

# Still there?

Nine  
Contemporary  
Slovenian  
Authors

Translated from the Slovenian  
by **Jasmin B. Frelih**



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- 5 \_\_\_\_\_ Blaž Božič  
***splinter & gas***  
***beyoğlu harvesting the remains***  
***the weight of the frost will be lifted by***  
***those who refrained from desecration***
- 13 \_\_\_\_\_ Ajda Bračič  
***There is Nobody that Looks Like You***
- 21 \_\_\_\_\_ Ivana Djilas  
***(She is) Brave***  
***How to Raise Feminist Sons***
- 31 \_\_\_\_\_ Nina Dragičević  
***it was late at night***  
***and so of course I know everything***
- 39 \_\_\_\_\_ Špela Frlic  
***Twinkle Hill***
- 51 \_\_\_\_\_ Dijana Matković  
***Why I Don't Write***
- 61 \_\_\_\_\_ Pino Pograjc  
***proverb IV.***  
***thirst V.***  
***ancient fear scratches I.***  
***brotherhood***  
***koseze, slovenia***  
***pančevo, serbia II.***
- 71 \_\_\_\_\_ Andrej Predin  
***Arlan Under the Carpet***
- 83 \_\_\_\_\_ Pia Prezelj  
***Heavy Water***
- 95 \_\_\_\_\_ *About the translator*
- 96 \_\_\_\_\_ *Funding opportunities*  
*for foreign publishers*

BLAŽ  
BOŽIČ

*splinter & gas*

*mleček,  
žbunje:  
grobovi  
v njem,*

Center za  
slovensko  
književnost,  
2022

another morning was about to wash  
the world's conscience  
the splintered blindness forested the silence  
on weak knees, like:  
*against* and in *your face* murmured

and with all that's gentle, elsewhere for us  
remaining numb  
at times still whispering ajar  
this and that to remind us, –

another morning: to overcome us once  
whenever one of ours returns,  
given to us  
to rip apart wild heritage,  
ossified as a lesson, as doom  
in front of *texas*, in front of *trade school* –  
and all the pliancy of years we endured:

a splinter blinds the morning,  
someone announces their  
return from abroad

on the fat ruins of stairs there remains  
the undergrowth as the mark of the place  
where in the warmth of the year 2005  
we huffed gas

you said you would withdraw  
become nothing but a

scribe: of those living abroad,  
of all the emergency exits, and  
of us: fragile bookmarks

unreadable on the weak margins of sky,  
displaced to the evening edges of the path –

like an irksome promise, uttered in the wind

or in the violence of rain and  
the scaffolding of tears

or in the carrion of this time  
where you can barely master what's to come

and want the furrows of rain to be the only thing that falls:  
on the petals of sky, as you call  
these fallen birds  
you trample & deny  
because you love them and  
then you overcome: us, refugees,

stripped bare, no less than the city

(2021–2022)

## *beyoğlu harvesting the remains*

if you were washed in the blood of this love  
you would know that attentiveness is always an ambush  
and that difficult choices are just an excuse

if you could read the winter manuscripts  
of endless frosted fields  
and reap the bare memories from them  
to rewrite them back into spring  
into the raw suns of your memory  
and if you could understand your inability  
to persevere in the open howling of god's bullets,

you would overcome the distance  
alone against all  
you would crawl  
with your last strength  
from invisible hells  
back to the living

accept payment on the spot  
and at the junction  
of today's dusk and dawn  
made sure the work was done  
beat back stage fright before the manuscripts of night  
that burn on the desolate plains of your heart

I know, in these moments you could promise anything

even if it was forced upon you in a really fucked up way

in exchange for the *ruddy dawn* you once nailed down  
to your withered, wilted body,  
through your heavenly fat –

washed in the blood of this love you would anchor in an infinite sea  
of guilt, among empty casings, considerate and understanding also  
of the seagull's supplies you are holding hostage, not knowing  
what the final tally will be

if you knew what it meant to forbid someone to gaze at the sky  
or at the sea, at all these nests of last resort

and if you knew how to wash the fat of god off the dunes, off  
the coasts drawn by your withered, wilted body  
your heavenly fat

you would also say something about expectation  
about the glimmer of a hundred skins and the snow of flower petals,  
about the gust of centuries,  
when the dark roses of the act decline:

when someone tries to show you the path  
you will dream of beyoğlu and the early  
spring manufactured there

and when the blood of this love washes you  
you will know that the situation is serious  
and there really is not enough time

(2020–2022)

## ***the weight of the frost will be lifted by those who refrained from desecration***

even for me there must be autumn somewhere  
some time, embanked in the ending  
so I can watch my final rains  
as a witness and a scribe  
never as a lover

in exchange for the infinite growth  
of adverbs from my body  
and new litters of winters growing old:

there I am shaking the ground, a mouse is born,  
the castling on the ridge of the dark winter to come –

in exchange for all the compassions, flattened into allegories,  
persistently losing blood –  
order & memory & my yearning, escaping from my entrails  
into vulnerable air

it was not necessarily a story  
not some of that meagre nakedness  
for which it is said  
that it gaped at the beginning of everything

it is not harder to distinguish now, in the hours demanded by the plea,  
in the threat of anaemic settlements –  
than in the spaces I once used to  
try to call home, emboldened and cunning  
and calmed, as if there was no hope for something

that would remain of me,  
to move into a kind of higher order?

& it is true,  
autumn must come  
& I will have to leave here once –  
irrevocably, ultimately,  
everything will be unrecognisable then within me  
the confused lights of my eyes  
searching for loved faces in vain  
not recognising the years in the mirrored remains

so what name should I give them, all these distant shores,  
that you call by names  
I no longer remember?

a frost will sit on the world for a few hours,  
demand its harvest –  
me and you and all the rest, to the letter, to the last  
scrap of memory  
and there will be just some cheerful plains left  
where you cannot distinguish between spring and death,

only faint indications:

were we a burden to the earth  
a dream of posterity

or the palms of sky:

or just immobile tongues of water locked in ice  
or just breathless  
or just

(2020-2022)

## Blaž Božič,

born in Ljubljana in 1991, is a poet, musician, classical philologist, and translator. He is currently a doctoral student of Classical Philology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, where he is preparing a dissertation on the final epic of antiquity, *Dionysiaca*, by Nonnus of Panopolis. Božič has published a chapbook *Grč* (KUD Kentaver, 2011) and three collections of poetry, *Potem smo si vranice odprli na nežno valujoči livadi* (KUD France Prešeren, 2013), *K območnim poročilom* (Center za slovensko književnost, 2016), and the most recent one, ***spurge, underbrush: the graves within*** (*mleček, žbunje: grobovi v njem*, Center za slovensko književnost, 2022). As a translator, he has translated literary works from ancient Greek, Hungarian, German, Albanian, and Ottoman Turkish. As the guitarist of the group *nevem nevem* and the founder of the experimental breakcore-glitchcore-noise project *SsmKOSK*, he is also committed to the fields of music and sound.

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AJDA  
BRAČIČ

## *There is Nobody that Looks Like You*

*Leteći ljudi,*

Literatura,  
2022

You said this once to flatter me, as lovers say in movies. I knew even then you were mistaken. Everyone looks like someone else, and everyone has someone who looks like them. It is even said we all have at least one double in the world, and I am certain of this: having already met three.

The first was Majda, a tall woman who had been coming over to till the corn. A part of the land by the house where I lived as a child belonged to her – the house stood on a level slope, with the field below it. Throughout the year she often came with a tractor and a border collie dog named Stella. While Majda worked, Stella sat next to her in the cabin or lay in wait beside the field for the voles and field mice.

Majda was about thirty years older than me, but it was clear she was my double. Our faces were the same, only her features were a bit more pronounced than mine. She had dimpled cheeks, like I do, and once she let me touch first hers and then my own. From the slope I watched her plough the ground, leaving long furrows behind. At the end, where the field slipped into the muddy plain, her tractor made an elegant half circle turn and I learned a new term: field margin. When the work on the field was done, she usually paid a visit to the house. We sat outside on the bench under the trellis, with dewy glasses of iced tea before us. Swarms of tiny midges rose above the creek and thickened into translucent clouds. My parents talked to Majda and I was allowed to play with Stella.

I do not know if Majda was aware that she was my double. Or was I hers? I was sure of it then; that she understood there was a special bond between us.

She smoked a pipe – imagine! When it was especially hot, she stood in the shade by the house and spat bits of coarsely ground tobacco on the rubble. In a stretched-out shirt with a straw hat on her head she looked like a vagabond or a good witch from a fairy tale. I peeked at her from the side, from under my brows, the way children look at things they like or are tempted by. She beckoned me to come.

“I have something for you.” She pulled out a little pocket knife. It was a folding knife, and the blade was slightly jagged. There was a tiny silver cross on the handle.

“If I give it to you, will you promise not to tell anyone about it?” She came in close and I was drawn into her scent of earth and sweat.

I nodded. I was pretty sure my parents would never let me keep the knife. I quickly hid it in my pocket.

“Good girl,” nodded Majda and stood up.

“Tell me something,” she said. “What will you be when you grow up?”

“When I grow up, I will be you,” I replied without thinking.

She burst into laughter, then looked at me with a frown. “I hope you are not serious,” she said.

I very much liked the way she laughed: with her head thrown backwards and her palms on her knees. She was quite different from the rest of the people there, who were either old and suspicious like my grandmother or young and constantly frightened like my parents. While they worked the fields, drove to work, or even when they gathered at the village tavern: whenever the church bells rang, they looked up timidly and quickly said their goodbyes. We often had afternoon storms that suddenly rushed across the plain and smashed the fields with heavy fists of hail. I remember those times now by the squeaking of my father’s bicycle on the macadam, leading to the road, and a low smoke twisting from the wicket of the brick oven. Each summer my wrists bloomed with the cuts of blades of grass and stings of insects. That was really everything I knew: the house, the storm, the chiming of the church bells in the distance. It seemed to me

it would be like this forever. Majda never married, never had children. She took care of her elderly father. When he died, one day, she simply left. If I think about it, I am now as old as Majda was when she disappeared. She left the house behind her empty and her corn turned yellow on the field, to be nibbled on by the deer in the morning. She took Stella with her, so I knew she left by her own will.

The second time was pure coincidence. It was not long after I graduated and the two of us just met. We went for lunches and dinners, as if we were already grown up. I liked this about you: politeness, responsibility. I had already lived in an apartment building by then, in a small apartment with two roommates where the lace curtains reeked of cigarette smoke. I thought a lot about the future, about my plans, about where I would be spending Friday night, not necessarily in that order. I was diligently recording my dreams, believing they would reveal something important.

I saw her at the end of an aisle in a store, next to the glass freezers of ice cream. You know how much I like hazelnut cones – I wanted to get one but she just stood there. I spent some time awkwardly shuffling by the frozen vegetables, waiting for her to move. She looked exactly like me, only she wore a bright wool coat, interwoven by different coloured patches. Very neatly dressed, with tasteful jewellery and a snug leather bag. There was a child with her – a boy about four or five years old. She held the shopping basket with one hand and absent-mindedly caressed the boy’s head with the other, while he was clinging to her leg. I approached her in a daze and wary, like approaching a rare sort of bird. She did not notice me. Then she opened the freezer and reached for the ice cream, so her outline glowed in the dull neon light. We looked at each other through the glass door. Her face completely matched the translucent reflection of mine on the glass. She smiled at me and nodded. It was clear she was one of those people who always know what to say. The dimples nested on her cheeks. She paused for a bit, as if she wanted to

say something, then looked away and I took a step closer. She closed the door of the freezer and disappeared with the boy behind the shelves of drinks.

Was this a missed opportunity? Never forget, there is always the possibility that the tangles of life cross and we take someone's place by mistake.

I wanted to go after her, to invite her for coffee, to ask her what she wanted to say to me – but I was afraid. I was frozen still. When I finally got myself together, I realised she had taken the last hazelnut cone.

