

Social Change

Contemporary Lithuanian Literature

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Social Change in Lithuanian Literature

This publication is our third anthology of contemporary Lithuanian literature translated into English¹ and it brings together a wide variety of Lithuanian prose writers, essayists, and playwrights. Rather than focusing on the differences in generational, aesthetic or ideological attitudes or literary status, this anthology brings together works whose common literary denominator is the theme of *social change* and whose numerator finds room for authors such as Ričardas Gavelis (1950–2002), Jurgis Kunčinas (1947–2002), Vanda Juknaitė (born 1949), Sigita Parulskis (born 1965), Herkus Kunčius (born 1965), Marius Ivaškevičius (born 1973), Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė (born 1976), among others.

The theme of social change that we have chosen covers the fundamental historical, social, and cultural shifts of the past few decades. From a historical point of view these works examine a specific period of political and social change – the extended period of Soviet occupation that interrupted Lithuania’s tradition of statehood, and the period after the re-establishment of Lithuania as an independent state in 1990. This was a period of unprecedented social change and has become not only a source² for literary history but also an object of creative reflection. Having in mind the movement of time, what is also important is the fact that the ‘starting point’ in the assessments of reality, connected with Lithuania’s ‘transition’ (around 1998) into the phase of global capitalism, signalled a change in the historical and literary timeline. This meant that not only was the road to democracy or free market economics opened up but also to the gap between the rich and the poor, social exclusion and alienation, etc.. Even in the world of Lithuanian literature it is evident that the factors of capitalism and globalization were at work, dictating new rules for the ‘game’. The first decade of Lithuania’s independence was marked by a remembrance of the past, an attempt at ‘writing out’ or ‘discharging’ all the things that were once forbidden, and attempts at reflecting on the experiences of the Soviet-era from a distance.

¹ The first anthology was *Sex: Lithuanian Style* (2011); the second – *No Men, No Cry* (2011) with prose by contemporary Lithuanian women writers.

² For example, the novel *Memoirs of a Young Man*, by Ričardas Gavelis, was published in periodicals in 1989 and marked the ‘independence’ of Lithuanian literature. It was one of the first works which declared the awakening of a free and critical consciousness.

However, today’s literature is marked by a tendency to mine present-day problems (like emigration, homosexuality, abandoned children and so on). In this anthology the concept of social change includes not only the politics of this turning point and its economic consequences, but also changes in Lithuanian culture, world-view, national identity, as well as in existential and creative experience. It should be noted that Lithuanian literature which is concerned with and which reflects social change broadly corresponds to an individual author’s sense of style and form. After all, the aesthetic form of a work flows from an understanding of the real world and in one way or another is suffused with the minutiae of social life; this is why it is the revealer and the assessor of the person being depicted and of his life.

This anthology presents only a small part of the world of post-independence Lithuanian literature through texts that best reveal the different social changes taking place. Because of this approach this book has been structured according to genre, i.e. novel, short story, essay, and drama.

This anthology gathers authors starting from the time of Independence (works written in the Soviet-era ‘for the drawer’) and finishing with authors who are publishing their works today, in 2012. It is not an arbitrarily chosen time period. The years following the re-establishment of Independence is marked by writers creating a great diversity of works dealing with these changing systems and world-views in a variety of aesthetic forms (from the rendering of existential experience to literary pastiche). The anthology includes the work of several generations of writers: those who grew up and matured under the Soviet system, bound by ideological dogma in a life of political and economic constrictions (Gavelis, Kunčinas, and Juknaitė, for example), but also the younger generation whose creative works matured in the period after Independence (Kunčius, Parulskis, Ivaškevičius, Černiauskaitė, and Labauskaitė, etc.). They are all united by a feeling for shifts in literature and tradition, anticipating a different outlook on the world, one that branches out into different directions.

The anthology begins with the work of Gavelis and Kunčinas, whose analysis and criticism of the Soviet system as a mechanism of totalitarianism depicts precisely how it crushed the fates of individuals. Gavelis writes about the all-encompassing sensation of absurdity – God’s Great Injustice – which is described as a metaphysical evil in the form of toxic air-borne spores, creating a totalitarian world of lies:

*In our muddled world it's absurd to ask a person directly: what do you really think of me? In the best case he will think you're an idiot. Or perhaps not and he will begin to wonder what your hidden intentions are. It wouldn't occur to anyone that you really want to know the truth. Each person immediately starts to guess at why you're asking such provocative questions, what answer you want to hear, and what you are going to use it for. People have long forgotten the Socratic oath to 'Know Thyself', and any person who follows it appears very suspect indeed. (Ričardas Gavelis, *Memoirs of a Young Man*)*

A somewhat different view of social change is offered up in Kunčinas's novel *Tūla*. From the point of view of a Soviet-era bohemian, this is one of the most interesting works representing the social and psychological existence of those 'dregs' of society unable to adapt to the totalitarian system, using alcohol to drown out their feeling of the existential meaningless of life. The novel strips away the Soviet reality and raises the fundamental question: what are society's 'rejects' to do in this 'Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors' suffused with lies?

The works of Gavelis and Kunčinas mark the line delineating the 'time before', and the distinctive analysis found in these works is carried on in the works of the 'cultural barbarian' Kunčius, but in his works the historical time period is recreated using biting satire and through grotesque parables of Soviet and post-Soviet society. The author boldly uses and in a paradoxical manner fuses together elements from history and the Bible, linking them together and connecting all the episodes in his novel into one metaphorical subject:

But for Dushansky this was not a terrible thing. No, he defended himself valiantly. And when Dushansky began to understand that the odds were not even, he took hold of a Pioneer who had fainted and held him in front of his chest, shooting with accuracy at the bandits. He wounded several and killed one – he saw him lying on the moss next to a lingonberry bush. However, the bandits were not planning on allowing the schoolchildren's excursion through the forest to Leningrad.

Many children from the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic fell.

Even the one who served as Dushansky's shield perished.

When that boy, all pale, collapsed, felled by a bullet to his forehead, Aaron grabbed another child – this time a blue-eyed girl - and hugged her to him. She looked death bravely in the eyes and understood that even if she died it

*was more important that Aaron Dushansky make it to Leningrad and gain some work experience, and that uncle would be ten times more useful to the Soviet republic than she – a silly slip of a girl from a village. (Herkus Kunčius, *Don't Blame Dushansky*)*

The works of Lithuanian prose writer Vanda Juknaitė arise from existential experience but also rely on the criteria of realism. Her most famous work is *The Wake* (1990) in which Juknaitė reflects on the tragedy of rural life in occupied Lithuania, with villages decaying, being destroyed and its inhabitants in the final stages of losing everything to drink. With regimes changing, death and the wake become the most important, if not the last remaining ritual left to bring people together in a village with an ever decreasing population. Juknaitė's storytelling style is like a mosaic. She glues together the fatal episodes of people's lives, through which is revealed the agonizing fate, marked by death, of both the village and its inhabitants.

In this galaxy of Lithuanian authors Jaroslavas Melnikas stands out because of the structure of his fascinating writings and the experimenting he does with the outer limits of the human soul, venturing into the thickets of the subconscious. It is worth noting that for this author the social theme in and of itself has no intrinsic value, but rather acts as a background against which paradoxical situations can be created when realistic depictions come into conflict with illusionary reality:

*On one of those critical evenings, after dinner, in a vile humour, I retired to my office, but... I could no longer find it. I mean I simply could not find it. To tell the truth, I almost expected this; it somehow seemed logical. But for some reason I just could not imagine this kind of perfidy. I could understand that my space was narrowing, but that it could disappear? Entirely? How was it possible? This time I did not touch the wall with my hands; I kicked it with my foot, even though I knew it was futile. That's why I kicked out, because I knew. (Jaroslavas Melnikas, *The Grand Piano Room*)*

The singularity of the recent historical past as seen from a distance is a theme found in the essayistic work of Andriuškevičius and Katkus, both of whom provoke the reader with their 'colourful' political and social references to another time (the existence of a Soviet teenager and reflections on the relationship between man and power, for example). The use of irony (Katkus) or a playful absurdist style (Andriuškevičius), as well as the re-formulation of Soviet realities in

contemporary language, allow the aforementioned authors to maintain a relatively neutral point of view as regards the everyday realities of the Soviet era, and to uncover the layers in different ways.

