

**VILENICA**



**ONE  
HUNDRED  
YEARS  
OF SLOVAK  
LITERATURE**

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**A n A n t o l o g y**



**The Union of Slovenian Writers  
The Association of Organisations of Slovak Writers**





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**Published by THE UNION OF SLOVENIAN WRITERS**

**and THE ASSOCIATION OF ORGANISATIONS OF SLOVAK WRITERS**

**in co-operation with the literary Information Centre**

**and the Institute of Slovak Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences**

**for the occasion of the undertaking of the Literary event,**

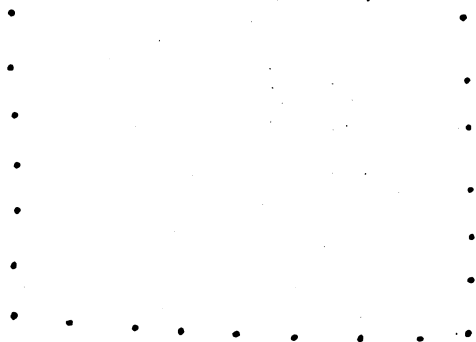
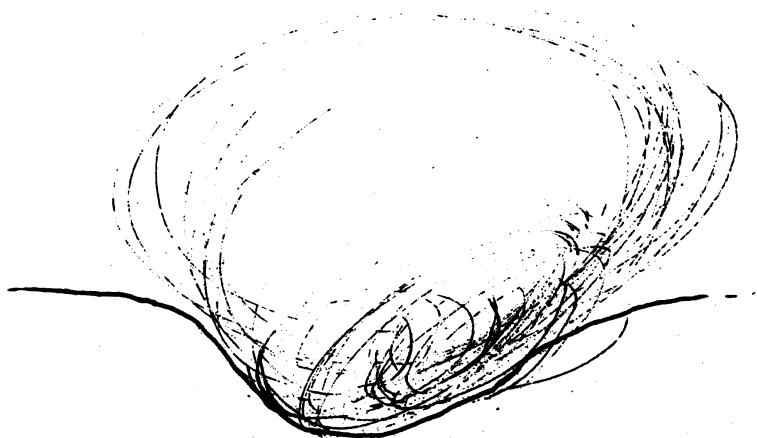
**Vilénica 2000, Slovenia**



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# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SLOVAK LITERATURE

A n A n t o l o g y



Bratislava 2000

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ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SLOVAK LITERATURE / An Anthology

Published by THE UNION OF SLOVENIAN WRITERS (represented by Evald Flisar) and THE ASSOCIATION OF ORGANISATIONS OF SLOVAK WRITERS (represented by Lajos Grendel) in co-operation with the Literary Information Centre (represented by Milan Resutík) and the Institute of Slovak Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (represented by Jelena Paštéková) for the occasion of the undertaking of the Literary event, Vilenica 2000, Slovenia

Bratislava 2000

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## In place of an introduction

The anthology, **One Hundred Years of Slovak Literature**, which you have before you and which is published in two language versions – Slovenian and English – came about in response to a request from outside. It is the most natural reaction to the decision by the international jury and the leadership of the festival devoting one day of the literary event, Vilenica 2000, in Slovenia to Slovak literature and its presentation in this Central European but also European “point of contact”, mixing and mutually communicating different literatures and cultures. The additional symbolism of the year 2000 gave an impulse to create the project which – within the limits of its scope – for both the curious and professional reader recapitulates the last one hundred years of modern Slovak literature. It is not only an interval in time, but a socially important period during which Slovak literature established for itself those aesthetic functions without which it would not be possible to emerge from the space of its own immanence, in particular a nationally-representative content to the communication of new meanings and expressive forms relevant in international contexts, of course, especially in the modern literary and art scene and later the post-modern.

The professional quality of the construction of the anthology, the selection of original extracts and the writing of accompanying secondary texts was undertaken by the Institute of Slovak Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (ÚSIL SAV) which in its work leaned heavily on its own scientific research and publication activity (for example *Čítame slovenskú literatúru* I, II, III). The group of selectors consisted of seven academics (one of them from the Philosophic Faculty of Comenius University) under the leadership of the Institute director, Jelena Paštéková. Our aim was to introduce the foreign reader mainly to poetry and prose from Slovakia. Limitations in space prevented the appearance of extracts from drama, essays and also work for children by Slovak writers in this period and the work Slovak writers living in other countries or members of linguistic and ethnic minorities in Slovakia.

So that the final version of the anthology would have a professional shape after a wave of expansion and then an unavoidable reduction of the retained material we asked one domestic and one foreign expert to assist in editing. We hope, that through them, a recognised ambition of the anthology to render a relatively complete and objective picture of authors and aesthetic movements in the last century in Slovak literature will avoid the pitfalls of subjectivity and self-promotion which always threatens such activities.

The publication opens with an essay by Peter Zajac from ÚSIL SAV, *Slovak Literature as an Adventure*, which in the wider context of considerations – from the perspectives of development and issues – is limited to something a little like a Gabriel Garcia Márquez *Hundred Years* covered by the selected extracts. In the accompanying sketches of individual authors and their texts those interested in the history of Slovak literature can read in more detail the actual, for

example, generational, publication and poetic manifestations which possessed the tendencies and lines of development which Professor Zajac touches on in his essay.

The English version of the anthology is accompanied by a bibliographical list of book titles which have been translated from Slovak to English although this not absolutely complete. On completion of the list there were a lot absences in both foreign and domestic translation of titles from Slovak to English which covered entire decades and it is necessary to engage in a more systematic effort than has been at our disposal. (Nevertheless it goes without saying that most of the cited translations should be read critically by the random reader against contemporary viewpoints.)

The Slovenian version of the anthology offers different interesting material from the pen of the Ljubljana Slovak scholar, Andrej Rozman, from which the reader can learn the issues in Slovak-Slovenian cultural relationships covering not only the twentieth century. Our mutual relationship is anchored in part of the bilateral agreements between both young republics and the matter of the anthology could be regarded, among other things, as a fulfilment of their letter and spirit.

The Slovenian side as the original progenitor of the whole undertaking had the obligation of rendering the anthology into Slovenian. Owing to Andrej Rozman and his efforts over many years to create a place for Slovak scholarship in the University in Ljubljana we can today offer Slovenian readership our anthology in its entirety and purpose. Using previous translations the Slovenian translation took place mostly simultaneously with a translation into English with eleven translators and two cooperators taking part, including students, under the leadership and responsible editing of Andrej Rozman.

In the English version *One Hundred Years of Slovak Literature* eight translators took part who like their Slovenian colleagues and through their own efforts enabled the successful completion of the whole enterprise. The editor responsible for the English language content was James Sutherland-Smith, a consultant with the British council and poet who has a wealth of experience in translating with his wife, Viera, Slovak literature into English.

In assessing all the participants who took part in the publication of *One Hundred Years of Slovak Literature* the role of the Slovak Ministry of Culture can't be forgotten. They financed the whole project (together with the Association of Slovenian Writers) through the Association of Organisations of Slovak Writers and the Literary Information centre. It is my firm belief that the anthology through the co-operation of many institutions and individuals helps not only provide information to interested foreign readers of Slovak literature in the twentieth century but also develops a higher level of readership of Slovak cultural identity beyond the borders of Slovakia.

Let me give my personal thanks to all those who worked with me on the anthology whose names you will find in the adjoining sections. My thanks also (and in this respect also the publisher's) belong to all the writers (and to the heirs of writers' estates) whose

work is presented in the anthology and who kindly gave their agreement to publication of their work without an honorarium.

Not least I would like to express my personal belief that the presentation of Slovak literature abroad through translation into other languages will be in the coming years and decades a natural need of our domestic environment and that implementation of this notion will reduce further issues of a subjective, but chiefly an objective character with which we strove during the relatively short period from the anthology's inception (November 1999 to August 2000).

Bratislava, 24 July 2000

Stanislava Chrobaková

Chief Editor

## Slovak Literature as an Adventure

The history of Slovak literature has traditionally been written as the history of a single *model* valid for its entire history from the oldest times up to the present day, as a history of *continuity* and *progress*. The reason for this is apparent. In the 19th century the national language and literature had a self-validating function. With respect to the past it meant validation of the antiquity of the nation and with it the legitimization of an historical claim to its existence among modern nations. With respect to the future it validated the vitality of the nation and its legitimization for the future.

This concept has prevailed and persisted as an undisturbed horizon in the history of Slovak literature, unquestionable and unquestioned to these days. So much so that over the last two centuries Slovak literature represented by the literary history has legitimized anything: national existence, the spirit of the times, national-socialist or internationalist ideology.

Yet the history of Slovak literature is dominated by discontinuity. The history of the older literature is more that of stops and halts than continuity. Between the history of older and younger, in a broader sense of the word, Modern literature – which is to say from the early 1800's up to the present – there is a significant breach. This was not only the inauguration of codified Slovak language as a literary language but also the transformation of a territorially perceived *patriotism* and, what is even more important, the fundamental change of the function of a literary text.

Even more typical of modern Slovak literature itself are the moment of discontinuity, contingency, fragmentation, chasms, breaks and incompleteness. The function of literature undergoes a dramatic change. The Romantic period is distinguished by the culturally representative function of literary texts. The period of Realism is dominated by a literary text as an expression of the “spirit of times.” In the period of Modernism at the turn of the century a literary text becomes a battlefield of the fight for the individual identity of subject. In literature between the wars the upper hand is gained by the immanent function of a literary text. Literature after the Second World War is characterized by the struggle between Modernism with its growing emphasis on self-reference, i.e. the text itself in its vanguard radicalism or post-modern intertextuality and Socialist Realism in the employ of class ideology.

However the discontinuous character of Slovak literature has not only been due to outer interventions. Its fragmentariness and truncation has been a typical feature of the literary text from Romanticism to the present. The desire for closure, compactness and monumentalism has been manifest throughout the development of modern Slovak literature as a call for the grand, *epochal epic-novel*, which has always concealed an unfulfilled will for the representation of Slovak community as a compactly structured bourgeois society.



However, modern Slovak literature can be approached in a different way. It can be stripped of its trouble-free platitudes of continuity and the fatal inevitability of looking upon it in an *organic*, naturalist fashion, as an unceasing, gradual growth. It can be grasped *culturally*, as a project, as a *risky enterprise*, as an adventure of existence and existentialism.

With this consideration we are not going to concentrate on an epoch in its outbreak, growth and completion, we are not going to pay so much attention to its classical works persisting as a cultural canon in readers and textbooks (although we are aware of them, and keep them in mind) but rather to those nodal points which determined its fundamental reversals and transformations.

The first, and with respect to modern Slovak literature, the key breakpoint, is its birth in the late 1830' and early 1840's. At that time it was perceived - and to these days it has been presented in this fashion - as a smooth, literally natural process.

The origin of modern political nations in Central Europe though, was a cultural project connected with an enormous, literally existential hazard, and in this respect it was an enormous adventure. It was, indeed, a matter of existence or non-existence. Above all, it was a existential matter of the language. The problem of young intellectuals of that period, followers of Ľudovít Štúr, however, was not different from that of young Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Slovenian or Croatian intellectuals. Much as the transition of the Czech writer Božena Němcová or the poet Karel Hynek Mácha from German to the Czech language was a cultural gesture, making themselves and the world aware that they wanted to be Czech writers which above all meant to *write in the Czech language*, so the transition of the Slovak Romantics from Czech or Hungarian to the *Slovak language* was above all an expression of their will for their own identity.

The birth of a modern political nation in Central Europe took a different course from that of Western or Northern Europe. There it was connected with the constitution of a national state, economics, legal system and culture. In Central Europe this was more or less the exception. A national culture, as a rule, replaced the *zero morpheme*, the absence, uncompleted or unfinished character of a nation state, economics and legal system and, more often than not, it adopted a complete institutional representation of it.

Therefore the decision of Slovak Romantics to start using their own, codified language (which, in the Czech cultural environment was perceived as a language, and implicitly, a cultural separation) was very important. It was incredibly risky.

Slovak intellectuals were only a handful. Ľudovít Štúr was well aware that the "life of peoples can't be hastened and if it is to be successful it can only proceed at a moderate pace" - and Slovak intellectuals had no time to spare as in the spring of 1848 they had to "try everything" at once and immediately.

The previous attempt of the Classicist generation of Bernolák's followers to introduce a codified Slovak language based on the Western Slovakian dialect failed because it was too close to the Czech language. This could be why the Romantic generation opted for a Central

Slovakian dialect as a basis as it had Slovak dialects only as neighbours, which, in this sense, made it the most resistant to Czech, Polish, Ukrainian or Ruthenian.

The result was unexpected. Young authors, especially poets, literally burst with creativity. Thus in the 1840's some of the most beautiful poems of modern Slovak poetry came into being. The poem "My Song" by Janko Kráľ reflects like a drop of water something that can be labeled as *Traumarbeit* of Slovak literature, as an "*emergence from dream*" about Slovak literature and at the same time as *exposition* of the apprehension of its possible short-lived nature.

The lines "she grazed peacocks under an apple-tree, she fell sound asleep/ sound, sound, very sound like a that stone./ Don't you sleep, don't you sleep little dove, you will mourn./ a dream is short, life long, you will deceive yourself!" are the quintessence of this dream. They have their paradisaical essence in the image of a "girl grazing peacocks", they contain an allegorical motif of "sound sleep" which can change into death, the contrast of a "short dream" and "long life" which signifies the extreme imbalance between desire and reality and expresses the sharp contrast of a short-lived fantastic desire and long-term poverty of a vigilant reality. The final accord of "deceit", lie and disappointment in the fact that the entire dream can remain just an illusion and appearance has its echo later in the generally melancholic mode of modern Slovak poetry.

Apprehensions about the risky nature of the entire venture, apprehensions that the existence of Slovak literature could very quickly turn into its non-existence, balancing on the edge of life and death of the whole literature constitute evidence that the Romantic generation was well aware of the risk it took and the absolute exclusiveness of the adventure they embarked on.

A short upheaval in the 1840's was terminated by the cruel defeat of 1849. It was accompanied by a sense of failure and hopelessness. After Ľudovít Štúr's death in 1856 it was most comprehensively expressed by the novelist, Jan Kalinčiak, and poet, Jan Botto. The first speaks about "white snow covering Štúr's grave", the latter about a "cordina (curtain) which came down and for a hundred years nobody will pull it up."

Both expressions have common ground in the despair that the attempt of Slovaks for a independent national existence had failed and the cultural project of the entire Romantic generation would fall into oblivion and vanish from cultural memory.

It didn't happen. We know that today "Cordina" was lifted as early as ten years later. In the 1860's Slovak literature ensured its existence, and confirmed it by Parnassianism and Realism from the late 1870's to the end of the century. Nevertheless, the original sense of exclusiveness, jeopardy and adventure remains the basis of the modern gesture of Slovak literature which says that existence must be wrenched from fate, that it originates from risk and desire - to fail among others.

The second nodal point of the adventure of Slovak literature was the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Up until then Slovak literature had played the cultural and representative role which was

expected of it and reliably guarded by the founding fathers of the nation. However, the young generation at the turn of the centuries rebelled against their fathers because it resisted the role they prescribed for literature. And again: the whole generation was aware of the risk it undertook when it based its writing on *individual subject*, its over-sensitiveness and rawness, ambivalence, duality, ambiguity and breakage as opposed to *monolithic unity* of Slovak literature favored by the fathers in the era of strenuous Hungarisation. All this undermined the apparent unity. However, this monolithic unity has never existed even though the generation of fathers demanded it despite one of the key representatives of the Romantic generation saying that it was a "*diametrical unity*" dominated by difference.

The younger generation set out on a risky path of argument with the older generation and entered a struggle for the original, aesthetic function of Slovak literature and its modern face. Consequently, it plunged into the stream of European Modernism with all the features accompanying modernization, industrialization, technology, differentiation and pluralism of the world, the loss of wholeness, the crisis of identities, cultural hybridization, the contest of traditional nationalism and modern cosmopolitanism, openness and xenophobia, secularization and anti-Semitism.

As evidenced by a key book *Slovensko a kultúra* by the first modern Slovak sociologist, Ján Lajčiak, the young generation was well aware of how dangerous the path they followed was. It moved - often educated in Europe - on a double periphery, on the edge of European modernization processes as well as out of the center of national culture. Let's cite two examples. Ján Lajčiak, who studied in Erlagen, Leipzig and Paris, spent all of his life in a village of Vyšná Boca. The female writer Božena Slančíková-Timrava spent almost all of her life in the small Novohrad villages of Polichno and Ábelova. But the Symbolic poet Ivan Krasko, too, wrote his most important collections of poems in the seclusion of Czech Klobouky, the poet and writer Janko Jesenský until the First World War lived in the small town of Bánovce nad Bebravou.

This *seclusion*, this distance from the center, had, however, no impact on the desire of a Slovak writer not to write about the nation as the supreme, unquestionable, value, but about himself or herself with all the contradictions and the risk of confrontation and its escalation to the point of break-up. The Modern generation was aware of this, however, entering the struggle with the traditional national ideology despite being aware of the risks. The fundamental gesture of Slovak literary Modernity consists in irony and delusion. It is clearly evidenced by the title of Timrava's novella "All for the Nation" which falsifies (denies) the rhetoric of the empty, verbal heroic gesture. Ironic denial of the image of heroic death connects Timrava, quite unexpectedly, with the Austrian Modern writers Salten or Schnitzler who, in a society isolating from public discourse the horror of death, convict the image of lying about its esthetic values. That *all*, the main character of Timrava's novella, "All for the Nation", is willing to sacrifice to the nation, including the resolve to die, is subjected to a hard trial that the hero fails. The verbal gestu-

re turns out to be not the carrier of true heroism, concealing pride and love to the nation, but only a concealment of shame and private panic.

The Modern gesture reaches even such a Realistic writer as Martin Kukučín. Kukučín, who is traditionally presented by literary history as the author of cheerful, although at times grotesque rural writings, wrote as early as 1894 his urban, "Prague Notes from a Dead House", recording in a dry, terse tone the modern, obverse and dark sides of life that unfold in the dim light of metropolitan back porches.

Quite surprisingly, the modern gesture of a deluded subject can also be applied to the work of a Slovak literary classicist, Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav, tied to Parnassianism and Realism. Hviezdoslav is traditionally considered the direct polar opposite to Modernism. However, in his "Laments" (1903–06) the fundamental ideological gesture consisting in the realization of destruction and vanity of a human subject is possibly even harsher and stronger than the gesture of doubt and despair in the only two collections of poems "Nox et Solitudo" (1909) and "Lines" (1912) by the most prominent Slovak Symbolic poet, Ivan Krasko. The adventure of Modernism, which virtually sneaked itself into Slovak literature, is much wider than traditionally realized. It has an impact on the entire body of Slovak literature at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries quite unexpectedly even at points where literary historians have failed to seek it to the present time.

The third nodal point of the adventure of Slovak literature is the period between the wars. From the Romantic period modern Slovak literature had been engaged in a struggle for its plural face. In the periods of Romanticism, Realism and even Modernism it had to wrench it from the idea of a national monolithic unity. This idea, although fictitious from the very beginning, was dominant as a demand throughout the 19th century and as a piece of instruction it functioned in the institutionalized form of *national operation*, literary life, journalism, museum keeping, textbooks, literary history and cultural activities up to the 1920's.

The 1920's and 1930's are the first period of *natural plurality* of Slovak literature in its modern history. If it can be said that that Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism are dominated by succession Modernism is the first period to disrupt this construction. The 1920's and 1930's are characterized by the simultaneity of literary processes. *Side by side*, often *opposite each other*, but also *next to each other* in a clinch there exist and co-exist individual authors, groups, generations and streams.

Slovak literature of that period can easily be labeled as *cheerful literature*. It brims with innovation, multiformity, variety, layered character. With the radicalism of avant-garde Symbolism, Vitalism (which can be considered a Slovak branch of Expressionism), Poetism, Neo-symbolism and Surrealism which even reached the members of traditional Catholic Modernism. Despite the fact that individual streams and tendencies tend to exclude one another, that they originate in a quick succession, in fact they exist simultaneo-

usly, side by side, and that even in a book by the same author with quick, often watershed transitions from one stage into another. The sign of that period is an internal rupture as signaled by the *rhombus*, that “broken shape” of the collection of poems by Ladislav Novomeský with its rhomboid, crystalline structure and “three unequally long and mutually perpendicular axes”, associating a broken toy.

The inter-war period in Slovak literature represents a somehow accelerated, time in flight, projected into a single space. Very often the past, present and future are placed side by side and blended into one another. In fact, within a framework of a single literary situation a perpetual innovation of generations, groups and tendencies occurs.

In the 1920's and 1930's novelists of the oldest Realistic and Naturalistic generation, Neo-Realists, related to Expressionism and trying to bring Social-realistic tendencies into Slovak literature, adherents of *Naturismus* or Magic Realists and poets of storytelling corresponding with the poetic Avant-garde worked side by side.

A Slovak poet, novelist and playwright moves from the countryside to the town. At first they perceive the town as something heterogeneous, as a strange and incomprehensible world of decay, begetter of sin, a jungle of vice from which only the road to destruction or a return to an original, although never-existing village idyll is offered. The prospective world of a romantic dream is herein transformed into a retrospective dream of Arcadian nostalgia.

The 1930's and 1940', however, represent the final prose-writing and poetic settlement into the city. The first generation of Slovak intellectuals and writers in the 1920's still stormed Bratislava as a new, multilingual capital city and from fear of the foreign Hungarian, German and Jewish element Slovakised it. However, by doing so, it became impoverished, stripped of multicultural multi-formity and colour. The generation of the 1930's becomes urbanized and open. It studies in Prague and Paris. It lives in the city and thereby appropriates it. And although the struggle for the urbanization of Slovak literature was to last another fifty years and, even after its conclusion, the urban and rural parts of Slovak literature and culture would be pitted against each other, the rural and natural would conclusively become cultural.

The chief witness of this transformation is the prose-writer František Švantner. His *Naturismus* novella *The Bride of the Mountains* (*Nevesta Hôľ*), written during the Second World War, is a cruel apotheosis of the natural world, its zoomorphism, erotic pantheism and magic. The hallucinatory vision of the main character takes it to a radical position of extreme expression position. However, the text is concluded in the gamekeeper Libor's declaration, “I decided to leave because I felt with all my body that there is nothing to look for among the rock giants that came to sit back on the horizon and that in the blue distances broad views with long roads opened to me.

As Švantner's unfinished novel *Never-ending Life* (*Život bez konca*) later showed “blue distances” and “and broad views with

long roads" lead Pulinka, the main character of the novel, to the city and its maze. This time, however, there is no road leading back to a rural idyll or natural, innocent cruelty. Civilization remains the only place of residence in spite of being disturbing, rationally intangible, tragic and destructive.

The fourth nodal point in which the existential form of Slovak literature of the second half of the 20th century was decided is tied to the year 1948. During the Second World War freedom of creation began to be curbed. It concerned authors who professed democracy, I. Republic Czechoslovakia, Avant-garde, as well as Socialist Realism and authors racially discriminated against. The communist intellectual, later himself a victim of communist reprisals, called this period a *perforated totalitarianism*.

However after 1948, in keeping with the ideological doctrine of Socialist realism, which was reinforced in various forms, harder or softer for forty years, modern Slovak literature was pursued in an alternately harsh or more lenient manner. The principal slogan became that of replacing modernity with Socialist Realism.

Thus for official cultural policy modernist art became the declared enemy of communist ideology. For full forty years, which is more than two literary generations, it was ostracized, pushed to the margin, expelled from public communication and forbidden. It was hardly changed by the fact that the entire process unfolded in waves alternately harsher or - as in the 1960's and late 1980's - more liberal.

The period between 1948-1989 can easily be called an existential struggle for the modern face of Slovak literature. Its harshness consisted in the fact that individual authors persisting in a Modernist line of literature faced the risk of not being published for a part or all of their lives and that they would not live to see their work publicly accepted. Only a handful weathered this pressure.

Talking about adventure in this sense would mean belittling the entire problem. It was literally a struggle of life and death a struggle with meagre prospects. In a society meant to last *forever* all temporal prospects seemed negligible. Existence on or beyond the periphery of the society required great courage, self-denial, confidence in one's own way of writing, endless patience and endurance.

Underlying was a problem each author had to solve for himself: to be publicly recognized and accepted at the cost of unacceptable compromises or not to make it to the public and fall into oblivion.

Telling is the fate of Dominik Tatarka. This prose-writer and essayist has been considered one of the most gifted authors since as early as the beginning of the 1940's when he made his debut with the generation of the *story-telling poets*. However, he also found his place in the literature in the late 1940's and early 1950's when he identified with communism. However, he won public acclaim in the 1960's when he became a paragon of freedom and guru of the young intellectual generation. He refused the *normalized* communist regime and its cultural *consolidation* which meant a public discrimination against the best minds of Slovak culture and he was barred from publishing until his death in May 1989. For twenty years, the time of

one literary and reader generation, his name fell out of published glosses, criticism, articles, essays, studies, textbooks and official literary history. The matter of oblivion, deletion and disappearance from the cultural memory of literature traumatized him for the rest of his life. He responded to it so that in his *writings*, diary entries, letters, annotations and fragmentary narration he addressed his letters to eternity and, as it turned out, the durability of his writing was greater than the *eternity* of communist regime.

Some authors, like Janko Silan, lived their humble authorial life for all forty years. Janko Silan himself emerged only for a short while in the late 1960's only to take breath and disappear beneath the surface of the literary public.

A wholly different was the fate of the poet Ján Smrek. He published his vitalistic lyric poetry all his life, adored by the young for his love poetry. As late as 1993, after his death, a collection of his political poetry from the late 1940's and early 1950's "Against the Night" was published. In this *letter in a bottle* he relays to the future generations his human experience with a totalitarian regime in a poetic language which was not as smooth as that of his love poetry but rough, rugged and halting like the subject it expressed.

The young generation of dissenters did not even tried to get published. Its emergence at the beginning of the 1980's is connected with the rise of the Kontakt magazine. Throughout the 1980's it underwent an incessant transformation ending up as "Fragment K" at the end of the decade, yet providing a shelter for authors around Oleg Pastier and Martin M. Šimečka.

More numerous, however, were the authors living in the *gray area* between existence and non-existence who failed to identify with the official cultural doctrine.

In some cases literally so. It is testified by the fate of the poetic *post-avant-garde*. The group of Concretist Poets rose in the late 1950's. Its group activities culminated in the 1960's. The beginning of the 1980's led, from both external and internal reasons, to its end. Ján Ondruš, probably the most gifted member of the group, was afflicted with Holderlin's fate. Ján Stacho, after a serious car crash, lived and died outside the literary world. Jozef Mihalkovič's later work has remained in the shadow of his achievement in the 1960's. Lubomír Feldek set out in the 1970's and 1980's on a solitary, more often than not break-neck path on the knife-edge.

The poetic group of *Solitary Runners* was decimated at the beginning of the 1980's. Ivan Laučík did not officially publish until 1988. Peter Repka's book of generation literary reports *Get up and Go* which had already been in print was banned and never came out. He moved to Germany and had not published in Slovakia until November 1989. Ivan Štrpka had not published any poetry for a decade; in the 1970's and 80's he was better known as an author of lyrics for the rock musician Dežo Ursíny.

The same applies to prose writers making their debuts in the 1960's. After 1970 Ivan Kadlečík and Pavel Hrúz published only in samizdat. Authors of *cheerful postmodernism*, Pavel Vilikovský and Rudolf Sloboda, or the author of phenomenological, narrative meta-

phorical analogies Ján Johanides published rarely, with smaller or bigger breaks and problems. Interruption, or to put it more accurately a *gustiness* became an abnormal normality of their literary existence in the 1970's and 1980's, which also applies to younger writers, Alta Vášová, Dušan Mitana and Dušan Dušek, whose publication in the early 1970's had been interrupted before it actually got under way.

A renewed rise of this generation double-wave in the late 1980's then unfolded in the sign of *ironic post-modernism*, encompassing the experience of the normalized two decades.

*The stigma* of Socialist realism afflicted and disheveled all authors. Not only those who voluntarily shaped it, adapted or succumbed to it but also those who resisted it. It left its mark on them. However, literary value can only be ascribed to those who resisted, risked the lifelong contention for their face which had become an adventure of their never-ending struggle for their own authorial integrity and identity. Those who endured managed to survive although battered and very often irreversibly afflicted and damaged by the struggle. Socialist Realism left nothing but a pan full of literary rubbish.

1989 brought the authors' struggle for public literary existence to an end. The *cool post-modernism* of the young generation of the 1990's links with the modernist arch of development of the twentieth century Slovak literature and it is likely to close it. That, however, does not end the internal process of struggle for the existence of Slovak literature. At present it does not have the form of the struggle for *Slovakness* but that of a contemplation of the existence of *literature*.

Writers of the last decade either strove for a hopeless revival of a culturally-representative role of the writer as a bearer of guarantees of national movement, which could hardly succeed in a structured political society at the end of the twentieth century or deliberately *excluded* themselves from the center of society in order to gain authorial *exclusiveness*. Here, in the narrow literary niches they play their intertextual games running the risk of passing unnoticed or in the period of the *end of art* they do their *trauerarbeit* of mourning as the literary scholar Fedor Matejov labeled his reading of Ján Ondruš's poem "Sobota" in which the poet "through one pore of gray inside of bread" gazes at the "bottom of his bare palm."

At the end of the arch of development of modern Slovak literature of the last two decades is the transformation of a romantic dream, *traumarbeit* of Slovak literature, connected with the exposed apprehension of its possible short durability, to *trauerarbeit*, the work of mourning, related to the finest distinguishing capability of poets and their authorized readers. At the end the poet gazes at the *bottom of a bare palm*, where there is nothing, "stupefied in melancholy." Only anxiety persists.

(Translated by Pavol Lukáč)







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# IVAN KRASKO

12 July 1876 Lukovištia – 3 March 1958 Bratislava

His real name was Ján Botto. Poet, founder of the modern Slovak lyric, the most significant poet of Slovak symbolism. He was the author of two collections of poetry which have strongly influenced Slovak poetry for almost the whole century.

His first book *Nox et Solitudo* (1909) introduced poems of enormous introspection with a dominating aestheticism often of a decadent tone. Until then this was almost unknown in such proportion; feelings of the futility of existence, loss, self-laceration for love ruined, caused by hesitation and set in gloomy, raining, mostly nocturnal and autumnal landscapes. Ghostly natural objects take on the validity of symbols of sadness, pain and doubts about existence. A limited but virtuoso use of vocabulary with an emphasis on the sound values is also a sign of the limitations of anxiety over the living conditions of the poet and his nation. In his second collection, *Lines* (*Verše*, 1912), personal problems have receded a little (the poet had discovered personal erotic happiness) to philosophic and reflective poems (an argument between scepticism and understanding human moral obligation) and poems which draw on the unformed national and social situation.

Krasko was also the author of some stories, (*Ours, Naši; Letter to the Dead, List mŕtvemu; A Wedding, Svadba; Alms, Almužna*) where he develops themes similar to his poetry reflecting the spiritual world of uncertain humanity.

VALÉR MIKULA

## AT THE CEMETERY

Mist crawls in the valley,  
crawls with a grey veil,  
it spreads like the melancholy  
of the spirit of peace.

Behind the mist someone calls me  
Calls me with a name from long ago – –  
Are perhaps sounds kept back  
within a soul's echo...?

From the sorrowing old pines  
a voice afflicted drones –  
Despairing wailings of the spirit,  
Have you awakened yet again ...?

No! From below someone calls to me,  
A pitiful moan that will not stop,  
I would rake it from the black earth,  
rake it, rake it up...

from *Nox et solitudo* (1909)

**BALLAD**

Although it has rained since morning today  
 someone sighing went up the valley.  
 (I have certain knowledge, for it was me.)  
 He often cast a look back as he went on unsurely,  
 his eyes sorrowing, misty and weary.

And he wished for a lie of unconcern, he wished it  
 - this knight of the sorrowing shape - for himself alone,  
 yet all at once he lifted his fists in anger  
 and shook them at the grey heavens, at the grey heavens.

Oh, he urged fire, oh, fire and sulphur  
 on the head of someone - wretched and orphaned --  
 but then suddenly left his curses half-spoken,  
 and went on in silence through meadows now sodden  
 just occasionally sneering at what hurt him most often.

from *Nox et solitudo* (1909)

**POPLARS**

Oh, poplars, these tall poplars!  
 Around them a wide meadow -  
 They point up to the sky, big, black,  
 - exactly like someone's sorrow --  
 poplars.

Oh, poplars, these poplars without leaf!

Ghosts like someone of evil will  
 they stand proudly shabby  
 in the frost, naked in the wind, chill  
 poplars.

Oh, poplars, these poplars without life!  
 They stand in a narrow circle mutely  
 - phantoms from Nirvana --  
 they gaze down on what is empty,  
 poplars.

Oh, these proud, tall poplars!  
 My spirit dwindles like their vision ...

Above...? Below...? To Nirvana...?  
 - Like a shabby raven  
 into night...

from *Nox et solitudo* (1909)

## ASCETICS

Without tenderness the moons of cold evenings emerge.  
 With an icy rigour in the morning fog the stars submerge.

The memories of wintry waves of minutes vanish.  
 In desirable flames our hearts cannot perish.

We have been much deceived by women both wise and  
stupid.  
 It is useless to punish snakes with the ascetic's pride.

Until we added a stone asceticism to our power,  
 We fasted, vigilant through nights of desire.

Until a stone asceticism cooled our hot blood  
 Day by day our souls died sorrowing, corroded.

Today we are at peace, no sorrow for us in solitude.  
 The past is dead, the future empty and mute.

Around us the steppe spreads blank to the back of  
beyond...  
 We stand on pillars, our bodies lashed by the sauntering  
wind.

from *Lines* (1912)

## SADNESS

Today I'm quiet and feeble, somehow without hope.  
 So all at once I recall my home far away,  
 so suddenly I recall the sadness of downcast eyes.  
 Perhaps through this I am quiet and somehow without  
hope.

And the sun soothingly sings its eternally young song  
 in the garden, in the fields, in the mountains.  
 It sings it on the roads, where  
 a young poplar dry, fearful and bare

claims that nothing painful can hurt any more,  
it sings in meadows, a stream racing in joy through  
willows,

buoyantly, buoyantly fresh,  
like the one in the black mountains of home  
where my dead young life lies in white on the turf.

from *Lines* (1912)

## SONNET

Only petrified trees where a spider spins its thread  
and a fallow field still scarred from whips of fire  
where sown seed cannot sprout any more  
where a raven close to death lays its old head

and silence lingers, in a broken fort  
which will not echo with cheerful banter,  
only in crumbling holes a rare hiss of anger  
where sad snakes breed on a moonless night.

And should your young feet wander here?  
And your cheerful laugh like children's laughter,  
Hidden somewhere in a vineyard's abundance,

ring out there as if from a garden of flowers?  
Oh, your laugh will never absolve a cursed silence,  
or young feet a fallow field beaten with sulphur...

from *Lines* (1912)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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## MILO URBAN

24 August 1904 Rabčice - 10 March 1982 Bratislava

Milo Urban was a spontaneous, narrative type of a writer. He attracted much attention with his novel **The Living Whip** (Živý bič, 1927). In it he explored the traditional theme of Slovak rural life but he connected it with a deep psychological content, expressionist and lyrical elements. In his first published book **Jašek Kutliak from under Bučinka, A Sketch from Mountain Life in Orava** (Jašek Kutliak spod Bučinky, Črta zo života oravských horalov, 1922) the plot is not dominant, the focus lies on the inner conflicts of the characters whose behaviour is influenced by "wild" nature. These "wild" people clash with the limits of rural society and this clash is one of the lasting motives of Urban's short novels: **Beyond the Upper Mill** (Za vyšným mlynom, 1926), **Calls without Echo** (Výkriky bez ozveny, 1928), of his theatre-plays: **Beta, Where Are You?** (Beta, kde si?, staged in 1991), and novels. This feature is most visible in the monumental figures of **The Living Whip**. The story takes place in a poor village in the mountains, it is highly dramatic, even tragic, with the village community playing the role of a classical Chorus. Milo Urban, inspired by this novel's success, wrote a second and then a third sequel to it, **Mists at Dawn** (Hmly na úsvite, 1930) and **In a Net** (V osídlach, 1940), where he follows the fate of the protagonist Adam Hlavaj. This trilogy continues with two more volumes: **Lights Out** (Zhasnuté svetlá, 1957) and **Who Sows the Wind** (Kto seje vietor, 1964). In them, Milo Urban describes historic events until the beginning of II. World War.

However, Milo Urban's narrative talent glows, perhaps more than in his later novels, in his memoirs: **Green Blood** (Zelená krv, 1970), **Wandering around Halinda** (Kade-tade po Halinde, 1992), **On the Bank of a Bloody River** (Na brehu krvavej rieky, 1994), **Freedom is Not Funny** (Sloboda nie je špás, 1995).

His other works include: a novel **Iron Stroke Iron** (Železom po železe, 1996).

VALÉR MIKULA

### THE TALE OF LABUDA

(extract)

I

Wherever they went, whether to church or to the fair in Zámostie, they stopped at the curve of the road just below the house of Štefan Labuda, they raised their voices and, with that special jeering note which lit up their faces, shouted,

"Štefan, your house is falling down!"

They had been calling like this regularly and for a long time, yet the house stood. That is why Štefan Labuda, his face turned to the east, retorted,

"Nonsense! It's not!"

And from the day that Výkrut swore by God that the cottage would be down by morning, and the cottage had weathered out his prophecy, Štefan Labuda would stand tall and proud with his legs apart, with a wide grin, and continue,

"See, it hasn't fallen then, it won't fall now either."

And although nobody believed him much, Štefan Labuda was certain. And he paced his courtyard ablaze with this certainty, leisurely paddling the air with his hands, stopping to gather boards, sticks, humming some long-forgotten song, and mending his house like fury. Wherever there appeared a crack, a tiny hole, Štefan Labuda jumped at it wildly with a maul and nails. He measured, mauled, and when the crack or hole was gone, he climbed the nearby hill, shaded his eyes with his palm, feeling extremely satisfied with himself.

The house looked patchy, because the white boards shone ostentatiously against a background of black wood, but Labuda did not care. Inside it was cosy and warm. The room smelt of fur and sour milk, and that smell helped Štefan to recall the times when Father was still alive. Yes, Father himself did his fair share of work on that house, yes, the cottage was a bit too small, but still large enough for Labuda, because he had no wife and his two children were elsewhere, making their living as servants. Therefore Labuda did not bother to build a new one, even though his share of common wood lay in stock, windswept, rainswept, and even though everybody urged him to start building.

“Why, it was Grandfather who built it,” he explained to his neighbours, grinning. “If it was good enough for him and for Father, why shouldn’t it be good enough for me?”

And he never ever even thought about constructing a new house.

He only mended the cottage, supported it with sticks and laced it with buckles, then climbed the hill, looked down, shading his sight with his palm, rejoicing: well, the buckle over there is firm, that stick is straight and that board below the window looks exactly like a new frame. He sat on the ground and it occurred to him that he might just as well make a new door and a new threshold. The old door he could not close and the threshold was worn – and Štefan Labuda fed his hens all day long... to no end. All village dogs gathered there, ate what they could out of the mangers, and Štefan Labuda threatened his neighbour Hruška that one day he would surely kill his dog Zahraj, but in vain. Zahraj always somehow managed to come when Labuda was away and to lick the mangers until they were so clean, they shone. The rivals used to meet in the field, Labuda would be going home, the dog, too; the former had clean mangers, the latter a good round belly. But Labuda did not like the mischievous animal. One day he hid and waited for Hruška’s mongrel and when it came, he broke one of its legs. The dog ran home, hobbling on three legs, but in no time Hruška came and there was an argument. Hruška swore that he would never cross Labuda’s threshold as long as he lived, and Labuda, just to make use of this opportunity, took it into his head that he would make himself a new door and, what’s more, paint it blue, for everyone to see that it was new. Thus he went to the town, he bought paint and new hinges, he had boards made from a log and he would have started to nail them together, when, suddenly... he saw that the roof on his cottage was leaking.

But of course! First things first, the roof is more important. Štefan Labuda knew it very well, thus he put the new door away, took



a piece of wood from the shed, found a special knife and started to shave the wood – to carve shingles.

The sun shone, inviting people all around to sing. Their singing was clear and fresh under the beating rays, crystal-clear like a new window-pane. It poured as if from all directions and when from time to time it faded, silence came and one could almost hear the oats ripening. Shavings piled on the ground, they smelled of resin and shone like melting silver. Labuda, sitting with his shirt open, felt merry and light-hearted.

There was just one thing that kept bothering him: that damned corner on which just now the sunshine was falling.

All of a sudden it started to sink, literally disappear in the ground.

When Štefan Labuda saw that, he just shook his head, scratched his armpits and since then he never thought good of the irritating thing. Each day he went there with a piece of red earth, each day he marked the corner with a line, as if to see how deep the corner could sink, but that cunning corner always sank deeper, the lines disappeared one by one below the surface and Štefan Labuda always had to draw a new one. When it had occurred to him that in this way he might very well lose the whole corner, he got angry. He took a stake, supported the corner, and so it went on, he kept supporting it, perhaps just out of old habit. Each year he nailed the stakes to the log-wall tirelessly, sweating like mad, swearing like a heathen, but the corner... the corner apparently took no notice.

One day, as he went to see what was new again, he found out that the connecting board had broken. Although the roof stayed where it belonged, between it and the log-wall a new hole gaped, a nasty black hole. Labuda took a ladder, gathered a few handfuls of moss and filled the hole carefully. However, scarcely a week had passed and there was it again, the moss filling had crumbled and fallen out and Labuda, dead-tired and desperate, just wiped his forehead.

He did not even sit on the hill that day. He just sat down directly on the spot, unable to understand how on earth it was possible that a hole was growing. Surely there was something uncanny, fatal in the whole thing, the hole was empty, he could see nothing in it, but still it grew, grinning shamelessly at Labuda and at the poor stakes, dried by the reckless sun, bending under an invisible burden. Labuda mused long, he thought until he got a headache, but he made nothing out of it, because everything in his mind clashed together into one formless, massive riddle. Thus he only stood up, waved his hand and muttered philosophically,

“If the corner doesn’t grow, then the hole must.”

And there was such an unbeatable logic in that declaration, that suddenly everything made sense to Labuda. He just sighed, shedding the weight off his chest. Utterly convinced that it is nothing but God’s own will, he added,

“Against God – man can’t do a thing.”

And that was the last thought he gave to that wicked corner.

from *The Tale of Labuda, Calls without Echo* (1928)

(translated by Marína Gálisová)

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# JÁN SMREK

16 December 1898 Zemianske Lieskové - 8 December 1982

Bratislava

His real name was Ján Čietek. Poet, translator, editor and publisher, children's writer. He was the most significant representative of vitalism and sensualism in Slovak poetry. Although he had already published a collection in 1922, he made his mark with his second collection **The Galloping Days** (Cválajúce dni, 1925) where he adhered to the philosophy of vitalism (from the Bergson expression of élan vital) and celebrated love, youth and beauty. These themes and the fundamental optimistic and joyful tone of the collection determined the tenor of his poetry for a long time and Ján Smrek became identified in readers' minds with these qualities; a hedonistic attitude to life, concrete experience, spontaneous feeling, a sense of freedom with motifs of distance, harbour taverns, the sea, voyages. But the most important and central theme was woman, her beauty and her erotic qualities. A constant in Smrek's poetry is its musicality and melody.

To these initial dominating qualities of experience and sensuality was added an element of reflection dealing with the classical theme of love as an enduring element in a person's life, **Poet and Woman** (Básnik a žena, 1934). Gradually there was a calming in emotions expressed and a widening of the thematic register to include domestic and national themes, **Grain** (Zrno, 1953), a humanist message, protests against war and nature, **The Banquet** (Hostina, 1944) and **The Well** (Studňa, 1945).

After the social changes in 1948 Ján Smrek was pushed to the side of cultural life by the Communist regime. As a poet who built on human values and individualism he could not identify with the period's ideology and retreated into "internal exile." His poems from the period 1948 to 1956 were first published only in 1993 and are civic lyrics against totalitarianism. They are the expression of the trauma of a sensitive intellectual due to the loss of freedom and a leaning towards nature, themes which dominate the later Smrek.

Other works: Poetry - **Sentenced to Eternal Thirst** (Odsúdení k večitej žízni, 1922), **The Knots of God** (Božské uzly, 1929), **Only Eyes** (Iba oči, 1933), **Picture of the World** (Obraz sveta, 1958), **Strings** (Struny, 1962), **Don't Disturb My Circles** (Nerušte moje kruhy, 1965).

A book of reminiscences - **Poetry My Love** (Poézia moja láska, 1968).

The author's selection - **My Most Loved** (Moje najmilšie, 1972), **A Poem is a Small Thing** (Maličká je báseň daktorá, 1981).

Selections from his estate - **Night, Love and Poetry** (Noc, láska a poézia, 1987).

A selection of poems against the regime which could not be published before 1989 - **Against the Night / Poems of Internal Exile** (Proti noci / Básne vnútorného exilu, 1993).

Verse for children - **A Painted Alphabet** (Maľovaná abeceda, 1954), **The Blot** (Machule, 1956).

DANA KRŠÁKOVÁ

## A MAIDEN IN BLOOM

Nothing in the world has more charm  
than a maiden in full bloom!

That living springtime which can suffuse  
 like an electric wave,  
 a slenderness like a coconut tree  
 and a view filled with the sun,  
 two white volcanoes  
 in which the lava seethes,  
 inciting dangerous play,  
 and savage teeth  
 a wild cat's weapons — —  
 all these mean  
 that he is drawn  
 once with bravado, once on his knees,  
 to feel she belongs to him  
 to caress her, protect,  
 wrap in silk,  
 tell a charming tale,  
 in spring to take to the forest,  
 in summer to a mountain lake,  
 a proud flower of the camellia  
 fixed upon his chest — —  
 better to burn in the heart's flame,  
 before that same  
 fades away.

from **The Galloping Days** (1925)

### **IN A HARBOUR TAVERN**

Perhaps tomorrow,  
 perhaps today  
 we'll board a ship  
 which will bear us away!  
 If there's a chance  
 to feel the sea wind's flow  
 then we'll bid you farewell,  
 brother, sister, and go!

If only you knew  
 the heart as a raging volcano  
 you wouldn't delay us!  
 Oh life's always in haste  
 it lays time itself to waste!

The city is silent.  
 The city is sleeping

There's little love here –  
So we leave, unweeping!

Yet we can't be afraid  
that somewhere we really must  
hang round taverns like small hounds  
that perhaps they'll kick us out.  
drunken sailors out of bounds!  
People have got teeth – will bare them to bite  
people have got fists – will put them up to fight!  
Submission isn't in our nature  
and our ideals aren't those of monks!

Look us closely in the face  
and don't wonder that there's no sorrow.  
The wine before us in our glass  
thrills us to the very marrow.  
With sorrow in the soul who could dare  
a great and outrageous plan.  
Then if a smile is free of care  
then mere person becomes a man!

In our villages each maiden  
has soft cheeks which quickly redden  
though a woman's love grows less and less  
except if she's a lioness!  
It's joy we wish to seize and plunder  
with all we have of blood and thunder.  
our hearts beat and flutter so  
like pennants when wet weathers blow.

All the people in our city  
lumber round with feet of lead,  
likewise their feelings, more's the pity,  
No-one cracks a whip above his head!  
So let's weigh anchor!

Off we go!  
have the winds begun to blow?  
They blow!

from **The Galloping Days** (1925)

## **DISPUTE**

The heart will endure it. Only the brow, the brow not.  
The brow changes to furrows, changes to tracks.

In the heart is a spring. In the brow the trouble it's got.  
And a twig withers in the pigeon's beak.

For here is no peace, only eternal dispute.  
Feeling and mind are stags during rut  
Who've challenged each other in a mountain thicket.  
He will lose, the one who's clever, who loves not.

from **Banquet** (1944)

## YOU MUST

Reed bed, you must tremble with horror,  
you, who swayed beneath the wind  
your dust is spurned by your native ground  
your destruction unwept by the alder

when you die not a single stream will moan  
for you not a single willow grow  
so feebly did you stifle all the strength within  
when that mad devil hacked down your mountain.

(14. 6. 1950)

from **Against the Night** (1993)

## YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE

You wouldn't believe how thrushes know  
how to fall silent in autumn.  
Instead in the air only leaves go,  
Not a bird anywhere on earth.

Why do I know that things turn?  
Because through the window I gaze  
With nature I live, into it hewn  
and separate from mankind

With nature I live. What salvation,  
granted under sword and law.  
The barefoot goddess, Beauty,  
laughs at the human score.

She just slaps with a hand: harvest done,  
rest ordained, gold blazes.

Blessed are all regions  
and pity to the evil man.

(25. 10. 1950)

from **Against the Night** (1993)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# IVAN HORVÁTH

26 July 1904 Senica – 5 September 1960 Bratislava

Horváth was an important representative of Slovak prose written between the two world wars. He wrote his first pieces in 1919 and published them in various student magazines. In 1923 his first book – **Mosaic of Life and Dreams** (*Mozaika života a snov*) appeared. Short novels written by Ivan Horváth were characteristic for their creative transformation of European literary impulses; they were based on the wide context of modern art. These texts show the influence of impressionism, dadaism, expressionism, poeticism and lyrical prose. However, all of these miscellaneous elements mix and overlap, therefore it is impossible to ascribe only one type of poetics to Horváth's writings

The elevated emotion, sensitivity, sharp imagination, a stream of associations and a dreamlike atmosphere inform the inner world of Horváth's texts. The overall expression is simple, dense and well-marked. Horváth strove to capture the unique aspects of life, his expressionism, rooted in the new romanticism, always searched for a connection between social, bodily existence and the natural and cosmic being. Horváth described an inner human world (for example love) but at the same time he managed to express the emotional and philosophical inclinations of his generation as a whole (mainly he voiced its longing to explore the world). His prose is marked by strong poeticism.

The cycle of five short novels *The Jurga Brothers* (*Bratia Jurgovci*) – together with the short novel *Laco and Bratislava* (*Laco a Bratislava*) – can be found in one book: **Man on the Street** (*Človek na ulici*, 1928). With his undeniable mastery, Horváth captures the literary types of the so-called useless people in these texts, their feelings of loneliness, isolation and loss. The four Jurga brothers – Ján, Tomáš, Arne and Peter – are outlandish personalities, ridden with strange unrest and longing to live their lives to the fullest. This extract which is taken from the part *Tomáš Jurga, the Wanderer* (*Tulák Tomáš Jurga*) features the vision of impressionism. Tomáš feels a desire to wander, to see faraway lands, and still finds his life senseless. He is a painter and the reader can appreciate his way of seeing reality: from the point of view of colour and perspective. *The Jurga Brothers* cycle closes with the short novel *Man on the Street*. Its name symbolizes the whole of Horváth's feeling towards life: the text focuses on a man who watches the world while watching himself. This last text also proves that the main protagonist of *The Jurga Brothers* is in truth Tomáš Jurga, a character with strong authentic features.

Horváth's other works include: **Silver Dust** (*Strieborný prach*, 1929), **European Visa** (*Vízum do Európy*, 1930), **It Should Have Happened That Way** (*Tak sa to malo stať*, 1944), **Return to Paris** (*Návrat do Paríža*, 1947), **Life with Laura** (1948).

DANA KRŠÁKOVÁ

## TOMÁŠ JURGA, THE WANDERER (extract)

It showed fully in autumn, he felt unwell for a couple of days, not quite ill, no, only a certain strange unrest had stricken him. He held his head, pacing the room, then paused in front of the window. He told himself, "I have a headache," but that was not true, he was lying

to himself. Then he sang the most woeful songs he knew; the more distant the parts of the world where he had originally heard them, the sadder they made him now.

He paused in front of the window, stood there for a long while, an unspeakable torment in his eyes. He looked truly lamentable, standing there. He used to behave like this even as a very young boy, but at that time he had never tried to control himself. He would run away from home, wander for a couple of days, then he usually climbed some high hills and waved at the world. Poplars in the valley, perhaps out of compassion, waved with him – so touching was the little wanderer.

But now he thought.

“I have so much work, so many pictures to finish!”

And indeed, his room was full of sketches, pictures-to-be. Some of his canvases were only blank spaces criss-crossed with silhouettes, the bare spots had gaped among the lines for some time.

“I’ve decided to finish these pictures. I must finish them, it has been so long since I did anything solid.”

Then he put on his apron, picked up his brush and his palette and approached one of these incomplete pictures. He spread paint on the canvas, painting without a model. Dark brown and purple tones of autumn appeared beside one another, but there was no harmony. He worked long, perhaps as long as two hours, then he wept.

“Why am I unable to do anything? Why is it so?”

He was avoiding the obvious: that it was because of autumn. Each autumn a great desire for wandering would seize him. Then he lost his peace of mind and just paced the room, holding his head.

An incorrigible wanderer was Tomáš Jurga.

There were times when he used to go to his family manor, so joyful, gratefully conscious of the fact that he could return home. His brother Arne used to welcome him, never uttering a single word of reproach, never asking a single question. He was a very good brother.

Tomáš was quite the opposite, full of promises, always reciting his good resolutions to his brother.

“From now on I stay here, I shall start working. Forgive me, for I am like a bird, but even birds do not fly all the time. Just look, that one over there will not fly away, either,” he said, pointing at their ancient coat of arms, an eagle with spread wings. “I am quite old, the bird has been there for a long time and so far he has not flown away.” And he laughed at his own joke.

Arne did not laugh, though, he was solemn and regarded his brother sadly. When he came back, he always spoke like this, and then, as soon as autumn arrived, he just changed. And he never stuck to his own declarations.

In autumn he could neither draw nor paint. Tomáš Jurga looked out of the window with tearful eyes, he looked at the rich autumn colours outside. Then he imagined all of that together on one surface – like a picture painted on the window-pane. He started up, ran to the window, wanting to peel off the colours and dash them on to the



canvas. He touched the window and it was nothing but glass, no colours there. And outside autumn grinned viciously.

His brother Arne knocked at the door, entered the room respectfully and sat down on the sofa.

"Good afternoon, Tomáš. I hope I am not disturbing you."

His boots were covered with mud, apparently he had been out in the fields, probably supervising the ploughmen. Arne was the supervisor of his father's estate, he administered it and gave money to all the brothers. Arne was a good brother.

"Work is so unpleasant in all that mud," he said, just trying to engage Tomáš in conversation.

"Yes," said Tomáš, "I cannot work either."

It was a silly answer, not at all consonant with his brother's words.

"You have so many incomplete pictures, why not finish at least one of them? I am certain it will be good."

Tomáš Jurga laughed.

"Well, you are certain! And they would not accept a single piece for their exhibition!" Now he was laughing his heart out, as if rejoicing at the fact that those old gentlemen, the members of the jury, would not accept his pictures.

Arne laughed too.

"Remember van Gogh, they discovered him only after his death."

Perhaps it was meant to comfort Tomáš, but it was a very clumsy sort of comfort.

Outside a gust of wind roared, yellow leaves flew in the air, lying gently down on the ground, embracing each other like maidens in spring.

"I just wonder what Ján might be doing?" remarked Tomáš, casting an anxious look at Arne. "Is he in town?"

Arne was all but reading his thoughts.

"You would like to go to see him, wouldn't you? You want to go now and I shall stay here with these incomplete pictures." And he looked aside, perhaps so that Tomáš would not see his emotion.

"You'll go away and these pictures will stay, accusing me."

They both looked out of the window. Outside darkness was lowering itself to the ground like veils, perhaps in attempt to shield the eyes of infinity from the joys and sorrows of humankind.

Tomáš said in a low, humble voice.

"I shall only go to the town to see Ján, for just a short while, until I forget about the call of autumn. I shall return soon," he added, feeling very weak, even hypocritical, for he knew very well that he was lying.

Arne knew it too. It was all so sad about Tomáš, he never lied, never, but as soon as autumn came, he began to talk as if in some daydream.

But Arne did not oppose him, he said nothing. In the morning he had the carriage prepared and saw Tomáš to the station. He embraced him and then he looked after the train, thinking perhaps that Tomáš might never return.

And muttering his farewell.

“It is autumn, it came and the old desire has seized him again. Poor brother Tomáš, he is an incorrigible wanderer.”

In the town Tomáš Jurga lost the feeling, just for a moment though, but he was happy and thought that it had left him for good. And he said to himself.

“I shall return to Arne in no time.”

His brother Ján had been living there for a long time and he was a curious sort of fellow. Tomáš liked him, he fancied that their personalities were similar. Ján, however, only sat at home, thinking, longing to see the world, but he never went anywhere. Well, in the past he had been different. Yes, he had been, but then he had withdrawn into seclusion and changed. They said that a girl had brought about that change. But Tomáš did not care.

Ján was a curious fellow. Early in the morning he woke Tomáš Jurga up, speaking nonsense.

“Tomáš, I see you so seldom and I would like to tell you so much. You see, she came to me, I loved her so much, I loved her so much, that after she had gone, my seclusion lost all of its charm for me.”

And Tomáš just listened, he did not understand a word, but he replied in a comforting voice.

“Yes, of course.”

And there were days when Ján Jurga spoke differently. “She lives here, in this town, oh, if I could only see her today!”

This was more intelligible, even though it revealed nothing more about the identity of the woman. But Tomáš Jurga never asked, he was content with what he heard and neither was he inclined to tell other people much about himself.

Ján Jurga lay in his bed in the morning, he lay long, then the telephone rang, it was someone from the bank, they were wondering if he was ill. Then he dressed quickly, left the house like a lunatic, sadly departing.

“Goodbye, Tomáš.”

Ján was in love and he infected Tomáš with his restlessness. Tomáš started to pace the room again, holding his head. He thought about his loves, about the cities where he had loved them, and once more he felt unsettled.

When Ján came home for lunch, he found a note with a few words on the desk.

“Goodbye, I’m off to see more.”

And thus Tomáš Jurga was on the move again, driven by autumn. He went wandering, went to see new things or, rather, to chase his memories. It was because of Ján, who had talked about love, that memories descended upon Tomáš and he started thinking about his past loves, about his past life.

from *Tomáš Jurga, the Wanderer, Man on the Street* (1928)

(translated by Marína Gáliková)

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# MAŠA HAĽAMOVÁ

28 August 1908 Blatnica – 17 July 1995 Bratislava

Poet, children's writer, translator. Her first collection was **Gift** (Dar, 1928), in which she drew on the symbolism of Krasko and appeared as a poet of delicate feminine sensibility. Her verses, which Milan Rúfus has remarked on as "song-cantilenas", have an urgent internal drama, reflecting the contradictions of time and space in everyday human life. The hardships of life in the mountains, human suffering and disappointments "alter" the archetypally understood world of love and tenderness which only lend meaning to human life. Her second collection **Red Poppy** (Červený mak, 1932), contains gentle, subjective lyrics and the understanding of the Czech poet Wolker of the world of love as a world of equality between people. She had met Wolker while he was convalescing in the Tatra mountains. The collection also contains reminiscences of Haľamová's mother who died early (an aesthetic strength are motifs on the difficulties experienced without her) and themes from Paris and Haľamová's studies at the Sorbonne in 1929. After a long silence in 1955 she published a second edition of both collections under the title **Poems** which included a cycle of new poems from 1936 to 1943. "Triptych" lyrical self-expression and love are present in Haľamová's last collection, **Your Death I Live** (Smrť tvoju žijem, 1966). She becomes reconciled to the loss of her lifetime partner with authentic memories and moments of their quiet human happiness and understanding.

The extracts from Maša Haľamová's work show the prevalence of a ballad-elegy tone in her lyrics, a creative use on the context of song, modernist lyrical abbreviation and ability to write decisive last lines.

Other works: **Creds** (Vyznania, 1988) – essays of reminiscences.

Works for children and young people – **Petrišorka** (1965), **Mechúrik Koščúrik and Friends** (Mechúrik Koščúrik s kamarátmi, 1962), **The Watch** (Hodinky, 1966), **On the Titmouse from the Coconut House** (O sýkorke z kokosového domčeka, 1976).

EVA JENČÍKOVÁ

## SONG

My eyes did not weep  
neither day nor night  
just hardened, did not sleep  
over many black nights.

My arms did not fold  
did not stretch out to plead,  
just by my sides they hung down  
without strength or control.

My heart did not die  
inside its insulted breast,  
it just took to a corner,  
did not welcome a guest.

My mouth did not cry out  
in unbearable pain,  
it just asked in silence  
where these feelings had gone.

from **Gift** (1928)

## **BALLAD**

We grew angry -  
my eyes  
and I.

Yesterday they betrayed  
what for long  
I'd hidden away.

As we returned,  
my love and I  
to the wood -

they ran aside  
to where  
steep cliffs stood.

I called to them  
in rage  
in vain,

my love himself  
went to the rocks  
to my shame.

Now he gives them to me  
as a strong man's  
prize

so no longer am I  
the owner  
of my eyes.

from **Red Poppy** (1932)

**THE WANDERER**

With every tug of the oars  
the banks are further away.

If this little boat  
could carry me from longing  
I'd go today to the ends of the earth  
for my deluded heart.

But I row  
in a small vessel...  
For me the sea is a lake,  
the ends of the earth, the mountains.

The sun breaks in the waves  
into silver bells -  
With my oars I ring out  
a wanderer's song  
in the waves.

Above my head  
the wild geese fly -  
my boat will not catch up with them...  
I have forged chains for my heart  
and in them I must live.

from **Red Poppy** (1932)

**BAREFOOT IN THE GRASS**

An afternoon of green lizards.  
Exhausted butterflies  
alight on my palms.

Where has the wind gone?

A silence of clay and grasses.

If you have confided to the wind  
something unspoken  
the wind hasn't carried it here.

I look for you  
in silent clays and grasses.

If I go after you  
barefoot in the grass -  
the clay will tell me  
what the wind hasn't carried.

from **Your Death I Live** (1966)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# VALENTÍN BENIAK

16 February 1894 Chynorany - 6 November 1973 Bratislava

Poet and translator. He made his debut late after a long search which continued after **We Clouds Pass by** (Tiahnime ďalej oblaky, 1928). At this time his poetry had a neo-symbolist character, thematically directed towards domestic motifs, presenting the destiny of the villager which included elements of social feeling and patriotism. The collection **Lunapark** (1936), inspired by a visit to France, lightened the heavy modality of Beniák's work. His powers of expression were modernised under the influence of Czech poetism to capture the dynamism of the modern world using a montage technique and associations to loosen conventional constructions. The peak of Beniák's achievement come in three collections **Žofia** (1941), **The Ashes** (Popolec, 1942) and **Minstrel** (1944) in which he returned to a "national" mostly tragic, considering wartime conditions, theme but linked with love and existential issues. For the protagonist the lyrical partner, **Žofia**, becomes a symbol of the female principal, poetry and wisdom. In capturing such a polyphonic perception of the world Beniák reaches out to the imaginativeness of surrealism for procedures in composition. The trilogy is a happy synthesis of tradition and modernism.

After a forced break in creation he returned to Slovak poetry in 1960 with poems unsentimentally reflecting on the poet's ageing and closeness to death.

Beniák was a prolific translator mainly from Hungarian (I. Madách, M. Vörösmarty and others) and also translated Shakespeare, Goethe, Kleist, Oscar Wilde and others.

Other works: Poetry - **Echoes of Steps** (Ozveny krokov, 1931), **The Royal Chain** (Kráľovská refaz, 1933), **Mail Pigeon** (Poštový holub, 1936), **Beech Nut** (Bukvica, 1938), **Vigil** (Vigilia, 1939), **A Second Vigil** (Druhá Vigília, 1942), **Tearful Amor** (Plačúci amor, 1969), **Sonnets of Nightfall** (Sonety podvečerné, 1970), **Medallions and Little Medallions** (Medailóny a medailónky, 1971).

VALÉR MIKULA

## (INTERMEZZO)

All of you who have lived  
know:  
everything is transitory,  
a child crying out in a dream,  
a mother's smile, too,  
the billing and cooing of pigeons,  
scented rain flooding a rainbow,  
the sound of a shepherd's horn,  
the sudden slam of a door  
in the hotel Alcron,  
everything is transitory  
and ends in pain  
like life  
like the beauty of the beloved, on fire with love,

which is the messenger of death  
and has a heavy thumb,  
a broad heavy thumb  
pressing on the eyelids,  
pulling down the blinds  
and running off  
as if with a mind bereft.  
Everything is transitory,  
love, too,  
drifting away  
an anchor of hopelessness flying behind  
wrenched away  
and, in the emptiness afterwards the whirlwind breaks in  
overthrowing worlds,  
uprooting worlds  
and, vainly,  
everything is transitory,  
the heart, too,  
beating its noon  
and shattering into marble  
in the black urn of human wretchedness.

from *Žofia* (1941)

## RENDEZVOUS

So much feebler is love,  
death itself more merciful.  
Oh, how a person grieves  
in an Autumn afternoon.

Love always to death draws close  
and is then by death preserved:  
my poet, you today bear witness  
in your sad hexameters.

The voice of broken violins,  
let them dissolve in black tears,  
for love, which you await,  
in the shape of death appears.

from *Beech Nut* (1938)



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**A VISIT**

I'm weary, I'll come, I merely wish  
to stay with you a while,  
you'll sing to me a little requiem  
and see me off to paradise.

I drink your memory in one draught,  
Neither bread nor water do I require,  
after you'll write more for me from your cantilena,  
you'll succeed with it, I'm absolutely sure.