That there was also a third was made apparent last winter. One morning, I saw her picture in the newspaper. Again, I saw the familiar smile bringing dimples to the cheeks, my hair, my nose. I showed her to you – “Yes,” you said and scooped the last bit of yoghurt from the cup, “she really does look like you.”

The article was about an award for special achievement in science. She was a biologist and it seemed like she was very successful. I felt a mix of curiosity and envy.

I could not help myself: I browsed the internet for everything I could find on her. I even read a few scientific articles she wrote on the Bospor-Suez migratory routes of birds and on the eating habits of quails. She was about to hold a public lecture at the city university in a few days. Tell me, how could I have skipped it? I wanted to see what she looked like in front of a live audience. I wanted to see if she would also recognise herself in me. Would I be disappointed? I was going through the different possible situations of our meeting in my mind. I browsed the photos of her profiles; she was holding a young chimpanzee, climbing in the Dolomites, staring at the sunset on a sandy beach. She seemed happy. She looked good. I was asking myself if I also look so good. “Of course,” you said while leaving, brushing your lips against my cheek and carefully closing the door behind you. The morning apartment sounded empty, raw.

A few academics were looking bored on the grey padded chairs in the lecture hall. A young man with a long beard and glasses was working on his camera in the front row. The lectu-

re started late, and I was expecting the lights to be dimmed, I felt dangerously visible in the sharp neon light. I searched for a corner to cower in, but there were not many seats and even fewer attendees. It took me a while before I noticed her. She was there already, going through her notes in the second row and occasionally fixing her hair. After a few minutes an older gentleman in a plaid shirt approached her and gently touched her elbow. This was the sign for the lecture to begin.

I know nothing about quails. The slides were full of graphs and charts and carefully outlined drawings of feathers. She spoke with a determined voice and offered an occasional smile. I waited for her eyes to meet mine, for her to notice me in the last row hunkered behind the grey back rest of a seat. She never did. I could not make out the words she spoke, I just tracked the tone of her voice, as if it could say something about her life. Where was she born? Does she remember the storm clouds huddling together on the horizon, does she remember the mosquito bites and low flying birds? Does she like hazelnut ice cream? Where had our paths separated? When the hell did I make my mistake?

When the lecture finished I slipped out of the hall and lit a cigarette in front of the entrance. She appeared after a while in the company of the long-bearded photographer and another attendee. They spent some time talking on the pavement, then said their goodbyes. I followed her down the street, through the snow-covered park, to the train station and on to her train. When she sat down, I picked a window seat and watched her outline in the reflection. It was my usual train: it went in my direction, and she got off at my stop. She folded her coat over her arm and flung her elegant backpack over her shoulder; I just sat there. I could see myself through the train window, crossing the patch of snow on the parking lot to get into our car. When she closed the door you kissed me, then turned on the lights. Snowflakes were swirling in beams of wind.

That was all I could see, the train pulled out from the

station, heading north. It was growing dark outside and soon there were fields all around us. A level plain on both sides, the horizon disappearing in the dusk. I felt Majda's knife in my pocket. It was sharp enough I could carve my initials in the wooden panel under the window. Mischief. Then I took off my shoes and put my feet on the seat across from me, next to Stella, who raised an inquisitive look. The constant rattle of the train made me drowsy and pushed the tattered traveling hat further down my eyes. Before I dozed off, it struck me: I didn't know where the next stop was.

## Ajda Bračić,

born in 1990, is a writer and architect. She writes articles on architecture and culture, works as an editor, curates exhibitions, and runs a platform for education on architectural renovations, Kajža. Her poetry, short stories, and essays have been published in numerous magazines, on the radio, and in anthologies, and she has won several awards. Her literary debut, a collection of short stories called *Flying People* (*Leteči ljudje*), was published by LUD Literatura in 2022. It received the Critic's Choice award and the Maruša Krese award for the best book of short stories and was nominated for the Best Literary Debut Award.

IVANA  
DJILAS

*(She is) Brave*

*A si lahko  
vsaj enkrat  
tiho,*

Goga, 2022

One Christmas during the war, when Belgrade was under the electricity reduction programme, I burned down my apartment. They turned the electricity on and off in groups A, B, and C, and we each spent eight hours a day without it. We had already stopped using the freezers and at some point we stopped using the refrigerators as well. It was safer to put food on the balcony, since it stayed cold out there even when the electricity ran out. We were cold; the heating only warmed the water in the pipes to five degrees, just enough that they wouldn't crack. And since we lived in an apartment building, we could only warm ourselves with strange infrared heaters that we bought as contraband at the flea market. I still lived with my mother, but my then boyfriend spent quite a lot of time with us, so there were less households to heat. We cooked using electricity, the gas was long gone. Once, the groups got mixed up and we spent 23 hours without electricity. When it finally came back on, we quickly tried to fry some potatoes. We had potatoes thanks to grandpa Milan, who was sending us bags of them from Vojvodina. The electricity ran out again after half an hour. Unsure if the potatoes were done, we left them in the boiling oil and forgot to take the pot off the stove. When the electricity came back on in the middle of the night, the oil caught fire. The fire burned the ventilation hood and then the entire kitchen and was just about to leap to the bookshelves. Luckily, the hood fell on to the stove and woke me up. In our pyjamas, we desperately tried to find a fire extinguisher in the stairwells, but they were all long since stolen. While I was coughing and watching the apartment on the ground floor of a seven-story building being consumed by

flames, I held the receiver of our phone in my hand, waiting to hear the *too-too-too* so I could call the fire department. The switchboards were ancient and overloaded. We used to have to wait several minutes for an open line. Back then you could have died five times over before the ambulance showed up, but the firemen came in three minutes. We spent the rest of Christmas in warm clothes scraping a thick layer of soot off the walls and floors with a couple of friends. Later we found out that Serbia had been exporting its electricity to Croatia at that time. Go figure.

A person so desperately does *not* want to be revolutionary and brave. We want to be conformists, we want safety, comfort and predictability. Even boredom. We do not want to think about how thin the line really is between ‚normal life’ and ‚the struggle to survive’. We are willing to close our eyes when the rights of others are violated, just to keep ours. We will have no trouble finding an excuse to explain why we are the ones entitled to ‚a better life’. We were the first. We are better educated. We have invested more. Our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents have invested more. We cannot do without, we got used to it. We do not have the time. Life is too short. We must extract as much as possible from this measure of ‚one life’. We are willing to leave the long-term decisions about our lives to others, just to buy ourselves a morsel of comfort. Of peace.

I was never truly brave. I was never the first in line at demonstrations. When you take to the street you can only hope that the demonstration will be peaceful and that both sides will keep that end in mind. But you never really know how many sides there are at play. So, you have to be careful.

They explained to me that a police baton does not leave a bruise but causes internal damage. That it does not hurt on the outside, but burns on the inside, and like any smart person I was afraid of this. That pepper spray burns and hurts for a long time after it gets into your eyes. That there are serious consequences for being locked up and questioned. That they can identify you and cause you trouble everywhere, at your

studies and your workplace and whenever you want to leave the country. I was afraid of a stampede in a crowd of forty thousand, two hundred and fifty thousand, even seven hundred thousand people, so I always walked by the sides. I knew all the secret passageways and parallel paths on the streets where demonstrations took place. I hoped I knew them better than the policemen who arrived here from other cities. I even knew which doors were kept unlocked. You must be ready to run, should the need arise. Why should I be the one to be beaten, trampled, harassed. I do not find martyrdom to be an attractive concept.

So, I never threw rocks at the television building or eggs at the parliament. I was there, in the crowd. I never gave a speech. I never had political ambitions. I never even yelled; I was always a little bit ashamed. But I was there. I never wanted this. I did blow on the whistle. I was cold. It was tiring. It was happening every day and it was not always fun. I asked myself often why this was happening to me at all. Couldn’t I stay home tonight? Lay low. Pretend to be sick. Why do I even live in the part of the world where my life looks like this? But then I went again. Some things you must do simply because they are the right things to do. And because nobody will do them for you. I understood the demonstrations as something that must be done together, and I saw myself as part of the community. If I didn’t go, then the rest of them could stick their heads in the sand too. Because of this, I was ashamed to stay home.

Of course, you never really lose the fear. You are always afraid, but you learn not to be stopped by fear. You are angry at yourself and at your fate, forcing you to make decisions like this, but once you are faced with them, they are unavoidable. You cannot pretend this is none of your business. In times of change you cannot be apolitical. In any time, really. What does it even mean to be *apolitical*, besides letting someone stronger than you decide. This is a possibility, but down the line you won’t necessarily agree with the decisions of those stronger than you, yet you will have to live with them. In each uprising, revolution, revolt, protest, whenever there is a

change, there are winners, losers and collateral damage. You never know how it will turn out and if it will be you who gets the short stick in the end. But you cannot let others do everything for you. This is your life, after all. You demonstrate and hope no one starts shooting.

On one of the many counter-rallies for Milošević and against him a group of fighters from the Second World War gathered in the legendary bourgeois café Tašmajdan in the centre of Belgrade. Gentlemen in their seventies. On that day they did not play cards or reminisce about their youth, they had more important things to do: to show support and loyalty to the strong leader. Just before they went out to the square one of them asked: »Did you bring them with you?« All of them pulled out their slightly rusty guns, when one of them cried out: »Are you crazy, bringing weapons, my grandson is among those students!« He was so upset he suffered a heart attack and the entire group ended up in the hospital instead of at the demonstrations. Nobody fired the first shot that day.

And I bravely learned to live with my own lack of courage. The only bravery I like is the one in books. The one that is not mine. At a party in Belgrade, I met a boy who had escaped from besieged Sarajevo. He was waiting for the papers to leave for Canada. He asked me what I was doing. I proudly explained that I was studying theatre direction. »Run away, or stay and write books,« he told me. I did both, I ran away, and I am writing books. The only thing I can conclude from this is that either I did not run far enough or that life is difficult everywhere.

## ***How to Raise Feminist Sons***

I already have all the gifts to put under the tree. If you are asking yourself what kind of a maniac would go shopping for gifts in November, that maniac would be me. They filled the stores with trendy toys during the November holidays and the most sought-after ones were already disappearing from the shelves. This year I finally managed to get my two sons to write letters to Santa Claus and so acquired their wish lists. It helps that they are in second grade now and are finally able to write what they want by themselves. And luckily their reading skills are not yet good enough to read this article, so they will not figure out that it is not Santa Claus who brings the gifts, but their mother. The first one wrote: "Dear Santa Claus, bring me something from the following list", and the other one wrote: "Please, bring me everything from the list". I had to perform some deciphering to untangle their phonetic transcriptions of Korean-English names for spinning tops, but with a bit of immersion into the currently popular cartoons I was able to do it. This year, the list was more or less as expected: many different names for two kinds of spinning tops, an attempt to get a gun shooting bullets made of foam, a plush toy with large, sparkling eyes that changes colour when you caress it (I have not yet worked out which toy this is), a remote controlled tank-like vehicle, a natural science kit for digging up crystals, dinosaur figurines (again), a diary with a lock, a magic pencil and a special light that makes the writing visible, a Harry Potter wand and Monopoly. The regular mixture of adventure, battle, the magical and the natural worlds, with the added touch of one of my son's obsessions: he likes to cuddle with plush toys. Everything that has more or less been served to them by the children's TV channels since October.