*During the Soviet period, eroticism – especially of the teenage variety – had a similar status as homosexual relations in Cavafy's Alexandria. Of course this enhanced its appeal, and our curiosity, a hundred times over. And since it was never talked about in 'good' schools or by families who 'served the government', most often rumours reached us from courtyard lore, jokes, and, a little later on, videos. Sometimes a group of drunks would stumble into our courtyard; they would find a spot behind the bushes, drink a bottle, and do whatever crazy things came to mind. This silence around sexuality forced us to create our own theories, which often crossed over into the realm of science fiction. And though while in conversation erotic quests took on unusual proportions, most often they were limited to a few minutes in a dark stairwell. (Laurynas Katkus, *The Cellar and other Essays*).*

The broad spectrum of themes, in which the pulse of life today is fundamentally reflected, is characteristic of the essays of Parulskis and Rastauskas and engage the reader because of their intellectual and refined quality. In the stream of contemporary Lithuanian literature these two authors stand out by their attentive focus on everyday reality, closely examining the human existential condition, while on the level of style they employ a sparkling wit and irony. The biting, sometimes even sarcastic self-reflection found in the essays of Parulskis reveals an acute, metaphysical depth. From the perspective of social change this is a particularly provocative diagnosis of damaged human beings and a damaged society. Through his witty and eloquently delineated details the essayist Rolandas Rastauskas does not shy away from social criticism. Wearing a 'Euro-Lithuanian' mask, and with the bravura of a master storyteller, he reflects on reality, filtering it through an inner prism of experience:

This midsummer, shortly after midnight, as fate would have it, I encountered two strangers for whom my poor head all of a sudden became an object of attention. Or should I say my lucky head because a slight concussion is better than a one-way ticket to the other side. After beating me about the head the two track-suited gentlemen snatched my half-empty purse and, without even saying goodbye, beat a retreat. It's better to have to come to terms with a fiasco such as this than to have to come to terms with a fiasco of the aforementioned other-side type, with which it is factually impossible to come to terms. 'Welcome to the club!' – wrote a friend's son a few days later, having at one point also been knocked about in a similar fashion in Palanga. They had to sew up his cheek;

*in my case just some skin on my broken nose. Up to that point I had never considered that there were so many of 'us', people who had been beaten up, most often for sport, in courtyards, in the streets, on bridges or under them. (Rolandas Rastauskas, *Private Territory*)*

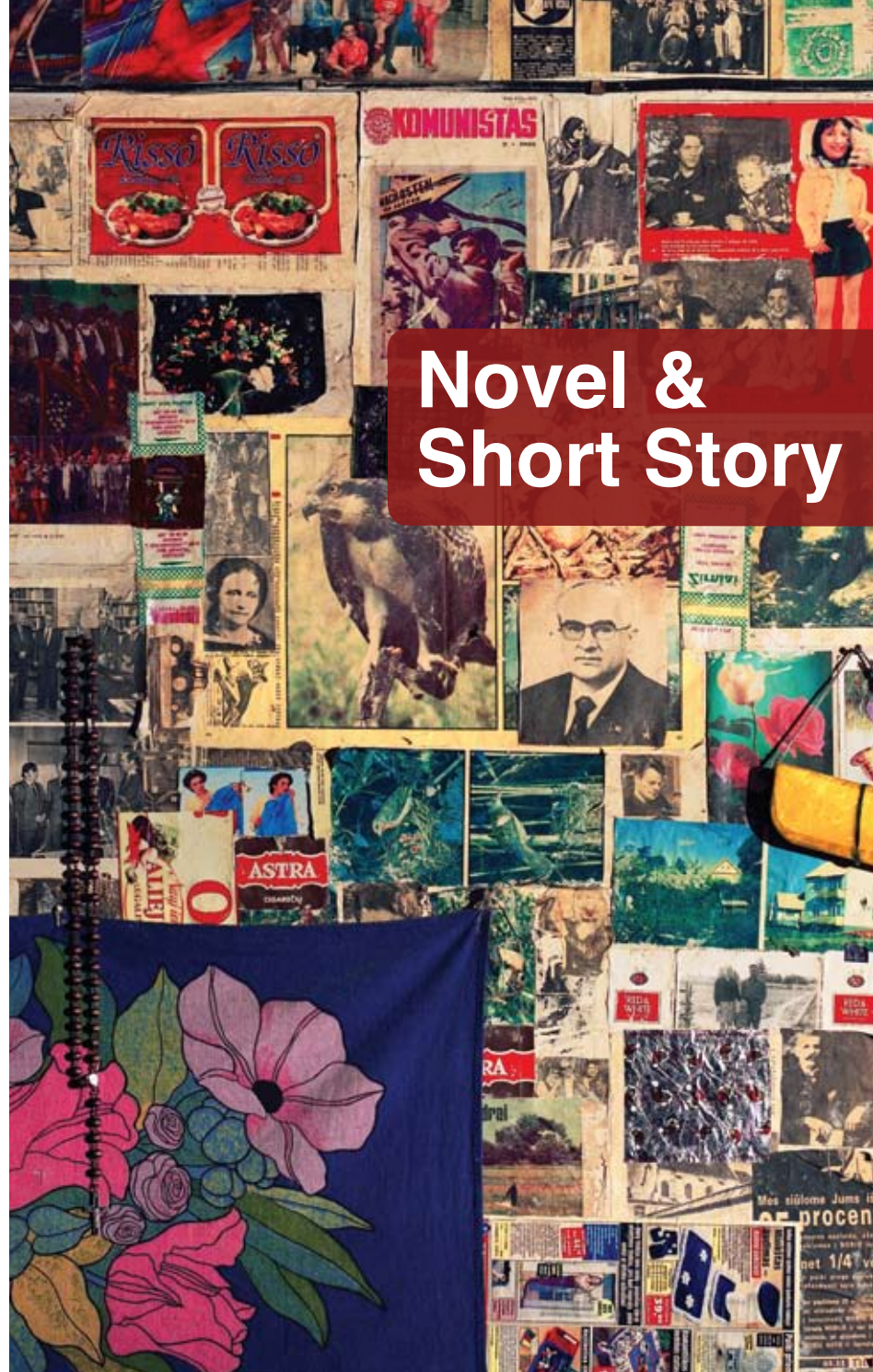
This anthology also presents dramatic works that address the important problems of the day and are a perfect reflection of the 'kaleidoscope' of social change: alienation, aggression, isolation, and the fear of being accountable for one's own life, as well as the problems of emigration, and the world of the 'other/foreignness'. It would seem the Lithuanian playwrights presented here are concerned with the selfsame question but each approaches it in his or her own way: how can one survive under present-day conditions without losing one's dignity and values?

*I'm still learning to get my expression right. I can already tell if someone is English or not, and make the adjustment myself accordingly. I've almost succeeded in softening my gaze, though sometimes the wolf still comes out. But it's rarer now – there's no comparison with before. I'm working on my jaw now... With them it's pulled in somehow, like they're biting down or something... Or it's fastened from within... That's the hardest part for me. I can't find the key to it. From the outside it looks easy but from the inside – no fucking way. I tried biting down with my teeth to create those hollows... but it's hard to talk and I've developed sores in my mouth. Clearly I'm using the wrong technique. I've even started to read Dickens, Walter Scott... I read a paragraph and then immediately rush to the mirror – has anything changed? (Marius Ivaškevičius, *Banishment*)*

As life changes so does our outlook, and contemporary Lithuanian playwrights are less interested in the victims of Soviet ideology than they are in 'documenting' reality, concentrating on human beings who 'fight' for something – for love (Černiauskaitė), for their place in life (Keleras), or for their identity (Ivaškevičius and Labanauskaitė). Some win, some lose, but the result of the 'fight' no longer depends on changes in the ideological system but rather on the personal choices and efforts of the characters.



Introduction by Neringa Klišienė



Novel & Short Story

Ričardas Gavelis

Memoirs of a Young Man

1991

Ričardas Gavelis (1950–2002) is, quite frankly, a legend of Lithuanian literature. He studied theoretical physics and was assigned (as was usual in the Soviet Union) to work at a popular science magazine where he discovered his ability to write. He debuted as an author in 1976 and published several collections of short stories, but his groundbreaking work, a novel called *Vilnius Poker* (*Vilniaus pokeris*) appeared in 1989, at the brink of Independence. It mockingly describes the cruel Soviet system, and a person broken by it. His later novels continued to explore the theme of the split consciousness of the post-Soviet citizen. Another theme that later became increasingly prominent in his works is the personified depictions of the city of Vilnius. Interestingly, Gavelis did not receive a major literary prize in his lifetime, though he is undoubtedly the most important and influential literary figure of the 1990s and remains the most iconic ‘transition writer’ of the early post-Soviet period.



Memoirs of a Young Man is an epistolary novel written in fourteen parts. Leonas Ciparis writes letters from beyond the grave to his friend and teacher Tomas Kelertas. Not only is the life of a young man from his earliest days to his last recreated in the letters, but the totalitarian regime that is crushing the fate of people is also unmasked. It is a novel about ideals, and the destructive search for them. It is about the battle for truth and a bright future, and at the same time about the battle against an entrenched regime that is impossible to understand, describe, or identify. In its entirety, the work is an unbroken search for the self.

Gavelis, Ričardas, *Jauno žmogaus memuarai*
Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2007, 216 p.
www.tytoalba.lt

I kept writing letters to you, wanting to ask you something or other. On that ill-starred night I wanted to ask you whether an honest man can take a dishonest path, if it is practically the only available path for the simple reason that there is nowhere else to go and there is no other option except to join the procession, all the while secretly hoping that you might be able to direct everyone in the appropriate direction sooner or later.

