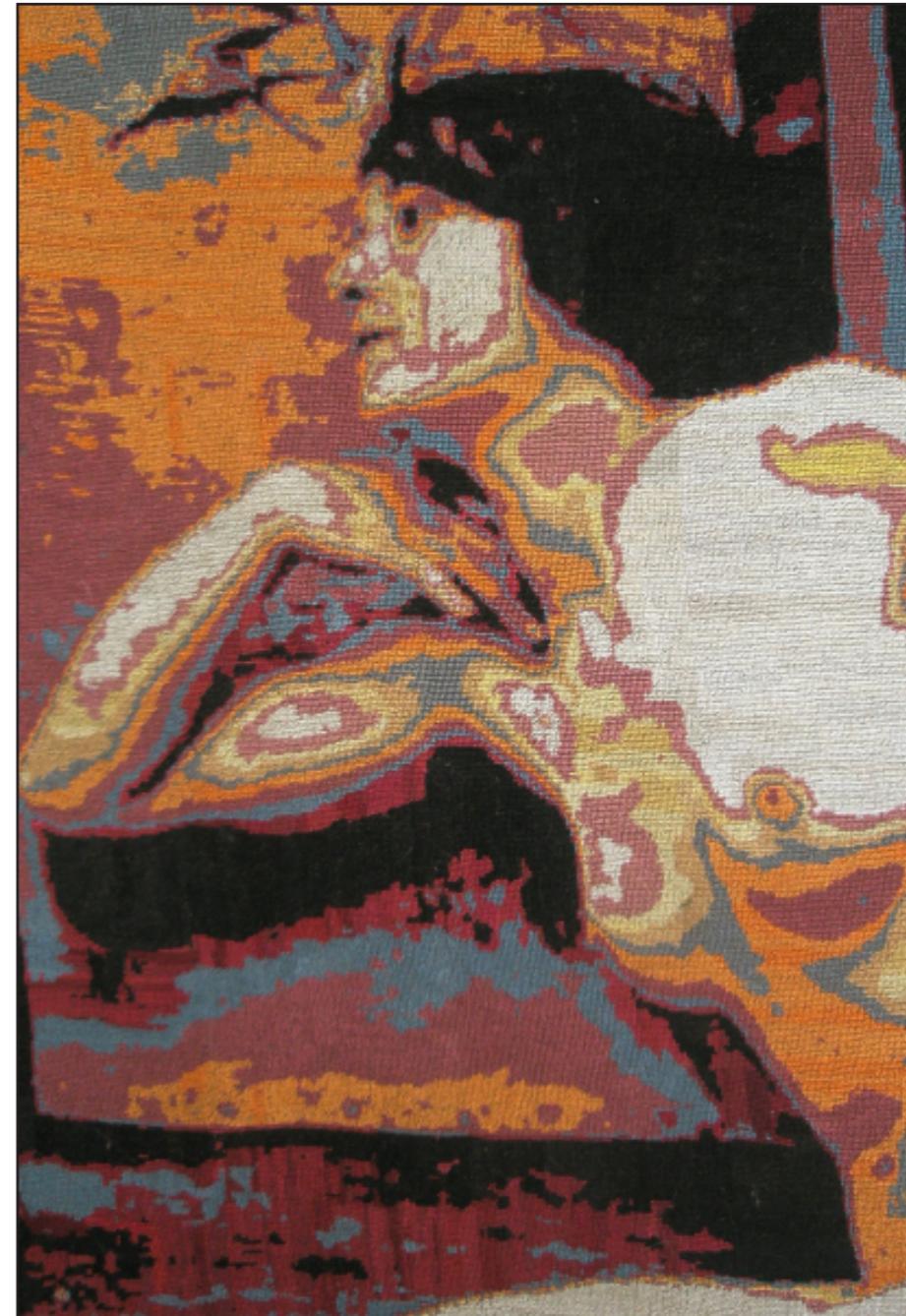
Online participation can only achieve so much; signing an online petition can only prove to be effective if it meets its objectives. The same can be said for any movement that takes place online. An online protest is only successful if it involves extensive and active offline participation. Does online rage result in tangible offline action or does it only end up being a part of the online noise? How effective is online protesting as a method of change? As journalist Anthony Shadid said when asked about the intensive use of social media during the Arab Spring, "It's not a Twitter or Facebook revolution. The revolution is in the streets, and it smells of blood."

Here's another point to keep in mind: as quick and easy as it is to spread factual information on the Internet, the same can be said for the dissemination of false information. It makes one wonder how many of us have fallen victim to supporting social campaigns without double-checking the details given to us. Just as the Internet is a treasure trove of information, it can also lead people to believe half-truths. A few weeks ago, I stumbled upon a news report of a disfigured three-year-old girl who got kicked out of KFC because her appearance scared off customers. The allegation against the famous fast food restaurant was posted on the little girl's Facebook page, titled "Victoria's Victories" and within minutes, social media users quickly showed their outrage against KFC, calling for a boycott. In response, KFC released an apology almost immediately after the incident with a vow to donate \$30,000 to Victoria's

# MARTA

Sweat rash like semolina. The yellowed mattress  
with the satin imprint left by a weightless shadow,  
  
the rotting vegetable patch where Marta  
finds a stranger's hand under her dress and – oh – August  
  
snaps like a dry twig. Nylon, grey paper in the ditches  
of dill, lower down the white stump of an arm, such a shiver,  
  
and the word knickers fading in his mouth, a small black cherry.  
How many fires raged through this shed is anyone's guess  
  
(gestures so quick darkness and hunger fail  
to keep pace). Their reflection in the well whirled  
  
long after they got home and before the mirrors  
pried into their new places.

~ Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało, trans. from Polish by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese



Antonia Petulant at the Window by Holly Day

boycott. In response, KFC released an apology almost immediately after the incident with a vow to donate \$30,000 to Victoria's medical bills. Moreover, online donation sites such as GoFundMe.com facilitated raising more than \$135,000 from over a 1000 people. However, new allegations surfaced claiming that the story was a hoax that the family concocted to bilk people into donating money, as well as free surgeries and gifts. Security footage showed that Victoria and her grandmother hadn't set foot in that particular KFC branch. Presently, well-wishers who donated money through GoFundMe.com are requesting for refunds as the case undergoes further investigation.

The world of social media is evolving everyday and by the looks of it, online protesting, Internet activism, digital advocacy – whatever you want to call it – is here to stay. Whatever the issue, a lot more people are resorting to online protests. It's a wonderful thing, the desire to help and fight for the rights of people but it's equally important to beware the snares that can entangle you if you don't get your facts straight. Not every dire cause we see on our social media news feed has a justified objective. In the virtual world where many campaigns are competing for supporters and viewership, social media movements may not always be truthful about their objectives. They'll stretch a few things

here and there. It's all in how well you can make the details work for you. So before you decide to pick up your digital picket sign and hit the social networking scene with a loud protest, take a moment to do a little more research.

After all, there's no harm in being smart about the issues and though social media networks are protest tools, their effectiveness does have limitations. It's not enough to like a status, share a video, change your display picture and participate in anger-fueled discussions; there's no reason to revel in self-gratification or give yourself a pat on the back. For an online protest to be successful, we're talking long-term devotion, and what that means is to be far more

proactive than counting a "like" or a "share" on Facebook as signs of protest. We have to unplug and face the real world.

#### Endnotes

i Goldberg, Eleanor, 'Dislike: Facebook Activism Doesn't Actually Translate Into Donations For Causes'; The Huffington Post, March 13, 2014

ii Sander, Thomas, 'Twitter, Facebook and YouTube's Role in Arab Spring (Middle East Uprisings)'; Social Capital Blog, July 7, 2013



## TURKISH BATH

Heavenly Hammam: this is where the living are washed.  
The dead could not be better cleansed. (I'd like to know). Soaped  
from head to foot, fondly lathered and scrubbed,  
Like a child by its mother. And these things a lifetime ago  
To the body. The last time everything was done on its behalf.  
Honest skin, you long for warmth but it's the cool you relish.  
The older you get the more unlikely you become, go on.

Under the knee  
Of the masseur, on this polished marble slab, no fat escapes,  
No fold of flesh, no birthmark, it is only thanks to the steam  
That he does not see through the hairy rind, your exegete.  
You come (see Marsyas) within an inch of being skinned  
With the rough glove (kese). Our Osman has a heart of stone.  
Kneading the dough of creation, beating you like a rug,  
Is part of the routine, pure civility. But boy, it toughens you up!  
For a long time, towel-wrapped roulade, you lie there half-asleep  
Under the dome of the steam-bath — silently pray with your feet.

## TÜRKISCHES BAD

Himmlisches Hamam: dies ist die Waschung der Lebenden.  
Die der Toten könnte nicht gründlicher sein. (Man wüßte es gern).  
So von Kopf bis Fuß eingeseift, mütterlich geschrubbt und bespült,  
Wurde das Kind von drei Jahren noch. Und so anfangsfern,  
Fühlt der Körper: Da, zum letzten Mal, war ihm alles vergeben.  
Ehrliche Haut, sehnst dich nach Wärme und hast es gern kühl. Je  
älter je unwahrscheinlicher bist du, gib zu.

Auf dem blanken  
Marmortisch, unterm Knie des Masseurs, dem kein Speck entgeht,  
Keine Falte, kein Muttermal, ist es dem Dunst nur zu danken, Daß  
er nicht tiefer blickt durch behaarte Schwarten, dein Exeget. Fehlt  
nicht viel, und du wirst (siehe Marsyas) vom Fleisch geschält Mit  
rauhem Handschuh (kese). Der Osmane kennt keine Gnade. Dich als  
Teppich zu klopfen, den Teig der Schöpfung zu kneten, Ist Teil der  
Übung, die reinste Höflichkeit. Mann, das stählt! Lange liegt  
man dann schlaftrig, ins Tuch eingerollt als Roulade Unter der Kuppel  
des Dampfbads — stumm mit den Füßen betend.

~ Durs Grünbein trans. from German by Karen Leeder

# TAKING TRINIDAD

By Sándor Jászberényi

Translated from Hungarian by M. Henderson Ellis

"The roof terrace, sir?" asked the hotel receptionist. He was in the regulation red uniform with gold-colored buttons and a little black hat.

"Yes," I said. My Blackberry buzzed in my pocket. I involuntarily checked to see what it was. Some girl commenting on Facebook; nothing interesting. But the device was useful in that it allowed me to cut short any further small talk with the receptionist. I didn't want him to ask how I was, what I did for a living, or why I was in the country. I didn't want to see him smile insincerely as he asked what I needed, then linger until I forked up a few coins as *baksheesh*.

A couple was also waiting for lift. I knew they were tourists, because they were in shorts, and only tourists wear shorts in Cairo. That's because everything gets coated by the dust and dirt kicked up from the street. And due to the unfathomable standards of Arab formality, nobody takes a person in shorts seriously, even in the city center. I've never liked tourists.

The lift arrived quietly. Its door opened and we got in. My jacket felt tight around my arms; my muscles were sore after a two-hour workout at Gold's Gym. I looked in the elevator mirror and was pleased with what I saw. I was muscular but not overly buff. I was pressing two hundred pounds these days.

I pushed the button for the fourteenth floor and the doors closed. As the piano version of "My Heart Will Go On" trickled quietly from the speakers, I reflected on whose decision it was to choose the music that plays in five-star hotel elevators. Why Vivaldi in the Four Seasons, Clayderman in the Hilton, but Celine Dion in the Marriot? Whose job was it to select the music that distracts a person's attention from the fact that they are racing up and down in a metal coffin at close to forty miles per hour?

The door opened at my floor. The terrace was bathed in afternoon light and the sound of gurgling water traveled down the leather-chair-lined corridor that led to the pool. The light wind blowing over the Nile brought with it the smell of mud.

Blue- and white-striped patio umbrellas fluttered in the breeze. Just a few people sat at the bamboo tables beneath them,



*Grandfather* by Jen Yu

mostly Saudis. I cut across the pool area and headed for the bar. There stood a waiter named Omar, his shirt unbuttoned to his chest. He smiled broadly when he saw me. Omar and I were tight. I had been paying my respects at the bar for almost half a year now.

Mustafa was once an activist with the April 6<sup>th</sup> Movement. During the revolution he would talk about true democ-

racy and the democratic transition.

After the army outlawed the April 6<sup>th</sup> Movement, he stopped talking about politics and took to drink. I knew this because his skin had begun to yellow, like that of all Arab drinkers. Their systems simply can't process alcohol properly.

"Whisky or Daiquiri?"

"Daiquiri."

Omar nodded and took a bottle of Havana

rum from the shelf. He poured a jigger into the blender, added ice cubes, and ground three limes onto a metal juicer that skillfully extracted the seeds. He shook the drink, poured it into a goblet, and then added sugarcane syrup.

"How was Sinai?" he asked, setting the glass in front of me.

"Good."

"It wasn't too hot?"

"It was. In Rafah it was up around 115 degrees."

"Did you see any tanks?"

"Yes. A few. There was fighting in El Arish."

"What kind?"

"The Bedouins kept the police building under fire for around eight hours."

"Damned Bedouins. I can't stand them."

"So the army came to restore order."

"Indeed, if the army showed up, order will follow."

My Blackberry buzzed.

**"A few days later, the Gaddafi loyalists began to shell Misrata, and Harvey Dabbs was killed. It was a stupid death, like every death in war."**

"Sorry," I said. Omar nodded and went to do some washing up.

The bank had sent a text. Two thousand dollars had arrived in my account; a pay transfer from the newspaper I worked for. I disconnected from both the mobile network and the Internet. I didn't want to hear from anybody. I looked at the cocktail in front of me, the condensation clinging to its side, and reflected that this had been my twelfth mission. I'd gotten it done, just like always. Not everybody could say the same. The fleeting image of Harvey Dabbs came to mind. In the Tibesti Hotel, in Benghazi, he was holding forth on the importance of prayer. We were drinking Johnny Walker, which they sold under the bar. The whole place was sloshed on it.

"You know, this is my fifteenth war," said Dabbs. "I'm in with God. I even have my own prayer. In this profession, you have to pray. 'Our

father who art in heaven / hallowed be thy name / thy kingdom come/ thy will be done/ In war we earn our daily bread/just don't shoot us with your "50s" / vests or not those buggers leave us dead." "Amen," said everybody and applauded loudly.

A few days later, the Gaddafi loyalists began to shell Misrata, and Harvey Dabbs was killed. It was a stupid death, like every death in war. A car bomb had exploded next to him while he was photographing the rebels' advance. Three of us went to identify his corpse in the garage they were using as a morgue. Only his upper torso remained; the rest was lost to the explosion or stray dogs.

I pondered whether I should raise my

glass to God's sense of humor or another stupid death. "To a stupid death," I said, and drank. I'd drink to a pointless idiotic death because, unlike God, it's something I have seen with my own eyes. The daiquiri went down well. I like to drink. It's good to drink after a war, during a war, before a war. It is good to drink with friends, to the death of friends, to childbirth, children's deaths, engagements and broken engagements, betrayal, quitting smoking, love. It's always good to drink. I signaled Mustafa to make me another. I looked up, gazed at the patio umbrellas rippling in the wind, the sand-colored Cairo rooftops, and laundry hung from the windows.