Even though I sprang into action early, it did not go without complications. The diary was the first hitch. I found one with a green cover that said: *A SECRET DIARY FOR BOYS, the book of best adventures. Discover the hero within*

you! And then in capital letters *FORBIDDEN FOR GIRLS*. And on the back, it said *Become a great adventurer, explorer, secret agent and a private detective*. Next to it was a green diary *TOP SECRET, my book of boy stuff*. With a drawing of boys, looking like Indiana Jones, in action, next to a plane and a snake. I leafed through them for a few moments, deciding which one to buy. But right next to them I found *MY BOOK OF SECRETS* in pink, with a drawing of girls whispering in each other's ears, and with *The book made in your image* written underneath. And on the back: *In this book you will find advice on fashion and beauty, quizzes to know yourself better and blank pages to fill with your deepest secrets*. This diary for girls was unfortunately no exception, I found two similar ones next to it, with pink-purple covers and lots of hearts. Seriously? The world of children is apparently no longer divided between blue and pink, but between green and pink, yet the contents and the nature of the division have remained exactly the same. I almost bought them something that says *forbidden for girls*. A thought flashed through my mind: I am lucky I have boys. Life is much more fun for boys. They can wear more comfortable clothes, they can kick up a ruckus, and they have access to the worlds of natural science, adventure, technology, the magical world and even the world of cooking – since chefs are still predominantly male.

Then there were problems with the school secret santa. They held a raffle and each student drew the name of one classmate for whom they had to buy a gift. Something worth two euros. My son instructed me to buy a LOL. He explained that this is something that girls play with, and his secret pal was a girl. He did not want to tell me which one, but she seemed important. Again, I took to the toy shop, on the second leg of my research mission. The saleslady told me that I could find LOL somewhere in the long line of red, pink, and – thanks to Ana and Elsa from *Frozen* – light blue dolls. At least now I know where the blue for boys went, it switched to the girls' side. I could not find LOL, so I checked the stores online. To my surprise, the website of the largest Slovenian webstore still

had categories: *toys for boys* (with a picture of an orange-blue plastic gun), and *toys for girls* (with a picture of a pink-purple elephant and a crib). In the end, I found LOL. These are dolls with wide eyes, accompanied by fingernail stickers, tattoos, and bracelets. Everything in toxic pink with glitter. But as much as it hurt my sense of aesthetics, I was more worried that my boys still separated toys based on who they were for. How did it come to this? When I have even bought them *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* in English and read them the book in awkward translation. Until recently, one of my boys carried a lifelike black baby doll around with him everywhere. Where did I make a mistake?

The next day I waited carefully for an opportunity to assess the damage. I took a little survey. During lunch, I slightly clumsily began to ask the boys about the differences between men and women. One told me that women make babies, but the other replied that he saw a pregnant man in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. They looked at me strangely when I asked them about colours for boys and girls. When I asked them if men and women dressed the same, one said that women wear skirts, and the other said that men also sometimes wore skirts. And when I asked them if they knew that in the old times men went to work to earn money, while the women stayed home to take care of the children, they said that today we have babysitters for this. And when the time came for the decisive question – “Can women be astronauts?” – they were both puzzled and immediately said, of course they can. When I then finally asked my son why he wanted to buy LOL for his girlfriend, he told me: “Well, that's what she likes to play with.” In truth, it calmed me down. It was not as bad as I thought at first. We must be doing something right, if the boys were able to internalize quite a few gender-neutral perspectives. But I immediately stumbled upon a new problem. Both thought that only a man and a woman could get married. And this despite the fact that whenever one of the grandmothers says “when you get a girlfriend”, I add “or a boyfriend”. It looks like this lesson still needs more work.



I consider myself a feminist. Simply because I would not want to live in any other period. I am well aware that in this moment women have more rights than they ever had throughout history. And I would not be willing to give up any of them at any price. Yet I am also aware that men and women are still not equal. Not even in the developed world. Even where women have the same rights as men on paper, our opportunities are not perfectly equal in practice. Women are still paid less for our work. At times we even discriminate against ourselves and favour male authority, male bosses, male co-workers. But this is a process.

As a big supporter of the #metoo movement I passionately pay attention to all the events and the discussions it brings forward. The mere fact we are discussing something at such lengths is changing the world. I am a little disheartened when I consider that much of the progress came too late for me. But I can take part in the process. And whenever women achieve change in some field, this also brings change for men. I am certain that attending to men is the most feminist act a woman can do. This is why my engagement with my sons, their toys, their convictions and beliefs, is so fateful. We need to discover new models and offer children different examples of manhood than the ones we grew up with. My seven- and eight-year-old will probably understand relations between the sexes and their roles in a new light when they grow up. This is why I am convinced we need to raise feminist sons.

## Ivana Djilas,

is a theatre director, writer, and publicist, writing on equal opportunities and acceptance of difference. She is an immigrant, having lived in Slovenia since 1999. An artist. A career woman. A precarious freelance worker. Still married for the first time. Mother of an adopted child and a child with special needs. Owns an apartment, a loan, and a master's degree. She is also loud, 40 years old, with a few extra kilograms. She wrote the notable novel *Hiša* (2017) and received the Rožanc award for the best book of essays for her second book, *Can You For Once Shut Up* (*A si lahko vsaj enkrat tiho*, 2023).

NINA  
DRAGIČEVIĆ

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*To telo  
pokončno,*  
ŠKUC, 2021

it was late at night  
like it is now  
it was late like it is now  
it was now.  
men in coats are chasing me  
dreams of magritte  
nightmare of tomšič  
no sound                      no words  
They are not chasing me      these figures are not in a hurry  
chanting all in good time  
I finally find comfort              then I am terrified  
postmodern dreams              a kind of nightmare of prayer  
disbanded signposts encourage their proliferation  
transtemporal perspective has its limitations  
now they are in coats      steely colourless unbending  
their things about them all without exception completely straight  
all somehow right      perhaps without bodies  
nothing there to bend when a person wants to bend  
no breaking point              no and then  
they are on my heels  
the body feigns anatomical eccentricities

anything to run away  
disappear  
assumes the thoughts of the origins of its persecution  
something about crooked heels  
the constructionist turn from the horror of the body in general  
into the body as finally possible  
and so what then there is no and then  
these are the capabilities of this mind  
but still on my heels  
are you listening to me still and so on  
all women are the heels of achilles  
blessed be the one who knows where to strike  
and so that homer guy made a mess of it all  
sadistic sentimentalist that is what this is called  
that is what it should be called  
massive sedentary relics they should be called  
I was spinning on my heels spinning the body forms the panopticon  
you have your axis if you want it or not  
the point the origin of movement———the bottom line  
the body a mass where mass is exhausted  
a noble absence it comes down to this  
these men know it so they are not in a hurry when they are on my heels  
always *around* the body  
that is running from them  
approaching from all sides  
this exhausted body is being exhausted precisely when it rests persecuted

so they come more thickly and closer  
the main terror is always around the body  
terror as possibility  
the body as the future of possibility  
body pouncing the elliptical fulcrum  
by the body the only body in a haze surrounding this body  
turned pale  
then everything clear: if you turn pale body surrounds the haze  
they march onward unbending  
and I sketch their advance  
there is truly nothing else I know how  
the body is charged with their advance  
their unending is my sociality  
so it was that night  
late that night  
late in good time  
late now  
when they were on my heels  
when they are on my heels  
on my heels by the body  
and I was I am afraid.

\*\*\*

and so of course I know everything:  
you cannot voice the pain of the body  
pain has no object  
no reference point  
no site allowed to be signified  
the body painfully voraciously grabs and grabs itself  
as it thrashes and wavers  
so that it can nonetheless remain  
the corners trunks fences whatever there is  
roars interjections and summaries  
recounts anecdotes and legends  
enters the nightmares of tomšič  
and the dreams of magritte  
while they enter it  
searching for words through its pitiful registries  
that should necessarily resemble the pointed  
dangerous and sharp and stuff like that  
the body full of examples  
taking refuge in flat rates and extremes  
trapped in the literal of the metaphor  
and so constantly misses  
talks but says nothing.

but it all is how you set it articulate it  
so when this body feebly staggers  
when it seems a freak and wanton  
this body just with space

34

NINA DRAGIČEVIĆ

with everything and everyone  
battling  
insisting insisting that it has a chance.  
and so that night as now precisely now  
when they squat in the granted darkness  
perfect voyeurs and still do not have enough  
on each other's heels no one dares to look back  
for the fear that there is nothing and especially no one there  
the horror of being followed or the dread of being unnoticed  
all history is the history of this choice  
in this night then, this body finds no peace  
electrified it electrifies taunts and generates stinging and picks itself up  
and it also seems the more it destroys the more it builds  
searching for cracks perhaps finds certainly dark in the light  
something about the vacuumizing forces and something about reversals  
it imagines imagines this is all it does imagines  
told everything no words no conciliation  
and so it increasingly seems that the constant restlessness of this body  
that presumably did everything to itself  
could be legitimate hope.

to imagine the body meaning the horizon  
the kaleidoscopic spectre potential  
the parallax instant everything is met somewhere  
the supergravitational plateau  
folded and sliding  
yet nothing with space the universes and  
similar lump sums of desire alienation  
nothing with nothing and no one yet only then  
to imagine it because of them and against them  
let the conflict come  
like a slippery singular multitude  
expanding and yet really ever smaller  
made grown up truly invisible yet right before the eyes

35

NINA DRAGIČEVIĆ

no longer merciful  
just repulsive  
the body only a voice which is only an echo  
never by itself and by no means for itself  
where there is no delay for the vanished and no waiting on the premature  
to slide free fall not falling no direction  
and then the gleam such shining  
to meet this body display  
to untie it widely tear it apart  
the body so slippery  
the body a slackline like a tool  
completely wrong and with a disgusting taste  
the gaze imagines the body that fakes the gaze  
this vain apparition of the future possible  
in short  
to no longer stare at the body that is that is not  
to imagine it that it could possibly possibly that it could possibly be.

## Nina Dragičević,

is a poet and essayist, who holds a doctorate in Sociology. She is the author of the books *Kdo ima druge skrbi* (2014), *Slavne neznane* (2016), *Med njima je glasba* (2017), *Ljubav reče greva* (2019), *This Body, Upright* (*To telo, pokončno*, 2021), *Kako zveni oblast* (2022), and *Ampak, kdo?* (2023). She received the Werner Düttmann Fellowship in 2023 (Akademie der Künste, Berlin), the Dr. Ana Mayer Kansky award in 2023, the Jenko award in 2021, the Župančič award in 2020, the Knight of Poetry award in 2018, and was a finalist for the Palma Ars Acustica award in 2018.

ŠPELA  
FRILIC

## *Twinkle Hill*

*Blešivka,*  
Mladinska  
knjiga, 2022

SATURDAY

### *Who is this woman?*

The red Renault quatrelle loudly made its way up Twinkle Hill and came to a stop at the parking space in front of the apartment buildings. A tall thin woman in a blue coat clumsily got out from behind the wheel. She straightened and took a worried glance at the sky above. Then she let out a relieved sigh and went to the back of the car. She pulled a backpack out of the boot, carefully lifted the crocodile out of the front seat, then made her way, carrying both, to the entrance of the building Twinkle Hill 1. Her finger went down the list of tenants and rang the bell saying: *Jože, janitor.*

“Yes?” the speaker creaked.

“My name is Silva. I am the niece of Mrs Mistral,” the woman replied. “Could you please open the front door?”

The bald head of the janitor appeared in the ground level window right next to the entrance. The man observed the visitor and the animal in her arms with suspicion. Before Dimitra Mistral left on her voyage, she did tell him about a niece that was supposed to look after the apartment while she was away. But she did not say anything about a domesticated reptile. He could feel it in his bones: this visitor means trouble.

“All the way to the top, fifth floor, apartment number 12,” he grumbled. “Because you are new here I just want to say that in our neighbourhood we pick up after our pets!” He motioned at the reptile that was nestled under Silva’s arm and grimaced.

“Well of course, thank you,” Silva said. The janitor nodded and disappeared from view. The doors buzzed as they opened.

Silva held the crocodile tight with one hand, grabbed the handle with the other, and the heavy front doors at Twinkle Hill 1 closed behind them with a bang.

If this strange visitor happened to look up before entering the building, she might have seen a boy on the fifth-floor balcony. He was leaning over the railing and observing the goings on at the front entrance with a large pair of binoculars. “If that is Silva,” he thought out loud, “then she is getting into the elevator right now and will soon ring our doorbell.”