From a great love an ember's light,  
I'll trill a song to it all by myself,  
when I'm with you what more do I require?

I'm weary, I'll come, I merely wish  
to stay with you a while.

from **Tearful Amor** (1969)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# JOZEF CÍGER HRONSKÝ

23 February 1896 Zvolen - 13 July 1960 Luján (Argentina)

Hronský's own name was Jozef Cíger, he was a writer, an essayist, he wrote books for young readers, and he worked in *Matica slovenská*. In 1945 he joined the national-oriented wing of Catholic exiles who emigrated through Austria and Bavaria to Rome - later, for fear that he might be returned to the Czechoslovak authorities, he went further to Argentina.

Hronský's vast work cannot be characterized by one united poetics. After a few collections of short prose and traditional realistic novels, the writer complicates his rendering of an epic story: the robust rural theme is elevated by poetic characters, the story bifurcates into visions and reality. In the "collective" novel **Bread** (Chlieb, 1931) the fatalism of the human bond with the earth is monumentalised, however, in the novel **Jozef Mak** (1933) Hronský analyses the never-ending individual sufferings of a "man who is but one of millions".

Hronský continued writing even in exile, he published a historical novel **Andreas Búr, the Master** (Andreas Búr Majster, 1948), focused on the motif of an exceptional but lonely man. His most controversial novel which was taboo in Slovakia until 1990s is the book **A World in the Quagmire** (Svet na Trasovisku, 1960). Here Hronský contemplates the anti-fascist resistance from a wholly different point of view: he considers it a perverse rebellion against one's own state, a Russian- and Czech-imported Bolshevik element which is alien to Slovakia.

Hronský's most complex novel with regards to its form is the grotesque **The Scrivener, Gráč** (Pisár Gráč, 1940). It is rooted in expressionism and it discloses the corruption of classic values of humanity in the catastrophic First World War. The endured horrors deprive the protagonist of his mental health and he loses the ability to communicate with the world around him. Gráč writes letters to the deceased Greškovič, he talks to people who are not with him. Despite irony and sarcasm the author, towards the end of the novel, frees Gráč from his loneliness, offering him the kind gesture of Jana Greškovičová. If he accepts her kindness, he still stands a chance...

Other works: Collections of short novels - **At our place** (U nás, 1923), **Tales from Podpoľana** (Podpolianske rozprávky, 1932), **Seven Hearts** (Sedem srdc, 1934). Novels - **The Prophecy of Dr Stankovský** (Proroctvo doktora Stankovského, 1930), **In Bukva's Courtyard** (Na Bukvovom dvore, 1944). Sketches - **Travels in Slovak America** (Cesty slovenskou Amerikou, 1940). Prose for young readers - **The Brave Rabbit** (Smelý zajko, 1930), **The Brave Rabbit in Africa** (Smelý zajko v Afrike, 1931), **Budkáčik and Dubkáčik**, **Two Piglets** (Budkáčik a Dubkáčik, 1932).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## THE SCRIVENER, GRÁČ

(extract)

Yesterday was already the third time that Mr Alojz Greškovič (deceased) had sent for me because it had been such a long time since I paid him a friendly visit. I did not notice the two previous invitations because it seemed to me that Mr Greškovič (deceased) and I had fallen out with each other a little bit. "You don't happen to remember?" But the third invitation was an urgent one, so it would

have been ill-mannered to lay the card aside. I went to the cemetery. I found a bunch of flowers on Greškovič's grave which rather moved me.

"What happened, Mr Greškovič (deceased)?"

"Nothing. Don't be confused by the flowers. I sent for a gardener before my death. I deposited a certain sum and told him to use the interest to buy a bunch of flowers every year on the third of March and put it on my grave. I had chosen an honest gardener, he didn't forget either about the money or about the flowers. It all happened at a moment when I thought that nobody would remember me after a year. You know how it goes, somebody could have noticed, so I thought of it myself in order to preserve the old firm's good reputation."

"But it's not that bad as far as your memory is concerned."

"Stop soft-soaping me, you know how things are and I know it too. I don't expect anything from Jana nor ask for anything from her. I'll be frank with you. She was the only woman I really loved although I met many of them. She will never know it...!"

"One day she might realize."

"She can't. I tormented her so that she had never learned the truth. How is she?"

"It's hard to say. She prefers to stay at home these days. But Čičko might know better."

"Čičko...? Ha ha..."

"Why are you laughing at Čičko, Mr Greškovič (deceased)?"

"Because it's very funny if Čičko is the one who might know better."

"That's just what I think."

"Jana has chosen him because she can talk freely in front of him (everyone needs it) and Čičko is so slavishly honest that he doesn't understand the half of it and simply forgets the other half, especially when allusions are concerned."

"Do you think, Mr Greškovič (deceased), that it's not as Čičko claims with the flowers in the courtyard?"

"I don't know anything about the flowers, the courtyard is of no great interest to me now. All I can tell from my experience is that Jana doesn't do anything without purpose, but she leads an inner life and doesn't comment on many things even after they have happened. But I invited you and you didn't feel like coming."

"Miško is liquidating the Grain Office, he has been commissioned for this job recently, and a lot of sacks are missing there. Sacks were precious after the *coup d'état* and all who could simply stole them. They had already arrested some of them and I help Miško revise the accounts, sometimes we finish late at night."

"But there is another reason as well."

"Well, Mr Greškovič, I'm not trying to conceal that once I wrote a letter to you."

"I know that but... we were not perfectly honest with each other. We talked and wrote to each other about the debt and you know just as I know that you did not and do not owe anything to my firm."

"But now it's impossible to tell!"

“We can tell anytime because we know how things are. You lived with my brother after you had been conscripted because they didn’t send you to the front right away. In fact Michal didn’t live anywhere at that time, he served at the transports from the Romanian front to the French and Italian fronts, and he scarcely slept at home.”

“Yes.”

“He did some kind of business on this occasion and I used to send him more money quite frequently. The money used to be sent to your address because you were at home and there were other reasons as well why Michal didn’t wish his name to be on the postal orders.”

“Yes.”

“So the sum has accumulated up to almost seventeen thousand ex interest.”

“Did Mrs Jana know about the postal orders?”

“No. She didn’t interfere with the accounts of the members of the household, she stated resolutely that they would be of no interest to her. She didn’t know anything about the consignments. But when the inheritance was being registered after my death, your name came out and then she suddenly felt dizzy.”

I jumped in a totally inappropriate manner considering the fact that I was in a quiet place of quiet citizens. I shook my head unconsciously and at that moment the gravedigger who was arranging one of the nearby graves looked at me and then started to gape awkwardly. Even without my jump I was conspicuous, as I was the only one to visit this grave. I felt a flush coming all over me. I was unable to control myself, that is a fact.

“Mr Gráč, I can tell my chatting has upset you. You grasped, even without me reminding you, why Jana nearly lost consciousness while signing the inheritance list. Terrible things came to her mind about the two or three of us. She noticed the dates of the postal orders and the appendices and they fitted with the time when the marriage of Jana and me was being arranged.”

“That’s true...”

I had to stand up again and then sit by the nearby grave, and it seemed to me that I was wringing my hands. The gravedigger put down his hoes and – now I can realize it fully – came close to me, pretending he was looking at the grass.

“That was clumsy of Michal not to remember those entries and when he saw the damage done it was too late. Yes. Jana thought that we two knew each other, that there was an agreement between us, that we had done something unpleasant behind her back because she didn’t know about you and you didn’t let her know. You would accept money and I would give it to you for something. Surely to buy your silence. Come on, you can see what it’s all about! Well, everything seemed to confirm the fact that you were making money out of her secret unfulfilled dreams.”

“That was a punishment!”

“Pardon?”

“That was a punishment that I deserved! A punishment, for I never told Michal that I knew Jana.”

"I know that."

"I asked him questions and learned a lot of things but I didn't reveal to him that I knew her. I thought things would get complicated..."

"That could have happened easily. And it probably would have happened but for Mrs Knutzka, my mother-in-law, who was a nosy woman, but sometimes it paid. She discovered the postal orders and told me that seeing your name, even on the roll of organdie, could make a strange impression on Jana and there were many reasons why it should be prevented. So I would take care of the postal orders!"

"I was really hideous!"

"Mr Gráč, scrivener, you pass judgements too easily!"

"Those damned shirts!"

"You don't have to think badly of them."

"Well, in fact I knew nothing about them. Michal used to deliver the mail as well, he would send various boxes, and sometimes we had the whole room full of them."

"At that time they were excellent goods."

"I didn't know what was inside, but once I mentioned shirts and Michal pointed at the boxes - there were a lot of them at that moment - and said, 'You can choose!' I opened the upper one and there were really shirts in it."

"And also canvas, fabrics for ladies, buttons, threads..."

"Yes, there were those things as well, but it just crossed my mind that Michal had engaged in smuggling on his business trips in Bohemia, in Budapest and in Transylvania. Damned shirts!"

"Watch out! Mr Gráč! Watch out! Those shirts and postal orders, and that debt of yours which is not a debt, in fact, can bring you luck, too! Just try to think...!"

I tried to think, but the gravedigger began to whistle which I found rather scandalous - whistling should be forbidden in gravediggers' contracts - so I did not think of anything.

"Ha ha..."

"You can laugh at me if you want, I'm not clever!"

"When Jana came round after the first shock, Michal tried to dissuade her - you know how sensitive she is! - but she wanted to sue you and you were urged to come to this town."

"Yes."

"Michal caught you at the station and then you ended up explaining things to each other at Zubřík's, sitting there and drinking wine till morning."

"Almost till morning."

"You two left together, you entered the courtyard as Michal's guest and -"

"My head began to ache at the stairs, but nevertheless I became perfectly sober and very nearly kicked myself for having come so far. I cried in embarrassment, but Michael started to grasp what was going on, though only subconsciously. He knocked at Mrs Čičková's window and woke her because he knew she had an empty room, and we slept with Michal in one bed till noon. Miško probably didn't

fall asleep, he actually lay in wait so that I wouldn't run away or do something foolish."

"So now you see! You don't have to pretend anything, you can say openly that Michal proved to be a friend that night as well as the next day, he could see inside you and kept his eye on you. You had silly thoughts, he noticed it, he knew that you were distressed and that even the scrivener, Gráč, – that is yourself – couldn't be entrusted to you."

"You know it all very well, Mr Greškovič!"

"The next day you saw Jana through the window for the first time after almost nine years..."

"How do you know it anyway?"

"You were thinking about it later right here, Mr Gráč, the scrivener! And after nine years it seemed to you that Jana had not changed; you recognized her walk, her hands, her hair, her voice, her eyes, and you heard her saying to Čičko, 'Mr Čičko, be so kind, come and repair my kitchen-clock, it has stopped again!'"

from *The Scrivener, Gráč* (1940)

(translated by Vladislav Gális)

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# LADISLAV NOVOMESKÝ

27 December 1904 Budapest - 4 September 1976 Bratislava

Poet, essayist, publicist, politician. His life is not only a commentary on his work, but is part of twentieth century history: left wing cultural activity and work in the Communist press in the Twenties and Thirties, present at the preparations for the anti-fascist uprising in 1944, after 1945 in cultural and political posts, a victim of the Stalinist repression of the Fifties, an authority for the reform of Socialist activity in the Sixties and in the 1970s adopted into the official canon of Socialist culture.

Novomeský's first collection, **Sunday**, (Nedeľa, 1927), was as a proletarian poet. Urban scenes, weighty social scenes or exotic civilisations became the inspiration for a more poised avant-garde imagination in his second collection, **Romboid**, (1932). With concentrated pictures, a panorama of the contradictory present world and poets and empathetic meditation encompasses the collection **Open Windows**, (Otvorené okná, 1939). The country realities in the collection **The Saint Beyond the Village**, (Svätý za dedinou, 1939), is an effective indicator of the poet's position, poetry and humanity in a world threatened by war. After the return to literature by Novomeský in the Sixties his work is akin to the gentle lyrical work of an interwar poet with poems of remembrance of the avant-garde movement of Prague in the Twenties in **The Villa Tereza**, (Vila Tereza, 1963). It was also a defence of the utopian relationship between artistic and social revolutions addressing the discussions at the beginning of the Sixties. In the lyrical collection **From There and Others**, (Stamodiaľ a iné, 1964) the experience of prison has led to an affirmation of fidelity to oneself and the spontaneous perception of the newly-returned everyday world. This theme is also in the fragmentary epilogue of Novomeský's lyric in the cycle **The House Where I Live**, (Dom, kde žijem, 1971).

The introduction to Novomeský's poetry is a gentle union of autobiography with a panorama of the world and lyrical melancholy; the final accord in his pre-war work exemplifies the age-old therapeutic role of poetry face to face with the epoch and with life; finally the bantering familiarity of the aging night-walking poet with a ghost moves from joke to a symbol of the doubleness of a burdensome public role, manipulation by others ...

Other works: Poetry from war time, published with wood cuts by the painter K. Sokol - **With a Smuggled Pencil** (Pašovanou ceruzkou, 1948); memoirs, a return to the home of his childhood in the form of poetic composition - **30 Minutes to the City** (Do mesta 30 min., 1963); a seven volume collection from political and cultural journalism and essays, published with breaks from 1969 covering the period from the Twenties to the Sixties.

FEDOR MATEJOV

## POEM

Time flies  
like birds too far away to see.

1904 -  
I mislaid that year  
as I did my black umbrella  
in the Café Union.

I know only this; in that year  
the sky was barely covered  
by the bright star of Bethlehem,  
just a woman in pain gave birth to a boy.

Time flies  
like birds too far away to see.

Perhaps nineteen times the flowers had fallen  
by the time the boy began to speak.

The marvellous power of the world does not groan  
from a child's greeting.

There was strength and weakness in the world,  
skyscrapers stood in New York.

He laughed in Paris,  
sewn up with bridges,  
and black man made love to black woman  
on the Bank of Elephant Bones  
and a woman in Moscow  
dreamed of better fortune,  
of a bigger slice of bread.

That boy's song  
didn't change the shape of the world.

And it seems  
it wasn't necessary for him to live here  
as he hadn't given anything to the world.

Nevertheless:

write in praise  
that he loved so much, unendingly  
things, big and small, from the world.

from **Sunday** (1927)

## **WORD**

Finish your line, once more say farewell  
and then go, playful poet.

The clock has struck and time is shackled



and thus we stumble enfeebled.

With bird cherries of sobs in our throat  
we'll be crushed by this age, inexorably.

Is everything lost?

I have a word on my tongue.  
I've thought about pain and found a cure for it.

from *The Saint Beyond the Village* (1939)

## SHADOW

He dragged after me long, much too long  
and trod on my heels in play.  
Beneath the lit up lamps I commanded: Get lost!  
But he overtook and walked on straight away

just in front of me. First in one step and then in two  
and certainly leading me on in mockery,  
he didn't consider the years that I had  
and like me, didn't think where we might be.

He just shrugged his shoulders when I shrugged mine,  
grew thin, grew long at every step I took.  
I was in a muddle; was I here, was I gone?  
He grew like interest in a debt collector's book.

All at once he was exactly as before.  
Unseen he'd turned around and now followed in my tracks  
Up to a lamp which still cast light on the ground and there  
he vanished like camphor, like a dream, like smoke.

In case the nimble devil from a bag popped out  
with whatever phantom plunder I'd stowed from sight  
I trudged up to here underneath the light  
so my shadow for once might be outguessed

and walked on without a guide, alone, so alone  
in a flood of light so bright and stark.  
But this can't be. My watch doesn't point to noon.  
It's midnight's midnight. I'm in the dark and from the dark.

from *The House Where I Live, The Art of Poetry 2* (1971)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

# JANKO SILAN

24 November 1914 Sila – 16 May 1984 Važec

Real name Ján Ďurka. Poet, prose writer and translator, a central personage among *Slovak Catholic Modernism* – a movement of spiritual poetry from Catholic poets (mostly priests) who entered literature mainly in the Thirties.

He made his début with the lyrical book of verse **Doom-mongers** (Kuvici, 1936) influenced by poetic modernism. The influence of symbolism upon his poetry is also perceptible later – in understanding poetry as essential tranquillity, meditation, prayer and singing. Already his second collection **A Ladder To Heaven** (Rebrík do neba, 1939) shows a move towards Christian lyric poetry, while its spiritual dimension has gradually deepened. He achieved artistic maturity with the books **Songs from Javorina** (Piesne z Javoriny, 1943), **Songs from Ždiar** (Piesne zo Ždiaru, 1947) and **Poor Soul upon the Earth** (Úbohá duša na zemi, 1948). The poet, fascinated by nature in the High Tatras, sings praises to God, seeing nature as an eulogy to God's existence and as an ideal of human existence, an ideal necessary in the times of the turbulent war and post-war reality which the poems react to. Poetically he reflects on the mystical theme of the human soul which longs for theocracy, connecting the image of the soul on its way with the search for brightness and light. In these collections Silan presented himself as an authentic lyric poet who combines religious (Catholic, Christian) inspiration with modern poetic expression in a sensitive and refined manner.

After 1948 Silan became inconvenient for the ideas of the communist regime. He was only allowed to publish in the late sixties. He rendered this experience in his autobiographical novel **The House of Desolation** (Dom opustenosti, 1991 – posthumously). In the Seventies he was among the group of Catholic dissidents and published his books solely in samizdat editions or abroad. The collection **Songs from Važec** (Piesne z Važca), written as early as in 1951, came out in Slovakia only in 1990. Its poems react to the persecution of priests and the Church by the communist regime. They are marked by sorrow in reality and the power springing from an unshakeable faith.

Other works: **Let Us Celebrate It Together** (Slávme to spoločne, 1941), **While We Are Not at Home** (Kým nebudeme doma, 1943), **Dazzle** (Oslnenie, 1969), **Catholic Songs from Važec** (Katolícke piesne z Važca, 1980), **I Am the Water** (Ja som voda, 1984) – in Slovakia under the title **Songs from Važec** (Piesne z Važca, 1990). Since 1995, his collected works have been published.

DANA KRŠÁKOVÁ

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I MAKE MY HEART WIDE OPEN:  
so the suffering of the world flows in.  
Come all terrors, come all woes,  
you've wounded me with so few blows.  
There's so much more I can endure  
than any plough horse down in Ždiar.

My voice wishes to be blissful  
with loving, quiet words.  
Here all you soldiers, here, stab here

with your bayonets and your swords.  
 Have no fear  
 My head won't fall.

The poet loves peril,  
 all that's difficult, all that grinds down.  
 He won't turn on his heel,  
 but move his trembling mouth -  
 and there's no longer speech  
 with its scarred echo,  
 speech disappointed, speech searing,  
 but angels singing;  
 from morning until morning  
 hosannas ringing.

from **Songs from Javorina** (1943)

## SNOWS

Oh, white snows, glittering spell,  
 a sign of our deliverance from hell,  
 oh, roads, timeless, trackless,  
 veils hiding loveliness,  
 oh, the sleigh's gradual progress,  
 oh, the escape from mountains and death's distress,  
 oh, the light alone, the Lord God with us...

from **Songs from Ždiar** (1947)

## PRIESTS TUMBLE DOWN LIKE NUTS

Priests tumble down like nuts:  
 whoever picks them up healthy?  
 Oh, Spirit of consolation, Oh Holy Spirit:  
 whoever will wipe their tears away  
 when they tumble down like nuts?

Like jackdaws tumbling from a roof that's hit  
 by the battering storm's fury.  
 Oh, Spirit of consolation, Oh Holy Spirit:  
 whoever will wipe their tears away  
 when like jackdaws they tumble from a roof that's hit.

Look, how the rabble mocks with spite,  
 then monstrously begins to bay.

Oh, Spirit of consolation, Oh Holy Spirit:  
whoever will wipe their tears away  
when the rabble mocks with spite?

Look, like stones they're tossed in the river's spate  
while all they have is taken away.  
Oh, Spirit of consolation, Oh Holy Spirit:  
whoever will wipe their tears away  
when like stones they're tossed in the river's spate?

The dragon-devil, their enemy, his hellfire spits,  
Seizes them to devour furiously!  
Oh, Spirit of consolation, Oh Holy Spirit:  
whoever will wipe their tears away  
when in fury, their enemy, his hellfire spits?

15. 5. 1951

from **Catholic Songs from Važec** (1980)

## **NEVER SO MUCH**

Never so much has the heart,  
which always trembled, ached,  
never so much has the body  
suffered as if it might break,

never so much has the soul  
which always moaned, cried out,  
it has never yet been broken  
like a rock shattered throughout.

Never so little to manage...  
All I can do is die.  
Never so little at the altar  
where only old parsons sigh.

Never so much has hope smouldered.  
In my heart sainthood unfurled!  
Never so much a sacrifice  
standing naked, mocked by the world!

25. 7. 1952

from **Catholic Songs from Važec** (1980)  
(translated by Marián Andričik and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# DOBROSLAV CHROBÁK

16 February 1907 Hybe - 16 May 1951 Bratislava

A fiction writer, one of the proponents of naturizmus in Slovak literature that evolved in late 1930s in contact with the then contemporary French regionalism and Nordic modernism (Knut Hamsun and others).

Chrobák published only two books of fiction - one volume of novellas **Friend Jašek** (Kamarát Jašek, 1937) and a larger novella **The Dragon Is Coming Back** (Drak sa vracia, 1943). Although the first book was not yet stylistically and thematically mature, Chrobák's strongest suit was the reworking of the traditional rural theme. He understood his purpose as a writer to portray the rich emotional world of plain village and mountain people by means of modern literature. The deep and often dramatic dimension of these people is rooted in their unity with nature - his characters are subject to the uncontrollable powers of nature within themselves - love, passions, hatred and jealousy. Natural instinct provides, at the same time, the most reliable ethical standards: Chrobák's archetypal male protagonists are characterized by an unspoiled sense of honour and justice.

After his vigorous rejection of urban morality in the book **Friend Jašek** Chrobák's fairy-tale-like and half-mythical novella **The Dragon Is Coming Back** renders rural morality ambiguous as well. The hero of the narrative Drak is supposed to heroically redeem his alleged "lost honour" in the eyes of the rural collective. The contradiction between the dreamt-about "natural" purity on the one hand and the necessity to live in "depraved" human society on the other, is one of the leitmotifs of Chrobák's oeuvre. He saw a possible solution in obeying the fundamental instincts of life.

VALÉR MIKULA

## A TALE (extract)

We stopped near the fire. Nobody took any notice of us. A figure wrapped in a large woollen cloth was sitting by the fire. It had a skirt drawn tight over its knees. At its feet, a hairy dog was lying stretched out with its jaws on its forelegs. The figure, the dog and a long whisk thrust into the ground were illuminated by the fire. There was a frog croaking from a small lake. We caught a glimpse of a stork standing on one foot on the bank of the lake; we couldn't tell if he was taking a nap or listening to the frog's croak. The bird's silhouette looked bizarre. It was warm. Sultry moisture was crawling low off the lake like the slime of some obscure snakes. Such hazes of moisture usually preceded storms. The clouds were low and black. We were sweltering, yet, at the same time, shivering all over as if from the cold. The figure and the dog were motionless. Our eyes widened in astonishment to see a cottage over like ours except smaller and narrower. There was a hint of three or four shadows moving silently and awkwardly behind the cottage. Horses, we thought. It looked, though, as if some infernal monsters were creeping behind the cottage. Suddenly, the figure moved; we stepped back, keeping an eye on it. As it got up, the figure adjusted something on the ground. Its movements were soft and strange - very strange. We tried but failed to make comparisons; at most, they resembled the movements of an

old man raising his hands in prayer. But the figure said no prayer and yet each movement spoke of resignation. It made us think of a young fir tree rocking in the wind or a wind-blown forest. Its contours were round. We could see it as it leaned over the fire, stoking it. The figure was now lying down where it had been sitting. Completely lit by the fire, it curled up and put its hands under its head. It was smiling softly and sadly with its eyes shut. All this was new and strange to us. Our chests were gripped as if by iron bars, something of them protruding into our throats. Something that had settled there during long moonlit nights. All the various impressions of the nightingale's songs and the smell of roses were alive. We turned our backs on the fire, helplessly strolling round the lake. We knew that the lake was only a shallow pool full of frogs. We approached the cottage from the back. We had forgotten about the horses and suddenly found ourselves next to them. They had appeared out of thin air. We no longer knew who'd become frightened first; we jumped aside and one of the horses did the same. The rest then bolted and pranced about joltingly - for their legs were chained to their necks - like contorted devils in the direction of the cottage. A dog ran from the fire, barking furiously in our faces. We used to have a dog once called Rex; we called this dog Rex, too, for we thought that all dogs were called Rex.

"His name isn't Rex, it's Rover. Come here, Rover!"

The figure that was sitting by the fire now stood in front of Ondrej, seeing off the animal.

"And what are you doing here?"

It had all happened so quickly that Ondrej could not make sense of it. He replied mechanically.

"Looking for a horse."

"Whose horse?"

"Ours."

"And who do you belong to?"

Ondrej gave a start. The horse was "ours", the cottage was "ours", oats were "ours" - that he knew. But who did *he* belong to!?

"Whose ours?"

"Ours," said Ondrej.

Ondrej wiped his forehead. He could see his reply would not do. Then he had an idea and his face brightened. Ondrej smiled as if in apology and said.

"I belong to God."

The figure across stared at him, startled in disbelief.

"To who?"

"God."

The figure, so far unprepossessing, suddenly burst into cheerful laughter, first suppressed, then wild and infectious, echoing down the whole valley. The dog started barking again wildly as if in response. Ondrej stared at the laughing face, dully and uncomprehendingly. But he remembered the old man's statement that he, Ondrej, was the son of God and that his whole life belonged to the Lord, his good Father. Why was this fellow laughing then? Gathering his wits, Ondrej asked the same question.

“And who do you belong to?”

But the laughter only grew.

“Why do you think I’m a man? Ha-ha-ha! This is a woman standing in front of you, ha-ha!”

A *woman*? The word never heard. The word cursed by the old man. The word that had made him limit his knowledge and twist his religion. The word that had never been meant to reach his ear if he was to face God with a whole, un plundered soul. And now a real woman, capricious and ready to hold out her arms, was standing in front of him.

She went grave as suddenly as she had begun laughing. Shyly, she lowered her eyes and said.

“I am Eva from the Halahija family.” She continued carefully. “I’m tending my father’s horses. There will be little hay-making to do this year. Everything is dry down there.”

There was an uneasy silence. Eva was ashamed of her laughter. She wanted to correct the bad impression she had made and asked kindly.

“You’re looking for that horse brought over by that odd man in the morning, aren’t you? He said someone would fetch him but I didn’t know it would be you. But why did he lead the horse over here if he knew its owner?”

Ondrej nodded in approval but his mouth remained silent. He gulped and gasped for air like fish out of water.

“There is your horse. Call him by his name; he’ll come if he knows you!”

Ondrej called to his horse. The horse hobbled up and rubbed his head against his master’s shoulder. The affectionate horse made Ondrej animated.

“You are not going back at night, are you...? Come to the fire, I’ll cook soup!”

Ondrej agreed. Sitting down by the fire, he watched Eva’s movements sheepishly. Then Eva left to get some water. Ondrej gave the dog a suspicious glance. The dog crept up, wagged its tail in a friendly manner and Ondrej responded by daring to scratch its back. When Eva came back, he and the dog were already friends. He again watched her as she made dough, slicing the bacon and putting the pot on to the fireplace. The dog kept him company. Suddenly, Ondrej remembered that he had got some bread in his bag. “Come, there’s bread for you right away.” He reached into his bag but as he was pulling the bread out he dropped his flute.

“What have you got there?”

Ondrej held out his hand with the flute.

“That’s my flute.”

“And can you play it?”

He nodded to show that he could.

“Will you play me a tune when we finish eating?”

“I will.”

They ate without speaking. The dog looked from Ondrej to Eva. She threw him some bread, then turned to Ondrej and smiled. Ondrej smiled back shyly, giving the dog some bread as well. This

brought them closer. They continued playing like this with the dog and laughed cheerfully every time the dog caught a flying piece of bread.

The had finished eating. Ondrej took up his flute and tried to play a tune. Eva pulled her skirt down her knees, rested her chin against her hands and took a long look at him.

“I play better when a nightingale sings along.”

“There is one over there. Let’s be still and perhaps he’ll start singing.”

They waited quietly. Suddenly, a nightingale started singing from the bushes by the lake, first hesitantly and then in full voice. Ondrej put his pipe to his lips, and, immediately catching both tone and rhythm, started piping. He, too, began hesitantly as he had never played in front of an audience. As he played on, though, he forgot about Eva’s presence and there he was again, as if transported back home to his upland meadow, outpouring the sources of his mourning and cheerful hopes from his breast with his fingers varying the notes. Ondrej was striving with the nightingale to express his dreams. He played an accompanying melody one moment and then went off in a digression, his tones stormy as if in protest against the bird’s song of resignation. When the bird paused for a while, Ondrej caught his last trill, repeating it over and over in endless variations, in high pitch and low pitch, crescendo and decrescendo and then in monotone until the bird resumed his song. – God knows how long he might have continued on his pipe (gazed at by a speechless Eva) if it hadn’t been for the dog who broke in into their duet, irritated by some treble sound. He howled in desperation and interrupted them.

from *A Tale*, **Friend Jašek** (1937)

(translated by Euben Urbánek)



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# FRANTIŠEK ŠVANTNER

29 January 1912 Bystrá - 13 October 1950 Prague

The most important figure in Slovak *naturizmus*, wrote novels and short novels. His work, together with that of Ludo Ondrejov, Dobroslav Chrobák and Margita Figuli, is usually labelled as lyrical prose. In the beginning his style was influenced by Zola's naturalism, later mythicism and vitalistic pantheism became its hallmarks. Švantner was inspired by Poe, by Dostojevskij, by the French regionalists (Giono, Ramuz), by Scandinavian writers (Hamsun), and there is a marked trace of Bergsonian vitalism in his writings.

Švantner saw nature as the essential and primeval mother of all things existing, as a demonic force. Life and death collide in his prose, surrounded by a half-folklore, half-mythical context. His short novels are full of strained situations and events: his plots are marked by suspense which is created through uncertainty, through multiple motives, through concealing certain facts, through ballad-like compositions. That is why his texts often contain multiple layers of significance. Sensuality is the determining principle, instincts and passions are stressed, as well as the unconscious of the characters, their unfathomable depths. All of this applies to the book **The Bride of the Mountains** (*Nevesta hôľ*, 1946). Švantner came to a final confirmation of the principles of "naturizmus", while at the same time transgressing them, in his novel **Never-ending Life** (*Život bez konca* - finished in 1949). Here human life finds its true value only through its ethical dimension.

The short novel *The Burning Mountain* (*Horiaci vrch*) is taken from the collection entitled **Malka** (1942). It has a strong ethical foundation, defining the free life of a man in nature as the highest value. Only nature, often opposing the human world, is eternal. Human life is ephemeral and it is but a small fragment of the undying being of nature. This short novel's plot is in fact based on a mystery - after the opening musings and meditations (mostly of the shepherd Joachim) a sequence describing the mysterious death of a young shepherdess follows. The mystery remains unsolved, although the plot points to a few directions where explanation may be found. However, no possibility is confirmed. The whole short novel is marked by a strong lyricism and poeticism.

Švantner's other works include: **Lady** (*Dáma*, 1966) - a collection of short stories, published posthumously, **Never-ending Life** (*Život bez konca* - finished in 1949, first published - censored - in 1956, the complete version appeared in 1974).

DANA KRŠÁKOVÁ

## THE BURNING MOUNTAIN

(extract)

Joachim was falling asleep. The rich aroma of fir branches he was lying on intoxicated him, heavy darkness fell upon his eyelids. Even darkness can be useful and pleasant.

Then he fell asleep, or maybe he just lost track of his own thoughts. But there is a state which cannot be yet defined as sleep, because in this state we still perceive the world with our senses, but our perceptions do not find any echo inside us, they are not clear. Therefore maybe Joachim was in such a state, somewhere between

sleep and consciousness, on the verge of reality and dreams, where one's eyes turn upside down and one loses all sense of direction, unable to recognize what is inside oneself and what is outside. For when he later heard voices coming undoubtedly from the outside, he could not decide whether they were real or not.

The first voice spoke, "When the sky gets dusty in the evening, there are no mists on the mountains..."

The second voice spoke, "This can't be mist, mist is white, but in the night it gets all black, thus we couldn't see it anyway."

The first voice, "Mist would be massing around the ridge and crawling down towards us, because mist is always heavy."

The second voice, "And this strange thing is rising straight up to the sky."

The first voice, "It's not crawling, it's bubbling like smoke."

The second voice, "So it must be smoke."

The first voice, "I've never seen so much smoke before."

The second voice, "But still it is smoke."

The first voice, "Look, the sky is all ablaze."

The second voice, "Joachim, Joachim, are you sleeping? Come out!"

That was when Joachim woke up, realizing that it was his father who was calling him. He jumped up. He hardly recognized the two figures standing close together and pointing upwards, where the mountain-ridge towered.

His father and Uncle Brnča.

In no time Jano dashed out as well.

The sky was dark, but there, where the men were pointing, something was rising from behind the mountain, something which resembled mist at first, but then mist always assumes the colour of its surroundings, and this thing had its own colour. Down, where the mountain ended, the colour was rosy, but sometimes this rosy cloud trembled and something like rays shot up from its mass and these rays then bled into yellow or bloody tones. On the upper part grey colour with a tinge of orange was forcing its way towards the sky. And all of these colours were being regularly shaken by waves of air. Some waves were light, thin, others were heavy, flowing like oily fumes and rising up towards heaven in thick columns, as if wanting to support it.

"The mountain's burning!" Joachim cried out unsteadily.

"What?"

"The mountain's burning."

"I've never heard of anything so strange."

"Look, those rays which shoot up and then turn to blood are flames, and those dark waves which chase one another - that is smoke."

Everybody was looking up and listening to Joachim whose voice was trembling slightly. They admitted that such an apparition could have no other explanation, but they were still unable to grasp it.

The mountain's burning!

Truly.

Therefore it is the mountain. The mountain, rocks, earth, grass,

everything... The mountain, that enormous colossus which lies at rest day and night and never speaks a single word, whose roots must reach down to the heart of Earth itself and whose summit pierces the clouds. It is the mountain. Why, it is just as if you said that the world was burning. Yes, exactly. Who could believe such a thing? Whose eyes could fathom the image of such an event? The mountain. Even this word is overwhelming, therefore how can you conceive the element that could swallow such a giant? Nonsense, utter nonsense.

The mountain's burning!

If you shout this out a bit louder, the waters in the valleys will stop and the forests will roar with awe.

The mountain's burning!

If you hear these words, your blood will freeze and a cracking whip will echo in your ears, as if someone hit you right across the face.

The mountain's burning.

Cover your eyes, lest they catch fire! Kneel and pray, for it is the hand of God reaching down to you.

"The mountain's burning!"

"What can we do?"

"Nothing."

"Rubbish!"

"What?"

"Let's go up there!"

"On the ridge?"

"Yes!"

"Well, it's pitch-dark, but we'll never see such a miracle again."

The sky opened and swallowed a bunch of venomous sparks.

"Well, then, let's be on our way!"

A horrible hissing came from somewhere, as if a snake-pit was yawning.

"Father, will you go, too?"

"I will!"

All four of them went, in the middle of the night. Joachim, Uncle, the old man and Jano. Darkness was slowing their progress, for they had no lamp with them.

Joachim lead them all. He planned to cross the slide and then scramble up the precipice towards the summit.

The slide was the worst place.

The slide always means danger.

It lies on the steepest slope. It lies in waiting for its prey like a predator hidden in the bush. Its prey can be a bird, an animal, but most probably a man, because on the slide he feels as uncertain as a ship's boy who is on the sea for the very first time. Even if the slide lacks bearings which would set it in motion in the most critical of moments to smash everything which crosses its path with its stone mass, it at least lays traps which even the careful and experienced foot of an animal cannot very well avoid. These traps are rocks, the rocks which make a slide a slide. These rocks could not tell you what hand could have carried them all up here, these rocks just lie idly for

days and months, but they are hard, crude, reckless – like everything which is part of the silent kingdom of the Spirit of Earth. They lie without a motion one beside another or one on another like tombstones, like scarce remains of a pile of carcasses. The sun beats them, rains engulf them, winds howl above them, lightning twists wildly among them like a furious snake, and still they lie silently, bunching together, holding on to the earth like mad. But if a foot touches them, they start to swing, they start to fidget, they come alive like an octopus hidden in green waters. They do all of that so the man would lose his balance, and then black abysses open like gaping mouths of hungry leeches.

The slide is most treacherous at night.

Joachim was advancing carefully. First he touched each stone with one foot tentatively, measuring each step. He kept conquering the wide area of the slide bit by bit. From time to time he went down on all four, to support himself better. And the others were following him. They showed one another where dangerous spots were waiting and where secure stones lied, and Jano even lead his father by the hand.

The night was thick and it seemed that it had not yet advanced on its journey the slightest bit. But the men were tough. They fought their way steadily on like a bunch of pioneers. The heel-irons and nails on the soles of their heavy boots stroke a light on the stones. Once in a while a single stone got loose, cracking like a broken limb, slipping among the others or dashing down the slope. At such moments the night broke in two.

“Look, there’s some light!” Jano shouted.

Everybody tried to fathom surrounding darkness which had no beginning and no end. Really! There was a light in the dark, a sail on the sea, a crack in the very guts of Earth. It flickered and flitted about like a fire-fly.

“These must be the shepherds from the Brezno sheep-farm, they have probably seen the fire too,” Uncle explained.

The light went slowly up right through the middle of darkness, as if wanting to draw a fiery line in the night.

“This night will be memorable,” Uncle shouted.

But they were already in the precipice, so they just started climbing the slope. The surface was covered with soft moss and grass. They had to progress sideways to prevent sliding. When they lost balance, they grabbed the scarce but tough mountain-grass.

“Now I can’t see a thing,” Uncle said.

“We are right under the summit and fire is on the other side of the mountain,” Joachim answered.

“Well, that must be precisely where the shepherdess’ cottage stands.”

“Yes.”

“Old Pazúr must be there already.”

The precipice was getting smoother. They soared up as if through a chimney.

“Wait a moment,” said Jano from behind.

They stopped, pricking their ears and searching the dark with

wide-open eyes. Thousands of whips were cracking somewhere above.

“Sparks.”

Then they swerved around a large boulder which appeared in their way, and, all of a sudden, they were on the summit.

The blaze blinded them instantly. So far they had proceeded in utter darkness, not seeing a thing. Now they had emerged to the light, and again they saw nothing. They had to learn to see again like puppies whose eyes are opening for the first time.

They shaded their eyes involuntarily as if against sunlight.

“Hell!”

Yes, it was hell itself down below them. Had they made a step further, they would have tumbled down, just a step more and the hellish furnace would have roasted them like crackling.

Hell!

Yes, it was hell itself, stretching below them, terrible and restless. It boiled, bubbled, roared, roared, bubbled, boiled. It screamed with laughter, it groaned with pain, alternately or at the same time, as if the malice of devils was trying to out roar the pains of tortured souls. In one moment it danced wildly, in another it writhed in spasms. Exploding screeches banged in the dark like threats to heaven itself.

They stood for a moment to absorb the first shock.

The blaze hurt their eyes. It lay heavily on the mountain like a vast sea. It was white like melted iron. It flared and burned. Out of it flaming tongues leaped. There was a whole hundred of them, they cracked and broke in pieces like waterfall meeting sharp rocks, in the next instant they gathered in one giant column of fire which first twisted and writhed like a serpent, licking the ground, but then it rose up, reaching up to the sky. At such a moment the earth shuddered and the sky roared as if thunder had been getting near. Sparks poured down like fiery bullets.

It was the high scrub. Burning.

“When the morning comes, the whole mountain will be bare.”

“God help us if the forests catch fire.”

“They won’t, they’re too low, unless this hell crawls down through the grass.”

While fire is small, it is a worthy servant of man, it never rebels, you can treat it as you like. It is like a playful kitten, jumping from side to side, it loves the wind, it tries to lick your hands faithfully when you stretch them to get some warmth. It is cunning, but it can never catch you unawares, because you can tame it at once. But wait till it gets stronger! It will come upon you like a thief. It will throw itself around, grabbing, swallowing recklessly. Such fire is always hungry, mighty and greedy. Once it gets hold of something, it will cost you much to beat it back. Still, in the valleys, human will is strong enough to handle it, but here, above the sky, fire is the true king of all things and man must flee from it, otherwise it would engulf him. Fire gets stronger every minute, stretching in all directions, playing its cruel tricks with everything.

“It spreads everywhere.”

“Yet it has no wind.”

“The high scrub is cracking.”

“It’s dry.”

They moved to the right slightly, to see the whole area on fire. The furnace looked even more frightening from there. The flames threw themselves in all directions, they banged against one another like chained animals. They fought the night. Fire raged, jumped around, snatching, swallowing everything. It had no mercy. It was abominable, brutish. Darkness tried to enclose it within its walls and when it seized even those, it withdrew up, only to fall upon the flames from above like a bird of prey. Fire incensed it with great clouds of fume. Fire was stronger, but darkness was larger. Fire was faster, but darkness was heavier. They could not defeat each other. And their furious fight was endless. It grew upwards, it spread around, it seemed it would soon engulf the whole earth and sky.

from *The Burning Mountain*, **Malka** (1942)

(translated by Marína Gálisová)

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## RUDOLF FABRY

8 February 1915 Budmerice - 11 February 1982 Bratislava

Poet, prose writer, publicist, artist, book illustrator.

With his first collection, **Severed Hands** (Uťaté ruky, 1935) he caused a furore in the peaceful world of Slovak poetry and criticism. It provoked and inspired with the free, unconstrained play of its poetry and astonished with a new lyricism and untraditional poetic sensibility. It became the starting point for a new period in Slovak literary history from 1935 and the stimulus for the founding of the Slovak surrealist avant-garde. The young followers of French surrealism presented themselves as a group in three individual issues of *Slovenské smery* in 1938 under the title **Yes and No** (Áno a nie). The title *Avantgarda 38* (A 38) was later added to their manifesto.

Slovak surrealists (Pavel Bunčák, Rudolf Fabry, Štefan Žáry, Vladimír Reisel, Július Lenko and others) under the influence of modernist European experiments with form and content, employed automatic procedures with elements of dreams. Its fantasy-imaginative lyricism is based on associative pictures and on the projection of the unconscious into poetry.

Fabry's work **I is Somebody Else** (Ja je niekto iný, 1946) is considered one of the peaks of Slovak surrealism. The fragment from this poetic apocalypse demonstrates Fabry's programme of disrupting the traditional elements of the Slovak lyric. *Féneo* - "the devil of dreams and darkness" is an imaginary hero with whom the author engages in dialogue on their common direction in a country devastated by war. Later work by Fabry is characterised by schematisation (**Bouquets for This Life**, *Kytice tomuto životu*, 1953; **Invitation to the Heavens. Poetry on the Cosmonauts**, *Pozvanie do nebies*, 1972; **Song of the Revolution**, *Pieseň revolúcie*, 1976). There was a certain re-vitalisation in surrealist procedures in the collections **Everyone Returns Once** (*Každý sa raz vráti*, 1964), **A Breeze Above the Stars of Death** (*Nad hviezdami smrti vánok*, 1969), **The Unstony Rock the Unrocky Boulder** (*Skala nekamenná bralo neskálnaté*, 1973) and **The Metamorphosis of Metaphors** (*Metamorfózy metafor*, 1978).

Other works include: Poetry - **Water Clock, Clock of Sand** (*Vodné hodiny, hodiny piesočné*, 1938), **The Rose Bleeds on the Shield** (*Na štít ruža krváca*, 1977).

Poetry for Children - **Drawings from a Little Palm and Lines on Them** (*Kresby z malej dlane a veršičky na ne*, 1950).

Prose - **To Praise with the Pen, to Burn with the Pen** (*Perom chvál, perom páľ*, 1956), **Salaam Alaikum: Conversations about Old and New Egypt** (*Salam alejkum. Rozprávanie o starom a novom Egypte*, 1958), **The Good Old Ship** (*Stará dobrá loď*, 1962), **Meetings with the Sakura: Reports from EXPO '70 and from Japan** (*Stretnutie pod sakurami. Reportáže z Expo '70 a z Japonska*, 1971), **The World Tastes Thus** (*Tak chutí svet*, 1978), **The Bells Don't Ring for Such as These** (*Takým zvony nezvonía*, 1978).

Radio Plays - **Morning of the Teachers** (*Ranní učítelia*, 1972), **A Day of Bryndzové Halušky** (*Deň bryndzových halušiek*, 1973), **After the Corpse to India** (*Po svoju mŕtvolu do Indie*, 1974)

EVA JENČÍKOVÁ

## A SECOND MEETING WITH FÉNEO

*(extract)*

This was the time when I said to myself  
 Look he's come look he's already here  
 and for the second time this time  
 I met Féneo  
 of whom a poet said:

“Oh devil of dreams and horrors do you know the beauty  
 of living  
 grief pain melancholy and the sad fall of the mallet  
 when human throats are crushed by a cruel executioner  
 those who sense their end lying on pallets  
 Oh devil of horrors and melancholy you know the cruelty  
 of living

You are king of my secrets and rose of my rose  
 when the vines of my desire round your hips curl  
 the bells of fear and anxiety ring throughout the whole  
 world  
 look the wings of my moods fan your place of repose  
 Oh devil of dreams and the dark, the god of my verse”

Or they said this of him:

“He's the devil of dream and revels in it  
 he's hungry for horror and savage in poetry  
 like the queen eagle warming the brows of her brood  
 and knowing the height of the sun she guards the nest of  
 dreams”

Thus we met Féneo  
 and we stood face to face  
 neither he nor I  
 no-one spoke  
 bellows of darkness swelled in our mouths  
 a departing train roared in the distance  
 the gates of houses closed  
 the town I had recalled was lighting up  
 the clocks wondered  
 fish slept  
 and the river stood still  
 a death bell of calm beat above the head of a lonely walker  
 the rain of which they'd talked ceased  
 the endless space compels  
 emptiness is a mirror of sadness



lying at anchor above the city clouds  
 while death the mother of prayer is close by  
 beneath us a bridge of the bones of mist  
 above us children's stars  
 their rays advance  
 into beds with curtains of dissembling  
 there where the honest servants of obscenity  
 and brave murderers of their freedom  
 I mean by that the peaceful inhabitants of the city  
 over whom we stand  
 and in whom we are  
 Féneo and I

It was the second time this spring  
 I'd met Féneo  
 and it was a terrible pilgrimage  
 we visited the wolf dens of the withering of life  
 we visited the pillars of the shame of virtue  
 and it was a worse pilgrimage than we imagined  
 where distances are set by the hands of the moon  
 where the horses of time drink vats of blood  
 there we wandered  
 and marvelled at the fields of asphodel  
 where each cowslip means murder  
 and the valleys of destruction were utterly yellow

There we walked feasting as though we gazed on our knees  
 we looked and saw  
 trunks full of horrible beetles  
 as they ripened toads of human ideals  
 and sighed with hydrophobia  
 they whooped in lamentation  
 they whined in a bitch's voice

Here are the countries of ugliness  
 there I wandered with Féneo

At that time  
 through a locked living spring  
 flowed tears of a tigress  
 only a single flower remained  
 a lily of desire and sorrow  
 running with the nectar of old bile  
 which will at last certainly  
 mix with the plundered wolf's eye  
 of my unknown fate

I say for the second time  
that I met Féneo  
on the deserted and dark banks of a living spring  
Féneo had the shape of a watery stone of death  
I knew him by his green eroded eye  
saying to him Trismegistus three times  
he assumed his proper shape  
a great number of thunder spots and other light  
at once ignited on the plates of lakes  
and my heart which is lit  
stabbed me cruelly with its spur

My heart why do you pierce me  
I told my heart  
I was truly contrite  
you're like a tiny golden louse  
on the fiery muscatel of an unattainable woman

Oh there's talk of that pilgrimage  
to the countries of destruction

from *I Is Somebody Else* (1946)

### **THE THIRD**

I walk in a meadow  
in my native land  
with my shadow and my shadow's shadow  
Who is this third?

The sun, the path?  
A stream or bird?  
Butterfly, train or wild poppy?  
Tell me who is this third?

What kind of grief-struck ill,  
A lump of earth, a hawk, a pine?  
A cloud drifting from a hill?  
Who is this third?

Is it a skylark,  
its song's dusty trace  
sprinkled with sweat from my face?  
Who is this third?

Buzzing on a cherry tree

a murmuring swarm is heard,  
 my childhood humming in me.  
 This is the third.

from **Everyone Returns Once** (1964)

**BUT IF ONCE AGAIN...**

Perhaps tomorrow I will appear  
 without a roof over my head and no-one will heat my  
 supper.

But it's useless to eat with the absent!  
 To eat here is necessary where life still flourishes  
 where the bones of the herdsmen crash in battle  
 where crude shepherds dance their earth dance  
 where Cinder Boy cuts off the heads of dragons.  
 Tell me why should the dead eat?  
 But when I come to life again  
 like the dry flower of the muscatel sprinkled  
 by the water of life, this true blood,  
 don't wait for me, prisoners of springs without fear.  
 I'll strip every well of its layers of hide,  
 I'll clean every tree of caterpillars,  
 I'll leach every flower of the colours of destruction,  
 I'll blow the clouds of fog off every hill,  
 don't adorn my spirit with a crown of thorns,  
 don't pierce my heart with a brooch of sorrow,  
 don't choke my tender throat with stone,  
 we'll meet each again in this world,  
 when I rise up from death - allelujah, allelujah!

from **A Breeze Above the Stars of Death** (1969)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

# ŠTEFAN ŽÁRY

12 December 1918 Poniky

Poet, prose writer, essayist, translator, member of the surrealist group. His collection, **Animal Zodiak** (Zvieratník, 1941) is dominated by automatic writing in which he also arranged surrealist prose. In his next collection, **An Age With Stigmata** (Stigmatizovaný vek, 1944) the writer's anxiety in the world war is presented in apocalyptic images of death and destruction and through mythological symbolism. The collection, **The Seal of Full Amphorae** (Pečať plných amfor, 1944) bears signs of fascination with wartime Rome where he was as a soldier with the Slovak army - fragments of actual experience in an indestructible city, cultural reminiscences and visions created by the war resulted in an impressive assembly. A plunge into sombre visions comes in the collection **Spider Pilgrim** (Pavúk pútnik, 1946) which completed Žáry's surrealist phase. Czech poetism influenced the book of villonesque ballads, **Good Day, Mr. Villon** (Dobrý deň, pán Villon, 1947) where the author is stylised as a cursed poet.

In his rich output Žáry entered a phase of schematisation during the 1950's, and a rhapsodic return to surrealist poetics, **The Muse Besieges Troy** (Múza oblieka Tróju, 1965) in his last phase where reminiscence prevails.

Autobiographical motifs from the war and Italy dominate his prose, **The Air of the Apennines** (Apeninský vzduch, 1947), **Down in the South** (Dolu na juhu, 1955), **Azure Anabasis** (Azúrová anabáza, 1972), **A Year with the She-Wolf** (Rok s vlčicou, 1982). He had popular success with his portraits and recollected stories about writers, **Snapshots of Masks** (Snímanie masiek, 1979), **Meetings with Poets** (Rande s básnikmi, 1988), **The Anecdote Dictionary of Slovak Writers** (Anekdôtický slovník slovenských spisovateľov, 1996.)

He has translated poetry by Eluard, Lorca, Pablo Neruda, Quasimodo, Ungaretti and other French and Italian poets. He has written for children and young people.

Other works: Poetry collections - **The Sword and Laurel** (Meč a vavrín, 1948), **After Me Others** (Po mne iní, 1957), **Icarus Eternally Alive** (Ikar večne živý, 1960), **A Miraculously Sober Ark** (Zázračný triezvy koráb, 1960), **A Woman Twelfefold** (Dvanásťkrát žena, 1964), **Pilgrimage After the Humming Bird** (Púť za kolibríkom, 1966), **A Midsummer Night's Dream** (Svetojánsky sen, 1974), **Black Ophelia** (Čierna Ofélia, 1984), **Toboggan** (Tobogan, 1992).

VALÉR MIKULA

## PANTOMIMOS

I

You are silent  
And although I can hear your harmonious breathing  
The sky chases it to me in a lovely robe of azure  
Come  
I'll pin it like a headband  
So the roses on which you tread giggle

Wonderful  
 your foot your tread your toes ants  
 they undulate at midday like a wedding march  
 Played by a cricket on a little fiddle  
 In your small breasts  
 The further you go away the closer you are to me with  
 your feelers

Your voice is closer to me  
 Each mulberry repeats it  
 Burning in eyes sweetly peeled  
 It seems to me a horse snorts  
 And brings the throned heights in the shape of a geyser  
 You are proud  
 The Roman lady I have defined exactly in my dreams  
 Touchable in a space  
 Vanishing swiftly  
 Not mine at all

The poet is alone  
 as ever until now  
 He writes lines which remain wildernesses  
 A single caravan interrupts the dust of battles  
 The sun gigantic as a cliff  
 Falls and falls into the river bed  
 Through the rainbow's parabolic track  
 You stand at the centre point  
 Only you again  
 Completely naked  
 Covered only in thoughts  
 Which I would like to see in my palms  
 sincerely lit

These lines make sense only if  
 you will not know of them  
 And you'll play a little drama  
 A pantomime  
 In which the stabbed poet crumples  
 Without loss of blood  
 And you'll lean over his breast  
 A wardrobe of sadness and desire

II

Under the tree of your breasts I want to lie utterly  
 exhausted  
 Sick unto death

A hand reaching for an orange  
With a burning cheek  
In fact it won't yet be me  
Because close to you metals change to liquid gold  
You give everyone something of yourself  
I cease to be myself  
I walk in your footsteps more faithfully than animals  
Oh woman beyond the limits of my reach  
Kingdom of maniacs  
Oh woman disrupter of the peaceful river  
Incendiary of quiet hearts  
A blaze ignited by a sleeping mandolin  
Oh woman trembling by the flame of will o'the wisps in  
late evenings

Oh woman  
The most obdurate among the sphinxes  
Over the balsamed body of the dead earth

In a while you must be fierce  
But it's not anger only despotism  
In a while calm as a meadow  
I seek you behind every curtain of the day  
I ask those who walk  
If they haven't seen my meadow sap which flows inside me  
The warmth of my body  
Energy and my colour  
The turbine of movement and breath

So I discover you so I lose you  
Hopelessly dry like a fig tree  
Angry

The poet smokes and drinks  
After he drinks again and seeks medicine against pain  
Nepenthes  
And against rage  
Acholol

from *An Age with Stigmata* (1944)

## **MASK**

So today I'm smoking a Virginia cigarette  
I'm not a lord  
Only it's sweet for me to sprawl at the table  
To drink an aperitif

And put my feet up

It's quiet and hot

The fig tree gives out its scent

The bare feet of Roman women are intoxicating from  
a dream

I lean from a window

The street boils

But not from anger

A little fear a little forgiveness

In an arcade before so noisy

Not a soul

And even the most wretched wanderer is drugged by  
Spring

Picking up cigarette butts from the pavement he sings  
a song

And taps the beat with his foot.

You've heard the city snigger

The city which forgets the present

In a moment it dries its tears

Only eyelids swollen from perpetual wakefulness

And holes sealed with black blood

They give an impression

That not everything is calm on the surface

Because here in Rome in the Piazza del Popolo

You don't know what is the organ and what is the music of  
the aeroplane

In a while these people forget

In a while I, too, forget

Opposite in a window a girl is getting dressed

In the cleavage of her blouse she shows a portion of the  
sky

And when she sees me

Her hair is like an enchanted forest

Falling over her face

She vanishes in shadow

And when she appears again

It's already dusk

I can't recognise myself

I'm angry and I'm a human being once more.

from **The Seal of Full Amphorae** (1944)

## THE PIHI BIRD

I would like to be a pihi, a little bird -  
which has been devised by the gods  
so that it has just a single wing

and when it flies in a crooked line  
it's never alone, only paired with some other  
it balances evenly.

from *Icarus Eternally Alive* (1960)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)



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# JÁN ČERVEŇ

12 February 1919 Abramová – 31 July 1942 Bratislava

Prose writer, the author of one collection of short stories, **The Blue Cathedral** (Modrá katedrála, 1942). His untimely death cut short his literary career.

Together with Dominik Tatarka, Pavol Hrtus Jurina and Peter Karvaš he belongs to the free experimental group known as the *poets of sujet*. Against the stylistic effects of lyrical ornamentalism and the mythical-folklore paradigms of *naturismus* Červeň sets dream-like, emotionally imaginative principles of text construction. The rehabilitation of the epic function of thematic elements in literary works (plot, protagonists, the external world), the organisation of subject became for him the most important aspects of art where an author can present epic events from his own viewpoint. At the stylistic level he fragments the logic of causality and time, making detail significant which is the author's means of understanding the originality and tragedy of human existence.

Červeň's protagonists are new-romantic oddities (even their names are chosen carefully) marked by physical, psychological or social handicaps. Their estrangement from the world is accompanied by feelings of fear and horror mixed with the phantom of death. Dream has a special function as entrance to a state of non-being, as do sensitive perceptions of colour (blue to yellow, blue to gold) and an impressionist sense of smell, taste and sound.

Hippolyte and Victoria are examples of Červeň's protagonists in the short story, *Broken Circle*, connected by their physical ugliness. After a dream meeting with his dead mother Hippolyte has plastic surgery and escapes his pre-ordained fate. With this he leaves Victoria in an unchanging isolation marked by incurable illness.

Other work: **Blue and Gold** (Modrá a zlatá, 1964) – besides a fifth story from the original collection **The Blue Cathedral** the editor has selected from Červeň's juvenilia, a study of Shakespeare and extracts from his diary.

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## THE BROKEN CIRCLE

(extract)

But that second summer he came only in the evening so no-one could recognise the features of his face. People who met him and recognised him because of his swinging walk said, as if they saw him every day for a whole year, "Good evening, Mr Hippolyte."

He, surrounded by darkness, replied. "Good evening, Anton" or "Good evening, Mária," according to whoever it was.

For some it seemed strange that he was among them again and they greeted him. "You've come then, you've come?"

To these he replied. "I've come because in summer the cities die and a man needs to live."

He was cheerful and he suppressed his cheerfulness, but they didn't notice that. He walked beside them with a smile, his eyes had a shine like glass. They, simple people from the mountains clad in black cloaks, turned their heads and watched him silently. He withdrew wrapped in a black cloak, but it wasn't a cloak it was night,

which hidden in the crowns of the trees crouched on the hill slopes and did not move.

He mounted the stairs and immediately smelt that Paulina was preparing eggs. She came to meet him thinking that it was someone coming from the village.

“Who are you?” she asked.

But he didn’t answer, but stood directly in the light so she could recognise him better.

“Hippolyte” she called out in joy. “Hippolyte!” Little bells rang in the courtyard.

She looked him and suddenly she saw that it was not him. How was it possible that she could be so mistaken? Or... it really wasn’t him? Oh, if he would just say a word so she could hear what sort of voice he had. Oh, if... And now he was opening his mouth (but not his, not Hippolyte’s; it was a completely strange mouth). “It’s me, me!”

It was indeed Hippolyte.

At night the rain started again and stopped just before morning. Drops slid from the roof and one by one splashed into a puddle: splash, splash. They drew a silver line through the air as they dropped.

It was Friday and appeared to be the prettiest day of the whole wet week.

“Do you know what has happened to Hippolyte?”

“To your nephew?”

“To him. He’s got very handsome.”

And the breeze sputtered in the rinsed sky like a splinter of sharpened glass. They smiled;

“How could it be?”

“So handsome. He’s like a picture now, like an actual painted picture. You wouldn’t even recognise him, if you didn’t hear his voice. They’ve given him a new face in the city.”

Again they just smiled.

“It can’t be possible.”

“I thought so, too. But now he’s completely different, believe me.”

“We can see him, can’t we?” they said to her as if she was rearing a precious bird in a cage.

She climbed with tiny steps and though she didn’t run those steps were actually the same as running.

“Just come! Come!” and she said it to all, also Victoria. She was sitting beneath the bell tower on the slope, where green grass and hare bells grow. It wasn’t clear whether she was resting or praying or whether she thinking about Hippolyte just then.

“Beauty has returned to him, Victoria,” she heard from Paulina, “It’s incredible. We’ve never seen anything like that, not I and not you!”

In the distance there was clop of horse’s hooves and the rattle of a wagon.

The girl looked at the old woman and Paulina observed her red

eyes within which grew a lot of small trees and within which perhaps one could see white houses.

“He’s got a nice straight forehead, nose and a smooth brow!”

Victoria had lost her voice. She opened her mouth... opened...

“And his chin isn’t yellow nor ashen. He simply resembles a human being... Oh, my little, my poor Victoria!

When she heard those words it seemed to her that it might have been said by Hippolyte, that he was standing next to her and that he was getting ready to sit on the grass beside her (as they had sat the previous year).

“Is it true?” she asked finally, full of mistrust and she stretched her arms with the elbows turned out. Small veins like streams on a map were visible at the joints.

“Absolutely true and if it hadn’t happened in these times people would say that a miracle had happened. As if they’d cut off his old head...”

“...that detestable...”

“... yes, detestable! They’ve cut it off and stuck on a new one, completely new.”

“So then he came here?”

“Yes, it’s summer and the sun lures him here.”

Victoria folded her arms and thought. She sat there for a long time after Paulina had left and even didn’t hear the bell clanging at lunch time. The old woman kept repeating to her in the distance. “Come, Victoria, come! - - -”

He’d fallen asleep in the orchard under the pear tree.

Thin, plain cloud filed across the sky like a great army; slowly with dignity without stopping and without their will adopting a thousand changes, shadows and colours.

With both hands she caught hold of the fence posts; a freshening wind blew her hair over her eyes.

“Lord, is it you, Mr Hippolyte?” she wanted to shout. She knew that she’d got a weak voice, but she knew she could shout; she sensed enough strength in her.

But she got it into her head, that it might disturb wake him up from his dreams that he would suddenly jump and would notice her there. Not for anything in the world, not for anything could it be allowed to happen! She was better off silent.

She opened the gate and took a step, two steps and approached the sleeper quietly... Thief, thief...

Why thief? No... but if he opened his eyes and saw her coming, bending forward, yellow and horrible he would say for certain that she’d come to steal.

When she’d come close to his legs she said. “It’s true what they say, he’s become completely handsome.”

There was an uncovered spot on his chest where his heart was beating and she toyed with a long shiny pin. Where had she got it from?... Indeed from where?... She was like a little girl from school... Ah, yes. She worked with her hands at home and it was one of the pins she kept in a white box.

She told him in her mind, "Why have you broken the circle which confined us and made us brother and sister. Why have you betrayed me?"

He gave her an answer, "I don't know why. Perhaps because I wanted to be happy like other people."

"And now?"

"Oh.... now... Can't you see how peacefully I'm sleeping and resting? When I wake up I'll sing and be cheerful... won't I?"

She went pale, "Yes, yes..."

"And you? Will you stay as you are forever, Victoria?"

"Oh no, not forever... only until death..."

"Only until death?" he laughed. And then, "But don't envy me... it'll indeed be only until death..." And as she heard this, she left, yellow and horrible. She turned back so that she could see once more the place where his heart beat.

"It's a short time until death... Short..."

And she threw away the pin with which she wanted to stab that place.

from *The Broken Circle*, **The Blue Cathedral** (1942)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# JÁN KOSTRA

4 December 1919 Turčianska Štiavnica - 5 November 1975

Bratislava

Poet, translator from French (Villon, Baudelaire) and Czech poetry (Mácha). Kostra is a typical lyric poet with his poetry coming from the traditional sources of lyrical inspiration; themes of love, adoration of women and beauty, seeking a home and reflections on the transience of human life - these are his main and abiding themes. In his first book, **Nests** (Hniezda, 1937) melancholy prevails - the author is prevented from experiencing full erotic happiness by thoughts on the fleeting nature and futility of existence. In contrast with a decadently coloured despair there is an evident desire for certainty - in an erotic self-forgetfulness, the endurance of poetry and a return to childhood. The double themes of the freely composed ode, **Ave Eva** (1943) contains two of the constants in Kostra's poetry - woman and beauty. In his books from the Second World War, **Time Cogged** (Ozubený čas, 1940), **The Broken Vase** (Puknutá váza, 1942) and **The Superiority of Sadness** (Presila smútku, 1946) Kostra's scepticism has grown to such an extent that the only certainty and last resort of beauty is poetic form. In the 1950's Kostra's work entered a rhetorical-schematic mode which is no longer relevant. In his last, but undervalued, collection, **Only Once** (Len raz, 1968) he continued reflections on his own work, on internal and external conditions which can liberate creativity. The themes of becoming old and facing death are made new in this collection.

Kostrá is a creative poet where we find both feeling and self-directed irony, artistic and civic expression, of course with a vital optimism and scepticism, drawn up from human sources, honest self-questioning and decadent stylisation. To summarise in most of his poems he knows how to evoke a mood which can be unambiguously described as lyrical.

Other works: collections of poetry - **My Native Land** (Moja rodná, 1939), **Everything is Good as Can Be** (Všetko je dobre tak, 1942), **For This May** (Za ten máj, 1950), **Maple Leaf** (Javorový list, 1953), **Rose Hips and Sun Flowers** (Šípky a snečnice, 1958), **Poem, Your Work** (Báseň, tvoje dielo, 1960), **Every Day** (Každý deň, 1964).