The second cocktail finally washed the taste of the desert from my mouth. I took out my Blackberry and loaded the game *Sid Meier's Pirates!* I thought I should keep busy, even if I had no real work. I had downloaded the game

## TANGIER

Even if the Hong Kong flu got me in the end,  
even if the Nobel Committee wrote me  
a letter in ink both green and invisible,  
I wouldn't leave her alone in this town,  
though its climate was amiable  
from March to October.

When she slips her jumper off,  
her hair is electricity.

She falls asleep on my shoulder  
in the middle of the street  
and her steps ignite  
small riots of leaves.

No two words about it, we fit the scene:  
a couple gliding to the pub for a drink  
like Port, that old bitch with her silver teeth  
glinting as if she were biting on glass.

They slept in a damp room:  
a smuggler with sleek hair  
and a black slut in a dappled dress  
with eyelets of a mosquito net.  
Her glittering hands when she walks  
suddenly, as if on sand?  
Barefoot, indulgent, with her back  
to the moon in orange.

~ Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało,  
trans. from Polish by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese

for free from the company's site; I got it as a bonus when I reached five gigabytes of downloads the previous month, 200 dollars' worth.

I had begun to play the game the night before, to fill the six-hour trip from El Arish to Cairo. In the game you are a pirate captain. The goal is to retire with the most points by battling other pirates and marrying into aristocracy.

We got caught in a sandstorm on our way back through the desert. When this happens you can't see anything of the road, because the air is full of dark whirling sand. Nobody was in the mood to talk, so I just played. I began the game as an English buccaneer. It was going well for a few hours, but I kept getting stuck when I tried to take Trinidad. Four frigates from

weight, as there must some reason the game notes just how much freight the boats carry.

*Instead of frigates I need some lighter boats, I thought. Lighter boats, which maneuver quickly, even in bad wind.* "I think somebody's looking for you," said Mustafa, taking my empty glass. I turned. By the pool stood Alistair Bleakly, *The Independent's* newly hired correspondent. He didn't look good. He was wearing the same clothing he had on yesterday in the desert. He hadn't shaved and his leather jacket sparkled with sand. I waved him over.

"I tried to ring you several times," he said, and hopped up on a barstool next to me.

"I was unplugged."

**"After the imam's pronouncement of adultery, the men of the mosque had dug a nice little pit. In it a woman was buried up to her waist. Her hands were bound so tightly behind her that she couldn't move."**

my flotilla with four hundred trained pirates waited in vain to attack, unable to overcome the tricky winds the game threw at us. I tried everything I could with the touch screen, but my ships could only bob futilely in the sea as the city's red fortress showered them with fire.

I had to take Trinidad at all costs if I wanted to end the game with maximum points. In Trinidad there was money, Spanish silver, the governor's daughter. Everything you need to win. It bothered me that I couldn't find a solution, because I wanted to make the game's Hall of Champions.

I hate when I can't finish what I start. It saddens me to think I let an opportunity pass me by.

The menu came up on the screen and I killed the sound. I loaded my saved settings and began to direct the fleet, but again the wind worked against me. My entire fleet was sunk twice. I wondered if the problem was the

"You're a reporter. You should have your phone on."

"It's my day off. Why, did something happen?"

"I was just thinking things over. We should do something."

"About what?"

Alistair stared at me in dismay, but kept quiet because Mustafa arrived with the two whiskeys I had ordered. I looked into the boy's bloodshot eyes. He couldn't have slept much last night. We picked up our drinks.

"We should do something in regards to the woman."

"What were you thinking of?" I asked, and took a drink of the whiskey. "What should we do?"

"Well, we could notify the UN. About the things that are happening in Rafah."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. You'd

have to fill out a questionnaire of at least ten pages, and you would have to supply all your information. The whole matter would get to Amn ad-Dawla."

"I don't care."

"They deported people for less just last week."

"Then we might say something to the police."

"There are no police."

"Then the military."

"The military won't care."

"For the love of god, something should be done," hissed the guy through clenched teeth.

"You could put a paragraph about it in your report."

"That's all? They killed a person."

"It wasn't a murder; she was executed."

"Murder is murder. We should do something. We're reporters."

"You need to rest. You're exhausted."

"I can't sleep."

"I can see that."

"How can you stay so fucking calm?"

"I drink, work out, and I don't give a shit."

Alistair fell silent for a moment, then took one of my Marlboros and lit up. He had only just started smoking, and he had to make an effort not to cough. I used the opportunity to order two more whiskeys. I liked how they served whiskey at the Marriot, giving you the ice in a separate glass. Alistair tossed his drink back in one gulp. It took immediate effect; he probably hadn't eaten anything all day.

"I can't leave it like this," he said, more relaxed now. "You think I should write something?"

"Yes."

"But I don't even know the woman's name."

"Just write that it was a woman."

"Would you write that?"

"Yes," I lied.

"OK, I am going now. I need to talk with my editor."

"Good."

He stood and with quick steps started for the exit. His cigarette continued to smolder in the

ashtray. I watched it for a bit, then picked it up and continued to smoke. I ordered another daiquiri.

*He'll be alright, I thought. He'll drink a few more and fall asleep. Or find a girl.* I closed my eyes.

In Rafah a huge crowd had gathered in front of the Mohamed Ali Mosque. After the imam's pronouncement of adultery, the men of the mosque had dug a nice little pit. In it a woman was buried up to her waist. Her hands were bound so tightly behind her that she couldn't move. Her torso and head were covered with a flour sack, on which "UNRWA" United Nations Relief and Works Agency was clearly printed. It was surprising that the woman didn't say anything or shake with sobbing. She kept obediently still in the pit. She only screamed when, from no more than ten yards, her husband threw a stone. It was a big stone. Large enough to break a bone, but not big enough that the fun came to a quick end. A red stain rose on the sack where it hit. After her husband, the judges each took a turn; then the relatives, and, finally, the men from the mosque. She withstood a surprising amount. After the first few blows she was still lucidly proclaiming her innocence, until a stone must have broke her jaw, because after that she just whimpered, then finally went quiet. The pit was tight, so she couldn't collapse forward. The sack didn't tear open; it just became drenched with blood. The soldiers standing at a nearby checkpoint watched the whole thing disinterestedly. It wasn't their business to interfere.

"Do something," I snarled at him, and massaged my temples. I took a sip of the Daiquiri, but found it sour. Mustafa had put in too much lime juice. *Do something.*

I turned to look around, but the bar was already empty, even the Saudis had left. Water was gurgling in the pool; the sun flushed red on the horizon.

I took my smart phone in my hand and reloaded the saved settings on the game.

*"Light boats," I thought. "If I trade my frigates, I'll be able to take Trinidad for sure."*

# EXAMINATION OF THE UNCHAINED

A look back to understand modern day rebels

By Aaron Grierson

Perhaps the stereotypical image of a mob is that of the torch-and-pitchfork-bearing peasants who gathered to dispose of a witch or some other individual or group whose presence is no longer desired. But what is the stereotypical image of a protest? I cannot think of anything equally iconic in popular culture. Surely, though, a mob is not the same thing as a protest. Both are social movements, but they exist within differing contexts.

It is unfortunate, then, that the clichéd image as the torch-and-pitchfork-bearing peasants is both historically inaccurate and irrelevant to its modern day equivalent. Anyone wanting to believe that the witch trial as depicted in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is accurate, will be sorely disappointed in

may be believed that most mobs are formed by a disadvantaged class, that isn't necessarily the case. In North America, for example, we can look at the Westboro Baptist Church, a religious organisation whose staunch ultra-conservative views have resulted in a seriously negative public image. Members of Westboro have been known to picket funerals, notably those of homosexuals involved in the military. For those unfamiliar, imagine a homogenous crowd carrying signs that read "God Hates Fags", and you'll have a rough idea of the type of individuals who make up this variety of mob.

Now, the image of a mob becomes blurry. What is it that makes a mob a mob? How is a mob gathering in protest any different from the crowds of people who recently filled the streets

**"There was no Pericles, exemplifying the democracy of the Western world by stepping up and trying to drive the energy somewhere. I suppose most people left their pitchforks at home, and hopeful onlookers mourned the near-dead art of oratory."**

what the witch craze actually was<sup>i</sup>. While there may not have been actual witches, or many burnings, there was a lot of panic, to the point of hysteria, a trait often associated with rampant mobs. The gist of the scene<sup>ii</sup>, for those who have never seen the film: in addition to witches you burn wood. How do you tell if she's made of wood? Wood floats. Well what else floats? A duck! So, logically, if she weighs the same as a duck, she's a witch. Though an amusing sketch, it doesn't really highlight the underlying political currents that seem to be necessary for any mob hoping to accomplish something.

For a starting point, let's say that all mobs are protesting about something, be it something important like feeding one's family, or something less consequential, like having to pay for one's entertainment. And while it

of Toronto in celebration of World Pride Week? Is it the intent of the group? What separates a reveller from a dissident? Is it simply media spin? The views of the dominant political party? Each of these factors seems to play a role, in addition to the factors behind the protest — that is, whatever it is the mobs are mobbing about. For example, a mob protesting against an abortion clinic will receive a very different characterisation than a mob of people striving to save a forest.

Historically speaking, things may look a little different. Stretching back some centuries, one may take note of eighteenth-century French peasants and farmers mobbing about the lack of bread. It may be worth noting that it was primarily women doing the protesting, actually marching on the King's palace at Versailles<sup>iii</sup>. Those women undermined the authority of the



Gush by Suzanne Levesque

king, and nearly dragged him to Paris with them. Of course, this accomplishment was not without violence. And the violence would continue: they would eventually have a Revolution, following, and largely inspired by, many of their countrymen lending support to the Americans in their Revolution when they freed themselves from British rule.<sup>iv</sup> However, the intricacies make for vastly different circumstances and outcomes. The French inadvertently traded a monarch for a dictator, while the Americans traded a distant democratic rule for a congressional one in their homelands. Both of these Revolutions were essentially wars, greatly exceeding the scale of any protest, though protests were key elements leading to the revolution. What factors differentiate mobs from other groups, exempting them from negative connotations? Well, there was the undeniable political element pertaining to ideas of individual freedom, and that all men (unfortunately they were this specific)<sup>v</sup> were created equal. Additionally, in these two scenarios, there were leaders, not

just the loudest voice amidst a rabble, but competent speakers, who worked in tandem with other likeminded individuals to propagate their cause. As a result they were able to channel the outrage in public opinion into action.

There is an important difference between this mob and a more modern example that comes to mind, that of the Occupy Movement. Without becoming needlessly involved in politics, Occupy splintered across much of the world, especially university campuses. A good show, to be sure, but they were little more than idle masses maintaining their own morale by an almost masturbatory indulgence in one another's company. In other words, they talked, and talked, and talked. There was no decree; the movement was felled by its own ineptitude before it so much as got off the ground. It boiled down to leadership. The people involved in Occupy wanted a plethora of things changed, but instead of organising from each one of these Occupy camps, they milled about and nothing was done. There was no Pericles,

exemplifying the democracy of the Western world by stepping up and trying to drive the energy somewhere. I suppose most people left their pitchforks at home, and hopeful onlookers mourned the near-dead art of oratory.

From the Occupy movement we can take a closer look at the differences between a mob and a protester, less as dictionary definition and more as a social phenomenon. Occupy wasn't ever considered a mob, or a series of mobs. They were always classified as protesters. This may in part have to do with the general lack of violence, akin to the hippie movement. Though I have no doubt that those running Wall Street thought of the original Occupiers as wasps with no stingers — mildly annoying but generally impotent, indicating that protests are usually viewed as nonthreatening to the status quo. Of course, the result of those protests

American Revolutions: a people had grown tired of the governing body that they felt was oppressive. As with these other Revolutions, they were met with violent resistance. An irony, when you look at the basic desire of these masses of people. They want more political power, more freedom, a higher standard of living. They typically do not act in violence, at least at first, though there is no such thing as an adequate generality: it would misconstrue situations to assert one when the other is the case. Regardless of their armaments, revolutionaries have always met with force — typically batons, bullets and teargas. This common thread shows us something more than just a difference between protests and mobs, and more broadly, revolutions. It shows us something that seems to have been pounded so hard into the human psyche it is innate. Or perhaps it is purely innate:



*Vater* by Suzanne Levesque

has often proved the powers that be so very, very wrong. This was the case with the French peasants, until they were knocking on the doors of Versailles, and the Americans, until the British found themselves spending more lives and money than the American colonies were worth. Even the Civil Rights movements from the mid-twentieth century, immortalised by figures like Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr., set an iconic precedent in different locations around the world. Occupy differs because no major social changes resulted from it. Wall Street runs the same, and the rich are still as rich as they were a few years ago.

The Revolution in Egypt in 2011 was not all that dissimilar from the French and

when threatened, we react violently. We do not merely slap down the upraised hands which beg for more food or water. We crush them beneath ironclad boots, grinding them into the asphalt. Such seems to be the aim, anyway.

Fallacious logic didn't only affect European peasants. It has endlessly been used in the form of propaganda to fuel hatred or fear of various sorts, while often only telling half-truths in the hope that no one notices. The American Revolution is an excellent example of how such propaganda can be used to affect positive change, as newspapers were regularly published and shipped to many larger towns and cities, detailing all of the political wrongdoings that the British were supposedly (and, in many cases, actually) perpetrating upon the

American colonies.<sup>i</sup> As much as war was caused, and as much as the people were divided, entire swathes of them were mobilised, united by the common cause of maintaining their liberty.

Is reason, then, the key to elevating a mob to a nobler category? It may be fair to say yes, but tentatively so, as the balance is precarious. Because protests and mobs are both typically large groups of people, they are subject to the peer pressure of the collective mentality. People often lose themselves, or part of their immediate, individual consciousness while in a group. This can lead to chanting and parading signposts around, or things can get far worse, very quickly. All it ever seems to take is the first rock that gets cast before dozens of others follow.<sup>vii</sup> Through a single act of violence, we hold within us the potential to turn a totally peaceful protest into a blood-lusted mob.

language of violence is understood to be the governing force, above the law, because the law has never been able to entirely contain it. It is a simple equation of force, not in the same sense as physics and motion, but in relation to threats. A mob can protest, or it can riot and break little, harm no one, but still be put down by the same number of police or guards that an armed mob might warrant. It is a question of what is available at the time, more so than what might actually be necessary to keep the peace. It seems as though bigger is better, if only to intimidate further occurrences. Unfortunately, not all rebellion happens in the street, and not all naysaying can be put down with physical force. It can simmer in our homes, workplaces, music, television, films, or literature and be considered a nonissue, until it catches the attention of the right authority.