Silva set the crocodile down on the ground floor hallway and pushed the button. The doors of the elevator opened slowly, but the lizard refused to go in, holding back on all fours. It peered into the bright opening before them and huffed helplessly.

“Oh come on, Silvester,” Silva sighed. “You don’t think I will fly all the way up to the fifth floor on a broom like a witch, do you?”

The crocodile puffed and stomped his way to the stairwell.

“And how will your short paws carry you up those stairs, huh?” she grumbled. The crocodile puffed again, slithered back and bit the sleeve of her pants.

“I should carry you?! Out of the question!”

“Puff,” Silvester begged.

She frowned and shook her head. “No way!”

“Puuuuuff!” The pleading eyes of Silvester could soften a stone.

“Well, okay,” Silva finally gave in. “But just this once!” She grabbed him under the belly and went up the stairs.

She immediately noticed that the narrow stairwell of the Twinkle Hill 1 building was squeaky clean and surprisingly quiet. There was no loud music or children’s joyful shouting. Not even a vacuum could be heard from behind the doors.

Her footsteps echoed among the walls.

“What is this place, Silvester?” she asked in a puzzled whisper. “Does anyone live here at all?”

Silvester nervously curled up in her arms. His sensitive ears caught the subdued voices coming through the locks on the apartment doors. The Twinklers were all very much at home! They were pushing their eyes to the peepholes and carefully watching them ascend the stairs.

Ground floor

“Did you see that?! (in a horrified voice) She has a crocodile!”

“And without a muzzle on it.”

First floor

“Am I seeing this right? Come, get me my glasses. A crocodile!! What if it bites someone?”

“Bites? (In a shrieking tone.) Are you kidding me? A crocodile devours you.”

Second floor

A muffled argument and cursing. Something about unwashed underwear. Not a word about the crocodile.

Third floor

“A crocodile!”

“What did you say?”

“A crocodile in the building! A scandal at Twinkle Hill!”

“Finally! Let me see.”

“Do you see it?”

“Would you look at that! Poor thing, it is completely terrified!”

Fourth floor

Sad sounds of the piano.

Fifth floor

Silvester was irritated by all the whispers coming from behind the doors and huffed like an old locomotive. “You

would think that you were the one who had to carry me up the stairs, huffing like that,” Silva caught her breath and was then happy to announce: “We made it.” She set Silvester back on the ground and looked up and down the dark hallway. “What did Dimitra write ...?” She pulled a crumpled piece of paper with a message written on it in shining letters from her coat. She began to read out loud in the dark.

“Hello, Silva! I am leaving for Africa for a few weeks. I urgently need somebody to look after my apartment and water the flowers. Yes, yes ... Here it is! Silvester, listen!”

She read the next sentence slowly and clearly. “Twinkle Hill 1, fifth floor, the apartment on the right.”

She looked up and victoriously pointed at the door with a poster of a large flock of flamingos.

“Silvester, we found the apartment!” She glanced at the paper in her hand again. “You can get the keys at the neighbours. Ring the bell at the Golob apartment. Tomo is a good friend of mine, he will tell you everything you need to know. The Golob apartment, then,” she murmured, stuffed the paper back into her pocket and turned to her left. It was only then that she noticed the doors of the apartment on the left being slightly ajar. The bright eyes of a child were apparently watching her this whole time. Well, they mostly watched the crocodile.

“Hello there,” Silva said and peeked at the sign on the door. Just as Dimitra foretold, the sign really said GOLOB. “Tomo lives here, is that correct?” The child’s head nodded, his eyes never leaving the crocodile.

“Could I please speak to him? To Tomo, I mean?” Silva asked.

“You could,” the boy cried out and flung the door wide open. “Tomo Golob, that’s me!”

Silva looked at the freckled fair-haired boy standing in the doorway. “Oh,” she nodded in confusion. Dimitra’s letter had forgotten to mention that Tomo was a child.

“Does he bite?” Tomo wanted to know. Without waiting for an answer, he gently stroked Silvester’s scaly head and

the beast closed its eyes and huffed from delight. “What is his name?”

“Silvester,” Silva composed herself. “And I am Silva. Dimitra is my aunt.”

“I know,” Tomo nodded. “I was waiting for you.” He looked at her with his bright blue eyes. “Dimitra told me you are a story sorceress. Are you really?”

Silva shook her head impatiently, as if the question irked her. “I suppose you could say that,” she mumbled. “I was told you have the keys to Silva’s apartment. Could you give them to me, please?”

Tomo looked down with disappointment. If this visitor truly knew lots of stories, she did not seem to like sharing them with others. But he was not upset for long.

“Okay!” he cried merrily. He took a bundle of keys from the hanger behind the door and hurried down the hallway in his socks. “Come! I am Dimitra’s co-worker and I promised her to show you around her observation apartment.”

Observation apartment?! Silva let out a tiny cackle. Her dear aunt spent her life researching migratory birds. When Silva was still a child, Dimitra followed them all the way to Africa. And in her old age she set up a laboratory on Twinkle Hill, where large flocks of birds gathered in autumn. It was just like Dimitra to draw children into her work. “Children are the best observers,” she said. “I truly do not understand why people, when they grow up, become so blind to details.”

There was a loud snap when Tomo turned the key in the lock to Dimitra’s apartment. “You better close your eyes. I’m openiiiiing!” he cried out and pushed the doors forcefully. Silva’s and Silvester’s eyes just about got accustomed to the dark of the hallway and were now flooded with a light that was so strong that for a moment they nearly went blind. Silva closed her eyes, picked up Silvester from the floor with one hand, and used the other to feel her way inside. Only then did she dare open her eyes again.

What brilliant light!

A large skylight expanded across the entire ceiling. The



autumn sun poured through it, casting golden sparkle over the entire apartment. The sky opening above them was so blue and full of birds, so glittery and alive, so different than any other sky Silva had seen in her life, she just stood there entranced.

“Puff,” Silvester complained and gently scratched her stomach.

“Oh, yes,” Silva came to her senses, carefully let Silvester down and looked around the apartment.

“Dimitra wants you to feel at home here,” Tomo said from the corner. The whole time Silva was staring entranced at the sky above, he was sitting down calmly on Dimitra’s bed by the wall and dangled his feet.

“How could we not,” Silva thought. The apartment was like a kind nesting place, bright, full of cushions and large green flowers. It smelled of the wide world, of adventure, of her Dimitra.

“So you help Dimitra with the birdwatching?” she inquired politely.

Tomo beamed. “All the children from Twinkle Hill help her. Do you know how many birds come here? Thousands! It is completely wild! We watch them with Dimitra, we count them and catalogue them.”

“And where are the other children now?” Silva asked with suspicion and carefully peered around the room. After a welcome like this she would not be surprised if an entire class of lively kids jumped out of the wardrobes.

“Everybody is at home cleaning, because it is a Saturday,” Tomo explained and kept dangling his feet.

“And you? Do you not have to clean on Saturdays?”

“I am already done! Dad says there is no point in cleaning too thoroughly, since things get messy and dirty soon enough in any case.”

“A wise thought,” Silva said. And then she no longer knew what to say and simply kept quiet. But Tomo could barely wait to repeat the question that persisted on his mind ever since Silvester and Silva appeared at his door.

“Dimitra said you know many interesting stories about birds,” he began, carefully this time.

Silva grew faintly pale. “What is your favourite kind of bird?” she tried to change the subject.

But Tomo disregarded the question. “Tell me a story!” he asked her, excited.

“Ummmmm,” Silva said.

Tomo kept dangling his feet and looking at her in expectation.

“Actually ...” she began. Why can a person, whenever they really need it, never think of a single interesting sentence?!

She tried smiling. This usually helps, right?

But Tomo did not return the smile. His feet stopped dangling, only the expectation remained on his eyes.

“Actually ... ummmm ... I can’t,” Silva decided to just tell the truth. “I unfortunately lost them all.”

“What?!” Tomo objected. “You cannot just lose stories. Either you know them or you don’t.”

“Well, they moved away from me,” she tried to explain the thing she did not understand well herself. “Maybe they are like birds in autumn, you know, they just left for warmer places. I tried to tell one to the children yesterday and realized I couldn’t. That I have no stories left.”

Tomo frowned. “You could just tell the truth and say you don’t want to and don’t feel like it. You don’t have to make stupid excuses. I am not a baby!” he flared up. Silva became terribly embarrassed. She would have loved to tell Tomo a story, she truly would. She would put all her heart into it, as a thank you that he cared so nicely for Dimitra’s apartment and watered her flowers. She would pick an extra exciting one just for him. One with bandits and clever princesses and strange monsters with their hearts in a golden box who can only be beaten by a hero with a noble heart. But she knew that right then she could break in half, and it would not do any good. She simply had no more stories left.

“I do have a book of birds with me, if you are interested,” she thought of a consolation prize. Before he could say no,

she went to the backpack she left on the floor and pulled out a large, leather-bound book. You cannot buy books like this in a bookstore. A similar one might be hidden as a great treasure by an antiquarian in a really dusty antique bookshop. And it is surely not shown to just anyone.

“Aunt Dimitra gave it to me when I was a child,” Silva proudly explained. “Actually, how old are you now?”

“Ten.”

“Oh, what a coincidence. I was exactly your age then,” she was satisfied to realize, as if this was some kind of an omen that everything will turn out well. She set the book carefully in Tomo’s lap and sat beside him on the bed. On the cover it said in large red letters: THE BOOK OF MADE-UP BIRDS.

Tomo carefully turned it in his hands. What an unusual book! It was entirely written out by hand, in neat, tiny handwriting. He turned the pages and read the titles in bold out loud: “Rain bird, Storm Hawk, Rainbow crow, The bird from an angel’s egg, Painted stork, Blue owl ...”

“My very favourite is the final story about the bird king Simorg,” Silva said. But Tomo did not even leaf through the end. He closed the book with a loud bang and exclaimed with disappointment: “These birds do not even actually exist. Somebody made them up.”

“Of course somebody made them up,” Silva said with surprise. “You could have figured that out from the title. Is that a problem? Every bird expert must also know birds that are ...” A loud call from the hallway interrupted her: “Tooomooo, lunch!” Tomo jumped from the bed without hesitation and pushed the book into Silva’s lap. “My dad is calling me. I have to go!” he said and ran out of the apartment so quickly he could not hear Silva’s hurt voice calling after him: “Just because they are made up ...” Bang! The doors shut close. Yet Silva still complained in their direction: “... does NOT mean they don’t EXIIIST!”

The door cared nothing for Silva’s rusty voice. Only Silvester, crouching at her feet, puffed with unease and nudged her with his scaly snout. “Let’s not be sad again, Silva,” he

wanted to say. “Siiilva, come ooon.”

Silva pressed *The Book of Made-Up Birds* close to her body and finally let the tears that had been gathering behind the dams of her eyes since yesterday evening, stream down her face.

## Špela Frlic,

born in 1982, graduated from Comparative Literature and Journalism and completed a Master of Science degree in Folkloristics on the topic of contemporary storytelling in Slovenia. She works in the area of storytelling and folk tales, and she combines her storytelling on stage with production work and pedagogical work on storytelling. She began her storytelling career on Radio Študent with the group *Za 2 groša fantazije* (2006–2012), then as a member of the Storytelling Variete (2009–2015). She was in charge of the children's programme on Vodnikova domačija in Šiška (2016–2020) and was the programme manager of the Storytelling Festival (2017–2022). She is the ideas and content manager of the project *Pravljični studio* of the foundation Divja misel, which focuses on developing storytelling capabilities in children through the creation of storytelling tools and cultural-artistic content. Her literary debut, *Twinkle Hill* (*Bleščivka*, Mladinska knjiga, 2022), received the Večernica award for the best children's and young adult book in the year 2022.