There was a lot more I wanted to ask, but I was interrupted by the incessant ringing of the doorbell. Visitors never called at night, so I was quite surprised when I saw Marius, our neighbour from the second floor, standing in the doorway. He was young but had already managed to gain recognition as a surgeon; he was perhaps the only younger man in our special building. All the rest were old enough to be my parents.

Almost pushing me to aside, Marius stumbled into the room with a partly drunk bottle of cognac. He grabbed glasses from the cupboard, poured some for us both and only settled down after I tossed back what seemed like a double.

‘I didn’t sign!’ he exclaimed in the voice of a gravedigger.

Then he trembled all over – from his cheeks down to his fingertips – and poured himself some more cognac. I had never seen a person tremble like that before.

‘They’re just hauling them in,’ he uttered sadly. ‘They’re laid right on the basement floor. They don’t let our staff near them; all kinds of militia and thugs are bringing them in and piling them up. You understand, they wouldn’t even let us... they just insisted that I sign. But I didn’t sign! Some had no documents but were somehow identified. Relatives are swarming to the clinics. There’s commotion everywhere, and that son of a bitch locked me in an office and tried to force me to sign. He alternated between threats and offers of sacks of gold. But I didn’t sign!’

I continued calmly asking him questions. Maybe you ended up hearing about it – rumours about the pontoon bridge over the Neris, the one near the Concert and Sport Hall, were buzzing around Vilnius for a few days. That pontoon bridge was unable to support large flows of pedestrians. Normally it would be closed after concerts or sporting events, but that night someone neglected to do something. Someone failed to put up a barrier with a warning; or, maybe he put it up but there were no security guards on duty; or, perhaps it was something else – in short, hundreds of people suddenly thronged to that rickety

pontoon bridge in a rush to cross to the other side of the river and the small bridge inevitably collapsed. Afterwards, I asked numerous witnesses many questions. Some floundered about in the shallow waters and waded to shore; many struggled in full view of everyone; others were dragged by the current into whirlpools. It was dark. You couldn't make sense of anything; women and children were yelling; someone was screaming for help; and the scene was crowned by the sight of a phlegmatic middle-aged man, like the captain of some ghost vessel, who swam out and climbed onto a pontoon that had broken off from the bridge that was floating right in the middle of the river, and proudly surveyed the situation. I found this out later.

But that night Marius sat across from me and explained something else about those people who had drowned. They were taken to clinics laid right on the floor. Only then did the real catastrophe, the real phantasmagoria, start. Nobody was supposed to have drowned. No catastrophe of any kind had taken place, not to mention one with victims. Marius was on duty that night, and so the guys who took charge slammed him up against the wall and demanded he sign a stack of death certificates.

All of those people who drowned, right down to the last one, were supposed to have died from lung infection. They died in bed because a doctor had not been called in time.

'They tried to break me,' Marius repeated. 'They cornered me. They talked so much and so convincingly that at times I thought I was seeing things and that dozens of people really had died from a strange lung infection. But when I looked once again at the drowned bodies dripping on the floor, I knew all of it was real. And they continued to try and break me. But I didn't sign.'

We gulped down that cognac, Marius pulled out another bottle, and I continued to ask him questions, but he repeated the same thing. I think I kissed him and kept shouting 'We won't give in!' Apparently, I threatened to fix things. Apparently, I threatened to inflict suffering on all those who had dug their claws into that mean business. Apparently, I fantasized about establishing an 'Avenue of the Drowned' in the cemetery, so that people would always be reminded of where lies lead.

'Wait. Hold on,' said Marius suddenly, stopping me from continuing as he began to sober up. 'What graves? What avenue? What victims? There won't be any drowned. That's what is most important. No one! There will be only those who died from a virulent outbreak of lung infection.'

'But you didn't sign!' I shouted. 'You were the doctor on duty. Everything's in your hands.'

'I'm not the doctor on duty any longer,' Marius answered even more soberly. 'They kicked me out and called in someone else. Maybe it was the hospital's senior doctor, but that is not important, ultimately. What's important is for him to have signed. Understand this – the most important thing is that nobody drowned. I didn't sign, but someone else will have. That's the worst thing. I didn't sign and I'm going to pay for that, they'll give me an enema for sure, but regardless, there won't be any victims! That's what's most important! If I remained a hero and I suffered for the truth, then all would be wonderful. But I achieved nothing, that's the worst thing. My conscience stayed clean, but someone will have signed. And nothing will change because of it – that's the worst thing. I stayed true, I will suffer for that, and that's the only comfort. But I didn't achieve anything else!'

And then I made a mistake. I suddenly remembered Father-in-law. I quickly realized whom we needed to turn to.

'I'll call up Father-in-law,' I told him quite loftily. 'He'll take care of it.' Yes, you could wake Father-in-law up even for this kind of thing.

'Idiot!' he shouted. 'Moron! Who do you think called me? Who, in your opinion, ordered me to sign those death certificates? Some decrepit Major, perhaps? Who gives those kinds of orders? Who do you think? Who?'

I wanted to barge into Father-in-law's office the very next morning, but I was in very bad shape. I wasn't used to drinking large amounts and so the next morning I felt like I was dying. I lapped up boiled water, ran to the toilet and retched. I didn't care about any of the victims or any fathers-in-law. Sometime later, I stopped by his office. It often happens that we arrive somewhere too late because we had a terrible hangover at a critical moment.

'Nobody drowned, kid' said Father-in-law, staring at me. 'Nobody. Got any documents, by chance?'

'People will testify,' I grumbled sullenly. 'I'll find them.'

'You won't find anybody,' said Father-in-law sternly.

'Marius will testify.'

‘And what will he say?’ asked Father-in-law, raising his eyebrows in innocent surprise. ‘That he wasn’t at work that night because he was drunk? He was taken to hospital at four in the morning. He was given a blood test. Your Marius was completely drunk.’

Father-in-law nonchalantly rifled through a copy of the expert report. He gazed at me like a boa constrictor, like an octopus, like a monster. By the way – what am I saying – you experienced that look of his not too long ago yourself. I didn’t understand why he explained everything to me. He could have shown me the door and that’s it. But he explained his secret ratiocinations very thoroughly. I still don’t get it. Why did he talk to me? And why did he talk to you, not all that long ago, for God’s sake? Was he showing off? Was he teaching us a lesson? I don’t understand.

‘Marius can’t testify to anything,’ continued Father-In-Law calmly. ‘No rumours, no slander. By the way, he could easily lose his position as head of the department for being drunk on the job.’

‘So nobody drowned?’ I inquired gloomily.

‘Nobody drowned.’

‘But the pontoon bridge existed, right?’ I said, trying to be ironic but with little success.

‘If need be,’ Father-In-Law said calmly, ‘we would do it in such a way that it was as if the dilapidated bridge had never been there at all – it’s just that there’s no sense in going to so much trouble.’

He didn’t speak in a triumphant way or with a clever smile or in any other way. He spoke drily and matter-of-factly.

Marius and I never discussed it again. He never engaged me in conversation. And I was afraid even to go near him.

I was afraid he would say that nobody had drowned, that he had not barged into my place with a partly drunk bottle of cognac, or that we hadn’t shouted ‘We won’t give in!’ at three o’clock in the morning.

Anything you wanted could have happened in that world. Nothing was real.



That year we had a very cold autumn, or else a wet, damp winter. I wandered Vilnius like a soul without a place, just like in my teenage years, feeling contempt and hatred for myself. I felt like a total weakling, a banal and lame excuse for a human being. Everything in my life was banal. There were no miracles, no tragedy, no burning passion. Did that Komsomol pseudo-tragedy of mine mean anything? It wasn’t a tragedy, it was a tragic farce. A circus. I couldn’t do anything properly in my life anymore.

Even my love was as banal as could be. When writing you letters I kept wanting to describe my love for Virginia but I couldn’t find any special words. My love was exactly the same as that of thousands – of millions – of others. I didn’t need any special, unique words to describe it.

That’s the way I was thinking that cold autumn (or damp, wet winter). I felt terrible. Even my carbon copy, my own reflection, my little Levukas, didn’t stand out from the other children – unless you counted his big head and stuck out ears.

And then I had a strange idea: I immediately had to find out how others see me. Suddenly I thought perhaps I had imagined myself, perhaps I wasn’t really the person for whom I was so concerned, whose life I lay out for you here, not even for a second. Suddenly I thought perhaps I had imagined everything: Virginia, my goals, you, my little tragedies. I began to doubt whether a person could understand himself at all. Perhaps a person, at least a Lithuanian, is not destined to reflect. Perhaps all he can do is feel – this is pretty much what Lithuanian literature had told me over and over again.

I couldn’t, and I didn’t want to believe it. A human, I thought, stands apart from lower animals in the fact that he is able to reflect. That’s another topic, by the way, on which I’ll write to you later.