By this point, the song "Angry People" by

**"All it ever seems to take is the first rock that gets cast before dozens of others follow. Through a single act of violence, we hold within us the potential to turn a totally peaceful protest into a blood-lusted mob."**

Unfortunately, such a show of legal force doesn't always stop the escalation of events. Sometimes, rather, it is the catalyst that leads to the explosion of mob violence. What might have been anger teetering on the edge of a precipice then explodes, typically beginning with riots, police forces attempting to contain rocks and makeshift weapons and prevent damage to public areas, often shops owned by small-time business folk, and the ones who tend to suffer the most in cataclysmic events like these.<sup>viii</sup> The result stretches beyond protest signs, shifting into bad media reviews for whatever cause is at hand. And while not all riots start violently, they often end violently: a consequence of some subconscious, unspoken understanding humanity has absorbed over millennia. The

the Barenaked Ladies (who are in fact neither naked, nor ladies, at least when they are on stage) has seeped its way into my head, and rather than chew up further words cataloguing the lyrics,<sup>x</sup> I'd rather talk about the development and mentality they describe. The song traces how an angry person starts off alone, but this eventually ripples outwards, consuming greater and greater numbers, reaching even into the world of happy people. The chorus in particular describes how angry people like, among other things, ruining happy people's days. The lyrics, or our own minds, might lead us to envision individuals in isolated situations, but what's to stop an onlooker, or retrospect, from characterising a mob the same way? Ultimately, it is true that mobs are

# AFTER THE IRON AGE

Summer rebelled but had no rose, no march.  
We wrapped ourselves in rains in October, watched run-over  
dogs scattered along the road: spilt guts,  
blood, hair. Talked in the car of marathoners  
of unhappiness who, painting the green blossom of their  
three-year loves' skies nicotine yellow, now sit  
with beer can and ashtray in puffy old armchairs  
saying, 'here at least we're home'. Their eviscerated  
loves moved first into the bridge's broken railings, into  
a picture, the wall of an unwashed glass and when that  
broke too, the pieces were cleared away. We flee  
with shreds of summer between our teeth, the weight  
of cobwebs on our brains, but on the first mountain slope  
a truck forces us into queue. No getting out of here  
unless you catapult. Stray movements will not scare off  
the shadows. Here, history is but a disused industrial zone. No-one  
thinks of eternity after the iron age, they invoke ever  
faster dissolving spectres against madness. Outside,  
an empty landscape. But the cobwebs are all of wire  
and because the victim never sees the execution,  
of the death-grinding machinery we are  
still in no position to say anything.

# A VASKORSZAK UTÁN

Föllázadt a nyár, de nem volt rózsája, se indulója.  
Októberben esőkbe bújtunk, az út mentén  
elgázolt kutyák feküdtek. Kifordult belek,  
vér és szőr. Az autóban a boldogtalanság  
maratonfutóiról beszélünk, akik, három évnyi  
szerelmük kizöldült egét nikotinsárgára festve,  
most öblös, öreg fotelban ülnek, és azt ismételgetik,  
„itt legalább otthon vagyunk”. Kezükben  
sörösdoboz, előttük hamutartó. Az elvérzett  
szerelmek előbb a híd törött korlátjába,  
aztán egy fényképbe, végül a mosatlan pohár  
falába költöztek, és mikor a pohár is eltört,  
rongyot hoztak, sietve letörölték. Fogaink között  
egy cafat nyári éggel, agyunkban a pókhálók  
súlyával menekülnk, de már az első hegyen  
karavánba zár egy kamion. Innen csak  
katapultálni lehet. Eltévedt mozdulatok  
az árnyakat nem riasztják. A történelem itt  
elhagyott ipari terület. A vaskorszak után  
senki sem gondol a halhatatlanságra, gyorsabban  
bomló rémeket hívnak az őrüt ellen.  
Az autó üres tájon robog át. De a pókhálók  
még mindig drótból vannak, és mert a kivégzést  
az áldozat sosem látja meg, a halált daráló  
gépezetről ezután sincs mit mondunk.

~ Gábor Schein, trans. from Hungarian by Erika  
Mihálycsa

typically angry, or at least frustrated, with some element of the status quo and they wish to upset it. The only real question is which side gets villainised and who is ruining whose day. And pointing fingers will only make things worse. After all, angry people get so sanctimonious.

Attitude is a necessary aspect of what makes a mob a mob. They're probably angry. They have some sort of goal(s) in mind, and this will take often substantial change, they may or may not be pacifists, but are typically met with violence, if not deadly force outright. They are not always in the right, even when they think they are. The definition of a mob, or protest, and how the two vary relies as much on intent as it does the outcome — what starts peacefully can end in tragic violence, or it can

revolutionise a nation. They can protest, they can riot, with signs or stones. Ultimately we have to be aware of one another, and how we can impact each other when we are part of a cohesive group, even if that group's interests are diverse. And their struggle is twofold, first to attain whatever social justice they seek, and second to maintain a degree of control, to stay in good standing with the law where applicable, and to try and avert any further sufferings.

As encompassing as I am trying to be here, mobs stretch beyond mere words. They are global, historical, and modern all at once, though they are stigmatised in various localities for these histories and discriminatory conceptions. The question of whether or not they are good or bad is a complex one that

deserves its own, much longer examination. Briefly, they are both, potentially at the same time — those for and those against may have opposing views on such a question. It is difficult to brush aside such a question, and even more so to make a statement about social change. While it may be safe to say that the majority are out for beneficial social change, many are out for more destructive purposes. But they are, above all, human beings who are struggling through the same diverse set of circumstances that the rest of us muddle through, day by day.

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## HERBSTVILLANELLE

den tagen geht das licht aus  
und eine stunde dauert zehn minuten.  
die bäume spielten ihre letzten farben.

am himmel wechselt man die bühnenbilder  
zu rasch für das kleine drama in jedem von uns:  
den tagen geht das licht aus.

dein grauer mantel trennt dich von der luft,  
ein passepport für einen satz wie diesen:  
*die bäume spielten ihre letzten farben.*

eisblaue fenster — auf den wetterkarten  
der fernsehgeräte die daumenabdrücke der tiefs.  
den tagen geht das licht aus,

dem leeren park, dem teich: die enten werden  
an unsichtbaren fäden aufgerollt.  
die bäume spielten ihre letzten farben.

und einer, der sich mit drei sonnenblumen  
ins dunkel tastet, drei schwarzen punkten auf gelb:  
den tagen geht das licht aus.  
die bäume spielten ihre letzten farben.

*This poem first appeared in Jan Wagner's collection,  
'Probebohrung im Himmel' and is republished here  
with kind permission from Berlin Verlag*

## AUTUMN VILLANELLE

the days are running out of light  
and an hour lasts ten minutes.  
the trees have played their final colours.

in heaven they're changing the stage sets  
too fast for our little dramas:  
the days are running out of light.

your gray coat separates you from the air,  
a passe-partout for a sentence like this:  
*the trees have played their final colours.*

ice-blue windows — on TV weather charts  
the thumb-prints of the lows.  
the days are running out of light —

the empty park, the pond: lines  
of ducks being pulled on invisible threads.  
the trees have played their final colours.

and a man with three sunflowers, three black  
spots on yellow, feels his way through the dark:  
the days are running out of light.  
the trees have played their final colours.

~ Jan Wagner, trans. from German by Iain Galbraith



Keys by Michael Ellis

# LITERATURE AND INDIVIDUALITY

When literature meets the academic herd

by Sana Hussain

In his 1891 essay, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', Oscar Wilde wrote "Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known. I am inclined to say that it is the only real mode of Individualism the world has known". Like many of his other aphorisms about the meaning and purpose of art, this statement expounds on the art-consumer relationship. Wilde contends that the most powerful and truest way to express the self is through engagement with Art. However, despite the elegance and terseness of the phrase, when thought of within the context of a literature syllabus in Pakistan these words lose their impact. For in order to actualize what Wilde says about the elevating purpose of Art, the nature of engagement the consumer undergoes merits closer inspection.

Unfortunately, in a country with a rich tradition of literature, and one that has and continues to produce prolific writers and poets, the pursuit of literature suffers. The whole process of education, from the students' decision to pursue the subject down to its tuition and grading is governed by an attitude of mimicry, lacking both individuality and originality. Due to a number of socio-cultural factors, students decide to study literature in universities, even when they are not passionate, either about writing or its far more essential cousin reading, which can be traced back to a lingering colonial mind-set that exalts all things English as a matter of superior status and prestige. Often, when teachers have asked new students why they chose to study literature, the overwhelming response has been, "to learn English". This indicates a collective misconception on the part of an entire body of students whereby they are unable to differentiate between a language course and literature. Yet they decide to study it, just to conform to popular belief. This herd behaviour, which springs from class imbalances and colonial vestiges, is one of the reasons why literature courses in Pakistan are fraught with monotony, discouraging independent thinking along with the ability to question, analyse and criticise.

While studying literature based on an interest in learning a language may seem like a misguided motive, one of the most

absurd and ridiculous reasons I've heard from postgraduate students is that a degree in English Literature makes one (read: a girl) eligible for a suitable matrimonial match. As outlandish as this may sound, in Pakistan this is one of the legitimate reasons why some girls pursue a literature degree. While this issue is more a reflection on Pakistani society and the warped cultural ideals of its people, one can imagine how a classroom of such students would engage with Art given their motivation.

While the students' choice of studying a particular discipline is certainly their own, no matter how absurd or misguided it may seem to others, the apathy of taught literature in the country could very well be attributed to the blind acceptance in the standardised form the subject is taught and graded in. And though this is cause for concern for the education system at large – i.e. the bland uniformity in pedagogy – that it extends to the arts in general and literature in particular, is far more worrying. These subjects, that in their essence imbibe creativity and awaken independent thinking, are taught in a way that lay waste to any individuality that a student might offer, churning out a homogenous mass of clones, each having the same uninspired take on a work of literature as the next. In most cases students are merely taught to come up with standard, unimaginative answers that are both what have been taught and expected, and what will earn them a good grade. Independent thinking or an individualistic take on a literary text is seldom encouraged by teachers when thinking is truly the cornerstone in education, especially education in the arts. Without it, students may never realise their potential as critical thinkers or have the confidence to express themselves, and instead continue to read literatures as disengaged perusers of information, failing to engage or connect meaningfully with any literary text.

This lack of independent thought and perpetuation of a conformist mind set is further cemented by the heavy reliance on guidebooks (the local equivalents to SparkNotes and CliffNotes), by both teachers and students. These guidebooks, while comprehensive and detailed



Puppet & Moth Sepia by Michael Ellis

in their explanation of stock questions to most literary texts, are the prime example of the herd mentality that defines literary education in Pakistan. Written by writers who are themselves products of this uninspired education system, these books provide students with readymade, unoriginal answers which they rote learn and reproduce verbatim on the exam answer sheet. Based on the common practices of a typical classroom, it is very much possible that a cursory analysis of exam papers from the past two decades till date would show identical questions and identical responses being replicated year after year. This severe and worrying lack of individuality also does not seem to be a cause of concern for a majority of educationists, as very little is being done to reform the system. Moreover, the practice of penalising rather than rewarding independent analysis and originality further quashes any individualistic tendency students might have, forcing them to become a part of the herd and exist only as an extension of the general collective society.

**“The practice of penalizing rather than rewarding independent analysis and originality quashes any individualistic tendency students might have, forcing them to become a part of the herd and exist only as an extension of the general collective society.”**

Literature, a discipline that is constantly expanding and evolving, merits constant innovations and revisions in its curriculum as well. Sadly, this is another aspect of Pakistani teaching of literature that falls short of what is required. For decades, the syllabi of literature programs has remained the same, save for minor modifications. The whole situation is one of stagnancy; stories like Saadat Hassan Manto's *The New Constitution*,<sup>ii</sup> included in the undergraduate literature syllabus, still censor pregnancy as well as Hinduism, based on the instructions of a dictator many decades ago, indicating the crucial need for innovation and reform in Pakistan's literature syllabus. Moreover, adherence to a strictly rigid outline of literary texts, selected without much thought to the students' individual tastes or contemporary

literature, reinforces an established standard that caters to a collective group rather than to the tastes of individual students. It also restricts students and their literary exposure to the past, barring any insight into the contemporary world of literature. Moreover, a firmly set course outline also means a standardized set of exam questions which eliminates the practice of additional reading, an exercise that undoubtedly contributes in promoting imagination and critical thinking among students.

In order to address this attitude of unimaginativeness that literature classrooms in the country breed, both the syllabus and the teaching methodology in literature programs need to be revisited. More contemporary titles should be added to courses rooted in the Western cannon so that students are able to relate more with what they are reading. They also need to be familiarised with the literary heritage of their own region, as well as contemporary works by Pakistani authors and poets writing in English to generate interest. The focus needs to shift

from an exam and grade oriented study of literature to an approach that encourages critical thinking and questioning of established ideas.

But more importantly, the pedagogy currently employed in literature classrooms needs to be overhauled to introduce a more stimulating approach, one where students' participation is encouraged and their ideas appreciated. Instead of snubbing every creative thought a student has in favour of the expected opinions, teachers need to embolden students to explore different perspectives and ultimately form their own opinions about what they think the writer is saying. This can come about through unorthodox teaching styles as well as a reform in the examination patterns. Stock questions result in stock answers. Creative approaches to the same questions can prompt students to

## MAGNETISM

Night sparkles and sparkles.  
Butterflies just like bridges  
—constructed. The multitude  
of sequins at night.

We say 'I love you'  
to get a response.  
'Death' is the answer,  
though it isn't right.

We touch so softly.  
Each touch has its echo.  
We turn away our eyes  
with animal gentleness.

~ Marcin Świetlicki, trans. from Polish by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese

think; questions that ask students to draw a courtroom scenario and prepare a defence for Macbeth would elicit far more unique responses than one that asks them to explain Macbeth's hamartia. However, it is highly unlikely like these changes are going to be implemented any time soon in literature programs in Pakistan; at least not in government run colleges and universities where they are most needed. The monotony of this style is only reinforced as teachers who have gone through the motions to obtain a degree in literature repeat the same uninspired process for their students, without any serious efforts for innovation or experimentation.

So, quite contrary to the grand purpose envisioned by Wilde, the teaching and studying of literature in most instances in Pakistan is an exercise that snuffs out rather than engenders individualism. With both teachers and students conforming to the established and derivative means of engaging with literary texts, and no apparent urgency to change the status quo, it is hard to imagine a time when Art will

indeed be the most powerful and the truest means of eliciting individualism. It is crucial to understand too, how this dearth of originality and individuality in the classroom is damaging for academia as a whole in the country. Failing to provide a space conducive to the development of original ideas and independent thoughts, will have lasting detrimental consequences on the country's intellectual culture. Teachers must defy the creed "those who can't do, teach" and become the role models to their students, living "*lives that are not merely satiated but wildly meaningful*".<sup>iii</sup> Only then does an academic revolution have a chance to bear fruit.