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## *Why I Don't Write*

DIJANA  
MATKOVIĆ

*Zakaj ne  
pišem,*

Cankarjeva  
založba, 2021

*»What kind of people is it in which I am  
comprised? Good people? Bad people?«*

*»Materials. Nothing more.«*

*»You're wrong. Did you know I knew how  
to play this? From which part of me did this  
knowledge reside? From this mind? From  
these hands? From this heart? And reading  
and speaking. Not so much things learned  
as things remembered.«*

*»Slight trace waves in the brain perhaps.«*

*»Did you ever consider the consequences of  
your actions? You made me, and you left  
me to die. Who am I?«*

*»You? I don't know.«*

*Frankenstein, 1994*

“The problem with your position,” my *beloved* suddenly told me during one of our eternal conversations on writing, “is that you are neither one nor the other. You come from a family of poor workers, but you cannot say you make a decent living as an intellectual. You are not an immigrant, but you are not Slovenian either,” and later I thought he could very well continue with the naming of all the things I am not.

(p. 8)

Lots of things would have turned out differently if we had stayed in the apartment building below the terraced houses where lots of immigrants lived, close to the businesses where my parents also worked. They lived there until their employers went bust, and then they merely survived. If we

stayed there, we would not become almost the only blue-collar family amongst Slovenes who worked in offices and never did manual work. We would not stand out. There would be other families playing loud folk music, with not enough money for a fence on the balcony. One day, I will fall off that balcony while chasing my slipper. I will be alright, but the neighbour will yell at my mother that she should take better care of me. She really should have. She must have been too busy figuring out how the two of us—once dad had left and my sister had run away—were going to survive. She must have been, from all of this—from poverty, divorce, and judgmental neighbours—at her mental and emotional limit.

I knew nothing about this then and had not yet developed the capacity to understand any of it. For a long time still, things just happened to me. I was a child. I was constantly ashamed. The shame was already built into me in the womb, like the stomach, lungs, and intestine. I was ashamed of my mother and the conditions we lived in.

I was ashamed because my mother did not know how to behave in any social setting, simply because she did not understand it. I was ashamed of the poverty. I was ashamed of that loud folk music. And because of this, I was ashamed of myself.

I did not know why the kids picked on me. I did not know what it meant when they chanted, “Everything that ends in *-iç*, throw it in the ditch.” I thought it had to do with me personally—that I was being picked on for being *weird*. I knew that when I cried, their nastiness took flight, but most of the time I could not hold back my tears. “Boooosnian, you stink!!” Peter yelled after me on our way from school. It was not just the kids; even their parents, the provincial schoolteachers, the ladies behind the counters in shops and banks, and others always needed to let me know, when I was around, in subtle and passive-aggressive ways, that I was *something less*.

“Do you have the time?” I once asked a passer-by while waiting for a bus that never came. I was a teenager in worn-down clothes; it must have been apparent that I was stuck. “You mean, if I know what the time is?” the man asked, taking a step

back, afraid I wanted to steal his watch—or I was just inferring this after many similar encounters, projecting it onto him.

When I tell people about this and similar experiences, they sometimes ask me: Did this really happen to you? They cannot understand what I am talking about because they—or so they say—have not seen or experienced anything remotely like it. When the French writer Édouard Louis was offering his now famous first novel, *The End of Eddy*, to publishing houses, he was most enraged by the rejection of a publisher who said that “in France, poverty like this does not exist.” The publisher had never seen it with his own eyes, so it must not exist. *We are invisible*, Édouard realised.

(p. 11-12)

The phenomenon I am describing—of disregarding, of being ignorant to the other—is visible even when we notice how those that make-up the dominant group in the community speak: as if other stories beside their own do not even exist, as if their story is the only true one and is thus universal, which makes it unnecessary to even inspect the position of others, so they often speak with the appropriate gesticulation, reaching into the personal space of their interlocutor with their hands. “When we move through bourgeois environments or simply through the middle class, we are often faced with the assumption that we are one of them,” describes Didier Eribon in his masterwork *Return to Rheims* (I will mention him often). In this way, people begin to discuss their doctoral studies, collecting art, or vacations, as if it is understood that these things are also part of the lived experience of the person they are talking to. And because their stories reflect the dominant forces in the environment and because these forces also influence the less privileged, the latter perhaps do not even notice at first that they live in a world that does not speak to them, does not represent them, and that they are surrounded by people who are constantly telling them, like the publisher told Louis, that “they do not

exist”. There is only one thing worse than being insulted—to be ignored.

All these are messages, sometimes communicated in a subtle way, other times more directly, through which it is constantly given to be understood by those raised in poverty, by worn-out workers, immigrants, people on unemployment, the “technological redundancies”, and, of course, their descendants, that their lives matter less than the lives of those who produce, even if the only thing they produce is profit for someone else. On our street of terraced houses, mostly peopled by “white collar” families, you mattered as much as you could spend. On a new car, a new bike, or a new vacation. All these things increased in value through the affirming looks of the neighbours, who also determined the amount of shame you had to swallow if you lacked these status symbols. Both denigration and envy were hidden in the words of every politely uttered *good afternoon*.

(p. 13-14)

“I am afraid to check,” I tell them, “what I was writing yesterday, and I definitely have no desire to spend any extra time with my mother, even if only on the page. Or with my father, for that matter.”

If translation is the most precise reading, as I like to say, does this mean writing is the most intense (re)living?

I tell them I am writing about class fear and complain that this is *hard* writing for me. I see myself saying this, as if I did not really believe myself: *Hard? What the hell? Are you mythologising your status as an author, suffering for your work, when you are really just lazy?*

*Me, the impostor.*

(p. 19)

### ***Sometimes we must tell a lie to show the truth.***

Mladen Dolar in The National Theater, 2015, attending an event at the Fabula festival titled *Who is now lying here?*

“I am also writing about mum,” I tell my sister. “I wrote that she killed Bono.”

“I mean, do you think she did it? She couldn’t have... Oh, no.”

“It was you who always said that! When he died. You kept saying she did it. Because she couldn’t stand him. Because he was always barking. And because she always said she wasn’t going to feed him, that she didn’t have anything to feed him with.”

“But it couldn’t be her. It was an accident. Bono heard someone coming from the basement and ran towards the stairs, but his chain was too short.”

“Are you trying to say the dog accidentally offed itself?”

“I think that’s what happened. There are a lot of things we can say about our mum, but I don’t think she killed the dog. I don’t think she has it in her... What—you think it was her?”

“I don’t know. You can’t discount the possibility. But in the end, it doesn’t really matter.”

“Yeah, because it was so long ago in any case.”

“No, because in the literary sense, I think it works better if I write that she killed him.”

When you reduce a person into someone who must fight for their survival, you turn them into a brute.

(p. 25-26)

### ***People would rather be electrically shocked than left alone with their thoughts***

The title of a research paper on Science.org, 2014

I am drinking a Red Bull. One. Two. I am smoking my fifteenth cigarette as I make my way through the evening’s tweets. I like four of them. I comment on one. The scroll is infinite and

55

DIJANA MATKOVIĆ

54

DIJANA MATKOVIĆ

continues on Facebook. People I know, and mostly people I do not know, are signalling their desire to be seen. A funny meme on procrastination. Someone's reading list. A clever response to a political development. I open a beer. A sad American satire on Youtube in symbiosis with the populists. The routines of public intellectuals who irritate me and calm me down at the same time with the predictable genre: their ultimate insight is always what we can all see is happening. I am smoking a cigarette. I no longer know which one; there are only two left in the pack. I check my backpack; good, I found another one. I take a photo of my yawning cat and post it. The hearts come. I should be writing. I will, once I check my email. I reply to three emails. The appearance of doing something. Facebook. More likes. A comment. Cuteness overload, writes an acquaintance who I usually just greet on the street, now it seems we are closer. I like her comment. I am tired. I should be writing. I should go for a walk. Or at least work out. I don't have time for a walk or working out. I must write. I check Twitter. I open a beer. An hour goes by. Maybe two. A red notice appears on my messenger. A co-worker is asking when we will publish her article. I reply while diagonally reading an essay by Simone Weil. I am interested in the intensity of Simone's eyes. I am googling but do not find a useful picture. I light a cigarette and take a sip of beer. I am putting out the cigarette and lighting a cigarillo. I take a drag, two. Three, eight. Beer. Cigarillo. Twitter. Facebook. Chat: a guy I know sends me a Youtube link. I don't like the song. I close it. Beer. Cigarette. A sip of beer... I run to the bathroom and throw up. Once, twice. Another time, maybe. Yes. Three times.

I drink water.

I take a shower.

I look at the time: twelve thirty.

Now I can write.

(p. 32-33)

I was finishing grade school—just barely, with D's and C's—when my sister, who by then had already lived in Ljubljana for a while, suggested I come and live with her and go to school in the capital. She was only twenty-two when she assumed the burden of parenthood. For the second time now, only the first was not by choice: when my parents were building our house, she had to take care of me. She was eight. They pushed a baby in her lap, and that was it—a self-evident thing that entertained no debate. So I was especially attached to her; when she went out as a teenager, I begged her in child talk: “I also go with me!” I know I was a burden; she was, after all, still a child herself. Despite that, or perhaps because the responsibility of parenthood was already familiar to her, at twenty-two, barely grown up, she asked me to come and live with her.

She shared a one-bedroom apartment with a friend. They worked as waitresses to make it through the month, and I got a mattress that was separated from the room with a wardrobe. All I could contribute to the common household was a government scholarship, or what was left of it after I, unused to money, spent it on frivolities.

At that time, my sister was starting to discover the party culture, and I shared in her discoveries. We three roommates spent an evening drinking in a bar on Trubar Street called *Motherfucker*, which I thought was daring and interesting, just as the whole city of Ljubljana was full of things and people you could not see in the village, which all made it very enticing. Quite drunk, we went to the club K4, a known underground setting for electronic music and other subcultures. The nineties were coming to an end, and rave began to make a splash—world-famous DJs from the USA, Britain, and Italy started coming to Slovenia, where a local scene was forming with Umek, Valentino Kanzyani, and others.

When we went down the stairs into the club and pulled back the red velvet curtain, I experienced the biggest culture shock

of my life until that moment. I was suddenly faced with a new world, here between the black and silver walls, flooded by the lights, full of people in brightly coloured clothes, with wild haircuts, but most of all full of... techno. Loud, vibrating, all-encompassing techno. This is music that was created for clubs, and until you hear it in this setting, you have not yet experienced its full power. Techno swept over me like a giant wave and threatened to carry me away.

I got scared and went to seek shelter in the bathroom. *What is this? What is happening?* I wondered, filled with adrenaline. In the mirror, I saw my childish braids, the regular cotton shirt with a generic caption, and then looked down at my brown corduroy pants and bright yellow boots. It did not seem like I was standing out much. It did not seem like I did not belong. *Well, this is it, jump right in,* I told the image in the mirror and went back to the dance floor. I spent some time by the door, shyly observing what was going on. My sister and her roommate disappeared from my mind, even though they must have been there; perhaps they were even talking to me. I can only remember the boy smiling at me, noticing my awkwardness, and who finally, with a hand reaching out, invited me in: come and dance.

And I went.

(p. 46–48)

## Dijana Matković,

was a coeditor of the Comparative Literature student's review *Izmus*, and then she edited the web portal *Airbeletrina*. She writes for the majority of the main Slovenian publications and works as an editor for many media projects. Since 2020, she has been the editor of the web portal *Disenz*. She published a hybrid collection of "short short stories" (*V imenu očeta*, Goga) in 2013 that was nominated for the literary debut of the year award. She was the programme manager of the Slovenian Critics Association and a member of the programme board of the Slovenian Book Days festival. She translates literature from the languages of former Yugoslavia for a number of Slovenian publishers. She edited a collection of essays by Slovenian and foreign writers on fears, phobias, and anxieties with the title *Anthology of Anxiety* (LUD Literatura, 2016). Her essayistic novel *Why I Don't Write* (*Zakaj ne pišem*, Cankarjeva založba) was published in 2022 and was the first book from Slovenia to be included on the books programme of the Berlinale film festival. It was shortlisted for the Kresnik award for the Slovenian novel of the year.