That harsh autumn (or damp winter) I was overcome by a true mania: I had to find out, as quickly as possible, how others saw me. At first glance this seems simple but people are so used to hiding the truth that in the end even they themselves no longer know what they really think. It’s almost impossible to ask a person their true opinion; he will lie to you without realizing it and soften his true thoughts, or make them more scathing. In our muddled world it’s absurd to ask a person directly: what do you really think of me? In the best case he will think you’re an idiot. Or

perhaps not and he will begin to wonder what your hidden intentions are. It wouldn't occur to anyone that you really want to know the truth. Each person immediately starts to guess at why you're asking such provocative questions, what answer you want to hear, and what you are going to use it for. People have long forgotten the Socratic oath to 'Know Thyself', and any person who follows it appears very suspect indeed. I found this out myself when I started asking every person I met what he or she really thought about me. My behaviour was totally absurd.

'Listen, in your opinion, what kind of person am I?' I'd bluntly ask a former classmate. 'What do I appear like to you? Don't lie. The truth is important to me.'

It was only later that I thought to myself: what would I reply if I was asked the same kind of question? For some, you wouldn't want to hurt them, and others you'd be afraid of flattering too much, and to others you'd lie on purpose, just out of the spiteful satisfaction that you're deceiving them. I even had this thought: in order to tell someone the truth, first of all you cannot fear the truth they might speak about you. Those fearless people are rare. One of them is you, Tomas. And in that harsh autumn (or damp winter) I was one of them too. Well, to be more precise, I was for a split second, until I extracted my first responses.

The first person I managed to convince to respond was Robertas, who had graduated from the Faculty of Physics maybe a few years before me. He sarcastically turned his sour little face to me and scornfully sneered:

'Maybe you think you're Jesus Christ? To me it always seemed that you secretly think that. Those speeches of yours at those meetings... Unbelievable! They were so naïve, you sermonize like... I don't even know. It seemed like it wasn't the Komsomol, but some sort of sect... A very naïve sect... No one listened to those speeches of yours, you know, that's the secret. The people who understood your desires couldn't care less. They understood the world in a more realistic, and smarter, way than you did... And the others... The others didn't even hear you... No one heard you, kid. If you wanted to be Jesus, you needed to make miracles happen. There's no other way to move the masses. No, you weren't Jesus Christ, you were... you were such a... naïve fool. Sorry, of course, but you asked for the truth.'

While listening I blushed and then paled, my handicapped heart beat like crazy. I looked at that sneering mug of that sly fox,

obscenely moving his lips, and I became enraged. Little Robertas – bridge player, speculating businessman and a little bit of a playboy – was ridiculing me. A person whose soul had never hurt, who drank on my dime, had kindly agreed to shit on my head. At that moment I could have strangled him.

He was like a crooked mirror. After listening to him my first thought was that no one could be my true mirror – each person is distorted in some way. You won't find out anything about yourself from others. They can give you different pictures of yourself, but not a single one of them will be the real one.

And so my desire to find the truth about myself from others cooled after the very first reply. Maybe I just was unlucky and listened to an unscrupulous person; regardless, right away I became disappointed in them all. Listlessly, I asked a few more people but I paid less and less attention to their words. Each sang their own song.

Kazys, a former weightlifter, sighed at length and grumbled, pouring cocktail after cocktail down his throat, until he finally snapped and laid out the entire truth for me.

'You're a bastard! A bastard!' he snarled in a hoarse basso voice. 'You betrayed the nation and gave it to the Ruskies. What does your Komsomol have to do with the Lithuanian nation? What? What did you do the whole time, you bastard? Who needs it? What were you trying to do? You wanted bread with a lot of butter? A black Volga car?'

And so on and so forth. Kazys spit it all out quite sincerely and at one point I thought he was going to hit me. He castigated me, belittled me, but he didn't explain one thing: what, in his view, was I supposed to do to be a true Lithuanian and an upstanding person? He was overcome with fury. He was a little older than me and his father had been taken without reason to Siberia and killed there.

Linukas spoke the most calmly and with the most mercy. He was the only one who knew the details of my grand collapse. He kept smacking his lips and shrugging his shoulders. Simply put, his heart hurt. Not for me, but for the opportunities I had squandered.

'What a chance you ruined, what a chance!' Linukas lamented sadly. 'You could have climbed high. You could have climbed higher than your father – in – law. You're very well suited for it. To me you always

looked... innocent or something. It seemed to me that you could rise through the ranks and not lose your humane qualities. And then you up and ruined it. Well, you snapped, well, you talked. And what changed? No one knows anything about it. You should have behaved differently. You should have risen, risen, and risen. You should have stepped into the clouds, you understand? And then afterwards... Only then...

‘Take off the mask?’

‘You could put it that way. That was your chance. Having risen, you could have changed a lot of things. But now you can’t do anything. And why did you try to fight it?’

Though Linukas spoke the most intelligently, he still spoke crudely. Everyone spoke crudely. Not a single one spoke about the spirit, the soul, or man’s goal in life. Not a single one tried to paint my spiritual portrait. Everyone talked about facts, real life, or to be more precise, about what we usually call life.

I often think that what we call life is not life at all. Life is something totally different.

In the evenings I would sit with my son, and began to read quite a lot. I began to no longer understand certain things. I looked around and searched for a person, a real person, but there was none to be found. I secretly hoped that perhaps you were that person, but you weren’t around. And all the others left me hopelessly disappointed. I couldn’t understand what there was left for me to do in such a world. Save money? I never had any, didn’t feel its power, which is perhaps why it didn’t tempt me. Besides, I didn’t have even the slightest bit of commercial talent. I had ruined my political career myself. I could no longer become a physicist. What was I supposed to do? I couldn’t live like this, spend my days without purpose, raising children. It wasn’t enough for me. I couldn’t live like this. I needed something more. But I no longer understood what it was I could search for in this despicable world.



Translated by Jayde Will, edited by Medeivė Tribinevičius

Vanda Juknaitė
The Wake

1990

Vanda Juknaitė (born 1949) debuted in 1983. She is not a particularly prolific writer – she has published one short-story collection and two short novels. In her fiction she shows clear signs of an unusual sensitivity to human sadness, pain and misery, and is particularly interested in examining the situation of women at various stages of their lives. However, in the first decade after Independence she took a much more hands-on approach in doing her part for the new state and society and became an active worker and organiser of social projects, first and foremost with street children. This experience inspired her to return to writing, only this time in a different way. Her later works contain essays and interviews addressing the sore points of social reality in Lithuania, but written in a literary fashion.



With a woman's characteristic concerns, the author describes the disintegration of a village, and with it the forms of human existence common to its inhabitants. A woman falls pregnant, gives birth, and raises a human life, then painfully experiences its deterioration and degeneration. With forced collectivization making inroads into the village, there remains only a single ritual that still connects the village inhabitants – the wake.

Juknaitė, Vanda, *Šermenys*
Vilnius: Vaga, 1990, 91 p.
www.vaga.lt

The rain comes unexpectedly, roaring and rustling, pouring into the forest ravine, splashing down and bouncing off the surface of the dammed part of the Šliužas stream. Striding across the meadow with melting snow, avoiding the white patches of snow showing on the higher ground, Karusė, Malcius' daughter, walks towards the hill. Karusė climbs the hill barefoot, without any outer garment, her brown hair, the colour of fox fur, loose and her eyes luminous green that can be seen from afar. In her hands she holds the dead Širvys boy wrapped in his clothes. She rocks the boy in one arm and with her free hand unwraps the strips of material serving as the infant's nappy, releasing them to the wind. The strips fly into the sky and, in the stillness, become clouds.

– Karusė! – A wailing voice shouts through the rain. – Karusė!
He's dead!

Karusė, lifting the shirt-sleeved little boy, his skin blue, to the rain, climbs to the top of the hill and in a ringing response from the hill answers:

– Weep and you will live.

Bent over in the rain, she presses the child to her chest with her large freckled hands and, from the peak of the hill, the four winds carry the words of her lament:

*Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh,
[How will he show himself?]
As a blade of grass,
As a leafless twig,
Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh,
If not alive,
Then dead,
If not as an insect,
Then at least as a pebble,
Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh...¹*

Everyone is standing at the foot of the hill: father, mother, Genė, Milda, grandmother, aunt Izabelė, Leksandra, and little Anyčiūtė. They

¹ This is a Lithuanian funeral lament (Lith. *rauda*) reflecting the pre-Christian belief that the soul of a recently deceased person will for a period of time appear in some form until it finds its final resting place. [Translator's note]

are all looking at Karusė and the fresh, warm rain falls like tears onto their big, wide-open eyes.

The rain murmurs on the other side of the window, gently splashing, running in streams along the earth. The cool, damp air in the ward smells of dust. Dawn is breaking. Milda raises her weightless hand, studies it, stretches her fingers and slowly draws them along the slippery, cool, oil painted ward wall. Then she stretches her hand out again and, with her fingertips, traces the square outline of the alarm with its pair of protruding burned-out red light bulbs.