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## ON THE SUBLIME

hailstones as big as avocados under the kinkinas  
and aviavy · the fruit of the northeast trades in the sacred  
corner of the house · the door opens here on the last  
rooms of the sun and the escape route en face  
gives onto the roof · but the king spent the grand  
and boring ceremonial days in his high bed  
sleeping in the scarlet of his nuptial chamber  
dreaming under his blue-flowered wall-paper  
of the queen in england · his hand  
wound up the victrola again and again but never let  
the trumpets play the anthem quite to the end  
to stop her face growing older still · the majesty  
of indifference in whalebone stays  
cul-de-paris and crinoline underskirts · the king  
of madagascar considered it the first and foremost  
duty of his office to learn to hold her gaze  
sailors hauled him up a piano from the coast  
the governor had given him a top hat his tutor  
came twice a day to teach him how to read and write  
and craftsmen built him a porter's lodge based  
on the model of a dorset country house · all praised  
jesus christ and his realm of the spirit · but he thought  
of the letter to queen victoria he had been  
drafting for years · as for the rest he saw no way  
to avert it · poison would enter his house with the porcelain  
plates and it would be one of the servants who brought  
it on a tray · they had told him often enough but he as king  
knew she wasn't dead nor could ever die · each day  
was as dull as the last · the breeze rang the blue bells  
of the jacaranda · the clouds too partook in the revels



Pressed Flowers by Rocktuette

~ Raoul Schrott, trans. from German by Iain Galbraith

## ÜBER DAS ERHABENE

hagelkörner groß wie avocados vor den kinkina-bäumen  
und aviavy · die früchte des nordostpassats in der heiligen  
ecke des hauses · dort geht die tür zu den letzten räumen  
der sonne und der fluchtweg gegenüber führt auf das dach  
der könig jedoch verschließt die großen langweiligen  
tage der zeremonie auf seinem hochbett im scharlach  
seines brautgemachs unter den blauen blumen der tapeten  
und träumte von der königin in england · mit der hand  
zog er die victrola immer wieder auf und ließ die trompeten  
die hymne nie ganz zu ende spielen damit ihr gesicht nicht  
noch mehr altern würde · die majestät des teilnahmslosen  
in walfischbeinernen röcken cul de paris und unterm gewand  
die krinoline · der könig von madagaskar sah die erste pflicht  
seines amtes darin ihren blick ertragen zu lernen · matrosen  
hatten ihm ein klavier von der küste herauf geschleppt  
der gouverneur ihm einen zylinder geschenkt der präzept  
kam zweimal am tag um ihm lesen und schreiben zu lehren  
und die handwerker bauten ihm die pförtnersloge  
eines landsitzes in dorset nach · von jedem hörte er eine eloge  
auf jesus christus und sein reich des geistes · er aber dachte  
sich schon seit Jahren einen brief an die königin victoria aus  
was anderes betraf aber ahnte er daß dem nicht zu wehren  
war · das gift kam mit den tellern aus porzellan ins haus  
und einer der diener würde es sein der es am tablett brachte  
man hatte es ihm zwar des öfteren gesagt doch er als könig  
wußte daß sie nicht tot war nie sterben könnte · eintönig  
vergingen so die tage · der wind läutete die blauen glocken  
des jakaranda · die wolken stimmten mit an zu frohlocken

ambohimanga, 3. 12. 96

This poem first appeared in Raoul Schrott's collection  
'Tropen' and is republished here with kind permission from  
Hanser Verlag

# HOW ADULT ARE YOU?

*On the pervasiveness and popularity of young adult fiction*

By Ghausia Rashid Salam

It seems that everyone over 25 is experiencing a second “teenage-hood” as they clutch their copies of young adult (YA) books such as *The Fault In Our Stars*<sup>1</sup> and weep over... well we still don’t know what they’re weeping over. It definitely isn’t tears of pain over reading bad fiction, that’s for sure.

While the genre has existed since the sixties, when the term “Young Adult” was first coined, YA fiction has travelled a long distance, and not necessarily down a good path. Consider books such as *The Outsiders*<sup>ii</sup> by S.E. Hinton, a coming-of-age tale that deals with themes of violence and death. Do we even need to discuss Judy Blume, the writer who gave teenagers dealing with spiritual crises a fictional character to relate to in *Are You*

For tweens and teens on the cusp of adulthood, dealing with issues of identity and belonging, life seems surreal and otherworldly; the similarity to the supernatural is uncanny. With ghosts caught between life and death, vampires that are given human emotions, werewolves that *are* human during the day, the struggle to live in two worlds is akin to the struggle to transition from child to adult and the difficulties associated with it.

Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine may have made their mark on the genre with their horror YA fiction, but authors such as Meg Cabot were quick to follow. It would be particularly difficult to criticise Meg Cabot’s *The Mediator*<sup>viii</sup> series, a book about a teenage mediator who navigates the trials and tribulations of teenage life while

**“The crux of the problem with YA [is its] clichéd, tired, hideously commercialized plots recycled constantly for the sake of profit. Lack of change is not the only reason a genre can stagnate, selling the soul of the genre for profit will kill it just as efficiently.”**

*There God? It's Me, Margaret*,<sup>iii</sup> not to mention teenage sexuality in *'Forever...'*<sup>iv</sup> And while *The Catcher In The Rye*<sup>v</sup> might not have been targeted towards the tween/teen audience, its theme of alienation quickly made it popular with similarly troubled adolescents. Madeleine L’Engle gave us the much-beloved, much-hated, bizarrely fantastical *Time Quintet*<sup>vi</sup> series, and *The Color Purple*<sup>vii</sup> is a lovely book that deals with internalized oppression, sexism, female solidarity, and racism. While these are the more common and popular examples of YA fiction, the genre in its early stages was certainly never limited to just a few writers.

So what went wrong? Nothing, at first. Genres change and evolve, for without change, there is stagnation and possible death. The nineties saw the addition of the supernatural to YA fiction which feels like a natural progression.

answering her calling as a guide for ghosts. Sound familiar? (*Buffy*, ahem) Similarities aside, the series isn’t a complete travesty, and I’ll admit, I might pick up my copy to start re-reading the series at any given point. And while *The Vampire Diaries*<sup>ix</sup> book series was definitely not as good as Cabot’s series, it was less atrocious than other “supernatural” books that would assault our eyes and minds with their obnoxious existence. And if we’re discussing YA, it is imperative to mention the story of a boy who lived in a cupboard, and woke up on his eleventh birthday to find that he had magic in him all his life. Yes, *'Harry Potter'*.<sup>x</sup> The series is problematic for me as an adult, but it’s an excellent way to get children involved in reading and it isn’t poorly written either.

We return then, to the previous question; what went wrong? When the YA genre has seen

## ERINNERUNG AN LAS VEGAS

plötzlich konnten wir sie hören.  
in der pause zwischen applaus und dem nächsten stück,  
in der kurzen stille, groß und still: die wüste.  
plötzlich konnten wir sie hören.

hoch über dem revuetheater hing  
der rostende colt des mondes in seinem halfter.  
die limousinen glitten lautlos vorüber —  
langgestreckte, weiße labyrinthe.

die kalten haifischaugen der swimming-pools ...  
noch heute sehen wir mit geschlossenen augen  
die leuchtreklamen und die bunten lichter  
der stadt, die blinkt und blinkt, um nicht schlafen zu müssen.

die nacht ist in uns.

## REMEMBERING LAS VEGAS

suddenly we could hear it.  
in the pause between applause and the piece that followed —  
in that brief lull, vast and still, the desert:  
suddenly we could hear it.

high above the theatre hung  
the rusting colt of the moon in its holster.  
limos glided past without a sound —  
stretch labyrinths in white.

the chill shark-eyes of those swimming-pools ...  
to this day, with our eyes closed, we see  
the neon ads and coloured lights of a town  
that blinks and blinks to ward off sleep.

the night is in us.

~ Jan Wagner, trans. from German by Iain Galbraith  
This poem first appeared in Jan Wagner’s collection  
*Probebohrung im Himmel* and is republished here with kind  
permission from Berlin Verlag.



Artwork by Rocktuette

brilliant works of fiction, why do some of us decry the genre and scoff at those who read it? Because we're scoffing at 30-somethings weeping over *'The Fault In Our Stars'* maybe? Granted, the genre has increasingly become more trashy by the year. From controlling boyfriends and abusive relationships in *'Twilight'*<sup>xi</sup> — yes children, your beloved Bella is in an incredibly abusive relationship — to hard-to-swallow plots like *'Divergent'*,<sup>xii</sup> it seems that the genre has embraced the approach of selling one's soul to make millions, while those of us with any brain cells remaining are left bereft of our brains, since our mind tends to commit suicide after reading what constitutes YA fiction today. Even recent YA fiction like *'The Perks of Being A Wallflower'*<sup>xiii</sup> wasn't that terrible, despite the desire to bang one's head on one's desk every time a 40-year-old breathlessly updates their Facebook status with, "In that moment, we were infinite."

The truth is, YA wasn't problematic as long as it was well-written. As Ruth Graham snarks in *Slate*, "*If I'm being honest, it [The Fault In Our Stars] also left me saying "Oh, brother" out loud more than once. Does this make me*

*heartless? Or does it make me a grown-up? This is, after all, a book that features a devastatingly handsome teen boy who says things like "I'm in love with you, and I'm not in the business of denying myself the simple pleasure of saying true things" to his girlfriend, whom he then tenderly deflowers on a European vacation he arranged.*"<sup>xiv</sup> One might wince and roll their eyes. Besides, hasn't that dreadful *'A Walk To Remember'*<sup>xv</sup> covered teens with cancer already? Which brings me to the crux of the problem with YA; clichéd, tired, hideously commercialised plots recycled constantly for the sake of profit. Lack of change is not the only reason a genre can stagnate, selling the soul of the genre for profit will kill it just as efficiently.

The books marketed to teenagers seem to have waned in tackling serious issues like race or sexism, and perpetuate messages of misogyny a la *'Twilight'*; in retrospect, books such as *'The Hunger Games'*<sup>xvi</sup> valiantly do their best to right such wrongs, and to be fair to the series, while the writing is mediocre, the themes of anti-authoritarianism, class struggles, and female empowerment are admirable. Then again, female empowerment is the fashionable thing

these days, with everyone from Miley Cyrus to Beyoncé embracing the dreaded F-Bomb, calling themselves feminists. Because all the cool kids are doing it so why not? But as commercialised as feminism might be becoming, to decry any work of art, be it written or visual, for depicting female strength is a fallacy I won't indulge. But it is pertinent to keep it in mind when considering the travesty that YA has become.

No adult needs to be ashamed for enjoying great works of fiction that just happen to be YA. But there is a great deal of shame in being an adult who likes mediocre writing and clichéd plots. If 30- to 40-year-olds garner contempt for enjoying YA, it is because you expect someone who is an actual adult to possess the emotional maturity and intellect to recognise crap writing for what it is, rather than weeping emotionally over it like a naïve child. To focus on the argument, "this book is for young people and I am not young so I think it is terrible" is

*gaps between who they are and who they could be. To help close those gaps, we could stand be reminded now and again of the elemental truths that we first encountered as teenagers. If reading YA as adults makes us feel older and wiser than the characters, if we remember but don't relate to the people we used to be, it is only an illustration of our capacity for change.*"<sup>xvii</sup> An excellent argument, but inherently flawed in its refusal to acknowledge the decline of YA fiction from a literary, rather than a financial or commercial perspective.

In an increasingly capitalist world, it seems that there is a profit-focused interest towards publishing books that can turn into blockbuster movies, or at the very least top bestseller lists. And that is the problem with the genre today. I could name more books of course, to lend credence to the argument but that focuses attention on individual books and deflects from the actual problem; for argument's

**"If the book has a female protagonist referring to her breasts as hushpuppies during shower sex, you know it's time to put the book down and ask yourself where you're going with your life."**

a reductive approach, considering that we've already established great works of fiction to be distinctly YA. The problem is a distinct lack of intellectual and emotional maturity that render you incapable of differentiating between good writing and bad writing, regardless of what genre it may belong to.

The appeal of YA for not-young-adults is as multifaceted as the genre itself. The element of nostalgia cannot be omitted, because who doesn't want to look back on simpler times when there were no mouths to feed and no wages to earn? As tumultuous as adolescence can be, the trials and tribulations of youth do fade in intensity the older you grow. And isn't all fiction escapist in some form or other, as the argument goes? Julie Beck presents an excellent argument in favour of YA when she writes, "*Just because you learn something once at 16, doesn't mean you won't have to re-learn it over and over again throughout your life... Everyone still has*

sake, we've established that a) the YA genre gave us some of the greatest works of fiction, b) that the problem isn't with reading YA but rather, reading poorly-written YA, and c) that the genre has suffered from love of money and fame. On the basis of these premises, the alarming popularity of mediocre fiction should be a matter of concern, but isn't. Of course, when you have a large group of YA enthusiasts one side, and a small minority shaking their heads with disgust on the other, it becomes difficult for either to make their case. But if we consider John Williams' *'The Great Y.A. Debate of 2014'*,<sup>xviii</sup> one can't help but sympathise with Kat Graham; if you're 40-years-old and cooing over *'Eleanor and Park'*,<sup>xix</sup> you deserve to be judged for your lack of emotional maturity. It's uncomfortable to write, considering that you're telling people they're liking the wrong things. It isn't easy to write about literature and write about people liking the wrong sort of literature.



Artwork by Rocktuette

But it's still a valid point.

When I started this article, I was determined to "bash" the fans of horrible books that make me want to cry because of how bad they are. My love for research was my undoing, as I quickly realized how many cherished favourites counted as YA, but that also led to the realization that forms the crux of my argument; the problem is with poor writing, not with an entire genre. We can't tell people what to read, but we can certainly criticize poor literature when it gains undeserved success without secretly wondering if we're too pretentious or sanctimonious. And to bemoan the difficulty of establishing what is, or isn't good literature is

ridiculous. If the book has a female protagonist referring to her breasts as hushpuppies during shower sex, you know it's time to put the book down and ask yourself where you're going with your life.

"Read YA and adult books. Read male authors, female authors, black authors, white authors, Native American authors, Asian authors, straight authors, gay authors, short stories, 700-page epics, classic novels, contemporary novels, graphic novels, fantasy stories, (yes) detective novels, thrillers, romance, and realism — for all ages. Read it all,"<sup>xx</sup> writes Caitlin and I'll insert an addendum

## PREPARATION FOR THE CROWS' FEAST<sup>x</sup>

We die here in a row, like little billy-goats.  
Who praise the claw, the hard labour, the lying word,  
and all are happy, if they can embrace the rosy flesh  
beneath the spider-woven blanket. It is not the great secrets  
  
that we are silent about. We do not glide for long on the crest of time.  
After forty, a person is already a graveyard.  
Looking into the heavy rain, faces covered by umbrellas,  
but thinking even here you can get a little meat.  
  
So we prepare, like idiots, for the crows' feast.  
Much weeping and cawing. If the victor marches by,  
body bound to the cart, we could possibly even laugh.  
The great scam has been successful. We just don't know for whom.

~ Gábor Schein, trans. from Hungarian by Ottolie Mulzet

to that sentiment; read it all, but don't read terrible writing and expect not to be judged for it.

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# THE SOUND OF THE SUNDIAL

By Hana Andronikova

Edited and adapted by Rachel Miranda Feingold from the translation by David Short

This excerpt is taken from Chapter VI of 'The Sound of the Sundial' (Plamen Press, 2015) with kind permission from the publisher.