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PINO  
POGRAJC

*proverb*  
**IV.**

I pull the socks off her swollen feet,  
bring her glasses of water,  
drip morphine,  
change her sheets,  
melt wax,  
scrub the floor,  
wash the laundry,  
do the dishes,  
untangle the knot,  
make breakfast,  
make coffee,  
make myself ready  
for everything

*use me like a paddle,  
to get to shore*

*Trgetanje,*  
Črna skrinjica,  
2022

***thirst***  
**V.**

he asks me often,  
if I love him

my hair stands on end,  
my stomach turns  
and my eyes glaze over

perhaps because,  
I do

I will never know what caused  
the cycles of addiction,  
I will never forgive him

usually I do not reply,  
I am silent,  
soaked in guilt

*what kind of a son would I be,  
if I did not?*

***ancient fear scratches***  
**I.**

I was in the car with my mum,  
with my dad on the phone

after a month of growing delusions,  
recognising ill intentions  
in the eyes of all who wish me well,  
the stream of my thoughts  
reached its culmination  
in a psychotic eruption

*I contribute nothing,  
I am merely a burden*

*he will kill me*

in a rush of panic  
I looked for a way out  
and thought of it, a bright spot,  
a refuge

*I have to check in*

in the car I pretended,  
I could no longer speak,  
I began to babble,  
coughing up consonants,  
drooling around the mouth,  
because I knew,  
for my mum it wouldn't be enough just to say,  
take me there

terrified, she asked me,  
if I wanted to be treated,  
and I nodded

## ***brotherhood***

my brother is studying economy  
and has an analytical approach  
to the problems of the world

he voted for tonin, because  
*who could he screw over?*  
*just look at his face*

when he buys a baseball bat,  
I ask him, why,  
and he explains  
*sometimes you need to screw someone over*

when I ask him,  
why he never posts pictures  
on social media  
and never likes anything,  
he explains that  
*you have to maintain the mystery*

when I ask him,  
why is he carrying  
weights in his school backpack,  
he enlightens me  
*you have to look good*

he was 12 years old  
when I wanted to tell him,  
I liked men

I tore out my hair for a week,  
gulped down vomit  
and prepared a speech

at the seaside I told him to sit down,  
told him that I wanted him  
to hear something *from me*,  
*not from others*

he interrupted me  
*you're gay, right?*  
and hugged me,  
while tears ran  
down my cheeks

## *koseze, slovenia*

there is cbd in the air of the living room  
and you are sitting next to me  
and aretha franklin is singing  
*nessun dorma*  
on a portable speaker  
and it is coming  
that trill  
at the third *vincero*  
and I want to see  
    how you feel  
because you probably heard pavarotti  
so many times  
that it became routine  
    but aretha feels  
    and I feel  
and I stare at you  
from across the desk  
and *all'alba vincero*  
and do you even understand  
and will you ever understand  
and my lips start to tremble  
and my eyes start to close  
because *vincero* comes  
and you are so beautiful  
and *VINCERO* comes  
and I look at the ceiling  
    because you are empty  
and the recording ends  
and you flick the ashes  
and we are silent

*Trepete,*  
ŠKUC, 2024

## ***pančevo, serbia*** **II.**

in may 2023 I am invited to pančevo  
as a guest of a festival for an anthology of authors  
from ex-yugoslavian countries

at a writing workshop I mention  
that I write queer literature

when I reveal myself,  
I always look at the ground,  
so I can ignore the facial expressions,  
whatever they're like

after the workshop the serbian organiser  
tells the slovenian editor,  
to tell me in my own language,  
that at the literary event in front of the audience  
it would be better not to talk about those topics

*it is not forbidden,  
but you never know,  
what kind of people are in the audience*

*it is for your safety*

and I say nothing

## **Pino Pograjc,**

born in 1997, is finishing his master's degree in English studies and Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. He grew up in Kamnik, where he first read his poems in poetry slam competitions, notching a few victories. In 2022, he became part of the selection team for the LGBT Film Festival in Ljubljana. That same year, the publisher Črna skrinjica published his debut collection of poetry, ***Rippering*** (*Trgetanje*), which received the Best Literary Debut Award at the Slovenian Book Fair. He joined the international poetry project POT-VOT (Poetry of the present – Voices of the future) in 2023, which sees contemporary poets visiting Slovenian high schools. His poem »*burleska*« was translated into Serbian for the anthology *Rukopisi*. Lidija Dimkovska translated a selection of his poems into Macedonian for the platform Blesok. sst. Dr. Anamarija Šporčič included his poetry in her lecture on Slovenian LGBT+ literature at St. Mary's College of Maryland in the USA. Prof. Dr. Borut Škodlar invited him to speak at the 2023 international conference *Contemplative Traditions and Psychotherapy*, where, in conversation with Prof. Škodlar, Pograjc spoke about poetry as a way to give meaning to psychotic experiences.

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## *Arlan Under the Carpet*

ANDREJ  
PREDIN

*Arlan pod  
preprogo,*  
Morfemplus,  
2022

Specks of silver dust glittered through the air, dancing playfully as they looked for a suitable place to land, once the stormy booming of the vacuum cleaner had moved south, and the world was covered in a thick blanket of silence once more. Then it would be hard to believe how violently everything had just shook and groaned and crackled, as the terrifying contraption roared across the block of sky; a mighty machine that sucks into its insatiable belly everything that isn't fixed, stuck, or glued down.

Everyone would agree that the storm was especially bad that night. Even the fearless dust mites had run for cover to perform their evil deeds who knows where, and yet the wonderful Earring strode out into the tempest. The wind whirled fiercely, howled and wailed, but could not drown out the strange moaning that had caught her attention. She walked decisively, shielding her eyes from the flying dust. Making her way through a thick tangle of hair and sewing threads, she got stuck briefly in a piece of tape, and by the time she arrived at her destination, the storm had passed.

She stopped in front of the Eternal Sea, which was still roiling from the storm, though trying to calm down. Nobody knew where the Eternal Sea began, just as nobody knew where the Eternal Sea ended. Every now and then an interesting artifact washed on the shore, or a creature turned up, who could not say how they got there. But never, truly never before, had something as unusual as this appeared on the shore – there was a boy lying in the sand.

The boy was soaked and frightened. Earring thought of all the sad things she had seen in her life, and life offers us many, but she had never seen anything as sad as this. If she had a heart, she would have shed a tear. But she didn't. Her body was hard and cold. There was a large red ruby where her heart should be. The precious stone glittered for all to see. If a person looked at it, their face split into ten red faces, who grimaced back at them, or stuck out their tongues at the same time. Earring never cried, because she did not have a heart, but this doesn't mean that she was not kind-hearted. There was not a single beating heart in the world Under the Carpet; that was just how it was. Even the mites didn't have hearts, though that surprised precisely no one. She was glad the block of sky was still empty from the storm.

Earring had spent so much time in the world Under the Carpet that she could no longer remember what it was like outside, but still she could not get used to the mites. She had learned to ignore their teasing and constant grumbling, but she found it hard to accept that someone was always watching her. At least they slept at night, their behinds shining above her head, so that the block of sky resembled a starry night. The only difference being that the stars Under the Carpet changed each night, with patterns that would drive any sailor crazy, surely crashing his boat on the rocks as soon as it left the port. It was usually the part of the sky where something bad had happened during the day that shone the brightest, as the mites were curious creatures, attracted by the misfortune of others. Whenever someone felt bad, they began to gather and stoke his sadness.

The boy was crying silently when he noticed someone approaching, so he turned and wrapped his hands around his banged-up knees.

*"Why are you crying, sweet boy? The storm has passed,"* sang Earring.

The boy opened his large dark eyes, wiped his tears and stood up. They looked at each other for a while and an eternity seemed to have passed before she broke the awkward silence: *"My name is Earring, and this is my ruby."*

The gentle being tried to speak, but words would not roll off his tongue. At the end, the little boy managed to ask, puzzled: *"Why can't I remember my name?"*

Earring smiled at him gently, took a step forward and said: *"Nothing to worry about, little one. I am sure your memory will come back soon."*

*"No it won't, puff, puff!"* could be heard from above.

Earring furrowed her brow and pointed towards the block of sky: *"Don't pay any attention to their horrid whispers. They will fill your ears with bad words and give you a headache."*

The boy lifted his gaze and saw the furry creatures gathering above them. He could clearly see their faces, their menacing eyes and the four pairs of legs that carried their round bodies.

*"Hey, you! Crying boy. What are you doing here? You have no right to be here, go away!"* the mites began to scream all at once.

The boy looked down.

Earring would have liked to get mad at the mites, but she knew that would only make them louder.

*"Come, dear boy, come, I'll make you some tea. Oh, you poor thing, you are soaking wet."*

*"Hurry, hurry, puff, puff, you can run, but you can never run away, we see and hear everything!"* the mites shouted after them.

Even though they have four pairs of them, the mite's legs do not serve them well. They are constantly tripping over them,

so their movements are cumbersome and slow. Luckily, this makes it easier to run away.

Earring's room was lit by a fireplace. Earring sat the soaked boy down in front of the fire, covered him with a blanket and went to the kitchen to make tea. The warmth of the flames caressed his face and made him drowsy, but the room was so interesting that he would not give in to tiredness. There were hundreds of shining objects on the shelves; pieces of glass and plastic and metal ornaments and rainbow-coloured insect shells. He noticed that Earring kept everything in pairs, two seats in front of the fireplace, two plates on the table with two chairs, two windows with two curtains. Everything was in a pair. With one exception. Above the fireplace, there was a single large painting of two ruby earrings holding hands.

His host came back from the kitchen and the smell of sweet tea filled the air. The boy took the offered cup gladly and took a cautious sip, careful not to burn his lips.

*"He is so cute,"* thought Earring.

*"Thank you for the tea,"* the boy whispered timidly. *"You have a very beautiful house."*

If Earring could blush, she would.

*"Sweet boy, you don't need to be so polite. I know you are confused and must have questions. Go ahead, ask."*

*"Where am I?"* the boy erupted. *"How did I get here? Who are you? Why can't I remember my name? Where are my mum and dad?"*

The kind host sat down and began to speak in a calm, confiding voice: *"The land Under the Carpet is spread out as far as your eyes can see. There is the Eternal Sea at one end, the Great Wall at the other. Nobody remembers how they got here, and nobody has ever been able to leave, unless they were taken*

*away by the terrifying Inspectors. They are horrible, horrible creatures,"* said Earring, looked around carefully, then continued in a brighter tone. *"You will get used to it very quickly, there are many interesting and even amusing beings here, and they will all be glad to keep you company."*

The boy listened intently while sipping his tea.

*"But before this happens, we are faced with a challenge. It is urgent that you remember your name. You cannot stay here without a name. Those are the rules."*

*"I have a name, I know I do,"* the boy groaned.

*"This will cause problems with the cruel Inspectors. They think that beings without a name are harmful strangers, that they are unnecessary, just here to be a nuisance and a burden, so they track down the nameless wretches and carry them away,"*

*"Who are the Inspectors? Where do they take the nameless ones?"* the boy asked.

*"Well, the Inspectors are a bit like police officers, yes, that's about right. As to where they take the nameless, well, nobody really knows,"* she admitted. *"There are rumours they take them to the Rift, where ..."* she grew silent for a moment, *"well, no need to burden ourselves with that right now."*

*"I could just make up a name and nobody would know. It could be our secret,"* the boy suggested.

*"Oh, we wouldn't be the first to think of that. But it won't work. The Inspectors can see through such lies. We all have just one real name and nobody can make it up. To the Inspectors, we are all worth no more or less than our names."*

The boy took a final sip of tea, emptied the cup and put it on the table. Then he stared at the dancing flames in the fireplace. The conversation had exhausted him. His eyelids grew heavier.