In the pale morning light the silhouettes of beds emerge bit by bit. The ward is huge with three-story windows set into thick wall niches – the hospital was founded in a former monastery. In the depths of the ward, by the wall, lies an elderly Polish woman – paralyzed, beside her – a Jew, having lost the use of her legs to osteomyelitis, then a Russian by the name of Valentina, recovering from a stroke, then another Pole, a seamstress, and then Glikeriya, a Belarusian, with two eroding vertebra joints... In the far corner of the ward lies Janina, afflicted with multiple sclerosis, and here, just beyond the top of Milda's bed, and in the next bed over, is Gražina. In the grey, steadily lightening morning things finally begin to materialize, solid and hard, no longer coming in and out of focus: the straight, severe contours of the walls, doors, and windows.

Over by the door to the ward the old Polish woman begins to whine. From her corner Janina whispers in answer:

– What's that? What's wrong? Has something happened?

When the old woman hears her she begins to whimper in a thin mouse-like voice. Janina's bed creaks, she gets up, puts on her robe, and begins to walk, her hands firmly gripping the bed ends, dragging her swollen, uncontrollable feet. Janina is forty-five but the whole ward calls her Granny. Her hair is grey, her body emaciated, her eyes sunken, the skin stretched over her face black and wilted.

– What is it you wanted? What?

The old woman struggles and croaks, pointing to her leg.

– What's that you're saying? Your foot's itching? The old woman's being naughty.

Janina sits down on the bed and scratches the paralyzed foot. – It's good, that it's itching. It means your foot's getting better.

After thanking her, the old woman starts up again with her squeaky whining.

Holding firmly onto the end of the bed, using all of her body, Janina drags her legs back to her bed and Milda suddenly recognizes the faded lettuce-coloured sleeves of her robe with white circles. She had seen those sleeves and those thin, blackened hands holding a glass of water with a plastic straw pushed between her lips Milda stops Janina by pulling on the edge of her robe and for a short moment the two women look deeply into one another's eyes. Janina's shining, clear blue eyes are now sunken into grey, dark sockets.

The Sister fills Milda's glass with tea and with a bowl of porridge in her hands, sits down by the bed, and prepares to feed her.

– I my... my... myself...

Milda wraps her fingers around the glass of tea and the steady warmth soaks into her cool, damp, emaciated palm.

The doctor pulls back the blanket and the Sister helps Milda get dressed and puts shoes on her feet. Then sitting either side of her, they put their arms around the patient's waist, placing her arms around their shoulders stand up together and lift her up.

– Can you stand on your own?

Milda is suddenly overtaken by the thick, heavy air in the ward, pressing down on her like water, her ears pop, her heart starts to beat hard, a grey fog floats before her eyes, and black shining specks spluttering and crackling quietly, begin to float in that fog.

– I can't see anything.

– That's the way it is sometimes. Let's lie down. We'll try again tomorrow.

Step by step, held up from under her armpits, Milda begins to walk. One day she reaches the end of the metal bed frame and holds onto it with weak, shaking hands. By propping herself up with her palms against the wall, Milda finally makes it to the ward door and places one hand on the door handle.

– Well, what, what? – The whole ward watches her actions.

– Well, open it, what are you waiting for, open it!

– Don't pester me. – Milda takes a deep breath, opens the door, and the multicoloured, checkerboard tile corridor floor suddenly appears before her eyes like a wall. She lets out a cry and collapses on the floor.

– Milda, dear, what is it? – Glasha asks.

The old Jewish woman without the use of her legs because of her osteomyelitis sits up in her bed and announces to the ward:

– She's on the floor.

– She is?

– Sit. Sit for a bit.

– Can you get up? Can you get up, dear, should we get the doctors? – Janina asks.

– I can get up – answers Milda, and sobbing, begins to laugh. She cries and laughs but not a single tear rolls down her face.

Every day, every morning, Milda gains more strength, managing to get as far as the nurses' station and the procedures suite. The hallway is cool, the windows set deep in niches in the thick walls are blocked from the outside by copious tree branches.

At lunch time she picks up a plate with slices of rectangular-shaped white wheat bread and rounded triangles of rye bread. Milda puts two slices on each bedside cabinet and all the patients thank her several times, as though the bread, for each and every one of them, is a gift of the miracle of hope and health.

On one occasion during an afternoon nap, Sister allows a young man wearing a checked summer shirt and with a frightened face and bulging eyes onto the ward. He sits next to Gražina's bed and, in a low voice, almost crying, asks her:

– What's wrong with you? What is it? What?

However, Gražina stays quiet. After being washed she does not

speak, with difficulty only able to utter a few incomprehensible words. The doctor sits next to her for a long time, trying without success to get her to respond as to which ear is her left and which her right. Gražina just points to her nose and laughs.

– Strange, – says the doctor, – these days no one has this problem, but she's in shock.

The young man takes a glass from Milda's bedside cabinet. He fills it with strawberries, pours cream over them, and asks again:

– Do you want some strawberries? Do you want some?

He raises a spoon to Gražina's lips, but Gražina shakes her head and the young man looks at Milda.

– Does she eat anything at all?

– They feed her.

The young man opens Gražina's mouth, tips a spoonful of cream into it, and Gražina, gurgling, begins to laugh. The young man tips in another spoonful of cream and she, still laughing, begins to choke and cough and then one of the women, unable to bear it, says:

– Stop it. Can't you see...

Supported from both sides, Valentina gets out of bed. The man who comes to visit on Sundays puts shoes on Glasha's feet and leads her out into the yard. Glasha returns in the early evening without saying a word and silently gets into bed. The women in the ward don't turn on the lights. The pale red rays of the dying sun brighten the darkening empty sky. Trolleybuses and the hum of passing cars occasionally disturb the quiet calm of the midsummer evening. Glasha suddenly begins to sing a Belarusian song about a sailor at the edge of the world. She then stops just as suddenly as she had begun and cries out sobbing:

– Oh, daughter, daughter... What's going to become of us? What?

– Don't cry, – says Janina. She repeats it firmly and quietly: – Don't cry.



Gathering speed the wind comes off the lake whistling and with fine crackling hail attacks the wooden walls of the houses on the shore. A barrier has been erected between the highway and the small town's street with long, three-edged drifts of snow. After looking around to see if the postal clerk – this is what the locals called the motorized bicycle – was still there, Vita went up the hill to the grocery store. It was pension day and she always had enough for a bottle of wine from the remaining kopecks left over at the end of the month, and today Karpuškienė and Marytė had thrown in a rouble each. Vita put two bottles of wine into her newspaper satchel and shoved the loaf of bread into a cloth bag.

Snow was swirling around. The small town's street was empty, and not even a solitary blue-nosed drunk could be seen loitering by the brick wall of the grocery store, as they usually could. It was freezing and blustery and probably sixteen degrees below zero when she left. It was rare for winds to blow when it was this cold. Vita pulled the satchel over her shoulder and hooked the bag of bread on the clerk's handlebars to which her hands stuck. Why did she take the damned bicycle today? The highway would be drifted over to where it forked. She would have to drag it through the drifts. A hindrance, nothing more. And her gloves were the officially issued canvas sort. She should have knitted herself some woollen ones, only when would she ever find the time to knit any?

Why do people live in such a godforsaken place? It's as if they were damned. Nobody clears the road anymore, nobody delivers bread, and no delivery vehicles come by. Choke, croak. Do as you wish. If you can no longer walk to town, then starve to death. She can't bring enough bread for all the invalids, and moreover they say that when Dručiūnas, for example, gives someone a rouble for a loaf, no one ever brings him back any change. But you can't take pity on everyone – what with your own family being the largest. And where can you move to with a family like that? Where can you go? Where will you get the money? And who will build the house? Albert, with his diabetes? And now an injured finger, not healing all winter. It may need to be amputated. All it needs is a scratch on the hand, and then it won't heal. And then there's that worthless drifter of a son-in-law. He shows up, fathers a child, and then disappears – no money coming in, no alimony, nothing.

Four kids underfoot, and who will dress them and feed them? Maybe I shouldn't have allowed it, forbidden her to marry. But would she even have listened? She wanted to marry so badly that she made it seem as if it would have been the end of the world if she hadn't got her way. What a life! Hardship piled on top of hardship from childhood and nothing else. When the forest brothers shot our parents all that remained was us little orphans. We were passed along, to all the aunts and then on to strangers, from one home to another. Gendrutė started to have epileptic fits from the fright. No one would look at them. They had no suitors – who wants orphans, and one with an illness to boot, which the other might also get. But she really was beautiful, she could see that for herself. She married Albert just to get out, not wanting to be in anyone's way. And no one said a bad word about her. She tried her best, didn't run around, but he never said one kind word to her. He'd keep quiet, acted sullen, and used her as if she were an object. She wanted something different for her child, but, as you see, it turned out even worse.