VALÉR MIKULA

## TO HUDDLE

Praisesong for a hedgehog which curls into a ball.

When anxiety arrives and once more I feel bitter  
I'd like to huddle under my prickles' shelter  
in safety against a less than gentle touch  
warm myself in my own dream, in my own blood,  
beneath a perished rainbow stretch a net of sleep,  
with the palms of my hands caress your transparent hips  
plunging into depths where there is gloom now,  
where the leaf falls now and the wind tears away  
a word from my mouth like a leaf destined for destruction,

to caress with the palms of my hands and seek a burrow  
again  
for a safe nest, for a fortress hidden away in time  
to huddle into myself where you inhabit naked in form  
and place my brow against your hands reaching to calm  
hurts that are infected, to soothe wounds that are open.  
To huddle into myself and dissolve inside a woman.

from **Nest** (1937)

## **A WOMAN WALKED BY IN MAY**

A woman walked by in a wave of sunlight,  
it was the exact silence that comes before rain  
When a cloud sprinkled the leaves of the chestnut  
it did not snuff out its candles of blossom.

Then the wind poured over the slopes  
of her lovely hips rippling her skirts.  
It didn't blow away bees that hummed  
around honey from the pillars of blossom.

A woman walked by in May. Her light gown  
in the breeze remained immensely blue.  
And a poet who walked on the Earth  
buried his brow in its soft folds.

from **My Native Land** (1939)

## **SOMETHING HAS BEEN SPOILED**

Something has been spoiled  
Perhaps a water main pipe has burst  
Perhaps water rushes in below decks  
They are keeping something from me  
Someone has died.

Or the lovely woman  
inhabiting my dreams  
has upped and away with someone else  
and sends back  
how happy she is  
in safety  
before ruin and obliteration

Somewhere deep inside my bowels  
 a small flame spreads  
 on an inflammable cord  
 or through the branches of veins  
 the bird nested  
 known as death  
 it emerges from the nest  
 and sings

I don't hear it yet  
 It is still silent  
 Already I feel  
 the galloping of the rider  
 with ominous tidings

Something has been spoiled  
 Already I am terrified  
 by this simple-souled  
 careless one  
 who comes to ask  
 who comes to betray  
 to murder

from **My Native Land** (1939)

## **A MAN WAKES UP AT NIGHT**

A man wakes up at night  
 and all once can see his error gleaming bright

as if he'd found a mushroom at the border of a wood,  
 a place he'd wandered in since childhood.

He kneels beside it in damp mosses  
 and his hand stretches to the lamp switch, presses.

Afterwards he gazes in the silence of the night  
 at how this hint of trace passes out of sight.

from **Rose Hips and Sun Flowers** (1958)

## **AUTUMN WON'T WAIT**

Autumn won't wait until your summer plans have ripened.  
 Anyway summer was full of blind thunderstorms.

Autumn won't wait. Nor even announce itself:

Hide away a fleeting summer event  
like a gem in a jewel box  
and don't wait any more for a bright spot.

And the low lid has been fastened.

from **Only Once** (1968)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

### **HOW GOOD IT IS TO BE BAREFOOT**

How good it is to be barefoot  
walking on your own carpet.  
then moving on to the cooler parquet  
and the even cooler linoleum  
and the tiles in the bathroom.

I seek ice cubes which are colder still  
but I find just the tin ice mould  
where they were not so long ago.  
This is coldest.

I put it's base against  
my heart  
and feel through my shirt how it cools me for a while.

It feels strange.

If I knew how to work  
your icebox  
I'd leave freezing cubes  
of distilled remorseful water.

from **First and Last** (1977)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)



## DOMINIK TATARKA

14 March 1913 Drienové - 10 May 1989 Bratislava

Prose writer, essayist, publicist. His resistance to the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 resulted in his expulsion from the Communist party. He was an original signatory to *Charter 77* - the Czech civil initiative for the protection of human rights - and became the most persecuted Slovak dissident. After his expulsion from the Union of Slovak Writers he lost all possibility of publishing, he could not travel abroad and his name disappeared from text books. He lived on an invalid's pension on the edge of starvation under constant supervision by the state police.

Tatarka's debut was a collection of short stories, **In the Anxiety of the Quest** (V úzkosti hľadania, 1942) in which he attempted aesthetic innovations in prose (as one of the poets of sujet). His next short novel, **The Miraculous Maiden** (Panna záračnica, 1944) experimented with surrealist methods impressively evoked the unchained games of Bratislava bohemians in the phantasmagoric atmosphere of death in the war. A partly autobiographical novel, **The Priest's Republic** (Farská republika, 1948) indicated a sharp turn towards the left and a change in his poetic. His expression had a more social-realist character and was marked by schematisation. By 1956, however, Tatarka was publishing in magazines "a fantastic tract from the end of one epoch," **The Demon of Agreement** (Démon súhlasu, 1963), in which in the form of satire he reacts to the diabolic manipulation of consciousness in the era of Stalin.

A remarkable artistic change in Tatarka's poetic can be seen in the two works, **Dialogues Without End** (Rozhovory bez konca, 1959) and the short story, **The Wickerwork Armchairs** (Prútené kreslá, 1962). Some motifs - a loving fellow-feeling towards women, anxiety over loneliness - which characterise his work in the 1970's and 1980's have already appeared. From this latter samizdat his writings have the character of repeated variations in a diary with neither an ending or a beginning. Tatarka's friend, Ján Mlynárik, arranged them into a trilogy, **Scribbles** (Písanky, 1984, 1999), the art historian, Eva Štolbová, recorded her dialogues with Tatarka which appeared under the title, **Recordings** (Navrávačky, 1988).

The act of writing for Tatarka meant both self-preservation and a self-acknowledging gesture at the same time the hopelessness of the writer's condition without the chance of a public reaction.

Other works: A double novella, **Dialogues Without End** (Rozhovory bez konca, 1959 - *The Cock in Agony*, Kohútik v agónii, *Staying With You A Little Longer*, Ešte s vami pobudnúť); the trilogy, **Scribbles** (**Letters to Eternity**, Listy do večnosti, 1988 - exile publication, **Alone Against the Night**, Sám proti noci, 1984 - only in Czech translation, **Scribbles**, 1984 -samizdat); **Scribbles**, 1999 - the edition of his son Oleg; **In a Bad Time** (V nečase, 1986 - samizdat); **Wordless Tale** (Neslovný príbeh, 1989 - samizdat).

A selection of essays, conversation and criticism, **Against the Demon** (Proti démonom, 1968); **Conversation on Culture and Discourse** (Hovory o kultúre a obcovaní, 1995); **Culture as Discourse** (Kultúra ako obcovanie, 1996).

Travel features, **Man on the Road** (Človek na cestách, 1957).

Film Scenarios, **The Miraculous Maiden** (distributed under the translated title *The Wonder-Maid*) which was made in 1966 under the direction of Štefan Uher.

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## LETTERS TO ETERNITY

*(extract)*

ERINA, DARLING - THE MOST, MOST, MOST,

...You invited me, me a written off, non-existent, farty, time-server for a walk.

They sat down at eleven in the morning in the Rotunda and sat and sat until closing time.

...We sit opposite one another, at least ten hours in a single breath. We don't get drunk. At most we have three vodka and tonics over the whole period. We didn't embrace, we didn't kiss, I didn't caress your breasts or arse, we didn't have lunch, supper, we didn't go to bed, we didn't promise anything to each other, we didn't dicker, we didn't "show each other magpies in a ring", we didn't moan about the party and the government, we didn't jerk off neither bodilessly nor bodily nor psychically nor by word nor cosmically nor in our imagination. Anything that I can remember and reason out that we might have done over those ten hours, I say we didn't. We gazed at each other for ten hours... Though also gazing (is) activity. What I, what we together or separately did-didn't do, what happened to us over all that time, is happening, where we descended and still always descend, what you mean to me, was shown to me in a dream...

...I, Little Tear, though I have expressed myself in words for the whole of my life, can't express myself like my dream... In a person, within me there's something of genius. (When Security read this, as it is understandable that they always read my letters, they rolled about, they shat themselves laughing: That wanker, that pisspot, he was really shit-scared, we gave [him] a good seeing to. It's ridiculous, you try it: Everything is shit definitely. And so we Security are shit, too.)

YOU WRITE SO THAT FATE WILL NOT PERMIT US to be parted from each other. I would say: courage, freedom. We have to say something to each other with words, without words. Fate is the greatest instance which speaks at the end. The wife of the murdered poet, the greatest woman of our times, Nadezhda Mandelstam, descended with him into the inferno and she recounts that he said: I have certainty with you. He said to Nadezhda: who drummed it into your head that a person should be happy or unhappy? (I admit modestly that unless we are penetrated by certainty we would complain.) Who are you? Who am I? Who are we? Freedom, which we have become receptive to, tender, holy, courageous. It'll come, he told me, I've known it from the beginning. You can also see it within me because we have descended into ignorance.

THE MOST, I STILL NAME YOU THUS... I hope you don't consider me to be a senile idiot (even though I am). Something besides sensuality, desires, depths, the unconscious was said to exist from the beginning and developed, something ancient, historical, eternal, moral (if you wish). That ours hasn't had the opportunity, I concede, but once, All of You, had a woman's blessing written on your

ribs, a cosmic perception of two human existences... (Unfinished, it's truly impossible, nothing can be repeated, nothing is for a second time, everything is unique, everything between us is unique, unrepeatable...) Most, you aren't allowed to leave me conscious that the most tender words, gestures, gifts, were just through chance, from fooling around, frivolity. Believe me I'm not sentimental, I concede the material nature of our existence, I'm dying, vanishing, I'm ridiculous. I can still be a silly old man. We can't deny ourselves like this, degrade ourselves, that things were only thus, we wrote only thus, talked thus, we were blissful all the time, then afterwards fell silent. Enough.

I BUILD YOU, I BURY YOU, from boulders I construct your walls, your imaginary hardness, strength. You are a saint in a high place, on it a fortress. All men will rampage through on the hooves of their horses, your district chiefs and the highest of all desecrate you. You're writing speeches for them; what bliss for you that they have occupied you forever. On the banks of the Hron there are the main headquarters of their forces. My endless darling, you are a nitwit. Can you understand how I suffer knowing you write speeches for these chiefs. (And yet you've do perceive it otherwise I wouldn't know about it.) I can tell you nothing else. It's better that you give yourself publicly in the main square to Commander What-a-cunt than write speeches and deliver them from their guilt. For What-a-cunt is every woman, kill me if you like, what-a-cunt, what-a-secretary, what-a-Slovak-woman. What-a-cunt-Stalin the all-sided shitty rapist seminarist like a monster growing from women's cunts but chiefly - I concede - from male genitals. Let's drink, Minister What-a-cunt. Minister What-a-cunt has his own self-servicing vaginas, desirable, dreaming about the sodomitic rape. Erina, darling, my midnight fantasy is a blasphemy from disgust. A man or woman who voluntarily serves as a What-a-cunt poetically, frantically yet sighing at the act of rape.

ERINA, FORGIVE. But I have to over-react, as they say, obscenely.

For the fifth time of asking they have checked out the poet (with the big arse) who was expelled from the party, who wished to re-enter the party. During the war he was terrified that he would go to the Caucasus "only for filming." The partisans shot him in the arse. (Where else?) For the fifth time of asking the checked-out poet (a genius) exposes it. I've told you this so many times. He puts his hand into the crack in his arse and walks confessing to the Party back home. I've drawn on the envelope, which you all know, that communism is a red apple, that I was filming in the Caucasus, that Rusky or our partisans shot me in the arse. I've nothing else to tell you. Because I was broken like that, God knows how often and how obscenely exposing myself, holding my arse, I was finally checked out, recognized as checked out. (Now interminably, cruelly he dies. The party back home will honour him with a state funeral) Poet and minister What-cunts will eulogize: The Party will never forget what you have done for it.

...I'll remain Mr. Furious and you Sleeping Ruzenka. It'll be super-sensuality if you'd say it. If you'd say a series, a litany of obscene words to which I over-react walking the streets, spilling words, insulting words, and now words absolutely inoffensive.

I LITTLE TEAR BEING SOMEONE in a waking state am unable to sharply, sensuously, urgently express my human relationships, still less prevent violence as shown to me in a dream...

And I, as if always in a dream again, can't and can't awake. Politics and love are mixed up together. A god would not be familiar with it, with a sabre he couldn't cut it from head to toe... In the position of the prehistoric hunched dead we lay together in a state of bliss. Then she awoke and said astonished: He's raping me.

And in me like a flash of lightning: He raped her.

You wanted to say that in the position of the prehistoric hunched dead that your father raped you, your step-father. It wasn't unpleasant, in sleep. Now your drunken husband does it to you.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT HE TOLD ME? HE TOLD ME, JUST IMAGINE IT, THIS: For such tiny hands a great deal of money is needed.

Before me in my mind or within my ignorance opened a chasm of the ages, a chasm of culture; it took my breath away. I gazed as if into an apparition. At length I sighed with astonishment, "Genius".

Whether richly endowed by God or nature, thousands of years of culture cultivated by a woman whether the eternal type of lover, consort, countess she knew and in the eyes of men saw her price, altered it, traded with it whether in the marketplace or the cathedral. At that moment I didn't think anything, as it is written because the all-knowing author and his hero had thought a valid truth at the apex of the century. No, I looked in astonishment within my ignorance which flooded me, whether through the Semitic or Homeric cow eyes, with a goddess laid bare and illuminated.

"GENIUS," I SAID.

"Come to that, what is genius?"

I myself had no idea it is in medical terms or what a genius could be. I'd heard my own voice, how it sounds lowered from a distance. A scene in an ambulance lit up in my soul, I saw it like a picture of a naked countess or goddess, which had stopped, raising her little hands, opening her palms accepting the annunciation by the Archangel *Ecce ancilla tua*. I thought to myself: I didn't have but I have taken everything away, you yourself told me. Because you have in your lap a low curly fur coat as in the Song of Solomon and this inspires me. A warm, fertile, wild rain falls on the goddess. By the semblance of a lover, position, the evaporation of sweat you have pulled him (into) oblivion, unmemory. Enchanted he has heard the rustling rain with which he embraces you and heartens himself saying in a rational way: For such, that is your tiny hands, a great deal of money is needed. And you are not even shocked and recount it joyfully and unknowingly to the man you love as if it were a joke or

sharp insight. You see and I was dreaming how I could take care of you.

In torment I felt as if this woman was in me in darkness like a full moon in a blue courtyard. I searched more for her in myself until I searched (in) her, lovely, exciting, as if they had been here together.

THIS REGIME HAS ENSLAVED A SMALL NATION into self-forgetfulness. The greatest representative cries of feeling (in this amnesia) are for the wealth we have won. He writes an emotional article for a world-wide publication, *Thirty Years of Free Life*. In his speech there isn't the slightest mention that in these thirty years he was humiliated in prison for eight of them. Every day he appears on television in the role of a naive although male sexual organ, raped at least 1000 times on postage stamps, streets, TV screens, celebrations, anniversary days of an ever-present man, known intimately.

And Erina? She'll appear to me in her naiveté, untouchably despairing, despairingly untouchable. "It's not necessary, but I'll take everything off," she says to me. Morbidity. Eroticism sodden with political morbidity. The doctor's magical utterance, "For such tiny hands a great deal of money is needed" in our own connection I must perceive it only so: You are wonderful, but I am neither a regional nor even a local functionary. Hell, I'm not even a doctor (so attractive). I'm just a pensioner, written off. Why did you say it to me? You don't even know what you're saying. In fact what you said was I could be in the Party or a regional or local functionary, I could have a beautiful lover, but I'm (only?) a jew.

DEAR ERIKA,

I'm not thanking you as you commanded. If someone by chance asked if he forgot an old black anorak, not so different from mine He could find in it, besides a used-up mouth freshener, a small key of excellent make, "Bane Sekulic" Sombor, made in Yugoslavia, BSS, and cigarettes Porti made in Albania. When I signed the receipt my hand couldn't hold the pen. I asked the woman at the Post Office to let me make a cross. This is why I write on a typewriter because my hand jumps around on the paper of its own accord. My right hand has had cramps for the last two weeks.. I've made up my mind to go to a neurologist. Tomorrow or Monday perhaps I'll go, I hope, that the muscle hasn't started to atrophy. It would be a mistake for (me) to be dependent.

...In spite of my pleas not to send me anything, you have sent me oil from your Mama, a shirt and that old black anorak, of course, it is my anorak... Mouth freshener. Otherwise I'm exaggerating. For me mouth freshener is a symbol or relationships in this society. It's sufficient to carry mouth freshener. I stink like slivovitz, like a barrel of it with furious ideas, but mouth freshener is enough. There are instructions how to use it. And still it is a gift, an old anorak with a key and mouth freshener. Perhaps I'll manage through understanding. I've been babbling up to now about the necessity of freedom,

about the creation of freedom for men and women when they are together, when they appear together, sometimes once.

If you like you can write to me, not from your office but from a silent space in your soul, during a quiet night from a corner of the kitchen when all of your own are asleep. Something. If, if. I haven't wanted and don't want a wordless speech that everything about the old anorak has been said. I hope and believe that I won't use the mouth freshener not so that I'll stink but to leave me here as I am (but I'm here already - or I still am?). Don't keep me alive with either anorak or shirt so I live on, nor prop me up in such a way.

**DEAR ERIKA, THE MOST, MY LOVE**

I'm thinking of Herbert, the diplomat, who, as you told me, sent you exotic, precious flowers from Prague by chauffeur. And do you know why I am thinking about the diplomat, such a type of man. Due to an "error" I put on his anorak, an anorak from Italy, cigarettes from Albania, a key from Yugoslavia, a used-up mouth freshener from the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. All this I found in the pockets when I put on the anorak which is whose... Who is it? You don't ask, arrogant in your power which in certain moments is not applicable to history, suddenly inapplicable to faith in anything we might consider. Everything breaks down, if, if, if. And you powerfully deceived slave woman light-mindedly (as it is said, light-bodied) deny the slave and send him clothes from the slave owner. Tell me how slave woman and slave got hold of the notion that they could carry something more than the slave owner. The Jewess and the Greek, the educator in the family. She reads his letters and allots him an anorak when a mouth freshener is found. If you are not a slave woman you can cancel everything with a word. Yes, "I shouldn't be prettier, but a better human being"... Do you also need to be spontaneous to slaughter unknowingly? It has happened... if you wish you can be pleased that you humiliated me with a key. "Bane Sekulic, Sombor, Made in Yugoslavia," which place I love, dice being thrown for everything...

from **Letters to Eternity** (Toronto 1984)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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## LEOPOLD LAHOLA

30 January 1918 Prešov – 12 January 1968 Bratislava

His real name was Leopold Arje Friedmann. Prose writer, dramatist, film and television scenario writer, director, poet, translator and publicist. By birth a Slovak writer from a Jewish family part of his productive life was lived abroad in exile in Israel, but mainly in Munich. He emigrated in 1949 as an established dramatist the author, then, of a third play for theatre, **Assassination Attempt** (Atentát, 1949) which had met with a negative reaction from dogmatic Stalinist criticism.

Before this play there was a dramatic project **No Wind in Zuela** (Bezvetrie v Zuele, 1947) and **The Four Sides of the World** (Štyri strany sveta, 1948) which dealt with Lahola's dominant theme, the war. With regard to that theme Lahola never considers heroism, the victors or the defeated, war is always presented as a "chamber" apocalypse with a permanent consequence, as a dramatic and absurd unending conflict and an impersonal crime which cannot be rationally explained. Two Lahola plays were staged in Czechoslovakia in the second part of the 1960's, **Spots on the Sun** (Škvrny na slnku, 1967) and **Inferno** (1968) where the theme of war was presented in this way.

The thematic and significant counterpart to Lahola's dramatic work is his prose which from the end of the 1940's, beginning in exile, recalls the war in the trenches (Lahola took part in the Slovak uprising) and also the Nazi liquidation camps (Lahola had had experience of these in an interment camp in Novaky.)

A collection of fourteen stories was published in 1968 (re-issued in 1994) under the title, **Last Thing** (Posledná vec, 1968). The book explores and uncovers the limits of human dignity and responsibility face to face with the absurd and monstrous experience of war or alternatively the experience of the Holocaust, leading to not only physical, but moral liquidation. The extract from *Last thing* is one of the most direct examples of this theme.

Other works: **Like a Scorpion's Poison** (Ako jed škorpióna, 1995) – a reconstruction and thematic arrangement of Lahola's poetry. **Chamsin** (1940) – the author's translations of New Hebrew poetry. Film scenarios – **White Darkness** (*Bílá tma*, 1948 directed by František Čáp), **Returning Home** (*Návrat domů*, 1948 – directed by Martin Frič), **Wolves' Lairs** (*Vlčie diery*, 1948 – directed by Paľo Bielik).

Films authored and directed – **Small Episode** (Epizódka, 1948), **At Each Milestone** (Na každej míli kameň, 1952), **Tent City** (Stanové mesto, 1953), **The Devil Plays the Balalaika** (Diabol hrá na balalajku, 1961), **The Sweet Time of Kaligmagdora** (Sladký čas Kalimagdory, an adaptation of the novel by Jan Weiss, *The Sleeper in the Animal Circle*).

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

### A LAST THING

(extract)

For a moment it seemed that Melius was breathing with difficulty and that he was striving against some weakness. But when the man with the moustache moved he shouted,

"Pick up the saw, because it doesn't bother me. You know what I think. If Joco is dead I don't see why I should have pity on you. Besides you're revolting; I've had a hundred impulses to blow a hole in your stomach from the moment I saw your moustache the first

time. But it doesn't matter, we aren't parted yet. Stop messing about and take hold of this saw."

To add emphasis to his words he placed the automatic across his lap. This annoyed the man with the moustache even more.

"You went to the subaltern school," he shouted, "Saw the corpse in half."

"You weren't at that school when I was studying there," whispered Melius quietly which increased the man with the moustache's anxiety and he placed the saw carefully with its sharp teeth on Joco's back above his hips.

Joco was cold from the frost and stiff from a death which had happened four hours before. Melius measured out what should be half of Joco's length.

"What are you measuring?" the man with the moustache jeered.

"A half."

"A half," the man with the moustache touched his head, "If it's a lump of cheese or sausage you can talk about a half. But a man, do you hear, subaltern, a man is not sausage. There's no such thing as half of a man."

"I was thinking of half of the weight," Melius said by way of excuse.

"The best thing would be if you cut off his arms also and put one with each half.

Or perhaps you prefer to saw him along his length?"

"You swine," Melius snapped at him not really knowing why, "Take hold of the saw with both hands. He's hard as bone."

Then he pulled himself together, swallowed the tears which had flowed down thinking that he might vomit them as his stomach was queasy. As soon as he began to saw he felt the resistance of the vertebrae in the backbone.

"You," Melius was startled and bewildered as a child and he reassured himself, "it can't be painful for him, I think, with this saw."

"You don't know," ventured the man with the moustache trying to gather hope for the last time.

"Of course I don't know," Melius lowered his head, "Those who do know say that the dead can't feel pain."

"From those who say so, none of them was a dead half," said the man with the moustache sharply and for a moment felt he had the advantage.

"You want to tell me that what we are doing here is hurting Joco?"

"One thing I know for sure is that he can't express his pain as he's dead. More I don't know. And neither do you."

"Then everyone should feel pain who is buried deep in the earth in a grave and in spite of that burying has been done from time out of mind."

"You don't know if all of them don't in fact feel pain," objected the man with the moustache and was pleased with the direction of the discussion.

Melius was seized by a fear he had never experienced and when after a short while he had recovered he said, "So I don't know. It's



better that Joco suffer pain from me than from those who would have to plough over him.”

When he settled over the saw again the man with the moustache shouted at him, “It is criminal what we are doing! It’s almost like a crime. There’s a law which protects the dead. You can’t even touch their graves otherwise you’re up to your neck in it immediately. And worse when cut the dead into pieces. You go to gaol for sure.”

Melius wasn’t persuaded. He was under a compulsion he couldn’t resist. The compulsion came from so deep within him that it seemed strange.

“We’re cutting up nothing,” he said, “And nothing is punishable. In a dark room there is still a crucified blackness. Take hold of the saw with both hands.”

So they sawed in silence. At the beginning the saw jumped twice then it bit into the body and plunged into it, at first slowly then more powerfully and finally it unexpectedly pierced somewhere and the man with the moustache turned his head aside so that he wouldn’t see. Melius forced himself to think about everything different in the world to free himself from the saw which held him and tore him, Lord save him, it was an absolute swine, as he gazed at it and the blood in Joco which had somehow vanished and turned into a little glittering dust which didn’t flow. From the bowels something steamed out. Melius desperately searched for an idea which would rid him of the present moment. He learnt to fly and left these mountains. He left everything that had happened and had done so a long time ago. So he didn’t know why he had been so afraid. From the sky it wasn’t visible that there were mountains. He was in a world where there were only plains. But that endlessness was worse because there was nowhere to hide when the shooting started and it would have to start sometime. Or better to imagine a time in the future when as many centuries had passed as had from the Glacial period and the scaly lizard Joco had described. Nobody would remain who could remember, there would be no continents and the sea would cover everything, what had happened, molehills and cathedrals and the whole globe uninhabited for a long time. There would only be the circulation of the ocean with the moon reflected in it and the fixed stars and many other worlds. But even this image could not console Melius. Any way he tried to disengage himself with carried the price that anyone else who didn’t succumb to destruction would carry the memory of it permanently in his mind. This could not be God or the angels but it had to be a human being, an exclusively human subject to decay and through that be able to desire consolation. Because if there were one immortal to offer calm, if he had no notion of what it meant to decay he would albeit unknowingly return under this uprooted tree where the saw had fallen from his hand, where he expected the man with the moustache to say something to him which might bring consolation.

But he was sweating and pointing in shock at Joco’s head.

“His hair’s standing on end,” he said and Melius looked closer.

“The hair of the dead doesn’t stand on end,” he spun away heavily from him. “It must have been standing on end before.”

"A moment ago when his cap fell off it was smooth. Now it's standing on end."

"You're right," said Melius, "It is standing on end. I'll carry Joco's head."

The man with the moustache was afraid.

"I mean the half with the head," Melius corrected himself and stood up to help the man with the moustache load the lower part on to his shoulders. Thus they carried him with Melius walking in front. It threatened to tip him over here and there but he kept on his feet. When they were deep in the mountains somehow Joco's hand got in front of his face and he wanted to turn so the man with the moustache could help him. Then he noticed that far behind him the man with the moustache was ridding himself of his burden and started to run. There wasn't much point in calling him to stay. So Melius put his part of Joco carefully on the ground and emptied the whole magazine of his gun after the fleeing man. One of the shots forced the man with the moustache to sit down where he was. He did so deliberately and with concentration. From a pocket he produced a cigarette. He didn't have time to put it into his mouth. A spasm of cramp crushed it to nothing and he gave up the ghost.

Melius brought his half of Joco up to the other half which was lying not far from the man with the moustache. He lay down on the frozen earth and leaned on an elbow waiting for what would happen. To start walking with one or other of the two halves was impossible for him. Hell, the man with the moustache was right, he thought. There isn't a half of a man even when he is cut into two or whatever.

It seemed that people were coming or it was only a hallucination. He pulled himself to the tree, took hold of it carefully and, leaning against it, pulled himself to his knees again. He looked at where Joco was lying and though he didn't know why he was sure that it was for the last time. Joco looked as though he was whole but his face was turned to the ground and both the soles of his feet were turned to the sky, turned inwards somewhat indecisively as those of the living sometimes are.

from *A Last Thing, A Last Thing* (1968)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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## VOJTECH MIHÁLIK

30 March 1926 Dolná Streda

Poet, translator, publicist. He embodies the contradictory position of a considerable part of Slovak literature over the last fifty years between art and political ideology. He made his debut as a successor to the group of *Catholic Modernism* group with the collection **Angels** (Anjeli, 1947). In **A Plebeian Shirt** (Plebejská košeľa, 1950), he changed from a youthful sensual and its spiritualising poetic counterpart to the exposition of the post-war world "from below". After his public conversion from Catholicism to communism he became a representative of official socialist poetry with the titles **A Singing Heart** (Spievajúce srdce, 1952) and **Armed Love** (Ozbrojená láska, 1953). He put his initial plebeian experience into the atheistic travesty of a biblical theme in the composition **Rebellious Job** (Vzbúrený Jób, 1960). Many of the participants in the Utopian project of socialism saw their imminent disillusion with it changed to antagonism between the "ideal" and everyday life, between one's public role and erotic intimacy. What the Czech writer M. Kundera put into tales of an ironical decameron of "laughable loves", Mihálik shaped into the contention between passion and banality (in the composition about love **Appassionata**, 1964), or the travesty of classical myth (in the collection **Escape after Orpheus**, Útek za Orfeom, 1965). Mihálik's poetry is characterised by tension between his clear-cut awareness of classical tradition and service to his times, between artistry of the high form and the "lowness" of selected moments from life, between a voluntary fidelity to the ideology and a plebeian distrust of every spiritualising deviation from reality. An artistically interesting change of Slovak poetry to a civic, everyday life in the Seventies and the Eighties also is exemplified in the Mihálik's collection **Fellow-feeling** (Účasť, 1983). Mihálik helped to create modern Slovak translation and his scope ranges from Ancient poetry and drama to contemporary American or Polish poetry.

Nearly two dozen Mihálik collections of verse are represented in this anthology by three poems arching from the lyrical juvenile "melancholy" through the biblically stylised erotic motif to the elegy for his mother which can be read as an epitaph to the mundane anonymous fate of Slovaks this century.

Other works: collections of political and reflective lyrical poetry - **Archimedes' Circles** (Archimedove kruhy, 1960) and **Black Autumn** (Čierna jeseň, 1969); the conversion of a seducer to a "feminist" and a sentimental chronicler of women's fates in the collection **Bitters** (Tŕpký, 1963); a crosscut of his artistry and intimate lyric verse - the collection **Sonnets for Your Solitude** (Sonety pre tvoju samotu, 1966); an occasional poem **Requiem** (Rekviem, 1968), which is the shock of the 1968 Soviet intervention inscribed into the Catholic liturgy for the dead. The poem was well-known abroad, nevertheless, it did not prevent Mihálik from becoming an influential figure of the politically *normalised* culture and literature of the Seventies.

FEDOR MATEJOV

### INDIAN SUMMER

Exhausted water drifts. Over the grass  
the sun is spilt like ink.

The peaks of mountains, fair and high,  
take the cloud train up to the sky.

No current, a depth of griefs  
rumbled in fear behind my brow.

My face in the water. A breeze starts up.  
My head is hot, the water cold.

*from A Plebeian Shirt (1950)*

## **HIDDEN ADAM**

At night the sombre forests still murmur,  
a slaughtered terror resounds in us.  
Under the tree of paradise you weep, your voice  
an agony of wasted hours: Adam, where are you?

And when the morning revives in dew,  
you're seared by frost, chilled by sun's brightness.  
That coward God has declined to show his face,  
instead you must call out: Adam, where are you?

Oh, better to ask about love, where it could be,  
about my love, its crazed, evil sneer,  
and like the dusk full of melancholy.

I saw you and understood how the dark draws near -  
and my heart trembles with anxiety  
that I'm afraid to say to you: I'm here.

*from Sonnets for Your Solitude (1966)*

## **COAL**

Mama, you always feared the beggar's frost  
would catch you out, that you'd have no coal,  
that nobody would chop wood for you,  
your husband and your son-in-law long since dead,  
and rarely did your son come home.  
Maybe that was why you chose to leave  
on a journey of no return to your own dead  
before the first snow fell. But November  
is almost always cold, the north wind blows  
and puddles on the road are glass at night,

and you departed from this world barefoot.  
They cleaned your body with cold water,  
crooked your arms when they squeezed you into clothes,  
the stockings on your feet were laddered.  
You teeth could have chattered as you were driven  
in a coffin of cheap board from Galanta to Sered' cemetery,  
so cold it gave the coffin lid goosebumps,  
on it paper angels shivered, could have caught their death.  
They put the coffin in the morgue on ice.  
Now, you lie there, waiting for your funeral,  
shrewd in the dark while the windstorm howls outside.  
Truly, you could do with a stove for your feet!  
You'd like to see a splinter of the sun,  
not even a woollen wrap to warm your back  
and spring is still so far away.  
You should not have left this life so soon,  
You could have thought of damp twilight,  
that without you my heart freezes over,  
and that the coal you have in your house beside the Váh  
would last you for a good two winters.

from **Fellow-Feeling** (1983)

(translated by Marián Andričík and James Sutherland-Smith)

# ALFONZ BEDNÁR

13 October 1914 Rožňová Neporadza - 9 November 1989

Bratislava

Alfonz Bednár wrote prose, film scripts, and he was a translator of English and American literature. Apart from formal innovations (first person narration in diary-like texts, three overlapping time-levels, plots with elements of mystery and suspense) he brought a polemic note to the literature of his time. He was convinced that moral imperatives do not stem from loud ideological phrases but from the necessary continuity of individual acts that had started in the anti-fascist resistance. Bednár explored this premise even further in the collection of short novels **Hours and Minutes** (Hodiny a minúty, 1956). Against the background of the moral bequest of the Slovak National Uprising and positive efforts of his contemporaries, he depicted personal failures determined by egoism and the creeping evil of the new regime - communism. In 1964 Bednár published the novel **Thundertooth, Fields I - II** (Hromový zub, Role I. - II.). This extensive chronicle of rural life maps the fate of the Slovak people in the twentieth century which was still guided by the archaic relation to the earth (the peasants are "the prisoners of the earth"). Here Alfonz Bednár tried no more formal experiments, quite the opposite, he resorted to traditional narrative methods. A sequel to **Thundertooth**, titled **Pierced Coin** (Deravý dukát), was finished in 1960s, however, it could appear only posthumously, in 1992 (in an edition **Fields I - II, III - IV**).

In 1960s Bednár began to work more and more often with the film director Štefan Uher. He wrote various scripts for important films which are considered as milestones in the development of Slovak cinema: **Sun in a Net** (Slnko v sieti, 1962), **Organ** (Organ, 1964), **Three Daughters** (Tri dcéry, 1967). He published them in the collection **Three Scripts** (Tri scenáre, 1968) and this fact helped the audience to change its perception of scripts as such (they could be finally taken for autonomous pieces of art).

The short novel *The Cradle* (Kolíska) from which this extract has been taken, is a part of **Hours and Minutes**. It testifies to the author's striving to revive the narrative structure of the story. Three time-periods overlap in the plot (1930s, 1945, and early 1950s when political trials were staged). Out of this combination the mystery of Zita's love-life emerges. Her relations to three men - Majerský, Ragala and Černek - are described against the dramatic background of her threatened existence.

Bednár's other works include: **Short Novels** (Novely, 1962) - short novels taken from the **Hours and Minutes** collection, plus two more: *Strangers* (Cudzí) and *Log-house Built of Stones* (Zrub z kameňa). A grotesque satirical trilogy **A Handful of Change** (Za hrst' drobných, 1970, 1974, 1980). Collected short prose that appeared originally in magazines in 1955 - 1973: **Block 4/B** (Blok 4/B, 1977). A novel **Lonely Raven** (Osamelý havran, 1989), a collection of meditative texts edited by Bednár's daughter **Conversations, or Edele and Other Things of this World** (Z rozhovorov alebo Edele a iné veci tohto sveta, 1994) and a travel-book **Greek Still Life** (Grécke zátišie, 1958).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## THE CRADLE

(extract)

Obmann's men were waiting for the night mission, looking at the *oberscharführer* who was deep in thought and daydreaming. Kniewald and Drossel were smiling stealthily.

Obmann's narrow lips were drawn back. It used to be so good, thought Obmann, in the mill near Ahlen, it used to be so good, his childhood had been beautiful until the creditors came and began to put pressure on Father and on the mill. Then came life in black Ahlen, the Moron, *Hitlerjugend*, *Streifendienst*, young Ernst Obmann had to learn to hold the rifle as naturally as a pen, then came boots, black riding boots - and before a man could notice he was influenced by the race, by the party, by the idea, by the Moron - and then came Russia, Russia, the hospital in Königsberg, Russia again, the vast, terrible, dull land... Oh Russia, there were opportunities for special techniques, he specialized in *politruks* there, he used to hang them by their legs and then brand stars, sickles and hammers on their chests with a red-hot rod - as the idea, the party, the government, the Moron ordered - and now, day and night missions in some country called Slovakia which bakes white bread even to this day, which lives in fear, but not in such fear that would stop it from offering hospitality, night and day missions and the duty to cleanse Europe of the partisan dirt and plague. "Du -!"

Zita looked at Obmann, a darkness of fear and anger blazed up from her glistening eyes towards Obmann's narrow drawn-back lips, because she sensed Majerský's fate, she sensed her own fate in that single short word, spat out with a poisonous breath - and what about the boy? Ferko...? Her hand on the iron frame was becoming numb. Zita looked at Obmann, listened to his unintelligible speech carried by his poisonous breath while rocking the cradle.

The boy clasped the cradle's rails with his tiny hands and sat up with difficulty. He looked at Obmann's men. He moaned.

Zita slowed down the rocking motion so that he would not hit his head on the upper rail.

"Rock faster!" Drossel told Zita. "Mister *oberscharführer* tell you that you are a bitch... *schwein*... and that we hef not kamm to protect you from partisans... you are dirt... scum... filth... you made the whole Europe dirty!" Drossel began to add to Obmann's words what came into his mind. "We search the haus... and if we find something that belongs to your husband, then you see... then you go to dirt! Remember! Rock faster! Mister *oberscharführer* orders! Rock the cradle!"

"He's ill," said Zita, "can't you see!"

"You put him down and rock faster!"

Zita stopped rocking the cradle. She leaned down to the boy and took him under his arms in order to lift him.

"*Nein, nein!*" Obmann told her quietly and gestured to her to leave the boy in the cradle. "*Aber nein!*"

"Poor little thing," said Zita and swallowed her tears, "here, my dear, lie down this way!" She laid the boy down, turning his face

away from Obmann's men and from the light. "Just lie this way and sleep, my boy..."

She began to rock the cradle again.

The boy obeyed and lay quietly.

"Ha ha ha ha!" *scharführer* Kniewald laughed and said to Drossel, "Otto, what's the difference between a fish and a woman? You don't know? A fish stinks of water and a woman smells of... Ha ha ha ha!"

Obmann first eyed the kitchen door and the living-room door, then looked at the red pots, arranged on the stove.

Zita was rocking the cradle with a poisonous darkness in her glistening eyes. Majerský was lying in bed, there were his footprints in front of the kitchen door and the living-room door and in between them, the footprints led to the bed, and she, in such a state, had to stand in front of so many men... All of this had transformed into heavy, dull pain in Zita's body. She did not even know whether he had come or whether this was all happening in a dream. She was thinking just about the fact that her husband Mišo's clothes were in the old chest in the loft, two Sunday bests, two hats, a short grey overcoat, a pair of shoes. There was his underwear. His razor, razor blades, even soap, shaving brushes. There were his papers in the drawer, identification cards with his pictures. She had put them all into the drawer. She had covered the chest with hay, but would that be of any help...? She was rocking the boy fast, he was opening his burning eyes dully. Poor little thing, he sleeps so little these days -

Obmann, his lips drawn back, his face like a steel axe, was thinking about Ahlen. A nice country all around, southern Westfahlen. The whole Westfahlen is like Ahlen, white flour and black soot, black soot and white flour. Ahlen, my Ahlen, what will remain of you...? Obmann saw with his mind's eye the destruction of towns and villages, both Russian and German. It was good to say, "*Das Ende von Kremmentschug!*" he thought. The end of Kremmentschug! But also *das Ende von Ahlen!* Ahlen, my Ahlen! Maybe just piles of concrete, piles of bricks with remains of mortar, holes leading into cellars, crumpled cellar ceilings - and there were his father and mother living somewhere, those human lice who once dared to bring him to such a world... Obmann looked coldly at Zita's face covered with sweat, smooth, wet, broad in the cheeks, even broader in the forehead, he eyed her smooth curly hair, her long white neck, her white blouse, lifted over her breasts, her blue skirt, broad on the hips.

Zita was rocking the cradle and with an invincible anger inside and without a thought about what would happen began to respect everyone who had rebelled against the Germans, she even began to respect Majerský. Poor man. Let it be soon over, don't let them find him, don't let anything bad happen to him!

Majerský could hear the worn cradle's base clacking and rumbling, and although he hoped that while Zita was rocking the cradle they were not doing her any harm, the cradle's base was clacking and rumbling in his ears, it beat at him, hitting his aching and burning head. He was trembling, he was wet all over, the blankets were trembling above him. Slowly, carefully, in order not to move any-



hing, with one arm and one leg, he began to shift his body very slowly towards the cover on the edge of the bed. He would go, he would run! Where? He heard laughter in his mind, it occurred every time the men in the shelter repeated, "Goodbye, calf, goodbye, cow, goodbye, pig..." The Frenchman tried to show them what *couvée* meant, but they never knew whether it was a basket, a wheel or a bowl perhaps. He always laughed and shook his head helplessly. He would go, but he just couldn't return under Biela skala. What would Černek say? Would he feed him a bullet? Why did he threaten him this way? He would go! But not along Zita's kitchen. No, the Germans could hear him. And how could he get away from here? Slowly, silently, as silently as it was possible for a trembling man, Majerský climbed down from Zita's bed, took out his army cap and his rifle, put on the cap and silently leaned his rifle against the wall. He could hear the Germans' laughter. He smoothed Zita's bed. He smoothed the three blankets (because he had been lying under them), he began from below, then took care of the upper side, then he smoothed the lower blanket.

The cradle base clacked in the kitchen, the SS-men were laughing loudly. One of them was speaking.

Everything was driving Majerský away. He knew he should go somewhere, but he did not know where. Where would he go, why...? There were times when he knew, it was just last year, before it had begun. He was at home, the Czechoslovak and Soviet flags were flying in Temešany, he would go too, he was just forty-one, he could make it like the other guys. He went to his wife and told her quietly, "Listen, everything's fine, don't tell the boys, let the older keep going to work as if nothing have happened. I'm going! Don't cry, don't talk! If someone asks where I am, tell them that I went to the ministry to Bratislava and that something happened to me - well, let's say I was hit by a car! - and that I am in hospital!" Majerský thought it would be just like being with the legionnaires after the war! Everyone who shot at the Germans or at least into the air, would be treated with respect. There were no more Jews, the devil had taken them, there was a fortune left and clever people would be needed. The Russians were already in Warsaw, in Bucharest, and he thought, when they start their attack, soon there will be no Hitler, there will be nothing left of him. He went to the partisan brigade headquarters, they gave him grenades and a rifle, he put on the uniform and then did what the others did. They liked him, because it was his creed that everything must be consensual. "It is a bad partisan," he used to say, "who has to go, a good partisan wants to go!" The Germans routed their company and apart from other groups there remained the one consisting of him, two students, two Jews, the Frenchman, Baďo the hunchback, lieutenant Haško, and Černek, Zita's husband. They dug a shelter, covered it with fir wood, they brought inside as many things as they could, and waited. They rotted there, they were still rotting there, he rotted there too, his eyes began to rot... Could he go back? What would they say - ?

Laughter and the clacking of the cradle's base could be heard from Zita's kitchen. Obmann's men began to talk loudly.

Majerský silently smoothed Zita's bed with his hand, he put down his ear flaps with trembling hands, he took his rifle and slowly, silently and carefully edged on his toes towards the dusky window. He stopped, his mind suddenly full of memories of the room he lived in on the Radolin estate. Zita used to come to see him and there was always both laughter and fear in her pretty young face when she pushed her heels underneath her on the bed. He went further. He was being driven away from Zita's room by the Germans' laughter, by their talk, by the friends who had stayed in the shelter, a few men of various sorts who always succeeded masking hunger, cold and fear with laughter. The Frenchman Jean Panais could not explain what "*couvée*" meant any other way than by making a snow nest and putting four snow eggs inside. He laughed and said, "*a, c'est la couvée!*" And most of all Majerský was being driven away by Zita, although he did not know what was driving him, he felt that he was being driven away by his trembling body, aching head, burning eyes and sick stomach. He held his rifle in his right hand, he touched the bed, its cold board, with his left hand, and took slow, short steps on the long patch-woven carpet, he took very short steps, shorter than a hand's span, balancing his body in order not to allow weakness to overcome him, not to fall down. Good Lord! His mouth was full of saliva, then it was suddenly dry all over from the throat, then it was full of disgusting saliva again.

The cradle base clacked in the kitchen. The German talk, the German laughter.

Majerský edged towards the dusky window. Jean Panais... *a, c'est la couvée...*! A wave of new fear hit Majerský. He liked the Frenchman very much – and if the Germans were to follow his footprints, they might find him... Good Lord...! He edged towards the window. Somewhere here the end of the second bed should be. It was still a long way towards the window. It seemed to Majerský that it was a terribly long way towards the window, that he would never make it, that he would fall... and then... then it would be over. Zitka, my Zitka. You've got a baby in the cradle... He slowly moved his hand wet with sweat along the smooth cold board. The window was becoming dusky, just as fear and hope mix together, and suddenly there was a trembling in his eyes, he wanted to fall to pieces. The Frenchman, that poor man, used to sing a strange song... Once they tried to translate it in the shelter under Biela skala. "*Le vent passe sur les tombes...*" Jean Panais told Ernest Waagmann and Waagmann translated it, "The wind blows over the graves..." – "*la liberté reviendra...*" – "freedom will return..." – "*on nous oubliera...*" – "On nous oubliera?" asked Ernest Waagmann. "*Pourquoi?*" – "*Je sai pas. On nous oubliera!*" – "People will forget about us," Waagmann translated the words a looked at Panais. "*Nous rentrerons dans l'ombre,*" concluded Panais. "We shall return to the shadow, to darkness," Waagmann translated the words. "Why?" asked Černek. "Why 'to the shadow, to darkness'? Our word will have its value everywhere" – "Oh," said Baďo the hunchback, "we shall go to prison, not just to darkness!" This way they translated the whole of Panais's song under Biela skala. Poor Frenchman Jean Panais, he was also rotting

there, he could sing quietly, very nicely about graves, about shadow, about the liberty that would return ... All of a sudden Majerský heard Zita cry, he felt heat, then he felt cold, her tearful scream brought into his mind the fir forest, the sharp blue sky, shining through firs and green branches, but at the same time it awakened in him the desire to be in that snow, under that sky, in that green forest, to be on guard night and day, to shed tears with burning eyes, but to guard the shelter by the deep long brook, because it was the easiest way to approach the shelter. He would return under Biela skala, he thought, he would go there even if Černek fed him a bullet – why did Černek say that? – he would apologize to his friends, to each and every one, and they would let him stay, and if need be, he would go to the gamekeeper's cottage, to Melichava... Good Lord – Zitka, Zitka... He would return, he would go with the Russian partisans, he would fight his way through the Germans to the army, if it was possible... Zitka – Zitka, please, forgive me everything, Zitka...! He heard her cry again. Zitka, Zitka... The rifle slipped a bit in his hand, hitting the floor with a dull thud, because at that moment it suddenly occurred to him that Zitka was Černek's wife. He had to take a deep breath to overcome the horror. No, he could not return there, under Biela skala, to the shelter –

*Oberscharführer* Obmann, full of thoughts, memories and of his whole good childhood and of his life fallen to pieces long ago, was quietly talking with *scharführer* Kniewald. He enjoyed both his own talk and Kniewald's remarks, because the men laughed. And they both and especially he could indulge in insulting the sweating, offended and humiliated mother and the ill child. He sat smoking, leaning back comfortably, opening his narrow lips with corners drawn back, only in the middle. His whole face was drawn back, everything fell from it, nothing stuck, on the half-closed eyes, on the ears, pressed to the skull, everything was like a steel axe.

It occurred to Zita in a jumble of fear, hope, malice, degradation and anger, that even a bullet would not have scratched his face.

"She is sweating," said Obmann. "She's giving in. She'll give in in such a way that she will be happy if we cheer her up a little – and when she begins to stink, she will have to heat water and we shall wash her. Hals – a retired St Bernard dog! What does he do? He doesn't shoot at partisans, he shoots into knickers."

from *The Cradle, Hours and Minutes* (1956)

(translated by Vladislav Gális)

# MILAN RÚFUS

10 December 1928 Závažná Poruba

Poet, essayist, creator of literature for children and young people, translator. From his first collection, **Until We Ripen** (Až dozrieme, 1956) Rúfus presented an astonishingly mature poetic personality. He engaged vigorously with that part of Slovak poetry characterised by empty rhetoric, the poster qualities and black and white images of the 1950's. It was only evident after some time that Rúfus' real debut was with a cycle of juvenile poems from the beginning of the 1950's, **Boy** (Chlapec, 1966), which was also published in a more complete collection, **Triptych** (1969) and in the collection **A Boy Paints a Rainbow** (Chlapec maľuje dúhu, 1974). Rúfus leans towards a symbolist and post-symbolist type of lyric. His poetry is tinged with tragedy which is echoed by the elegiac tone of his verse. A picture full of sadness and bewilderment characterises his third collection, **Bells** (Zvony, 1968) in which there is movement in Rúfus's conception of the lyric. Most evident is a changed to a gnomic-aphoristic reflectiveness (his poems often have the form of proverbs, parables or prayer).

His collections from the 1970's and 1980's, **The Impoverished Table** (Stôl chudobných, 1972) lyrical texts for the photographs of M. Martinček - **Cradle** (Kolíska, 1972), books published in close co-operation with the academic painter L. Fulla, **A Cradle Sings to Children** (Kolíska spieva deťom, 1974) and **The Music of Shapes** (Hudba tvarov, 1977), his poem **Ode to Joy** (Óda na radosť, 1981) and the collection **Strict Bread** (Prísny chlieb, 1987) reveal a thematic consistency with the forms of Rúfus' previous work. Its novelty lies in the depths it penetrates reality and a stricter ethical attitude to the self and the fundamentals of human existence. There is also a "turning aside" to the genre of fairy tale in harmony with Rúfus' whole life philosophy and beliefs, **A Book of Fairy Tales** (Kniha rozprávok, 1975) and **Saturday Evenings** (Sobotné večery, 1979).

The collections of the last decade, **Quiet Fern** (Tiché papradie, 1990), **Late Self-Portrait** (Neskorý autoportrét, 1993), **Reading from Fate** (Čítanie z údely, 1996), **Psalms of the Innocent** (Žalmy o nevinnej, 1997) continue his common humane themes in which a sacred-spiritual modality intensifies.

Other works: **Honour Belongs to You** (Vám patrí úcta, 1966) - verses to photographs by M. Martinček, **People in the Mountains** (Ľudia v horách, 1969) - a verse sequence to photographs by M. Martinček, **The Mountain** (Hora, 1978) - verses to photographs by M. Martinček, two poetry collections - **Dragonfly** (Vážka, 1998), **All the Way Down to the Roots of One's Hair** (Jednoduchá až po koreňky vlasov, 2000).

From his essayistic work: **People, Time and Creation** (Ľovek, čas a tvorba, 1968), **Four Epistles to People** (Štyri epištoly k ľuďom, 1969), **On Literature** (O literatúre, 1974), **Conversations with Myself and with You** (Rozhovory so sebou a s tebou, 1999) - a book length collection of interviews with the author.

For Children: **Little Prayers** (Modlitbičky, 1992), **Petals from the Apple Tree** (Lupienky z jabloní, 1993), **Little Zodiac** (Zvieratníček, 1994), **New Prayers** (Nové modlitbičky, 1994).

EVA JENČÍKOVÁ

## MEETING ON THE RINGSTRASSE

A speech unknown to me with a close music  
was uttered by her lips and slowly flowed,  
circled round my bewildered brow.  
And afterwards we kissed.

The chestnut rustled in the warm, mute night.  
Trams ting-tanged some way away.  
The earth, Lord, everywhere so full of grace!  
And a woman everywhere is lovely.

As if in a storm an ear of wheat is bent on the stalk  
as if a triumphant, ripe ear.  
In the tower ten o'clock was struck  
and someone passed us by.

He looked, paused in the silent street.  
Then from a distance smiled.  
But I've never ever seen  
anyone with a smile so bitter.

And he left, a twenty-eight year old,  
Oddly inclining his shoulders.  
And on the cobbles through the long night silence  
his wooden leg clattered.

from **Until We Ripen** (1956)

## AFTER EVERYTHING

A silence as if before creation.  
Smoke drives over the roofs.  
With a disfigured whisper  
fear crawls over the day.

Broken in his arms,  
this his heavy shadow.  
Clocks drumming  
within jaws grind the day.

It snows on our brows.  
Without torments, without secrets.  
Beaks of narrow towers  
peck at clouds.

It oozes again in a dream  
from severed embraces.  
Pitiless wheel,  
who will turn you?

from **Boy** (1966)

## THE WELL

Window, oh, wonder emerging from the deep.

How many times with my head on the coping  
have I observed your shifting glass.  
And a god lurked behind it  
or a devil. (Sensed  
as joined like the pictures  
in a pack of cards.)

Well.  
I inquired, you were silent.

You gave out only a little frog. Your stones  
always covered with green,  
like the baize on the high court bench,  
glittered. You gave out a little roof  
over your self. And my curious head  
you carried like Salome  
on a gleaming dish.

Window of the home  
of nobody! What did I want to see through you?  
To where? Unknowing that a window works as a window  
only for those within.  
That a god looks down from on high  
into windows as into wells  
and this way learns what is inside us.

Oh hoop, pail, deceptive ring.

from **Bells** (1968)

**CARPENTERS**

Also to cut through  
 also to cut through to beauty  
 my Lord.  
 With an axe.  
 As in January  
 a well-spring is pierced:  
 on the surface  
 by a stone from its depths,  
 a gem in a ring.  
 Also with an axe.

And christened with a knife,  
 a face a lonely tiny scar,  
 beautifying beneath the blows.  
 Also with an axe.

Oh, drummer spirit,  
 striking with a fist on the poem's high threshold.  
 It was opened.

from **The Impoverished Table** (1972)

**FAREWELL TO LITERATURE**

Rang off. Also to self-lessening pride.  
 Everything had already gone in a gesture, timid.  
 Not even a whisper uttered – so quiet  
 it was, what he now termed fate.

Yet nothing, yet nothing, even a simple sentence  
 bashful before being, naked.  
 Yet nothing, my Lord.  
 On the threshold of this world  
 where all roads lead to silence.

from **Reading from Fate** (1996)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

# MIROSLAV VÁLEK

17 July 1927 Trnava - 27 January 1991 Bratislava

Poet, translator, during the time of *normalisation* for many years Minister of Culture (1969 - 1988). His first book was **Touches** (Dotyky, 1959) which broke with the conventional Slovak lyric. The spontaneous sensitivity, fresh lyrical gestures, the thought and poetics of the modern lyric and form of this writer destroyed definitively the hold schematisation had in Slovak lyric poetry. (In 1956 Milan Rúfus had begun to do this and later Mikuláš Kováč and others). In the 1950's and 60's he opened space for the young generation of poets known as the *Concretists* group. The genesis of Válek's poetry was revealed in the third edition of **Touches** in 1971 where he inserted the cycle *Matches* (Zápalky) - his juvenile work from 1946 to 1958.

His collections from the 1960's belong among the highest achievements of Slovak poetry (**Attraction**, *Príťažlivosť*, 1961; **Unrest**, *Nepokoj*, 1963; **Making Love in a Goose Skin**, *Milovanie v husej koži*, 1965). Válek, remarkable at analysis and synthesis, began to create large compositions with the functional use of montage where he works moving among different significant contexts and repeated metaphors. He always goes about observing "the low layers" of humanity, their interior and exterior "history" sensitive to breakdown and crisis.

After an eleven-year pause Válek published his political poem, **Word** (*Slovo*, 1976) which documents his controversial "regeneration" in which he moralises from the position of communist ideology. In 1977 he published a cycle of gentle intimate poems **From Water** (*Z vody*, 1977).

The poem *Aesthetics* (*Estetika*) is an example of the poet's thinking in relation to the world and about the place of poetry in the life of mankind, about the uncovering of hidden connections of things, in which Válek formulates his own poetic.

In the poem *Killing Rabbits* (*Zabíjanie králikov*) Válek creates a metonymic parallel between killing rabbits and human beings. The whole poem is a picture of the double morality of contemporary humanity, his internal animality and an analysis of tragic conflict in the world (implicitly referring to the time of fascism).

Other works: **Four Books of Unrest** (*Štyri knihy nepokoja*, 1971) - collected poems from the first four books, **Translations** (*Preklady*, 1977) - a selection. **On Literature and Culture** (*O literatúre a kultúre*, 1979) - a selection from articles.

Poetry for children: **Spells under the Table** (*Kúzla pod stolom*, 1959), **Let's Look at Nature, Who is of Use and Who is Harmful** (*Pozrime sa do prírody, kto osoží a kto škodí*, 1960), **Great Travel Fever for Little Travellers** (*Veľká cestovná horúčka pre malých cestovateľov*, 1964), **To Tramtaria** (*Do Tramtárie*, 1970).

EVA JENČÍKOVÁ

## AESTHETICS

1

Odd soldiers  
in the dilapidated tavern  
we've overturned the night sky  
like a great black jug.



We guzzle the tired Autumn rains.

And so behindhand  
and so pointlessly  
the attack of the sun will begin.

Cocks have tarantara'd the dawn long since.  
In us the night lies down.  
We're assailed by a drumming fusillade of melancholy,  
a tearful spleen forces us down upon the earth.  
And from the not-so-distant past a sad, small  
multiplication table of courage tangles in us:  
We write

we erase,  
we erase,  
we erase.

2

And afterwards the morning:  
Some pal,  
well known,  
some face already seen somewhere  
regards me through the café window.  
Standing, finger-wagging he warns  
the atmosphere is full of cordite  
and the clouds above us detonate.  
– Poet, flee, poet, be silent!  
Grind in a run-down little mill  
pearls of tears,  
a barley of stars  
undying love  
sweet gingerbread.  
Poet, be silent!

3

It's me,  
the soiled eternal student of the muses.  
I hung myself on the throat of life,  
I drank his bitter blood.  
And now I break out from myself  
like a river from its banks  
and I bear a word still red hot,  
a word yet to be born and blind,  
I'll fashion from it a lovely grip for your hair,  
a sharp knife and a plough  
and anything that you desire,  
each object essential for happiness.

Command and the trees will bloom.  
Say the word and gravel will ring.  
You'll fall asleep with my word in your heart  
and it'll wake you up to life.

But once when  
in thick cold rain  
we go to work together  
and I touch furtively  
your damp raincoat,  
smile at me  
at least with your eyes.

from **Touches** (1959)

## **SUN**

Wheat yellows.  
Straw for hats  
ripens beautifully.  
A day as if created for reading palms.  
A drowsy woodpecker knocks on wood.  
Everywhere in the world this means SOS.

The forest is drowned in bright blue air.  
Lovers sit within it with pale faces,  
they drink sun and vinegar,  
they eat sour apples,  
they count their fingers and toes,  
they rejoice that this suffices for a life.

Blue forest. It's clouding up above the forest.  
From the clouds lightning suddenly breaks.  
The earth stoops.  
Pines bang together, brow to brow.  
She's so frightened that it's got dark.

And I would buy you  
a summer storm with flowers,  
timid lightning which might graze on it.

Even if I had nothing for bread or salt  
I'd find something for a piece of the sun.  
I can't blame you for anything.  
Everybody loved you.

They all read it in your palm:

When you smile  
the rainbows of peacocks appear  
and where you step rivers show their heads.

Wheat yellows.  
Straw for hats  
ripens beautifully.

But I still walk bareheaded  
full of troubles.

from **Attraction** (1961)

## **KILLING RABBITS**

On Sunday after breakfast  
when the air is about halfway to ice,  
shrill flutes of mice squeaking in the chimney,  
on Sunday after breakfast,  
step out on to new-fallen snow  
to the cage.

Remove your gloves for a pink festival,  
stick them on the fence posts  
like freshly severed palms  
and smoke through the little gate.  
Afterwards feel about with a questing hand  
and with smoke in your teeth say sweet words,  
compliments, gentle words,  
feel a little sorry,  
grip the fur firmly  
and lift away from the warm straw.

On Sunday after breakfast  
sniff the ammonia.

With your left hand hold upside down for a moment  
observing how the ears flush,  
caress tenderly behind the neck,  
blow, hold away  
and all at once strike with the right on the nape of  
the neck.

Once more sense in your palm the reflex  
of a futile leap,

a heaviness in you hand,  
sweet on your palate,  
listen how rabbit heaven opens  
and full handfuls of fur fall from it.

Vienna Blue,  
Belgian Giant,  
French Ram,  
Czech Tabby,  
but also a mongrel of any bloodline,  
all die quickly the same way  
without a word.

On Monday have blue bags under your eyes, be silent,  
on Tuesday think about the destiny of the world,  
on Wednesday and Thursday  
invent the steam engine  
and discover stars,  
on Friday think of others,  
but mostly about clear blue eyes,  
the whole week feel sorry for orphans  
and admire flowers,  
on Saturday emerge pink from the bath  
and fall asleep on her lips.

On Sunday after breakfast  
kill a rabbit.

from **Unrest** (1963)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# RUDOLF JAŠÍK

2 December 1919 Turzovka – 30 July 1960 Bratislava

The writer and poet made his debut in 1956, a balladic novel **On the Bank of a Limpid River** (Na brehu priezračnej rieky) set in the poor region Kysuce in Northern Slovakia, which addresses the theme of the class struggle in a lyrical idiom. His next novel **Saint Elizabeth Square** (Námestie svätej Alžbety, 1958) is a story of love racially discriminated against during the Second World War. Using elements of Shakespearean tragedy, Jašík deepened the psychological dimensions of the novel's protagonists and thus created a number of real life characters representing the moral attitudes and the commonplace existence of the bourgeois population as well as the rise of Slovak fascism.

One year after his death his unfinished wartime trilogy **Dead Men Don't Sing** (Mŕtvi nespievajú, 1961) appeared. Here the events in the Slovak hinterland as part of the father's subplot (ethnic clashes in the town Pravno populated by a fanatical German minority) are intertwined with the ongoing war on the Eastern front where the sons become disillusioned. Posthumous works include the strongly metaphorical novella **The Tale of White Stones** (Poveš' o bielych kameňoch, 1961) and the book of novellas **Black and White Circles** (Čierne a biele kruhy, 1961) which features the text presented in this anthology.

The plot of *Dead Eyes* (Mŕtve oči) is based on the tragic and desperate plight of the blind Adam. His superhuman efforts to win respect and an equal position in the family are cruelly abused: overhearing a conversation about his future, Adam eventually attempts suicide.

Other works: **The Gloomy Bridge** (Ponurý most, 1966) – a posthumously published selection of early writing including unfinished manuscripts of surrealist poems, short-stories, a portion of the novel *White Bread* (Biely chlieb) and ten chapters of his strongly autobiographical and expressive wartime fiction *Grizzlebeard* (Laktibrada).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## DEAD EYES

(extract)

“Adam!” she said, both excited and astonished to find him here sitting near her, on the other side of the stream, and looking straight at her. In the first moment she felt shy. She crossed her hands over her breasts – two evening stars – and then leant forward so she could see his face better.

Adam was silent, seriously silent as he had never been before in his life. His mouth half-open he sucked in air, hissing. His hands were shaking for he felt a strange light striking him, hot as the sun, yet different, weird, enrapturing. The light lashed his blood, painfully, making him clench his teeth and suppress his desire to shout out, oh... just to shout out!

The stream was running, babbling and lightning from two human clouds, flashed on its banks. They crossed above the stream and swirled in a great burning wheel which was then broken and shattered by laughter.

It was her, the girl from the summer camp.

She was laughing.

And this laughter wiped the brutal expression off her long face, making it more womanly. She took her hands off her breasts, showing the two evening stars that flickered dimly into the stillness of the night.

She was seated, naked to her waist, on a rock and her dangling legs were no longer swirling the water. Instead, the stream was washing them, cooling them.

The girl aroused the night with her nakedness. She rocked back and forth, her body swaying and rolling and she gave herself over to that dance-like motion with bewildered eyes which spoke of half-extinguished fears. Because there on the other side of the stream he was seated, he who had so far stirred little in her save pity. But this night said to her that it was not blind Adam with the face of a child, but a broad-shouldered man.

So the night said.

Night. This silent night.

It was indeed lovely - to sit like this in front of him, unashamed, in front of a man, with straight arms and hips and to be met only by his dead eyes.

Her shoulders and chest were dry now.

The night was warm.

But her face was distorted with a brutal expression. The night had spat it out, brought from the fields somewhere or from the crowns of firs through which the evening star shone.

Adam had gone deaf. The threads connecting him to the world were cut. Loneliness with only the stream babbling.

"Where are you?" he called.

"Here," she replied from the other bank. The stone was a melancholy place to sit upon and he'd got firm shoulders and a broad chest.

She slid from the stone and stood for a moment. The bottom of the stream was slippery. She listened as Adam had a moment before. She turned her head. But the night was still with not even an accordion to be heard. Her heart was throbbing wildly, her throat was sore with an increasing pain. She was shivering. Her knees went weak. She had to catch hold of the stone. She put just one leg forward onto the bank, then the other one, but was couldn't stand and had to sit down.

They were both on the one bank now - the girl from the summer camp and he, firm-shouldered and broad-chested.

Somewhere a cart rattled.

Leaning to him, she whispered.

"Adam."