In December of 1938, Baťa launched a new kind of waterproof shoe on the Indian market. Shop windows displayed metal bowls of water with shoes bobbing in them. *In wet and dry.* They were an immediate hit; the Indians went wild over them. They cost fifteen annas a pair. In the middle of January our dog, Amon, died. My father said he'd reached that age. I cried a lot; he'd been in the family since before I was born. I missed him terribly. Then, in February of 1939, my mother's sister, Regina, wrote us a letter that changed our lives completely:

*Erik, Lily, and little Irma have emigrated. They're in England now. Lily has some relatives there, but I don't know where they'll end up. Mother fell ill soon after; it's become clear she's actually been ill for some time. There's no hope. The doctors say she has a month left, maybe two. I've taken time off because it would be hard for Father to look after her. They talk about you all the time. I think life's playing games with us. Father finally seemed to have come around after his stroke last year, but everything has begun to slide back again. You'd hardly recognize them.*

Thomas could hear the despair in his own voice, which was failing.

"Rachel, try to understand. We can't go back!"

"My mother is dying."

"I know. I know it's hard, but we can't go back now."

"I have to go back! I owe it to her."

"Rachel –"

"I haven't seen her since you and I met."

His throat tightened. "There's going to be a war. It's—suicide." He couldn't swallow. He was sticking a leg out to stop a train.

"I have to go home. If you won't come with me, I'm going alone!"

"You can't do that."

"I will!"

She shot out of her chair and slammed the door behind her.

Thomas remained in the garden till dusk, stifled by the muggy heat, and listened to the evening ritual of the parched earth. Thousands of leaves in the tops of the banyan trees, like naked hearts with sharp tips, ready to defend their own vulnerability. The cicadas brought darkness. The clamor of night invaded his life.

I made my farewells. To India. To Kavita and her embraces, songs, and incantations. To the people with their countless stories and gods. A small pack on my back, I became a pilgrim against the flow of time.

I'd never been on an airplane before. It seemed incredible that the heap of metal would actually lift itself off the ground. It was against nature, against all logic. We rose into the sun, and the land below us looked like an enormous map, without frontiers or customs regulations, without watchtowers. I had turned into a giant and was striding with seven-league boots over deserts and mountains, and I saw rivers like thin threads, like tiny veins on the curved body of mother earth. One day I'll be a pilot, I vowed. Definitely. Behind us we left Calcutta and Batanagar, now the biggest shoe factory in India. It employed six thousand Indians and a handful of Czechoslovaks. My father was no longer one of them.

We landed in Vienna and switched to the train. On the evening of Sunday, March 12, I alighted at the station in the town of my birth—a town I didn't know. Zlín. Not even my parents recognized it. In six years it had grown by thousands of inhabitants and hundreds of houses and other buildings. The skyscraper as the modern city's landmark, the Tomáš Baťa Memorial in glass and concrete, schools and film studios. The uniformity of style; the parks and gardens.

Three days later, snow floated down incessantly onto the roofs of the little brick houses while armored cars, personnel carriers, and motorcycles streamed across the flimsy frontier of the Protectorate. The Legionnaires in front of Prague Castle were replaced by a battalion of Death's Heads, clad in black to render homage to Hitler. Winston Churchill sulked, but that was no help. Czechoslovakia became a ghost.

We were swimming against the tide. By then a lot of the Baťa management were already

out of the country, yet we were coming home to Zlín. We moved into a vacant house near the woods. Hallway, living room, kitchen, and powder room on the ground floor; three bedrooms, dressing rooms, and bathroom upstairs. The house had a glazed veranda with a terrace, a cellar, a garage, and a little garden facing the woods. We collected our piano from the Wassermanns—an ebony Petrof. Dad had bought it for Mom's birthday a week before their wedding.

My mother set off to Prague to visit Grandma. She phoned to say that we should come. My grandparents wanted to meet me. In Prague, a new world opened before me. The handle of the door to the Vinohrady apartment was so high up I could barely reach it. An affable gentleman appeared, walking with a stick. He had a short but full greying beard and pince-nez on his aquiline nose. He gazed at Dad for a long time, his eyes like little balls of quick-

know each other at last." He shook my hand and put on an official expression.

I liked him. I had always wanted a grandfather like that. With a strange tightness in my throat, I crossed the threshold. High ceilings, stucco, and antique furniture, the place engulfed in Persian carpets, some even hanging on the walls, clocks ticking in every corner. Grandma. Dwarfed by her goose-down quilt, she looked like a girl, tiny and feeble, a sickly child with the face of an old woman. The massive bed only magnified her fragility. Eyes full of pain, lost in a web of wrinkles, skin cracked like earth in the dry season. I gave her my hand. She grabbed it eagerly, held on, and tried to say something, but instead she burst into tears. Her slight hand, those bony fingers with their prominent, swollen knuckles hid a surprising strength. It was as if my hand were in a vice; she squeezed it as if she would never let go

**"The Legionnaires in front of Prague Castle were replaced by a battalion of Death's Heads, clad in black to render homage to Hitler. Winston Churchill sulked, but that was no help. Czechoslovakia became a ghost."**

silver. They had never seen each other before; now they stood face to face, gazing at each other as though a wordless dialogue passed between them. Seconds and minutes went by in awkward silence, and I waited throughout that eternity for someone to finally speak.

I slipped my hand into Dad's. He looked at me and winked.

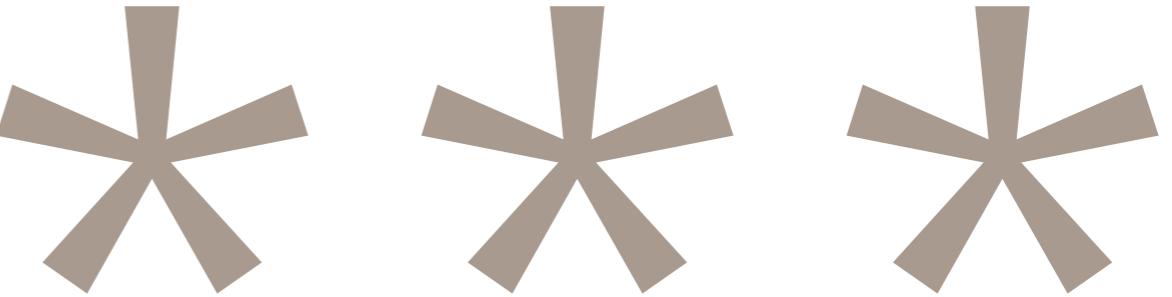
"Come on, say hello to Grandpa, Daniel. Or has the cat got your tongue?"

The old man laughed. "Come in, you strangers from faraway, let's get to

of me. It was unpleasant. I felt uncomfortable and wanted to get out of there. I looked around the shadowy room and breathed in a smell that suddenly made my stomach heave: a whiff of age and approaching death.

Mom freed me from Grandma's iron grasp and sent me to Grandpa. The old housemaid, Margit, was just serving supper. In the dining room, Dad and Grandpa were at a huge oval table that could easily have sat twelve. They were obviously discussing something serious. Grandpa saw how taken I was by the

**“Meeting my Prague grandfather marked me profoundly, indelibly. I left there with a sense of having discovered another god. Years later I understood that I had discovered something more...”**



antique sideboard, made from the same wood as the table and chairs. “If only some of these pieces of furniture could speak, that would be something,” he winked at me.

He tapped the tabletop. Walnut. He told me that two hundred years ago, a French count had it made as a wedding present for his betrothed. As the cabinetmaker was putting in the finishing touches and the wedding preparations began, life had taken up the cards and reshuffled them: the count’s beloved didn’t live to see her own wedding, and so the fate of this furniture changed course.

By the window, the dining room took an L-shaped turn, with the living room around the corner. I caught my breath: in an alcove on a raised platform stood a grand piano. Mom had once told me all about it; she said it was *sacred*. A Bösendorfer: a mahogany giant that had been handed down from generation to generation. To play or practice on such an instrument was a great honor. Angular lines, delicate mechanics, a wooden music stand, and two brass candle holders.

Dad left immediately on the Sunday, but I stayed for two weeks; an incredible fourteen days with Grandpa. I would sidle up the gloomy staircase and finger the elaborately wrought banisters with their wooden handrail, worn with the patina of dozens of years and hundreds of hands. I would run my own hand over the grain and imagine all those people

who had touched it. The matriarchs of the past squeezed into corsets and crinolines that rustled at every step; worthy, top-hatted gentlemen; neatly pressed young ladies in dainty gloves. Mom and her sister, Regi, looked after Grandma, helped by the ancient Margit, while Grandpa introduced me to Prague and bathed me in the wellspring of Jewish wisdom. The old professor of history was the best possible guide to Prague, with its undertone of servitude and its gloss of majesty. The city, in all its shame and glory, seemed to want me to find out its secrets, but somehow it still remained mysterious. Vyšehrad, Petřín, the gardens that were gradually coming to life; Prague Castle and the *orloj*—the astronomical clock on the Old Town Hall. The legend of Master Hanuš with his eyes gouged out through human folly. *Orloj* comes from the Latin *horologium*, Grandpa told me.

The Jewish cemetery. The Old-New Synagogue. In the gloom of its Gothic walls stood an old man with a yarmulke on his bald head. His lips released the colors of Hebrew words, he swayed to their rhythm, hunched into himself, a bundle of atoms making up a human frame beneath a prayer shawl, stooping over a book of psalms, putting on his leather phylacteries. For the first time in my life I heard Hebrew spoken, I saw the Torah and listened to stories from the time of Abraham and Sarah. I dropped off to sleep with an image of Moses in my head: the sea parting before him and the Jews leaving Egypt. I

added a stone to the grave of Rabbi Löw, and in my dreams I searched the lost corners of Josefov for the *shem* so I could bring the Golem to life.

“Why do we put stones on the grave, and not flowers?” I asked.

“Because we come from inhospitable lands, from deserts and highlands where flowers are hard to find. The stone means the same as a flower: that you have stood by the grave of the deceased and thought of him.”

Grandpa gave me a leather-bound copy of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, full of eerie illustrations. A dog with huge eyes, shining like lanterns out of the yellowed paper, guarded some treasure. He looked a bit funny, and his furrowed brow reminded me of Amon.

And then a celebration: Passover. The Jewish holiday of spring, in memory of Moses and the Exodus. Passover comes from *pessah*, which means to pass by, leave out. *Yahweh* would go from house to house, and wherever he did not see a mark of blood, he struck down the firstborn son. He passed over the homes of the Israelites.

On the eve of the holiday there was a festive supper, the Seder. I ate matzos: “... in all your habitations shall ye eat unleavened bread.” The meal was served on blue-and-white Rosenthal china. During the evening the Haggadah was read, a retelling of the story of Moses, how he led his people out of their Egyptian bondage, wandered through

the wilderness and crossed the Red Sea.

Grandpa told me how my mother used to be nervous before Seder, because, as the youngest, she had to recite the *Mah Nishtanah*—the so-called Four Questions. She would fidget during the reading of the Haggadah, and could never manage to sit through to the end. She would run around making faces at Regi and Erik.

He fell into a reverie and said that the last twenty years had been the first years of this free and beautiful Republic. Then he grew sad.

“And now it’s over.” He blew across his palm, as if blowing a kiss. “Puff, and it’s gone.”

He gave me a pocket watch—the first watch I ever had. A Remontoir patent, big Roman numerals and a tiny winder, with a second hand, too. I opened the back. Sparkling and perfect. An interplay of delicate wheels, minuscule teeth that interlocked and spun the web of time. Fifteen jewels and grandpa’s monogram in gold.

Meeting my Prague grandfather marked me profoundly, indelibly. I left there with a sense of having discovered another god. Years later I understood that I had discovered something more: primordial matter. Roots that belonged to me, and someone who had parted the ground cover and showed me how deep they went.

I never saw him again.

# MORE THAN 50 SHADES OF GREY

*A case for asking questions rather than having answers*  
by Maria Amir

*"Tell people there's an invisible man in the sky who created the universe, and the vast majority will believe you. Tell them the paint is wet, and they have to touch it to be sure." ~ George Carlin*

There is an institutionalised and fetishised psychology behind definitives. Personally, I have often encountered the criticism that my persistent need for grey zones and mediums somehow amounts to intellectual cowardice. That the inability to pick one position on anything in a yes/no bracket denotes a sort of mediocre thinking... most just accuse me of moral relativism. As if nurturing and appreciating the ability to revise one's positions about complex moral conundrums is inherently apologist, evil even.

The genealogy of doubt has always intrigued me, and I often wonder at people's inherent certainty in the face of the inherently uncertain. How does one become certain of *anything*? Nearly everyone I know purports positions that they are "positive" about — opinions, philosophies, edicts, and I always marvel at this ability of being sure in both oneself and what one is saying, enough to dispel all the niggling worms of worry that I assume crop up for everyone in some capacity. Yet the sheer magnitude of self-assuredness I often encounter in the people I meet makes me think that my own overwhelming lack of confidence is a psychological or — what is far more likely — genetic glitch. I have never really been sure of anything in my life, save doubt. And I'm not being naïve when I say that most people grow up certain of some things — God, or their parents' love, or good and evil. I have never instinctively known how to believe in the former, was steadily disillusioned for the middle and still struggle with the latter.

Ever since I stumbled, rather fortuitously, across a volume of Philosophical Essays when I was fourteen, I have placed my faith squarely in doubt. I read the book cover to cover in two days and unlike most novels, which moved me beyond the barricade of my person, this was different. Reading philosophy was like discovering that infernal wardrobe in the "spare 'oom" of my mind that could go anywhere as long as my

facial expressions remained cautious enough to never reflect what I was really thinking.

I was cautious, primarily because I started with the Skeptics. Pyrrho, Epicurus and Feuerbach, and I appreciated the sheer humility and honesty of just saying "I don't know" to positions that one really can't *know* answers to. I still wonder why we fear that answer so much: "I don't know". Is it because admitting it makes us look ignorant even though we often are, or is it because most think that it leaves us with so little? I disagree with the latter; if anything, admitting that one does not know something actually opens avenues to discover options, rather than closing them down. We can speculate, sure; we can even advocate and lean one way or the other, but we cannot really *know* most things. I never really understood why that was so terrifying to admit for most people.

I encountered the concept of Pyrrho's "*acatalepsia*" when I was 15, and that was perhaps a little too early to properly process all its nuances. Perhaps that is why I still stick to doubt so pedantically, which admittedly is a tad unhealthy. The word itself connotes one's ability to withhold affirmation for doctrines regarding the "truth of things in their own nature", against everything that could contradict it in equal measure. A little like Newton's Third Law in reverse, rather than "*for every action there ought to be an equal and opposite reaction*", the genealogy of doubt traces the foil for every thought and idea, it roots itself wholly in a state of consistent intellectual suspense. Pyrrho also advocated a balm for this constant metaphysical gymnastics; he called it "*ataraxia*", or freedom from worry. By suspending judgment and observing things as they appear at their core rather than as we hope or need them to, and withholding on declaring definitives (especially in moral and intellectual positions), one can achieve a modicum of "real" peace.

I can attest to the effectiveness of this, naïve and utopian as it sounds. There is something refreshing and incredibly freeing about grounding one's entire philosophy in the search for multiple truths, without needing to declare one the winner. It prevents hubris for one but more often; it allows a larger

circumference of discovery. I cannot boast "freedom from worry" but I certainly can boast an overwhelming calm in the face of most of my worries. I have always loathed consolation and the lies we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better. Always preferring rock-hard, sharp and pointy truths that pierce but do so once, over the watery, wobbly half-truths that perpetually need to be renegotiated to reassure us of their foundations.