At Matiekus' forest, by the slurry from the farm complex, Vita props the clerk against the side of the ditch by the road, and standing in the icy wind which goes right through her, removes the cork from the bottle with her teeth, raises it, and takes several gulps. The warmth, scalding her throat, spreads through her whole body. At the Epušėlės hill she stops again, no longer needing to prop the bike up against anything – it stands upright in a drift at the bottom of the hill. From the hill she will have to carry on along the crest, without any shelter from the wind. Vita raises the bottle again. She drinks the wine in big gulps, as though it were water, and a warm heavy tiredness makes her legs go weak. She pulls the bicycle out of the drift, removes the newspaper satchel from her shoulder and wraps its strap several times around the handlebars of the bicycle. Now she won't have to carry it. Staggering, stumbling onto the bike, she begins to plough through the drifted road. A sleepy weariness pulls her towards the ground, the snow hacks at her eyes, the stormy wind pulls and tears at her clothes, and a hopeless anger, an alcohol-fuelled regret squeezes her heart. How she pities those children, Albert, her sister, and this whole decaying, empty village.

What a life! Governments come and go but the people stay the same. One on top of the other, one on top of the other, tormenting one another and nothing more. Oh, to hell with it, she isn't the only one living like this. Earlier, if someone had seen a woman drunk they would have pointed fingers. A daughter abandoned with four children

– unheard of. Now they're all the same. Zacharienė fled to Latvia with her children, Zacharas moved to Kalniškis where he lives with Ancė. And Alvyda, for example, who is the same age as Sigutė, the youngest, lost everything to drink. Any man that wants her can have her – she breeds like an animal, and they say that she's living with her father. Who can make head or tail of this? Mekuškiokas is in prison again. Mekuškietė has a child out of wedlock. And what about them? They grew up without any parents, without being looked after and yet didn't go bad. They behaved properly. But so what? The very same ending. Everything ruined. Maybe if there had been more people around, more young people, Sigutė would have made a better marriage. Oh, to hell with it all.

Vita walks, talking to herself, snoozing off, falling onto her bike, and from the satchel banging against the wheel, little by little newspapers, money, the latest letters so eagerly awaited by the inhabitants of the dying village begin to slip out and fly across the field. Caught by the wind they roll over the fields like tumbleweed, getting wet, torn, and mixed into the snow.



Translated by Romas Kinka

Jurgis Kunčinas

Tūla

1993

Jurgis Kunčinas (1947–2002) remains one of the most popular Lithuanian writers. Very prolific, he wrote mostly half-fictionalised autobiographical stories, some novel-length, some shorter. He also published several books of poetry (including poems for children) and a few collections of essays. He was an acclaimed translator from German. He is known, both in his life and in his works, for his ability to see the beauty in the mundane and even in the filth, and for his humour – sometimes bittersweet, but often side-splitting, and so rare in Lithuanian literature. He is admired for his penchant for describing the well-known places and cityscapes (most often of Vilnius, but also of his native Alytus) and transforming them into something intrinsically romantic and beautiful. Kunčinas is one of the most widely translated Lithuanian authors; his works are available in Polish, Russian, Swedish, and German. His characters, who are often drunks or vagabonds, invite comparison with those of Charles Bukowski and Beat literature.



Tūla (1993) is every Lithuanian art student's favourite book. Roaming through the old streets of Soviet-era Vilnius, the story is told in the first-person by a nameless narrator who drinks, loiters, and remembers the one week he spent with Tūla, a girl he was hopelessly in love with, but lost. His memories of her are the only things that really matter in an otherwise pointless, dreary and booze-sodden life. The narrator is a literary type in his own right: a 'vagabond intellectual of the Soviet society', as one critic calls him. The novel is in fact three-fold. It is a story of star-crossed lovers and an unattainable, impossible, and in a way incredible, imagined love (Tūla herself doesn't have a single line of direct speech in the whole book). It is a love song for the city of Vilnius, seen through the soft focus of blurry, drunken eyes. And it is a social commentary on the late Soviet period and the circumstances faced by a well-educated, creative person at odds with the regime, and thus without a place in society.

Kunčinas, Jurgis, *Tūla*
 Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2013, 256 p.
 www.rsleidykla.lt

VIII

But then, *domine*, I was already in the Second Section – I've already mentioned it rather vaguely. Vasaros, Rudens and Olandų streets, right up to the rise of the Polocko line on the southeast, were its natural boundaries, where for almost two months I made myself at home. The hospital territory was, obviously, much more restricted. On the east side rose a steep, pine-covered slope, which when climbed opened into the valley of the Butterfly Cemetery. On sleepless nights, *domine*, above it I would fly to the corner of Filaretų, and there, making a turn to the west, I'd be flapping to Malūnų Street...

There's nothing to hide any more: the Second Section was a poorly disguised sanatorium for alcoholics – most of the time they'd write into the hospital admission records that such and such a person suffered from a disturbance of the central nervous system. This was certainly true, but there wouldn't be a single word about hallucinations or phobias, or about hangover syndrome or cirrhosis. An open secret, a finger on the lips when someone from the outside asked: the Second Section? What's that, really?

It was the dullest section. Those slaves to the bottle, whatever remained of their minds still whispered: go on, take a break, then you can booze it up 'like a man!' again; accompanied by tearful wives or girlfriends, or else alone like me, they came to this shady park, lived in barracks that looked more like coquettish summer-houses, and lolled about for a good month, guzzling vitamins and tranquilizers, in their free time corrupting the unhinged young girls that filled both the beautiful park and the woods around the insane asylum. The beige barracks held only these resting, male alcoholics, but in the other sections – brick buildings, some with barred windows, and a tall, wire-entangled enclosure for walking – in those building calmly going out of their minds were potential suicides, handsome young men beset by depression, curly-haired schizophrenics with eagle noses and fiery glances, unfortunate students who had decided it was better to sit in a nut house than go into the army, hysterical teenagers (some of whom you could hardly call teenagers) in conflict with their parents and lonely old people who no longer wanted to go anywhere except the kingdom of heaven. They were the ones who fluttered off to that vale, to the Butterfly Cemetery, where they would quietly be buried in an even quieter slope... usually at night, for some reason. I saw this...

The soft sand, the restless butterfly graves, the pockets of the dead filled with wind-blown sand...

The alcoholics got better right before your eyes – they would lift a rusting two-pood weight by the door, hang around the kitchen, play cards, and nearly all of them had a handle that would open almost every door.

As not just a drunk, but also a homeless one, I felt particularly well there. Clearly the Second Section was, in a certain sense, a concentration camp, whose administration and personnel attempted to turn the ‘drinking animal’ into a human again, even though the detox specialists and psychotherapists had long since given up believing in miracles, and therefore in the meaning of their work. But they did what they could, or at least pretended to. A thin, nervous doctor with sternly twitching cheek signed me up for the experimental group right away – I agreed to all the conditions. Every other afternoon he would take us, six or seven wretches, to the attic of the barrack, lie us down on cushioned platforms, roughly chest-high and covered in brown oilcloth, and, slowly repeating pleasant words, urge us or even force us to relax... Really... after a filling lunch the body would grow lazy, the eyes would shut of their own accord. During these séances, Glebas, a freight handler from the ‘Krasnūcha’ industrial zone, who lay to my right, would often, to our horror and to his own misfortune, start snoring. I’d want to laugh but the psychotherapist, giving an angry shout, would poke Glebas in his bare stomach and start the second half of the experiment: in a high voice, full of drama, he’d start passionately cursing vodka, wine and beer, comparing the bottle’s neck with a nipple; his eyes probably sparked. But we couldn’t see – we’d been ordered to lie with our eyes tightly shut and not to stir, otherwise everything would go to hell. But it’s questionable whether he himself believed in the power of his influence when, reaching the climax, he suddenly spouted:

‘There it is, that damned vodka! There! That’s the reason (he’d jab the nearest prone chest with his finger) you lost your job! It’s because of vodka that your wife left you! (At this point he could have jabbed almost anyone.) Vodka destroyed your brains! Vodka! Vodka did it!’

Nearly hissing in fury by now the doctor would order us to open our mouths as wide as we could and, pulling out of somewhere a full bottle of the self-same cursed vodka, or spirits diluted in half, he’d start slopping it into our open mouths... And sloshing and splashing this way

and that it’d get onto our face and eyes – that’s why he told us to close our eyes! After emptying the entire bottle of spirits, he’d collapse limply into an armchair, cover his eyes with his palms and, brushing back the black hair that had fallen onto his forehead, request, in a more normal voice, for us to get up, slowly. There were red and blue plastic buckets set on the ground between the cushioned platforms, but it was a rare patient, moved by suggestion or by the vodka splashed on his lips, who would throw up. And this was the goal of this cruel treatment – to force vomiting, to cause as much disgust as possible. The pukers were encouraged in all ways possible and held up as an example to the non-pukers.