The night was not still. The cart was jolting down the main road and drunken voices could be heard.

"Come, come," Adam called, extending his hands.

She moved closer.

The night was not still. The voices grew distinct. The cart was jolting, its wheels hacking at the rocks. Hoofs clip-clopped.

The summer camp girl was shivering. She moved another yard closer but Adam's hands and his broad chest were still far, far away.

There were two voices. One was hoarse and reedy, the other rich and full, obviously that of a young man.

"Come, come," Adam whispered. His eyes were moist as if he had looked into the sun.

But the girl from the summer camp made no further move. It was night: a night with a jolting cart and drunken voices.

"Adam, for God's sake! Your father is back."

The hands fell.

"Father..."

"Pass me my blouse, please, I have to get dressed."

He gave it to her without a word. He was in another world by now. In the clearing, among tree stumps and by the cart that went down the main road on to a field road where its wheels were rolling through round stones.

The girl put her blouse on and, yet unbuttoned, jumped to Adam and kissed his mouth. Then she ran up the slope and rushed inside the yard beside speckled stones. She stood there and buttoned herself. Her face was red.

Adam had dead eyes, but his mouth was dead too. The shy kiss seemed to have had no effect on him. And she, too, seemed to have never sat here, never washing herself in the stream water and he had never held her warm blouse with its eight buttons. The only truth was that the cart was crossing the railway track. How well Adam knew this sound! It was the metal-rimmed wheel hitting the rails.

"Father and brother," he said to the night. Nobody could hear him. But then, he didn't mean to be heard except by himself, and so he said it again.

"Father and brother," and something like the summer camp girl appeared to him and vanished right away and the thought remained thrust in something that resembled a cleared tree stump.

Stick in hand he set out.

"Giddy-up, horses, giddy-up!" the proud voice of Adam's father, the richest farmer in the village. The horses were pulling like mad, the cart banged and the whip whisked above their heads.

"Giddy-up, giddy-up!" This was a raucous voice. It belonged to Adam's brother and it was saying the world would treat him as it had his father before him. He too, would elbow his way onward through life only forward and with a head lowered like a bull.

"Giddy-up, my horses!" the girl shrieked. Her voice had taken after her mother's.

"Horses!" she yelled once more, giggling. The summer camp girl had a nicer laugh, though. For some reason Adam was beginning to suspect that everyone in this house was evil. He thrust his metal-tipped stick to the ground, pushing it hard until it struck the stones.

Suddenly, the kitchen door flew open:

"Good gracious, there they go on the cart! Those drunkards! Riding like madmen. Mother of God, they're going to crush the horses and the cart. Wolves are what they are," Adam's mother lamented, "Yelling like that, those devils! Why, they've got that

stupid girl drunk too. Isn't her yelling. Oh my, oh my what a life I have!"

Adam found his mother's voice strange. Untouched by her words and indifferent to her laments, he was looking for that summer camp girl, inclining his head. But the night brought no familiar footsteps nor the familiar rustle of her dress.

"Mother! Here we are!" yelled the girl.

"Whoa!" Adam's father pulled at the reins without steering the horses into the yard, "Ugh, wasn't that a ride! We've been on our way from town for an hour. Almost flew the whole way.

The girl jumped down from the cart and rushed to her mother holding a big box.

"You'll never guess what I've got here! Enough for two dresses!"

There was a curse from the cart. It was Adam's brother. He couldn't carry booze like his father and found it difficult to get down from the cart. When he finally did, he tried to stand on his wobbly legs and staggered to the tiny gate. On his right - underneath the cottage windows - was a whole pile of tree stumps. He stumbled and tumbled over one of them. Down on the ground, he breathed heavily and as he got up he ground his teeth fearsomely:

"Who the...." he swore. And then he recalled: "The blind one's clearing the woods. You hear me, father? The blind one's clearing the woods. But I be damned... if he doesn't clear the whole thing before too long. Before too long!" he began to laugh and his laughter echoed into the night like a blasphemous curse.

Adam pulled his stick out of the ground and moved deeper inside the yard and further away from the cart and from his brother.

"Don't be blasphemous, poor fellow! You should have stayed there where you got boozed up. What a drunk you've become, my son, Good Lord!" she wrung her hands.

"You're not telling me what to do, are you? I am old enough to use my own head," said the son mildly, suppressing his anger. His voice had sobered.

"You hear what he's saying, aren't you? Stop nattering, you ungrateful scoundrel! Good Lord, talking to your mother like that! You're not going to slap me, are you? I'm telling you the moment you lay a hand on me you're past praying for. Look at the blind one. He's cleared three trunks today. Three of them! You know how hard that is for him? And he even brought them over here. Alone!" she was on the verge of tears.

"Why, three trunks isn't that much," a dark voice came out from among the tree trunks, sober by now. "Rubbish! All his work is rubbish! He brings three trunks like this and eats for four of us. He's good for nothing. Well, he won't be clearing these trunks for long. Not for long. He'll be going!" he lit a cigarette. The fire lit up his face contorted with anger.

"Why, it isn't your business to keep the house clean and tidy. And shut your mouth, snivelling fellow!"

"Hold it, old woman! This is my business and you stay away from it! Adam is going to a home, that's it. And no more words about it or



else there will be trouble in this house. Take my word for it! Giddy-up!" he said, whipping the horses. They reared up, snorted and broke into the yard, wildly.

from *Dead Eyes*, **Black and White Circles** (1961)

(translated by Ľubén Urbánek)

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# LADISLAV MŇAČKO

29 January 1919 Valašské Klobouky - 24 February 1994

Bratislava

Ladislav Mňačko was a journalist, a writer of prose, of film and television scripts and plays.

His work has two lines which are equal in significance: the line of journalistic texts and the line of prose. These two branches often overlap and intertwine. This is especially marked in his factual reports and in his socio-critical satire, starting from the novel **What Is the Taste of Power** (*Ako chutá moc*, 1968), to other pieces written in his Austrian exile.

Mňačko left the Czechoslovak Republic in 1968. His life until then was complex, especially as far as ideological positions were concerned. In the very beginning he was an ardent Marxist and communist. In late 1950s he changed his opinion and became an uncompromising critic of the regime, mainly pointing to its criminal forms (the staged trials of the 1950s). Two books of Mňačko's factual reports **Where Dusty Roads End** (*Kde končia prашné cesty*, 1962) and, most of all, **Belated Reports** (*Oneskorené reportáže*, 1963), form a combination of real journalistic experience and critically declared facts concerning the staged trials in 1950's.

Mňačko's critical attitude was particularly useful in writings that dealt with the Slovak National Uprising and resistance during the Second World War. He deconstructed the traditional image of the Uprising, for example in the novel **The Name of Death is Engelchen** (*Smrť sa volá Engelchen*, 1959). This book brought a nonconformist, polemical note into the after-the-war prose, exploring the activity of various resistance groups. The whole narrative is presented as the retrospective musings of Volodá, a former partisan, who is being cured of his war-wound in a hospital. The author tests the limits of human courage, self-sacrifice and declared heroism. The background of this story is, however, utterly real: during the war the Nazi army destroyed and burned the village of Ploština, while a nearby group of resistance-fighters did not do a thing to defend its inhabitants.

Fact and fiction, reality and hypothetical interpretations overlap in Mňačko's political pamphlet **What Is the Taste of Power** (1968). The protagonist, an influential politician, is real but Mňačko uses him to create an allegory discovering the lethal effects of manipulation associated with power. Somewhere at the beginning of Mňačko's courageous attacks on the regime, stemming from personal disillusion, the prose *The Garden of Suffering* (*Záhrada utrpenia*) from the book **Belated Reports** can be found. This extract has been taken from it, too. The narrator is a journalist who, in the atmosphere of fear and self-exculpation of his fellow-humans, realizes the terrible relation between politics and legally committed crimes.

Mňačko's other works include: **Night Talk** (*Nočný rozhovor*, 1966) - a short novel based mainly on dialogue, analysing the responsibility for war-crimes; **The Seventh Night** (*Siedma noc*, German edition 1968, Slovak edition 1990) - a political essay commenting on the two invasions to Czechoslovakia (in 1938 and 1968); **Comrade Münchhausen** (*Súdrh Münchhausen*, German edition 1972, Slovak edition 1997) - a political pamphlet criticising the period of *normalisation*.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## THE GARDEN OF SUFFERING

(extract)

### 2. FEAR

Some acquaintances started to avoid me, and for a long time I couldn't tell why. I just can't stand such ignominy and when I greeted a good friend of mine and he didn't greet me back, I hurried after him.

"What's the matter? What have you got against me?"

He claimed that it was just a misunderstanding, that he hadn't seen me. But he felt himself that it was not a good explanation.

"Very well, then, I'll tell you. You wrote about that trial..."

"So what? Of course I wrote about that trial, it's my job to write for newspapers and yes, apart from other things, about trials. What's wrong with you?"

"Are you so naive or such a hypocrite? You were there, watching the trial, how come you didn't see they had sentenced an innocent man? Sentenced him to death?"

"An innocent man? How can you claim that he was innocent? What do *you* know about it?"

"I think I know enough. I knew the man very well. What you've done is unforgivable."

He left me standing there. Stupid. What the hell was he talking about? He'd better watch his tongue, because one day he could meet someone with less consideration! But at least people show their true colours. They can be hiding their true selves for years, and then, all of a sudden, they reveal everything.

An innocent man... did it mean that our justice is murderous?

Several days passed and he came to visit me. There wasn't the familiar, sincere talk anymore. Conversation languished and after a while he stood up. Just by the door he turned to me.

"Could you forget about that outburst of mine? You know, I was upset by that case, I didn't really know what I was saying..."

He left and I knew that it was for good. I'd lost a friend. Well, it didn't matter, we live in revolutionary, unsentimental times. But why did he turn up in the first place? Was he afraid? What was he afraid of? Was he afraid because he'd stood up for a man he knew well? Of course, it was stupid of him, what could *he* know about the trial and the circumstances that had led to it? But why was he afraid? What made him scared? That I would use it against him? That I would accuse him in public somewhere? Where? We had been in touch for years, but we work in different places, I wouldn't have had a chance to attack him even if I had wanted to.

He was afraid that I would inform against him... it occurred to me. He was stupid, that's what he was, he was seeing things, he had succumbed to enemy propaganda. Damn, if you are a communist, you've got to have the guts not to take back your word when things go wrong. I always thought that I knew people well. But how could you see inside someone's black soul?

Then I received an anonymous letter. And then another letter, this time signed, from an old acquaintance from Prague.

“I don’t suppose you wrote the article on command. I’m willing to believe that you just swallowed the bait. But that is not to your credit either!”

What was going on? What did I have in common with that trial? I hadn’t sentenced the man, I’d just presented the public with the facts that were revealed. It wasn’t my fault that the editor had crossed the wider context out of the article and there hadn’t been a word left about the mining revolt which I’d related to the trial. All the same, I just didn’t understand the exaggerated anxiety of some people. The Supreme Court had altered the judgement anyway. The saboteur wouldn’t be hanged, and considering the circumstances, twenty years in prison was an appropriate punishment!

I’d swallowed the bait... whose bait? Whose bait could I possibly have swallowed? The prosecutor was a socialist prosecutor, a lawyer, an honest, old communist! All right, I wasn’t very good at legal matters, but if I had swallowed the bait, it meant that our justice had swallowed it too! But why? Who in our country could have an interest in sentencing an innocent man to death?

And who was he anyway, when so many people cared about him, when so many people worried about his fate? We had arrested a lot of other people in the meantime, more outstanding, more famous people, it turned out that the enemy had penetrated right into the heart of our party. Novomeský was some poet, and some man, and look what we were discovering about him now! But those many acquaintances of mine were not worried about Novomeský’s fate, they were upset because one cunning lawyer had been found guilty. The court had probably known what kind of man he was – his influence extended far beyond the regional capital.

They wouldn’t want to claim that the trial was just a staged farce, would they? Weren’t some people just going too far?

Months passed and there was always someone who rebuked me for the article about that trial. What did they want from me? They hadn’t been at the trial, I’d been there, I had to have known things better!

Then a time came when nobody worried about the fate of a sentenced mill manager...

What did I know about him? Nothing. I hadn’t heard about him at any time in my life, I’d seen him for the first time at the trial, I hadn’t liked the way he’d looked nor the way he’d acted, I knew the judge and I didn’t doubt his sense of justice, he was a tough, strict but a righteous socialist judge. The facts that had been verified at the trial could have seemed trivial in terms of the death penalty, but this had been a political trial and the sentenced man had been a treacherous class enemy.

But after some time they arrested a man I knew very well, a man I had known since my childhood. Did I believe that Novomeský and Clementis were criminals? Yes, I did. But I couldn’t believe that the pure, honest man about whom I knew everything, a man whose whole life I knew so well, was a spy, a traitor, a murderer, and who knows what else.

One day, early in the morning, his wife turned up, her hair uncombed, her clothes untidy.

“They have arrested Eugen...”

I was struck dumb. Eugen? That’s just not possible... It has to be some kind of a tragic misunderstanding... “It’s just a misunderstanding. Somebody has produced a false accusation.”

But she didn’t want consolation. She came for something more concrete. Could I possibly ask someone who might know why they had arrested him and where he was? I couldn’t refuse. We went downtown and I was wondering who would give us some information; then I thought of the Justice Commissioner. I knew the man well, we had been on a long training course together, we were neighbours, every time we met he greeted me cordially.

“Why are you sticking your nose in things that are not your business? Want to get into trouble? Want to follow him?”

I don’t remember how I responded, I just probably said nothing. I staggered out of the building. I didn’t have to explain anything to the woman who was waiting for me. She grasped everything. A week later they turned her out of the flat along with her four children...

Then something happened to me. I started to suspect that they were arresting and sentencing innocent people, mostly communists. If it was so easy for a man who should be the guardian of justice to say “want to follow him...”, something was wrong in our society. Why “follow him”? Just because you weren’t indifferent to the fate of a friend you knew so well? Again and again I thought of the trial with the mill manager. What if he really was innocent? What if those who stood up for him were right? What if everything that was going on in our system of justice was in fact a monstrous distortion of justice? How and where could I find certainty?

from *The Garden of Suffering*, **Belated Reports** (1963)

(translated by Vladislav Gális)

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# IVAN KUPEC

21 October 1922 Hlohovec - 15 May 1997 Bratislava

Poet, translator, essayist. He entered literature as the youngest of the Surrealists in the 1940's. His publication of poetry was interrupted for more than ten years through work in journalism and publishing. In the background of official ideology and rhetoric Kupec sought from the mid-Fifties for resources to renew his sensibility in romantic dream and revolt. A characteristic fascination with human history, the beauty of nature, intimate communication "whispered into a shell" resulted in the collection **Shell** (Mušľa, 1961). The key books of Kupec in the Sixties are **Mahonai** (1964) and **Removing Angers** (Vyzliekanie z hnevov, 1965). The composition of **Mahonai** is a staging of a possible apocalypse of modern mankind in contrast to an evocative figure of woman as the elegiac witness and "Great Mother" of ancient myth. The lyrics of **Removing Angers** are a counterweight to the deformities of politics and civilisation humanity finds in love, the great cycles in nature and fragments of cultural myth. The surrealist or hermetic imagination is grounded in the realities of mundane civilisation; the critical weighing of human ambitions becomes the self in the world of nature and the ancient truth of myth.

In the Seventies and Eighties as the result of political repression Kupec could not publish original work only translations (translated paraphrases of oriental poetry through Pushkin to Celan). Over these twenty years with breaks Kupec worked on his poetic project **The Book of Shadows** (Kniha tieňov, 1990). Kupec's work passed from exotic beauty of the "shell" to "shadows" as the lower side of being and things. The collection has the appearance of a diary contrasting with the autobiographical prose of dissent. There are symbols of his personal situation mingled with a therapeutic or disillusioned perception of nature and a fatal awareness of the end of all utopias which was for those of Kupec's generation a freedom from history. At the beginning of the Twentieth century in the fires of the First World War the Austrian poet Trakl in a poem before his death talked of "unborn grandchildren". Kupec in *The Second Shortest poem for the Year 2000* (Druhá najkratšia báseň pre rok 2000) written during Christmas 1988 of "descendants, dead before birth."

Other work: collections of essays - **The Immortals** (Nesmrtelní, 1963) - on romantic modernist poets; **A Defence of Poetry** (Obrana poézie, 1963) - polemically extrapolating the message of the romantics and avant-garde for contemporary poetry; collections of poetry - **A Lesson with an Angel** (Hodina s anjelom, 1968), reflections on the visit of Allen Ginsberg to Czechoslovakia in 1965; the selection **Shadow Play** (Tieňohra, 1988) with the first version of **The Book of Shadows** and with stoic elegies for his life's partner, *Conversation with Emilia* (Rozhovory s Emíliou); **A Diary 1962-1968** (Denník 1962-1968, 1999) - an interesting witness to cultural and literary life in the Sixties.

FEDOR MATEJOV

## THE HERETIC'S CREED: MOTHER

I've stayed with you so little, mother,  
although you've dwelt within me permanently.  
Because the "pushing in" isn't non-being.

Why should I drag you with me through the defiles  
although you didn't, it's true, clean up the rosary beads,  
but every step of the way descended  
to prayer? Today I know that by forgetting I protected  
the cosmos  
from a single human innocence. Naturally, death changes  
life after the third bend in the road it trims shadows  
and in the fear of poetry, which once piled earth over me,  
it sees just the budding shoot  
with which a child enters a burnt city.

from **The Book of Shadows** (1990)

**(TIME TO THINK)**

DON'T FORGET THAT IN SEPTEMBER IT'S TIME TO  
THINK  
ALSO THAT NOT EVERY TREE-SOLITARY  
SHEDS COMPLETELY: IF SOMETIMES YOU FIND  
AFTER THE FIRST GREY STORMS THREE BRONZE  
LEAVES,

IT COULD BE EVIDENCE THAT YOU  
ARE NOT ENTIRELY WITHOUT HOPE. IF YOU FIND  
A TREE  
WITH TWO LEAVES IN DECEMBER THIS OTHER  
WILL BE CLEAR PROOF THAT YOUR HOPELESSNESS

HASN'T TOUCHED BOTTOM. AND IF YOU FIND SUCH  
A ONE WITH A SINGLE LEAF SHAKING BUT NOT  
TURNING  
NOT EVEN IN THE FEBRUARY BLIZZARDS, REMAIN  
BY IT AN HOUR BECAUSE IT IS A TRUE BROTHER

OF YOUR ANXIETY. UNSELFISHLY FAITHFUL,  
UNBUYABLE TO THE POINT OF SELF-DESTRUCTION.  
THE TEAR OF SAP IN IT IS LIKE A BANNER  
ON A CASTLE TOWER: THE LORD IS AT HOME AND IS  
VIGILANT.

from **The Book of Shadows** (1990)

**A SECOND SHORTEST POEM FOR THE YEAR 2000**

And we still remain, feet in the sand  
on a yet more unconsoling bank. We haven't forded  
the river,  
the dawn of a fortunate star flickers for us  
from a distance further than the half century.  
The myth is vanishing; perhaps we wanted  
much too much, one heave of our shoulders  
and we swim to the other bank, prisoners  
of yesterdays,  
also with descendants dead before birth.

from **The Book of Shadows** (1990)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)



# LADISLAV ŤAŽKÝ

19 September 1924 Čierny Balog

Writer, playwright, essayist, was expelled from *The Union of Slovak Writers* because he had disagreed publicly with the Soviet invasion in 1969. Until 1979 he could not publish at all.

Ťažký writes, so to speak, experience-prose. His works are powerful not because of any intellectual narrative constructions, which they lack, but due to the ponderous truth of their themes. After two collections of short stories published in early 1960's, Ťažký attracted much attention with his short novel **Danube Graves** (*Dunajské hroby*, 1964). In a year he incorporated it into a triad of short novels **A Flock of Wild Adams** (*Kfdeľ divých Adamov*, 1965). Ballad-like notes of the tragic inevitability of fate sound in this short novel and this type of atmosphere is fully developed also in Ťažký's successful novel **Amenmária. All the Good Soldiers** (*Amenmária. Samí dobrí vojaci*, 1964). This novel, written in the form of diary by the protagonist, focuses on the ideologically suppressed theme of the Slovak Army fighting side by side with the Nazi Army on the Eastern Front. A sequel to the story of the "lost division" appeared later: a novel in two volumes, **Gospel According to the Platoon-leader Matúš** (*Evanjelium čatára Matúša*, 1979).

The novel **A Cellar Full of Wolves** (*Pivnica plná vlkov*, 1969), represents the dark reality of collectivization, which was schematically idealized in the genre of socialist realism. The inhabitants of the village Perúnova Ves are not divided into "progressives" and "backlashers". They are but simple peasants who barely scrape a living. The central motif of this book is violence which hits ordinary honest people. The lives of the patriarchal Fedor Perún and his family are directed by their everyday fear of Germans, Russians, partisans, the Vlasov Army and communists. In the end Perún rebels against oppression and refuses to sign the documents that would bring him to the co-operative farm. He ends up, beaten and tied up, in his own cellar which has seen too many captives already. This extract describes one of these captives. The narrator is the young girl Dominika Perúnová, Fedor's daughter.

In 1990's Ťažký has striven to create a new form of reflective fiction, using the background of adventure stories.

His other works include: Collections of short stories - **Deserter** (*Vojenský zbeh*, 1962), **I Buried Him Naked** (*Pochoval som ho nahého*, 1970), **Marias and Magdalenes** (*Márie a Magdalény*, 1983). A trilogy of short novels - **Fantastic Faidra** (*Fantastická Faidra*, 1991). Novels - **There Is a Meadow in Heaven, Too** (*Aj v nebi je lúka*, 1986), **Before the Flood** (*Pred potopou*, 1988), **Who Has Killed Abel?** (*Kto zabil Ábela?*, 1991), **Twelve Golden Monarchs** (*Dvanásť zlatých monarchov*, 1992), **Marshall's Daughter** (*Maršalova dcéra*, 1993). A play - **The Sinner Condemns Darkness** (*Hriešnica žaluje tmu*, 1966). A script for the first two film stories of the trilogy by Juraj Jakubisko **Deserters and Pilgrims** (*Zbehovia a pútnici*, 1969). He also wrote a book of memoir-dialogues **Testament of Conscience** (*Testament svedomia*, 1996).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

**A CELLAR FULL OF WOLVES***(extract)***A REQUEST**

Chick-chick, chick-chick, chick... (Has Uncle Fabo been in the cellar all night?!) I know that he's been in the cellar and I wonder just in order to ease my conscience.

Feed the ducks too...

Do this, do that... You can hardly hear anything else in our courtyard. Our courtyard is full of orders and requests. Ducks mix with geese, there are hens flying among them, they poke, they fight, they peck, they pluck off one another's feathers, yuk! Hens fight with hens too and geese with geese.

Here ducks, here ducks...

Hey, little girl...!

I can hear Uncle Fabo.

Send your father here... tell him I beg him... to come quickly.

Eat, ducks, eat, geese, dip your beaks in the manger, peck each other, hens, draw your blood, Uncle Fabo is begging... he's been waiting in the cellar all night... Uncle Fabo is hungry too, maybe that's why he's begging so nicely.

Our father suffers when he hears requests .

What do you want, Fabo?

Let me out, Fedor, please, let me out just for a moment.

Didn't you hear that they'll shoot me if... I'm responsible for you, Fabo.

Fedor, let me out, I won't run away, where could I run... I just have to.... you know.

You can pee in the corner, Fabo.

But I have to... your beet and potatoes would stink, let me out, Fedor... there are carrots too... I can't do it in here... Fedor, I can't... let me out just for a moment.

I'm afraid, Fabo, what if they come?

No, they won't, they can always find me, I won't run away, I won't try to escape, why would I run? But quickly, Fedor!

Quickly, quickly, then they will do it quickly too... well, be that as it may, come on, Fabo... but really quickly!

We all laughed, it was so funny when Uncle Fabo ran towards the midden. We all guarded him while he was sitting in the hut and father tried to wave me, Tonko and Ivka away to the kitchen with his hat. Why are you laughing? People do that... what's so funny... go to the kitchen.

Milan ran through the courtyard just like Uncle Fabo had and shouted... it's only human... Fedor, lemme out... it's...faaart, faaart....

Milan got a good licking again.

Mother hasn't got a heavy hand. When she hits us, we cry just in order not to let her be upset that she'd been angry in vain.

Are you still there, Fabo?

Yes, I'm here, Fedor, where could I possibly...

OK, Fabo, just say something to me once in a while so that I know you're still there.

Father is pacing the courtyard, he's satisfied, but he's still looking at the hut. There's a solemn expression on his face, he's done a great thing, he's fulfilled Uncle Fabo's request, although he is personally responsible for him.

But that's only human, father!

HEROES.

I don't go to the spring anymore but I'm embarrassed to see my mother carrying buckets full of water and panting. Fedor, Fedor, where's Fabo?

Over there, he points towards the wooden hut by the midden.

For Christ's sake! Do you know what you've done, Fedor? You've put us in danger, that's what you've done. Fabo, you better hurry up... run to the cellar. Quickly! They are coming!

Who's coming?

Nikolai!

Nikolai is not coming, Nikolai is already here, opening the gate, they are all coming, the Hrebenár brothers and Big Nose, they are walking straight towards father. Father looks like a small boy, he's stammering, he doesn't know what to do with his hands, he blushes. They've caught him...

Where is he, *khazai*?

I let him out... he's over there...

You let him out...? I've told you...!

I'm here, brother, I'm here... just a minute... everything hurts me, my insides are going to explode, there's blood pouring from me.

Nikolai was first to draw out his gun and then he opened the hut door. The tall Big Nose is laughing. He's laughing the same way as he was laughing when Uncle Fabo crossed the bridge. The younger Hrebenár can't laugh, he's just looking at Big Nose with sad eyes. Stop laughing, don't ridicule us, our Viktor and I will measure that laugh of yours one day and then you'll have to pay for it... just stop laughing, will you? Listen, don't laugh and go...

And you go... Yuk! That was rude, Big Nose, but you've told the Hrebenár brothers what they deserved, I don't like their silence.

Come out!

Wait, wait, people are watching! Uncle Fabo closed the door again a little for a while, then came out, fastening his trousers. Stachura grabbed Uncle Fabo's arm. They both walked towards the cellar door. Uncle Fabo slipped on the wet stairs.

Why have you let him out? Well? Why? I've told you that you are responsible for him!

Father stammers.

And what should I...? What? Let him soil my potatoes, my beets? You want to eat them, too!

Our father is a hero!

But I've told you that...

Is our father really a hero?

All right, go on, shoot me... Where has he run? Where? Why are you turning my cellar into a prison? It's... it's my cellar... it's a cellar, not a toilet! Just in case you didn't know!

You shouldn't have said that, father. Nikolai is going to be angry, the Hrebenár brothers are already angry.

You dumbhead...

I don't know what I shouted when Nikolai pushed my father, probably I was just squeaking, crying and shouting at all of them in the courtyard, at Miško and also at Kuzma, my face was red, let him shoot me, it doesn't matter, but I won't have him pushing my father, he told me that I was a lizard when I stepped in front of him and whipped him with sparks of anger and offence through my tears.

Why are you shouting at us, why? Why are you pushing my father, what have we done to you...?

You *devushka*, you go to school, understand?

Nikolai is right in fact, the older Hrebenár says and his brother Viktor nods. Only Big Nose winks at me.

Stachura came out of the cellar, holding a doorknob. Stachura has got two doorknobs already.

Send him out! Quickly!

What are they going to do to Uncle Fabo?

Stop crying!

No, Nikolai hasn't been drinking today yet, he is perfectly sober, he is just angry.

I told you to come out!

Do what he tells you, Fabo. Stachura is gazing into the black hole.

I'd rather stay here. I'm better already.

Come out!

Stachura is the second commander.

The cock flew up on the stack, it had been triggered by Stachura's order, the hens dispersed in the garden, the drake is the most courageous, it answered Stachura.

Uncle Fabo came out of the cellar, his long arms with their black palms are hanging beside his dirty, patched trousers. His face had utterly changed during the night, his nose was longer, more pointed, his eyes were wider, Uncle Fabo was afraid.

Tell them, Uncle Fabo, that you are not a trader...

Why are you angry with me, Russian? What have I done to you?

Run home, Fabo!

Beg your pardon?

Run home! Quickly!

Nikolai turned Uncle Fabo to face the gate, kicked his behind and pushed him towards the gate. Next time don't walk on mines and listen to our drums! Our drums must be heard even in the town! Understand?

Stop laughing, will you! I've already told you that our Victor and I will measure that laugh of yours one day.

He is rolling his blue, saintly eyes in vain, he is biting his whiskered lip, Big Nose is laughing aloud, he is laughing, he has a pleasant, a bit hoarse, velvet voice, Nikolai is laughing too, he is laughing with his mouth open wide, he is laughing aloud, the forest echoes his laughter, his laughter can be heard even in the town. The Hrebenár brothers are laughing too, our father is laughing just like Milan.

I'm a German son of a b...ch!

Never had so much laughter been heard in our courtyard. It was the first time I saw a smile on Nikolai's face.

We made a mistake, *nu shto?*

*Geroi!*

When father was a child he looked just like Milan.

I'm a German son of a b...ch!

What? Just you wait! Mother is trying to cover his mouth, Stachura is praising him, excellent, my boy, excellent! You belong to us, just give them what they deserve, those German sons of b...ches!

Everybody's laughing, only Milan is crying. Father's had a heavy palm again. Just now I noticed that Stachura is wearing a deerskin coat. Uncle Fabo came back. For God's sake! He wants to spoil the laughter! Everybody stopped laughing, Uncle Fabo is the only one who's laughing.

You've come back?

I have, Fedor, my insides are going to explode, can't we go... (he points with his hand)...

They all went. Only Miško stayed. We heard Uncle Fabo singing while walking up the road at night. It was a sad song, very slow as on a pilgrimage.

I've never heard him sing before, mother said.

from **A Cellar Full of Wolves** (1969)

(translated by Vladislav Gális)

# KLÁRA JARUNKOVÁ

28 April 1922 Červená Skala

Prose writer, author of literature for children and young people, publicist. She made her debut with the generation of prose writers and poets which included Jaroslava Blažková, Lubomír Feldek and Miroslav Válek who tried a new approach to literature for children and young people. Their innovations were based on the notion of equality in literature for children and other artistic works in whose thematic limits opportunities were opened for authentic and attractive tales for readers. These had a lack of stylisation and used authentic language. With Blažková, Jarunková brought into the prose of the Sixties the use of slang as a permanent feature in Slovak writing.

Her first book of prose for young people was **Heroic Diary** (Hrdinský zápisník, 1960) but only in her subsequent two books, the children's novel, **The Only** (Jediná, 1963) and the prose work, **Brother of the Silent Wolf** (Brat mlčanlivého Vlka, 1967) did she succeed in presenting a picture of an unvarnished, socially exact, artistically persuasive and moving world of the time between childhood and adulthood. As in the extract from **The Only**, it is full of amazing invention (love, friendship, fellow-feeling) as well as disillusion, disappointment and the acceptance of the till then "strange" principles of the world of adults.

Part of Jarunková's work written for adults (the novels - **Quiet Storms**, Tiché búrky, 1977; **Low Cloud**, Nízka oblačnosť, 1993) tells of the frustration of children caused by incomplete or broken families. Jarunková has also written travel books (**A Few Steps In Brazil**, Pár krokov po Brazílii, 1972; **Meetings with the Missing**, Stretnutie s nezvestným, 1978, **Pictures from an Island**, Obrázky z ostrova, 1979), a novels from the time of the Slovak National Uprising against fascism - **Black Solstice** (Čierny slnovrat, 1979) and well as prose for very young readers.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## THE ONLY

(extract)

"You know what, Oli," Eva said suddenly, "Let's promise each other that if one of us isn't accepted to the 12-year school the other won't go there!" We'll find some other school and go there together. What do you say?"

Gentlemen, it was a serious matter because I had to finish the twelve-year school if I wanted to the art school! I didn't answer immediately because Eva was so passionate about this that she almost burst into tears in the street.

"I know," she burst out, "Your father will use his influence and I'll be left dangling! What do you care that they'll kill me at home?"

This matter of influence honestly made me angry. I wasn't going to listen to this from anyone! But I was little bit sorry for Eva because her father could be quite cruel. If he was in a bad mood he would throw slippers at his children and he smacked Eva over any little thing. Once she ran away from home because of this, but it didn't do any good because when she returned in the evening he thrashed her. Wonderful act of heroism - a battle with a girl! Now Eva was just putting up with it and waiting until she could start earning money

for herself. Then she'd find lodgings and wouldn't move a step towards home any more, understandably it has to be admitted.

"I know you're going to pass the exam," I said to her. "But if by any chance they don't take you and they take me I'll give up the twelve-year school and I'll go somewhere else with you; to a school of Arts and Crafts or something similar."

Eva looked at me disbelievingly. She knew that I'd just won in the highest category of the children's painting competition with my cycle "Children." She wasn't going to believe me at any price. But I meant it seriously. Once I'd given my word I'd keep it, even if it would be difficult for me, because I knew what friendship was. (Imro also knew and I'd be seeing him the next day!) From the twelve-year school Babinska would drive me away anyway. I didn't have influence working on my behalf and I never wanted it!

"Don't worry, Eva," I said cheerfully, "Next year we'll be sitting next to each other again. It doesn't matter if it's at a ten-year school or any other school!"

We clasped each other under the arms and we were going to be fine as we never had been since we were born. And not only on that day.

And the next day Eva kept her word. When Imro and I came out of the cinema she was waiting in the street.

"I hope," her teeth were chattering, "that next time you'll go for at least both programmes.

She is sometimes so poisonous, but in fact it was quite cold outside.

"I was thinking about you," I said, "Imro could bring Sano and next time we could go as a four. What do you think about that?"

Eva shrugged that it would suit her quite well. But Imro, that creature, was silent as the grave. He preferred to be with me by himself. Me, too, but it had to be evident to Eva. The fact was that I wasn't thinking about her at all in the cinema. I'd forgotten about everything, even about the film. I'd been watching the film to about half way, but then Imro caught hold of my hand which had never happened until then.

"Was your mother," he whispered in the darkness, "Strict?"

"Yes, but don't worry," I whispered to him, "I've solved things with her. I was crying until night."

"Olinka!" Imro looked at me in the darkness, "My dear!" and squeezed my hand so much that I became scared and freed it.

When I looked at him again he was looking fixedly at the screen. It made me uneasy and so I touched his hand and whispered:

"You are my only friend!"

Imro turned to me and looked at me thoughtfully for a long time. I gave my hand to him completely and we sat like that to the end. I thought a little bit about if we were still friends, but I considered that we were. Truly we liked being together best and we talked all the time and I knew that Imro would never hurt me even if we were completely alone together somewhere for a week. We didn't talk about such things, of course, but everybody knew that if two people were alone together and weren't good friends then they could

serious things. Like the two hooligans behind the shed. Or what some of my fellow pupils did. Truly!

In the cloakroom Imro held my coat for me. Boys didn't normally do this. So it surprised me a little and I couldn't get my arm into a sleeve. When I had struggled enough Imro let the sleeve go because he was actually holding it with his other hand. We laughed a little, but I had gone red and in my anger I had buttoned my plait inside the coat. I pulled it out when I couldn't move my head. Gentlemen I had completely ruffled my hair!

"Olinka is pretty name," said Imro, "But if we were Indians I would call you Black Plait. It'd suit you perfectly. Did you know that?"

I knew, but I always liked to hear it again. A hundred times Imro had said this to me.

"I would call you Boy of Three Faces - I whispered as I had thought to myself for a long time.

"Why three?" Imro wondered.

"So," I said secretly, "In the three colours of the neon lights three different faces, but still the same Imro. The fourth is a Cuban song. I wouldn't give it a name but it's enough that I won't forget until my dying day." And I quietly hummed a part of the well-known rhythm without the words. I nearly fainted when Imro joined in confidently and even corrected me at one point.

"I also won't forget until my dying day," he whispered to me.

At that moment we saw Eva.

from **The Only** (1963)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)



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# JOZEF MIHALKOVIČ

30 January 1935 Veľké Kostolany

Poet, translator. His entry into literature is connected with the *Concretist* group (1958) committed to modernize Slovak poetry. Mihalkovič's poetry is usually built upon an epic background, a texture of "fragments" of individual lives. The poet sees this as manifestations of the global sense of human existence. To achieve that, he ritualizes the details of everyday life, searches for their deeper sense, which is expressed in gnomic formulations. In his writing, Mihalkovič seeks harmony to overcome a tragic feeling of life. The search is very intense in his first two collections **Sorrow** (Ľútosť, 1962) and **Wintering Places** (Zimoviská, 1965). In the first part of his debut - *Running through Unripe Fruits* - we can also find poems inspired by memories of hedonistic experiences (perhaps similar to a Rimbaud-like absorption with the world and individual being). The book's latter part *Cement* evokes moments of cementing the breaking integrity of the world of childhood, love, family, and marriage. The second collection, though, casts doubt on the hard won sense of being: through the patchwork of fragments of individual destinies of the author's relatives gleams the spectre of death, the lyric subject "overgrows with silence" and his world ceases being comprehensible and transparent.

The oscillation between discovery and perpetual loss of the sense of human existence is the main characteristic of Mihalkovič also in his later collections - **Where Are You Rushing** (Kam sa náhlite, 1974), **Approximate Location** (Približné polozenie, 1978), and **Occasional Poems** (Príležitostné básne, 1988).

In his translations, Mihalkovič focuses chiefly on French poetry (e.g. Michaux, Cendrars).

VALÉR MIKULA

## A THOUGHT WITH MARRIAGE

Not yet. The tear could not be  
pure  
before it mirrored you.

Noticeably stiffening; it's increasingly  
silken  
in the dancing walk of women.

It seemed to me it was raining in you  
upward.  
You raise a nest of your palms  
to the level of fruits.

A horse was descending in the rosy leaves,  
and once more he drinks water. Give,  
let his hair fall into his eyes.  
There is the moon, the white quarter. There is an age

and adopted delicacy of sight, a needle  
through which a bee looks askance  
at flowers  
and begrudges  
the drones exhausted at the peak of summer.

You don't feel the blow by which the roof  
separated fruit from  
a multitude of fruits.

With walls one begins to comprehend  
the desert and the other, turning away  
to the dark, sinking  
in spirit. A feeling within us  
is anxious about the ebb,  
after which wild animals at the forest edge  
get wind of  
genuine salt.

You disappear through the door  
each time  
as if forever.  
A fold of gown follows you.

from *Wintering Places* (1965)

## PLANTING

Crouching, we open the earth.

I was digging the soil out of loneliness. The light  
offended her. Further than roots  
I felt and touched her  
in the clock  
as it stopped.

A twig lit up. A bud  
broke away  
From the moon's bounds.  
I prophesied how deep  
fish would be.

There is the first bird's agreement  
with a tree. Your silent negative,  
at a time out-of-sorts. Let no one utter a thing.

I can hear. The first charged dewdrop has flown in  
through the heart of a tree.

I have come in quieter  
with clay on my soles.

I wanted to be gentle  
for you, so I refrain from ruffling  
the shadows cast upon the table.

Breathing has risen above the level of your throat,  
you endure  
in the present tense. Also with your lips. And only  
childishness,  
blown away  
to the corners of your mouth, is  
on its own.

From the tips of your hands  
an apple fell, bitten  
with remorse; in the dark  
I wash my nails clean  
of clay.

from **Wintering Places** (1965)

## **CRUMPLED PAPER**

Crumpled paper in the dark  
unwraps itself upon the floor  
from some remembered handful  
without crackling.  
The outer steps, unacknowledged by any  
more obvious twitter  
in the callous snow,  
could have been silently expected.  
But my child-like snow  
is  
melting  
somewhere else.

from **Where Are You Rushing** (1974)

## WHERE IS THE HORNBEAM

There, where is the elm  
by which I shiver with cold,  
the walnut, by which I sweat!

I am afraid of children,  
bitten by a snake.  
Here's a table.  
It couldn't be more quiet.  
I sit,  
the door right behind me,  
hunchbacked.

from **Where Are You Rushing** (1974)

## I HAD RUN OUT

I had run out, straight  
in between the bulldozers. I could recognize myself  
only by the feathers on my boots.  
Petted, shifting from one foot to the other I came to myself,  
burning with secret-promising,  
foxy little flames,  
a traitor. In time  
within a rectangular tree  
I was allotted a corner  
where for a moment I could piss.

from **Where Are You Rushing** (1974)

(translated by Martin Solotruk and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# LUBOMÍR FELDEK

9 October 1936 Žilina

Poet, writer, dramatist, translator and essayist, Feldek entered literature as a member of the *Concretist* group. His poetic debut **The Only Salty Home** (*Jediný slaný domov*, 1961) was praised for its innovative, fresh imagery and introduced a sensuous, playful literary perception. He brought to Slovak literary verse sensitive feeling, visual colour and a poetic, playful vision of experience (especially in the emblematic *A Play for Your Blue Eyes*). A current collection, *Northern Summer*, is freely composed from autobiographical material in which an associative, significant movement runs along an axis from “the closed vicious circle” of human isolation to the “open” type of lyrical protagonist in the backdrop of a motivating interest in the relationship of a man and a woman.

After a break, Feldek returned to poetry with his second collection **A Chalk Circle** (*Kriedový kruh*, 1970). The book is composed of terse, down-to-earth, self-ironical civic verse with intellectual imagery mapping the everyday life of “the family circle”.

Feldek’s next books document his different concepts of poetry: as originating in “sight from within” (*Paracelsus*, 1973), or in human spontaneity, creativity (*Notes on Epos*, *Poznámky na epos*, 1980).

In the Nineties, Feldek published (with his wife Oľga) a book of short stories and feuilletons **World Is Also Other Places** (*Svet je aj inde*, 1998), a limited edition collection of poems of harsh political satire **A Farewell Dance** (*Odzemok na rozlúčku*, 1992) and wrote several dramas parodying both past and present myths, or social issues – **Death in Pink** (*Smrť v ružovom*, 1995), **Aunt from Prague** (*Teta z Prahy*, 1995), **The Foot Play, and You, the Other, Dance** (*Hraj noha, a ty, druhá, tancuj*, 1999).

In the intellectually playful, humorous text *A Washed Poem* a perpetual rejuvenation and “endurance” of a marital relationship is likened to a metaphorically used image of the twilight and dawn above a country.

The poem *Jaroslav*, from the collection **Crying is Beautiful** (*Plakať je krásne*, 1990) refers to the existential situation of the Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert and his book *Being a Poet* (*Býti básníkem*, 1983).

His other works include: a collection of poems **Two around the Table** (*Dvaja okolo stola*, 1976), and complete poems titled **Smiling Father** (*Usmiaty otec*, 1991) including a new poetic series **1989**, a book of essays **From Tongue to Tongue** (*Z reči do reči*, 1977), **Van Stiphout** (1980) – a novel, **Homo Scribens** (1982) – a book of essays and contemplations on literature, **Sad Comedies** (*Smutné komédie*, 1982) and **Two Plays on Truth** (*Dve hry o pravde*, 1990) – books of plays.

Childrens literature: **On a Deaf Granny and Grandson Goldie** (*O hluchej babke a vnúčikovi Zlatúšikovi*, 1967) – poem, **The Head I Had Then** (*Hlava, ktorú som mal vtedy*, 1967) – poetry book, **A Blue Book of Fairy Tales** (*Modrá kniha rozprávok*, 1974), **A Green Book of Fairy Tales** (*Zelená kniha rozprávok*, 1983) and **5 x Botafogo** (1987) – a collection of puppet theatre plays.

EVA JENČÍKOVÁ

## SONNET ON THE PLATOON BIRD

On a journey in India I saw a bird.  
During drought in idleness he dozes

and in tender rage waits for rains to burst.  
Heaven alone may refresh him, he supposes.

The platoon bird has no liking for a pool  
even when peach blossoms float in its shade.  
If the rains don't come, he doesn't feel a fool,  
preferring to perish parched and proud.

Oh, the similarity, oh whom does this recall?  
An indolent head. On it time gently falls  
It sleeps in jasmine, in lovely dreams is left.

And the rains don't come, his rains don't come.  
Oh, the similarity. He sleeps thirsty, slavish, dumb.  
Poor Platoon Bird, a poet of all his work bereft.

from *The Only Salty Home* (1961)

## **A WASHED POEM**

1  
ten years ago  
you took your apron  
from the washer  
and found my poem  
so you called out in surprise  
it had got washed

what remained on the white page  
was just a blotch of blue  
similar to the twilight  
above a snowy hillside  
in which  
the landscape sleeps  
as if put out of mind  
though once written  
a poem  
and her sleep  
resembles death

2  
or love  
as if neither had ever been

the night whirls  
as if the motionless

and black  
 smell of another woman  
 over which my head  
 shakes

the darkness stretches  
 like a fabric  
 through which you feel  
 the heartbeat of another man  
 burning and heavy  
 pressing you against a tree

morning is far  
 and the light  
 on the other scale pan  
 all too weightless

to resist  
 seems to make no sense  
 yet we resist

because a landscape  
 like a poem  
 once written  
 though put out of mind  
 dreams in colour

and is alive

3  
 and as the dawn appears  
 in wonder  
 above the snowy hillside  
 similar to notes  
 in a diary, long out of date  
 from which today, once more,  
 ten years on,  
 I write  
 a poem  
 outside a shepherd's hut  
 and something  
 like recollection  
 occurs to me  
 just now  
 as it did back then  
 something  
 like prediction

and like you  
back then  
I call out in surprise  
It's been washed clean

my little apron

hence today again  
my word can go  
into the washer.

from **A Chalk Circle** (1970)

## JAROSLAV

*"Necítím se dobře,  
ale mám radost,"\**

said Seifert  
when in the hospital  
they told him solicitously  
he'd got the Nobel prize.

In those few seconds  
as an opalescent  
television shovel  
bore him to the grave,  
he managed to conduct  
a fast course in poetry.

In six words  
he explained to millions  
where that dog was buried,  
the one with the odd name  
*Beingapoet.*

---

\*from Seifert's Czech

*"I don't feel well,  
but joyfull"*

from **Crying Is Beautiful** (1990)

(translated by Martin Solotruk and James Sutherland-Smith)



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# JÁN STACHO

1 January 1936 Trnava – 15 July 1995 Bratislava

Poet, translator. First worked as a doctor and later became an editor. Stacho began his career as a member of the *Concretist* group (1958). Opposing the then propagandizing socialist realism, the group saw their poetic mission in a return to concrete reality as lived and experienced. In this context, Stacho's approach to reality, as well as poetic imagination, was driven by his powerful sensualism rising to ecstatic states enabling both the author and the reader to experience fully their being. Above all, it is sexuality that Stacho envisions as a manifestation of human essence and a way to the metaphysical dimension of the existence. Consequently, the poet ritualizes sexual intercourse as the primary, fundamental experience linked with the "holy" act of human creation.

Stacho's work represents an arrival (or rather return) of the modern concept of poetry as the expression and projection of human self (of an author). In the then literary landscape, Stacho was a main element in the effort to establish a respect for the autonomy of poetic language.

In the Sixties, Stacho's concept of poetry became so influential that it was followed by a sizeable wave of imitators. After a carcrash (1973) confined Stacho to bed for the rest of his life, his poetry lost its experimental character.

His translations are mainly of French authors (Rimbaud, Bertrand, Perse), but also other poets (Pablo Neruda, Dylan Thomas, Galczynski, etc.)

Other works: *A Marriage Journey* (Svadobná cesta, 1961), *The Pure Double-Armed Body* (Dvojramenné čisté telo, 1964), *Ignitions* (Zážehy, 1967), *Apocrypha* (Apokryfy, 1969), *Of the Lived Day* (Z prežitého dňa, 1978).

VALÉR MIKULA

## FOR MARION

### Lying In Wait

Stay alert, Marion,  
There is fire lying in wait in flints  
and you are thirteen with lit teeth,  
so I want to blow out your eyes  
into a fine little broom on sleepy cheeks.

I am a soldier and I am bold,  
because I'm under the command of iron  
I spy.

In the glitter of weapons, though, you are not lovely at all.

A bell tower hums, in the dark  
a hanging bell.

Stay alert, Marion,

because much can happen in a flash:  
the moon from a green landscape  
shells villages, the white geese, crouching  
on the warm earth their wings  
awaiting a breeze.

When dynamite flashes in your face  
it's me - coming close.

Oh, death, oh, naked death!

Let's lie in wait, Marion, for fruit to split,  
for that's me  
yours  
as if I have snowed.

Oh, today there's summer on the earth,  
there's a mustard seed, the sun, and even laughter.  
And tomorrow?

Therefore I greet treacherously and from behind  
like an exploding grenade and I call  
you to come above blue ponds where old willows lean.  
The trees there are of sulphur.  
We'll feel it in our bodies,  
ignited.

Stay alert, Marion,  
I want to feel the skin in the full moon  
so that orange peel could be its sister,  
a sweet-smelling sister  
to the complexion of your face.

And the wind has lit up all of the bells.

Stay alert, Marion,  
the wind rings us out to the hot fields  
and the moon rises behind your sleep.

from *A Marriage Journey* (1961)

## THE WORD

A time in fire and the word. And the flame, free  
in a space, purging. Hence the spirit is  
in the celibacy of hoarse fire.

Unadorned as the birds of heaven and in the garments  
of the scent of lilies –  
it is. As it was in the beginning, so the word  
grew heavy within us.

Tracks too burdensome on such youthful snow.

See, dust rising through the shapes of a chalice  
and before it a flower, chased down  
before the grave, pallid and resonant all the way to salt.  
But the man  
walks dumbly, a solitary of pariah birth, he returns  
with his hands stretched forth  
and groping. There is no peace, though,  
in his tracks, there is no end  
to the pursuit and evasion of fires,  
indeed there is no longer any escape.  
And his people have forsworn him.

The word has limped blindly back and forth  
alive from the forebears of the sons of fire and all at once  
withdrawing... No shape or  
semblance can ever be alien to the soul.

And the man saw that the word was  
good.

It is the dust returning,  
Yes, through the forms of bells taken from  
the heavy salts of the sea, to the lap  
of the earth. But the spirit  
withdrawing through lime and blood  
into an egg shell that has roamed  
all the way to us from eternity.

What follows is, hatching in reverse, wings taken from  
holy water, excited into  
the shape of snow, into an egg  
a song, teeming with birds of prayer, locks itself up  
with a bride of the word, Oh, the soul! But you, man,  
dumb, until above the stars  
the wind is its own movement, Oh, you proudly lean into  
it, tower  
of Adam's bones, that you whitened?  
And from the air  
on a rope  
a smoking bell hangs down to the dust. So the night

comes filled with heart and in the bell tower  
spasm.

Oh, the inspirer, with fire in his tracks before the gates of  
grass  
the outlaw seeks refuge in a still sepulchre.

The man was, as the spirit is  
above ash, so the word that was here in the beginning is  
and will endure.

from **The Pure Double-Armed Body** (1964)

## A PILGRIMAGE TO THE PROMISED LAND

On my pilgrimage striding out  
always with one foot in the grave  
above a circle of chalk, I awake with a with a fish  
thrown up on the shore by the ominous torrent, and  
I watch  
the repose of the fish, a green glitter  
of bottles, chimed with fin and the throbbing lights  
behind windows. There in the hiss of blood the wretched  
mob  
dragged to their deaths, plumb the depths for a well for  
their smart sleep  
and fall into it profoundly in a gnarl of muscle.

Kill the violin that wails! But it's the raging beat on my face  
of white linen from my homeland,  
since I have gushed aside a lovely grain of salt  
into the long dawn as I hungry-hearted  
all at once placed my feet on the earth!

Once in the promised land  
the circles of sacred vessels will cross  
and in this single clinking  
your face, mother, will flash for an instant  
and my tongue will taste the golden chain  
broken in two in a chalice of blown glass.

I still seek a home that resists fire,  
in the red air I see ringing  
clay lashed with light. There someone readies herself for  
work  
wraps bread in her scarf with a smile

and listens to my steps on the coarse gravel.  
 Cords rattle over the skin  
 the moon still beats and in desire  
 a brass pendulum with a heart walks faster.

In a flood of fresh copper under the vaults' ringing,  
 the servant mother  
 squats, keeps silence  
 in her hands, rouses fire, breaks her subtle joints  
 filled with light and a fallen angel of light in black  
 from a dream in sweat  
 presses against the window as she recalls her son,  
 washes his shirt, and shakes out  
 amber sweat into the dawn.

In the promised land there will be no terror  
 when violet fish leave the day under the thunder of trains  
 there will no whirls of light full of dust and faces  
 behind curtains, there will be no eyes  
 which clouds sift silver to, there will be no salt  
 either in fields of vision of a buzzing plain under the moon  
 when in drumming, it burns and is empty.

A stab of pain strikes over the low bones of the skull,  
 a vessel just  
 stabbing the heart and on the back of the hand  
 a thin vein with a blown redness shines in the dawnlight:  
 Lord, once he will return to me  
 under the northern light and in the wind...  
 ...And she draws up from the bottom, by hand  
 places a bitter pill in her mouth and leans back  
 like a swimming goose.

And see  
 in the midst of summer above the chalk circle  
 under a heavy sky of tin a dove swims,  
 its legs flayed to the bone,  
 a dove swims. Somewhere up high  
 directly to the face of God flutters  
 above its head a Slovak sky is spread  
 of fine, sweet smelling linen  
 washed under the sun.

A dove swims ...

from **The Pure Double-Armed Body** (1964)  
 (translated by Martin Solotruk)

# JÁN JOHANIDES

18 August 1934 Dolný Kubín

Prose writer and essayist. He belongs among the most important authors who first published in the 1960's. Besides his first collection, **Privacy** (Súkromie, 1963) which was thematically radical and polemically engaged with the literature of the Fifties, his subsequent two collections were also significant, **The Essence of the Quarry** (Podstata kameňolomu, 1965) and **No** (Nie, 1966). Johanides tried in a magisterial manner to bring the methods of existentialism and its new-age form, which the Fifties was the poetic of the *roman nouveau*, into a Slovak cultural and literary context.

After a long break in creativity which Johanides ended at the end of the Seventies his vision and dominant theme gradually changed. Beginning with **The Unacknowledged Crows** (Nepriznané vrany, 1978) and **Ballad of a Savings Book** (Balada o vkladnej knižke, 1979) he produced a morally charged prose on the lessening of empathy, courtesy, consideration and collective responsibility in human relationships.

An important motif in Johanides' work of the 1980's and 90's is the crime, not so much as violation of the law, but from the narrator's frightened gaze at irrationality and inscrutability. The affected human disposition, "being evil", is in Johanides work related to the prose evocation of collective memory (often reminiscences about the Holocaust) and also bringing to mind possible human deviations and perversity within a fractured communication with the surrounding world; **The Saddest Ballad of Orava** (Najsmutnejšia oravská balada, 1988), **The Crime of the Timid Lesbian** (Zločin plachej lesbičky, 1991) **Barefrost** (Holomráz, 1991) **Carrying Across the Bridge** (Previesť cez most, 1991) **The Cry of the Thrush Before Sleep** (Krik drozdov pred spaním, 1991), **The Tomcat and The Man of Winter** (Kocúr a zimný človek, 1994).

The extract from the novella comes from Johanides' first collection, **Privacy**. The piece is about the relative value of happiness which could be defined as a valuable or sharp feeling as indicated in the title *The Sources of the Sea Attract the Diver* (Potápača priťahujú pramene mora). The film version, which was the director Dušan Hanák's first film in 1969, bore the title 322. The presentation of a diagnosis of a catastrophic illness in both the writer's and director's interpretation has an unambiguous value - showing the relative and always ambivalent character of an undeniable and fatal evil.

Other works: **The Horseman, Marek, and the Hungarian Pope** (Marek, koniar a uhorský pápež, 1983) - discursive historical prose, **The Elephant at Mauthausen** (Slony v Mauthausene, 1985) - a novel on the Holocaust from the perspective of the shattered understanding of those who survived. **Punishing Crime** (Trestajúci zločin, 1995) - on the criminal trials on the 1950's, **Identity and Crisis** (1995) - articles, essays and dialogues, **Rembrandt** (1996) - an essay restoring Johanides as an art critic.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## THE SOURCES OF THE SEA ATTRACT THE DIVER (extract)

I got up at twilight and there was only an old man in the empty room, then a stranger to me. His head was indistinct in the darkness and turned towards me as he leaned on a newspaper on the table. It seemed to me that his watchful gaze had removed my dream.

I supposed he'd noticed that I was awake because he stirred.

He wiped around his mouth with his little finger. As his slow and dreadful rise from the chair went on he, in fact, became more stooped. So that when he was standing completely he was bending over the tablecloth close to his shadow while his thick fingers briskly tapped its border.

I got up. The old man moved to a beside table. He didn't flex his knees. He moved them very carefully in front of him and I switched on the light. But it could have stayed off. I didn't need the light and neither did the old man because he was blind. Of course, he had sensed the presence of a stranger, but he wasn't even able to straighten up. So he only moved his head as if he wanted to observe me. He twisted his lower lip to one side until it stood out. It was an unbalanced movement which reminded me of something like groping. It seemed to me that he had substituted a lip for his eyes and I turned away from his toothless mouth.

With a crooked forefinger he slowly reached towards an outside ear. He reached the luxuriant hairs which sprouted from it, "Is it ... you ... Vladko?" he asked very quietly. He smiled. I answered that I wasn't and I smiled at him, too.

"I'm new here," I said after a while and the old man's head started to tremble. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but his shaking reached his mouth. His gums writhed against each other and to help himself he made a short but rapid movement with his hands as though he were separating or tearing something apart. He screwed up his face and again pushed out his lower lip like a feeler. He stepped towards me. Surprisingly he now bent his knees. He gave his hands to me. I felt his leathery palms and saw his thin, delicate hair. He put his left hand on my wrist and his spread fingers could be felt through the sleeve of my gown. The old man stood silently as if he were expressing his condolences.

A thirty year old man came into the room. His hair was slicked back like one of the musicians who played in the Štefanka. His round face had a smile on it. He came up behind the old man and put both his hands on his blind eyes. "Guess who it is?" he said patiently in the same voice that we use to address children when we want to play with them. The old man trembled, bent as though he were falling. He showed his gums and repeated happily, "Vladko, Vladko."

Then a nurse entered the room and called me out into the corridor. The nurse stopped irresolutely as if she didn't know if she could speak as we walked or not. I asked what was going on. She looked at me timidly, but with a fixed stare and then she let eyes fall as though I wished to blame her for something. She continually rubbed her cheek after giving me the following information: my wife had been killed near Modra in a car. I just stared at a brass door handle. There was a spot of dried enamel on it and I remembered the nurse's words, "There is someone waiting downstairs."

I followed the nurse although I don't know if she asked me to come. We stopped in front of the small room where I'd put my clothes that afternoon. An older woman dressed in mourning passed the

door. She stopped the nurse. From what she said I understood that she'd come to collect her husband's clothes. The nurse had already unlocked when the woman in mourning asked why her cheek was red. It seemed to me that she only asked the nurse and smiled at her so that she wouldn't have to wait until the nurse had finished with me. At that moment I realised the nurse's cheek was red because she'd been rubbing it while she announced my wife's death to me.

But the nurse turned to me and gave me my shirt, my knitted waistcoat and my cravat. The woman in mourning caught at the nurse's sleeve so that my fingers touched her wrist. She looked me up and down with tiny eyes which had almost vanished in her face. Her small bent nose was covered in blackheads which reached up to her forehead although they didn't go further than the first wrinkle. The nurse pulled my suit off a hanger nervously. "I'll be here," she said, "A car is waiting."

I decided I wouldn't go to the ward because patients were there and I dressed in a toilet. I tidied myself in a hurry at the same time feeling there a thousand people laughing behind my back. I was sweating from the simple act of dressing. I might even say that it made me weak. For no good reason I took off my tie which I'd already done up. I was putting it in an inside pocket when I smelt smoke. Perhaps someone had been secretly smoking in the toilet.

I couldn't rid myself of the silly feeling that there were rows of guffawing spectators standing round me who'd somehow decided my life as though they were destiny and were now enjoying themselves with how I might accept it. It was funny, but I'd had such a feeling before and it had been as funny then as it was now. I'd had this feeling after the funeral of my father who'd died in the middle of the war. I'd walked through the suburb along the railway line and stumbled. People who'd been passing by laughed and observed "Take care!" It also seemed to me then that these people had planned the death of my father and my future and as they warned me with their "Take care," I'd at last become angry.

The nurse expressed her condolences and then turned to the woman in mourning. She said that everything had been arranged.

A taxi was waiting at the entrance to the Metropol cinema. The driver got out of the car when I came up to his window.

"Is it you?" he asked as if checking on someone he knew. It was then I realised that I didn't know where Marta actually was. I'd forgotten to ask or else I'd forgotten what I'd been told by the nurse. I'd have to call the ward in the hospital, but I didn't know the nurse's surname. So I went back.

"You see, I forgot to tell you," she apologised. We'd met in the corridor. So I hadn't had to look everywhere for her.

"In Trnava ... in the hospital. You know, ask about the crash at reception. That's all."

I closed my eyes in the car, not because I wanted to sleep, but because I wasn't able to see anything not even the light off the reflectors.

The door-keeper in reception seemed to have been waiting just for me and wanted to get shot of everything. Without a word, almost



hastily he led me into the mortuary and as I opened the door I saw Marta. She was lying on a table and was covered by a large piece of sheeting pulled up to her closed mouth. A lock of hair hung down to her left eyebrow.

A policeman sat on a chair next to her head. Behind him stood a short doctor with a bald head and by her legs was the student and young author whom I'd met at home before the business trip. The young man had a bandaged head and his eyes were full of tears.

"Heart," said the policeman and got up and drew back the sheeting. But he immediately dropped it covering the face of the corpse. I didn't notice any blood. The doctor nodded. The policeman seemed to be a sergeant. He came up to me and first gave me his condolences. Then he continued, "It's like this ... so anyway I'd better ... Do you know this comrade?" He turned to the young man and I acknowledged him. The sergeant took out a notebook and asked for my identity papers. Before he started to write he observed, "The car isn't in bad shape." I told him that I wasn't interested in that.

"We'll have to dissect her," said the doctor after the sergeant had left. "In my opinion she suffered a heart attack as the car ran off the road. Our comrade here only cut his head on the glass. He got out of the car easily enough and ran to Modra to telephone." The doctor sniffed and pressed his left nostril slightly with a forefinger, then sniffed again. "When we arrived she was gone." He fixed his gaze on me. Our eyes met. His were as dark as weak black coffee and they were tired. We agreed that I'd fetch Marta the next day in the evening after her dissection. He asked me if I'd inform her relatives. "She's got no relatives," I declared. "Her parents died long ago." I knew that Marta had got a cousin somewhere in Spiš, but in the eleven years I'd survived with her she hadn't visited us and they hadn't even exchanged letters. "Was she completely alone when you married her?" the doctor asked. "Yes," I replied, "Alone." Then the doctor stood up, took his glasses out of his gown and lightly cleaned them with it. "I'll leave you here," he whispered, "I've got look upstairs." He sighed, "Tell the door-keeper, if it's not too much trouble." At last he gave me his condolences. He held my hand in his for a while. It was soft and hot as though he had a fever. He shook his head and reminded me of the old man in my ward.

from *The Sources of Sea Attract the Diver*, **Privacy** (1963)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

# JÁN ONDRUŠ

11 March 1932 *Nová Vieska*

A poet with the ordinary name of Ján Ondruš. For Ondruš, poetry is a stigma. To the pioneering poetic effort of his generation, Ondruš contributed namely a perfect sense of everyday experience and a disciplined, matter-of-fact metaphor. In the early Sixties, an interval of great creative zeal, with a progressive disease Ondruš gradually withdrew to literary and civilian seclusion. The natural world of the everyday grew troubled with states of anxiety, ecstatic clairvoyance, dreams and phantasms - particularly in his first published book **Insane Moon** (*Šialený mesiac*, 1965). The poetic text becomes a tremendous visual detail or a fatal record of the irresistible and irreversible ritual of self-examination, self-scrutiny, and self-torture with only occasional flashes of catharsis. The surgically precise, "corporeal" imagination draws some inspiration from surrealism and the image of a man and universe runs along similar lines and has certain parallels in the philosophy of existence, works of Kafka, Beckett, or brute artistic gesture of Dubuffet or Bacon. In 1966, Ondruš published his only translated book, a selection of the poetry of Vasko Popa with whom his work in the Sixties had affinities. His generation's utopia of autonomous poetry underwent another test of solitude and pain in the second book **Gesture with Flower** (*Posunok s kvetom*, 1968). The obverse side of Ondruš's existentially tense vision of the human condition and poetry is his gravitation to situational, linguistic grotesque, blasphemy, aesthetics of the ugly - chiefly in the major poems **Genuflection** (*Kľak*, 1968) and **In a State of Gall** (*V stave žľče*, 1970). Today, in critical retrospective we can observe Ondruš's work as similarly independent of the sixties Slovak anesthetizing neo-avant-garde as it was the case with Michaux and Charms in relation to classical avant-garde.

The Seventies were not a very favourable period for the publication of Ondruš's poetry. After several re-editions authorized and reworked poetry selections **Swallowing a Hair** (*Prehĺtanie vlasu*, 1996) and new collections - e.g. word formative decomposition grotesques **Sheep in Wolf's Clothing** (*Ovca vo vlčej koži*, 1997), Ondruš has definitively established himself with a wide readership as a key poet of recent decades.