“Dear boy,” said Earring in a gentle voice. “*You should gather your strength. Tomorrow is a new day and everything will be easier. Who knows, you might even remember your name and then we can start looking for your parents.*”

He was overwhelmed with fatigue before she even finished the sentence. Earring gently fixed his blanket, then sat back, drunk her own tea and admired the little boy. She watched him for hours, maybe even days, who could tell?

In the land Under the Carpet time is a mind bogglingly complex thing that no one ever really gets used to. Sometimes it speeds by in a rush, as if trying to catch the bus, but then it almost stops and stands still. It comes as no surprise that everyone here is constantly late, or arriving much too early, if they even arrive at all. Sometimes it even happens that they never leave, and this is truly frightful, and the confusion all the larger.

“*Sorry for being right on time,*” Izo squeaked and proceeded to wipe the soles of his many feet on the doormat. The little crab was Earring’s faithful friend and confidant. They had lived through many an adventure together. There were evenings when they talked until the early morning hours, when the mites’ behinds stopped glowing and the dawn came, along with the creatures’ taunting. Their jibes were especially juicy in the mornings.

“*Why is it so crowded around your house today? The mites are tripping over each other,*” Izo wanted to know. “They are saying you are harbouring a stranger. The rumours are spreading all over; I came as quickly as my feet could carry me.”

Earring pointed towards the fireplace, where the boy was fast asleep. Izo quickly hurried over to the child, climbed up his leg to his lap, to his shoulders, walked across his head and jumped to the ground on the other side.

“*A strange thing, this. Did you notice that it is moving?*” Izo again wanted to know.

“*Oh, you silly,*” she smiled. “*It is a little boy.*”

“*A boy, you say?*” the crab repeated and approached the unusual being. He paid much attention to the soles of his feet, thoroughly examining them with his antennas.

“*Aha!*” he cried out suddenly. “*I knew at once I have seen them before. These feet. How could I forget that I spent my entire childhood running away from feet just like this, oh horror.*”

Earring bent down and caressed her friend’s head: “*That was in another world, in a different time. Look, his feet are too small to hurt you now.*”

“*That does appear to be true,*” Izo agreed. “*And what is his name?*”

Earring sipped her tea, cold now, pretending she hadn’t heard the question.

“*Well, what’s his name?*” Izo insisted.

“*He can’t remember his name,*” she admitted.

The crab lifted his feelers high up in the air, bulged his eyes and whispered in a fright: “*Are you trying to tell me he doesn’t have a name?*”

“*He certainly does have a name, it is just that he cannot remember it right at the moment,*” Earring continued, setting her cup on the table in annoyance.

Izo looked stiffly to the left and right, then drew closer to his friend: “*You know they will come to get him. If they’re not already on their way! You know full well what they will do to us, we need to report him immediately. It might not be too late.*”

He ran to the window, shifted the curtain and peeked out.

*“Look at him, puff, puff,”* the mites whistled. *“There he is!”*

The crab closed the curtain quickly, moved backward from the window and bumped into the table, causing the cups to come crashing to the floor. The clatter startled the boy, who woke up, yawned and opened his big black eyes. Izo grew still for a moment and looked at Earring in fear. She smiled at him, but the smile froze on her lips when a loud knock on the door rang out.

*“Open up, this is an inspection. Open the door immediately! We suspect there is a stranger hiding in your house!”*

Earring grabbed the boy by the arm and quickly dragged him to an adjoining room. She strained to move a large wardrobe that was hiding a secret passage behind it.

*“Little boy, I am sorry to say we have run out of time. If we had too much of it before, now we have not enough. My friend Izo will take you to the Blue Bandage, who will help you find a name.”*

The boy looked at the frightened crab: *“I do have a name, I know I do, I just cannot remember it,”* he sighed.

She gently caressed his cheek and gave him a backpack with an oil lamp inside.

*“Izo is a good friend, you can trust him. He knows the way through the underground maze.”*

A fierce crash rang out. The Inspectors broke the front door down.

*“Run, boy, run,”* she cried out and watched as the boy and the crab disappeared into the tunnel. She pushed the large wardrobe back in its place, stroked her ruby and walked towards the Inspectors who were rummaging through the drawers and moving furniture around.

*“How can I help you, gentlemen?”* she addressed them politely, charming them with a smile. The brutes did not look nice at all. They had large flat TV screens constantly running streams of tiny numbers where their heads should be. Their long slim bodies wore black jackets and trousers. They all looked the same, you could not tell one from another.

*“Where is he hiding?”* the intruders asked all at once.

*“There is nobody here,”* she replied, feigning offense at such an accusation. *“May I offer you a cup of tea?”*

She knew full well the Inspectors did not drink tea, just as nobody ever saw them eat anything. They intimidated everything that moves, digs, walks, or is leaning against another thing.

It was said that one time they took a nameless stranger to The Rift – the hole that a burning ember had drilled into the block of sky – and left him there, tied down. The poor fellow was sucked into the vacuum next time the storm came.

*“Reliable sources notified us you are hiding a nameless guest. Hand him over at once, or you will be punished,”* their robotic voices threatened.

If they had known Earring, they would know she would never betray her friends.

The Inspector standing nearest to her suddenly began to stare at her ruby. The numbers on his screen went wild, he went down on all fours and began to crawl towards her. He was drawing closer in a menacing way, knocking down everything in his path. Soon the rest of the Inspectors were doing the same, crawling towards her like giant spiders, staring at her ruby and repeating: *“Come back, come back, come back ...”*

The oil lamp was a godsend for the boy and the crab as they made their way through the maze of underground hallways leading from Earring’s home. The boy was desperate. He was

completely dependent on this strange crab he did not know and had no reason to trust.

*“Hurry, next left, and now right,”* the crab instructed. They ran as hard as they could and reached the exit completely exhausted.

*“Oh no, today is not my lucky day,”* Izo whimpered, while the boy was still catching his breath. The child turned around and saw a giant floating black wall before him, stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see. The surface of the wall was completely smooth, and its black colour was so deep no reflection could escape.

*“No, today is truly not my lucky day,”* the crab said again: *“Of all the times we had to run into an empty promise just now.”*

*“This black thing is an empty promise?”* the little boy wondered.

*“Yes, there are quite a few of them in the land Under the Carpet,”* Izo explained. *“This one is especially large.”*

*“What is an empty promise?”* asked the boy carefully, while constantly glancing at the tunnel exit, worried that the Inspectors are going to appear in any moment.

*“Well, something quite common around here. Somebody promised something, then immediately broke his promise. The bigger the promise, the heavier it is. But because it is empty, it never touches the ground.”*

## Andrej Predin,

born in 1976, works as a writer, journalist, dramaturge and scriptwriter. His first three novels, *Na zeleno vejo* (2007), *Učiteljice* (2010) and *Prihodnost d.o.o.* (2017), were written for adults. In collaboration with the illustrator Marijan Manček he then wrote four children's books about a girl called Mica (*Mica pri babici: Čarobni cilindar*, 2013; *Mica pri babici: Čarovniki iz dežele Merikaka*, 2014, *Mica pri babici: Podivjane princeske*, 2015 and *Mica pri babici: Ugrabljeni Božiček*, 2018), which were translated into English and Turkish. His ecological picture book *Gnusna kalnica* was nominated for the Desetnica Award for best children's and young adult book by the Slovenian Writers' Association and has also been translated into English and Turkish. His children's book *Čebula Grdula* was published in 2015. In 2018, the German translation of an excerpt from his novel *Na zeleno vejo* was published in the anthology *Gegen den Ball* by Sisyphus Verlag. In 2020, his children's book *Vesoljčki* was published by Mladinska knjiga, followed by *Arlan Under the Carpet* (*Arlan pod preprogo*, illustrated by Peter Škerl) with the same publisher in 2022. For the latter, he received the Desetnica Award for best children's and young adult book. His most recent children's book *Boljšji cirkus* was published in 2024.

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PIA  
PREZELJ

## *Heavy Water*

*Težka voda,*

Goga, 2022

Ida was staring at the colours turning in the foamy water. The first batch of clothes, held in the air with clothespins, was already stretched out between the two apple trees in the garden. In the mornings, the swallows liked to join the clothes on the line, jumping and chirping and crowding around the feeder. On the hill that rose from the village like a nipple, a little church glittered; the loud chimes of its bells burrowed into the plain, mingling with the sound of a tractor that rumbled over potatoes and rapeseed.

Ida stared at the colours while misfortune roamed her garden, sticking its nose into zinnias and nibbling on the bramble. To her right, someone was sipping coffee, making gurgling sounds and whistling out of tune. Ida squeezed the warm and slimy blacks with her fingers, and wondered whether she should be forgiving and gracious this time as well. She licked her finger and decided to charge at the man, terrible as an army with banners. After all, it had been a long time since she'd had any real fun.

The waiting room of the hospital ER was a field of orange – peeling orange walls, rows of orange chairs and orange linoleum. Orangey teeth of laughing nurses and the orangey hue of their skin. They sat Ida on one of the hard chairs, pushed a questionnaire into her hands and told her You'll be comfortable here. She went through the purse between her legs, felt a cotton handkerchief, a handful of walnuts, an old lipstick. A squishy spoiled pear had stuck to her wallet. She would have to stand up and get a pencil, explain that she could not fill out the form without one, but she was too lazy, and her ankles hurt, her feet were swollen like a drowned man's.

Instead, she sucked and chewed on the pear, so juice dripped down her chin and trickled along her forearm. A girl in a stained bathrobe was coughing in the corner of the room, choking and gasping and leaning against the wall, shifting her feet in fluffy purple slippers with pom-poms. A boy with a busted upper lip sat across from her, slurping juice from a carton.

Ida allowed herself to imagine that the child belonged to her, that she had given birth to him, breastfed him, raised him, and now she would call him back at any moment and he would come running, of course, he would grab her arm and cling to her neck. She would stroke his head, bury her nose in his hair, it would smell of soap, butter, the sweet joy of motherhood, sticky like caramel. She knew this would finally put to rest the rumours that she had sat on a fireplace as a little girl and burned herself so badly that nothing could be done; the poor thing could only sit on the edge of her right buttock, and as a wife, she proved completely useless. On top of all that, she reeked of burnt flesh down there.

At first the other women had tried to help. They recommended poultices – concoctions of St. John’s wort and marigold oil – and encouraged her to sit in warm water every day, in the bucket in which she had previously boiled comfrey, but they soon realised that more drastic measures were necessary. Then they prayed for Ida and lit candles for her in wayside chapels, but after years of effort it was decided this was all in vain, and it was simply God’s will. They pitied her then, and tried to cheer her up by saying I can bring mine over, if you want, so you won’t be lonely. Ida thought this was pointless until she fell down the stairs one day, ending up in hospital with a broken leg, where they asked Should we call one of your children? And, panicking, she gave them her own phone number.

Ma’am? said someone behind Ida. Have you filled out the questionnaire yet?

I couldn’t find a pencil, she said, spreading the sticky pear juice over her chin and neck and wiping it with her sleeve.

ve. The voice sat down next to her, leaned in closer, turned softer.

Can you tell me what happened?

He just stretched out across the plot, across the parsley and carrots, and lay there all broken, Ida was supposed to say, but she only said Did you find out what’s wrong with him? And when can we leave?

I’m not sure, ma’am, but it won’t take long, I can’t tell you, I understand, I understand, yes, I think it’s best you wait down the hallway, the door next to last.

Ida shifted in her seat, leaning back and forth. The girl in the purple slippers disappeared and was replaced by a young man with his hands in plaster, covered with dried blood, who was barking into his phone, Tell that little bitch I’m waiting for him, tell him, yeah, tell him that.

A nurse appeared from behind the corner and motioned her to get up. The young man stopped yapping at his phone for a moment, pulled a cigarette from his pocket and pushed it through his broken teeth. Ida grabbed the questionnaire, her coat and purse and followed the nurse over the linoleum. The squeak squeak of clogs and carts, stretchers, and nursing beds.