This way of thinking naturally lends itself to the practice of science, something is only declared a "scientific truth" after it has gone through a rigorous beating of doubt and been attacked by skeptics of all relevant

to Diogenes Laertius who attributed them to Agrippa until they were distilled into the following over time:

i) *Dissent* — Echoing the uncertainty of all rules in common life and of all opinions whether philosophically sanctioned or juvenile

ii) *Progress ad infinitum* — The idea that all proof requires further proof and so on to infinity. That theoretically speaking, all proofs are fallible and must fall if and when unproven.

iii) *Relation* — That all things are mutable depending on their mutations

**"I still wonder why we fear that answer so much: 'I don't know'. Is it because admitting it makes us look ignorant even though we often are, or is it because most think that it leaves us with so little?"**

denominations. If it survives, it is allowed to grow and even then, if proven otherwise, it must collapse in the face of evidence. In '*Camden Conversations*',<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman said "*I like the scientific spirit — the holding off, the being sure but not too sure, the willingness to surrender ideas when the evidence is against them: this is ultimately fine — it always keeps the way beyond open — always gives life, thought, affection, the whole man, a chance to try over again after a mistake — after a wrong guess.*" This is "healthy skepticism" in the practical realm; the spiritual and emotional realms, I feel, require the exercise to continue *ad infinitum* as a constant revision and reaffirmation to keep us from spiritual and emotional stagnation.

The first person to properly put down Pyrrho's teachings was Sextus Empiricus, who laid down the five major tropes of doubt in a sort of inverse gospel. The tropes came down

among people, which is to say that things change by the way we relate to them and by who relates to them.

iv) *Assumption* — That all asserted truths are merely hypotheses, even if some are truer than others. This involves a precarious balance of evidence and intellect over speculation and suspicion.

v) *Circularity* — That all asserted truths must start at the beginning with dissent, consistently revolving and open to reexamination and reinterpretation.

There have been revisions in the so-called "Gospel of Doubt", however, and these revisions have made it possible for us to progress beyond the swamp of indecision and

consistent suspension. Tropes 1 and 3 were part of the original grounds of earlier skepticism, but the remaining tropes evolved over time to allow skeptics to move beyond a state of stasis. Yes, we can doubt and withhold final judgments, but that does not mean we cannot make simple decisions and lay weight on evidence. Evidence and value now ground skepticism, they allow for doubters to follow a trail of common sense and percentages without needing dogmatic declarations and final words. Skepticism, healthy or otherwise, is a scarce resource in the age of social media where everyone seems to have their own personal “public” soapbox

*don't give in, insist on arguments, and act in this way, attentive and persistent, every single time, and the day will come when, instead of being a destroyer, it will become one of your best workers – perhaps the most intelligent of all the ones that are building your life.*” This is a standard to live by, if one has the courage to try it. And even though I recognize the blatant contradiction of stating that “one believes in doubt”, I really do. I believe in it, in the way method can save one from madness, even if they both originate from the same source.

My method has been to admit when I don't know something, often and flagrantly enough.

**“Certainty needs to be upheld and so all inquiry in its midst must be regulated so as not to topple some invisible, delicate balance of floundering egos insisting upon their ‘only truth’.”**

to belt out their answers to everything. Doubt would only have us introduce a few questions into this rabid mix.

In ‘Letters to a Young Poet’,<sup>ii</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke says “And your doubt can become a good quality if you train it. It must become knowing, it must become criticism. Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, why something is ugly, demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it perhaps bewildered and embarrassed, perhaps also protesting. But

Somehow I have never really experienced a “loss of ego” for it either; if anything, I have felt empowered to go looking for real answers to questions and ideologies rather than satisfying myself with half-truths and smoked mirrors.

There is an inherent humility involved in acknowledging that one does not know something because it allows the opportunity for discovery. Something certainty inherently curbs and controls. Certainty needs to be upheld and so all inquiry in its midst must be

regulated so as not to topple some invisible, delicate balance of floundering egos insisting upon their “only truth”. Doubt begins from a toppling of egos, and there is barren, fertile land as far as the eye can see to build upon. I find it incredibly disheartening how the once-mighty “grey zones” of maybe's, if's, what-if's, perhaps' and somewhat's are being steadily struck down in the battle for yeses, noes and “let's close the case” settlements.

In general, doubt gets a bad rep. “Doubting Thomas”; “Do you have doubts?”; “I doubt it”... the word is always tainted with an inflection, and skepticism as a whole is considered an extension of moral relativism. As if being relative on any position, especially moral ones, is unequivocally a bad thing. I fail to understand this inherent glorification of “blind belief” and “moral monoliths”. As Voltaire said “doubt is an uncomfortable condition, but certainty is a ridiculous one.” How can we be so comfortable settling for simple answers to the most complex of human conditions while demanding intricate, detailed contracts and receipts for everyday grocery purchases and car rentals?

So much of doubt is important when it comes to countering group think and mob mentality. This isn't to say that skepticism and grey zones are naturally synonymous with individuality but they are certainly close. Mob mentality, is after all, born from our need to choose a fraternity and fraternities are built upon collections of similar ideas and the need for direction.

My own relationship with Doubt has been a steady stream of negotiations since I was

fifteen. Now, fifteen years later, I can admit that while initially the sheer exercise of entertaining doubts on any and everything was an exhausting enterprise entailing a lot of guilt, not to mention quite a bit of self-loathing, today I have honed it to an instinct. That does not mean I do not commit to moral and philosophical positions or that I “don't” have opinions. Only that my positions tend to be very open to negotiation, even encouraging challenges so I can make sure I still keep the same commitments or whether I need to rethink myself. My personal certainties are always in flux and I enjoy that. It allows me to argue with people but not need to get worked up over it. It means I seldom need to raise my voice, and can focus on raising my arguments instead. And if that fails, I let them win. Some people just need that a lot more than I do. They need to win, it affirms something in them and I have never really needed to win in the same way. I am perfectly comfortable relinquishing that victory and resolving to go home and read a book about it to know where I stand on the issue, or *still* stand on it, as the case may be.

That is why grey zones are so important, as the world becomes more and more divided into pedants and preachers, there need to be some mediums. Grey zones are the only spaces that still allow us to debate, deliberate and argue without needing to win, think without needing to pander, and believe without needing to preach.

#### *Endnotes*

i Whitman, Walt; *Walt Whitman's Camden Conversations*; Rutgers University Press, 1973

ii Rilke, Rainer Maria; *Letters to a Young Poet*; W. W. Norton, 1934

# BEHIND THE STATION

By Arno Camenisch

*Translated from Romansh by Donal McLaughlin*

This excerpt is taken from 'Behind the Station' (Columbia University Press, 2015), and appears with kind permission from the publisher.

Behind the station are the soldiers' cars. We watch as they drive off on Saturday morning and on Sunday evening park their cars behind the station again. They open the car trunks and take out trunks and bags and the rifles. The rifles have no magazines. We observe how they tie their cravats and do their shirt buttons up. They put on their jackets with the flashes on the shoulders, put on their caps, talk to each other and pass the station and vanish round the bend of the station road.

Gion Baretta lifts the two bunnies out of the box by the ears. He lets them go in the garden. Right, he says, there you go. The bunnies

takes a long time though for the bikes to arrive, and then the bikes have to be built as well. Giacasep says he'll do it later, he doesn't have time now. He never has time. He has to take screws down into the cellar and he has to make keys. He has a tower in the shop, he can sit at it on a stool and make keys. To do so, he puts on glasses. When Giacasep is making keys, we go through the shop putting fishhooks on each other's pullovers like medals. Near the back entrance he has boxes of nails. In these boxes are nails as long as pencils. The nails have flat heads, the heads of the nails are broad. We stuff nails in our trouser pockets.

On Saturday morning we watch as the soldiers arrive at their cars, untie their cravats, undo their shirt buttons. They open the cars and throw their caps on the back seats. They talk to each other and laugh. In our trouser pockets we

**"My mother is going off. The washing machine has broken down. Boys, she yells who put nails in the washing machine. My father takes us by the hair..."**

jump around the garden. We jump around after them. Gion Baretta says to my father to wait a few weeks, then they'll be ready, then you can mate them. They clink glasses. My father made the cage. We spread the straw. The bunnies go into the cage. We'll make them a bigger cage later so they've enough room when the bunnies have babies. And see if you don't look after them properly and clean the hutch, we'll be getting rid. Off into the pot, understood. We nod. Thanks, my father says to Gion Baretta, don't mention it. Gion Baretta climbs over the fence, gets into his Subaru, and with a wave is gone.

Giacasep lives below us. He has a shop and a tash. He sells screws. He sells nails and chainsaws. He sells hammers, screwdrivers, screw clamps, gas cylinders, tape measures, drills, and drill bits. He also sells tool boxes, Mars bars, and ice creams. And if you order them, you can also buy bikes from Giacasep. It

have the nails from Giacasep's.

My father asks have we fed the bunny rabbits. We say we'll feed the bunnies in a minute, just need to do something first. My father says, we need to clean the hutch out again soon too. We nod. My father looks strict and shows us his finger. On his finger is white paint. He's wearing overalls. His overalls are white with splashes of paint. My father's a painter. On his shoes are splashes of paint. On his hands are splashes of paint. He's got soap for that that we're not allowed to use. Hands off, my father says, it's poisonous, not for the likes of you. Drink that and you'll end up with a hole in your stomach. We don't want holes in our stomachs so we keep our hands off. My father parks his car at an angle outside Giacasep's shop. Giacasep doesn't like that. Tell your father not to park his car outside my shop. My father's already gone though. He parks and heads up the station road

to the restaurant.

My father is in the restaurant. We're behind the station. We walk round the soldiers' parked cars. My brother rhymes off the makes of car. I rhyme off the colors. We kneel at the car doors. My brother kneels at an orange car. I kneel at a red one. With my nail from Giacasep's I draw a house on the side door. My house has a double door. It has a window next to the door and two windows on the first floor. On the roof it has tiles. On the roof is a chimney. Smoke is coming from the chimney. I draw curtains in the windows. Next to the house is a garden. In the garden I draw flowers. I also draw a sun and clouds in the sky. In the sky there are two birds. In the garden I draw a big tree. Beneath the tree is a cage. In the cage I draw a bunny.

Next to our house is the Rorers' house. The Rorers don't always live there, they live in Chur and only live in our village at weekends. The Rorers' house is right beside the railway lines. They never come by train though. They always come by car. Their car is brown. That's an Opel, my brother says. The Rorers can't speak Romansh. When I scrape my knee riding my bike or playing football my mother takes me to FrauRorer. She's a first-aider and paints my knee red, puts plasters on with pictures on them, or bandages it. Come back tomorrow and we'll see then, eh, sweetheart. I nod and she kisses me on the cheek. The frame of her glasses presses into my forehead. I wipe my cheek with my sleeve. My mother then takes cherries from the garden round to her.

My mother is giving off. The washing machine has broken down. Boys, she yells, who put nails in the washing machine. My father takes us by the hair, we forgot to take the nails from Giacasep's out of our trouser pockets before throwing the trousers in the tub for dirty clothes. My father pulls at the bottom of your hair at the back. When he pulls it there, it hurts more. Little rogues, my father yells. Ash from his Kiel cigar falls on the rug in the corridor. My father bites on the yellow mouthpiece of his Kiel. His teeth are grayish-yellow. Just you wait, there's going to be trouble, off to bed with you now, no supper tonight, *sez la cuolpa*, only

yourselfs to blame.

Luis-from-Schlans has a steinbock on the sleeve of his blue ski jacket. He's a skiing instructor. He always wears the same jacket and always the same belt as well. Okay boys, he says, if you want some chocolate, nip into the kiosk, into Mena's, and get me a packet of Rössli cigars. Do you know which ones, say it's for Luis, and Mena will know, and to put it on the slate. Mena's sitting behind the glass pane, reading the NewPost. Behind her, Jesus is hanging on the cross. His right hand's broken off. She takes off her specs and opens the glass pane. *Tgei levas*, she asks. *Rösslis ed ina tschugalata Rayon*. Mena won't give us the chocolate, she doesn't believe Luis said we could have the Rayon. She won't give us Torinos either, though they're smaller. Luis-from-Schlans says, don't worry, you'll get the chocolate from me, bye then, you two. We take the short cut to the station. Behind the station we discuss it all. It's Mena's fault. Mena will be in trouble, we'll take her by the hair.

On Saturday morning the soldiers come down the station road. Do you have any biscuits, we ask. They produce biscuits from their pockets and hold the biscuits out to us. We say merci buccups. They produce dark chocolate from their pockets and hold it out to us. Merci buccups. They laugh and continue down the station road, cutting the bend. You're not supposed to do that. You're not supposed to cut the bend on the station road. When will you finally cotton on that you're not supposed to cut the bend, you little camels, my father says to us, do you want to end up under a car or what. We don't. We only cut the bend when we forget we're not supposed to cut the bend. If we end up under a car, we'll go to FrauRorer.

Silvana's my girlfriend. She lives in a restaurant, the Crusch Alva, on the first floor. Her mother runs the restaurant. Silvana has a brother, he's bigger than us, and she also has a sister, she's bigger than her brother. Silvana's father's bigger than my father and has hair on his hands and three gold rings on his left hand. My father has a fatter tummy than Silvana's father and colorful hands. I'm in Silvana's bathroom.

# DANTE - PRATO AL SAGLIO

the mountains keep the earth in poise  
and the seas in check · a stone slab above  
my head teetered as I leant on its flank · thus

a wave breaks and is hurled back · smooth  
slopes and a swallow's nest · the wind freezes  
in the nooks and gulping air your mouth

is sated with a fear that fades  
solely when you walk · debris and scree · the noon  
a bowl where the rock-falls echo · the slope erodes

layer by layer as if time here lay thin  
and peeling · what lends order to this space  
are my outstretched arm and fingers their diagonal line

is my assurance of life · a steady pace  
along a ledge and the steeper the track  
the more my eyes were fixed on the path · in one place

a jutting larch · there was no turning back  
at every step I lunged into the shadow cast before me by  
a reproachful sun · slowly it began to take

on mass in the light as if it wished to pay  
its dues to a body whose toes and fingertips were all that clung  
to the rock · in meadows higher up the day

stripped sods as big as fontanelles · it was groping  
for a hold on this stony mass in the other face  
of death · and it was as clear as an ice-cold spring

winter 1311

Silvana's in the bath. She has wet hair and her mother's washing her back. Silvana's mother has rolled up her sleeves. On her left arm she has a watch. It's a Swatch, Silvana told me. Her finger nails are long and red, and on her right forearm she has bruises. There's a lot of foam in the bath. I put foam on Silvana's head. She thinks it's funny. I want a Swatch too. Maybe Silvana's mother will give me her Swatch if I take cherries from our garden round to her.