The composition *Disgrace* models a "magic" triangle of the selection of a hostage or a victim before execution. This is a limiting and emblematically terrifying experience of this century, nightmare phantasm, as well as a variation on a children's game.

Other poetry collections: **Male Seasonings** (*Mužské korenie*, 1972).

FEDOR MATEJOV

## DISGRACE

1

Stepping over the knife you'll have one leg  
in front of the knife and the other beyond it,

2

with two hats on your head

3  
 you stare out of two windows,  
 bite into two apples.

4  
 "One of you will go under the knife."

5  
 They throng, they plead, Granddad,  
 a child says Father, a woman looks at a man,  
 at last

granddad steps forth and his flickering shadow  
 will be in the shape of a boy, will be in a shirt  
 and will have a thorn in its heel.

6  
 A stab wound in the apple also has corners  
 like a bird's beak which overflows and whistles,  
 which of you will wipe it on your sleeve, dry it

7  
 this relief on waking that it was all only a dream,  
 whoever had been subjected to it whoever had emerged  
 from it  
 beyond knife and edge,

a bad dream, to see in sleep  
 is not permitted and punished  
 by a midnight awakening -

8  
 and everything over and above guilt is added, brought  
 together,  
 an embrace will be binding and love awry,  
 a caress will graze and a smile unknown.

9  
 "One of you will go into the dark."

10  
 Left looks at right,  
 the sighted at the blind, the stronger at the weaker,  
 at last

one who is blind steps forth and his unseeing  
shadow leads on hunched  
and stumbles at the entrance to the dark -

11  
scattering the allotment of sunflower seeds,  
with a pin he brings it to a plate, to arrange  
it in the shape of breasts, a face, the seeds shoot out little  
tongues  
that are dry on the windward side, moist on the other,

12  
this relief on falling asleep that dreaming is allowed,  
is permitted, pure,  
a sweet and merciful armpit, fall of the apple, when the  
crest  
of a cock turns blue  
with the tolling of a bell in you -

13  
and everything over and above sacrifice is subtracted,  
diminished by love, because it has been brought,  
a smile trapped, a caress felt.

14  
“One of you will remain  
and will always be the same.”

15  
They threaten Granddad, the lovers look at one another,  
the sighted at the blind, the mother at her child, but all  
depart, only a bare shadow remains -

16  
in the rustle of a leg  
of a grasshopper  
in clockwork

17  
it gave itself over to hurt and is in the right, can  
beat and stab, quarrel and quarter,

18  
with two hats on its head,  
its, yours.

19  
staring out of two windows,  
biting into two apples,

20  
with one leg in front of the knife  
and the other behind it.

from **Insane Moon** (1965)

(translated by Martin Solotruk and James Sutherland-Smith)

# JAROSLAVA BLAŽKOVÁ

15 November 1933 Velké Meziříčt

Prose writer, author of books for children and young people, publicist – the 1960's the most published and read Slovak writer. In 1968 she emigrated with her family to Canada for which she was expelled from the *Union of Slovak Writers* in 1971. She was not allowed to be published and her name vanished from cultural circles. In Canada she wrote mostly dramatic texts, and edited for the Toronto publishing house *68 Publishers* with the Škvo-reckys. After 1989 more editions of her work were published in Slovakia, but she continues to live abroad.

She first appeared in print with the *Generation of 56* who began to publish in the magazine *Mladá tvorba* (Young Creation) – with Hykisch, Kot and Johanides. This generation did not engage in an open polemic against the programme of building socialism of the father-insurgents. Their revolt was stylistic rather than fundamental, more thematic than conceptual. They indeed legitimised a literary type “*the uncombed hero*” – making mistakes, in doubt, searching – which did not correspond to the demands of the age which required a picture of “*new man*.”

In the centre of Blažková's attention were the moral problems of contemporary life in the context of the everyday and the desire for self-realisation. Such is “*the long-haired dragon Vanda*” from the stories of **Nylon Moon** (Nylonový mesiac, 1961) occurring among Bratislava intellectuals, such are the young heroes and little rebels from the collection of short stories, **The Lamb and the Grandee** (Jahniatko a grandí, 1964). One of them, *A Story Full of Snow* created a scandal and became the subject of discussion in the magazine on the writer's morality.

Blažková's style is plain: she uses levels of simple language, the expressive slang of young people. She can be ironical and direct the irony at herself. These are evident in the novel from the 1990's, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Záhrada pozemských rozkoší) where biblical parable is the backdrop for the sensitive psychological struggle by a mother for her son's trust.

Other works: **Nylon Moon** (Nylonový mesiac, 1963) – the full text without editorial interference, ...**as from a Card of Congratulations...** (...ako z gratulačnej karty..., 1997) – the complete texts of **Nylon Moon**, **The Lamb and the Grandee** and a story published in a magazine, *Kirké*.

For children and young people: a novel **My Excellent Brother Robinson** (Môj skvelý brat Robinson, 1968), dramatic texts with an educational tone **Tóno, Me and the Ants** (Tóno, ja a mravce, 1961) and **The Island of Captain Hašašar** (Ostrov kapitána Hašašara, 1962), humorous prose **Fireworks for Grandpa** (Ohňostroj pre deduška, 1962). From the short story of that name the director Eduard Grečner made a film *Nylon Moon*.

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

(extract)

I met my son, Daniel, one icy Sunday in January in small café situated in the modernist labyrinth of the Ontario gallery. It was immediately after he had returned from India where he had spent seven months searching for God.

I arrived half an hour early as I have done always and everywhere. It is as if I might miss an important train which I'm afraid has alrea-

dy left. I left my coat in the cloakroom, I checked my make-up and went to look for a small table from which I would be able to see Daniel immediately. I was wearing a new blue-green dress with shoulder pads like a rugby player. It was something really ugly, but it was in fashion. Round my neck I had a silver chain with a large dial flattened in the manner of a melted watch by Salvador Dali and on my finger there was a silver ring with a lotus flower. Every time I met him I needed special armour...

When Daniel was small he was an exceptionally pretty child. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was so beautiful that it hurt and when I took to the nursery school I had the feeling that I had hurt myself, that I had lost something eternally precious, irrevocable.

Daniel came on time. He was wearing a thick dark blue sweater and a black waistcoat which suggested warmth, but he was somehow twisted with cold. He was handsome even now, but the bright glow which had emanated from him in the past seemed to be gone. He was twenty-five and his very bright light grey eyes had sunk into deep holes and his face was haggard. He was pale even grey; after three months in the hot sun!

"Daniel! How are you, darling? Are you all right?"

"Everything's fine."

"Perhaps you're weak after all this fasting. But if you let me look after you, everything will be fine immediately."

I heard my voice going along in a false chattering tone concentrated only on earning a smile from him. Naturally he didn't smile at all.

"So what can we afford today? I must treat you to something. We'll kill the fatted calf in celebration of the return of the prodigal son, but in that case you can't be a vegetarian. Indeed what do vegetarians kill when a lost son returns?"

"They stab a fat marrow and make sausages out of it. But don't forget that I haven't been completely lost."

"Of course you weren't. Not a bit of it. Anyway I'm happy that you were found once more. If you found yourself."

He looked at me sharply. I felt as though I was covered red all over. It had started again. We both lowered our eyes to the glass corner where angular pots stood with fashionably strange food: leaves of red cabbage with mushrooms and the pink tails of shrimps, a few poison-green mystical berries with a piece of Ementhal cheese. In each hole black olives, halved strawberries with bilberries and a pile of lettuce round a heap of cottage cheese, pieces of celery, leaves with raw rhubarb and calerab, the calerab being, I suppose, because of its beautiful violet skin which contrasted with the redness of the rhubarb. It was a feast for the eyes! In fact we were in a gallery and it was a dream for emaciated caterpillars. Daniel chose a miniature black roll and a glass of mineral water.

"Why don't you choose something more nutritious? Yoghurt. You always liked yoghurt. Or at least milk instead of that water!"

"Mother!"

"A banana, for example. There's calcium in a banana. You need it. So fine, fine, I haven't said anything."

Mechanically I poured boiling water into a small glass over a hot tea bag and had chosen a small plate with carrots and cheese. We took our trays to the small table in the corner of the room. It was half-past twelve. The place started to fill up with smart couples who would spend part of the Sunday in the gallery in one of the few places open on a puritan Toronto Sunday. Young families also came where the fathers were laced into different bags, harnesses and ingenious metal constructions carrying their children wrapped up as though they were newly hatched. The young mothers were outfitted as for the Alps, wearing hand-knitted sweaters by hungry Indian women from Peru and leggings with hobnailed brogues. Everything was as fashion dictated and all these young people declared that life is climb from the earth to rocky peaks and that, although they had come to see pictures in their golden frames, they were ready for the struggle.

The walls of the dining room were a deep cinnamon colour. In the background there were glassed covered reproductions. There was also a picture which reminded me of something, but I didn't know what it could be. In the blank pearl space some elves hovered, one pink and the other blue, fish and bird and the whole space was distorted as if it were submerged in water glass.

"Doesn't that remind you of something?"

Daniel looked at it, but it was obvious that he didn't see it. His face was also as if plunged beneath water. My Daniel used to be the merriest child in the world. We would call him the clown Jengibarov. He was born in October so I had an excuse not to send him to school when he was six. I thought he wasn't old enough for school then. Even when he was seven he wasn't mature enough. But he had to go to school then and it was a catastrophe. He couldn't stay there. The only thing he was interested in was running away. And then there were the girls beautiful Žambor twins. They lived just round the corner and were completely smitten. They were always standing under our balcony and calling like sirens: "Daniel! Daniel!" Daniel would mercifully emerge and throw them cakes baked by his aunt.

"Listen Daniel these girls don't need your cakes! They're from a rich family, they're crème de la crème."

"Creamy, but their grandma is so old that she can go begging."

I was shocked how he could make the connection that to be old was to be a wretched creature, that poverty was the same as begging. At that time there were no beggars in Bratislava. They weren't allowed to exist!

"Do you remember the Žambor twins? How they stared at our balcony and caught your cakes?"

Daniel looked dismissively. He didn't to be reminded with tales of his childhood although I never laughed at him. In my eyes he was always a prince on the white fairy-tale horse, cheerful Vanušek, the third son of the king! In photographs he had an aura around his fair hair although it was his older brother, David, who used to be the serious child with a gift for piety. Daniel could just smile and his eyes shone. The English have a saying, "I could see the sun coming out of him!" For me the sun rose and set with Daniel.



“So darling, start talking!”

“What do you want me to talk to you about?”

“Everything! You’ve seen a different continent. You’ve seen an exotic culture, strange gods ...”

“You’ve seen! It’s you who wants to see it! You’re completely turned towards exterior things!”

“Darling, I’m not forcing you into anything. You can be turned as you wish. Tell me, let’s say about your interior caverns.”

“Interior caverns!”

“You’ve returned from a great journey, so share your experiences with me. Don’t leave me in the dark.”

“You live in darkness?”

“I live, I don’t live... I have no idea. You tell me yourself...”

“Mother, you live like a sparrow. From branch to branch – hop, hop and off.”

“A sparrow?”

“A sparrow, a crow, a wagtail it’s all the same. Any old bird. And what have you got against birds? They’re also God’s creatures. And what’s more such a bird doesn’t cause grief in anyone.

In the meantime I’m causing you grief. I’ve disappointed your hopes, always the same old story.”

“Don’t be angry. We’ve met after such a long time. We’re in the gallery together. I’ve always liked it here... There are people around and they’re happy so why shouldn’t we be too? Let’s start from the beginning. I greet you and you tell me, for example, about the ashram. What was it like there?”

“I’ve already to you about it.”

“Meagrely.”

“You’ve always expected too much.”

from *Romboid* (1998)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# ŠTEFAN STRÁŽAY

10 November 1940 Igram

Poet, essayist. Thirty years of working as a literary editor have immunized Strážay against literary mannerisms both in terms of his own texts and socially established role of a writer. He entered literature in 1966, apparently in the shade of the neo-avant-garde utopia of art and political engagement which was fashionable in those days. He did so with his characteristically titled collection **To Things on the Table** (*Veciam na stole*). The book's sensual and subtle eroticism was gradually replaced by the everyday urbane experience of the Slovak Seventies and Eighties in the following key poetry books: **Igram**, (Igram, 1975), **Artemisia** (Palina, 1979), **Malinovsky 96** (1985), **Elegy** (*Elégia*, 1989), and **Interior** (*Interiér*, 1992). Reality enters the texts as a man in an empty apartment, waiting room, public transport vehicle, melancholic park, or a cemetery. The author is a civilian, discreet participant and observer of all these situations, urbane interiors and exteriors. This is a poetry form of a "novel of education" and "novel of disillusionment", at the same time serving as a quiet alternative to official literary concepts of the Seventies and early Eighties. The poetry offers intellectual and aesthetic "self-education" regarding the hedonism of little moments and details, but also to skepticism towards future and the whole. Unlike authors of the older generations, Strážay is not "disillusioned" primarily with social projects and phenomena, but with his personal "weakenings": sensitivity, life limitations, desires. For this, the texts can most often be read as sensual snapshots, situation fragments, ponderings, stylized monologues or dialogues in poetic urban environments. Strážay does not work with an exclusive metaphoric coding, but rather with the prosaic synecdoche of common things and situations.

If we replace "fever" by Strážay's reserved lyric nature, we can find a slogan for his poetry in the following confession of the Slovene poet Aleš Debeljak: "*Feverishly, we strived to see the muses smiling at us and, in our poetry, to have the angel of privacy and the demons of history recognize themselves in the mirror of the banal everyday, at least once.*"

Other works: **Dawn, but Indefinite** (*Úsvit, ale neurčitý*, 1971), **Holidays** (*Sviatky*, 1974), **Podhorany** (1977), **Courtyard** (*Dvor*, 1981), **Sister** (*Sestra*, 1985), **December** (1990).

FEDOR MATEJOV

## ANXIETY OF UNDESSING

Breathing quietly  
The lamp remembers all about you,  
You take off your shirt:  
That's how you will lie dying.

Snowfall reaches up to the arms  
Of naked crosses.  
It is night, undressing and a lamp  
shining within.

from **To Things on the Table** (1966)

**SUNSET**

At the corner of two long  
wide empty streets  
A man parts with a woman.  
Thirty, forty.

It is a long farewell. The sky  
Arches above them, gigantic,  
dirty grey. Now it is all  
Figured and numbered -

This much time for love,  
That much time for lying.  
But none any more for illusions.  
Sorrow is of the body.

from *Artemisia* (1979)

**FROM AN OLD PAINTING**

A magical maiden stepped into  
my sleep early one morning. The dream before  
had been torn, full of frights,  
restless,  
And there she came, complete and naked,  
vital, fair haired,  
As if illuminated  
By a dim lamp  
from behind,  
Composed and wholly  
Tender, sensuous -  
yet her face was grave.  
Death was often painted  
as an angel.

from *Malinovsky 96* (1985)

**OPHELIA**

Ophelia, already a trifle weary,  
with tiny wrinkles around her mouth  
and lovely eyes,  
with a kid, flat and husband,  
resigned, perhaps

happy -  
at times, not often  
she can still recall herself as a maiden  
in white veils,  
Snowily lovely,  
floating in the long waters,  
dead.

from **Malinovsky 96** (1985)

## THE CITY

In the city statues have been veiled,  
a long time.  
It is like an ominous sign.  
Theme: despair.  
The past does not exist,  
the future is covered  
And time keeps working on  
what is under the impregnated  
Rubber-coated sheet  
without us knowing how,  
as we can't see.

from **Interior** (1992)

## POSTPONEMENT

Our apocalypse has got  
our look. Smaller than others,  
it's rather loose,  
gradual, for most of us, though,  
practically invisible,  
devastating, but friendly,  
continually eroticized,  
postponed till tomorrow  
and, what is worst, making us expect  
subconsciously that what died yesterday  
will bloom  
into beauty next year.

from **Interior** (1992)

(translated by Martin Solotruk)

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# VINCENT ŠIKULA

19 October 1936 Dubová

He writes prose, film-scripts and poetry. He made his first appearance in the field of literature in 1964, when he published two collections of stories **No Applause at Concerts** (Na koncertoch sa netlieska) and **Maybe I'll Build Myself a Bungalow** (Možno si postavím bungalow). In 1966 the short novel **With Rozarka** (S Rozarkou) followed, two years later he published a collection of short stories **Air** (Povetrie, 1968). In all of these pieces he followed the formal principles of the "lyrical" branch of Slovak prose. His characteristic perspective stresses the authenticity of being, the importance of details through which his characters perceive the world - namely the so-called large history intervening in their lives. Šikula is especially sensitive in individualizing his protagonists who are often very "different" from their surroundings. In the past he felt the weak fundamentals of socialist realism and its "moral imperative", therefore he chose to depict those "humble and small", following masterfully in the footsteps of Jozef Gregor Tajovský, Jozef Ciger Hronský and Pavol Hrtus Jurina. At the same time his effort corresponded with the contemporary striving to depict real-life problems as opposed to automatic ideological constructions. This necessity was felt mainly by the so-called *Generation '56* of artists who reflected life after the fall of Stalinism. Šikula described the contradictory position of "small people" and "large history" in his trilogy of II. World War novels **Masters** (Majstri, 1976), **Geranium** (Muškát, 1977) and **Vilma** (1979).

The peripheral point of view can be found for the first time in Šikula's short novel **Not Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining** (Nebýva na každom vršku hostinec, 1966). It is almost a musical composition, aesthetically dominated by the rich scenery of Western Slovakia, Šikula's home. Limited motif sequences interweave, forming three units: the theme of Šimon, the theme of beggars (Krujbel, Hejgeš and their companions), and the theme of the boy. All of them are united by the author's stylistic mastery using methods borrowed from folklore narratives, even "oral history". Šikula's protagonists often live in dire poverty, but they never give up their dreams, they never lose their ability to live a poetic life determined by human generosity and friendship, even love.

Other works: the novel **Ornament** (Ornament, 1991) - its first chapters were published in the late 1960's. The author reflected Stalinist practices in the book and the way these methods "invaded" the lives of small people. The short novel **Weathercock** (Veterná ružica, 1995) forms a second part to the novel **Ornament**. Vincent Šikula also wrote literature for young readers: **The Gamekeeper Has a Feather on His Hat** (Pán horár má za klobúkom mydleničku, 1965), **Holidays with Uncle Rafael** (Prázdniny so strýcom Rafaelom, 1966), **Đuro, Say Hello to Đuro** (Đuro, pozdrav Đura, 1978). Film-scripts: **Wild Lilies** (Lalie poľné, 1972), based on the short novel **Not Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining**, directed by Eliáš Havetta. Poetry: **From a Neglected Garden** (Zo zanedbanej záhrady, 1993).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## NOT EVERY CLOUD HAS A SILVER LINING

(extract)

There was a forest, in the forest there was a small hill, on the hill there stood a church. There were musicians, uncle Jano and uncle Štefan, they used to pass through the woods. Where is the forest?

Where is the hill? Where is it and where is he, the patron saint of all roaming souls?

And there was this wanderer, his name was Hejgeš. He used to go to Šaštín, to Mariatál, even to Nitra. And, what was more, he was seen three or four times wandering near distant Levoča. They said that there was no other wanderer in the world like him, because Hejgeš, believe it or not, could play the clarinet. You know, singing is thought to be a double prayer, therefore clarinet-play must be at least a triple. Beggars, cripples, all that ragged wandering riffraff hated Hejgeš more than hell itself. They cursed him, slandered him, invented whatever malicious things they pleased about him. They spread rumours that he came from a rich family and had inherited a whole mill from his father. Well, that mill of his was not very prosperous, because there were two mills in his village, an upper one and a lower one. The villagers mostly went to the upper mill. The upper miller's name was Zúbek, he wore riding breeches and creaky leather boots. Thus Hejgeš had to get riding breeches too, and a pair of creaky leather boots to wear with them. Then the other one bought himself a rifle and got a hunting licence. As soon as the lower miller heard about that, it was not even Sunday, he went out of his courtyard with a rifle in his hand, and, moreover, put a hunter's hat on his head. He strutted around the village with an aromatic cigar in his mouth, even though he never smoked at home. And so it went on and on. The upper miller was a cunning fellow, when he was not working, he sat thinking, wondering what more he could do to provoke Hejgeš. He bought five hives, Hejgeš bought ten. He subscribed to a dozen Hungarian magazines, Hejgeš subscribed to two more. He had a wooden cross erected in front of the church, Hejgeš had a side-altar reconstructed inside the church. He got himself a flute, Hejgeš got himself, God knows from where, a clarinet. The upper miller gave the flute to his journeyman, and Hejgeš, not having anyone to give the clarinet to, had to twitter himself. The upper miller milled, the lower one twittered. The upper miller got richer day by day, the lower one just twittered and twittered. After all, what else was there left for him?

Frankly, all of this was maybe not even half-true. Wanderers like to spread all sorts of nonsense around the world and other people only add up to their nonsense. But enough of explanations.

"Where do you come from, old man?" two boys spoke to him in Levoča. They looked as if they were wandering just for the fun of it. Perhaps they had run away from school or they had been apprentices before and they just had grown tired of being ordered around. Who knows? In those days all sorts of people trotted around, crouched in front of churches or mixed with folks at fairs.

Hejgeš did not even lift his head, he had no intention satisfying the curiosity of such youngsters. Just recently one of the stops on his clarinet had broken, thus he had to cut a new one. He cut it from lime-wood to make it match with the others.

"Where are you from, old man?" they repeated their question.

He looked at them, one after the other, then told the first boy, a tall

blond freckled one, to hold the clarinet for him at an appropriate level.

The boy did so.

The other boy was smaller, plump, and short-winded. He leaned forward, taking part in the process of repair at least through his helpful posture.

“What sort of glue is this?” he panted. He touched the small tin bowl, where Hejgeš had dipped his finger a minute ago.

“What?” Hejgeš fished a tiny leather cushion from his pocket, not a bit bigger than a lentil, smeared one of its sides with glue and then put it under the finger-button. “Turn it down!” he told the freckled boy.

“What sort of glue is this?”

“Shellac.” The tiny cushion was where it belonged. He could push the finger-button, he did so and the cushion slid over the opening.

“Shellac? What is that for?”

“Can’t you see?” He still pushed the finger-button, taking good care not to move his finger even a bit. “Actually, it’s not shellac. But it should be shellac.”

“Do you think that this could glue shoe-soles?”

“You asshole! Of course it can! It’s a shoemaking glue!”

“Really?”

“Where do you come from, old man?” the freckled boy asked for the third time.

“From there!” He pointed with his chin towards the wooden fence. Behind the fence there was a garden, then there were some fields, and then, even further, hills stretched lazily under the sky.

“So you come from the hills?” insisted the freckled boy.

“Yes, from the hills, but not just from there,” Hejgeš nodded. “The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Each plant opens in the morning and closes in the evening. When nettle starts to give honey, bees and bumble-bees must tire quicker than when acacia gives honey.”

“Well, it depends!” panted the other boy. The freckled one did not know what to make of such an answer.

“Snakes and lizards lie in the sun. But when winter gets closer, they hide in hollows and lie as if in a stupor. Then pumpkins turn yellow and swallows fly to the south.”

“Hey, ain’t you just a prophet!” the plump boy laughed.

“Do you know where a good hive can be found?” the freckled one asked.

“Hey, I bet you can’t say a prayer!” he waved his finger in front of the boys’ faces, even though he himself found some prayers funny. But a prayer is never funny, until it is worn out.

“Hey, old man, could we go with you?” they started to clamour when they saw that he was packing up his belongings.

“With me? And where?” He took the tiny bowl with shoemaking glue, wrapped it carefully in a piece of old newspaper and put into a cloth bag. He slid his small knife in his pocket.

“With you.”

“You fools! Where would you go with me?” He looked around anxiously, wondering if he had left something lying on the ground.

“Just let us try!” They were both so persistent.

“Let’s go!” He put his bag on his shoulder, carrying the clarinet in his hand.

But they did not go to the south, they went to the west. In the next village they stopped in front of the very first cottage. Hejgeš played and the boys sang:

*O, the blessed Virgin Mary and her blessed Godly Son!  
He used to walk here, on this Earth,  
He brought His truth to those who had none.  
We saw His wonders and His goodness,  
then in a moment, He was gone...*

The villagers gathered around them. Children climbed up to the nearby trees and threw lime-branches on them.

*The last Supper was at hand,  
He spoke to the Twelve about his fate,  
He gave them bread, He poured them wine,  
and the night got late.  
Then He told them He was the Heavenly Bread  
that would surely save them all...*

“Hey, why don’t you find some work?” a peasant barked at them. He pushed a cartwheel full of grass and was ready to jab one of the beggars with his pitchfork.

“Work? And where?” A woman took a piece of chicory out of her apron and handed it to Hejgeš.

The peasant noticed that and knocked the piece out of his hand.

The freckled boy turned green with anger.

“Imro!” the plump one panted.

“What?”

Now the boys jumped at the peasant. One pulled his pitchfork, the other pushed his back.

“Boys!” Hejgeš shouted with his eyes wide open.

Of course, the villagers defended the peasant. A fight broke out. The men used their fists, the women squealed and the children on the trees clasped the branches silently like little bats.

“Fucking bastards! Fucking bastards!” the assaulted peasant spit out. He managed to slip away, waving the pitchfork all around him wildly, hitting even those of his own kind. He marked the freckled boy, made a bolt for him, obviously wanting to stab him. But the youngster side-stepped, yanked his mate by the sleeve and they both ran like hell.

Hejgeš started after them. But his legs were not as good as theirs. In no time the furious villagers were at him. They mauled him, milled him like crazy, someone kicked his ass three or four times. And



even when he got away from them, he had to hop from side to side to avoid the stones the children threw at him.

He went alone. Just before dusk he crept to the next village. Actually, he crept around it. He rambled along fences, peeked into backyards, searching for some stack or roof, where he could lay his head. He found a hay-stack. He threw his bag to the ground, then took off his coat, which seemed to him the heaviest of his belongings. But in winter such coat always came in handy. And even in summer it was good when one wanted something as a blanket in the night.

He sat down by the hay-stack. He found a slice of bread in his pocket, broke it in two and ate it slowly. But he ate only the bread and put the crust carefully back. He wiped his mouth and once again started to fiddle with his clarinet. He stroked the wooden stop, touched the thin edge of the tiny leather cushion. Then he licked the wooden reed and tried to blow a note. It did not please him much. He undid the cord which held the lower part of the mouthpiece together, took the reed out and wiped it against his trousers. He scabbled around his pockets, searching for a coin, then for matches.

At that very moment the boys appeared as if from nowhere. They just sat down pretending nothing had happened. The freckled one was smoking, the other one was stuffing himself with green apricots.

He ignored them. He pressed the reed against the coin. With his right hand he groped for the box, took one match out of it, stroked it and lifted it very carefully to the coin, so that the flame had licked only the jagged edge of the reed.

"You wanna burn the whistle?"

"Stop panting!" He threw the match away. Then he studied the reed, licked it and studied it once again.

"Who taught you this?" the freckled boy asked.

He ignored that question too. He fished a knife from his pocket, shaved the wood to make the reed thin, wafer-thin. Of course, no-one could make a soft note with a thick reed.

Once again he bound the mouthpiece firmly with the dirty cord. From time to time he blew the clarinet just to hear whether the notes are not small and wheezy.

Meanwhile the sky turned dark. The boys burrowed inside the hay-stack, side by side, only their feet showed now, and once in a while one or the other's head emerged.

"Hey, old man, why don't you call it a day?"

"Call it a day? Why should I?"

"So you say, old man, that you don't ever sleep?"

"I sleep."

"So why don't you just lie down?"

It was getting too dark to see. He tied the cord. He licked the reed and spat twice under the wooden finger-button. He played a scale. Then he went over the stops without playing. He looked at the leather cushion. He moved the stops again. He blew through the hole where he had just spat. He played a few notes. Now the moon was high.

He put the instrument down and covered himself with his patchy coat.

The sun had not even risen above the horizon, and he was already awake.

"Hey, boys, get up! We are moving on," he shouted.

A hare jumped out of the bushes.

"Boys!"

The hare ran across the meadow, then swerved.

The grass was dewy, even the upper layer of hay was moist.

Hejgeš looked around - the boys were gone. Those miscreants! Most probably they were rambling around gardens, chasing for green fruits. Why, he might even get into trouble again just because of them. Perhaps he should shake them off while there was still time. Why should he fraternise with such green geese? He could wander on alone, minding his own business. And they could take care of themselves.

He put on his coat and it was only then when he found out that his humble pile of belongings consisted all of a sudden only of his bag and stick. The clarinet was gone. And so was his cap.

He jumped and started running around as if in a maze. He wanted to shout at them, but he did not know which direction they had taken. He grabbed his bag and his stick and dashed towards the gardens.

"Hey, where are you running so fast, good man?" A villager turned up and stepped in his way.

"Here... here..." he panted.

"What happened?"

"My God, they have robbed me! How could they?" His voice cracked.

"But who? Who could have robbed you?" The villager smiled.

Oh no, this one is of no help to me, thought Hejgeš. He just sighed and dashed on.

The villager looked after him.

"Hey, you!" he shouted.

Hejgeš turned around.

"There, go into the second house at the end of the village. Tell them to give you something." And then he continued, but this time only muttering to himself, "A beggar robbed! Bad luck for all of us!"

from *Not Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining* (1966)

(translated by Marína Gálišová)

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# LÝDIA VADKERTI-GAVORNÍKOVÁ

30 March 1932 Modra - 2 May 1999 Bratislava

Poet and translator. Her first collection was **Candlemasstide** (Pohromnice, 1965) and linked her to the *Concretist* group mainly Jozef Mihalkovič. In her succeeding collections she gradually worked towards her own style and subject matter. Her poetry took its place in an unchanging element in Slovak women's writing with themes of family and home resonating within it but having significance for mankind and the considerations of life.

Vadkerti-Gavorníková was able to use a connection with an environment of folklore speech - the speech of Záhorie and Modra as well as the inspirations of modernism and a woman's perception of life; daughter, sister, sweetheart, wife, mother at the end of the twentieth century. The loving and caring nature of the lyrical protagonists of her poems is lightened by a spiritual Christian message but also beset by the anxieties of civilisation and existential themes which destroy the hard-won harmony of the world and stability of poetic tradition.

Vadkerti-Gavorníková impressed with the evident "womanness" of her writing and the contemporary universal significance rising from archetypal depths of human experience. Her poetry is distinguished by the biomorphic nature of her metaphors, the dynamism of her language made deeper with conversational and folkloristic layers (often transposing phrases, proverbs, sayings, nursery rhymes in her verses). These effects together with the sound and structural qualities of her work, the significant tension between the search for certainty in life and the issues brought about by the impetus of time and constraining relationships. The epic base of many of her poetic tales creates a sense of authenticity and the reiteration of their ancient roots. The allegorical work **Wine** (Vino, 1982) can be considered as an attempt at a poetical synthesis by Vadkerti-Gavorníková, a poetical testament based on the processes of wine-making and human maturation although as a result of this semantic project there is tendency for the original experience and sensuousness to disappear which is not typical in her work. Her last collection **A Game of Odds and Evens** (Hra na pár-nepár, 1992) emerges from the situation of a woman after the loss of her partner which recapitulates her fate and life's afflictions, but still with a feeling for the text and a sense of language which gives this revaluation a breadth of spirit and lack of self-pity.

The selection is taken from three collections published in the Seventies and the poem *We Lock Ourselves In* is taken from her last collection which was published after a ten year pause.

Other works: Poetry - **Identity** (Totožnosť, 1970), **Spinning Wheel** (Kolovrátok, 1972) **Stone and Jug** (Kameň a džbán, 1974), **Sandy Song** (Piesočná pieseň, 1977) **Enduring** (Trvanie, 1979), Vadkerti-Gavorníková's own selection - **Mirrorings** (Zrkadlenie, 1999) with unpublished poems from her estate. For children she wrote a puppet play, **Ping and Tinka** (Ping a Tinka, 1981).

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

## FALLING ASLEEP

Father,  
who fashioned this bed  
from punctilious planks

for a whole life long  
now help me seek out  
lost children

Or better a new berth  
fixed together from the unpunctual  
bark of conifers  
at least for one night  
let me lie as in pine needles  
let a forest grow over me

Hasten  
Already the moment is passing  
Already somewhere it has caught fire

And a squirrel  
through the burnt-out ground

Behind her the dog  
Amen

from **Stone and Jug** (1974)

## **WHITE NIGHTS WITH A ROOSTER**

There'll be, my daughter,  
white nights  
with a rooster on the roof  
Shadow split by lightning  
A double loneliness

And beyond the blaze of the slates  
you'll ignite a field of poppies  
Wolf-dark will come

You'll go in a red  
circle  
One leg  
will catch up the other

There'll be, my daughter,  
red nights  
with a rooster in the well  
A multiple picture of the moon  
sparkling beneath the surface

And how ever much you scoop up  
then so much the less

You'll drop the tiny key  
of a child's treasure chest  
into the well

You'll hear upside-down buckets  
rattle above the water  
Behind the blind window the goatsucker  
will hoot at billy goat corner:

(The maiden dreamed in a white heat  
her little bed caught fire beneath her)

She sleeps  
Her pretty head streams out  
over the bedside

as if she already knew

from **Stone and Jug** (1974)

## **WE LOCK OURSELVES UP**

with three locks  
for fear of burglars  
Apparently dead  
each in his tomb  
we await the summons -  
Lazarus arise!

Every night desire  
for human tenderness burgles  
my privacy  
Every morning  
I find my heart  
in public  
before a locked door  
on a strange threshold  
and wide open

from **A Game of Odds and Evens** (1992)

## DESIRE

To get into the poem  
like the pip in a cherry

To tuck yourself up in it  
as in a lap

To sweat in it  
as in your own skin

To preserve yourself in it  
as in the grave

Words Words Words

Go poem go  
take yourself off to an old willow  
Whisper to the hollow trunk  
So no-one can hear

that the poet is  
naked

Words Words Words  
All we have on  
Nothing more  
Nothing less

from **Sunday Song** (1977)

## WIND

At the start cautious  
like someone sightless  
fumbling the home  
and searching for the door  
It bangs the window with its head  
Walls will wail  
window glass clink  
chimneys begin to howl with melancholy  
and drums crack in the ears of jugs

Then on the door the latch rattles  
like noon in a pocket watch  
and corners start to cuckoo midnight

Meanwhile the wind has dragged itself inside  
the violin's little cavity through the bass key  
and is already whistling in church  
in verses full of windlessness

And you mutely put up with them

from **Enduring** (1979)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

# RUDOLF SLOBODA

16 April 1938 Devínska Nová Ves - 6 October 1995 Devínska Nová Ves

Writer, dramatist, film screenwriter, poet. His writings focus on the indispensability of the authentic experience. His books are strongly autobiographical. Sloboda questions so-called eternal truths. Relativizing meditations concerning values, authority, God (as a metaphysical authority), belief, personal authority, freedom and determinism as well as chastity constitute a continuous thematic and poetic invariable.

His literary début *Narcissus* (Narcis, 1965) is an "educational novel" of the building era. Outer impulses (dropping out of university, manual labor) have a strong impact on the emotionally frustrated hero and cause a change in his personality commented on with a light irony. In the novel, *The Razor* (Britva, 1967) Sloboda deals with the problem of jealousy rendered with a typical Slobodian balance between noble goals and the triteness of life. A picturesque book of twelve short stories *The Blue Moon* (Uhorský rok, 1968) is an experiment in prose in which the author tests the bearing capacity of constructional principles of epic writing.

During the *Normalization Period* Sloboda's writing managed to steer clear of everything dictated by other rules than those of his own experience. In his long novellas *The Other Man* (Druhý člověk, 1981 - the original title *The Old Narcissus*, *Starý narcis*), but especially *The Brains* (Rozum, 1982) Sloboda created a stylistic figure of the "writing I" having life data corresponding to those of the author (occupation of a screenwriter, residence, situation in the family). In this way, the author diagnosed the socially imposed schizophrenia of the "real socialism" as well as his own life. Indeed, the laws of intelligence always stumble against the triteness of life and are incapable of bringing relief to anybody; his characters suffer from the lack of feeling eventually leading to the skepticism of the final sentence "*I'm a killed man.*"

In the 1990's, Sloboda follows this line with mixed genres of essays and minimalist stories; reminiscent of stylized diary records *The Blood* (Krv, 1991), *The Autumn* (Jeseň, 1994).

Other works: *Grey Roses* (Šedé ruže, 1969), *Romanetto Don Juan* (Romaneto Don Juan, 1971), *Fidelity* (Vernosť, 1979), *Paradise Lost* (Stratený raj, 1981), *Ursula* (Uršula, 1987), *Rubato* (Rubato, 1990), collections of short stories - *Deep Peace* (Hlboký mier, 1976), *Days of Pleasure* (Dni radosti, 1982), *Escape from the Native Village* (Útek z rodnej obce, 1992), *Actresses* (Herečky, 1995). A book of essays representing a commentary on his own writing, *Attempt at an Self-portrait* (Pokus o autoportrét, 1988). Plays - *Armageddon on Grb* (Armagedon na Grbe, 1993) and *Stepmother* (Macoča, 1996). A collection of short poems, *An Evening Question for a Bird* (Večerná otázka vtákovi, 1977).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## THE BRAINS

(extract)

We were discussing how much trouble a person could be given by his own child and how much I tried to dissuade my daughter from organising a pompous birthday party.



I was also considering my strange relationship to trees and I had likened myself to a pear tree.

When the actress, whose eyes were inflamed, had recovered I was summoned to Nová Baňa again. We were to shoot a scene where the lead character wants to mislead her parents into thinking she is pregnant, and goes with her father to a gynaecologist friend. The father waits nervously in his car, and the gynaecologist finds out that the heroine is not pregnant. The doctor was to be played by myself.

When I put on the white coat I looked odd because they chose one that was too large for me. The director wanted it that way.

A real nurse explained to us the way such dialogues usually unfold, and what is to be done in such situations. The shots were to be chaste, without realism, yet clear in their result. The equipment for the shoot was being adjusted and the actress was sitting on a chair. The shot started with the doctor taking a rubber glove off his hand and saying, "You are not pregnant."

In the same setting another scene was shot where the same heroine comes to the same doctor but this time she is pregnant. He says to her:

"Have you had any diseases such as German measles or tonsillitis? Any abortions?"

The actress shakes her head. The doctor hands a maternity book to her and says, "This is your maternity book. Check every month."

Since, due to my faltering memory the shot had been rehearsed for a considerably long time, I probably "over-memorised" the text, because when we were shooting live I said, "Here is the chequebook. Check every month." I realised my mistake, gestured something with my hands, and found it strange that the director failed to interrupt the shoot. The actress took the book straight-faced and put it in her lap exactly as the script instructed her. Only as soon as the director's Cut! was heard incredible laughter bellowed out from everywhere where the members of the crew were standing. The actress, too, couldn't help laughing, as well as the real nurse. However, only the actress knew that it wasn't a completely incidental slip of tongue because while we had been rehearsing the text it had been the version I offered her just to cheer her up a little. At that moment she hadn't found it so funny, because she had not quite identified with the situation yet. And the fact that she didn't laugh during the shooting session is illustrative of how actors identify with their parts even despite themselves. And one more thing became obvious: the apparently indifferent and bored crew suddenly proved to be an animal carefully observing every nuance.

For the uninformed it must be added that the text was only recorded on a tape recorder so the mistake failed to make its way on to the film. The soundtrack was done later in a studio.

But when I had to walk the heroine to the door and give her a fatherly hug I was stricken by stage fright. It was against my nature, and as I have already mentioned, I liked the girl very much so I had to struggle with myself to concentrate so my hug was not more than fatherly. God knows, what it would have looked like!? I think that

even the director was not sure, nothing but the developed pictures would show.

But we finished the shot after all, the day's work concluded with the usual round of applause. As soon as I changed I was instantly my normal self. I met the actress in the corridor and said, "I'm sorry it was so hard going. I've a bad memory."

Then I went to lunch or supper in a pub. The director assured me that everything was OK and he was satisfied. The director of photography, too, said that he wasn't worried about the shots.

I was tired, I had a headache.

In the pub I relaxed for half an hour. Then I got on a bus to Bratislava. The driver drove like the devil. Within two hours we were in front of Avion. I had fallen asleep in the bus, my headache had stopped but the nape of my neck had gone numb.

I reported my shooting experiences to my colleagues in the office.

I'm not sure what possessed one of my colleagues to start relating experiences from his youth. Before each story he didn't fail to remind us that he had a copyright on it. Did he want to insinuate that I had used his experience in one of my screenplays? Almost all of his stories took place after the war. Weapons, tents, tramping, Bandera Corps. I think, he need not have worried about his experiences – these things are out of my sphere of interest. In one case an unpleasant thing had happened to him. They had gone hiking, put up a tent and fallen asleep. Inside they had a beautiful, irritable German shepherd. The colleague had probably forgotten that he had composed the story from two different experiences but having mixed the shepherd into it he found it very difficult to explain and we to believe, what followed: as they were sleeping a storm broke out and suddenly somebody started to unbutton the tent. The dog – the narrator only now remembered him – hardly dared bark. The invader slipped his hand inside and broke or knocked down the tent pole so the tent collapsed. The invader disappeared. However, later on they noticed him somewhere, he turned out to be a Bandera fighter and they received five thousand for tracking him down.

I'm loath to criticise such stories. They are intended to arouse horror and may be after some polishing they might succeed. However it is in that polishing that art lies.

After the discussion we went to an American film called *Voices*. A deaf and dumb teacher of deaf and dumb children falls in love with a driver and singer. She also invites him to a posh flat where she telephones with a telex machine for the deaf and dumb. This had attracted the filmmakers' attention because it would be impossible to set it up in any of our films. The rich and helpless girl loses her head. Although she has a good job the singer convinces her that she should enter a competition for a dancing job, and then the director puts the audience through real torture. Finally, of course, she succeeds in the competition but it is not clear why she has to become a dancer. I remarked aloud, "If he wants to get her, he must destroy her first." This remark was probably indiscreet because some women in the cinema were reacting very emotionally as though the story could be true.

The singer acted with a lot of confidence, and although he lived in poverty, he didn't hesitate to drag the poor girl into his world, too. What is more, occasionally he thought he might marry her after all.

Discussing the film later on, one keen-sighted observer remarked that it can be perceived as a satire on certain kind of films. It is made for the spectators who take the status of a dancer to be the absolute peak of achievement and that of a singer for something higher still. An ordinary Slovak used to the term comedians would understand the story as the poor girl's punishment: she couldn't resist the temptation, she succumbed to manly looks, she simply didn't like a stable friendship with a man who could be her equal. She needed to fall into the pit of sex and get her fair share of shame.

Her former lover wasn't probably familiar with the theory which says that after some time you shouldn't economise on kisses and caresses with a woman. And so he was beaten by a singer of a southern hue, possibly a Gypsy or Puerto Rican or something similarly black.

Somebody observed that I was a racist. But it was the filmmaker who was a racist if he thought that only a dark man could behave in such a shameful way. Why hadn't he selected a very white man, Swedish or English? If he thought that such a role was unsuitable for a different race, he was openly admitting that he was a racist. Anyway, the director hardly had an inkling what discussion he would provoke in Slovakia. He failed to realise that such people give us nothing but trouble and we shouldn't brown-nose them. If I pictured my daughter having a lover like that, who would make her, even without being deaf and dumb, enter a competition for a dancing job in some seedy theatre, I would kill her with my own hand. A female colleague, whose daughter was the same age as mine, said that she would beat her up even if she went to see the movie.

My anger didn't let up all the evening.

Once at home I told my wife about the film. She remembered that when she was single she had a date with a black man from Kenya and she didn't consider it a crime. Only when her parents told her that people would think that she was dating the black man for money she never met him again. I declared that I had nothing against blacks, if there were more of them here, and if they were chauffeurs or bulldozer drivers; but they are usually students who disappear from the republic only to leave their children behind. In this case a black man is equally dangerous as, say, a Vietnamese – although I don't know if any girl would ever date a Vietnamese. They probably have their own girls at home.

My wife observed that they are short and that they can't date our girls because it would be funny.

I said that a Slovak girl should find a Slovak guy – or, at most, a Czech or Hungarian. Possibly a Bulgarian or Romanian would do. But a German or Austrian – that smacks of personal profit. It is no use explaining to people that you have fallen in love with a handsome Austrian businessman – the public, if it took notice, would understand it in its own way.

My wife replied, that the public should not interfere in things like love. Everyone should put their own house in order.

I said that it is easier for a woman to form an acquaintance with a foreigner because he looks exotic, mysterious without apparent shortcomings. And therefore it is dangerous, not because of anything else. If my neighbor were a Hottentot, and I knew that he was a nice fellow, I would never think of preventing my daughter from doing anything.

The day after this debate my daughter returned from her Graanddmother's and said that on Saturday she was going to leave for Gbely with her girlfriend who was the head of their class. Her post was supposed to stun and disarm us. I said that I would never allow her to make the trip as a punishment for her having got drunk at her birthday party. In addition my daughter wanted money. Since we didn't have any, I told her to wait until next day, until pay day, or until we had gone to a bank. But she wouldn't listen to us and vanished. I blew my top and threw an ashtray at my wife. I missed, but it flew through the window, so I hit something after all. It is a solid window, built in, it will be difficult to replace the window pane.

When my daughter returned - soaked, because the country had been swept by a thunderstorm - she said that she would come to grab the money the next day and whether indeed she really could not go on the trip.

I asked her what they intended to do there and if she was going to drink again. My daughter pointed out that I didn't trust her. That I could hardly check if she drank or not anyway. I said that if she thought that I really couldn't check her, she was wrong because in that case she wouldn't be allowed to stick her toe out of the house. And I made it clear to her again that if she developed the habit of drinking, if she became an alcoholic, it wouldn't be me who was going to suffer but her.

Then we agreed that next day she would take some money from my wife and that she had to be back home on Saturday, that I would come and check.

My daughter said that she would bring a rabbit from Gbely.

I sat down and said:

"Two months ago when the cat had the young you wanted me to keep a little tomcat. I kept it, I house-trained it, it got lost twice, it fell into a pit, couldn't find its way back home. You don't look after it at all and now you want a rabbit. It will be my job to look after it again. And it is not a tomcat that eats once a day, and even without being fed can cope. And where will we keep it, in the kennel?"

"Yeah," replied my daughter.

"And where will the dog stay?"

"Out, for the time being."

I raised my arms to the heaven and exclaimed:

"I had thought that you were a thoughtful girl and you have become an idiot. You are not bringing any rabbits here. And from now on think twice about whether you are going to piss me off. Or I will smash something or somebody here."

So at last we agreed that she wouldn't bring a rabbit.

My wife observed that although she was stupid, too, she wouldn't bring home a rabbit either because she heard that they mated with rats.

When our daughter had left I said to my wife:

"The two of you are not going to bugger me about all the time. I will find myself a girlfriend and move to her place..."

"Where would that be?" asks my wife matter-of-factly.

"We will see. I can find myself a woman in two hours even one that has a flat and is sane. I'm not a psychiatrist performing here various pedagogical tricks on a daily basis, looking after you and giving you money to top it all off. And if you ever dare raise any objections when I'm talking to my daughter I will knock your teeth out. I keep ruining my property here and then I'm the bad guy. You, of course are the good one, you yell as if you were being flayed alive but you don't give a damn about anything."

My wife was used to this. Silently, she ate a cake and when she finished it she went to see her grandmother.

Once alone, I told myself that there was really nothing I could achieve in this world. Even my opinions were worth nothing. What was all my wisdom good for when I was unable to sort out simple things? For whose sake did I study, and amass edifying stories since I was unable to live by them?! Only these sentimental effusions only this rage - they were all I was up to.

How nice it was when my daughter was five years old and listened to me in everything...

Oh, those times would not come back. In the end everyone would abandon me.

Maybe poverty would solve everything. If I hadn't a penny, if we only had enough to buy some food I would have no problems... Then my daughter would not ask me to buy her a train ticket, she would hitch-hike and wear less fashionable clothes. Oh, no, problems would persist, and in addition I would be ludicrous. My wife would get into debt... No, without money I would be completely finished. There was at least one thing that put me ahead of my wife and daughter - they are unable to make money.

from **The Brains** (1982)

(translated by Pavol Lukáč)

# JÁN BUZÁSSY

10 April 1935 Kočovce

Poet, translator. His work is characterised by a conscious and self-ennobling link with the great cultural and artistic traditions (from antiquity to modern times), a temperate attitude to life, a quiet understanding of the great cycles of nature and individual phases in human life. At the same time he knows of the terrible reverse side of beauty and exposed moments of life where he is not protected by layers of custom or culture. As an author in his Sixties he has searched for a route among the sensuous urgencies of poetic image with words or paradoxes of life and philosophic aspirations of poetry – **A Game with Knives** (Hra s nožmi, 1965), **The School of Cynics** (Škola kynická, 1966), **Nausicaa** (1970). The clear essence of this period was captured by the fragment propositional lyrics of the collection **Beauty Leads Stone** (Krása vedie kameň, 1972). From the changed situation of the seventies Buzássy found an alternative in the harmonious creativity in the classical themes of nature, love, work and art – **Fairy Tale** (Rozprávka, 1975), **A Year** (Rok, 1976), **Phonolite** (Znelec 1976), **Spirit of the Elder Tree** (Bazová duša, 1978). The ambitious **Plain, Mountains** (Pláň, hory, 1982) was composed over a long period as a summation of his major themes which overflowed into the hardly less valuable lyrics from life's matters of fact and perceptions, **Saint John's Wort** (Ľubovník, 1979). The progress of Buzássy as a poet of culture from the sixties was complete with important translations of T. S. Eliot, Allen Ginsberg and also Byron and Boris Pasternak.

After his collection **The Golden Cut** (Zlatý rez, 1988) his poetry became surprisingly full of well-being, a poetic Autumn – **Remedy with Wine** (Náprava vínom, 1993), **Days** (Dni, 1995), **Light of the Waters** (Svetlo vód, 1997) and **A Walk in Autumn** (Prechádzka jeseňou, 1999). The various large and small impulses in life are ranged and ordered in Buzássy's characteristic life and forms; a moderate turn in the direction of faith, a loving Christianity derived from Erasmus, a Middle European secularised religion as a form of self-discipline and correction, but also a more dramatic dialogue with God impelled by Buzássy's fascination with the great Czech metaphysical poet, Vladimír Holan. Finally there is an ironical consciousness of religion at the end of the millennium. His poetry, drawn up like a discreet protection of leaves of text, has now changed into a membrane between the poet and the world, the poet and reader.

FEDOR MATEJOV

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The spirit moved from a Christian  
to a Buddhist temple.  
It softened because touched by another.  
It rattled as if overturned on the other side  
and on it, where it lay  
is something written in strange letters.

Only the body which is always Christian  
reads it in Hebrew.

from **The Waters' Light** (1997)

\*\*\*

God, when they had knocked out all his teeth  
and pulled out his fingernails and when  
in exhaustion he had signed at last that he  
did not exist, that he had never existed,  
just sat  
as if in the dock.

You whisper to him in this dream: "Others can, you must.  
You exist

because I need you. Without your existence  
mine would not be. How could my lesser  
affliction remain either?"

"I know, I retreat,  
but I do not surrender."

from *The Waters' Light* (1997)

\*\*\*

From whom - if not from mankind  
does the devil learn cruelty. He adds to his learning.  
The devil who knew no mother and then does not know  
what an old people's home can mean.  
He himself devised it, but mankind organises  
a trip for virgins to a foreign land.

Eventually no-one can tell  
on which side of death hell is.

from *The Waters' Light* (1997)

\*\*\*

Tatiana writes:  
"I'm writing you a letter and what... "  
in the midst of a long ponder into which  
destiny soaks - like a stain on wall paper.

Life is a shout and silence death.  
Thus Pushkin today dictates: "Tania, write:

A letter for Onegin. And two copies!  
Don't forget. Two carbons!"

Death wouldn't know how to be so cruel.

from **The Waters' Light** (1997)

\*\*\*

"Also a sinful priest is a priest," you found in Holan.  
He's talking about himself although perhaps it's a  
quotation  
set in italics. Yet doesn't it address you  
even though from a book, you won't be permitted to read?

He was a bad priest though of good faith. Night after night  
he conducted disputes with evil, so close... already he had  
made out  
on his face features of the devil. Thus in the morning he'd  
shave himself urgently  
so as to strip them off - down to the blood, down to  
the last outline.

from **A Walk in Autumn** (1999)

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Hole, pit, chasm, grave  
are between what is said and written,  
and reading is following the tracks  
left by yourself from time to time.

The eyes are quicker, mind delays,  
in this advance of meaning, too; in reading  
two processes of thought and just a single head.  
Truth is a great tale. Brightening, darkening?  
Singing, dreaming?

from **A Walk in Autumn** (1999)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)



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# DUŠAN KUŽEL

7 September 1940 Martin - 18 December 1985 Bratislava

Writer, author of radio and TV plays. His first book was a collection of short stories **Somebody Else will Return** (Vráti sa niekto iný, 1964). Due to his premature demise he only authored four books and a couple of radio and TV plays.

Kužel's important contribution to the literature of the 1960's and 1970's, when his books were written and to a large extent (with the exception of the novel **The Lamp**) critically reflected on, is the short story in which the author combines an original epic story with mildly conventionalized autobiographical experience and topical esthetic procedures referring to either existentially accentuated sci-fi as in a collection of short stories, **Escape from Heaven** (Útek z neba, 1969) or epically "doctored" rewriting of traumatizing and conflicting autobiographical experiences, **Somebody Else will Return** (Vráti sa niekto iný, 1964), **Oblique Lines** (Mímobežky, 1967).

Kužel's writings are thematically connected with his resistance to the culminating Communism as it was presented in the 1970's, the period of Normalization, and especially his novel, **The Lamp** (Lampa, 1991) which, due to censorship, remained editorially uncompleted (it was published as late as 1991, after the *Velvet Revolution*) places the author in the same ideological line with his contemporaries P. Vilikovský and P. Hrúz.

While in his early three collections the reader is confronted with a non-authentic hero's and narrator's experience rendered in the mode of "rounded" solutions, the novel **The Lamp** is, despite its pronounced allegorical fabulation, which only indirectly refers to a possible biographical experience, an open criticism of the Normalization period.

The story of this rather extensive novel is narrated by its main character Ján, a teacher. The novel consists of a series of "elopements and escapes" from destructive stereotypes of dailiness, yet at the same time it is a reminder of the necessity of purposeful and creative existence for others' sake (especially the disabled, wronged, and suffering), presented in the experiences of the same hero. An articulate example of Kužel's authorial intention is the final part of the novel reflected in the fragment published herein. It is an ironical as well as serious warning that human life is, more than anything else, service and denial.

Other works: **Braking Distance** (Brzdná dráha, 1977) - radio play, **Sweet Selfcontrol** (Sladké sebaovládanie, 1978) - TV comedy, **Derailment** (Vykoľajenie, 1979), **Stop Running After Me** (Nebehaj stále za mnou, 1979) - radio plays for the young.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## THE LAMP

(extract)

And then the vale appears. The road is slightly declining, pedals turn easily. Bridge across the river, sharp turn and another long climb. A dirt road turns to the right and at the cross-roads there is a wayside cross - much like anywhere else. Tin Christ has already lost almost all its enamel and rattles loudly in the wind. Below his feet a spring bubbles out. There are a few battered glass jars with dry wild flowers. Ján perceives all that only by the way because he assumes that the tin Christ, much like a great number of other tin Christs

before, will disappear behind his back. But when he reaches the foot of the climb, all of a sudden he is pierced by a sharp metallic sound and his entire body is seized by strong juddering. The tyre on the front wheel shrivels and catches against the fork. Ján is suddenly hurled forward, he flies over the handlebar and there he goes sliding on his palms and knees down the tarmac road. For a while he remains lying, startled and appalled, then looks around quickly, picks up the bike with its crooked wheel and limps to one side to the cross with the tin Christ. He looks at himself, then at the bike. His palms and knees are bleeding, trousers are torn and shirt is crumpled. The tyre on the front wheel is flat and the inner tube, chopped into pieces by the rim, is hanging out like intestines. Disgustedly, he discards the bike on the baulk, he feels sick. He sits down on the grass, his head in his hands. A fresh wind picks up and the tin Christ starts rattling so loudly that Ján has to slides his hands a little lower to cover his ears. Then he stands up again, bends over the front wheel of his bike and inspects it carefully. He sits on his heels and pulls a huge nail out of the tyre. He places it on his palm and brings it closer to his eyes. Once again, the Christ flutters in the wind. Ján raises his eyes, looks up at him then back at the nail. Then he stoops, looks around for a stone, and drives the nail into the feet of Christ.

"Keep it," he mutters.

Christ stops fluttering, he is satisfied.

Ján takes off his sweater, shirt and trousers. First he drinks thirstily, then washes his bloody knees and palms and finally splashes water onto the rest of his body. The water is so cold that it pricks his skin. He rubs himself with the towel scampering naked round the well to warm himself.

Suddenly the warbling of birds, twirling of grasshoppers and hissing sweeps of the wind is overlaid by an odd sound; regular, metallic, intensifying. He pauses and listens. Then he props himself up on the pedestal of the cross to see as far as possible; from the distance, from beyond the boundary of dusk a vehicle is creeping along. At first the eye only catches an unclear, blurred hint of motion, then the windows flash, the cabin materialises; rectangular body-work, windows. Such vehicles are used to deliver bread. Or milk? Meat?

No. The windows are barred.

Ján wraps the towel round his midriff hastily and looks round. The meadow he is standing on is exposed to the road like a palm inspected by a man after work. Not a single little shrub or ditch nearby.

For a while the ambulance disappears behind a dip in the landscape, however the sound of its engine suggests that in a short while it will reappear. Ján nimbly jumps onto the pedestal of the cross, stretches his hands out and covers the tin Christ with his own body. On his back he can feel how cold, crooked and cracked the Christ is. He clings to him, tilts his head to one side and holds his breath.

The ambulance pops up from behind the hill and swoops into the vale. It rumbles on the bridge across the stream, its engine utters a wheezing sound as if taking a deep breath before a long climb.

However, immediately afterwards it exhales, slows down hesitantly and – the brakes screech. The ambulance turns onto the dirt road, and pulls over. Ján’s stomach tightens and the whole of his body jerks. If he starts up the meadow now he can be at least a couple of meters ahead. But how about his clothes? Should he wander in the woods with only the towel wrapped round his loins?

Before he is able to make up his mind, doors on both sides of the ambulance open. On one side a driver gets out on the other an orderly in a crumpled white coat. However, they are in no hurry and not looking in his direction. The driver stretches himself, moves his hands. The orderly shuffles his feet and watches the driver.

“You sure we can release her here?”

The driver shrugs.

“So what? Does it make any difference if we release her in front of the house or a kilometre or two away? If she wants it so much... at least we needn’t lumber down that dirt road.”

Reluctantly, the orderly opens the back door. Another orderly, older than the first, backs out of there, holds the door open and reaches out his hand. From inside another hand, tiny and shrivelled, reaches out and grasps the orderly’s hand. The hand is followed by an old woman, equally tiny, bony and shrivelled. She is completely lost in a dark scarf. She gets out and takes a couple of steps.

“I’m not sure what the doctor would say...” the younger medic is worried.

“Come on, tell him something,” the driver is growing impatient and turns to the older orderly. “If the doctor decides to discharge her it means that she is OK and we can let her get out anywhere, can’t we?”

The older orderly assumes an air of importance.

“It can hardly be said that she is OK. But she is definitely not dangerous and she can take care of herself.”

“Mother, are you sure you don’t want us to take you right to your front door?” the younger orderly asks the old lady.

“Yes, I’m, doctor, thank you,” says the old lady in a whistling, trembling voice. “I have some potatoes right here below the woods and I want to check if my sister-in-law covered them properly while I was at your place. She is so scatter-brained.”

“Well, here is your bag. And take care, don’t wander in the woods or we will take you to our place again! See you!”

“God be with you.”

The elder orderly returns into the back of the vehicle and the younger one slams the door shut behind him. Then he turns to the driver.

“Hold on, I’m parched! There is a spring over there.”

The driver puts his hand round his shoulders.

“Come on, leave water to the cattle! As soon as we pick up that guy in Obuchovo, we will go to a pub.”

The engine howls, the ambulance emits a cloud of bluish smoke and starts climbing up the hill. The old lady turns round and with a childish eagerness waves farewell. Then she straightens the scarf on her head, looks round furtively and trots towards Ján. She crou-

ches at the spring and merrily splashes water around herself. After a while she stands up as if she thought of something and removes a jar from the pedestal beneath Ján's feet. She discards dry stalks rinses the jar, pours fresh water into it, plucks a couple of wild flowers and replaces the jar.

"Here you are," she says in a soft, trembling voice, "It is for you to see that I'm already at home."

"Thank you, mother," says Ján.

"Not at all, son, not at all. Don't worry, I will take care of you again. You are mine. Aren't you?"

"I am."

"There you go. I won't tell the friar, he would be cross again. Nor will I tell that doctor." The old lady picks up another jar and walks towards the spring. Once there, she gets a bit lost again and starts splashing water.

"Mother," smiles Ján, "and don't you find it strange that I'm talking to you?"

The old lady pauses for a moment. She straightens up, crumpling one corner of the cloth between her fingers, looks at Ján. Then she gestures as if it were of no consequence.

"And why should I find it strange? It was strange that you didn't talk before. But you couldn't, I know, only on the radio."

Once again she pulls up a couple of flowers and puts them into the jar.

"Mother?"

"Yeah?"

"And why do you wander in the woods?"

"Hey, I have already told you. Have you forgotten? Of course, I know, so many people walk around, bugged it... That doctor doesn't understand a thing. It was Our Lady who told me to look for him. You can't find your guy and mine is here on the cross. We will share them, mine will also be yours, and I will assist you in looking for yours. The friar got very angry when I told him that, but She really told me so. And the other day, when I turned on the radio, she repeated it to me. You must know, say, was it so?"

"I guess... sure, it was."

"Of course, it was. What could I do? They came in the evening, we had already been in bed, they stuck out those machine-guns of theirs and told me to harness the horses and get moving! They may not have said exactly that because we didn't understand them but that is what they meant by their gestures. Our Lady, you have seen it, and the other day you told me so on the radio. And I shouted out, leave me alone, you have already taken my husband and now you are taking him away! But they didn't understand me. They were wearing such grey uniforms and they shouted horribly but it wasn't words they shouted. You heard it too, it is only the doctor that doesn't understand a thing. And he said, mother, the war is not yet over, I must go. But don't worry, no matter what they tell you, I will be back. That was what he said and the other day he repeated it on the radio. And old Hrotek said that in the forest above the town they bound and shot him. But he didn't understand a thing because Our

Lady threw him a coat from the heaven and so they failed to hit him. She had told me so herself the other day, before the radio broke down. I know it didn't break down of its own accord, it was them who came while I was asleep, and pierced it with that machine-gun of theirs. But I will buy a new one when I get my salary from the Forest plant. So it is, they failed to hit him, it is only that he is unable to untie himself. Or he's lost his way. But I will find him. You know it, say, shall I find him?

"Mother... Mother, what's the good of thinking about what has already happened?"

The old lady raises her eyes, her voice suddenly as sharp as a blade.

"Son, I'm his mother, I can't dump him. You are mine too but he was absolutely, absolutely mine. Recently, too, people have said that a man has been wandering round the woods. Our Lady told me that it was him. You know it, say, is it him? Shall I find him."

The old lady's face lights up with a smile.

"So, I'm on my way," she says. "Tomorrow I will come back to change the water for you."

Impatiently, she trots away. Walking fast, all of her tiny figure is trembling. From time to time she turns round and waves clumsily. All the while she keeps murmuring something. Ján's legs started going numb. However, he dares not move while the old lady is still in sight. Finally, with her tiny steps, she reaches the upper end of the meadow and disappears behind thick hazelnut shrubs. A wind picks up, as though suddenly sweeping her away from the meadow. But Ján still dares not jump down. For a long, long time he gazes at the spot where she disappeared, and it seems to him that he can even see her behind the shrubs.

The sun suddenly jumps up from behind a shaggy hill and tickles him in the nose so that he has to sneeze. He disengages one hand and rubs it over his face. The landscape is suddenly completely different.

He lowers the other hand too, moves his legs and is about to jump down. But suddenly, like a knife, the noise of the engine cuts through the silence again. The first morning bus. Ján has to wait for it to pass. But it has hardly drawn level with him when another one appears in the distance. It is followed by a truck. And that by a car.

The morning rush has begun on the road.

And Ján knows that it is unlikely that he will be able to come down from the cross very soon.

from **The Lamp** (1991)

(translated by Pavol Lukáč)

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# IVAN LAUČÍK

4 July 1944 Liptovský Mikuláš

Poet Laučík is a founding member of the poetic group *Solitary Runners* (together with Ivan Štrpka and Peter Repka), established in 1964. The young poets rebelled against the then current concept of literature as an official institution, in favour of literary authenticity. The alternative vision of poetry, art, and life in the Sixties style was profoundly enhanced by the poets' meeting with Allen Ginsberg during Ginsberg's visit to Czechoslovakia in 1965. Laučík, a literature teacher by profession, lives and works in his native region of Liptov, far from the literary life of Bratislava. Liptov is rich in cultural traditions and natural beauties. Laučík's first two collections **Mobile within Mobility** (*Pohyblivý v pohyblivom*, 1968) and **We are Akin from the Beginning** (*Sme príbuzní na začiatku*, 1970) brought ecstatic movements across geographical space, time, and cultural history reflected in semantically fragmentary poetic scripts employing a camera-eye technique. Because of being banned from publication, Laučík's third book **At the Threshold of Hearing** (*Na prahu počutelnosti*) was not published until 1988. The book is inspired by a magnificent, monumental Nature, but also by nature threatened. Inspiration also comes from the particular landscape with its cultural and archeological layers. In many senses, the poetry is quite close to land-art, body-art, and action-art. The "lofty" vertical of mountain and cave treks has an ironical "lowered counterpart" in our everyday life. The asceticism and intense attitude to life is conveyed by crystal clear imagery using cavernous architectures, mountainous snow planes, or vegetative cycles.