‘Well now,’ after each séance the doctor would ask every little lab rat, ‘How do you feel? Do you still want to drink?’ ‘Oh *doktor!*’ my neighbor Glebas, the freight loader from Krasnūcha, would moan, ‘*Nikgoda bol’she, i bogu!*’ – Never again, oh God! – ‘*Chto by ja jetu gadost’ bol’she buchil!*’ – I’d rather soak in lye than this filth! – ‘*Basta, zavjazyvaju!*’ – That’s it, it’s over! The doctor’s bad eye twitched, and he marked something down in his observation notebook.

‘Well, and how are you doing sir?’ he asked me one beautiful fall afternoon. Beyond the narrow white window fell gray, green and red maple leaves bigger than your hand and rays of warm sunlight glittered. How badly I wanted to answer this good person with something like Glebas did! Alas, the saddest part was that I, like the majority of the inhabitants of this colony of alcoholics, didn’t imagine myself as an invalid of some kind, not by a long stretch. Maybe a tired boozier who didn’t have anywhere to live and who in general didn’t have a life. Who had nowhere. I was ashamed to look into this nervous, thin man’s troubled eyes. After all, he had addressed me politely. After all, it was actually his brother, an actor who had yet to voice his definitive words, who helped set me up in this autumn sanatorium. He even requested that they not go overboard and force me to take medication. It was this doctor I had to thank for my bed in a corner by the window and for the fact that they had already, on the fifth day of my voluntary captivity, allowed me to go into town – I went down the street knowing I had somewhere to come home to, a blanket to crawl under. I don’t know, I’d say to the doctor, the actor’s brother, when he asked; it’s disgusting to me, of course... believe me, I try, but I don’t get nauseous... I don’t throw up! A person gets used to all kinds of smells, you know... ‘No matter, no matter,’ he’d shout, fairly elated, ‘you just need to hold yourself together and not fall apart, and everything will be okay!’ I’d nod and together with my gray-faced colleagues march out to rake

armfuls of fallen leaves and pile them into the little tractor's rusty trailer.

In the evenings, when the guards were wiping puddles of milk soup and bacon rinds off the long tables (family would bring the smoked meat products; recovering alcoholics were overcome with a beastly hunger!) I would often settle down under the refectory's dim lamp. I could sit and read there until the middle of the night, or, having been woken up by the mighty snoring of one of my neighbours and unable to fall back asleep or find somewhere else to put myself, I'd come here with my notebook – I wrote down some impressions, tried to compile the minimum of an explanatory slang dictionary, but mostly I'd write you letters, Tūla – by then I didn't send them anymore... and not just because I didn't have an address for you... Often some other guy, also tortured by insomnia, would come and bother me – most of the time they were overflowing with a passionate need to let it all out, to talk it out – I'd unwittingly fall into an empty conversation, or listen to interminable monologues about riotous all-night parties, quarrels and fights with drinking buddies, about endless escapades in bed and about constant battles with the authorities, with wives, with neighbours, with the entire world! Sitting around in the night-time cafeteria I wrote and wrote you letters – I no longer crossed anything out, I'd tell you about everything in turn, or sometimes just the opposite – I'd confuse everything so badly that I myself was no longer able to distinguish what was true and what was an invention smacking of quiet insanity – no illusions!...

XII

Tūla, my love... how are you? Alive? Still in one piece? Alive. Still in one piece...

Let's go? Where? You know where... And give me some more of our wine, today everything's possible, everything's permissible, never mind the idiots, the perverts and the self-declared morality police!... Everything? Everything, everything!

So... let's go? Let's go. By this bridge? This one, this one... and not far...

So now that's everything.

A night of burdocks, a night of sleeping dragonflies, a night of homeless cats, and unhappy madcaps! The dark fans of burdock above my face, above your face, Tūla, from time to time, through the gaps and breaks in the leaves, sparkle blinding night stars, or maybe it's just sparks flying from my eyes – they burn through your green skirt, all of the scanty clothes you were wearing today when you so unexpectedly wandered into the Rotunda... was that only today? Sob, Tūla; writhe, cry, lie to me, poison me, until that cement cloud from Bekešas Hill finally slinks over; until from the sky spill the coins gathered up by a whirlwind – thalers, ducats and groats; until all the coffins open up and we are all called to the Last Judgment – me, you... Lavinia and Romanas Būkas, all of your disappointed suitors... the lithographer with white eyelashes, the *professore*, and even citizen Graždanskaja... all of Užupis will howl and thunder when we arise! But for I'll intercede with my body for you, while you can still feel my thighs on yours, here, between the burdock, knot-grass, nettles, catnip, valerian, thistle, dill, goosefoot, as long as you still whisper to me – press me, press me deeper into the earth – press as hard as you can!... And I feel myself plunging ever deeper, some kind of spring breaks through under you, Tūla, what's that gushing in the dark – blood, silt, brown spring water? Let's roll away, but not let go, don't let go under any circumstances – hang on to me with your nails, feet, and arms; after all, we've broken through to an underground spring with our bodies, when we get up from here a fountain will probably gush in a jet to the skies – we'll see it yet! Tūla, my true one, my patient Tūla! Why do you moan? You're crying, Tūla? Your face is smudged, my dear, muddy now, from the fingers you thrust into this muck, the fingers you try to brace yourself with, to prop yourself up against something, you're

straddling me now, your fingers sticking deeper and deeper, you sob like a child being beaten even though no one wants to hurt you, don't you be afraid, Tūla, dance, it's truly our last dance... pour wine on my face, wash it off, then I'll wash off yours... Don't shout, don't scream so loud, don't gargle, I beg you, we don't need the evil spirits to hear us, we don't need the good ones to hear us either, breathe into my green as a burdock ear, poke me with your pointy breasts, fall on me exhausted, all your strength gone, wait!... Wait a bit, don't fall yet!

Burdock on your thighs, on your quivery breasts, on your belly overgrown with shadows – like moss, like the roots of grass; why did we pick this particular spot, what knocked us over here, laid us down on this blocked spring? No, not blocked, but just overgrown with grass. Now I'm afraid to slide over, it will spurt out, gush to the skies, outgrow the hills and towers, tell me, Tūla, why are we making love here? Now *you* press me into the ground, Tūla, press me... Why are you pressing my mouth with a palm covered with thin mud, I'll suffocate! It must look like I'm talking, that I'm screaming, but I'm quiet, quiet!... Why do you wipe that same slippery palm and blackened elbow across my face, whispering – it's cleansing... What cleansing, cripes, now I'm drowning, I'm sinking!... All right, if it's cleansing, then why are you crying, Tūla? Are you really crying? Go ahead, cry, cry, trample me, Tūla, trample me into this dirt, this mud, press on me with your brown bottom, it's all I'm worth, wrestle me with your hands, mouth, nipples, all of your beloved flat body, here, on this slope, in this sludge below the Užupis garbage dump, below broken double bed frames, rusty baby carriages, skates, tires that continue to roll even down here – they lie at the bottom, next to cradles in which neither our nor anyone else's children will cry, below the potatoes peels, cat shit, and rotting stalks... tell me, Tūla, affirm for me... is this mud in which we're soaking, tortured by burning passion as though we're trying to make up for seven long years, is it really cleaner than our whole lives, than the shadow lives watching us, than our deaths, still to come, and everything that will happen afterwards? Repeat this to me, soothe me and beat me, Tūla, turn your face to the dark sky so that at least your nostrils won't fill with mud, be careful of your nostrils, Tūla, at least while we're making love, while the giant burdock leaves rustle above our heads – their undersides are silver, pale, coarse... lie down on me, rest for a minute... who would have thought that beneath this tangle of grass a hideous mire pulses and a spring beats... you're lying down? Lie down, rest, Tūla, until they come to take us away – it doesn't matter where – to heaven or to hell... or until the Užupis veterans and