My grandmother is bollock in front of

me. When she sees me, she's startled. She's wide-eyed. She has her mouth open. She hasn't her false teeth in. I'm startled too. I don't look away though. I can't look away. My neck is made of wood. I've never seen Nonna bollock before. She looks so different, totally bollock. Oh, she says. She limps back into the bathroom and closes the door. One of her legs is shorter than the other. The sole of her right shoe is thicker. It looks like she has a wooden foot. But at least she doesn't limp with shoes on. Without

die berge halten die erde im gleichgewicht  
und die meere hintan · über mir war eine felsplatte  
die sich leicht an der seite bewegen ließ · so bricht

und wird eine welle zurückgeworfen · glatte  
hänge und ein schwabennest · an den winkeln friert  
der wind und beim atemholen immer dieser übersatte

mund voll angst die sich dann erst verliert  
im gehen · geröll und schutt · der mittag eine schale  
in der die steinschläge verhallen · die halde erodiert

schicht um schicht als würde das schmale  
der zeit abgetragen von ihr · es ordnet den raum  
der zu den fingern getreckte arm seine diagonale

ist mir als leben gewiß · ein steig am saum  
je steiler er wurde desto mehr schritt ich vor mir her  
die augen am weg ausgerichtet · ein lärchenbaum

waagrecht in der luft · es war keine umkehr  
bei jedem einzelnen tritt griff ich in einen schatten  
den mir die sonne vorwarf · er wurde langsam schwer

im licht als wollte er mir den leib erstatten  
von dem bloß die hände und zehenspitzen an den fels  
geklammert reichen · der tag auf den grasmatten

oben riß lücken in der grüße eines fontanells  
er suchte halt im steinernen in dem andern angesicht  
des tods · und er hatte die klarheit eines kalten quells

winter 1311

~ Raoul Schott, trans. from German by Iain Galbraith  
This poem first appeared in Raoul Schott's collection 'Tropen' and is  
republished here with kind permission from Hanser Verlag.

her shoes, she stands crooked. Through the bathroom door I hear her say, why didn't you shout something. I don't say anything. I did shout. I shouted *halihō Nonna* as I came in. No one answered. I went into the kitchen with the plastic bag with the mangold leaves from our garden. My mother said to take them to Nonna, Nonna makes her *capuns* with them. I could hear someone in the bathroom, that's why I waited in the kitchen beside the coffee machine. If you want into Nonna's bathroom, you have to

go through the kitchen. Nonna comes out of the bathroom. She has tied a bath towel round her. Her toenails are grayish-blue. The bath towel is pink. She doesn't look at me. Why didn't you shout as you came in, silly. I did shout. I don't say so. Suddenly, I can't talk any more. My Nonna, bollock, took my voice away. When she goes into her room and closes the door, I put the plastic bag down on the table beside the coffee machine and leave. I close the front door carefully. There'll be trouble for sure.

# PREMONITIONS OF MOURNING

## I started awake

I started awake when a door slammed,  
seized by terror that you died that instant  
and the gust of wind banged the door left  
open. Was it you who left it deliberately  
open, to let me know the time of your departure?

It was three in the morning. The wings  
of two black moths brushed across my face  
as I walked around the apartment: two  
noxious heralds. One I killed,  
it crumbled in my handkerchief  
and stained the death-white wall.

The other made its nest in my  
heart, lays eggs from which the days  
ahead are slowly hatching.

## Machines do

Machines do your breathing, your  
sleeping. You lie with eyes closed,  
clean-shaven under the gaze of your wretched  
visitors. In the whole ward you are  
the most beautiful. Your sinewy arm,  
well-proportioned chest are revealed to us.  
Though I dressed in white, against my  
will my tears well up.

## For nineteen days

For nineteen days you've been sleeping. While I was  
by your bedside a gust of wind reached in  
the window left open at home and knocked  
over the floor lamp I received from  
you. Let everything perish is its will.

## For twenty-three days

For twenty-three days  
you've been laid out for us in the snow-white ward  
freezing and sweating,  
so we may go on our pointless  
errands. You lie,

your dark eyelashes flutter yet  
unable to lift your heavy  
eyelid, your gaze the green  
bird will not settle  
on us.

## From now on

From now on dark falls earlier.  
At six in the morning the streets are dark.  
Night glows with cold light.  
Shades drift, the blind  
walk side by side.

## If anybody touched me

If anybody touched me now, their freezing  
hands would pull away at once.  
I stand, moonlit shade on the lamp-  
lit street, waiting to be let in.  
Black geraniums the size of a child's  
head beckon in a window. The tears of  
a sprinkling can trickle down on them.

## The time comes

The time comes when you've had enough.  
There will be tears I dreaded long  
in advance, when the Lord of Heaven  
places you in His hall of statues –  
so there were. Without, the sun is shining.

## Postscript

Like one deranged, the tram clangs  
up and down the streets, looking  
for someone lost in the night.  
It picks up some discarded rags  
and drops them again. A clatter.  
Snow frozen to splinters.

~ Zsuzsa Takács, trans. from Hungarian by Erika Mihálycsa

# THE WALL

By Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki

Translated from Polish by Julia and Peter Sherwood

1.

– Ah well, you only live once. You scared of flying? – the man in the seat next to me asked. He looked much older than me. It might have been the beard. – No, I’m not scared, I know I have to come back – I replied. – Well, I am scared. It’s not natural for human beings to fly. Birds are a different matter, although I’m not sure if birds feel fear. From my experience as a vet I can neither deny nor confirm that. So my travelling companion was a vet. – What’s your pigeon? – he asked again. I hesitated. Who knows if he really was a vet. He might just as well have been a plant, a customs officer, or some other kind of agent. How could I be sure the plane would really take off if I told him the truth? What if they took my stuff away or thrown me off the flight? The guys in uniform, they had all the power in those days. They could have thrown me off the flight but they could just as easily have locked me up and kept me in for a couple of years. And I couldn’t afford to be thrown off, let alone locked up. I had become a father just two months earlier. I was a student sharing a tiny room in a student dormitory with my wife, my baby son, one of those they called a spousal room. The only difference between this and a normal room was that it contained another bed. The size was the same. Provided everything went to plan, this trip was a chance for us to survive for a few years. And with a bit of luck, it might have been enough to buy a tiny studio flat for us to call our own. Those were difficult times even though the curtain was beginning to rust. The fact that I was able to take a day trip to West Berlin was proof of that. Polish citizens had recently been allowed to keep their passports at home, in their desk drawers. I was the proud owner of a few deutschmarks, bought from a shifty character by the Okrąglak department store. I made a brief trip to Hungary where I stocked up on multicoloured hats and scarves, followed by another, even shorter, trip to the GDR where I hawked the goods to a Vietnamese trader. This yielded hundreds of East German marks, which I exchanged for real deutschmarks. Next I went to West Berlin and

purchased six jamboxes illegally from a dealer on the Ku’damm. It had to be the ones with flashing LED lights. The long black ones, with stereo speakers, of course. They were going to fetch a lot more in the Soviet Union. And it was these six jamboxes that I had declared at the airport as items meant exclusively for personal use, which I would bring back with me. The customs officer just smiled as he signed my customs declaration... – I’ve got a thousand condoms – said the vet. There’s no law that says how many condoms you can take abroad on a one-week trip, right? I was beginning to like the vet so I smiled back at him and nodded. – I didn’t declare anything, – he went on. – They kicked up a huge fuss at the airport. I told them I wasn’t going to bring back used rubbers. I almost managed to convince them when this officer joined in, quite a prude she was. All of a sudden she said, sure, you may take condoms for your own use, just like a hairbrush or toothpaste, but this quantity suggests smuggling. I blew my top. I wasn’t doing anything illegal. Could she show me a law that said how many condoms one can carry? No, she couldn’t. We all have different needs, right? – he evidently expected me to agree. – She wouldn’t let off. She sized me as a one-shag-a-day man, seven rubbers altogether. What a slap in the face! No way, I said. When she saw how annoyed I was she said I could take fourteen, that came to two a day. I didn’t agree to that either. She stuck to her guns and said I must leave the remaining rubbers behind. But then her colleague said, leave him alone, Bożena, maybe the gentleman wants to shag himself to death? Yes, exactly, I want to shag myself to death, I screamed, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me. There’s no law against it. So they let me go. I have no other goods, this stuff sells like hot cakes over there, you know. Rubbers are hard to get in Russia, the government is hot on procreation. One rouble per rubber, I’ve a thousand roubles in my suitcase, work it out for yourself. And the poor buggers make a hundred a month. These rubbers will turn into a golden sausage, I tell you. I was reassured. Now I could tell that my neighbour was an honest man. – I’ve got jamboxes. Six of them. – With LED lights? The

Russkies like flashing lights, you know. They’re no good without flashing lights. – I know, I know – I replied. All the jamboxes have LED lights, in various colours. – Good man, that’s the way. The more flashing, the more colours, the more roubles you get. Bravo! The plane taxied onto the runway and came to a halt. We were headed for Moscow first, then further still. – This is is the bit I’m most scared of – said the vet, hastily fishing out a hip flask from the inside pocket of his jacket. – Will you have one? – No, thanks, it’s a bit early for me – I said. – I have to, I’m dead scared of the moment the plane takes off, I’m always like that. But when I take a sip it gets a little better. You sure you don’t want some? – he repeated his offer. – No, thanks, I really don’t. – OK. You only live once. The vet took a big gulp from the bottle. As the plane took off, he took another. – OK, we’re

married, had children, his wife took a lover. It ended in divorce. Because of the divorce he took to drink; because of the drinking he developed a heart condition; because of his fear of dying he began to drink even more; because of his excessive drinking he was fired from his job; and because he was fired and unable to pay alimony he started a business, i.e. trading, i.e. smuggling. Because of the smuggling he had to start flying and because of his fear of flying, he went on drinking, as evidenced by another bottle of vodka, a larger one this time, which he took out of his bag when the aircraft stopped in Moscow to refuel. Once we were up in the skies again my travelling companion heaved a sigh of relief. He got through the bottle in less than an hour and went to sleep. He slept through the landing on the concrete surface of the Siberian airport. I gave him a nudge when people started

**“Those were difficult times even though the curtain was beginning to rust. The fact that I was able to take a day trip to West Berlin was proof of that. Polish citizens had recently been allowed to keep their passports at home, in their desk drawers.”**

in heaven now – he said, with a small gasp.

2.

The plane landed at Moscow airport. While we were in the air my fellow passenger managed to empty his hip flask, becoming ever more talkative. He treated me to several stories from the difficult life of a vet in the sticks, a man who had missed his vocation. Deep down he had always wanted to treat people. But he didn’t have the guts to apply to study medicine and took the entrance exam to the Veterinary Department at the Agricultural College in Wrocław instead. That’s where he met his future wife. They got

to get off. He woke up and jumped to his feet as if he were completely sober. – Are we there yet? – he asked. – Yes, we’ve arrived, time to get off. One by one, we walked down the stairs that had been wheeled to the plane door, and followed the stewardess to a metal shed that boasted a sign in two alphabets. The second one said in English: Novosibirsk International Airport. We waited by the empty black luggage carousel. When it started to move, mine and the vet’s luggage happened to arrive one after the other. That’s when I knew we were destined to stay together until the end of this trip. When we went through passport control and entered the customs area, the vet was the first to be asked: Anything to

declare? Without batting an eyelid he said he had nothing to declare but had brought a small gift in honour of Polish-Soviet friendship. He opened his suitcase stuffed with condoms, covered by a layer of clothes, and produced a few boxes of Pollena Ewa eye shadows. – This is for you, your favourite shade of blue, it's for you, gorgeous, here you are, put it on, be beautiful! *Da zdavstvuyet druzhba sovetskopol'skaya!* Long live Soviet-Polish friendship! – he exclaimed. The customs officers went wild with joy. One of them, smelling the alcohol on the vet's breath, immediately recognized him as one of their own, and expressed her appreciation by saying – *Vot nastoyashchy turist!* Now that's what I call a tourist! – Now that the vet prepared the ground for me, they

## “The vet invested in gold. After three days he said he was running out of money but had enough for a sausage.”

only glanced at my jamboxes and asked if they were for personal use, chuckling to themselves. I nodded, showed them the customs declaration from Poznań and they slapped a stamp on it. At the hotel the vet and I ended up sharing a room. He went out and a few minutes later he was back with a bottle of Russian vodka. – It's nice and chilled, sure you won't have a drink with me now? – he offered. He reached for two shot glasses perched by the TV set. – All you have to do is wait, the customers will turn up by themselves – he said, when I asked his advice. – What do you mean, by themselves? – You'll see, they'll be here before too long. Each floor has a *dezhurnaya*, a floor supervisor, she's supposed to manage her floor, but her real job is drumming up customers. She's just sold me the vodka. I told her there's a mountain of rubbers and a few tape recorders up for grabs. He grinned as he pronounced the word *magnitofon* in the Russian way. When we finished the bottle, he imparted further sad stories from the difficult life of a divorced

man. There was a knock on the door. Without waiting for an invitation, the floor supervisor barged in. – You'll have visitors later. Marian, with whom I was on first name terms by now, got up and took out a small box of eye shadow from his suitcase. – Only one? – OK, have one more – said the vet, taking another one out. – Just two? – she inquired again. – Here, have four, that's all I've got. That got rid of her. Later that evening two bearded men turned up. They insisted on purchasing all the rubbers along with the suitcase. They bought the lot. The condoms, the suitcase, and my jamboxes to boot. The following day at breakfast our tour guide proposed a sightseeing tour. A few people signed up but others, including the two of us, decided to get on with our own

*kapitan.* I'm not a major, I'm a captain – the policeman said, returning to his seat below the portrait. – So whereabouts in Poland are you from? – he asked. – From Poznań – I was the one who replied this time. – Comrade general, colonel, major, captain chuckled. – *Molodtsy!* Good lads! Then he left the office, taking my customs form with him. – When he comes back, you'll hand him the money – Marian said.

The vet invested in gold. After three days he said he was running out of money but had enough for a sausage. I made enough from the jamboxes to buy three Kiev cameras. They were perfect fakes of Swedish originals, irrefutable evidence of Soviet industrial espionage.

A day before our departure the floor supervisor knocked on our door again, announcing new visitors. Two Asian-looking guys came in and sat down on the bed. One of them brought half a litre of vodka. The other raised his hands and made the sign of the devil. He moved his hands up and down. Taking this for a kind of greeting I responded with the same gesture. The Asian took a metal container out of his jacket pocket. – No drugs, clear off! – the vet shouted. – Get out of here! The men were taken aback. The syringe seller put his wares away, rushed to the coffee table and opened the bottle of vodka, inviting us all to a drink. Marian screamed at them again. The men cleared off. In the morning the vet squeezed the sausage – i.e. a condom stuffed with gold – into his rear end and grabbed the bottle of vodka, a present from our uninvited guests. – Something to drink on the plane – he said. Everything went well at the airport. The customs officers gathered us all in one place and patiently waited for the tour guide to go around and make the collection. The senior customs officer, a bald fellow with a grey mustache, accepted a carrier bag full of money and gave a salute. In Moscow during refuelling we again stayed on the plane. After take-off Marian produced the bottle. He took a sip, closed his eyes and fell asleep. I looked out of the window as we flew above the clouds. The silence and my sense of achievement were short-lived because all of a sudden the vet slid off his seat and ended up sprawled in the aisle, lifeless. I jumped up, bent down to him and gave him a nudge. He showed no signs

of life. I remembered him mentioning heart problems on the way there. I called for help in broken Russian. But there was nothing to be done. The shocked stewardess covered his face with a white towel with an Aeroflot logo on it.