The self-sufficient, "inhuman" nature of Laučík's poetry, paradoxically, becomes the poet's ally in his search for human closeness and understanding. The alternative counter-culture gesture of the Sixties and environmentally inspired artistic activism of the Seventies today transform into a purging ascetism amidst the postmodern world full of textual, visual, information, and consumerist waste.

Other collections: **On a Flight Path** (*Vzdušnou čiarou*, 1991) and **Havránok** (1998) (name of the archeological site in the Liptov region) bring poetry designed of imagined and real landscapes, with a strong sense of natural and cultural details of the intimately familiar region, combined with literary and life "selective affiliations" (Hölderlin, Mandelstam, Michaux, etc.).

FEDOR MATEJOV

## MY DEAR FRIENDS!

A man in his thin hat  
is not at home for himself, but for someone.  
Should he spread himself? Mature? Progress?

Look, clamour. Dull steel. Fading sounds.  
Pressure on the forests. A table scraped to the bone.  
Summer is closing down fast. Burnt sugar floods  
the palate.  
I live on urgent grass. Clear days

Have come from the North, from their country of origin.  
 The white tents of winter months, threats of  
 avalanche.  
 The warmth of the buried will again create  
 some sort of gap in the snow.  
 And on my table I have in stone the "body"  
 of a cephalopod severed by a layer of flint.  
 Not even resurrection could put it together!  
 The disunited are growing distant.  
 But who speaks up? Who survives in himself?  
 Yesterday is the same for as the whole  
 of the past.

Overhangs gleam into windows. Snow blends  
 with light. (Oh, overhangs with no roots,  
 luminescent links, with what?)  
 I desired glass between us  
 that with an interior flaw  
 would mark my side, my standpoint.  
 A blinded caver shows his white palm.  
 He scratched the level of the tide on the rocks.

There are caves. But in them you cannot rely  
 on words. Only go beyond the threshold of hearing  
 your inner voice.

In the counterlight birds populate the gardens.  
 There I move against gentle pressure of their shadows  
 like nourishment.  
 There are both cries and whispers in the windlessness  
 of my throat,  
 Pockets filled with desert sand.

As dawn breaks in rain  
 wagons of glass cotton travel through the fog  
 and in the opposite direction wagons of saplings  
 to southern showers.

I listen to what follows  
 the clanging  
 of the rails.

from *At the Threshold of Hearing* (1988)

**A POLAR EXPLORER'S DIARY***(fragment)*

A crossing? A crossroads?

From the frozen night express  
 you always see the same  
 (empty)  
 fully illuminated! A crossroads:  
 no longer does anyone maintain that we live forever...  
 indeed they keep secret  
 that we live only once.

from **On a Flight Path** (1991)

**TRISTIA**

"Aurora to set sail", - so goes the story  
 of the twilight.  
 I am, however, moving to Petrograd,  
 where the descendants of Osip's swallows  
 nest in the Ionic volutes.

A track of crushed rubble cuts the forest in two.  
 Signs of water cruise the sky  
 like purple stamps hurdling the pages in a passport.  
 All of importance appears on a giant blackboard:  
 summer is coming and swimming not ad-vi-sa-ble.  
 The Northern swallows are kept in secret.  
 (A new sewer is dug out from clay - "hatching place  
 of insects for birds!")

Green and unrefined are the gowns - the quilted  
 all-weather jackets of road maintenance ladies.  
 Faithful to the heavy kerbs  
 in the morning mist they sweep the little bones of herrings  
 and the light ash of stars.

"We shall meet again in Petrograd."

So I come to you, the ones unyielding to the pain  
 in the entrails of time, swallowed at dawn  
 like a gulp of tea,  
 after a ballet of whales in the bay.



In the egg yolk morning foam rises  
 from the papermills.  
 The Aurora's heavy propellor creaked...  
 From Ancient Greek could be heard. A test drew close.

And of Mandelstam nothing.

from **Havránok** 1998

### **MARCH INCANTATION**

Let the snow say  
 in the needles of a pine  
 what is still an embrace...  
 Let sunny nights also be included in the news!  
 Let the silence not forget us  
 as we do not forget a little flame  
 left in a cave!

I write to you from a future emptiness  
 already fixed in this moment and from an uncertain  
 place on the maps:  
 Here I conjure the windy night  
 not to snuff out our candles  
 when the March stars must fizz out.

from **Havránok** (1998)

(translated by Martin Solotruk and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# PAVEL HRÚZ

14 June 1941 Banská Bystrica

Pavel Hruží is a writer, an essayist and an editor. In 1998 he was awarded the prestigious *Dominik Tatarka Award*.

Hruží belongs to the generation of writers who made their first literary appearance in 1960's, and who, due to severe ideological censorship, had to give up publishing temporarily. Hruží's long pause came after his first two books. His first work **Documents of Vistas** (*Dokumenty o výhladoch*, 1966) was awarded the *Krasko Prize* (which is regularly granted to the best literary newcomers), even though the author treated the problems of contemporary society rather provocatively. However, his second book, a collection of fourteen stories with a mystifying and ironic title **Occultism** (*Okultizmus*, 1968), appeared at a different time and situation. Ideologically biased criticism tore it to pieces, disapproving of the author's accent on the controversy between the impersonal character of social history (even referring back to the socialist reality of 1950's) and the irrationality of the individual human history/hysteria. From 1971 Hruží was not allowed to publish, his texts appeared only in *samizdat* (he was in contact with the Slovak writer Ivan Kadlečík and the Czech writer Ludvík Vaculík). Pavel Hruží had to wait more than twenty years for his next book **Sty and Games** (*Chliev a hry*, 1990) to be published. In it the author again explores social relations, this time between outsiders and established structures (both visible and invisible), while the latter manipulate the former.

Hruží's sharp eye captures stylistically and linguistically the marginalized, mostly tragic lives of pariah people. He depicts the atmosphere of the periphery where his characters live truly, but he pays an equal proportion of attention to language. It is a language which catches the described situations "unawares" and illuminates them with expressive stylistic and semantic hyperbole. The other two books published in the 1990s - **Pereat** (1991) and **Bread and Bushes** (*Chlieb a kry*, 1996) - show a similar writing strategy.

However, it is not only history which provokes Hruží's protagonist and narrator. In the prose *Steep Decline* (*Strmý zostup* - the sixth "séance" in the **Occultism** book), the provoking authority is a professor of mathematics, nicknamed Atilla the Hun, who is extremely unpopular with his students. One of them, Weber, has decided to put his mentor to a test...

Hruží's other works include: **Mating of Recluses** (*Párenie samotárov*, 1993) - written in 1970s under the title *The Slovak Decameron* (*Slovenský dekameron*), **The Eyes of the Stoker** (*Oči kuričove*, 1996) - a parody on the socialist genre of "production novel", **Up the Navel, the Navel of the World** (*Hore pupkom, pupkom sveta*, 1998) - a collection of fiction and shorter essays, ironically commenting on various subjects from history.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## SIXTH SÉANCE: STEEP DESCENT

(extract)

Together we searched for the window which was closest to the school-porter's flat and we shouted our lungs out - in vain. Then my teacher voiced the theory that one of the keys on the ring should fit in the keyhole downstairs. Of course, the keys could not go by them-

selves, so we had to walk up and down again only to find that his theory was false.

Atila the Hun pierced me with his eyes. "Now think of something, you good-for-nothing!"

"Well, have *I* ever thought of anything useful?" I said innocently. "You know how dumb I am."

"Enough of this nonsense, Weber," he said sternly, with growing suspicion. "Don't try to exploit this unfortunate situation! And spare me from your silly comments, will you?" He turned on the heel and started pacing the corridor, opening all the windows one by one. He looked out of one of them, leaning out for a while. Finally he straightened, pushed the window closed and leaned back against the sash. "Have you got any ideas?"

I nodded self-consciously, opening the next window. "It's not that bad," I pointed out.

"Oh, thank you very much," Atila the Hun wiped his forehead. "Am I a circus lion to jump when you say 'jump!'?" He peeped out again. "It's five meters at least."

"Surely it must be less than that." I cracked a smile. "And there's grass down there." I balanced my bag better and made an attempt to climb up to the window.

"Wait, Weber!" Atila the Hun shouted and caught me by the sleeve. "Do you want to abandon me in my hour of need?"

"I really should be going, comrade professor," I said, as politely as possible, to make my triumph all the more obvious.

"Really?" chanted the most disciplined disciple of Comenius derisively. "And whose fault is this? Yes, tell me, whose?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. I glanced down and made a move as if preparing to jump ship.

"So you don't know whose fault this is," Atila the Hun repeated. "Lo and behold! Just you wait, I'll explain it to you!"

Surprise stopped me, so my teacher could pull me back into the corridor quite easily. "Have some common sense, Weber, have you forgotten my words?"

I said nothing.

"I told you that your exams' results depended on you and you alone. Isn't that clear? Believe me, I have nothing against you, Weber! It's your behaviour that matters. If you help me, I'll help you. We both are gentlemen, aren't we, Weber?"

I was at a loss.

"I always say that one can talk business with you. I have even said that in front of all my colleagues. Who do you think stood up for you after the director had said that there is a draught in the classroom and you put a bung in the keyhole? You can't say I've never said a kind word about you! Look, Weber, if you have the courage to jump, then jump! But, for chrissake, don't run away, bring me some ladder or what!"

"There's no ladder there," I said quickly. "And we're nearly at street level."

"Ladder or no ladder," barked Atila the Hun impatiently, "I only want to get out of here."

I lead my esteemed mentor upstairs, right above the entrance to the building. It seemed that there was one possible way out: to climb through a window to a small roof and then slide down a flag-staff.

"Do you know what professional pride is?" Atilla the Hun asked, having carefully examined the whole well-lit street. "No, you don't. Otherwise you could never utter such a proposal. Let's go!"

We searched the whole school for a ladder, but we found none. Such a defeat was too bitter a pill for Atilla the Hun to swallow. He declared that he would never use it anyway, because someone might see us and then use the same way to break into the building. Then we found one classroom on the ground floor from which a lightning-conductor could be reached. We tested the strength of the thick wire, but the ground floor was elevated more than slightly, because the school stood on a slope. Atilla the Hun decided that he would keep that exit as his last possibility.

On our way upstairs it occurred to my teacher that maybe we should search the classroom where he had been examining students until dark once more.

Still, it looked like wasted effort. We peeped into all desks, even under the teacher's. Atilla the Hun's face fell, but then it seemed he saw the light.

"Come over here, Weber!"

"Why?" I asked uncertainly.

"Never mind, just do what I tell you." He waved his finger at me. "Empty your pockets right now, and quickly!"

I started emptying my pockets as slowly as I could. Useless items appeared on the desk: crumpled movie tickets, a handkerchief, safety matches, a dirty pack of cigarettes and some more rubbish.

"You don't carry any keys on you?" Atilla the Hun asked matter-of-factly.

"No, I don't."

"How do you lock your locker in the hostel, then?"

"I don't lock it at all."

"Of course," my teacher commented knowingly. He never admits it when someone has the better of him. "Well, then at least turn your pockets inside out."

I did as he had told me, spilling nothing but a few crumbs on the floor.

"Does that mean this is all you have?"

"I've never had anything else."

"And you'll never have anything more," Atilla the Hun admonished, "if you don't stop this sort of talk right now. Really, Weber! You must understand: trust but check, don't you know? And put your pockets in, you look like a beggar in Rotterdam."

Again I did as he had told me and then I said that we could go down along the roof.

"One day you might be hanged for such jokes, my dear boy!" He was getting seriously nervous.

"I mean it," I said defensively. "Just as you have told me, not everything is lost, just like that..." I paused. "I mean it."

“This is blackmail, Weber!” Atilla the Hun eyed me sternly. “Well... we can try.”

On the third floor we groped our way to the metal steps leading up to the attic. I took my bag in my teeth, I climbed the steps and lifted the lid. Atilla the Hun pulled his hat lower to prevent losing it and started after me. On the last step he stopped and handed me his briefcase. “It’s unnerving. Am I a buffoon to climb roofs like this?”

“I would give you my hand, but we would both fall.”

“Rubbish, why both?” Atilla the Hun muttered. “How can we both fall? Give me your hand! Now! How come you’re so goddamned clumsy?”

Finally he pulled himself up, utterly satisfied with his performance. “Well, have we fallen?” he asked derisively.

It took me a while to grasp where we were but then I went straight to a small window.

From behind me came a loud bang.

“Mind your head!”

“You’d better mind your own!” my spiritual leader panted. “How am I to know that there are beams here? Didn’t you say there was a flat roof here?”

“But we’re still on...”

“How many times shall I tell you not to exploit this situation?” he barked.

Our little disagreement was resolved in no time, because Atilla the Hun wanted to get to the roof, but the small window was of a different opinion, therefore co-operation occurred again. Finally we both emerged under the star-freckled sky.

“You want to kill me, admit it!” panted my teacher.

from *Sixth Séance: Steep Descent, Occultism* (1968)

(translated by Marína Gálisová)

# IVAN ŠTRPKA

30 June 1944 Hlohovec

Poet, writer, lyrics writer, essayist, translator, member of the group *Solitary Runners*, which both in their literary program and practice meant an un-compromising breakaway from and polemics with all of contemporary established concepts of writing in Slovak literature. *Solitary Runners* (Ivan Štrpka, Ivan Laučík, Peter Repka) perceive literary creation as "a way to one's self", as a living action translated into a model of an open poem, the original, authentic poetic record, a "protocol" of individual, cultural, natural circumstances and contexts of civilisation.

As early as in his debut **The Short Childhood of the Lancers** (Krátko detstvo kopijníkov, 1969), Štrpka witnesses and records the affairs of the world, his existential life situations and "stirrings" of his mind via "inner sight" ("within my trial") and in complex polynotional play of meanings (see the fragment of *The Wind of My Hair, Secret Copy*). The second collection **Tristan Talks Trash** (Tristan tára, 1971) using much of a dada-like provocative tone, is dominated by the multifaceted fictitious character of the "missing" Tristan (a cultural archetype of a jester, loony, great mystifier). The book is composed as a poetic collage of bizarre, persiflage details of Tristan's "biography". The polemical "lyric rebellion" of the collection served as a pretext for the publication ban imposed on Štrpka for some ten years. His third poetry book **Now and Other Islands** (Teraz a iné ostrovy) got published only in 1981. In the meantime, though, the author wrote numerous song lyrics for renowned singer and rock music composer Dežo Ursiny.

Other Štrpkas collections - "*situation reports on my self and the world*", published in the Eighties were written at about the same time as the songs. The nineties collections develop the poetics of the early books, but tend to be more serious, dark, less playful, and bring original "admonitory" metaphors (**Plainlandia, Southwest. Death of My Mother** (Rovinsko, juhozápad. Smrť matky, 1995), **Interludes. Beheaded Puppets** (Medzihry. Bábky kratšie o hlavu, 1997), **Master Mu and Female Voices** (Majster Mu a ženské hlasy, 1997).

With Štrpka, poetic images are born mainly from an inner human longing for "self rejuvenation and constitution in the springs", where, "out of the authentic being a reflex of language is continually coming to existence". Only thus, can humans live life of independent individuals rather than collectively anesthetized monsters.

Freedom and poetry (an ode) "burn in us", but only we ourselves can let them "fly up" (see the poem *To the Parrot's Festival*).

Other works: Poetry - **Before a Change** (Pred premenou, 1982), **Reports from the Apple** (Správy z jablka, 1985), **Everything Is in a Shell** (Všetko je v škrupine, 1989), **Beautiful Naked World** (Krásny nahý svet, 1990) - a book of verse from the late Sixties and early Seventies, **Blue Hill** (Modrý vrch, 1988 - collected song lyrics).

Lyrics: **The Continent of Childhood** (Pevnina detstva, 1978), **New Maps of Silence** (Nové mapy ticha, 1979), **Blue Hill** (Modrý vrch, 1981), **4/4** (1983), **Without Weather** (Bez počasia, 1984), **The Green** (Zelená, 1986), **On the Way Home** (Na ceste domov, 1987), **To Embers** (Do tla, 1990), **The Other Dance** (Iný tanec, 1995), **Story** (Príbeh, 1997).

A novel **Hostage** (Rukojemník), appeared in 1999.

EVA JENČÍKOVÁ

**THE WIND OF MY HAIR (SECRET SPEAR)***(extract)*

And we rise from a cold harp of grass (they are already  
upon us)

(breakfast in the grass)  
with transparent eyes striving  
to read

to understand the signs (oh, the signs) on our quiet  
(yes - gemini)

foreheads

Nothing against alien signs of your forehead  
(nothing) against alien signs of my forehead -  
(but) (these stirrings)  
stirrings in the long central breezes (of Alberts  
thoughts) -

There

the close ones

(more or less distant) above the fair-headed shield  
of armistice

yet for a moment (oh, the moment) unmarked  
(by the mournings of morning)

Wait

Who is talking? For whom?

And what about?

Who asks?

Where are

the messengers

(where are) your messengers

where are mine?

(Oh the messengers)

my slut-heralds

where in their long linen shirts

where

(in salty) sands too immense to view

Helicopters have taken off

but the reports

have failed to fall through

down upon our

waiting foreheads

Where are your messengers

(where are mine)

where

the uprooted from the purple contexts of speech

where the mute

where the lost

the lost

oh where –  
in what darkness before the hieroglyphs  
*where are the messengers...*

Do come (I'm telling myself) to us after the explosion  
We smiled (shyly)  
and  
the sun  
above the hill...

from **The Short Childhood of the Lancers** (1969)

## **TO THE PARROTS FESTIVAL**

In the howling air  
we overgrow  
with burning f-  
eathers Free-  
dom burns  
in us and it m-  
ust  
fly up

from **Tristan Talks Trash** (1971)

## **TRISTAN TALKS TRASH (2)**

Ladies and gentlemen!  
Thank you for honouring me with your absence  
Oh  
how quickly the time passes – 16,20  
sixteen twenty and minus 5 degrees Celsius  
oh and just a second ago we  
played water chess with Long Paul  
in bathing suits we idly lied on beach chairs drinking  
soda and discussed the deeds we should  
commit for the mankind yes so now lets get  
to the topic – yes the indifference and integrity immanent  
in human individual in the intensions of the integrating  
situation does not eliminate creation  
of fundamental premises which, being an expression of its  
authenticity  
and totali-  
ty, could serve the purpose of illuminating the problem of  
littering and vice versa dialectically, as Jean Sol Partre



maintains, literature means nothing  
 in the world devoid of hunger as positivist structural-  
 ism does  
 not interpret art as neurosis, because Robby Little Grill  
 because on the con-  
 trary God-ard is the greatest hypochondriac GENI-  
 US of our age because the art materialising because the a-  
 rt oh, oh, ooh, ooh...  
 Ladies and gentlemen!  
 Welcome on the board! The bus with vertical-ho-  
 rizontal seats and loudspeakers is rea-  
 dy for embarkment  
 Oh of course its YOU!  
 Great Stylists  
 Great Semanticians  
 Great Anthropologists  
 Great Sentencekillers  
 Great Machos  
 Could we have the door shut please We are launching the  
 Institute of Classical Syntax to your left the Institute of  
 Avant-guard Complex Sentences to your rig-  
 ht the Interresearch Institute of Verbs in Neo-novel-poem-  
 essay right next to it Watch out! Ahead of us there is the  
 Institute of Subjectless Reportage with a de- tour Ooh  
 NO do not take it the bridge is fur-  
 ther to your left! SPLASH!  
 There you are sinking to the bedrock  
 of reality!  
 Blub-blub!  
 I have drowned YOU!  
 What now?  
 The bubbles have bubbled out  
 The air has cleared up  
 Fair weather. And the ti-  
 me passes so quickly! Broad opportu-  
 nities Ooh to act  
 are wide opening!  
 But my fin-  
 ger hurts  
 as I DEVICE POSTERS A-  
 GAINST P-  
 AIN  
 WAI-  
 TING FOR YOU

Yourse

Tristan

from **Tristan Talks Trash** (1971)

**PLAINLANDIA, SOUTHWEST. AND A SONG**

And the song breaks. (A high  
subtle stem of an empty vessel.)

I look for it (to the depths) in blind groping touches.  
While touching a passionately groaning female  
body. Travelling through a slowly breathing, intensely  
absorbing, landscape of dazzling nakedness.

This is the strength which gives strength  
to come on further than the end. The infinite  
way there and back is (somewhat  
more than) a clairvoyant, dizzy, blissful  
journey to Nowhere.

And in the unutterable blaze of fulfillment  
(it's everything) I just cry out -

alighting (pale and naked)  
on a steep shore of dumb elegy,  
in water which stretches beyond words.

from *Plainlandia, Southwest. Death of My Mother* (1995)

**(VII.) SO THIS IS THE END?**

Where did the white shot sink in the white desert?

How many needles are there aimed at an angel?

An angel is a clear glance void of imagination. A cry,  
which calls for life. (And a child's  
scrawl on the wall -  
a closer reading of MENE TEKEL.)

An angel as long as the last days of the millenium,  
which he (motionless and unmoved)  
leafs through indiscernibly slowly, on his own.  
Too short to get to the point. Shorter  
than his own leap into (emptiness absorbed)  
a mirror (at the very end of an endlessly long one-way  
corridor in the University library).  
(Trackless.) (With no address.)

The angel (after all) the words

of my dear, good, long deceased mother my  
mother come alive  
“drop me a word” (understanding of “a comprehensible  
poem.”)  
I am bleeding. Though bleeding, I can’t aim there.

And this is the other end (of the shot, the desert,  
remembrance)  
of my hereditary angel, too.

from **Interludes. Beheaded Puppets** (1997)

(translated by Martin Solotruk)

# ALTA VÁŠOVÁ

27 May 1939 Sevljusha (Carpatho-Ukraine)

Alta Vášová writes prose, film, television, theatre and radio scripts and literature for young readers. She made her first appearance with a collection of short prose titled **Recording the False** (Zaznamenávanie nepráv, 1970) where she explored the existence of contemporary people. Right from the start she proved herself as an intellectual author with high sensibility and sharp perception, sensitive conscience and imaginative, free thinking. After an experimental book containing two short novels **Place, Time, Cause** (Miesto, čas, príčina, 1972), she started to write sci-fi novels: **After** (Po, 1979), **In the Gardens** (V záhradách, 1982) where, apart from typical sci-fi themes, she managed to play with signification in a very contemporary manner and to analyse the problematic relations of contemporary individuals. In a magical "medieval" short novel **Festival of the Innocents** (Sviatok neviniatok, 1992), she expresses the need for love and creation as opposed to the destructive elements in the history of humankind. In 1995 she published an autobiographical diary called **Digressions** (Úlety), marked by a strange rhapsodic and fragmentary reverse chronology and a collection of short stories under the title **Lotteries** (Osudia) - from which this extract has been taken. The book is a lively mix of genres, containing evocative autobiographical prose, essays, poetry in prose, ecological reports, documentary situational recordings. Various points of view overlap there: emotional female experience of family life, intellectual, philosophical and reflexive elements which often point to fragmentary plots containing mystery or an admonitory metaphor. In her short novel **Skin-tight** (Natesno, 1997), Alta Vášová discloses the often shunned problems of the after-the-war history of ethnic Hungarians living in Southern Slovakia. Moreover, she tries to describe the reality of the communist regime and the way various people bent under its pressure, and for this purpose she uses the metaphor of "skin-tight living". Apart from historical circumstances she captures the fine threads of human relationships. Vášová writes literature for young readers, too, stressing partnership, sensitivity, empathy and the natural co-operation of the adult world with the world of children - in 1990 she was awarded the Janusz Korczak International IBBY Prize for the book **Someone Like Me** (Niekto ako ja). She also writes scripts for television, film and radio - the film **Sweet Games of Last Summer** (Sladké hry minulého leta, directed by Juraj Herz, 1969 - based on Maupassant's short story Little Fly for which she wrote a script) was awarded Grand Prix of the International Monte Carlo Television Festival (1970). She wrote the libretto to the enormously successful musical **A Suburban Cyrano** (Cyrano z predmestia, 1977).

Her other works include: **After** (Po, 1993 - a complete and uncensored re-edition of the novel from 1979). Books for young readers: **Big Girls** (Veľkáčky, 1978), **Twins from Gemini** (Blíženci z Gemini, 1981), **7.5 Degrees Celsius** (7,5 stupňa Celzia, 1984), **Mr Puch** (Pán Puch, 1991), **Lelka from the Bureau** (Lelka zo sekretára, 1992). Film, television, theatre and radio plays: the script for the film **A Novel about a Bass** (Román o base, 1969, based on a short story by Chekhov), a radio-play **Birthday** (Narodeniny, 1980), the script for the TV film **Retaliation** (Odveta, 1980) and **Like Leaves from A Single Tree** (Ako lístie jedného stromu, 1979 - about the Czech writer Božena Němcová), the script for the TV musical for children **Don't Take Our Princess Away** (Neberte nám princeznú, 1982), for the musical film **Someone Like Me** (Niekto ako ja, 1988) - and the play **P + L** (1989 - a tribute to Romain Rolland).

EVA JENČÍKOVÁ

## HANDS ON A BEER-STAINED TABLE

*(extract)*

You resisted two of those doors, but not the third, and at once it was clear: the first two entrances lead to cheap canteens offering coffee in a plastic cup, no seats, dens where a woman with a dirty rag in her hand would shuffle around... but the third door is different, just pay a bit more and you're the king again, you forget that you have to be careful with your money, your good humour is back and everything is as it should be.

So you were yourself again, again that woman who does not notice small outrages, you just threw anything that had caught your attention into your shopping-bag, then you put that light and easy shopping on your shoulder and there you went, smiling at the passers-by. Pure, pure complacency... and then it happened. Then you saw him.

He looked miserable, a decrepit boy with premature wrinkles, stuffed inside a coat, inside the coat you knew so well. Oily hair hanging shaggily to his face, staggering stride, the eyes of a drunkard, although a temporarily sober and freezing one, you would have bet your life that beneath that coat, that coat you knew so well, he wore a sweater, his second skin, that sweater he never ever took off, not even when sleeping. You perceived him completely, up to those sparse hairs on his legs. Of course, you knew nothing about them, but you still pictured them, feeling as if there were a magnifying glass behind your eyes, a very fine magnifying glass somewhere in between your brain and eyes: you pictured that rough filthy skin and those scarce pale hairs, thinner on the legs, thicker on the hands. It was a short moment as you passed him by, but that moment dismantled into an infinite series of seconds, and each of those seconds turned into a mini-shot of the horror: the horror of those hairy legs, of that greasy hair, of those soft, cowardly lips, of that filthy sweater, of those bitten nails, of that dismayed powerlessness. But those eyes... the eyes of a drunkard, but, oh, so blue... You have never, not once in your life... you could have sworn that there was not another pair of such blue eyes in the world... A pub would have been enough for him, perhaps even the worst canteen at the station, one glass of beer, any beer. But it was not charity that loomed in your mind, you were not tempted to light up that heavenly blue in those lost eyes. Because that coat...

You can never get rid of that guy, you can never forget him and how could you? You have experienced him down to the smallest detail and he will be your nightmare, his image will break into your head out of nowhere each day, you can never get rid of him, never, because he has cursed you with the horror of imagination and premonition.

...But surely there must be more coats like this here! There must be at least fifty of them in this town, even though they were on sale three years ago and you already wanted to buy your son a new one recently, but then you told him that you would buy it next year. He had nothing against it, but then, all of a sudden: all of a sudden he

came home in an anorak, in a common, simple anorak, he hung it on the hook, stuffing his gloves into pockets and his cap into one of the sleeves, just like they had taught him in kindergarten long ago...

Since that moment you had not looked anybody in the face, even if all those supposedly remaining forty-nine coats had passed you by, you wouldn't have noticed them. Just that one, that single one stuck in your head, only that guy with oily hair, because that coat was obviously too small for him, obviously ill-fitting, actually, that coat looked as if he had inherited it or stolen it. Or as if someone had given it to him.

The stop was full of people, you pushed through the crowd towards the trolley bus, in your head your boy was growing up fast from his first baby overall, through that winter-coat with gloves on strings sown to the sleeves so that he wouldn't lose them, then through his small fur-coat, through that colourful anorak, through all of his winter-coats and anoraks and scarves and wool-hats up to *that* coat instead of which he has recently brought home that alien thing, where he has stuffed his gloves, his cap and scarf... and he said: It's not forever. We have just exchanged our coats... With whom have you exchanged your coat? Why, with a friend. He happened to like it.

Is that possible? If this is him... if this is that friendship... then it can only be because... Oh, do you know him so little? Or perhaps so well? Yes, do you know him so well, because you guess immediately where his curious head might lead him... his curious body? But to such an outcast? Why, what for? Just for the sake of experience? Is that worse or better? Experience or money? What is on the more attractive side of the scale?

Your mind was leaping crazily between the image of tiny wool mittens on strings hanging from the sleeves of a tiny coat, and the image of those bitten nails of that guy, those nails stuck in the pockets of *our* coat, even though, frankly, you have not seen his hands, but maybe you still caught a glimpse of them in one of those long seconds as he was approaching you on the sidewalk, as he avoided you, swerved around you. Did he light a cigar-end? Did he fish it from his pocket? Did he?

You boiled milk, you put your shopping where it belonged, so what, there is nothing wrong! Nothing has changed. You have seen your son just this morning, he looked all right, not a bit different, only... Eva hasn't called him for some time. And you did not even mention it, why, you did not mind it, that much you have to admit... And now that guy. Oh no, stop it, it was just a coincidence and in your head it has joined your own silliness. Your boy is going out with Eva, you just never pay attention to what's going on and then you know nothing and worry in vain. You should ask him about that friend... about that one with his coat, the *real* one, the friend who has lent your son his anorak.

Or you'd rather order him to give that anorak back. Yes, but your relationship has never been about orders. So should you just put that question, so to speak, matter-of-factly? At supper? That question about Eva and about that friend? He muttered a vague answer,

so you started, you know, a silly thing has happened, I have met a suspicious-looking fellow in the same... er... You wanted to get rid of it so desperately, you wanted him to laugh at it with you. He did not laugh, however. He gave you a confused glance, then changed the subject.

You were having that dream. You were having it anytime, at home, at work, it was a persistent day-dream, but not a pleasant one. Whether you sat thinking or with nothing to think about, that dream appeared. Repelling, persistent, stuffed inside a too-small coat.

A friend - but what kind of friendship could it be when it includes the imperative to keep at least a piece of clothing...? Stop being silly, will you? The boys simply like each other and they both are fed up with their old coats. To exchange things is the easiest way to double the size of your property... What kind of friendship could it be when it includes the imperative of constant touch?

First it was, as they say, happenstance, one hand had rested on the other during a talk, one pair of eyes looked into the other, brown into blue! Hands between tankards. A man is happy when there are depths discovered in him... a man is as deep as his listener allows him to be. As deep as the attention that is being paid to him. Of course, you cannot fathom everyone and when you cannot, you just shrink away. But this time it felt right, the other one had his own depths too, equally exciting, waiting to be explored.

Or was it perhaps only a memory of a talk, of an innocent human touch and an understanding look? A coat as a sign of closeness? But all the same: those dishevelled, dirty hands. Where on earth can the boy find the strength to overcome it, to look at it from the other side... Won't he miss his soul mate, won't he miss that proximity supported by alcohol, supported by long hours of talking, because that man has obviously enough time, supported by... you'd rather not go further... your imagination is not up to that task... maybe there came a moment of intoxicated ecstasy and in the next instant a sobering one, like a sauna, hot, cold, hot, cold. Merciful, dumb slumber. It allows you to start again, only to... again... and so it goes...

A few days had passed and you found that coat lying in his room. It smelled of winter and that was all. No smell of the body of a stranger. The pockets were empty, or rather, carefully emptied. The boy had understood. He saw those worries in you. And now in his eyes you look like a complete idiot. Sure he must have found out what precisely you were worrying about, those images must have leaked from your head...

You bought him a new anorak and you were talking absently as always, did you eat, where are you going, did anyone call? but - still it seemed to you that you were being kind, too kind to each other, that you were watching each other. It seemed to you in spite of the fact that you usually did not see each other all day, you were just, so to speak, brushing by each other. And you started inventing evening entertainment. Your husband grumbled, but he almost always let you take him out. One night you returned home, both merry and relaxed, yes, you were relaxed and you felt you had long needed to

be and deserved it. You pushed the door silently ajar. From beneath the blanket two pairs of legs stuck out, one bigger than the other... which was the bigger one? That of the stranger? That of your son? You closed the door, knocked, then again and louder! Bare feet tapping, approaching the door, he slipped out of the room, dreams still dripping from half-closed eyes. Throw him out! At once! Him? It's Eva. We were...

What's worse? Oh my God, what's worse? How come Eva has such legs? So long and boyish? What do I know about him after all? Maybe he's going to marry her and I... I'm completely ignorant. All of a sudden he is a grown man. Or - is he?

But the vision of that guy in the ill-fitting coat, that vivid dream, has not disappeared since. Maybe one day, when you again have a few last coins in your pocket, when you again walk the same street and when he crawls out of the same dungeon in the same, precisely the same coat... You will find those coins, you both will buy a beer, hands on a beer-stained table...

from **Lotteries** (1995)

(translated by Marína Gálisová)



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# PAVEL VILIKOVSKÝ

27 June 1941 Palúdzka

Writer, translator and publicist. Winner of the prestigious Slovak Dominik Tatarka Award in 1996 and the Central European literary award Vilenica 1997.

He made his literary debut in 1965 with a genre-composed collection of short stories **A Sensuous Upbringing in March** (Citová výchova v marci). Even explicitly (with reference to the title) Vilikovský claimed to the quest for and discovery of bounds of new and different sensitivity typical of the generation of writers entering the literary scene in the 1960's. Important, and in Vilikovský's case characteristic effort ever since the publication of his first book has also consisted in discovering new bounds directly related to the effort of attaining to new sensitivity. They are the bounds of the language, incessant revelation of its potential and limits, concentration on the assertion of epic expression which would correspond and harmonize with the language deprived from layers of conventional functioning, revealing and renewing supremely free and unique authorial idiolect.

Beginning with Vilikovský's first book up to his most recent collection of short stories **The Cruel Engine Driver** (Krutý strojvodca, 1996), the author marries his writing interest with the expressive theme (love, death, murder, physical violence as the source of manipulation and self-manipulation), as evidenced by the books **The First Sentence of Sleep** (Prvá veta spánku, 1983), **Escalation of Feeling** (Eskalácia citu, 1989), **Horse on the Floor, Blind Man in Vrábľe** (Kôň na poschodí, slepec vo Vrábľoch, 1989), **Pedestrian Story** (Peší príbeh, 1992), or polemic, parodying gesture directed at the settled manifestations of non-authentic (often cultural or political) stereotypes. It is apparent from Vilikovský's books **Forever Green is** (Večne je zelený, 1989), collection of short stories **Slovak Casanova** (Slovenský Casanova, 1991, with L. Grendel), and partly in the stories from the collection **Escalation of Feeling**, as well as in his essays written in the 1990's.

A high level of Vilikovský's linguistic and stylistic prowess is also evidenced by his numerous translations from English and American literature.

Within the generation of writers entering the literary scene in the 1960's Vilikovský emphasises and introduces new democratic themes and genres, (black chronicles, essays) into fiction writing which, however, he does with the polished utilization of serious as well as expressive possibilities of literary expression. With respect to the aforesaid, the fragment of the pamphlet like text **Green is Forever** can serve as a good example. The monologue of a narcissist secret service agent turning a possible genre proto-text inside out is a deconstruction of information and dialogue, and example of "linguistic manipulation."

Other works: **Horse on the Floor, Blind Man in Vrábľe** (Kôň na poschodí, slepec vo Vrábľoch (in magazine 1988, book 1989), author's masterpiece novella reflecting complex and ambivalent possibilities to execute or define non-standard (expressive) human deeds. **The Winged Cage or from the Life of Young Slovakia and Old Slovaks** (Okrídlená klietka alebo zo života mladého Slovenska a starých Slovákov, 1998), with Tomáš Janovic, selected essays written in the 1990's.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

**FOREVER GREEN IS...***(extract)*

Beginnings, you say, first steps? How handsome I was then! Pale face, fashionable, fair moustache, velvety... well, I hardly had any bristles then; so I started as Colonel Alfred's lover.

You are familiar with a situation like this case, of course, but you are familiar in a completely different way. I don't claim I can remember all the details, it has already been... nine plus two makes sixteen, sixty one years? All the roads are open to a young man. In my case, lest I exaggerate, at least two. After all, at that time I had not yet turned my attention to women, I only formed this bad habit later on, in the course of active duty, and the Colonel is not to blame for that at all.

So when they told me: in the supreme interest of the country, in the name of the sacred Christian traditions represented by the imperial and royal crown... That I had been summoned by S.P.O.O.K himself, which was what we called him, the commander of the third, or was it the fifth?, three plus five, the eight department. He was standing with his back turned to the door, the Venetian blind was down... it went down by itself, all you needed to do was turn the door handle. Much worse, however, just between ourselves, was it, to pull it up.

S.P.O.O.K

Anyway, S.P.O.O.K... read as written periods are, of course, not to be read, with a period you can only lower your voice; one can't remember everything, but essential things, as for instance, the lowering of one's voice, become bred in the bone. It was the intelligence department... but I have already said that. Dear boy, that is what he called me every time we were alone; he put his arm round my neck in a friendly manner, he stood quite close to me, I felt how the hairs in his nose quivered and he was feeling my shoulder with his hand. I used to have strong shoulders... feel for yourself, even now; well, just have a feel. I exercised with the Sandow method.

scurvy

Sandow, you probably don't know, was a sickly fellow suffering from his birth from rachitis, syphilis, scurvy, hay fever, and other things I hardly care to remember. His schoolmates, you know children, ridiculed him. Haven't you read that? Lest I should uselessly. Then he started exercising, and, one day, he lifted up their teacher complete with platform and blackboard. Of course, you sho-

uld know, how well fed teachers used to be then... state service, eligible for a pension. It was during the math class, I remember it as if it happened today... Good book.

Curbing sensuality means standing one's ground in the face of temptation. I'm being a little vulgar. Take it as a poetic quibble. To love a man... is it an inferior being? With respect to pure value? But this is just an aside. The first thing was to forfeit love, except, of course, for the supreme love, love for an idea. Between ourselves, it is like sucking one's thumb, at worst one's big toe.

curbing sensuality

The room was suffused with the delicate scent of Katharsis perfume, now I'm talking about a different room, not about the intelligence department, the walls were draped with red leather glittering bloodily like a gaping wound.

Colonel, I called, hear out a hapless human being. To hear a confession sounds better, but I have reserved confession for communication with God. The emotion I invested in the words, all the pure streams gushing from a blooming young man's soul... the young man is me or at least was then.... in the bloom of youth, and sincere despair forced a blush into my normally pale face. There wasn't a dry eye. He had two of them. In this respect he was normal. The lens of his eyeglass glittered with a cold metallic sheen; it was, you most certainly surmise, bullet-proof.

Not an eye

Colonel, echoed my words marked with deep emotion, hear the confession of... I mean hear out a hapless fellow. I have long been resisting feelings stirring up confusion in my soul and tearing me apart; I, who since time immemorial...

Hold on, said the Colonel with a single imperious gesture of hand used to issuing orders. He had delicate hands with long manicured nails and a large gold ring on his left little finger. Treachery is requited with death. Where had we broken off? The hand alighted lightly on my shoulder and under its probing touch, trembling with the indication of a burgeoning understanding, I apprehended a strange similarity, coincidence, you might say, but it was too attractive to prevent an idea, that I initially found almost blasphemous, from fluttering through my mind. The hand that was growing heavier on my shoulder... later on I got 300 Crowns for that ring in a pawn shop, and it should be noted, that for 10 Crowns you could buy a decent pair of shoes. Three pounds of pork fat cost three Crowns... or seven? Seven plus

Treachery is requited

1kg=  
3 crowns

three, seventy three. In many countries seven is considered a lucky number.

the most  
human mus-  
cle

Before we get to the point, which, as I can see, weighs heavily upon your heart, and as the Colonel was saying those words, he brushed his fingers lightly against the spot where under my blue silk shirt the most human muscle pulsated, I don't have in mind the one you do, I mean the one up on the left side. So first of all, the Colonel continued with a mild smile on his face which stood between me and his real thoughts as a thin but opaque curtain, let's drop these formal parts of garment which all too manifestly remind us of our social status and commitments, and allow me, to usher you to my parlor and offer you some simple refreshment, such as chance has garnered in the austere abode of a bachelor.

With these words he escorted me deeper into the bowels of his flat furnished, even by the standards of that era, with unusual, even astounding luxury.

the clash of  
arms

I see, young friend, said the Colonel, and with a smile he pointed at an empirical... empire sofa draped with violet brocade, I can see that you are startled, let's put it a little immodestly, by the delicate taste and elegance you are seeing in the abode of a tough soldier, a man who spent his entire life amid the clash and clatter of arms.

Doors close of  
their own voli-  
tion

At that moment an impartial observer would probably have called his smile ironic. If he, of course, could have slipped into the flat through the carefully locked door that had soundlessly closed behind me. Doors, dear friend, even then could close of their own volition and all the Colonel had to do was turn the key, quite inconspicuously... The left hand doesn't know what the right one is doing.

from **Forever Green is**. (1989)

(translated by Pavol Lukáč)

# IVAN KADLEČÍK

8 April 1938 Modra

A writer of fiction, essayist and literary critic of old Lutheran and intellectual descent. His life was strongly affected by the 1968 military occupation of Czechoslovakia and the ensuing *normalization*. As an editor-in-chief of the journal *Matičné čítanie* he appeared on the "black list" of politically dissenting people, was denied publication and qualified work. After his projected book of literary criticism **Speeches in the Lowlands** (Z rečí v nížinách) was forbidden in 1971 (only published as late as 1993) he started to collaborate with Czech dissidence, appearing mainly in the samizdat publication *Petlice* run by the Czech writer Ludvík Vaculík.

For Kadlečík writing is an act of resistance, a form of self-defence against the dehumanized world around, of self-affirming and self-questioning one's existence in intimate contact with the ethics of protestantism and Christian universalism. He likes to tax the possibilities of the word, doing away with its ideologically aggressive meanings, cultivating and personalizing it in his inventive linguistic games and neologisms.

Kadlečík's fictions **Rhapsodies and miniatures** (Rapsódie a miniatúry, 1981, 1987 - samizdat editions 1981, 1987; officially published 1992), **Twelve** (Dvanásť, 1989), **A Horrorscope of One's Own** (Vlastný horoskop, 1991), **Lunerie** (The Mooning, 1993) present a syncretic intertwining of different genres and forms, often inspired by musical composition. His strongest form is the short sequence, a personal rendition characterized by temporal simultaneity (mixing present with the past) with intermittent epic, lyrical and reflective passages.

The extract from **A Horrorscope of One's Own** is marked by its associative composition, use of irony and self-irony while the text's division into twelve units corresponds to the months of the year as well as the signs of the Zodiac. Using a literary parallel with the absurd situation of the surveyor K from F. Kafka's *The Castle* the author comments on his own plight of being under siege by power.

Other works: Collections of essays in literary criticism and cultural history, **Speeches from the Lowlands** (Reči z nížin, 1973, 1974 - samizdat editions), **Faces and addresses** (Tváre a oslovenia - 1974 samizdat, 1990 - officially published); correspondence from 1990-1991 published as **Epistles**, 1992 (Epištoly), correspondence with Ludvík Vaculík published as **Poco Rubato** (1994); collection of poems **The Heart is called ñ** (Srdce sa volá ñ, 1994).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

## A HORRORSCOPE OF ONE'S OWN

(extract)

/VI/

On this planet it is not advisable keep company with unclean people and officers of his lordship, just as it is necessary to stay far away from muddy places and beware of snakes, falling axes and the loss of one's keys.

But that doesn't mean axes are in fact falling from the sky. - No, said my colleague Franz, the weather doesn't look like it, and axes

don't regularly fall sharp side down anyway. – So we parted, laughing. I was going to see my doctor for a check-up to the hospital at Kramáre, 5 Limbová street.

The buzzing motorway wound itself onto the wheels (knees) of the express bus. We were approaching Nové Zámky (New Castles) but I could see a Castle (das Schloss) on every hill, everything was under the castle, fields, rivers, women – both married and liberal-minded – wells, animals, the whole country under a spellbound castle. Wickedly, I thought of Franz, my intimate companion, waving me good-bye (with his hand, of course).

In Cafe Grand in Bratislava I was awaited by my friends, precious people (the next day, one of them, the poet and editor Oleg Pastier was abducted on the street like a gangster to a police hearing because of the magazine Fragment K).

We were discussing the key issues of the day, speaking exclusively about criminal matters, about one and the same thing: literature, the Czech edition Petlice (the Clasp), culture, ethics of civil cowardice and courage; historical ethos that – according to the moral and intellectual personality of Dr. Šimečka – has for some of us become so stale and bureaucratic it can't be moved or removed, that ethos: it makes us feel helpless and vanquished; we were talking about the apostle Dominik who has just passed away (we were about to pay a visit and didn't know then), we were the more lonely without him. And we parted.

Outside, no sunshine but some shadows following us – officially authorized shadows to be precise. The authorized shadows were shy and capricious like young girls. – Good point, the surveyor K had said, the officially authorized must have more qualities common to young girls.

My son Ivan saw me off on to the bus back home. He, too, was visited by two gentlemen at his dormitory last week. The gents wanted to talk about his acquaintances and contacts, his reading and his father, at the time of his state exams in mathematical analysis when he was psychologically very vulnerable; he felt uneasy, he said, and didn't know how to deal with them. Don't you worry, I said, (how easy it sounded,) one cannot get over one's shadow, don't let yourself be put off, they can't intimidate or humiliate you more than you allow them to, just hold on, we are living a state governed by the rule of law, not terrorism, the government hasn't declared war against its people, nor is the Castle hysterically afraid of its subjects...

K seemed to have been cut off from every connection and felt more free than ever, he felt he could wait as long as he wanted to, and nobody could touch him or drive him away, or even speak to him, and yet, at the same time, he felt nothing could be more absurd and more desperate than this freedom, this waiting...

At the door of the bus to Banská Štiavnica we were joined by a tall police officer in uniform. Can I see your identification cards, please, he said only to the two of us. He saw that our names and surnames were identical and poked fun at us: son, father or brother? We are the Gemini, I replied.

(A boy born under the sign of the Gemini tends to be of a witty, cunning and easy-going nature. At a tender age he seduces a close relative and becomes even more easy-going. He is good at mathematics.)

The officer wrote down data from our IDs slowly and meticulously, as if nothing had happened and no axes had fallen, so slowly I nodded at the driver to have a little patience. The passengers were all curious to see what was going on, and I felt like a criminal, a looter, a disguised punk or, at least, a Slovak writer – a mass murderer of his own children (may they have mercy on me). The police officer, also a Gemini, had a moustache very similar to mine: schizophrenia, perhaps? Or had the sleuths sent this one so he could easily remember the guy he was supposed to look for on the platform? The search for one's identity is everyman's business after all, so what the heck.

What did he want, asked the bus driver. Oh, I wave my hand, I didn't have a moustache in my ID picture, but immediately I realized I couldn't have said anything more stupid: the policeman had had to check my papers first and only then could have realized that the moustache was missing. (Ludvík, too, laughed his head off when I once told him that in one of my manuscripts I wrote about where the piece was hidden: First they have to find it and then they can read it to find where it is. But Marxengels? Did he wear a moustache in his ID? – thus much the bus driver.)

Instead of taking action against K, they preferred to suffer, although they of course hoped that K, too, had to slowly but surely understand what was so clearly obvious, and, he, too, would suffer unbearably, just like their lordships did, for he had most inadequately and indecently been standing here on the corridor at this early morning hour.

The bus was leaving. The reel, the coloured film, the video are hissing, winding themselves onto the bus wheels, and through the window forests were quivering (with fear); we were passing meadows, fields and the country in a green uniform. I didn't want to see this. I closed my eyes and then I could see my country in a black uniform. All green, I touched my forehead. It was moist and cold. (Fear: a key to freedom?)

There was a complex anatomy of anxiety, analysed through intestines and vessels and the intellect during the two or three hours of the journey. (As that cop Zdeno told me at the hearing in Levice around the tenth anniversary of the entry of Warsaw pact troops: Are your friends again preparing something for the anniversary? Too bad the fifties are over, you'd have caught it back then, today we must be careful. But I tell you I'll find some way or another and you'll catch it anyway.) My poor soul, fragile as it is like a glass of vodka, had just become another inch deeper, more transparent and richer through that gift and mercy of an intense authentic feeling of a whole, integral existence and by having been visited by something that was harsh and indestructible like a disease, happiness, sin, pain, like good health, death, the unbearable love of L. and repentance.

I panicked in paranoid fear: they just wanted to know where I'd been and when I'd left or they were going to pick me up on the way or at the terminal, or was it so that these self-appointed Gemini of ours had just dropped by to remind, humiliate, intimidate?, or? or... So I was blessed with fear and, as such, a common coward. Among other things. I hadn't been to the recent National pilgrimage to Štefánik's memorial at Bradlo, nor to Tatarka's burial (I sent my son, my successor: so we survive).

When K appeared, it was late evening. The hill with the castle was invisible under a veil of fog and darkness and not even the tiniest sunbeam could reveal a sign of the castle's existence. K had been standing on a wooden bridge that led the road into the village, and was looking up into an empty void. Is there a castle? - Of course, - said the young man slowly. - This village belongs to the castle, and every one who stays here at daytime or overnight is in fact staying in the castle. It can't be done without the permission of his Lordship. But you have no such permission or, at least, have not shown it.

I was back home. Nothing had happened (to me). But something could happen tomorrow or the day after. Who knows? Those people worked proudly for their daily grind and an early, high pension, whereas we were under stress permanently and alone like targets of anonymous remote-controlled destruction: such was the price for being agents of truth.

(The conclusions of the hearing I had with the officers at the State Police's Department of Investigation in Levice on March 3, 1978 suggested things would be easier for me and my family if I made a written statement about myself and my work since what they called the years of crisis until then, in other words, to write a piece of self-criticism that would prevent me getting into trouble - as they tactfully made clear. After a thorough consideration of my ideas, my conscience, my work both public and private or my work as a writer I did not find anything that would be in contradiction with the current laws of our state or with the laws of human ethics - and consequently worthy of such peculiar piece of self-criticism. In this sense, that was to act according to law, moral standards and intellect, I would live my future days... This I quote from a letter I sent to the police in March 1978 as well as for the attention of my employer. These letters would be burned in a couple of months time when the Earth approaches the tropic of Capricorn.)

I was home (and so in some sort of a sanctuary, I think). I produced a bundle of keys (it hadn't got lost?) from my pocket, I was looking for the right one, my hands still stressed out and shaky, I couldn't find the lock in the dark, so I rang the bell, the doors swung open and behind them appeared the contorted face of Franz Kafka, the Gemini, who said in English: My house is my castle. To which I replied, also in fluent English but with a soft Central Slovakian touch: Fucking bastards!

(If published in the Elementary School Reader, the last expression can be replaced by "sweet little pigs". Or, better yet: it can be replaced according to one's own individual experience. And so, on the authority of my profession as a writer, I am granting an absolute fre-



edom of expression to each and every citizen including the censor,  
the office-holder, the policeman and the bureaucrat.)

from **A Horrorscope of One's Own** (1991)

(translated by Ľuben Urbánek)

# PETER JAROŠ

22 January 1940 Hybe

Peter Jaroš writes prose and film and television scripts. He made his first appearance as a writer in 1963 and in 1960's he was an exceptionally fertile author (in total he wrote eight books). With each new title he tried to innovate the method of realism. Jaroš does not strive to change writing strategies, however, he focuses on innovations in the field of the genre and on the "semiotic" side-effects of a once written and overwritten text.

In 1960's his texts carried features of surrealism and existentialism, for example **Minuet** (1967), **Return with a Statue** (Návrat so sochou, 1969), or the French New Novel - **Horror** (Zdesenie, 1965), **Scales** (Váhy, 1966), **The Journey to Immobility** (Putovanie k nehybnosti, 1967).

Since the early 1970's Jaroš has been concentrating on experiments in the realm of an epic narrative. This is visible in the composition in prose **Gory Stories** (Krvaviny, 1970) to the duology **The Thousand-Year-Old Bee** (Tisícročná včela, 1979) and **Mute Ear, Deaf Eye** (Nemé ucho, hluché oko, 1984).

Another marked feature of Jaroš's writing since early 1970s is the fact that he tends to accentuate a sharply defined (from the point of view of both society and politics) Slovak and Slavonic context, bringing more and more cultural and historical facts from this region into literature.

This new approach can be found in the second part of the aforementioned saga of the family of Martin Pichanda, a mason from Liptov. However, its first part (**The Thousand-Year-Old Bee**) is more successful in its effort to accent the irrational, instinctive and objectively invisible connections of this family history. (The novel was made into a film in 1983). Its first focus lies on the symbolic significance of sexuality, fertility and vitality which (as you can see in this extract) opens a semantic space for reading the novel as a post-realistic epic.

His other works include: **Love Touch** (Lásky hmat, 1988), **Dogs' Wedding** (Psy sa ženja, 1990), **Charity Rope** (Milodar slučka, 1991). Here Jaroš binds his allegorical inclinations with his critical attitude to various phenomena in society.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## THE THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD BEE

(extract)

Exhausted by the fishbone, Samo dragged himself into the spacious bee-house at the very end of the garden. He lay down on the old wooden but nevertheless comfortable sofa, covered with sheepskin and coats with holes in them. There were only six hives at that time there but the buzzing of the bees flowed in the bee-house so intensely and monotonously that it lulled him to sleep. His eyelids were heavy, two or three times he swallowed tentatively, touched his throat in disbelief and a terrible image came to him before he fell asleep: the sharp, thick fishbone had penetrated his throat, blood was pouring from the wound, it was flowing outside, but mainly inside, into his throat and he was suffocating and suffocating and crying, screaming, heelp, heelp, I can't breath, I can't scream, heelp, heelp... He woke up for a moment with horror on his face, realizing that he

had nearly strangled himself with his own hand and then he thought, "If I had been alone with that bone in my throat, I would surely have choked!" He felt for the bone in his trouser pocket, took it out, examined it, licked it, bit into it tentatively and hid it into his pocket again. It was only now that he, calm and satisfied, really fell asleep. He might have slept a very long time, he might even have slept till the next day but for the strayed bees. They kept landing on his forehead, crawling around his face and body and one of them peeped into a hairy nostril. It stayed there till he started to drag it in when he took a deep, contented breath. The half-imprisoned bee began to talk aloud in Samo's nostril in its bee language. It buzzed, moved its wings in self-defence, scratching him with its little legs so that Samo had to sneeze aloud. The bee flew out to the sofa, Samo woke up for a moment, scratched his itching nose, turned on his right side and fell half-asleep again. He heard the buzzing of the bees and flies, he felt them crawling on his hands but he was too lazy to make a single move. And right then it seemed to him that a huge queen peeped from under the lid of the biggest hive, gazed at him with her five eyes, stuck out her long tongue, twinkled her antennas and her whole head smiled.

"Come, come over, lie with me, lie with me!" the queen told Samo and smiled at him seductively. She emitted off a tantalising coloured scent, tempting, attractive, penetrating, from ten pairs of breathing-holes on the sides of her bee body.

"No, no, I'm afraid, I'm afraid!" Samo screamed, twisting convulsively on the sofa.

The queen just laughed scornfully. The lid began to rise slowly and soon the whole ten-thousand bee family gathered around the queen. The queen suddenly turned serious and spoke with her complicated mouth-parts, proboscis and tongue, in a low voice, "Samko, I am a thousand-year-old queen. I am the only one who never dies and I stay and live in the hive, being eternal. I know everything about your predecessors, about yourself, about all of you and I will know everything about your children, grandchildren, great grandchildren... Thousands of my worker bees bring me news everyday... you should marry me, then you would live a thousand years with me... You should marry me..."

Samo jerked and sat up abruptly. He looked at the hives in front of him but did not see anything strange. He wiped his eyes and looked again. Then he got up, walked to one of the hives, lifted the lid and peeped among the bees. They were swarming, teeming, buzzing and humming. In the middle he saw a big queen, lazily crawling over the bodies of the drones and worker bees. He felt a strange anger, so he began to take out whole handfuls of bees, he held them in his hands, inspected them closely and then put them back. There was the queen showing off in one of the handfuls.

"So it was you teasing me?" he spoke to her. "It was you stirring? It would take just one squeeze with two fingers and... Eternal, you say, thousand years old!"

He tossed the bees back into the hive, covered it with the lid and

it was just now that he began to wonder why he had not been stung by a single bee. He examined his hands, gasped in amazement. But as there was a light knock on the door, he forgot about the bees at once. Maybe he forgot about them, because he was scared, and he was scared, because nobody ever knocked on the bee-house door. His heart raced as the door began to open slowly. "No, it wasn't fear," he tried to persuade himself, it was only impatience.

Young Mária Dudáčová peeped into the bee-house and when she noticed the startled Samo, she just gasped and closed the door at once.

"Mária!" Samo shouted.

He ran to the door, jerked it open and was ready to start chasing the running girl but then suddenly halted and froze on the spot, because Mária was standing three steps away of him.

"Come in!" he invited the girl into the bee-house.

She hesitated for a moment and then came in. She stopped in the middle, smoothing her hair with one hand and smiling prettily.

"Were you looking for me?" he asked her.

"I didn't know that you were here!"

"Why did you knock at the door?"

"To encourage myself!"

"And are you encouraged?" Samo began to laugh.

"I am," Mária said. "You saw that I opened the door."

"Let's sit down, shan't we?" he touched her hand lightly and pulled her gently to the sofa. They were sitting close to each other, their stockings and calves touching, and they were still holding hands. They both began to breath faster, as if because of the craving in their eyes. Mária closed her eyes only when he touched her lips and then her swelling bosom with his fingers. Suddenly she snuggled close to him and he embraced her. She moaned with pleasure and whispered with desire, "Samko, Samko!" and began to kiss his chest and his neck. He embraced her again and moved close to her ardently and with devotion. He kissed her eyelids, her mouth, her lips. He kissed her neck, shoulders and breasts. And when she lay down by his side on the sofa, he whispered in her ear.

"Do you want it, Mária? Do you want it today?"

"Today?" she asked with surprise but did not resist.

They made love feverishly. They moved their beautiful bodies, sensing them intensely. They were vibrating with the rhythm of the bee buzz, although they did not even know that they could hear it. The flexibility and smoothness of their skin, their courage and their reproductive instinct brought on an ever stronger passion, consuming pleasure and eternal goodness in them. They smelt their bodies, their love sweat, and it all kept transforming into new love... They calmed down very slowly. They lay side by side without movement for a long time and it was long before their eyes began to see again and their ears began to hear.

"Why is it the way it is?" Mária asked after a long while.

"And how is it?"

"It's so good when we are together!"

“I love you!” Samo said.

“Will it always be so good?” Mária asked.

He just sat there and did not answer but she did not insist either.

from **The Thousand-Year-Old Bee** (1982)

(translated by Vladislav Gális)

# MILA HAUGOVÁ

14 June 1942 Budapest

Poet and translator. She published her first collection of poems **Rusty Clay** (Hrdzavá hlina, 1980) under the alias of Srnková. Since then, she has published under her own name. She was one of the solitary authors capable of dodging official ideological expectations in the field of art and literature after 1971, in the period of the so-called *Political Normalization*.

A more important part of her literary activities is tied with the 1990's that saw the publication of six of Haugova's nine hitherto published collections of poems. Her poetry is markedly metaphorical with an ever-increasing extent of entropy of form and meaning alike. In her texts, Haugova offers an equally large space to personal mythology and collective archetypes as well as post-modern non-referentiality and intertextuality. The carrying theme of her poetry – love between man and woman – is gradually converted into philosophical and spiritual questions, without the exclusion of word and poetic language from the process. Not only by means of explicit references but also through creative procedures and poetical symbolism her poetry keeps entering into an intense contact with the poetry of prominent authors she encounters as a translator from the German, English and Hungarian (R. M. Rilke, P. Celan, I. Bachmann, S. Plath, E. Lasker-Schüler i.a.)

The character of the ancient proto-woman Alfa (for the first time in the collection **Ancient Love**, 1991) represents the author's alter ego or that part of female gender identity – with its ambivalence of values –, which remains concealed in the depth of the collective unconscious. Also thematically, Haugova's poetry often intertwines opposites of meaning; man is related to woman, love to pain, life to death, language to existence, human beings to their pictures, body to signs, authenticity to "tight masks" behind which someone's gaping face can only be suspected...

Haugova's free verse increasingly becomes the vehicle of her self-realization by means of textual record. It is also evidenced by the poems published here, their linguistic, poetological, and also fragmentation of significance, occasionally beyond the bounds of interpretative comprehensibility (*From Angelic Substance 1 - 11*). The mutual linking of motifs and their generation on a book-to-book basis evokes the feeling that Haugová's deconstructing the form of a poem is an offsetting reaction to the hermetic confinement of the world of a poem in its own meanings and symbols. Her poetry more and more increasingly fits into the genre of poetic diary with many a revealing but mutually isolated images requiring familiarity with the context of all Haugova's works.

Other works: **Changeable Surface** (Premenlivý povrch, 1983), **Possible Tenderness** (Možná neha, 1984), **Pure Days** (Čisté dni, 1990), **Nostalgia** (Nostalgia, 1993), **Lady with a Unicorn** (Dáma s jednorožcom, 1995), **Alfa Centauri** (Alfa Centauri, 1997), **A Winged Woman** (Kridlatá žena, 1999), Her tenth collection of poems **Genotext** is to be published this year.

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

## ENCAUSTICS

shadows,  
we are wakeful with their  
strictness hardly consists in lengthening



corporeal body, addressing with passion: eating fruits  
 from the hands of man (the abruptness of taste!) -  
 te gyöngyörű -

In the long-gone mother tongue  
 the long-forgotten blazes.

12. 10. 1992

from *Nostalgia* (1993)

## ANIMA PARTICIPATION MYSTIQUE

...is a heavy, humid morning star. Without memory  
 is a stone from the sea, two intertwined bodies (perfect  
 state),  
 at least in fingers something must remain (premonition of  
 the end of things)

...is the ash of stars. Turned hungry stones,  
 greedy crater of self, short inertia of sexes,  
 hope? in the Pompeian frescoes a man with a tower of self,  
 woman's birdlike cry. Full moon of the body.  
 ... is silence. Your my name, secret harmony,  
 forgiveness. Who, whom and why? I repeat myself - in  
 myself.

from *Nostalgia* (1993)

## ECRIVE

*"Ich weiss, wo du meinen Arm berührt hast."*

(L. Wittgenstein)

...leave everything noc-  
 cealed in a word; arrogant light of  
 darkness; music of sonorous vowels;  
 incest of sounds; palpably im-  
 palpable words; smell of tongue's  
 sex; gestures of hands touching;  
 warmth (mine only?)

I step towards to you like an Egyptian woman;  
 one hand inside you, the other one round  
 you, here, now (in a sentence which God  
 commanded us), we make love without a single word.

11. 11. 1992

from *Nostalgia* (1993)



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**FROM ANGELIC SUBSTANCE**

1 ...without preliminary warning  
he pounces on us. is close  
and reticent. torturing  
space, naked as a wall...

2 ...and carries us among  
petrifying currents. into robust  
convulsions, to sparking of minerals,  
to mix with the essence of what  
is strangest to us, what  
denies us...

3 ...sbehind the adhesion of the body. creeping  
over stone pavements (anxiety)  
the accuracy of self-sacrifice, in it  
different images of flame, when the evil  
returns it is worse than the one, which  
came first...

4 ...they touch the finished  
chink identified with the wall,  
overgrows at the rate of carelessly  
ingenious motion. where  
there are doors, thresholds, door jambs...

5 ...fore-silences of desert, bodies,  
reality of water is in its permanent  
abandonment by shape, by abolition  
of the center, they ambush our error,  
it can appear anytime and  
anywhere...

6 ...here we breathe in injuries,  
scars carried away inward (three  
life lines on the palm). I want  
a hole in the wall, to open your  
white windows by a warm embrace...

7 ...it requires a gift of self, a very  
weak poison of self-sacrifice,  
an exercise in patience, to keep  
it in an inert state of attention,  
which stirs for an awakened  
goal...

8 ...and again intrusive mirrors,  
the face of my face ambushed by  
a dream, mask (on a mask), the power  
of slow (fatigue), as never  
(repetition), like a wing di-  
vided... from angelic substance, to give, to want, to take...

9 ...in the frost of pain extraordinarily  
glittering spaces, with a broken body  
she follows the opening and delivery  
of breathing, steps in a sheer void.  
recites an immediate gesture...