Did you find out what’s wrong with him yet? Can you tell me?

No reply, other than the swaying of the behind that lead her down the hallway, here and there, here and there, here and there, here and

Ida sunk into the stained plaid pattern and dropped her purse. She found the wet wipes in the glove compartment and wiped her forearm, chin, cheeks, eyelids, nose, cleaning off the snot mixed with the sweetness of the pear. She put the key in, turned it and yelped. The car jumped like a cat touching water, bristled to its tail and jerked forward an inch, pushing Ida against the wheel, then broke down. She stayed like that for a long time, too long – with her forehead against the wheel and her hands on the back of her head – so that

when she straightened up there was a red arch connecting her eyebrows. She tried again, pushing the pedal and turning the key with greater care.

*latest information there were seven killed in the accident, with eleven severely wounded while the train conductor contacted his supervisors multiple times before the accident, asking for technical help, as per the public statement of the representative of the Taiwanese railroad agency*

The car was humming and puffing as Ida drove carelessly, staying in first gear through crossroads and all the signals of red stop yellow stop green go,

*slightly overcast, more sunny weather in the west, in the morning and early afternoon in parts of northern and northeastern*

her gums ached, fingernails hurt, eyeballs burned, she needed sleep, a dreamless night, a new morning, she wanted to forget the purple slippers with pom-poms, the carton, the linoleum,

*the most common and disruptive disease in the commercial production of apples; with the types resistant to scab there is no real need for regular spraying, but I would still recommend*

she drove much too slowly, so people honked behind her, but she could only hear the humming of the car the squeak squeak of clogs tell that little bitch I'm waiting for him tell him yeah tell him

\*

At the edge of the garden the blackberries glistened with rain and dew, ripe and full of sweetness. The trunks of the pear trees were slippery, the apples were slippery, the stalks of parsley were slippery. The towels and sheets had escaped the grasp of their clothespins and collapsed in soggy piles amongst the trees. Something like a lawnmower rattled from the neighbouring garden, turned off, started, turned off again, started.

Ida did not care about the slippery stalks or the slippery apples. She was in bed, covers over her head, trying to breathe through the tingling that crept up her feet and ankles at night. She counted to thirty, recited the great wars, sang lullabies, and tried to name all the mountains in the Julian Alps. It did not help one bit. She thought of

Don't. Don't do this. If you think about it, it will only get worse. Get out of bed. Left leg out, then the right one. Come on, you don't have a choice.

She climbed out of bed and got to her feet. She took off the sweaty clothes from the day before, changed her underwear, put on a fresh shirt and dragged herself to the kitchen, to the pot of cold, stale coffee, a cube of sugar, a slice of bread with butter and honey and a carton of milk. Laying near the plate was BUY WD40 GREASE IT DOCTOR RAVNIKAR

Ida took out her dentures over the sink, washed her face, spat out the acidity and rinsed her mouth. She went through the cabinet, took out a blue box and swallowed a pill, then another. To seal the deal, she dissolved a lemon-and-orange flavoured painkiller in some water and drank it with another two pills from a different box. She limped to the window and let down the blinds, then stood in the semi-darkness and stared at the flickering light, listened to the dewing, the babbling, the humming.

When she began to shiver, she went back to bed barefoot and barelegged.

After about an hour, an old man in a frock walked up

the village hill. He sighed and sniffled, wiped his nose while walking, cursed his weak lungs. He unlatched a wooden door, hitched up his clothes, and climbed to the top of the belltower. The bell rang three times – loudly, greedily, shrilly – announcing the death of the man who spent his mornings whistling out of tune.

The slope was steep, overgrown with ferns and moss, it was moist, narrow, muddy. Wearing a yellow raincoat, Ida was making her way up with a wicker basket in her hand, though she did not know why and she could have sworn her legs were carrying her on their own. She noticed a giant russula mushroom to her left, grabbed it by the stem, twisted and pulled it out of the ground, cleaned it a bit, shook off the earth, then turned around. There was a hairy man standing before her.

She shifted on her feet, slipped on a damp, slick root and fell, oh my, oh boy.

Well, there is really no need to be afraid of me, he said through his beard and offered her a hand in help.

She just stared at him at first, then offered him the basket instead of her hand, as if he had come to rob her, as if saying Here you go.

I was told to make this quick, but well, if you're offering, he smiled, reached for the russula, sniffed it, and took a small bite.

Your desire will be for your husband, he said while looking at the mushroom and moved a step closer so she could smell his breath – I know that smell, she thought, the smell of ants, of anthills – so she could feel it, warm, sticky, corrosive.

Your desire will be for your husband and he shall rule over you until you return to the ground just like this thing, he told her and stuffed the russula in his mouth, grimaced, chewed on it, sniffed, then chewed again for a long, long time, before he pulled out a worm from his teeth, wagged it in front of her face and said Guess what makes me laugh.

Ida was silent, she stared at the animal and felt like throwing up.

Man feeds other creatures to feed himself with them, and feeds himself for the maggots. Isn't that absolutely brilliant?

The knocking woke her up. Someone was banging at the window, shouting Ida! Ida, open up! and peering through the blinds. Ida got up and put on her socks, trousers and a sweater. She rinsed her mouth, put in her dentures and drank some water. The banging moved to the doors, shouting Is anyone home? Hello? Hello? I just came to say hello!

Ida opened the door.

Oh my, you're home, said the woman in the plastic boots that left a trail of manure crumbs behind them. Sorry to bother you, I was ringing and ringing but you didn't hear.

Yes, I was asleep, said Ida, even though she wanted to say What do you want this time, Marta? She did not have to wait long for an answer.

I saw the ambulance and then I heard the bells ring. My condolences, Ida, I am so sorry, he was a fine man, not many like him. You really never know. Remember how it was when our Tone went? I was completely lost, you know, and then Lojze told me to go down to pray to Mary and light a candle each morning and say, Tone, I forgive you. So, I went there every day, you know, and it helped me quite a bit. Do you have an ache in your gums? I had it often. And the fingernails, the hair, you can't believe it. Of course, you know where that chapel is?

By Bognarček.

Yes, on the corner. Go there in the morning when it is fresh outside, to catch some air and come to your senses. I can see the way you look.

Ida turned around and shut the door in her face, forgot to say I have to go, thank you for stopping by. Marta took her time milling about and peering through the windows, then went home through the forest where Tone had chopped wood every Sunday until a giant falling beech had squashed his head

and left Marta alone to take care of the chickens, the son, and the cows.

Ida stood in front of the closed door, waiting for

Absolutely nothing. What was there to wait for now? Don't spread nonsense.

She was waiting to gather the strength to walk and move, to drag herself to the cabinet and the faucet and the sink, to the blue box with the pills. As she swallowed another two, she remembered she had to eat, that she was told Not on an empty stomach, or you will throw up. She took the butter from the fridge and sliced it like bread and took it with her to bed. She put one slice after another in her mouth and just waited for the grease to slide down her throat. She rubbed her eyes with sticky fingers, put down the plate, covered herself. A stuffed rabbit was staring at her from the nightstand. Do you remember where you got me? Do you remember how it was, then? Why the hell are you stuffing yourself with butter?

Of course, she remembered – the first Fiat, August, mountains, the scent of the woods and sweat and cheese. It turned greasy in the heat; they diced it and ate it with bread and peppers. In Vals they spent some time in a small hotel and shared the bathroom with an older couple from Rovereto. They kept saying kebelo, kebelo at lunch, on the terrace, while on a walk, kebelo with each coffee, cigarette, game of cards. Kebelo, Ida repeated, until they taught her how to soften her tongue and hold it until it snaps on the palate. Che bello, she laughed, still with teeth of her own then. They picked mushrooms, dried them on the balcony, stored them to take home, explored all the surrounding hills. A few days before they left, a man appeared at the hotel with a backpack full of animals – shabbily stuffed mice, squirrels, rabbits, all with bulging eyes. Oh, che bello, the old lady caressed the rodents, poked their ears, snouts, then bought a rabbit and gave it to Ida, even though she resisted vigorously. They must both already be six feet under or in disgusting urns, she managed to think to herself before someone turned out the lights.

\*

First, she got rid of the bread the flies were grazing on, then the milk and sugar. She threw the coffee in the pot among the asters, picked up the sheets and towels, the stained overalls, hung them back up with the clothespins so they dangled in the warm wind. Thick tomatoes were bursting on the plot, bending the branches and dripping down each other and the soil. She was supposed to pick them, pulp them, freeze them. She was supposed to sow the radishes and the winter leek, pour wood ash over the carrots, sow lamb's lettuce, chard, Brussels sprouts. And the beets, black radishes, swedes and turnips, she was supposed to pick the ripe eggplants and peppers, support the branches of the pear and apple trees, spray the plots with chive tea and weed them, water them with nettles. She will do none of the above – not today, not tomorrow, not in the days to come.

You have to eat, she thought, remembering the nurse, Most stop eating, you know, most stop washing and moving and sleeping. I know it will be hard, but you mustn't forget, write it down on a piece of paper.

She dragged herself to the kitchen, grabbed three slices of bread, some minced lard and pickles, and collapsed into the folds of her sofa. There was a box on the table next to the papers that for years – decades – kept pins, needles, threads, a used tape measure, scissors, and buttons under the sign ROYAL DANSK. She was supposed to taper and hem the pants for that one and sew up the apron and the blouse for that other one who was married to Mežnar, to uphold the neighbourly relations, as she put it. Ida now cared nothing for good relations, for all the aprons and blouses and all the lives the women – these and all the rest – will lead, for all the money she used to make by sewing. Now it was her gums that stung, her fingernails that ached, her eyeballs that burned. Her feet turned purple overnight, they stung, ached, burned. She gnawed on the pickles, fishing them out of the glass with her fingers, dipped the bread in the lard and stared at the air



above her, until she returned to the kitchen, to dissolve the powder and swallow the pills once again. The crumpled piece of paper was still on the kitchen table, BUY WD40 GREASE IT DOCTOR RAVNIKAR, words Ida no longer understood, their meaning was stuck in the easier days, shrunk to meaninglessness, to the shallowness of shopping, greasing, calling (calling those who can no longer help, who can only say We're sorry or You should have called us sooner). She threw it in the bin, rinsed her mouth and returned to the folds of the sofa. She tried to fall asleep, but it was too bright; sharp sunlight poured into the room, battering the cabinet, the TV, and the aspidistra with pointed beams. Ida reached for the remote.

## Pia Prezelj,

born in 1995, is a writer, translator, and journalist for the cultural section of the main Slovenian newspaper *Delo*. In 2022, she was awarded the Young Journalist of the Year Watchdog Award by the Slovenian Journalists' Association. Her translation of Lucia Berlin's short story collection *A Manual for Cleaning Women* was published by Cankarjeva založba in 2018. Her novel *Heavy Water* (*Težka voda*, Založba Goga) was awarded the 2023 Best Literary Debut Award by the Slovenian Writers' Association.

*About the translator*

**Jasmin B. Frelih,**

born in 1986, is the author of three novels, a collection of short stories and a book of essays. His debut novel *In/Half* (Cankarjeva založba, 2013) won the European Union Prize for Literature and was translated into ten languages. *Pale Freedom* (Cankarjeva založba, 2018) won the Marjan Rožanc Award for the best book of essays. His latest work is the novel *The Ice Saints* (Beletrina, 2023) and a translation of *Libra* by Don DeLillo into Slovenian (Beletrina, 2023).

# Slovenian Book Agency: funding opportunities for foreign publishers

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Annual open call for translations from Slovenian and translations of works, written in other languages, when author is a part of Slovenian cultural environment. It includes first translations of adult fiction, children's and young adult fiction, essayistic and critical works on culture and the humanities, plays, graphic novels and comics. Applicants must be legal persons (publishing houses, theatres) registered outside Slovenia. The subsidy covers up to 100% and maximum of 10,000 EUR of the translation costs.

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