### 3.

One day, out of the blue, an Arab appeared in our hall of residence. He had hooked a girl from the third floor. I overheard her talking on the payphone by the reception a couple of times. Shaking with excitement, she was telling someone that she was going to drop out of university and move to the West. He had impressed her with his curly hair, slim body, parachute pants and silk windcheater.

Then there was Nabil from Iraq. He also lived in our hall and behaved as if he'd never left his homeland. He would play plaintive Arab music on his cassette player all day long, standing in the open door to his room and greeting passers-by. He never went to lectures. He got his Master's in the first year, after a considerable sum of money landed in the university's bank account. All he had to do now was stick it out in Poland for five years. His life would have been quite happy if it hadn't been for Barbara from Łódź. She would turn up in Poznań once every six months, driving him crazy. He hadn't registered their marriage at the embassy and she was blackmailing him. He'd fallen in love before he got to Poznań and now he had to pay the price.

Nabil found out that the Arab Lothario had relatives in West Berlin, including an uncle who owned a camera shop. This made me hope that we might be able to leave our spousal room in a few months' time and start living like human beings. The condition was that the Lothario would come with us. I was to pay for the tickets. Everything would go like clockwork, with Nabil and the other guy posing as owners of the other two cameras.

The Lothario gently hugged and kissed his beloved goodbye, promising to be back and shower her with the most expensive beauty products. The Moscow-Paris train via Berlin Zoo arrived on time. We shared a second-class compartment with a bunch of petty vodka and cigarette smugglers. As soon as they saw us

**“I opened my eyes and saw Nabil standing over me. In a voice shaking with excitement, he announced that the Wall had fallen... I tapped my forehead to indicate he was imagining things.”**

they asked if we would mind taking on a bottle of vodka and a carton of cigarettes each for the duration of the journey. At Rzepin station Polish border guards and customs officers boarded the train and immediately set to work with screwdrivers, looking for God knows what. Passports were checked, a few routine questions asked. We crossed the River Odra. In Frankfurt German officers got on. However, on that day they just walked the length of the train without entering the compartments. – Shit, if I'd known this – one of the cigarette men shouted. – Fuck it, all the money lost... Our passports were not stamped until East Berlin. At Bahnhof Zoo the Arab Lothario started explaining something to Nabil, looking uneasy. He tore out a page from a notebook and scribbled some mysterious characters on it. Then he kissed Nabil, shook my hand and ran down the stairs. When he was gone I realized he'd taken one of the cameras. Panicking, I screamed: – I've got to dash, the camera! – Calm down, don't go anywhere, he's given me his uncle's address, we'll meet him in two hours. He'll be there with the camera, don't worry. He told me he had some urgent business to attend to, that's why he left, just for a moment. We hailed a taxi. We found the street and the house all right but instead of a camera shop there were funeral directors. Everyone we met and asked about a camera shop just shrugged and said there wasn't one and never had been one around there. We waited for the Adonis. We might have stayed there waiting until the end of the time and perhaps he might have turned up for the Last Judgment. I went back to the same

black marketeer on Ku'damm I had bought the jamboxes from, and asked if he'd buy something from me for a change. He offered half the amount I'd been hoping for. Tears welling up in my eyes, I shook my head and he added two hundred deutschmarks. I took the money, bitter and crestfallen. I decided not to buy a nice pushchair for my son, I couldn't afford it now. Instead I bought a litre of vodka to drown my sorrows. I opened the bottle in my cheap hotel room. After two shots Nabil's power of speech returned. He asked forgiveness on behalf of the Adonis.

Evening fell. I was getting ready to go to bed but Nabil didn't feel like sleeping. I was already in bed, trying to go to sleep when he told me he was going out to a phone box, to call a cousin in Sweden. All these people have cousins somewhere and they all take one another for a ride, I thought as I closed my eyes. I dreamt that someone was shouting, poking me in the ribs and trying to rouse me from sleep. I dreamt of Marian the vet, his head covered by a towel with the Aeroflot logo. I also dreamt of my wife and my child in a market place, selling apples wrapped in Pampers. At some point I opened my eyes and saw Nabil standing over me. In a voice shaking with excitement, he announced that the Wall had fallen. His cousin had told him over the phone. I tapped my forehead to indicate he was imagining things. – Nabil, you shouldn't drink, this is all my fault, I'm so sorry. Just go to sleep, don't worry about the Wall, it'll be with us for a while. And I went back to sleep. In the morning I got up and opened the window. I leaned out. The pavement was teeming with

## POSTHUMOUS CORRESPONDENCE

*Man:*

Well, in some ways I've been unfaithful.  
There's the world. Which distracts. I woke  
and lived, touched, ate and talked,  
drank wine, played human games, travelled  
by train and posed for photographs. I got distracted,  
forgive me.

*Death:*

Well, in some ways I've been unfaithful.  
I was busy in other places, in other  
people, besides you I had seasons,  
animals, trees, wars, children, vast spaces  
to embrace. Only now can I stay with you,  
forgive me.

*Man:* And now will there be all?

*Death:* There'll be nothing now.  
Hats and roofs, crowns of trees, towers,  
roads and rail tracks, rivers – seen from here  
they'll dissolve right away. I've allowed myself  
a postscript to your postcard,  
forgive me.

~ Marcin Świetlicki, trans. from Polish by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese

# CONTRIBUTORS

## INTRODUCTION

**Michael Stein** is a writer and journalist in the Czech Republic and runs Literalab, a blog on Central European writing. He is an editor at B O D Y, and a regular contributor to journals such as *Absinthe: New European Writing*, *The Cerise Press* and Berlin's *Redux*, has had a book review in *Asymptote*, and published short stories in publications such as *Drunken Boat*, *McSweeney's*, *The Medulla Review* and *Cafe Irreal* among other magazines.

## POETRY

**Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkał** is an award-winning poet with eight volumes to her name; she also writes novels, journalism and books for children. She is also known for her performance readings and her promotion of women's writing in Poland.

Born in Dresden in 1962, **Durs Grünbein** is the most significant and successful poet to emerge from the former East Germany. A modern poeta doctus, his streetwise, ironic style belies at first the deep seriousness of his project and the emotional resonance at its core. Grünbein has published more than thirty books of poetry and prose, which have been translated into dozens of languages. He himself has also translated, including work by Aeschylus and Seneca. The poems in this issue come from 'Koloss im Nebel' (Suhrkamp, 2012).

Highly acclaimed as a poet, a dramatist, a children's author, and a novelist, **Gábor Schein** lives in Budapest, where he is a professor at the Hungarian Literary History Institute of Eötvös Loránd University. He has written nine collections of poetry and three novels.

Born in Hamburg in 1971, **Jan Wagner** studied English in Hamburg, Dublin and

Berlin, where he has lived since 1995. He has published six volumes of poetry, including his most recent collection 'Regentonnevariationen' (*Rain Barrel Variations*, 2014). A translator and essayist, he has received numerous awards, including the Mondsee Poetry Award (2004), the Ernst Meister Prize for Poetry (2005), the Wilhelm Lehmann Prize (2009) and the Friedrich Hölderlin Prize (2011).

**Marcin Świetlicki** is the author of ten poetry books, most recent 'One' (*Jeden*; winner of the 2014 Gdynia Literary Prize and nominated for the NIKE Prize), and three novels. He writes texts for the band Świetlik, where he is also a lead vocalist. He lives in Kraków.

Born in 1964, brought up in Tunis and Tyrol, **Raoul Schrott** writes poetry and fiction, and is a prolific translator and essayist. His translation of the *Iliad*, together with 'Homers Heimat', a monograph challenging orthodox views of Homer's cultural background, appeared in 2008. Much of his work reflects a keen interest in science, 'Gehirn und Gedicht' (2011), for example, co-authored with the neurologist Arthur Jacobs, offering a 'neuropoetical' study of the activity of the brain in writing and reading poetry.

**Zsuzsa Takács** is the doyenne of Hungarian poetry. Since 1970, she has published eleven volumes of poetry, a book of children's verse, and several volumes of translations. Her volumes address both private and historical traumas, the impotence of language when faced with the creature's suffering. 'Premonitions of Mourning' appears in her collection 'Tiltott Nyelv' (*Forbidden Tongue*), published in 2013. She lives in Budapest.

## FICTION

**Arno Camenisch** writes in both Rhaeto-

Romanic and German. He is best known for his award-winning trilogy of novels, beginning with 'The Alp', already excerpted in Harper's, and continuing with 'Behind the Station' and 'Last Last Orders', all of which will appear from Dalkey Archive Press over the next two years.

**Hana Andronikova** (1967-2011), was born in Zlín. She went on to study English and Czech literature at Charles University in Prague. Her first novel, 'Zvuk slunečních hodin' (*The Sound of the Sundial*), was published in 2001 to great acclaim, receiving the Book Club Literary Award and the 2002 Magnesia Litera Award.

**Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki** is a Polish writer and poet, author of several collections of short stories and short novels as well as two volumes of poetry and a children's book. After studying theology and philosophy and travelling around Europe, he spent 10 years living in Reykjavík, studying Icelandic language and literature. Before turning to full-time writing, he tried his hand at a variety of jobs, including short order cook, strawberry picker, clown, and orderly in an old-people's home. He currently lives in Vienna with his family.

**Jáchym Topol** is the leading Czech author of his generation. Active in his youth as a samizdat poet and songwriter, since the Velvet Revolution of 1989 he is best known for his reportage as a journalist and his fiction capturing the struggle of Czech society to come to terms with the legacies of communism. His previous novels include 'City Sister Silver', 'Gargling with Tar' and 'The Devil's Workshop'.

**Sándor Jászberényi** is a Hungarian writer and Middle East correspondent who has covered the Darfur crisis, the revolutions in Egypt and Libya, the Gaza War, and the Huthi uprising in Yemen, and has interviewed several armed Islamist groups.

A photojournalist for the *Egypt Independent* and Hungarian newspapers, he currently lives in Cairo, Egypt. His first collection of short stories, 'Az ördög egy fekete kutya' (*The Devil is a Black Dog*), was published in late 2013.

**Zsuzsa Selyem** is regarded as one of the most original voices of mid-generation Hungarian experimental writing. She is a critic, novelist, poet, translator, and Associate Professor at the Department of Hungarian Literature, Babes-Bolyai University Cluj, Romania where she teaches critical theory and 20th-21st century Hungarian literature. To date, her work comprises one novel (translated into German and French), two volumes of short stories and four volumes of criticism.

## TRANSLATORS

**David Short** graduated with a BA in Russian with French from the University of Birmingham. He has translated a wide range of Czech texts and has won awards both for translations and for his contribution to Czech and Slovak studies, notably, in 2004, the Czech Minister of Culture's Artis Bohemicae Amicis medal and the Medal of the Comenius University in Bratislava.

Born in Derry, **Donal McLaughlin** moved to Scotland as a child. His debut collection, 'an allergic reaction to national anthems & other stories' (2009), was longlisted for the Frank O'Connor Short Story Award. In 2012, he featured in 'Best European Fiction' (Dalkey Archive) as both a writer and a translator. In 2013, his translation of Urs Widmer's 'My Father's Book' (Seagull) was shortlisted for the Best Translated Book Award (USA).

**Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese** writes between English, Polish and Danish. Her books include: 'Nothing More', a selection from

Krystyna Milobędzka (2013); 'Salt Monody', versions of Marzanna Kielar (2006); 'Cognitive Poetic Readings in Elizabeth Bishop: Portrait of a Mind Thinking' (2010). She has co-edited and co-written 'Carnivorous Boy Carnivorous Bird: Poetry from Poland' (2004) and co-wrote 'Metropoetica. Poetry and Urban Space: Women Writing Cities' (2013).

**Erika Mihályesa** teaches 20th-century British fiction at Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj. Her research is focused mainly on Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien, and she is a prolific translator from English into Hungarian. Her translations of Hungarian literature into English have previously appeared in B O D Y magazine and World Literature Today. She is editor, together with Rainer J. Hanshe, of HYPERION magazine, issued by Contra Mundum Press.

**Iain Galbraith** has won the John Dryden Translation Prize and the Stephen Spender Prize, as well as publishing his own poems. He is the editor of five poetry anthologies, while his recent translated books include a selection of W.G. Sebald's poetry, 'Across the Land and the Water' (2011), John Burnside's selected poems in German, 'Versuch über das Licht' (2011), and Jan Wagner's 'Self-portrait with a Swarm of Bees' (2015). He lives in Wiesbaden, Germany, and teaches Poetry Translation at the University for Applied Arts in Vienna.

**Julia Sherwood** is a freelance translator. She grew up in Czechoslovakia and is now based in London. Her book-length translations include 'Samko Tále's Cemetery Book' by Daniela Kapitáňová and Freshta by Petra Procházková and jointly with Peter Sherwood, 'The House of the Deaf Man' by Peter Krištúfek and 'Ilona. My Life with the Bard' by Jana Juráňová. She is Asymptote's Editor-at-large for Slovakia and chairs the NGO Rights in Russia.

**Karen Leeder**'s translations of German poetry have appeared in a variety of journals. Her volume of Evelyn Schlag's 'Selected Poems' with Carcanet in 2004 won the Schlegel-Tieck Prize in 2005 and she received a Deutscher Übersetzerfonds award for her translation of Ulrike Almut Sandig in 2014. In 2013, she received first prize in the Stephen Spender competition with her translation of Durs Grünbein's 'Childhood in the Diorama'.

**Marek Tomin** was born in Prague and grew up in England, where his family found refuge after being exiled by the Communist regime in 1980. His translations include 'Glorious Nemesis' by Ladislav Klíma and Emil Hakl's 'Of Kids and Parents'. He lives in Prague and London.

**M. Henderson Ellis** is the author of the novel 'Keeping Bedlam at Bay in the Prague Café' (New Europe Books, February 2013). He lives in Budapest, where he works as a freelance editor at Wordpill Editing, and is a founding editor at Pilvax magazine.

**Ottolie Mulzet** translates from Hungarian and Mongolian. Her translation of László Krasznahorkai's 'Seiobo There Below' won the Best Translated Book Award for 2013. Forthcoming are Krasznahorkai's 'Destruction and Sorrow beneath the Heavens' (Seagull Books, Fall 2015), and 'The Dispossessed' by Szilárd Borbély (HarperCollins, 2016).

**Peter Sherwood** is emeritus Professor of Hungarian Language and Culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has translated the novels 'The Book of Fathers' by Miklós Vámos and 'The Finno-Ugrian Vampire' by Noémi Szécsi as well as stories by Dezső Kosztolányi, Zsigmond Móricz and others, along with works of poetry, drama and philosophy.

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A glowing lightbulb with the text "THE MISSING SLATE" and "For the discerning metropolitan." is resting on a cracked, dry ground surface. The lightbulb is glowing brightly, casting a warm glow on the surrounding area. The text "Submissions Open" and "For more information, visit <http://www.themissingslate.com>" are displayed below the lightbulb.

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