10 ...expansion of space in hopelessly  
denied boundaries. line.  
she marks it with the mouth and again sets out  
alone (in herself), shouts through empty  
open spaces (the dream of matter:  
with hurtful accuracy to creat again  
from shards, rubble...  
from dew?)

11 ...does life turn against itself  
here? stopped only by the hand of ritual?  
or prayer? without gender, without memory,  
in a single point now called (two  
straight  
lines intersecting...) I deviate from  
the path predestined and eternal...

What kind of manuscript is this after all?

from **A Winged Woman** (1999)

(translated by Pavol Lukáč)

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## LADISLAV BALLEK

2 April 1941 Terany

Prose writer, journalist. His first three books marked by allegories and lyrical pathos were published in the experimentally-friendly atmosphere of the 1960's, but his true artistic achievements did not come before the 1970's. At this time he discovered his theme of the Slovak South as the basis of all his subsequent works. The so-called Palánok cycle which includes the book of short-stories **Mail Southward** (Južná pošta, 1974), and the novels **The Assistant** (Pomocník, 1977) and **The Acacias** (Agáty, 1981), although with different emphasis in values, forms a thematically compact whole, a "great narrative" unfolding the histories of its protagonists through meandering composition. The surfacing of characters from memory, their ascendance and demise in oblivion and their Phoenix-like rebirth in the course of the narration is the vault of this consistent three-part cycle which resulted in two major contributions to the "normalized" Slovak literature of the 1970's: authenticity in rendering autobiographical experience, and a new form of representing human existence in a fundamental relationship with its environment.

The novel **The Assistant** is built on two contrasting male characters: the listless Riečan, former hero of the Slovak Anti-Nazi Uprising in the Second World War, loses his moral battle with his animalistic adversary Lančarič, a butcher's assistant and a go-getting capitalist. In **Acacias** the straightforward story line based on characters is abandoned in favour of evoking atmosphere and capturing the "secrets" of fragile human relationships.

**Mail Southward** (a paraphrase of Saint-Exupéry's **Courrier sud**), a nostalgic book of short-stories, is a loosely composed work about the growing-up of a young boy. The world is seen through the eyes of the main character, the five years old Ján Jurkovič, the son of a frontier man. In the story *Berlin Waltzer* which is a kind of pigeon Ballek addresses the theme of child's enchantment and the first experience of death.

Other works: novellas **Escape to the Green Meadow** (Útek na zelenú lúku, 1967), **The Lily-Red Journey** (Púť červená ako ľalia, 1969), novels **White Sparrow** (Biely vrabec, 1970), **Theatre in the Woods** (Lesné divadlo, 1987), **The Strange Sleeper from the Slovak Paradise** (Čudný spáč zo Slovenského raja, 1990), **The Thirteenth Month** (Trinásty mesiac, 1995).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

### THE BERLIN WALTZER

(extract)

The Berlin waltzer flew in at night.

He was discovered on the rooftop of a summer's kitchen in the next morning, glowing against the blue skies of May like a copper teapot. He was a sturdy pigeon, well-trained as a postman.

Both brothers were watching the bird from under a well top that stood amidst a large backyard attached to a town semi-detached house. Sprinkled with white sand, the house had a beautiful glitter in the bright blue-tinged Southern morning. There was a strong smell of coffee, vine, the oil in the well gear and fresh water. The tree-lined avenue reverberated with the sound of doves.

The boys had grave faces, markedly fair heads and white sailor's shirts. The younger one was five, the older was seven and as their father had no taste for diminutives everyone called them: Ján and Pavol.

Ján was the younger. He tended the pigeons and knew just so much about them in order to interest him in them above all other things and Pavol liked to handle the business. They had lived in this southern town for a year, in a house previously owned by a man called Jakab who had skipped over the border soon after the war. They'd got from him red pony trap with a lantern, a white-washed stable with a wide country-style chandelier and some carved pigeon coops. In the stable was Vacko's horse Radko and the green pigeon coops were inhabited by three pairs of ordinary pigeons.

Ján whispered excitedly.

"He is red, he glows like fire! Pavol, he's a genie!"

The older brother rolled his eyes because, from the outset, he had been thinking about his shop in the kitchen outhouse. He kept trading and selling things and might have had a drop or two of Armenian blood save that he was fair as a candle flame.

He announced. "This one beats even Mr. Csomó's!"

The younger one nodded. He was characteristically quiet and had a child's deep sadness. What was distinct from the grown-ups was his height and inability to cope with his worries. He had just found himself on that short, yet abruptly increasing line of life that hints at a trace of talent and returns, in a year or two, back to a steady course of mediocrity and ordinariness. He, too, was bound to return there but at that moment was living through the miraculous days of a five-year-old that he would feel nostalgic about later, and one day, when he'd grown up and those days were gone, he'd say the bitter: Thank you childhood for happening.

"He could stay," said Pavol.

"The way I see it he's just stopped here for a break. I'm sure he's delivering mail all the way to Baghdad."

"Where?"

"Maybe he's a genie, you know, a postal pigeon from the Caliph of Baghdad. He was flying over the town at night with an important message to deliver and got confused by the flames in which he was born a long time ago."

"...You're thick as a brick to think that. They have mail ships sailing to Baghdad. When I come back from school, we'll have to tie up the corncobs."

"The thread will choke him."

"Don't worry," said the older boy; he was only concerned about sales, the four seasons and the smell of jam.

"He's a genie."

"I can't stand listening to this!"

Pavol left for school and Ján went to see his mother. On his way through the double doors of the kitchen he said.

"Am I more stupid than Pavol?"

Mother pushed her coffee an inch away, wiped her forehead and said, gravely.

“No, I don’t think so. You just think differently. All of us can think, but differently. And everything depends on just what sort of worries you have.”

The boy winked. He liked looking at her.

“Whose worries are bigger? Mine or Pavol’s?”

“All worries are big.”

“But who’s got the bigger ones?”

“All the children in the world have awfully big things to worry about. That’s why all you young boys are good thinkers.”

“Can Pavol think that I am more stupid?”

She shook her head.

“Will you tell him?”

She gave a short nod.

He searched her face and set out under the vine of the verandah from where he watched the red bird.

With the sun growing more relentless the pigeon came to life. He gave a nervous jump off the hot tiles and flew up into the clear skies, in slow and ever-widening circles high above the town like a fragment of flame.

The boy was afraid of losing him in the sky, begged him to come back, but immediately he thought better of it.

“Fly, fly away, genie or he’ll sell you for an old goat, he doesn’t understand!”

The bird paused for a while, flew down from the skies like a burning meteor, alighted, hopped a little and angrily scuttled into the shade and stayed there like a statue captured in movement.

The boy smiled and lying happily on his back began to breathe deeply.

Someone came into the yard and then hurried into the kitchen. He sensed a woman: she was moving softly and quickly, like the shadow of a horse or a bird. He jumped to his feet quickly, worried about his mother. Through the window of the inside door he caught a glimpse of the wife of his father’s colleague. He didn’t like the Kuric family, he would pinch his cheek, she would yell at her husband. When they were sitting with his parents in the hall or out on the verandah, she would be the only one heard inside. During their visits his father would often leave. He would roam through the rooms, take a seat in the rocking chair, rock the chair and gaze gloomily into the green twilight of the street.

Once he had murmured irritably.

“The world is too complex to be judged by Mrs. Kuricová.”

Ján was sitting at his desk, re-drawing the pigeons in a zoology book.

“I don’t like her either.”

Father swung round astonished at his son.

“Quiet!” he said emphatically.

The boy gave a start, and putting away his metal pencil, focused on the dial of the table clock.

“I like your directness,” said his father more gently, “but you mustn’t be strict. You have to be sincere, so you can sleep well, but don’t be strict for nobody will like you. Also, sometimes it’s good to

remember that grown-ups used to be small kids once. It's not a bad thing to see these in grown-ups. What do you say, eh?"

"Eh," the boy nodded.

"I went a bit too far," said his father. Standing up nimbly, he rattled his knuckles slightly against the table and left relieved.

His mother was standing by the stove while Kuricová was fidgeting at the table.

He overheard her.

"... and if a hot bath can't even help me, I'll beat him with the bicycle pump!"

Blushing, mother jumped to the door.

"Go and look out for Daddy, he's coming for lunch."

He whispered to her. "Why do you allow to call you Mária?"

"He's coming very soon, go," she said aloud.

He went down the stairs and stopped underneath the arch of the gate. Jakab's pony trap stood there. He sat down in the nook where the oil lantern was with his feet up on the pony trap, looking thoughtfully at the glowing sky and its for him most powerful attraction - the unknown red bird.

He pushed open the wooden gate and looked out on to the street thickly populated with ancient maples, chestnuts and lindens. Only after heavy rain would the street be soaked.

His father was on his way, looking very tall and pale in the light green shade. He was walking slowly, almost solemnly.

The boy liked most to walk through the silent twilight of the street just before nightfall, when the trees were awash with the red light of the setting sun. Then darkness would come, suddenly and quickly, with the wax light of one of these wordless, painfully beautiful and unforgettable evenings of the south flickering at the end of the street. The evening bell would ring, the darkness come, mosquitoes would be buzzing in the streets, lamps lighting up and the next morning would come as if from another world.

"You've been waiting for me?" said his father, wondering.

"We've got a new pigeon," the boy said before it was too late.

"Another one!"

"He just flew in."

"I know."

"He's red like a burning fire. It looks like a genie to me."

"Turned into pigeon?"

"You're right," he agreed.

"These short legs..."

"No, Dad, I'm not making things up. He was flying, I'd say, carrying a secret message to Baghdad... or from Baghdad, except he got lost."

"Didn't make it then," said his father, pushing the green gate open.

"He's taking a rest now."

"Well, I am curious if you're pulling your father's leg this time."

"Not in the least."

"Oh, so it's serious thing then."

They walked under the arch to the courtyard and on through the dry sand ground to the well head with its sweet smell of standing

water. The water was still in the stone trough, left undrunk by Vacko's horse Radko, a tall yellow trotter.

"He's flying up there in the sky, all alone."

"An aristocrat perhaps?"

Surprised, the father paused and, leaning against the well, put his other hand on his son's head as was his habit. The boy didn't like this gesture, he couldn't talk calmly.

"What a precious pigeon..."

"I'd like to call him Genie."

"Well, Genie suits him all right. Ask Pavol about it."

"Can he stay?"

"We're going to have lunch."

To have lunch with father meant to use all of the cutlery properly, sit upright and be silent. But there was nothing for it because father thought it natural.

In the spacious stone-floored hall where his mother used to set the table for hot summer lunches his father said.

"Well, I would prefer if you and your brother gave up those pigeons. They mess up the verandah. And you spoil them... What do you say?"

He replied suddenly and in a despairing voice.

"But, Dad, I like them! I have to tell you I want them!"

"Er."

"Very much!"

"All right then. I'll wait until you grow out of it. You wouldn't like me if I sent them away, would you?"

"I do like you, Dad."

"You don't say that to me," said father slowly.

Suddenly in the kitchen mother dropped a plate.

"What was that?"

"A scythe on stone," said father wonderingly. "All right, we've agreed, I understand you're not ready yet to give up those heavenly babies - because you don't know everything about them. You know, they've been praised ever since Homer; but I don't like them. Until they knew better people considered pigeons to be a symbol of friendship, faithfulness and love. But now we know everything about them. Or maybe the birds have changed by being with us in our company, the way dogs have. You can feed your Genie now. Maybe he won't fly away."

When father was gone the boy said on the kitchen doorway:

"...I like my father. And we know how to talk."

"And he wasn't upset because of that pigeon?" asked his mother from behind the sink.

"No. I behaved like a man."

He gave his mother a quiet smile for a moment and then went to see his pigeon.

Some days before the landing of the red bird mother had hurried for the market, leaving him alone to guard the house. White Head, his favourite pigeon, landed by the kitchen door and flew inside. The gloom of the room scared him and, crashing his beak against the tiles above the cooker, he flapped into the boiling tomato soup.

The bird spent the rest of the day lying on the roof and was gone by the next morning.

Wounded by this great misfortune he roamed the courtyard, hands on his head, twisting his hips and announcing readily. "He flew away to die. I think maybe he's off to their cemetery up in the sky or he's hiding from shame."

"The cat ate him!" said brother derisively.

"No, Pavol, I don't think the cat would be able to swallow him. Besides, he was still in a shape to fight back although his feet were red."

"Pigeons have red feet anyway!"

"They do but this one also had extra red nails."

"Claws!"

"Whatever you say. He had red claws then."

"Did you see them?"

"When you get out of bath you're red."

"Just wait till father comes!"

His father had had more than misgivings about the pigeon coop.

"Don't forget, Ján, that you're also to blame for his cruel death for you have spoilt him. Your job was to guard the house. You didn't do your job so you didn't behave like a man. Pavol, in the next couple of days you are going to make full use of your business talents by selling all the pigeons. And you Mária fetch me a clean shirt, will you? I've been boiling as if in French Africa. Heck! This death could break the heart of a grown man!"

Father was firm in his decisions; he had a good memory. The boy was able to think about his father now, freely, and contradict him, and so could talk about him. His conversations with father were for him the sort of hard work that inspires. Father was interested in him but mostly for his silence. His silence for his pigeon coop.

from *The Berlin Waltzer*, **Mail Southward** (1974)

(translated by Luben Urbánek)



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# DUŠAN MITANA

9 December 1946 Moravské Lieskové

A writer, film and TV screenwriter and poet. As an author, he is an original and expansive follower of the gains of 1960's. Since his literary debut at the beginning of the 1970's **Dog Days** (Psie dni, 1970), he has been one of the most popular and well-read (In a sense cult) authors. In his shorter as well as longer fiction works Mitana marries the esthetic rarefaction of the prosaic expression with the gesture of provocation, polemics, and exhibitionism, often with socially critical intention. The debut as well as the two books that followed – the novella **Patagonia** (Patagonia, 1972) and the collection of short stories **Night News** (Nocne spravy, 1976) were more than anything else intended to address young readers expecting of literature a demanding esthetic experience but also experimentation and deliberately stressed difference.

The centre of Mitana's interest in this period, in keeping with his readership's expectation, was a mystery transecting a more or less explicit detective plot. The heroes of his fiction writings were young, slightly antisocial in character, and Mitana's declared reason for writing consisted in exploration of the almost invisible, irrational and incidental motivations of human behaviour.

A watershed in Mitana's writing strategy came with the 1990's. The novel **Endgame** (Koniec hry, 1984) is Mitana's last book which, despite experimentation and embellishment (the author marries the genre of socially critical prose with a psychologically-criminal prose tending towards a "study" of a crime and criminal) doesn't avoid the meaningfulness of a traditionally composed story and narration. In both books written in the 1990's **Search for the Lost Author** (Hľadanie strateného autora, 1991) and **The Return of Christ** (Návrat Krista, 2000) Mitana markedly changes his strategy and his interest tilts towards decomposing, glossing texts with journalistic, imperative and didactic intention.

The fragment published here is a reminder of the prose of the début of the author. The story **Dog Days** from the collection of the same title is an example of the ambivalent, esthetically productive strategy of epic statement in which a seemingly absurd (and tabooed) theme of crime, inflicting harm and all the irrational motivations in human behavior is turned into a strangely encoded and accepted inevitability.

Other works: **Slovak Poker** (Slovenský poker, 1983) – collection of short stories; **Cruelhills** (Krutohory, 1992), **Maranatha** (Maranatha, 1996) – collections of poems; **Sensations of a Streetwise Native** (Pocity pouličného našinca, 1998) – a book of selected journalism and essays.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## DOG DAYS (extract)

I don't know when I fell asleep. I was roused by the roar of waves shattering against rocks. I trembled under the shower of cold water. A large towing boat with a tricolor was sailing upstream. They were watching me from the deck through a binocular. Enraged, I threatened them, but they took it the wrong way and waved back in a friendly manner. The water surface was slowly settling. I bent my head down to its level, and all I saw was a boundless plain, glittering in

the sunshine, changing in the distance into blue sky. The horizon disappeared, everything was pervaded by everything else. Dimensionless. The water flowed peacefully and regularly, without ever thinking of turning back to its source. My head burned, its blood beating wildly against the walls. My throat constricted from thirst. I lay on my stomach putting my head into the water. It seemed to me that water evaporated as it touched my red-hot skin. Then I drank. I drank in long gulps tasting nothing.

When I withdrew my lips from the water surface, I spotted a dog near the bank struggling in the water as though it was drowning. I didn't know if dogs could swim; that one probably hadn't had time to learn. I wanted to jump in and pull it out but then I noticed a long branch. I offered it to the dog, and the animal wisely buried its teeth in it, and let me pull it out onto the bank. It was small, and my guess was that it was also young; almost a puppy. Wet matted fur, bristly. I was trembling all over, not knowing whether from fear or cold. It was probably one of the dogs condemned by its merciful lords who didn't have the heart to do in their dumb friend; they only drag it far away from its kennel hoping that it wouldn't find its way back. I laid it on the hot stones; let it dry out and warm. It occurred to me that the dog didn't belong to anybody so I could keep it. Indeed, I had saved its life. I was taken with the idea, smiled at the dog, stroked it, spoke to it in an unknown language. I was happy that eventually I would have a dog too, much like all my neighbours. I would make friends with it, train it according to a dog training manual, we would become inseparable. I wouldn't humiliate it with guarding jobs, it would sleep in my bed. I became so cheerful that I lay back on my back and placed the dog on my chest. It cuddled up trustfully and basked in the scorching sunlight. Once dry, it became lively. I got scared that the dog might bite off my cock, shrunk, resting in the thicket between my legs. But the dog started in the opposite direction. It started twisting, crawling on my chest and settled on my shoulder. I felt its muzzle on my neck, its breath, its coarse tongue. Suddenly I got scared that it might bite me in my carotid artery. My entire body became numb with fear; numb chill ran down my back. I wanted to catch it and put it off my shoulder but doing the sudden movement I put my finger in its eye. It snarled with pain, and, confused, bit my finger. Hey, what are you doing. Is this because I saved you. A human instinct arose inside me - I demanded gratitude and since I didn't get any I snarled at the dog, showed my teeth, and bit it in the neck. The dog responded by biting me in the cheek. I retaliated. We bit each other for a while. I felt fur and gristle between my teeth. Then I grasped the dog and threw it into water. My injured cheek was bleeding. I spat out fur, picked up stones and threw them at the dog struggling in the water. The fourth stone finished it off. The water turned pink. The dog stopped struggling, it was far away already, and it seemed to me that it was sinking towards the bottom.

Disgusted I dressed. I hope that it wasn't rabid, I thought, and just in case I decided to go and have some treatment.

When I appeared from behind the shrubs that protected me from any potentially curious eyes I noticed a man; he was standing with

his back turned to me. He had just thrown some white rope over a thick branch of a tree. The ends of the string were hanging loose, and as the rays of sunshine making their way through the foliage fell on them at irregular intervals, they shone white; it was clear that the rope was brand new. The man was old and somehow decrepit; even from the back I could dimly recognize him. A moment later I recognized him because he turned round helplessly looking round as if searching for somebody to give him a hand. Before I managed to hide away he had waved at me. Reluctantly, I jumped from behind the shrubs. Then he paused for a while because he recognized me. He didn't lose composure and gave me a civil greeting.

"We have got to stop meeting like this today," I smiled.

"I'm sorry, I declined your assistance," he said apologetically, "I hope, you didn't take an offence."

"No, no," I protested.

"My belated thanks, I was too agitated then."

"I understand," I responded. "I think I'm not used to being slapped across my face in the street."

"I was glad we didn't talk about that thing any more," he said pleadingly. "You surely understand."

"Thank you. I smoke a pipe," he said, and took a pipe in a leather holster out of his pocket. "I would like to ask you for a favour." He started looking hesitantly at the rope.

"But of course," I responded because I knew what the matter was. It was obvious that he would have a lot of trouble climbing the tree and tying the rope round the branch.

"Thank you," he said seeing me climbing the tree willingly.

To tie the rope and make a loop was no problem for me. Although I found the rope a little thin I didn't want to become involved in it. I had had experience of the old gentleman.

"You are very kind," he said, when he finished smoking.

"Not at all. It is only that I don't know what you are going to step up on," I said. "Well, I would lift you up to the noose but they might classify it as murder by hanging and I wouldn't appreciate that."

"Oh, God forbid, I don't want to cause you any trouble."

I looked round, and spotted oil barrels lying on the riverbank.

"Yes, they are empty. That might work," I said.

Together, we brought a barrel and placed it under the noose. An oil stain remained on the old gentleman's shirt. It upset him completely. He probably had a strict wife. I tried to calm him down, I didn't want him to leave this world in discomfort. I was quite successful. Then he shook hands with me and said that he was glad that he met me. "I'm really glad that I met such a nice and obliging man," he said.

I responded with an acquired phrase. "It is my pleasure." He asked me to go away. "You know, I want to spare you a sight that might not be very esthetic."

Although I felt a strong urge to ask him his reasons, I didn't want him to change his good opinion of me, and besides - a last wish should be fulfilled.

I went to the river and carefully washed my oil-smearing hands.

When I came back with some surprise I noticed that the rope hadn't snapped. He was already stiff. He looked well only the oil stain on his shirt looked incongruous.

I left quickly. I didn't want anyone to find out that I was a witness. I wouldn't be able to clarify anything and nobody would be interested in my hypotheses.

My head felt as if it were on fire. I had a splitting headache, the blood beating against my skull.

from **Dog Days** (1970)

(translated by Pavol Lukáč)

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# ŠTEFAN MORAVČÍK

22 December 1943 *Jakubov*

Poet, fiction writer, author of children's literature. His first two books of poetry were inspired by the traditions of the avant-garde of the early 20th century (Surrealism, Futurism). In the context of the socialist literature, the poetry's linguistic playfulness and experimentation manifested principles of free creation and was Moravčík's answer to the then constrained and limited possibilities of protests about life. At the same time, the reduction of an individual to biological instincts equals a plunge to mental layers unbiased by the ideology. From the collection **Cherry Hunger** (*Čerešňový hlad*, 1979), Moravčík's literary production was one of the most authentic and illuminating testimonies of the human condition under the so-called real socialism. In this and other collections – **Treerotic Frog** (*Erosnička*, 1981), **Silent Household** (*Tichá domácnosť*, 1981), **Painted Yokes** (*Maľované jarmá*, 1984), **Idioticon** (*Idiotikon*, 1989) – the asylum of natural sensitivity is confronted with an inauthentic life experience in socialist society. The poet's other asylum of the time is his language: cultivated virtuosity blends with immersions into "prelinguistic" situations expressed by semi-articulated, as if just emerging, "protolanguage".

As a writer, Moravčík attracted attention chiefly with his novel **Farmers** (*Sedláci*, 1988) evoking both collectivisation, his growing-up, as well as diminishing connection of farming with the world of nature, myths and magic.

Moravčík's poetry for children, once again, played a major role namely in the eighties, when its linguistic virtuosity helped to foster authentic creativity and thus shielded children from the corrupting influences of communist didacticism.

Other works: poetry collections – **Festivals of the Ram**, (*Slávnosti baránkov*, 1969), **On the Great Sensuality of White Sheep** (*O veľkej zmyselnosti bielych ovečiek*, 1970), **Nettling** (*Pfíhľavie*, 1989), **Human Sandwich** (*Ludský sendvič*, 1991), **Honey of the Mass Meadows**, (*Med omšových lúk*, 1998); novels – **Moving the River** (*Sťahovanie riek*, 1988), **Bread in the Track** (*Chlieb v koľaji*, 1992, sequel to *Farmers*); short story collection – **The Miller's Wife Has a Dove** (*Mlynárka má holubičku*, 1990); book of tales – **Secret Book of Záhoráks** (*Tajná kniha Záhorákov*, 1994) and children's books **A Little Giggle** (*Chichôtk*, 1985), **They Shoe Swines in Kiripolec** (*V Kiripolci svine kujú*, 1989).

VALÉR MIKULA

## WORKERS COMING HOME

Lads, lads, where are you going?  
Exhausted and blind,  
like flails during threshing  
rolling about.  
As if through high harvest in the fields  
blue and crumpled  
three steps at a time...  
To where do you hurry?  
Do you ache?

And for whom?  
Do you crave a woman,  
for a soft braid?  
No one can look in their eyes.

from **Cherry Hunger** (1979)

## THE VITAL FORCE OF TRADITION

What is closest to us?  
All good old words.  
Wine.  
Bread.  
And heart.  
And heart again!

So many times up  
so many times down  
the whole ruddy day!  
That only the balm of wine  
or thread of alcohol  
can help it heal...

from **Cherry Hunger** (1979)

## WHAT A FEELING!

Death sits on me  
like a farmer with a hoe on a beet.  
I can only wait to get tossed.  
A death finch may just twang a twig of raglan  
and I'll enter the lustreless glades,  
though unable to move an inch.  
My heart,  
You'll no longer crack like a whip  
when the ferocious festive  
nights of July!

The heavens will not collapse, fish will swim  
And grass grow  
instants for happiness.

from **Cherry Hunger** (1979)

**DUST OF ROSES**

Now it is a strange season:  
 all the seeds are ripe and ready!  
 Around the roses a sultry gravity  
 with an ox-like calm is strewn.

With an ox-like calm to beauty  
 A mumbling miserly silence rises.  
 Dust, remember  
 you are roses  
 and in roses you will alter!

from **Cherry Hunger** (1979)

**A NIGHT IN THE CITY**

In the city it's impossible to believe in God  
 as night is not different  
 from day.  
 The city is always alive:  
 working, buzzing, rattling,  
 scorning death.  
 Hence it shows  
 that nothing happens:  
 whether you perish or survive...  
 As if there wasn't anything like a blizzard -  
 not even in the greatest blizzard  
 and the wind howls,  
 and an angel's bud bursts.  
 Rose or heart...  
 All the same.

The city glows cold, restrained,  
 unlike charcoal from ash.  
 Night in the city is as if it never were.

from **Silent Household** (1981)

**SILENT HOUSEHOLD**

There's someone walking in the kitchen.  
 Someone strange, someone wolfish.  
 He breaks and shatters,  
 muffles, shuffles things...

Otherwise keeps silent.  
Sheepish as a husband  
who's come back from pretty women  
to an horribly chilly stove.  
There's someone walking in the kitchen.  
The dog's not been fed. Not a word.

And over a year the chill grows worse!

from **Silent Household** (1981)

## LINDEN

Why is our linden tree  
a naked mother,  
which has so much beauty beyond words  
that we find it irresistible  
to break her twigs?

from **Silent Household** (1981)

## SPECULUM AMORIS

Girlishly snow lies down under my feet  
devotedly.  
The snow smells of feeble, curled up slut  
Otherwise, for me, there's long been nothing to say.  
It lies down under my feet, a pallid grudge...  
Lies down under my feet it soothes me  
and a heart that is bitter, cold.  
Between two women I am laid out  
and there's no razor  
to clutch at.

from **Silent Household** (1981)

(translated by Martin Solotruk and James Sutherland-Smith)



# DUŠAN DUŠEK

4 January 1946 Gbelce

Writer, film and TV screenwriter, author of children's literature. In addition to a loose connection with the poetry of *The Solitary Runners* as well as neo-ornamental, metaphorically sophisticated poetry of Stefan Strážay, Dušek's contribution to the Slovak fiction of the last thirty years consists above all in the originality of a seemingly marginal yet imaginatively rich rewriting of mundane, everyday themes originating in the readers mind on the dividing line between dreaming and reality, finding and losing, life and death. They are the themes always implicitly accompanying an esthetic survey of the moveable boundaries between the story and its hidden (unarticulated or semi-articulated) meaning.

Dušek's short stories and screenwriting is tied not only with thematic but also ideological "minimalart", the interest in peripherally uncensored children's, young people's as well senior and very old people's consciousness.

The accompanying motif of his film screenplays is the survey with empathy or with gentle irony viewed social periphery - Roma population in the *Tinted Dreams* (Ružové sny, 1976), a bizarre image of the dark side of a simple worker's profession in the film *I Love, You Love* (Ja milujem, ty miluješ, 1980). The leitmotif of his numerous books for adults and children is the author's apostrophe of human sympathy and empathy, positive situations in partnership (this can be exemplified by the fragment from his short story *The Sea is Getting Larger*) and also family relations. In a literary form this positive authorial penchant for reality is connected with sensitive employment of the language, accentuation of its nontransparent lyrical and poetical potential, and, above all, humorous and gentle overview of rough and brutal facets of life.

Other works: **Eyes and Sight** (Oči a zrak, 1975) - a collection of short stories with a fundamental significance for Dušek's future poetics, **A Position at the Heart** (Poloha pri srdci, 1982), **Calendar** (Kalendár, 1983) - development and expansion of the theme towards problems, polarization between life and death, gradual accentuation of individual memory and memories as esthetically creative elements, **The Thimble** (Náprstok, 1985), **The Thermometer** (Teplomer, 1986) - attempt at complexly composed prose, **Pišťáček** (1990) - the book opens a prose cycle for children with a common main character.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## THE SEA IS GETTING LARGER

(extract)

I'm completely alone with my hair, eyes, a pair of ears, thin nose, moustache and cheeks. I returned from the cinema and found my flat empty. Outside, it is getting dusky - cherries in a nearby garden are mere black points. My wife is probably at my mother-in-law's. Possibly at the tailor's, or somewhere else, but she is not at home. I searched the entire flat, all the rooms, I peeked into the toilet, I also looked into the bathroom - nobody. Water is glittering in the bathtub. Most likely she is at the mother-in-law's, now I remember, she called yesterday, and later on my wife told me that she has eczema on her hands, that her skin peels off and turns into tiny scales. She's

probably gone to bring her some cream. And so I'm alone with my neck, two nipples, a hole my navel has gone hiding in, buttocks and the sleeping eagle in the shorts, alone with these two legs of mine.

There is still some light around me. I settled myself comfortably in an armchair. I can hear thrushes in evening gardens, they are getting ready for sleep, and they are already tired, their feathers still hot, in the dark trees they are looking for branches for their birdie legs. My eyelids are leaden too. I'm leafing through a picture magazine, page by page, but I'm not reading anything just looking at pictures and drawings. The thrushes are surely asleep now: in their dreams the shriek of hawks but especially that of peregrine falcons echoes, nothing but danger and fear. I find it enjoyable to think about it, I can close my eyes, I can stroke my hair, I can imagine whatever I want.

There are some cartoons on the back page of the magazine, five or six pictures, one of them extrapolated over in a number of frames. And it is the one I like most: it features a woman standing on a cliff above the sea with a small fish in her hand. The woman has no breasts. In the next picture the woman has no legs, she is short of something whereas the fish has got larger. In the third picture the fish is larger still. In the next picture the woman has no hips either, and again the fish is larger, its head has come off and moved over to the woman's belly. In the next picture it has changed into a mermaid: the fish head became a breast, the back part of the fish with tail became attached to the woman's waist. In the last but one picture the mermaid plunges into the sea. And the last picture is the same with the only difference that she is already touching the water surface with her hands.

There had long been darkness outside, balmy and soft, much like the one in the thrushes' down just above their thin skin. Immediately, I start inventing things.

The husband of the woman on the cliff is a fisherman, a guy with a scar on his cheek, a passionate fighter that keeps smoking, walks in a plume of smoke and wears a gold earring in his ear. The woman weeps. She spends her evenings sitting at the table with a lamp, her face yellow with the light, her cheeks glittering with furrows left behind by the dropped tears. Her husband doesn't want to make love to her, doesn't say a word to her, because she has no breasts. He stops liking her. During hot nights the woman presses her hands between her knees, suppresses tears and despair and again and again her head drops down onto the table, into the oil lamp light, her throat fills up with pain and sobs. Now the fisherman has stopped coming home. He spends nights at pubs where he always picks a strong guy he provokes and then has a fight with. His face gets swollen like that of a prize fighter, tiny veins burst in his eyes, his nose is bleeding; the earring glitters provokingly. In the morning he gets into his boat and goes out to sea. He doesn't have a penny left from the money for yesterday's fish. The woman makes a decision: she takes a small fish she bought herself for supper and couldn't eat, goes to the cliff looks into the sea, and between two moments – the decision to jump and the jump itself – she changes into a mermaid with large breasts and a scaly tail. Her hands slip into the quiet water

without a splash. Meanwhile, her husband sails back to the coast. From anger and hatred his mouth fills with saliva, he keeps spitting, muffled swear-words streaming out of his mouth. He drags empty nets behind the boat. And catches the mermaid. And doesn't know that it is his wife. In the darkness and foamy surf on the beach he makes love to her, he shouts with pleasure, he can't get enough of her sweet heaviness, filling his hands. He spends a night with her and the next day he comes back to her. He will keep coming back. He will hurry. He will. He will. His wife starts crying with all the joy...

Did I sleep? I didn't. My lips smile over the guy, over how he ended up. He did it! He was wallowing with a mermaid, wet and shining in the moonlight dust. And he is completely unaware of the fact that it is his own wife. The darkness outside is getting thicker, you can't see or hear a thing: from one of the treetops a thrush cries, startled and tired wings of the night.

The door behind me opens. My wife turns on the light so I close my eyes to make them unaccustomed to darkness under the lids, get up from the armchair and walk over to her.

I say: "How is your mother? Is she better?"

And my wife says: "You're at home?"

"I?"

"I didn't hear you coming."

"But I have been at home for at least an hour."

She laughs and says:

"And I haven't heard you coming. You can't hear anything in the bathroom; and nothing at all under water. I was diving, as in the sea."

Suddenly I'm very sleepy. I open my eyes: she is standing by the light switch wrapped in a towel, only her neck and face exposed to the light. Her body is still steaming; the edge of the towel concealing drops of perspiration. She smiles like a full moon. There is nothing I can do: I must move and slip under her towel, light like a shadow, I'm checking if my hands get filled as usual, then rip off the towel and hope that my eyes won't be blinded by scales. I must. I must. Smell her; search for salt with my nose. I know that I must. However, I'm unable to move an inch. I want to sleep so much. Sleep. Sleep all the time. I want to sleep so much - and your green hair - your cheeks of moss - greenish light on your lips, taste of sea saliva - oh - so much I want to sleep.

from **A Position at the heart** (1982)

(translated by Pavol Lukáč)

# DANIEL HEVIER

6 December 1955 Bratislava

Poet, children's author, essayist, writer of song texts, translator, editor, publisher. He published first while very young in the 1974 with the collection, **The Butterfly's Carousel** (Motýlí kolotoč) and has maintained a solitary position among writers which was one of the few positions available to a writer in the period after 1970 with its ideological pressure. So far he has published nine collections of poetry, a book of essays on the art of Slovak poets under the title, **Understanding in One Language** (Dorozumenie v jednej reči, 1988) and many children's books, both poetry and prose, for which he has received many prizes.

Early in his career Hevier impressed many with his light expressiveness, his fresh imagination based on the sound, graphic and all the language qualities of a poem. Thanks to this shapely style and form and inventiveness he transformed aspects of every day life on poetical elements. This later deepened the urban context of his work in contrast to the traditional metaphorical and rural bias of other poets. Many of these abilities led him towards work for children and in that he became a distinguished follower of Miroslav Válek and Ľubomír Feldek, with their undidactic and linguistically creative model of children's writing involving a young reader in the semantic action in the poem or tale.

The spontaneous sensitivity of the young Hevier changed gradually through the addition of experience to a modern conceptual perception which could include science fiction pictures, as in **Electronic Clown** (Elektrónkový klaun, 1983), and towards the direction of pop culture. There was a reduction in the significance of the poem and programming of form to meet readers' expectations. Hevier's interest in the market and the mediation of literature led him towards mixing both writing and publishing, lyrics and poems and this meant that from the individuality and exclusiveness of his work of the first half of the 1980's he moved towards the literary *mainstream* of the 1990's. But paradoxically Hevier has been less visible on the poetry scene in the last ten years as before.

Selections are from **Electronic Clown** and also from the work **A Man Seeking the Sea** (Muž hľadá more, 1984). The cycle originated as a recapitulation of the gains and losses which come to Hevier's lyrical hero as he lives. Direction and hero are depicted in a general way but with obvious references on the author's subject.

Other works include: Poetry collections - **With Father in the Garden** (S otcom v záhrade, 1976), **Bird Drinking from the Tracks** (Vták pije z koľaje, 1977), **Non-stop** (1981), **The Moving Bank** (Pohyblivý breh, 1984), **At Every Door** (V každých dverách, 1988) and **Poems from an Advertising Campaign on the End of the World** (Básne z reklamnej kampane na koniec sveta, 1996). For children: Poetry - **Birds at a Dance** (Vtáci v tanci, 1978), **Don't Stick Your Tongue Out At a Lion** (Nevyplazuj jazyk na leva, 1982), **The King Pursues a Rabbit** (Kráľ naháňa kráľíka, 1985), **Country of Miracles** (Krajina zázračno, 1987), **A Poem Can Help You** (Básnička ti pomôže, 1989) **A Speaking Book** (Hovorníček, 1992).

Prose - **Thirteen Marching Teapots** (Trináť pochodujúcich čajníkov, 1984), **Where the Ice-Cream Sellers Go in Winter** (Kam chodia na zimnu zmrzlinári, 1984), **April's Hugo** (Aprílový Hugo, 1985), **We Don't Want to Go to Sleep Yet** (Nám sa ešte nechce spať, 1990), **The Monster** (2000).

Book of short prose, **Do You Want to Be Happy? Ask Me How...** (Chcete byť šťastní? Opýtajte sa ma, ako na to..., 1997) and others.

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

**HAMLET, MAD AS EVER**

Computer J. S. Bach  
 composes music for television adverts  
 for anti-obesity armchairs

Computer Leonardo  
 paints a thousand first time originals  
 of the Mona Lisa  
 and according to a subscription list  
 he mails to the first millionaire

Computer Hemingway  
 writes the memoirs  
 of failed politicians

Computer  
 Napoleon prepares  
 materials for a new variant  
 of psychedelic war.

Computer Galileo  
 recalls his theory  
 of elastic space.

Computer Seneca  
 makes a speech in the UN on the women's question  
 and the mass suicide  
 of whales

Computer Adam  
 and computer Eve  
 produce new computers

Computer Hamlet  
 is jammed, he endlessly repeats  
 some nonsensical question.

from **Electronic Clown** (1983)

**MAN HAS GIVEN NAMES TO ALL THE ANIMALS**

"Man gave names to all the animals"  
 sings Bob Dylan  
 and I try to name as well  
 everything I've got inside me:

all these  
tigers,  
wolves,  
jackals,  
snakes,  
hawks,  
ponies,  
baboons,  
crocodiles,  
lizards,  
herds of horses,  
pigeons.

.....

All this menagerie  
known as  
a man's soul.

from **Electronic Clown** (1983)

## **A MAN SEEKING THE SEA** *(extracts)*

\*\*\*

a man seeks a boat  
for his sea

a man seeks a sea  
for his boat

yet the sea is of flame  
and the boat only of paper

\*\*\*

he bites into an apple  
with sharp lips  
thirsty teeth  
with his whole face  
he dips into pink meat  
it feeds him  
but the taste of the apple  
remained in the apple tree

\*\*\*

a dog on three

legs  
pisses in the snow

steam rises  
in white clots

it touches  
me

it touches  
me

with its  
animal tenderness

\*\*\*

a dog must be fed  
a wolf not

a wolf is a runner  
with an anvil tongue  
and fiery teeth

it sates itself  
with its own fury

bound on a chain  
of wind and cold

\*\*\*

air touched air  
stone overturned stone  
something sighed within an apple

toys bloomed

the door cock-a-doodled do

then the man noticed  
how his son  
was leaving  
through a broken down door

to seek  
another  
sea

\*\*\*

night gets bitter

bodily darkness  
touches his  
weighty body

the body of a man is  
from flesh  
and flames

and he knows

that all women  
are less

than one woman

from **A Man Seeking the Sea** (1984)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)



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# MARTIN M. ŠIMEČKA

3 November 1957 Bratislava

Prose writer, publicist and editor. Son of the Czech philosopher and dissident Milan Šimečka, who lived and worked in Bratislava.

Before 1989 Šimečka was one of the authors discriminated against by the state machine on the grounds of their political opinions and attitudes. After 1968, due to the activities of his father, a reformed Marxist, he was not permitted either secondary school or university. He did various unskilled jobs (hospital orderly, shop assistant, lifeguard, sports instructor and boilerman), and only since 1990 has he been allowed to pursue a career in publishing, editing and publicity.

He began to publish in 1980. The Czech samizdat publication *Edice Petlice* successively published his collection of short stories **A Soldier's Book** (*Vojenská knížka*, 1980), books of fiction, **Testimony** (*Výpověď*, 1982), **Year of the Frog** (*Žabí rok*, 1983) and **Jinn** (*Džin*, 1987). The latter three texts were included in his official debut in 1990. Šimečka's books are an authentic transcription of the biographical experience of a young protagonist who lives the „deferred“ life of a social outcast compelled to seek understanding in either a community of people of similar mind or confirm his identity against a background of family and parents and later on through love and the story of a newly-married couple. With the lapse of time and therefore the author's changed personal situation the theme and stories of this loose trilogy were followed by the novel **Interest** (*Zájem*, 1997). Here the Šimečka's protagonist has arrived at the position of a socially exposed, mature man no longer exploring the world but balancing and assessing his previous experience in the face of new social conditions and role which markedly alters the protagonist's and narrator's angle of vision - the observer becomes the observed.

The extract from **Testimony** is an example of Šimečka's juvenile narrative vigour. Here the autobiographical hero offers the reader a seemingly factual transcription, yet one which exudes horror and fear of the event of death which the protagonist, as a hospital orderly, confronts on a „professional“ basis.

Other works: **Signs of Light** (*Světelná znamení*, 1984, official edition 1991) a text composed from authentic letters from prison and commentary. It was co-authored by Šimečka's father. Not only is the book a direct reference to an authentic family situation it also serves as a reminder of the positive value of simple family or private events casting a negative light on the non-authentic form of social and political life of that period.

ZORA PRUŠKOVÁ

## DECLARATION

(extract)

I ran into the corridor and I flung the wings of the door wide open because the bed was rushing towards me. One of its wheels had stuck and left behind it a screeching black line. The doctor ran behind the bed and she squeezed a black ball which breathed instead of the Grandpa who was borne towards us. He was smirking in sleep but only because the corner of his mouth had been stretched by a red tube. His pillow was bloody.

I heaved the operating table to one side and pushed the bed into its place. The doctor handed over the ball and connected Grandpa to the machine. Everything was calm for a while. His chest rose and fell in the rhythm which inflated the cylinder of the respirator. A second doctor washed himself and a surgical sister prepared his instruments.

Only I flew about the hall like a madman. I jumped in big leaps from place to place connecting apparatus, loose tubes, switched on lights and felt that my time had come. Like a shot from a starting pistol energy exploded within me and I vibrated with a seething power. Not even four minutes had passed, definitely less than a four minute mile and I was ready. Again I shaved his temples quickly. The hair, sticky with blood, wouldn't go into the shaver and so I cut it with scissors. Then I scraped off the rest with a safety razor. It must have hurt, but Grandpa just smirked. His eyelids had swollen up quickly and were suffused with a violet colour.

Four of us remained: the anaesthetist, the surgeon, the surgical sister and myself. I'd prepared everything; my job was done.

The surgeon put a sterile sheet with a hole in the middle over Grandpa's head. He cut into his temples with a scalpel. The blood ran between his hair and into his ear. He opened an aperture and a little while had dried out the blood with a swab. Then he took a drill like a small wheel and by the end there was a rotating nickel pyramid.

Suddenly he said, "Milan, hold his head, please."

Oh with what pleasure I took hold of Grandpa's head and neck beneath the sheet. I would like to take the heads of my friends into my hands instead of shaking hands. And close their eyes, live the closeness of their thoughts through my fingers... Or I would like to lean Tana's smooth forehead against my own bumpy one and declare love in such a way.

I felt a roaring through my hands. I remember the feeling when I was an apprentice drilling thousands of holes into pieces of tin. It vibrated in my thumbs and tingled pleasantly. Then I closed my eyes and felt how the nickel tip was not penetrating Grandpa but through my skull. I listened to how fragments from my scalp sprang out from each of the angles of the nickel tip. I held my head myself and lay down under the drill, my body held in a vice.

The palms of my hands became sweaty and slid on his forehead and the more I pressed the quicker it slid. But it was no longer necessary to press. The surgeon took up a thick needle blunt at the end with a small hole in the side.

I felt how that cold needle entered my brain touched a vein just so perforated the lobe and pushed into the cosmos of a white mass and stopped only when it had entered a chamber of the brain.

A stream of pink water flowed from the needle and when the flow slackened the doctor inserted a syringe and gently sipped pulling out the needle at the same time. The syringe slowly filled with a black gruel.

He had finished. He had extracted the clotted blood and nothing else was necessary. He dried the wound and sewed it up with a blunt

needle which passed through the skin with such difficulty that Grandpa almost woke up from the pain and bent his right leg. Then the doctor stood up, removed his gown and gloves and invited the women for coffee.

The anaesthetist checked Grandpa's pulse for a while and scraped the violet eyelids and then they all left. I had to take Grandpa to the recovery ward.

When we were alone I felt the need to talk to someone.

"So how, Grandpa? What did you do? Fall downstairs? A car hit you? Or did you get drunk and fell over on a level pavement? How come that you're lying here on a bloody bed with a hole in your head? I asked in my mind.

I poured the blood into a sink and rinsed the tubes. I took the gowns and blankets, swept away the bloody swabs. Then I cleaned the floor, put the instruments back in their places and sat down. It was half past two in the morning.

So this is how it looks, I said to myself. Why go America if I can also find freedom in Bratislava? Isn't it an expression of freedom if you help save someone else's life? What do you reckon, Grandpa? Who would have held your head if I were now somewhere in America?

I switched off the bee's eye. Only the white bulbs stayed on. They blind one and if you look aside you can see how they glitter. They imparted a paleness to everything and made my reflection in the milky glass tremble. I sat down on a rotating stool and listened to the respirator's breathing. Under the light Grandpa's face had become unpleasantly yellow as if his liver had suddenly become infected. I took hold of his hand. After a moment I felt his pulse. It was slow and regular as I used to have. I would have lifted his eyelids, but I didn't know how I might react to his opened eyes. His chin sagged. But he was breathing regularly.

I went round his bed and studied his body. It bore the marks of a long life, a little dried, the soles of his feet were puckered and instead of nails claws had grown. I tested his wrist with a finger as I had seen Anka doing. Nothing happened. All at once a thought occurred to me.

I held his wrist again and pressed my thumb on a vein. But this time I touched my neck with the other hand and waited. And I felt everything clearly; thud... thud... thud... The same rhythm in thumb and neck. Slow and regular and regular as I used to have. Shit. I was feeling my own pulse.

Anka was draining mucus from Emma.

"Anka, come and look at him!" I said.

She came to the bed, looked and said. "Call the doctor. Switch off the respirator."

And so it was. Grandpa had died. Now I could see that his lips had turned blue completely and only the respirator was lively. It was inflating his chest, wheezing, clattering with ventilator and couldn't give a damn whose lungs it was blowing oxygen into. It had cheated me.

Anka returned to Emma's mucus. I felt tired. The stupid machine

worked unceasingly just to disturb the living and the dead. But I still didn't want to call the doctor. I wanted to talk to Grandpa.

"How so, old fellow? Can you hear me? Who are you? I feel nothing. Not even sorrow. Only fatigue. I understand that you have died, but it doesn't mean anything to me, you know? I don't know if you lived, walked, talked and did everything that the living do. If you had said at least a single word, just looked at me or made a human gesture! But like this? Did you live at all?"

I went for the doctor, but he called Anka, listened for a moment and then said.

"You can turn it off. It was to be expected." And he turned to the anaesthetist who was stubbing out a cigarette butt.

I pressed the button then and when the cylinder was shut down, with a long, drawn out sigh like an accordion, I sat beside the bed and waited. What did the doctors know? Perhaps Grandpa would revive. The tense skin on his belly would start pulsing, his mouth would open, draw in air, perhaps he'd move his hand...

Then I pulled the bed from the theatre and Anka painted on to his yellow thigh: Ivan Rojko, 1918. So that's what he was called. And he was sixty-two. At least he'd lived. Who could say? When now he could just be a well-made figure in wax?

from **The Jinn** (1990)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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## ERIK GROCH

25 April 1957 Košice

Poet, radio dramatist, author of children's literature, editor and publisher. By the end of the Seventies and in the Eighties he was a member of the literary, artistic and intellectual underground in Košice. He entered official literature in 1989 with his book of verse **Private Lessons in Sadness** (Súkromné hodiny smútku). In 1992 he established a publishing house, *Knižná dielňa Timotej*, which brings out mainly translations.

Groch's poetics are based on what is known as Christian lyrical poetry in its more sober variant. It was especially his second collection **Baba Jaga: Elegies** (Baba Jaga: Žalospevy, 1991) where his poetry acquired a more modern expression by involving the lyrical character in the semantic action in the poem. The character of Baba Jaga symbolises the impersonality of evil in human lives, however, the semantic ambiguity lends the whole event a character of a puzzle with mystery, disturbing a fairy-tale-like stereotype to which the reader is primarily tempted to succumb.

In his third, the latest collection of poems **Brothersister** (Bratsestra, 1992), Groch moved from a playful type of poetry to a more meditative which distantly reminds us of the principle of biblical parables, however, the semantic frame of particular poems is much more intimate and personal. The basic noetic and value findings of the lyrical subject have their hidden parallel in the Foucaultian "cultural archaeology" of the history of mankind - from mythological through religious to modern layers of civilisation in the memory of mankind. At the same time the poet does not lose his contact with dailiness. His conception of the universe and the creation also includes minute details accompanying man en route to himself. The positive outcome of Groch's poems is effectively combined with the natural basis of his metaphors and poetic allegories. The poet stresses the need for understanding and love not only among people but also in relation to everything living that surrounds the mankind, fulfilling us with its breath. Distinctly imprinted into this semantic line is a theosophical tradition derived from St. Francis from Assisi.

The selected poems are from the forthcoming collection *It (To)*, where "speech searches for its mouth" and the poet for his new expression. The poetry of Erik Groch is typical of the movement from a lyrical situation to the composed figuration of the story to the poetic speech as a medium of human existence. As the awareness that the world is not comprehensible by words deepens, the potential of in-depth meanings grow proportionally, by which the poet - along with the dimension of his personality - occasionally gets close to poetic mysticism.

Other works: Collections of poems - **Private Lessons in Sadness** (Súkromné hodiny smútku, 1985 - samizdat edition, 1989 - revised edition, 1999 - author's selection). Erik Groch was a co-editor of the literary almanac **Tichá voda I, II, III** (1991-1992). Radio cycles of fairy tales for children - **Ding-a-ling** (Cililink, 1987), **Taletwisters or What Is What and What Is Not What** (Rozprávokolamy alebo Čo je čo a čo čo nie je, 1988) and **Klára and the Ne'er-Do-Well** (Tuláčik a Klára, 1989).

His fourth collection of poems is due to come out this year.

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

## HOME

In a bundle, swaying on a soft maple cane, I carry my home.

At the same time, the wind carries me home, wherever it wants.

What is there in the bundle. Catechism from sour wine. The Old Testament and the New Testament, both of readable, vocable clay. Litanies of faithful, percolated blood, constantly leaking like thirst. And on the bottom of the bundle, quite separate, psalms bound in the skin from Treblinka! Mein Gott!

My home is a road.

At the same time, someone constantly whistles me as he likes. And sings me along. I am a long, never-interrupted tone, a note forming out of forming chromosomes. And at the same time, as if someone was exhaling the soul in me from the bottom of his lungs, so I ring with all the pipes from my drying bones; fragile, parchment bagpipes in the hands of he-who-is.

My home is a song.

And at the same time, someone originates me resignedly and changes me and grows me. And at the same time very quietly it steps me out and treads me. And at the same time it paces me.

My home is a sleeping rose, just unfolding.

from manuscript It

## ABSTRACTS

*(dedicated to C. Lévi-Strauss)*

The intruder's malice broke up the misery of the camp, brought back to the compassion of angels the eternity of flowing souls. Mother's anxiety put roots of moss into the smallness of a basket. Vocation and hunger of the sex severed the woman into the langour of the forest. The warrior's lust drove the resignation of the body into the deepness of the womb. The secret of inhalation and exhalation begot a rendition of being, the minuteness of the aging redwood, the immensity of the tree frog just incubating.

The Love of the Never Created *Is Drawing* the Stiffness of Abstracts into Itself, Changing It to the Movement of Verbs in Plusquamperfect Minustense.

from manuscript It

## WRITING

This is how your work looks; in a Belgian sweater, with your hands crossed or on your thighs, you are waiting.

Silence is not shining yet, but has already risen above

the floor.  
 You spread out a sheet of cellulose as jasmine spreads  
 its bowl.

The beams, the door frames, the floor, the stove of clay,  
 their walls  
 lime-washed; names stiffly awaking with you.

And everything that appears and flows out in subconscious  
 outlines  
 - fossils of structures, pictograms, stinking axioms -

you refuse: *poesis* means *to create out of nothing*.  
 Your *scribere* is the shape of bird dung,

droppings from greyly shining finches, mating still  
 up in the air, changing and separating

to grain, chaff, and what is missing.

from manuscript It

## MÁRIA FROM THE FIELD

Mária from the field, Mária the burnt cheeks,  
 Mária the eyes of ash, conceived from the polar night,  
 Mária from wild limbs shining like a city,  
 Mária the tar, Mária the burning thighs and the face  
 - the soldering iron on the peak of existence in bloom-  
 you who were the first to take me into your mouth so that  
 I feel you to this day, the red-hot ring grown deep in the  
 flesh;

recall me, *mariko*, in a blind and unbending hour,  
 as I recall, bent in the middle of the cold bathroom,  
 turned away from the mirror as from the Autumn and  
 graciously covered  
 with a veil of whitish aura, so casually and tenderly woven,  
 as if it did not come from this inevitable, unspeakably  
 sprouting  
 anxiety.

from manuscript It

## PAIN

Pain has the strength of light, my love,  
your and my face,  
shining in the light like holes.

It has the face of an angel,  
of your and my children,  
my love,

far away from love.

from manuscript *It*

(translated by Marián Andričik)



## KAROL CHMEL

6 October 1953 Zvolen

Poet, editor and translator (from Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian and Polish). He made his début in 1985 with the collection of poems **You Have What You Don't Have** (Máš, čo nemáš). In the deluge of schematic writing under *normalisation* he attracted the attention of readers especially with his distinctiveness in "rewriting" traditional poetic patterns.

In his next two collections which appeared after quite a long lapse in time, he confirmed his affiliation to the present (postmodern) aesthetics of Central and Western Europe. This is also seen in his prolific translation activities (books by E. Kocbek, D. Zajc, A. Debeljak, D. Kiss, S. Basara, B. Peki, D. Albahari, M. Świetlicki, M. Baran and others) which cannot be separated from his personality and individuality as author.

Chmel's poetry is a synthesis of intuition and conceptuality, the expression of emotion and rationality, and is based on a constant breaking of conventions - of language, epistemology and civilisation. It is marked by a philosophical basis, partly inspired by deconstruction and partly by Zen Buddhism, and by the contrast of the gnostic and the ambiguous. The exploration of the communicative (im)possibilities of the language is an immanent part of such an approach. Notable is the way Chmel deals with whole cultural and semiotic "blocks" or their signs: from incorporation of Dante through the unknown Bettes to the group of *Solitary Runners* and other literary alliances; from an advertisement through *An English Grammar For Everybody*, the Einstein theory of relativity to keeping silent in Tibetan; from the realistic arranging of facts through artistic conceptualism or minimal art to an (Ondruš-like) urgent, in-depth interrupted obsession with speech.

Chmel's poetry stands on the quaking marshland of never-ending cultural reflection. Quite naturally, it remains in the territory between the illogical and the transcendental, referring to the stratification, cycling and "serial character" of human existence. By its very discreteness (in time) and openness (in space) it is as if it indicates that only those questions to which there exist no responses are eternal. Also new-age "technologies of power" along with "the irony of history" pose an unsaid semantic prerequisite for this poetry. However, the presence of this prerequisite, in confrontation with the authentic experience of various practices of manipulation by the lyrical hero of Chmel's poems, cannot be unnoticed.

Other works: Collections of poems - **A More Fruitful Tree** (Ovocnejší strom, 1989), **A Spray, Blue Mentality** (Spray, modrá mentalita, 1998). From magazine translations: a short anthology of contemporary Slovenian poetry (*Romboid* 1999, No. 7), a short anthology of contemporary Polish poetry (*Fragment* 1999, No. 1-2).

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

\* \* \*

This man still insists upon hope,  
drinks water from his palms, falls down into the grass,  
learns the alphabet, counts on his  
fingers anew, smiles  
at the sun, walks through the rain

head uncovered, breathes  
in accord with his sleeping son,  
he has planted a tree, still insists upon hope,  
touches the bark of a birch, the hot  
skin of his wife, a cup of tea,  
the wing of a black grand piano, the polished  
wood of which reflects  
the intent face  
of an unknown gunman.

from **You Have What You Don't Have** (1985)

## **WHAT REMAINS**

the tongue, living meat.

Relative disputes  
about absolute fantasy.

We hold hands  
with the dead  
who will outlive us...

from **You Have What You Don't Have** (1985)

## **A MESSAGE FOR ISTVÁN BETTES**

on the teenth of juliober in the disappointed year  
of the orchestral stavrogin era  
a certain melancholic left  
all the Saint jokers in a coma,  
and we wouldn't even have known about it  
had we not found (by sheer chance)  
baked into the bread  
a blood-stained conductor's baton.

from **You Have What You Don't Have** (1985)

**A MORE FRUITFUL TREE***(for M. Reisel)*

the bell all cliché

God's tongue gets sticky  
 the stars all sugar  
 sugar  
 the moral code inside me

*the hour of truth* with the music for the deaf

somebody vomits  
 leaning from the window  
 falling luckily from it  
 he listens to cosmogony

it's bright  
 it's Sunday  
 everything's fine

the sick prepare for visits  
 the dead put on make-up behind the mirror

from **A More Fruitful Tree** (1989)

**SOAKING INTO THE MAPS**

you are supposed to know: only in the hollowspace  
 is time *fulfilled*; so postulate the world  
 as misting over; what is behind it,  
 will unstitch *God's thread* from the office for the dead,  
 what is behind it, *will forgive*  
 the burden

from **A Spray, Blue Mentality** (1998)

**ANDANTE**

and  
 in the coffee: the future: a dissolving  
 lump of sugar

inferno: *my memory, the mirror of my  
 visions...*

you're smiling, *mitschuldig*, but it only helps  
those who need  
explanatory notes; prepare yourself for the worst,  
*corpus hermeticum* will be the point, the finger  
reclaims the splinter, the blind man the darkness:  
the press ignores the grapes,  
but the metaphors *work*...

from **A Spray, Blue Mentality** (1998)

(translated by Marián Andričik)

Could this be allegory  
of Messias?

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## PETER PIŠŤANEK

28 April 1960 Devínska Nová Ves

Prose writer, publicist, writer of film scenarios. He started to publish in magazines in the late 80's and early 90's with Dušan Taragel and Igor Otčenáš. Their short stories were a parodic return to social realism (the myth of work, celebrating the collective, an optimistic brilliant tomorrow) in which recent ideals are ironically juxtaposed with the lifeless materialism of morally and socially devastated individuals.

Pišťanek's first novel – the first part of the trilogy **Rivers of Babylon** (1991) is an early peak of Slovak post-modernism, “a parody, a grotesque, a thriller, pornography and at the same time serious prose.” After remarkable success with readers Pišťanek followed this with **Rivers of Babylon 2. The Wooden Village** (Drevená dedina, 1994) and **Rivers of Babylon 3. Fredy's End** (Fredyho koniec, 1999). The themes of the return of the frustrations of “socialist man” are contained in the collection **By Axe & Knife** (Sekerou & nožom, 1999) with Dušan Taragel where literary stylisation is balanced by black humour and hyperrealistic morbidity.

The dramatic tale of the huge social career of the hotel boilerman, Racz, in **The Rivers of Babylon**, which our extract is taken from, uses the breeding ground of the declining genre of pop culture (an essential part of the book are the illustrations by Jozef “Danglár” Gertli.) The theme of physicality, bodily functions and vulgarity is linked to the epic staging “in the form of life itself” where at the level of the sentence there is a distancing in the world depicted (hyperbole, caricature, persiflage and irony.)

The progress of the boilerman, Rác, (marriage to the beautiful Eržika) is complicated by numerous pitfalls. From the intoxicating pursuit of wealth he becomes obsessed with power, his own importance and fame.

Other works: A selection of the tales **Young Dôňč** (Mladý Dôňč, 1993 expanded and completely published in 1998) the politically charged **Fairy Tales About Vlado** (Skazky o Vladovi, 1995), **New Fairy Tales About Vlado** (Nové skazky o Vladovi, 1998), a film scenario of **The Rivers of Babylon** (1998) which was shot by Vladimír Balco.

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ

### THE RIVERS OF BABYLON

(extract)

Rác needs money, too, a lot of money. Every evening he counts it. It is a loving ritual. He looks forward to it all day long. Sometimes he counts it twice just for the joy of it. The wedding with Eržika is now just a misty, uncertain goal in the distant future; he doesn't think about it. He saves for her out of habit. His mind is now occupied by only one woman; Silvia. He's completely obsessed by her. He's jealous of her, he hates her. He knows that she's a whore and this torments him. Every time she comes to him he wants to sniff out traces of other men. Sometimes he can't hold back and he slaps her. Sometimes twice. Silvia is not in debt to him. She is angry, snappy. She asks for even more. On the other hand it gets on her nerves that with Rác one can only talk about his extortions and money. He has no interests. He doesn't go out into town. He only feels good in the boiler-room and hotel wearing his fitter's overalls and boots. In

his surroundings which he knows very well nothing can surprise him. From such dust there must be suffering Silvia always says. He wasn't always so wild and rough. From a recently modest and straight-laced lad a wild autocrat has emerged. A self-satisfied, desperate smile plays across his face. Everyone bows down to him. He likes that. In the past he used to talk about himself in the third person plural. Rác's don't wish it, Rác's never lend, Rác's this, Rác's that. Her, Silvia, he always takes without a trace of feeling, without tenderness.. Actually that's the last thing that would worry her, Silvia. She's used to even odder treatment. Rác indeed does it without esprit, without the slightest charm. He takes her as if he were at home in the village saddling a mare. Occasionally he bites her. Here and there he rubs against it with a fist. When he's come he rolls over and smokes. Other than the boiler man no-one gets on her nerves. So let him pay up then!

Rác can't give her up. Eržika has stepped into the background. He can't even remember how she looks. She's become colourless, a pale photograph with a name, but without a face. She exists for him only in a long gone past and uncertain future. Rác knows that Silvia doesn't like him. It irks him. He takes it out on her. He stings her in anger. Yet she's his, Rác's, wealth, property. Like a packet of American cigarettes on a shabby, unkempt table. He knows very well that Silvia puts up with his perpetual humiliation only for his, Rác's, money. Despite this he feels pangs of conscience when he hits her. Without hesitation he grabs money to compensate her. Silvia doesn't even turn aside from the blows. She knows that the more he hurts her, the more sentimental he becomes and the more he'll pay. When Rác wishes her to scream she screams. When he wants her mouth shut she is silent.

The boiler man is jealous. He doesn't want her going with other men. Perhaps Rác gives you too little money? he shouts. Perhaps Rác doesn't make you come? He appeals to her sex. Silvia can only laugh at this. She has yet to feel any pleasure with him; not even the very first time. It's something of which he hasn't even an inkling. It's not the point.

Silvia has had to break off all her recent contacts. She's had to give up her regulars. Rác watches all day long. Silvia is afraid of what he'll say when Zdravko G. Appears. Luckily he doesn't come. Silvia occasionally gets the feeling that she'll go crazy from all this. Over and over she convinces herself that she'll inveigle as much money as she can from Rác and then she'll dump him. When she's got enough money or when the boiler man is utterly loathsome she'll leave. Silvia knows that the money from Rác is hard won. She still hasn't got enough. Rác pays well. Silvia's regular lifestyle is now upside down. From her previous life just morning examinations and evening appearances. Her lodgings at the other end of town yawn with emptiness often during the week. She spends time with Rác, she lets him co-habit with her, she listens to his words and angry outpourings. As a passive spectator she takes part in his business.

All at once everything is repulsive to her. She doesn't go anywhe-

re. Then for whole days she lies down and looks at the ceiling. Or she sits at the window and watches children playing in the sandpit. From time to time Edita visits her and gives her the news. Zdravko G. Has been around. He asked about her, about Silvia. When he found that she'd got time and had gone away he rolled up Vanda – the Truck and spent a whole weekend with her. The day before yesterday there was a big raid. They took away a lot of hard men. It's said that the gypsies tipped them off. But Berki says that isn't true. Silvia lets it go in one ear and out the other. When Edita starts to come on to her she gets up and locks the door so as not to allow the landlady to come in. Humbly she lets her undress her and put her to bed. With her eyes closed she gives herself up to her friend's caresses. After a while she comes alive. She changes position and returns Edita's tenderness. They both come at once. It doesn't take long.

Other times Silvia lies down and thinks how she can escape from Rácz. She knows that the boiler man will never come for her here. So she's not afraid that one day he might break in, grab her arm and drag her away with him to the Ambassador Hotel. Silvia is afraid of herself. She knows she can't resist money. It's the highest value for her, it has never let her down. So it is and always has been from the time Silvia let herself be touched by elderly men to augment her pocket money. She has got to have some right now. Swan Lake is never going to happen. Rácz doesn't have to come for her. Rácz waits peacefully without blinking. She'll come by herself. Rácz waits with a smile.

.....

One night Rácz wakes up on a bench in the kitchen. He hears a quiet rustle. He listens for a while and then stands up, grabs a poker and follows the noise. As he keeps a lot of money and goods stashed in his den he is careful. He's also got lattices stored everywhere; Ďula has got the welder. When he enters the dark passage two strangers, big guys, pounce on him. The struggle is short. The gasping intruders don't have a chance against the mobile, wiry boiler man who fights savagely and mercilessly, protecting his own. He knocks down both fatties with his fists. They lie stricken on the ground with their eyes shut. He binds them tightly with telephone cable and with an effort drags them into the boiler room. Only there does he look more closely at them. Their faces are familiar to him, they are two gypsies from the alley. He brings them round with hard slaps. They stop playing dead and gaze uncertainly at Rácz. The boiler man begins his examination. He threatens them with a white-hot poker. What were they doing here? One of the gypsies licks his lips. They, good gypsies, had come out of the bar of the Ambassador Hotel and taken a wrong turning. They were lost. Yes, somehow they hadn't found a way out the second gypsy added. Where in fact were they? Rácz pulls the poker out from the stove and carelessly puts it on the waistcoat of the first gypsy. The skin sizzles, smokes. Yeah, what are you doing? screams the gypsy. There is a smell of burning

in the boiler room. The waistcoat can't feel it says Rác, but it will hurt you.

Yes, they, the gypsies did come to steal, Berki admits. They'd heard that the boiler man had a lot of money, gold, jewellery and other lovely and useful things hidden away. He, Berki, can't explain at all how they got it into their heads. But now that they've confessed he should let them go.

Who had told them that at his place, at Rác's, there is gold and hard currency hidden? Rác gets angry. That, pleadingly, they, the gypsies, don't know how to answer. Nobody had told them. It was generally known. All acknowledge this of Rác. Everybody considers him to be a wealthy and powerful gentleman. Possible they, the gypsies, could make up their minds to do something like this. Sipos chimes in, only for his safety, that he's got the character of a swine. Both gypsies start to assert that never ever again will they steal in this life. They also want to stop their extortions. When he releases them they'll both find a job straight away and in a short while be living honestly. Berki will study and work at the same time.

Under the menace of the poker they fall silent. Rác takes great sadistic pleasure in their fear. He is very sensitive about his possessions, about his estate which has accumulated with his brain and with his two hands. He knows to spread and increase his property through his actions. In the boiler room it's too small for him. He has to rise up to the surface of the earth to emerge into the circle around the Hotel Ambassador. Heating now irritates him. He, Rác, needs somebody to take his place in the boiler room. Competently or incompetently.

Both gypsies nod eagerly. He speaks cleverly. But they when they find that it is they he has chosen to replace him they get scared. Sipos has got bad lungs and kidneys. He can't lift heavy things. Berki has got problems with his back and his head. He gets attacks occasionally. Mainly when he is doing something.

Rác yells. He raises the poker. The gypsies fall silent. They agree. Let the honourable gentleman put them in his place. They'll go and take leave of their wives and children, get ready and be back in a moment. Rác huffs and puffs threateningly. Do these gypsies somehow think that he, Rác, is a fool? Is he going to wait? No! No sentimental scenes, farewells and such like. They are to stay here at once. They'll get a short session of instructions and they can work. If they spoil anything or loiter on the job he, Rác, will torture them one after the other with red hot iron. He'll discover such pain that no-one ever discovered before. They shouldn't play around with him because they will pay over many days! Their howls and groans will be heard all the way up to the hotel!

The gypsies are afraid of pain. They fall silent.

Rác knows that no-one from their gang will look for them. No-one will miss them. They'll think that Berki and Sipos have got it into their heads to go to the East to a gypsy camp for a few weeks, drink wood alcohol and sit with their hats on at a table in the uproar of the camp site. The gypsies know this, too. The gang won't res-



cue them, they won't find that they, Berki and Sipos are confined not a hundred metres from the alley.

Rácz promises them a little pocket money if they obey. He unties them. The gypsies stand up and rub their wrists. They are afraid of the explosive boiler man who managed to overcome them so easily. They are clumsy and sluggish. They shouldn't eat so much. Rácz doesn't waste time. Immediately he begins to train his slaves. They shouldn't turn the valves. They will only stoke. The steam pressure shouldn't be over fifteen atmospheres. That's up to here, look. He, Rácz, will come every day to check on them. He'll bring food for them every morning which will have to last until the next day. But the gypsies shouldn't be afraid. There'll be enough food and tasty with it. The toilet is at the end of the corridor. Perhaps they'll lose a little bit of weight, but that'll only improve them. So that they won't run off there are strong bars everywhere and the chimney is narrow.

Rácz shows them how to stoke and how to rake out the ash. He is proud of his resourcefulness. He, Rácz, is clever! To arrange things like this! From now he'll be free and he won't have that stinking boiler room round his neck. Now he can start moving! He is seized by a whimsical mood. He shouts sternly at them and at the same time smiles kindly on them. He threatens them with his fist and then offers them a drink. Scotch. There's just bit in the bottle, but they can have it. He shows them that if they obey him he, Rácz, can be fair. If they piss him off they'll never get out.

Out there it is dawn. Rácz stops feeling sleepy. He pulls out his suitcase and slowly packs it with things of everyday use. The gypsies grumble uneasily. The shovels are heavy, the wheels of the wheelbarrow creak unbearably.

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In the morning Rácz moves into the hotel straight away. The receptionist gives him an apartment with a view of the river. Rácz likes it there. The bed is soft and smells clean. Rácz lies on it with his legs and boots dangling down to the rug. After a short rest he throws off his grimy overalls. He takes a shower. Afterwards he puts on fresh clothes, he has brought from downstairs. It's a fashionably, loose, striking orange and green shell suit. On the back the title AMERICAN FOOTBALL gleams. The material is shiny and pleasant to touch. His leather lace-up Adidas sports shoes halfway up his ankles smell new. They are two sizes too big, but the Italian who gave them to him in payment for heat said that they were wearing them like this these days. It's fashionable. Rácz stands up and goes to the mirror. The hair on his round head has grown a little. His big ears are upsetting. He presses them against his head with both hands. He listens to the fizz of his own blood for a moment. Only half a year ago he was carried by tractor in his village, he recalls. Old Kiss, should see him, Rácz, at this very moment. For a moment Rácz feels even hatred towards the old butcher, his daughter and all and sundry.

Someone knocks at the door. A waiter. He pushes in a trolley on wheels. In the little, silver, bedewed bucket is a bottle, Moet and Chandon. Ráčz hasn't unpacked yet, he says. He doesn't have anything. Next time. Scram... The waiter steps back regretfully. He feigns disappointment.

from **Rivers of Babylon** (1991)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# TAŤJANA LEHENOVÁ

23 January 1961 Bratislava

Poet, author of prose for children (from 1992 she has lived in Prague.)

In 1989 the magazine *Romboid* published Lehenová's poem, *A Little Nightmare Music* (Malá nočná mora), which resulted in controversy and discussion over the difference between pornography and the presentation of physical eroticism in literature. The debate uncovered the false prudery on the part of some of the writers' community who regarded the author's gesture of frank femininity in the lyric with indignation. It demonstrated a playful spontaneous physicality and human intimacy. The retort to the moralising of her poet colleagues was an unconventional first volume, **For the Chosen Few** (Pre vybranú spoločnosť, 1989) which had an astonishing lightness of touch, frankness and provocative stimulation to the previously taboo theme of sexuality. At the same it asserted the right of women to write about eroticism and physical pleasure in love. Its modern, urgent and mature expression, a dynamic narrative style also irony and a human tenderness, a philosophy of resistance, dissatisfaction and controversy in relationship to the world, self-sufficiency, a woman's otherness, ecstasy, spontaneous joy in life but also a difficult struggle with its everyday routine indicated a new type of sensitivity in the Slovak lyric.

In her collection **Gypsy Camp** (Cigánsky tábor, 1991) Lehenová is interested in otherness and the inner being of a woman, an emancipated relationship with a male partner, the quality of life in a wider context, games with feeling with allusions to Zen philosophy. There is an evident movement from the passionate poetry of the senses towards reflection, to deeper thought about the multi dimensions of everyday existence. A gentle ironical view of the feminine principle over the male is present in Lehenová's book for children, a humorous and magically playful prose book, **Is Miška a Mouse?** (Je Miška myška?, 1991)

EVA JENČÍKOVÁ

## A TAP LIKE A WATER MAIN

Once upon a time when my world had just begun  
I would continually beg Mama  
to buy me a fabulous tap  
just like my neighbour, Jurko, had:  
                                a little geyser in his trousers.

She would not.  
She wouldn't promise it for Christmas either  
and so I couldn't take part in competitions,  
                                "Who can spurt furthest,"  
and I couldn't win a red ball.

When we played Indians I could never be  
Winnetou, since even with that the unfortunate tap  
was somehow inexplicably connected.  
I was only Ribana; kept to be caught  
and tortured, tortured...

and they always lifted my skirt as part of it.  
Mama was surprised afterwards why  
I didn't want to wear it.

Once and for all I had to be reconciled:  
There would not be any spurting!  
But if we look at it from a wider perspective:  
we must begin to go to school and endlessly  
sit on a boring bench,  
we must eat all the time,  
nobody willing to believe there's a witch beneath the bed  
stretching out long white arms as soon as the light is off,  
they kill your tom-cat – and it was  
Yours... Beloved... the one and only tom-cat!  
But if we look at it from a wider perspective  
one begins to forgive the world a variety.

Yet it hasn't changed so much.  
I don't play Indians any more, but there is always  
somebody at hand – ready to catch,  
torture and torture...  
and lifting your skirt as part of it.  
Only now I wear it, somehow without protest.

from **For the Chosen Few** (1989)

## **A LITTLE NIGHTMARE MUSIC**

With unending amazement  
guilelessly I watch you grow.  
I want it.  
I want you to be big and strong.  
I want you to be a king.

Lightly with a finger... and the tiny mouth  
puckers... Don't dribble so!  
You see, you've messed yourself again.

In the warmth of a featherbed, in this white  
paradise, my hand smooths your brow,  
you a curved breadroll with a drop of honey,  
you, a blindly questing mole, the proud result  
of my diligent endaeuvres,  
you, my selfish nightmare...  
Never forever and never asleep.

Tenderly I regard the rosy surface  
of your skin delicate as a puppy's nose,  
you press yourself, you snuggle yourself into my hand  
like a kitten, warm, delighted; I know:  
you like this touch...

Often in the middle of raven nights,  
often in the place of flies  
fluttering in the zone of dreams,  
I must spoil you, I must caress you,  
little pampered pet – when you grow up  
how helpless I will be before you.

from **For the Chosen Few** (1989)

### **THE CHOSEN FEW**

I was inclined  
to have a dainty social evening  
only for the chosen few.  
On the door I hang a notice:  
Do Not Disturb!  
We are not at home,  
we are asleep and we paint!  
Closed to everybody!

I'm looking forward already to lighting candles,  
to putting on music turned down as far as possible,  
I'll pour a glass of red wine  
and with a good book  
placed off-handly near at hand  
I'll begin a conversation with the one invited -  
turning to myself.

from **For the Chosen Few** (1989)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# IVAN KOLENIČ

22 January 1965 Zvolen

Poet and prose writer. He has published ten books up to now. He made his début with the collection **Brought by the Storm** (Prinesené búrkou, 1986). It can be ranked among the titles which helped to reconstruct the autonomy of aesthetic criteria in the Slovak literature in the late eighties. A new sensibility, the surreal imagination and non-conformist character of the poems immediately won him the reputation of an *enfant terrible*, while at present some critics brand him as a populist hack.

As an experienced stylist, Kolenič was able to move from book to book toward other (literary-historical, genre, aesthetic) contexts and at the same time to balance the tension between commercial demands and the experimental provocation of his texts. Poetic decadence along with the decline of language and style, artistic revolt and provocation, romantic stylisation, or authenticity of diary notes – those are just some of the aspects of genre and style in which his talent has been exercised until now. This diversity in Kolenič's works corresponds with the complexity of the empirical background of his characters, or with the inner disunity of the lyrical subject. In his works, cruelty and indifference go hand in hand with vulnerability of the individual, manipulation of others with the sense of one's own freedom, (egoistic) love and self-love with (altruistic) sorrow and sympathy with the destiny of others. Kolenič's wide poetic "lineage" ranges from Baudelaire and Rimbaud up to Bukowski. His present poetry, we can say, is characterised by a retro-style with elements of mannerism, often close to lyrical cliché.

The heroes of Kolenič's proses are most frequently emotionally deracinated individuals at the extremes of social acceptability, with complicated relationships toward their surroundings and neighbourhood (mother, lover). Their regressive or self-destructive behaviour, expressing disorders in sensitivity or other deficiencies, can also be interpreted as an implication in the aggression of the outer world or of the incapability of an individual to adapt himself to it in a meaningful manner. The narrative structure of this prose shows the author's instability – its effect at once spontaneous even chaotic, as in novel **To Keep Silent** (Mlčať, 1992), another time composed or calculated, as in novella **One Smile Is Enough** (Jeden úsmev stačí, 1999). The published selections are from the collection of poems **The Graceful Games of the Aristocracy** (Pôvabné hry aristokracie, 1991). Its diction along with the atmosphere reveals not only a trace of Russian and world literary classics, the study of which is connected with the origin of this opus, but also the author's ability to cope with it with a softly ironical style.

Other works: Collections of poems – **Rock and Roll** (1990), **Delights of Anarchy** (Slasti anarchie, 1993), **Little Roots of Invisibility** (Korienky neviditeľnosti, 1994), **Not Sleeping, You Gently Deny** (Nespíš a nežne zapieraš, 1997); a cycle of poems **Or Gothic** (Alebo Gotika) – in the almanac **Circle** (Kruh, 1987), a long poem **They Called Him Bird** (Volali ho Bird) – in the anthology **Aperitif on the Blue Planet** (Aperitív na modrej planéte, 1988); prose works – a collection of short stories **The Breaking of Paradise** (Porušenie raja, 1993), a novella **Like the Smoke from Cigarettes** (Ako cigariet dym, 1996).

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

**IN DIEBUS ILLIS**

Sometimes we pondered nothingness and infinity.  
 We connected thought to thought, gem to gem,  
 Systematically, according to a pre-determined method.  
 Mundus senescit, at every whiff of breeze  
 cigarette smoke shaped  
 inexhaustible harmonic constructions.  
 And then it burst;  
 Some mad woman in slim high heels,  
 In black stockings, her face made-up  
 à la POLYMORPH PERVERS -  
 Invited me for a martini with ice and lemon.  
 Infinity is the prolongation of abbreviations...

from *The Graceful Games of the Aristocracy* (1991)

**A CERTAIN LADY VIRGINIA**

Weighed down by an unnamed mental disease,  
 By a carnal bloody incest, chaste, immaculate,  
 Grey-haired guillotine prostitute.  
 This is, my friend, the reason,  
 Why I no longer attempt to reflect...

from *The Graceful Games of the Aristocracy* (1991)

**PANEM ET CIRCENSES**

"Love!" you shout, "love!"  
 As when you meet an old acquaintance  
 And explain to her in short  
 That your elegant suit with a narrow black tie  
 And perfectly trimmed hair is a mere excuse,  
 That you still think of this and this, and that...  
 Her faint arrogance suddenly knocks you out, when hardly  
 Perceptibly but clearly, unerringly she waves her hand  
 To say that everything is long gone...  
 And the future is unclear!

from *The Graceful Games of the Aristocracy* (1991)

## IGNORANCE AS A FORM

1

No, I shall not be visited any more by those in whose veins  
Indigestible blood circulates, the foaming galaxy...

I'm not one of the chosen...

I'm coming back alone, empty, always beginning there

Where they lost their purpose. (*fixed adj*

*fest; fixed salary - fixes Gehalt; fixity n -*

*die Festigkeit...*)

How powerful they were, how beautiful,

The boots of the finest leather presented to them

By the last of the gods. They used to drink French

Champagne

From the court shoes of ladies, they used to dine with

priests...

How do you look now, my friend?

Your low forehead and your little hoofs,

penis dragging on the floor.

No, one needn't be afraid of you today...

2

With a young miss hardly over twenty,

With a miss of natural courtesy I had aroused

My unconcealed passions by midnight:

"Form is an opportunity, miss, a chance to scream!

To present oneself with every savagery...

To drop ones lids and let out a cynical guffaw,

to be a prolific buck of the revolution..."

The rain was crumbling on children's disturbances

Like a well-bred elegant, her narrow calves

And swelling breast, crackling hair,

Charming clatter of her bracelets...

With a young miss hardly over twenty

I had aroused my unconcealed passions:

"To have time means to make use of each second,

my dear, a masterpiece is born

like a human being - first it's an instinct, attraction,

inevitability. After moments

of physical bluster there comes an act,

action, work... Do you understand me? And finally,

there will be a result...

Dostoyevski claimed that in fact

no work of fiction is completed,



absolute perfection does not exist.  
Talent is a curse..."  
"Kolenič," she whispered, "you're awfully boring..."

from *The Graceful Games of the Aristocracy* (1991)

## HAPPINESS

I have always longed to own a small jail,  
yes, a pleasant cosy space,  
just a few lousy metres would do,  
yes, yes, I'd really like  
my own private jail,  
with the walls scrawled all over, with the graffiti,  
*death and bored*  
and the bog pan without a seat,  
with cold tiles  
worn down by the bare feet of a convict,  
with a never-closing window – so cold.  
Just cold and cold and cold!

Oh, who wouldn't want a splendid stone cell,  
with a cop and his truncheon.  
With a narrow strip of light  
shining through the shutter on the door...

from *The Little Roots of Invisibility* (1994)

## GIVE ME BACK MY PEACE

You know, everything is slightly different.  
I'm not a real poet,  
every one of my lines is just a kiss on your lids.  
I'd like to have a small shabby house  
with one laughable row of green strawberries,  
a faithful dog and the lyrical hat of a lunatic.

It would do for me,  
an odd little cutting from the galaxy.  
I feel sick. I'm sick at heart.  
You'll be cross that I'm drunk again,  
that I'm weak and all... You may be right  
if you don't want to waste time on me.

It was raining and crazy little lizards were jumping  
from walls,  
the windowpanes lured black phantoms of solitude,  
somewhere children were dying,  
somewhere everything was coming to an end.  
The last five cigarettes, hunger, darkness, anxiety,  
a sleeping pill in the coffee cup.

So I'm trying to do the impossible.  
*Give me peace,*  
*give me back my desperate silent peace,*  
*give me back my lost peace!*

from **The Little Roots of Invisibility** (1994)

(translated by Marián Andričik and James Sutherland-Smith)

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# JANA JURÁŇOVÁ

19 February 1957 Senica

Prose writer, dramatist, theatre and literary critic, translator and editor. Her first book was a collection of stories called **Menagerie** (Zverinec, 1993) and until then she had pursued a career as a theatre producer, critic and publicist. She is the co-founder of the feminist magazine *Aspekt* (1993) and is an outstanding representative of feminist thinking and literature in Slovakia. This has been most evident in her subsequent two prose works and also in the stage play **Silver Bowls, Excellent Vessels** (Misky strieborné, nádoby výborne, 1997) with a literary-historical theme (from the Štúr era) which breaks down the traditional frames and heroic schemata.

In her first book Juráňová sets thematically a basic situation of feminine survival in everyday reality and relationships with other people besides their partners. Her narrators are characterised with a healthy proportion of scepticism far from the sentimentality, intellectualism, black-and-white heroines and either “feminine” or “masculine” prose. The urban topography of the stories, Juráňová’s attempt for a realistic view of the world, the modelling of the protagonists as independent individuals who try to break down the existing or threatening abuses of civilisation and of individuals, but also an interior feeling of loneliness and the secretive vulnerability of the female protagonists all indicate that Juráňová’s work is devoted to the world of a modern woman with her self-confidence and her doubts. Her stories (and her later texts) are formally structured in small scenes and short episodes which might indicate her debt to the theatre. We see in them reverse allusions to the traditional genre (fables, fairy tale, ballad and others) and an aim to write a deliberately simple sentence structure. Their psychological and socially-critical dimensions offer the possibility of a future deepening of Juráňová’s themes, attitudes and stylistic methods.

The feminist discourse of two novellas, *Clad in a Net* (Do siete odetá) and *Zombi* which were published together under the title, **Nets** (Siete, 1996) three years later show she has fulfilled the promise of her first collection. The first is derived from the tale of Clever Sheba in *A Thousand and One Nights* but from the point of view of the main female protagonist and within a shift in time – beginning where the tale breaks off which means it lies at the heart of a conflict male and female interests. The second, a gently grotesque novella from which the selected extract is taken, is mercilessly direct, with a permanently present subtext, describing the petty and empty world of a successful man preoccupied with his achievements, but also with an inferiority complex which can be discovered behind the facade of his lifestyle.

Juráňová’s instinct for methodically precise prose methods and her systematic circling of the main theme, in places stifled by the transparency of the author’s opinion, is demonstrated in her latest book. It is aimed mainly at young women readers and at their parents. The main protagonist, Sojka, solves questions of family stereotyping which she experiences during the sensitive time of puberty.

Other works: Prose for young people with a feminist angle, **Just a Babe** (Iba baba, 1999). For the theatre – the improvisation **Theme Mayakovsky** (Téma Majakovský, 1988 as co-author), the monodrama **Salome** (1989) a stage play using literary-historical issues **Silver Bowls, Excellent Vessels** (Misky strieborné, nádoby výborné, published in *Divadlo v medzičase* – June, 1997).

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

**ZOMBI***(extracts)*

Music is playing. The road is suddenly wider. The lights of the grey town are brighter. The world has a wider dimension to it. Zombi feels as if he's in an American film. He drives the car inside the rhythms and tones which flow from the car radio. He drives as if he's in an American film. He lights up a cigarette and feels how he changes, suddenly full of vitality. Identity. His own identity. Swinging in the rhythms of tones still more fantastic, more colourful, Zombi feels great. He observes himself and tries it out ... In the rear view mirror he sees, beside the curve of the road, part of his forehead. The tuft of hair which has remained in the centre of his head. He's going bald. Baldness doesn't suit him. It suits some men. He can't get used to the bald head that is his head. He looks like a miserable, frightened tortoise. When he was young he had long hair. That was truly him - as he looked in his youth - or is it really him - as he looks now - bald? Zombi turns off the radio. He's lost the appetite to be in an American film. The mood has gone. An identity without hair... Zombi doesn't know what to do.

But he'll meet Diana in the evening. Diana gives him the desire and courage to live. When he sees his image in her eager pupils he knows that he's Somebody. Diana admires him. Because Zombi is admirable. Diana listens to the commentary and tells him that it was good, excellent, fabulous. Without him the radio would be useless. He's better than any one else. She agrees with him when Zombi is daydreaming how it will be when once he owns the radio. He'll give everyone the boot and employ just himself... and some other excellent people who will all agree with him. Diana doesn't know anybody so fabulous. Truly Diana hasn't slept with anybody so great. With nobody who speaks in the ether neither with anybody who appears on the screen. Or anybody who might know a minister or some such. Zombi rarely appears anywhere and then with somebody he knows. This is due to his father in whose footsteps he is trying to follow. But he burrows more deeply into the depths of mediocrity. It doesn't matter. Diana has no cause to compare him with his father. Only Zombi compares himself with his father. Diana will admire him whatever happens. She's got power over him, and she wants to use it. For example Diana has said that a bald head is a sign of intelligence and passion. The combination of these two has been scientifically proved to cause hair loss. Diana has no doubts about his intelligence - and despite everything - not even doubts about his ardour.

Zombi gains passion from watching films. The positions, steps, where it is necessary to begin through what continues and so on. Sometimes he regrets that he can't see himself doing that, that he can't film himself at it and then watch himself... Himself not her. He likes to imagine himself doing that.

He likes watching women. He cultivates the beautiful feeling within himself that they're in his power. Their behaviour and feelings are dependent only on him. They react to what he does. He's got power over them here. He's got them. He's got this feeling. Which is

why he likes it so much. He gets sensual pleasure, too. This, too. But it's not the main thing. He satisfies them and with this overcomes himself. His boundaries. His ego. He's got them in the palm of his hand and he feels like God. Sometimes he gets the fearful idea that they might be cheating on him. That they're only pretending. Sometimes he doesn't know how much and what he has indeed brought about and what he hasn't. Other times he thinks he knows exactly. And that everything depends on him and only him.

Diana had a voice full of such promise on the telephone. Zombi will write a commentary, narrate in the studio and then go after her. He'll go after her because she lures him and calls. He likes it that she belongs to another. According to Zombi women will belong to somebody or be lonely. Diana is not lonely. She belongs to somebody. It's exciting. He'd be bored with someone lonely. Such a one would use him as a medicine against loneliness. Diana - she's a different case. Diana can choose. And she chose him. She's unfaithful to the one she belongs to. With Zombi. Zombi is proud of himself for this. It's only incidentally that he's discovered that Diana has got a child. Zombi suddenly felt so responsible... Diana has told him such a bitter story over which Zombi has not dwelt. Diana is here only for a while and he doesn't need to know everything about her. Zombi has still got in reserve here a young, passionate sound technician. And he has just parted from one of the many in whom he had an interest for so long. Now he's got rid of her because he was bored with her. Zombi doesn't understand why it should continue. He played with her for a while. It was easy for him. He'd said to her: I won't deceive you, I'm a swine. And she contradicted him: Oh, you're not a swine. He explained to her that he had to split up with her because he was living with somebody. With another woman. Had been for many years... What about her. It wasn't interesting for him so he started with Diana who has a child and so won't be too demanding. Zombi is fed up. He doesn't know from where these women derive their love for him. Why do they want to save him from himself when he likes himself as he is? In fact Zombi is a good person. He doesn't know how to be angry. He doesn't have the energy to be wicked. He said to her: You're the most amazing, the most beautiful woman that I've ever met. What more could he do for her? He said: You're better than all the others, you're so wonderful that I'm afraid of you. Could he give her a better gift? He honoured her. He told her that he wanted to have a child with her. She wanted to go off with him and so he told her to wait until he'd got all his things in order. Then he didn't call. She called him and he told her that he was a coward that he couldn't cope. She agreed with him. He had been caught out. He washes his hands of it. He hasn't the energy to be good or honest or open or truthful. He could be better, yes, he could be. There is still an opportunity. He can always use it. But now he doesn't want it. He has neither enough time nor enough energy and he can't see anything interesting in it. Why should he be better? And what is it anyway - to be better? If somebody doesn't seem to be good enough she can wash her hands of him. If he's such a - liar, irresponsible and

I don't know what else. He is what he is. Why should he be better? For whom? Sometimes everything is so tiresome!

Sometimes it seems to Zombi that he has gone beyond the limits of his own ego. Nothing is anything to do with him. Idiots are incalculable. He doesn't rule himself out. Sometimes he doesn't know what he's doing. He doesn't identify with what he's done. He's opposed to it, he's sorry about it. But he can't help himself. "I'm a swine, I don't deserve you, I have these days, sometimes I'm aggressive, I'm Jekyll and Hyde, I can't help it, maybe there was a mistake in my upbringing, perhaps they didn't love me enough..." Women try to compensate for all that. Whoever wants to try this out with him he lets, whoever doesn't he lets go. It's all the same to Zombi. Because he knows that these others, that her or her or that one are not all the same. He relies on it. Women are so. Zombi doesn't understand that. Occasionally it gets on his nerves. But sometimes the all-encompassing self-sacrifice of some of them suits him. That's life. Zombi must be helped. He must be saved. So he won't start drinking. This is always a threat. It could always break out. He could end badly...

Zombi gets involved and involved and untangled and untangled. He looks after himself. That's the most important thing. Women also deal with him. It's very important for him.

Zombi feels young. Zombi dresses young. Zombi behaves young. Zombi is so sweetly irresponsible. Zombi is kind. Independent. He likes freedom. Nobody will chain him up. Nobody will order him about.

He likes a full stadium. Concerts. All are one. All are him. Occasionally he's troubled that the crowds are not turned towards him, but to somebody else. Zombi merges. He likes it and doesn't like it.

from *Zombi, Nets* (1996)

(translated by Viera and James Sutherland-Smith)

# VILIAM KLIMÁČEK

14 September 1958 Trenčín

He writes poetry, prose and drama. In the beginning his activities were connected exclusively to alternative theatre-forms, the Bratislava theatre GUnaGU. He co-founded this theatre in 1985 and he still is its main author, director and actor. Despite his medical university education (he graduated in 1983), he abandoned his medical practice as an anaesthetist and from 1992 the theatre became his profession. Klimáček is a “bipolar” author: a man of the theatre and a man of literature.

His first literary appearance was a collection of poems **Up to Your Ears** (Až po uši, 1988) where he already fully displayed all of his characteristic features: playfulness, freedom, experiment, unconventionality and difference. He loves to play with language, to mix genres, to revise and question literary clichés and models. His texts are marked by an overlapping of high and low (from the point of view of both value and the aesthetic). Klimáček’s typical absurd irony is probably the only way to treat the deformed society he sees. Recently there have been more frequent autobiographical moments in his writing – for example the prose **Váňa Krutov** (1999).

Klimáček’s prose **The Virgin in the Underground** (Panic v podzemí, 1997) is, according to the author’s designation, “a subnovel in 16 acts”. He shows the world from a different perspective, fully enjoying irony, parody, cynical detachment and a jokey view of all events. The “subnovel” is a fictitious autobiography (the autobiographical milestones 1956 – 2003 are based on reality but their outcome is fantastic) of a demonic young man Viktor whose uniqueness is caused by his overdeveloped sexuality. (Klimáček as an author often explores the motifs of sexuality.) The whole text is a dramatically twisted myth about the immaculate conception and a new Messiah. It is an unconventional hagiography where virtue and vice have exchanged places. A myth and legend are dethroned and confronted with genres from precisely the opposite ends of the spectrum: with the picaresque novel, the gothic novel, the novel of adventure and the utopian novel.

His other works include: **Binocularity** (Ďalekohľadenie, 1991) – a collection of short comic prose, **Caramel Candies** (Karamelky, 1992) – a collection of poems, **Leg to Leg** (Noha k nohe, 1996) – a book for children, **Mária Sabína** (1997) – plays.

DANA KRŠÁKOVÁ

## THE VIRGIN IN THE UNDERGROUND

(extract)

“Father, I have spilt my semen on the floor countless times,” I contemplate aloud, “I have done the deed, but I haven’t sown.”

“That is a sin, my son,” Panda says, “and how many times haven’t you sown?”

“Three times a day, father.”

“Which hand did you use, my son?”

“Mostly the right one, father. It’s safer.”

“The left is closer to the heart...”

“But then it doesn’t feel right. What should I do?” I repent.

“Take up sport. Take Ondrej Nepela, for example...”

“I hate skiing, father.”

"He's a skater, dummy," Panda cannot contain himself any longer and begins to giggle.

"But it seems that you're a clever boy," he continues, "how would you sort out wooden and iron shavings?"

"With a magnet."

"Well, and what about peas and ash?"

"With pigeons," I can remember the story about that poor abused little thing.

"You deserve a good supper, boy," Panda concludes, "blow on your drinks if they are hot and don't gobble!"

My body is a cage. Ribs are its frontiers. There is a funny creature living inside, he climbs the bones, keeps nagging and sometimes asks questions. I do not know whether he wants to help me or to trouble me.

Is he a bear? A rodent? He must have claws. He likes merciless humour. He changes position inside me.

"Where are you?" I ask carefully.

"Here," he answers and the skin on my left hip arches.

There is something round-shaped and my hip gleams for a moment, as if there were a torch sewn inside.

As a young boy I used to call him "my teddy bear". Back then he was silent. But he has grown up since.

He enjoys making fun of me, well - of himself. He enjoys long debates and we are always hungry when they are over. When I want to tease him, I gobble. He grumbles, when big pieces of meat fall on his head. I pour morello syrup on him and he falls silent. He likes sweet stuff. I began to call him Panda.

"When will I see you?" I ask.

"Never. Well, maybe... but I'm not sure... at the very end."

"At what end?" I play dumb.

"At the end of you."

"When will that be," I sip tea from my cup, "the end of me?"

"It could easily happen right now, if you don't stop drinking hot tea!" he screams, scalded, and twists so fast that my chair begins to shake.

"Does it burn? But you've got fur, haven't you?" I ask innocently.

Right then Panda digs his claws into my liver and a terrible pain throws me down on the linoleum. I manage to stand up by the time my frightened mother comes and then I send her away abruptly.

She has got used to my rude manners, there is nothing else left for her. She has no more strength left to beat me and I am her only connection with the world. I feel as if I were dragging around a long cord with a telephone on the end and with my mother sitting there and biting her nails, waiting for my call.

In order to get my attention, she tells me heartbreaking stories:

"There was a terrible scandal when they painted the portrait of Mariška," she begins.

But I am thinking of Gervaisa and my peacock begins to get rock-hard.

"The painter was handsome, from Budapest, moustaches were in



at the beginning of the century..." she remembers, but Gervaisa has no moustache, although she limps which is exciting.

"The town council paid for a picture of Madonna with gold coins," mother says and I know that gold is the colour of Gervaisa's hair.

"And the child she had with the painter," mother concludes, "that was your grandfather."

"Didn't they take the picture down?" I ask at last.

"It is hanging on the left of the altar, don't you know?"

"I'm not blind, mind your own business," I grab a slice of bread with butter and run away.

It takes just a couple of minutes down the lane and, having read hundreds of issues of *Catholic Weekly*, I finally enter the church for the first time.

There is a dusky light in the nave, a few male heads are praying on a bench, on which there is an enamel plate: Males. There is a section for women quite far away. There is a sponge soaked with Holy Water.

There is nothing to be seen under the Madonna, only eternal light in memory of my great grandmother's drowned body. Too beautiful to be a saint, she slept with a stranger, gave birth to a child and then could not stand it any more.

They drove her to suicide. One night they found her in the goose pond at the edge of the village.

I begin to understand why my mother has not come down for ten years, why she never longs to see her colleagues from whom she borrows a Neckermann dream-book every year and why she thinks that if I take care of everything on behalf of the family, I will not get possessed by depression, our family curse...

"You're a deep thinker," Panda interrupts spitefully, "you're a miner for knowledge!"

I am waiting, holding my breath. The little shaggy thing can stand it no more and I can feel him move a little in my right hip - bang! I hit his hunch. Panda screams, rolling down, he must have fallen into a heel and he will not crawl up before midnight.

This is the way we live: my peacock, Panda and I.

\* \* \*

I take two jars of morello jam from the shelf every morning and give them to the refugees. Some of them accept the jar gratefully and some of them throw it back at me.

My flat is full of jam. Mother writes long letters regularly, calling me back to the house on the hill - and in order to persuade me, she puts as many jars of jam in the parcel as possible.

"Oh, late again," the receptionist chants viciously and immediately begins to tattoo a line on my wrist.

When there are ten of them, I will have to go. It is not easy to find a new job, the first thing they do everywhere is look at your wrist.

"There was a shooting near the railroad," I say while the red-hot wire pricks one little hole after another in my skin, "the Panthers robbed the dairy."

There is not a single cigarette in my pocket, there is nothing to buy off the old beast.

"That's it," she says and dips the point in disinfectant, "come here, young man!!!"

A surgeon has tried to pass unnoticed by the wall.

Our locker room is in the chapel. There used to be a monastery where the hospital is now. I feel a strange trembling each day as I pass by the altar pictures. Madonna watches us when we change. But then she has seen a lot of things in five hundred years.

"One paramedic to number eight, on the bicycle!" the voice of the Chief Nurse roars.

She has got a strong whip and urges people to work. I belong to the dregs of the clinic, well, paramedics are considered to be more than potato-peelers, but anyway. My company consists of former galley-slaves and neglected artists.

Everybody tries to persuade themselves that they are in this hole only for a while, that this is just a way stage on their way to better life, but time flies and all of us spend years and years in monotonous work. We do not leave, but a lot of things leave us.

"Paramedic to number eight!!!"

I hang my belongings on a hook and lift the small parcel up to the vault. Clothes are swinging underneath the darkened frescoes like hanged men.

But I cannot pass by the portrait of the Gothic Madonna painted on wood without stopping. I have stayed here for so long because of her too.

"It was about time," Tram pants and climbs down the seat.

There is a new bruise under his eyes. When he came with the first, he claimed that he had fallen under a tram. The nickname stuck.

"How much?" I climb the bicycle.

"Two megawatts at least," Chief Nurse orders.

I push down on the pedals and the dynamo begins to rattle. I have been working here for ten years. My Clinical period lasts ten years too.

"Guess who it is!" somebody covers my eyes.

I stagger a bit and all the clinic lights flicker.

"Eva," I say.

Her palms are ice-cold. My eyes become cold slowly.

"You're right," she laughs, "how did you know?"

Eva is an ice woman, she puts patients into the bath and pours crushed ice on them, using a cake turner.

Ice women long for love more than others. They have to make love three times a day because otherwise they would die of hypothermia. Chief Nurse has to tolerate their lust if she does not want to lose her best nurses. Their caresses could drive one mad.

The crushed ice has done something to Eva's fingers and there is a sparkling under my shirt on the spot where she is caressing me. Eva wants me right now and she knows that it is not possible. Chief Nurse indicates it to her with the whip.

Then there is Monika. She is the only one who drives a motorbike. Everybody is afraid of her. She is a Panther and she provides

medical care for the members of the gang. I saw covered stretchers late at night often and surgeons were working till morning.

Monika likes bicycle bondage. Each wrist has to be bound separately. She is out of her mind night after night. All paramedics on duty meet in the energy centre.

Monika licks the Chief Nurse's smooth whip with her pointed tongue. Somebody manages to steal it from her office every time. Everybody wants Monika. They are gathered around, it is quite stuffy.

Bü, a sadistic poet, likes whipping her most of all. Bü shouts out new verses in ecstasy with every swollen red stripe, Monika pants, the paramedics laugh and Bü begs.

"For God's sake, write it down, someone! I can't remember a thing!!!"

And indeed, when he puts down the whip, he bangs his head against the dynamo. His verses are lost again.

"Look, dumbo, thiz iz what I call poetry!" the horny Tram shouts, kissing Monika's back.

Bü shrugs and walks away to prepare fresh ice.

from **The Virgin in the Underground** (1997)

(translated by Vladislav Gális)

## JOZEF URBAN

29 November 1964 Košice - 28 April 1999 Detva

Poet, lyricist, publicist, author of children's literature. He entered the literary scene vigorously with his first collection **Small Furious Robinson** (Malý zúrivý Robinson, 1985) in which he expressed the sense of life of the youngest generation of the late Eighties. With his sophisticated technique (marked metaphors, excellently handled rhymed verse), unbound language and style (using colloquial urban language, slang and idioms), and non-conformist style, he subverted officially established poetic schemes and ideas of the time.

Urban thematised his antipathy to ossification, dullness and the petty-bourgeois mentality, as well as the inclination of young people to the problems of their lives (such as the question of identity or theme of love). As positive outcome to social decline an independent, bohemian way of life is presented which we can also see in his later collections. However, the initial youthful dynamism of the lyrical hero is replaced by scepticism, sometimes even an unwillingness to find one's way in the maze of values and human motivations. In spite of the fact that from the beginning of his career his poetry spoke almost for a whole generation, Urban's resistance gesture never went beyond the limits of official acceptance. Later, in the Nineties, his work saw a weakening in its outer conditional character and inner authenticity when the poet's formal mannerisms outweighed the communicated content.

All collections of this author prove that his strength lies in his ability to award the observed details of everyday life the validity of metaphor, to search for poetic solutions to old (often technical) challenges, to evade stock phrases, lyrical clichés or cheap rhymes, and to find new sources of inspiration in down-to-earth reality. A thorough reading of modern European poetry, accessible at that time, but especially of Nezval's poetism bore fruit. From the point of view of the demands of the genre, Urban's sonnet sequences (*The Haunted Tower of Babel; No More No Less...; Golden Times...*) rank among the best works in Slovak literature of recent decades. However, while the thematic side of his poetry is really inventive and inspired, in its overall perspective it gradually loses its surprising character and becomes a new (life as well as poetic) simplifying convention. The noticeable influence of the American Beat poets and their attitudes upon his work loses its novelty - especially after the revolution in *November 1989*.

Jozef Urban was among the few authors whose poetry became popular during their lives. He contributed to this with his artistry in writing lyrics to popular songs for which he had excellent skills from the very beginning.

Other works: Poetry collections - **Deaf-and-Dumb Music** (Hluchonemá hudba, 1989), **The Book of the Half-Dead** (Kniha polomŕtvych, 1992) and **Snowdrops & Bibles** (Snežienky & biblie, 1996); the Sonnet sequence **The Haunted Tower of Babel** (Strašenie vo veži - in the almanac **Circle**, Kruh 1987). Books of pop lyrics: **A Shot from the Hoe** (Výstrel z motyky, 1990 - together with two other authors), **The Water That Keeps Me Afloat** (Voda, čo ma drží nad vodou, 2000). Popular and instructive book **The Sorrows of a Young Poet. Chapters on Poems** (Utrpenie mladého poeta. Kapitoly o básničkách, 1999); a book for children **Adventures of Danka the Crow** (Dobrodružstvá vranky Danky, 1995).

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

**GAUGUINIAD**

and these years that remain till tomorrow  
 and these nuns with red crosses and the sign  
 THE SALVATION ARMY  
 and these books I will write instead of you  
 and you instead of me  
 weeks go by at cow's pace and graze  
 on me my hair the inorganic  
 is apparent and welcome  
 but still  
 no one has ever built a bridge  
 worth jumping from indeed we  
 are none  
 the worse like memorials  
 we, too, have in us our mother's blood and pain  
 what am I doing here?  
 searching a bed for you into an empty flat?  
 scattering matches and chasing a bubble-gum  
 Manon from some hole?  
 sleeping with her or listening to the roar of solid  
 beasts while going off one's head?  
 throwing her out, and just few things are as ugly  
 as her?  
 would it be super if we put a question mark after everything?  
 the postman is a machine but he carries cards from nirvana  
 from Nerval who hanged himself  
 and from Mohammed who thought he was  
 the beacon of the universal ambulance  
 that's why he winked with his tongue  
 while it was someone else who got a siren  
 in the neck  
 sometimes Fredo sends a card too  
 broken-hearted with darkness and the babble of grass down  
 there  
 like in women  
 I perceive paradoxes of dampness and patterns of optimal  
 glands  
 the addled light of yolks blinks in orange  
 I have suffered from barbarous chatter about love  
 once more the struggle once more beer on tap and in the lift  
 someone has scribbled  
 AIDS IS JUST  
 intellectual bones crack in the railings  
 it's hellishly nice hot space physical temporal  
 one would go nuts  
 from this little movement of the incredible

history sings GLORIA in an eunuch voice  
 wounds crackle in their seams  
 hopelessly overflow their banks  
 are those lakes of sense which you'll never cease  
 to doubt  
 you, the new model of a whipping boy  
 me, the new model of a whipping boy  
 her, the new model of a whipping boy  
 her, who has a title in empty eggshells  
 clock hands interlock like a man and a woman  
 one is of no use  
 but two are in contradiction forever  
 modestly creating time  
 making love only at noon and midnight

I lay down on her and everything lasts just a second  
 then we will part drink something  
 ring somewhere weep ourselves out to someone break up  
 sometimes and I will understand that senses are my  
 cancer triumphing  
 and incurably sad

there's an impudence of adverts in this life  
 OIL AFTER BATH!  
 JELLY AFTER SHAVING!  
 LOTION AFTER DEATH!  
 but there's still something that has sense because  
 ugly girls give birth to children too  
 because also ours  
 because also u g l y

we debate and with disgust inherit  
 an ivy-like character of kitsch and recognition  
 that only the air force camouflages wings  
 that you won't jump headfirst from the rainbow  
 that behind the delta of tongues there is a sea

in the cold slippers of passage-ways  
 this city is wading through the aggressive air  
 aggressive flesh aggressive colour  
 of the dress

who are we?  
 who are we destroying?  
 who is destroying us?

everywhere there are so many lives I will live instead of you  
 you instead of me  
 and these years that remain  
 till tomorrow...

from **Deaf-and-Dumb Music** (1989)

## WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE

a publisher knocks saying he wants a poem of love and  
 death  
 and I tell him to write it out from the newspapers  
 the only thing that fascinates me is the death  
 of John Berryman  
 he broke on the ice of Mississippi like a bag of banknotes  
 what would you expect from such an old river  
 and from such an old Berryman  
 I pay with pieces of this poet for cheese spaghetti and TV  
 I have as much money as he had days  
 and then we shall go sliding my darling

where did we get that mysterious female eagerness:  
 continually reaching for majesty  
 and after it throws up its mysteries to wonder  
 why it hides and disappears in desolate thicket  
 like love and death and other misunderstandings

from **The Book of the Half-Dead** (1992)

## A MACHINE FROM THE FIRM THAT HAS LONG GONE BANKRUPT

I have no ambitions at all to get to substance,  
 I have no remarks on the golden age, I don't want  
 to shock an ape as did Peter Gabriel. I'm just picking  
 the débris of a fixed point so that I can  
 bury it decently. Next to those who wanted to  
 lean on it. And in the wreaths some spiteful justice  
 will glitter.

They say that what surrounds me did never originate  
 and will never cease to exist. If someone sang somewhere  
 about the depth of dumb loves, forget it. This machine  
 will never be repaired, the firm crashed, the shareholders  
 turned to coal. Billions of their blue, valueless

shares give the sea the very tint which  
doesn't interest me.

It was a mysterious story. If you think apart from wars  
and copulations little has changed. With such a message,  
it's hard to enter a woman – some parts of the body have  
the status of foreigners and suddenly you feel indifferent  
to whether they return. In that story, we could put a little  
trust  
only in beauty.

But one night when the light broke the curse  
of the unexplored depths of dumb loves, beauty  
started to behave like an enemy.

from *The Book of the Half-Dead* (1992)

## A POSTCARD TO MILOŠ H.

I'm not so dead as to stay here  
I'm not so longer alive as to leave

when I recall Miloš H. whom Christ  
inspired so deeply that the police nabbed them both  
and when I recall Miloš' complaint  
that there is no one to wash his feet  
and when I recall how the screw said to Miloš H.  
"so we'll cut them off"  
and when I recall that they finally left him his feet  
only made a Chinese lantern from his head  
and when I recall that Miloš H. pissed on the eternal fire  
but they proved to him nothing because the fire burned on  
and when I recall that Christ divided bread at the customs  
shed  
in Petržalka while I was ripping the blouse off some babe  
and when I recall how long ago it was what is yet to come  
and when I recall that Miloš H. stopped in Paris  
Christ in Kurdistan and me there where they don't give  
a damn about

almost anything  
anyway when I recall all this I find out  
that I'm not so dead as to stay here  
and I'm not so longer alive as to leave

from *The Book of the Half-Dead* (1992)



**INSPIRE**

I stopped listening to music while writing.  
 I'll deny myself references to masters. Hardly anyone knows  
 them.

No strategies. And I've grown out of shouting  
 at a woman critic with a soul of bakelite, who in her way  
 hates me

clean and tenderly:  
 GESTAPO!

Awareness of futility is beautiful. As when it rains and dries  
 up.

And that fragrant and singularly soft air between it...  
 I don't know what it smells of but I would say  
 fig tree.

from **Snowdrops and Bibles** (1996)

(translated by Marián Andričík and James Sutherland-Smith)

# BALLA

8 May 1967 *Nové Zámky*

Vladimír Balla, publishing under his surname Balla, belongs to the youngest generation of Slovak writers. His first short-stories appeared in 1992 in magazines, followed, in 1996, by his first book *Leptokaria*. The book's fourteen (sixteen in the 2000 edition) pieces of fiction convey a sense of deeply felt existential anxiety and fear of living in a world that is full of absurdity and outside enemies. His major topics were the in/ability to communicate and loneliness. The latter was furthermore understood as providing the only space for authenticity as even the oneness inherent in an act of love is for him a mere "twosome loneliness" (*Die Zweisamkeit*). His second volume of fiction *Outsideria* (1997) also conveys a sense of essential isolation of the individual and problems of the authorial ego. His stories which explicitly refuse to tell stories are reduced to descriptions of inner states of the subject while writing is presented as a form of salvation.

Balla as a narrator does have a taste for telling a story, albeit a dramatically diminished one. He often uses his own literary experience and philosophical training - his writing is quite intertextual. His references span from ancient Greek through classical German philosophy to postmodern philosophy, from Dostoevsky through Handke to his peer and friend, the poet Peter Macsovszky. He uses sudden changes in narration and shifts between the literary and the non-literary. His texts switch between the serious, the ridiculous and the absurd, between philosophical reflections and subtle poetry.

Balla's short-story *The End of Summer. De-rat-ification* has won the literary competition *Poviedka '97* (Short-Story '97). Even in this piece he clings to his poetics of anxiety and of the absurd.

DANA KRŠÁKOVÁ

## THE END OF SUMMER. DE-RAT-IFICATION

(extract)

Ending with an end, beginning with a beginning, the instructions were given, so at the beginning the father's strange aviary, then building walls along both sides of a long garden. At the beginning a recollection of the boy's childhood, his early childhood, a recollection of the childhood of the father's boy: in childhood the boy had no rat yet in his head, just a brain, a child's brain, and therefore cruel (no primordial goodness, no fundamental transparency nor unmanipulated openness) and "one track" sort of brain, one that was able to produce - extract - make - fury out of anything.

By the way, perhaps: what is unpleasant? To observe a mind and understand what is going on in it? To understand the boy with a rat instead of a brain? A pair of glaring eyes looks through a pair of pale, extinguished eyes, a pair of eyes through another pair of eyes? We begin to feel sentimental. (Sentiment as a mere projection of frustrations... Existential fear comes with being imperfect - with the possibility of threat. Which, too, is endless.)

The boy had a scaled mobile tail protruding out of his right ear,

but that wasn't the beginning – and still not the end, after all, the tail ran back inside after a while, and, shortly after, there was a following, just as at the beginning.

Small things – nothing but small things left to focus on – this focusing, this orientation perhaps still provides possibilities – it won't help, but is worth trying – so we slide our finger into the match box and crush the tiny, fragile pieces of wood, with heads of red, black, green – what cheerfulness in colours! Focusing on small things: a tall woman pushing a pram left the Academy of Education. The pram's contents gave a beastly yell. That was long ago. The child is a boy now with a rat inside his skull. The father reproaches his son with having hidden one of his rodents in his head and let it eat up his brain in order to smuggle the animal out of his father's aviary. The rat ate its way through the brain, cutting across it with its body, settling inside the skull among the rest of the grey matter, its tail running out through the boy's ear, hanging down by one of his sideburns.

To have a good rummage about in the brain, eat its way through, cut across it with its body! To wallow with its body in the rest of the grey matter. To live inside the skull, to eat through it, in the warmth of the skull.

“You think I don't know anything beautiful, noble, kind and pleasing? I don't like that rodent in my skull either.”

He will go mad! If he's allowed to – he will go mad! There are so very few moments when, in the course of his days, he isn't thinking about a beloved woman. And the rat masticates rather slowly, never minding the boy's pain caused by the remains of his miserable brain: the remains of his miserable ego? Catharsis comes in sleep. Those who sleep are in love, someone said, so he sleeps, taking advantage of it.

He took a solid thirteen hours of sleep. The boy woke up, got out of bed: then breakfast and a browse through a book by Mircea Eliade... He struggled for half an hour with it. Then... then the feeling of exhaustion spread all over his body, even where the mind is supposed to be. Half-hallucinating, but the hallucinations are boring, grey, and somewhat vague. Thereafter sleep, heavy and “dense” as if following a hard day's work. And this is repeated again and again, without end. Remark: he feels he is bidding farewell to his beloved through his weary ideas: for he is barely there and she has been left alone in the relationship.

“I think to be able to mean as little to my environment as I do is a colossal achievement.”

The boy is inconsistent, there is always someone within himself, some creature unlike the one that was inside him a while ago. We're not talking about anal intercourse, we're talking about creatures deep down inside, in the boundless worlds of the “I”, in the work of a slave that will reinvent himself only when he would like to.

The boy touches the beloved woman despite her protests, despite her jitters: even at the cost of a small coin he wants to take a glimpse inside her body and so to kill, once and forever, his desire for the surface of the body and its shapes... or, for that matter, to intensify

his desire. If the woman then was walking down the street, down the sunny side of the street, he would join the pariah dogs eagerly scenting the woman's obvious lust, he would sneak in among the wild cats, sweating human sweat and trying to guess her moistening secret spots, the gateways to the horrible bloody organs inside ("Sex is a bad psychic idea, born out of the spirit of decay..." - A. Artaud).

"No, stop it. This isn't going to work."

"Why?"

"Because you seem to be observing me. You are observing me in this. Analyzing me."

"I can just see you. I can't do it with eyes shut."

She was sitting on the table. She embraced her thighs and leaned her face against her knee. Why, am I feverish?, the boys says to himself. Sweat broke out on his forehead, he was swimming in sweat.

Two girls were walking on a sand-strewn pavement, from the garden fence towards the aviary. (It would be nice to elaborate further on these two characters, to have them walk longer so they can talk to each other, and have the text "anchored", "charged" with something more human and pleasant, care-free and womanly. The action would proceed, and they would depict the character of the father, a caring and skillful craftsman as fathers tend to be, so we wouldn't be left with a single deranged rat-keeper - it would be nice perhaps to find out that he owns a private lab where he's involved in some medical experiments. All this could be figured out by the reader in the dialogue between the two girls, but, then: who are those girls? How did they get into the garden? How come they know so much about the character of the father? Couldn't they be sleeping with him? Couldn't they be with his rats, too, after all? or with his son - unless, of course, father and son are one and the same person? We'll delete that last question. We'll then delete everything in the brackets. We'll think about it once more and then delete the whole text: afterwards: "We have bare hands!")

"Did you hear? His son used to sleep with his own mother."

He used to sleep with his own mother and is now his own son. Therefore he will only hurt *himself*, if he steals his father's rat and accommodates it in his skull, feeding it his brain, feeding it himself.

About the boy's shame: he is ashamed because he isn't able to bend down to the weeds and grab them at their roots. He lacks the instinct to bend down to the weeds, and is unaware of the meaning of this activity - although he can tell the weeds are indeed in the way - about this he needs no explanation, what needs to be explained is why he should bend down. He is ashamed of this unreadiness to perform an act that might reveal something unwholesome inside him working flawlessly in all its perversity and baseness.

"Are you really tired? A couple of slow moves and you can't go on?"

"I just wonder that I've actually moved in the first place. I'm sorry."

The rat is relentless. He is always eating, always feeding himself. The hairs around his mouth are glued together by the boy's brain... In the darkness of the skull. The tail is tickling the boy's ear.

“Get off me. Come on. You are crushing my breasts. Come on, move yourself. It doesn’t make any sense anyway.”

“...”

“You can’t go on again? You »can’t« again? I guess you’re only business is flipping pages of those idiotic books and booze.”

“I can’t even keep flipping those pages – as you call it. And beer makes my whole body burn. Plus it makes my intestines sound funny.”

“Look. There’s something hanging out of your ear!”

“How am I supposed to see it? Where’s the mirror?”

“In the hall.”

He can see himself and he can see the tail, sticking out of his ear and almost touching his shoulder. That is my father’s rat, he said to the beloved woman. I torture everyone, he added, father and you, because when I open you I can never finish you, he concluded.

Everyone will wipe his own tears away alone.

The boy is sinking down his tiny body and that body is filling up the cracks on the staircase where the boy is seated, staring through the railings at a half-empty aviary. Rubber coverings, ragged and awkwardly nailed to the aviary’s walls are blowing in the wind. What the boy hoped would be an endless summer was nearing an end.

He is by now used to the sort of weariness that grows ever stronger with rest. And he rests a lot: he thinks it helps.

“When I’m with you or when I think about you I feel lonely...”

“Go away, then. Forget me.”

“I don’t know how to put this. I think, if I went away... if I didn’t even think about you...”

“Yes?”

“I would be alone. And you too, I guess.”

“I am always alone.”

“Even when you are with me?”

“Even then.”

“And when I leave?”

“Then I am silent. Can you hear it?”

“When I leave?”

“I solve it.”

“I don’t know how to express myself.”

“You are always dreaming about meaning. But if you keep searching for it like this, you won’t find it.” (“There is no hope with a meaning. Every man should be warned against having his dreams come true. Rather, he should try to understand the inherent infatuation of cherishing hopes. If he understands that he may cherish a hope...” – Robert Schneider: *Schlafes Bruder*.)

To kill God? Or: God is dead? How ridiculous. What sort of God? At the same time: how terrible – what are we for, if not to try our best to kill God and to get the work done? But: others have done it for us long ago – leaving us without a target to strike.

The boy’s hatred – that is a form of religion: religion is an expression of hatred towards the natural; losers usually convey their hate through religion, yet this cult, this comic weapon of the losers aga-

inst a victorious reality (?) tends to be concluded by death - absolute, eternal defeat.

We emphasize the obvious: no zigzagging. The "reasonable" use of metaphors. No behind the scenes manipulation or theatre. A street here or there, a cheap beer somewhere, wax glasses. A bedside and a night somewhere: let us chiefly hold on to the creased blanket and the cold floor - the sleep in jeans and a T-shirt, the neck entangled in chain pendants: no matter how new, on the boy they always look used, damaged, "untidy" and tasteless, out of place as a decoration - disgusting and shameful. They hurt the observers and their bearer alike. So: vulnerability, weakness, weariness. An indeterminate smell is continuously present, continuously renewed - to make sure it doesn't die away, in case it were to evaporate.

After the boy cut off his penis leaving his ovaries intact he felt an erection of absence at the sight of the beloved woman. And, during the moments of excitement, the beloved woman's "lovehole" was filled with absence, yet, obviously, only until the woman chucked him over, which happened shortly after the amputation, at the time of his most severe headaches caused by the bites of the brain-hungry rat. The previous sentences were later deleted by the author.

from **Short-Story '97** (1998)

(translated by Ľuben Urbánek)

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## PETER MACSOVSZKY

4 November 1966 Nové Zámky

Poet, critic, journalist, translator of English and Hungarian texts. He attracted critical interest right from his debut **Fear of Utopia** (Strach z utópie, 1994) for his principally different concept of poetry, previously unknown in the Slovak context. Macsovszky is a characteristic representative of the Nineties when literature redefined genre criteria, introducing new poetic procedures and artistic concepts. In the course of five years he has published 8 poetry collections, interestingly, one under the pseudonym Petra Malúchová - **Twilight of Chastity** (Súmrak cudnosti, 1996) and one in Hungarian - **Álbonctan**, 1998. He is a co-author of the team poetic project **Generator X: Nebula** (Generátor X, Hmlovina, 1999).

Macsovszky's poetry is an experiment at the frontiers of genres, his intellectual background is evident in both the content and form of his texts, and makes programmatic use of all postmodern literary procedures including mass-production of "textual products", linguistic sterility, creation of self-referential notional simulacra. The ever-present threat of inner reversibility and semantic collapse of the simulacra not only leaves uncertainty for the reader, but also deconstructs the institution of author. Text becomes a subject of linguistic, stylistic, style-formative, genre, and intermedial manipulations and thus complies with the author's statement: "*peter macsovszky as a metaphor*" (**Twilight Speech**, Súmračná reč, 1999).

As a result, the traditional question of poetic originality of style becomes an irrelevant issue.

On a different plane, however, the textual and speech permutations refer to the life situation of Peter Macsovszky as a person, testify his potential for communication and consequent "despair of search". Abused as a tool of manipulation *ad infinitum*, language confines individuals and human society in a trap of words, none of which means anything and each of them can mean everything. This impossibility of defining the world, apparently, subsuming certainty of gender and the linguistic sources is the origin of the author's inspirations, too. The Babel-like failure of inter-linguistic communication grows into an awareness of the total failure of understanding via human speech. This leads to the author's oscillation between absolute emptiness of meaning and absolute concentration on the spoken subject matter.

Obviously, it is only up to each and every reader to decide to what extent they find the indiscriminate "inclusiveness" and, in fact, aggressive nature of this cross-discourse poetry attractive or painful.

Other works: Poetry collections - **Ambit** (Ambit, 1995), **Amnesia** (Amnézia, 1995 - bibliophilia), **Trial Autopsy** (Cvičná pitva, 1997), **Sangaku** (Sangaku, 1998).

STANISLAVA CHROBÁKOVÁ

### THIS IS THE REAL THING

This is a structured speech of poetic expression.

It denotes a level of textual bondage,  
structuring of text in the guise of form.

It relates to form rather than content.

Brevity is its main merit.

This is a basic unit of  
poetic rhythm, usually one verse.  
Characterised by a sound structure.

So far what has been said fully  
relates also to this arrangement  
of basic units of poetic rhythm  
using a common rhyme scheme  
and applying  
an equal metrical scheme.

The couplet is the smallest stanza.

And if the textual scheme perpetually changes,  
not being subject to regularity,  
it concerns content rather than form.

from **Fear of Utopia** (1994)

## **NAME AND MOTION**

move the body,  
yourself...  
thus the space  
around you may breathe  
in you  
and in itself.

what do you know of him:  
ask yourself  
in the second person...

write of what  
in you knows  
of itself in motion:  
in the third person.

with question, with person  
give number,  
sequence...  
figure,  
so it may breathe.

by being in persons  
and by them,  
continually



deceived,  
you discover:

that, which you know  
really is  
and in you only has  
a moveable name.

move it  
and you'll name  
static  
illusions.

from **Ambit**

### THE BRIDGE

the words of this poem  
cannot survive in isolation.  
they are scared: of the fear  
of the moveable borders  
of emptiness...

the words of this poem  
need companions,  
even though sometimes  
vicious and unreliable...

the words of this poem  
need the other words  
of this poem  
to create a chain:  
a chain bridge  
over which they could  
stroll and shed  
obsolete sounds  
and withered  
disabled meanings

with which they've never  
coincided  
and never fashioned  
any bonds.

from **Ambit** (1995)

## STERILE SUICIDAL

after sterilisation,  
my poetic language  
slipped  
into slimy waters

of demonstrative,  
possessive  
and indefinite  
pronouns.

it is held above the Water  
only by the limbs  
of auxiliary verbs

out of which  
the auxiliary verb  
to be

in the present tense  
and third person  
Is

the most depressing,  
tedious,  
and dead.

from **Ambit** (1995)

(translated by Martin Solotruk)



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## A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

In building the anthology, **One Hundred Years of Slovak Literature**, we would like to offer the foreign reader the fullest information on individual writers. Certainly there is also the opportunity

to discover the work of other authors translated into English. It has to be said that the information, alas, is not complete. There is no organisation in Slovakia with a complete database of the necessary bibliographical information which is why we have used the *recherche* information of three institutions: The Department of Library Information Service in the Slovak National Library of Matica Slovenská, The University Library and the Information-Analysis Section of the Literary Information Centre.

With regard to completing the dates of publication we haven't succeeded even with the book publications (with the some the name of the translator was missing, elsewhere the number of pages in the publication, in one case the contents of the anthology.) We became gave up over magazine publication where the situation is even more complicated.

We have divided the bibliography into two parts: a) Individual Publications of Authors b) Anthologies. Both are organised alphabetically and alphabetical order is observed with authors in individual anthologies. The name of the author in the present publication, *One Hundred Years of Slovak Literature* is emphasised in semi-bold type. In cases where the English title is a translation of an original title of a collection of poems, a novel, novella, a selection of short prose it is presented after the English title in parentheses (in standard type.) If an editor or translator decided on a new title there is only the English title in semi-bold.

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ



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## Note on This Edition

The present anthology, *One Hundred Years of Slovak Literature*, is conceived as a valuable selection of national literary texts, conditioned nevertheless by limitations of space (for this reason we could not include extracts from dramatic texts) and the aesthetic preferences of the selection panel. The selection spreads like a funnel towards the present. The classical artistic values of the first half of the twentieth century are gradually drawn into a living literary process which we believe will resonate outside the confines of Slovakia.

Each extract from a writer is accompanied by an informative guide. This contains basic biographical data (date of birth and possibly death) and from the rest only that which pertains directly to the author's work. If a pseudonym was used by a writer in publication his or her actual name is present in the first line and, depending on significance, the other characteristics of the writer's actions together with his or her place in the literary context of his or her era. In the guide only the most important works are described and the last paragraph is a comment on a selected extract or the individual features of the poetics of a certain poet. The bibliography is obviously a selected one which does not include all works or even the titles of all works mentioned in the text of the guide. In parentheses after the English or Slovenian is the original Slovak together with the year of publication. The titles of the works are printed in semi-bold type, individual poems, stories or novellas in italics. At the end of an extract from a poetry collection or collection of stories or novellas the title or the original work is printed.

In the text of the guides certain concepts, which are specifically Slovak, are printed in italics. This includes national institutions (for example, *Matica slovenská*) or magazines (*Slovenské pohľady*, *Romboid*) possibly historical dates and eras (*Február 48* - the year of the Communist take-over, *normalizácia* - the era of occupation by the forces of the Warsaw Pact from 1968 onwards).

JELENA PAŠTÉKOVÁ





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