the decrepit aristocrats, in their silk robes and fringed slippers, hurry over; until people crawl out of the basements and attics, rubbing their eyes, un-artistic people, people of love, and not of love; until the first full-bellied crows rush over to peck out our eyes, but it's not time for them yet, Tūla!... Love only succeeds when it ends in death, said the executioner, and cut off both their heads, where's that from?... I don't know, Tūla... Love me even when you're dreaming, quietly ripening on my limp body, dream while loving me, rest, Tūla. Rest some more, until that cloud that eradicates everything in its path rushes down from Bekešas Hill; no doubt we'll still manage to say everything to one another, so few words remain. We'll sit whimpering, splashing in the mud with stalks of grass and roots and streaming blood onto the barbed wire emerging from the ground, the sharp mattress springs, who will wash and bandage us then, Tūla? Who will drown us and pull us out – not needed by anyone anymore – not even each other! – naked, squeaking like the rats that mate over by the sheds, oh... what's left for us? Only to love, to whimper, to cuddle, to moan, to spit black blood through clenched teeth, love's blood, the blood of a mad dog, the juice of the moon, to rub burdock liquid on our already marked foreheads... you rub my forehead, too, rub it – it's so refreshing, even if it's revoltingly unappetizing, that burdock juice and goosefoot... hey, Tūla, can you still hear me, through one little ear at least?... Do you realize you're lying on top of me, your legs spread, that in the green moonlight your little rear end shines dimly? Do you see me, splattered with dirt, memories, spittle, tears, do you feel my rod rising anew on your groin, are you riding with me to hell on this damned and beaten path, to hell, whose red glow shines already beyond those hills, from the direction of the Butterfly Cemetery, from the Polocko highway, from Filaretų Street and Belmontas: why are you silent!? Why don't you say something to me, why are you spitting blood too? Why did you lock me up by the legs and arms so that I can't even budge? Where do you get the strength, my delicate one? Who told you these herbs are poisonous? Nonsense! They merely cause an even greater desire to make love, they drive you out of your mind, it's true – chew them, suck their juices, pull them out by the roots, yank at my hair, you insane woman, you Medusa, you traitor, strangle me to death because there is no other alternative anymore, don't tell me you don't hear, my drunk, dirty, beloved Tūla, or maybe I've gone deaf and blind myself? What are you shouting at me? I don't hear anything anymore! Whattt? Don't shout! Or else shout, howl, fall over on top of me again, grab onto the rocks so you won't lose your balance, let's lock ourselves together again like beasts, splattered with dirt and

blood, beasts grinding their teeth, that's what's been made of us, that's what the world has nurtured – raw meat and the luminescence of your ribs, which I can see even through a layer of dirt... hit me as hard as you can, Tūla, my love, I beg you... so that I could hit you too, bite at your sallow, weasel-like breast; stab me with a rusty kitchen knife groped out of the grass because I never managed, back then, to love you so that your howling echoed above these slopes and hills, the echo resounding in everyone's ears until they all understood that you were mine alone and no one would dare to stand in our way, stab me because I didn't manage to do that, that I didn't resolve to steal you, tie you up and take you away with me to my wilderness, to turn you into a slave, into a tramp just like me, because I didn't, in the end, pay forty sheep and camels for you, as is acceptable in your puffed-up Second City... kill me because I'm drunk, because there's only wine, not blood, flowing, oozing through my open pores, strike me and put me down!... Without you there's neither life nor death for me anyways... and already I'll never tell you anything else ever again... well? At least hit me if you don't dare kill me, knock out my front teeth, they're all that's left – as long as I live I'll suck burdock juice with my gums and love you... Tūla!



Translated by Elizabeth Novickas, edited by Medeinė Tribinevičius

Herkus Kunčius
Don't Blame
Dushansky

2006

Herkus Kunčius (born 1965) is one of the most consistently prolific Lithuanian writers, publishing a book or a play every year since his debut in 1998. His novels, essays, and dramas are marked with postmodernist characteristics and a mocking irony towards consumerist society and its fake, superficial values. He often focuses on blunt descriptions of bodies and bodily functions and never shies away from blasphemy and indecency. His writing has been described as 'carnival' and it clearly contains shock value, cruelty, and nihilism. He is one of the few Lithuanian playwrights whose work is consistently produced in major theatres and he has won numerous awards for his dramas. His literary work is less acclaimed, but always attracts the attention of serious critics.



In this, his seventh novel, Kunčius plays with post-modern style and creates a richly evocative parallel between the Gospel and the Party Programme. What happened two thousand years ago is repeated now, and forever, says the novelist through his text.

Kunčius, Herkus, *Nepasigailėti Dušanskio*
Vilnius: Versus aureus, 2006, 221 p.
www.versus.lt

Courage and truthfulness in language

One spring day thousands of people gathered for a spontaneous but ceremonial demonstration-parade. They raised flags and unfurled banners honouring the greatness of Nachman from the Centre.

When Nachman from the Centre raised his hand the orderly columns carrying portraits of him and his friends moved forward.

They marched past the tribune where Nachman from the Centre stood, reviewing the parade.

The people's love for Nachman from the Centre was so great that, in their wish to see him from as close up as possible, they began to push towards the tribune, stumbling, rising, crawling, stretching out their hands. They soon began trampling on one another. There were more than several hundred victims.

Nachman from the Centre observed the tragedy calmly. Not one muscle in his face moved to show that he felt deeply for the misfortune occurring right before his eyes. However, he soon became unable to bear it any longer, understanding that what he was witnessing wasn't really so bad, and said didactically to his friends, standing next to him in the tribune:

– Beware of hypocrisy! There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, nothing hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ears of the debauched in private rooms will be proclaimed from the rooftops. I tell you, my friends: do not be afraid of those who, right now, before our eyes, kill their bodies and after that can no longer harm others. I will show you whom you must fear: fear him who, after the killing of the body, has the power to throw you into the anti-Central Committee hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him, and that one, and the other one, as well as the one on the left, wearing a red cap, who in the act of getting up wants to take hold of someone else's cane!

The number of trampled victims increased. Children and pregnant women shouted annoyingly. Sirens began to blare.

The dying, so that they would not suffer, were finished off on the spot. The living would not have been able to wade through their bodies. They were all conscious, they understood that it was necessary, that otherwise everyone would die.

Nachman from the Centre continued to speak, only now he addressed

a mass where order had completely collapsed.

– Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten. Know that even all the hairs on your head have been counted. Fear not therefore! You people are worth more than a multitude of sparrows!

After hearing these words the people were all the more content to die. Everyone of them wanted to be trampled on as painfully as possible because they believed they would then be saved and attain immortality.

An even bigger chaos arose. People began to beg one another to kill them, that is how persuasive the words of Nachman from the Centre were. They all wanted to die – here and now – observed by Nachman from the Centre, at the demonstration, taking the journey to a better world. They were more valuable than sparrows, plantain, the wisdom of hypocrites or barren fig trees.

Nachman from the Centre could not remain unmoved by the sincerity of the people's efforts, and showing his concern announced to the dying:

– I tell you: whoever acknowledges me before all these people, the son of the Leader will also acknowledge him before the angels of the Revolution. And he who denies me before all these people will be denied before the angels of the Revolution. Anyone who speaks a word against the son of the Leader will be forgiven, but he who blasphemes against the Conscience of the Party will not be forgiven.

The people, listening to the words of Nachman from the Centre, began to kill themselves even faster. No one wanted the shame of being the last one.

Soon, with the festive demonstration drawing to an end, of the multitude all that were left were one or two half-alive souls – phlegmatics. The comrades, standing on the tribune, took no pride in them and descended to finish them off.

And Nachman from the Centre continued to announce through his megaphone:

– When in the other world you are brought before the Central Committee chiefs or higher authorities, do not worry about how to defend yourself or what to say, because the Party Conscience will teach you what to say.

And those were the words of Nachman from the Centre.

Afterwards he left the tribune, went on to teach and proclaim the Truth about life and death.



The smell of chicken boiling took Aaron Dushansky suddenly back to the post-war years.

It was a time when really anything could happen. And a lot did happen. Now, after the return of capitalism, you could look at it in a variety of ways but those were the times, those were the circumstances, there is nothing you can now do, nothing you can change...

Aaron Dushansky was then suddenly sent to get some work experience – in 1945 or 1946 – to Leningrad, the Hero City.

Aaron had waited impatiently for this chance. He dreamed, almost deliriously, about a time when he, an ordinary Soviet party worker from the provinces, would have the joy and honour to work in and walk the same streets as before him had Dostoyevsky, Peter the Great, Benua, Pushkin, Chaliapin, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

It was there and only there, in Leningrad, that the celebrated April Theses were read; it was there that the barricades of the 1905 Revolution had stood; it was there that Bloody Sunday had taken place; it was there that its inhabitants had heroically survived the blockade – the Nazi-Fascists never got through.

It was in Leningrad, and not some other place in the world, that the despised Stolypin and Rasputin were murdered. It was there that the Interim Government was arrested, and the Decrees on Land and Peace were passed. It was in Leningrad, in Senate Square, that, for the first time in the history of the empire, the people rose up against autocracy. The Duma that disobeyed the Tsar had sat in Leningrad. It was there that the monument to Peter the Great stood.

In Leningrad the New Economic Policy blossomed. In Leningrad you had Smolny¹ and Nevsky Prospect, Liteyny 4², the Russian Museum. It was in Leningrad that Rastrelli worked, as did Sverdlov for a time, where Kirov, Kalinin, Dzerzhinsky dreamed, – you could become dizzy from thinking of all the people who lived there and all the historical facts.

It was a trip to remember – with breakneck adventures.

¹ A complex of buildings associated with the October Revolution of 1917 and with Lenin who lived and worked there in 1917–1918. [Translator's note]

² The headquarters of the Soviet secret police. [Translator's note]

There are still people in this country who remember how dangerous it was to travel in Lithuania in the post-war period: the bogs, the mines, the snares, the ambushes, the starving wolves.

Aaron Dushansky could have gone by train, but instead he chose to go by lorry and he begged his way into a student excursion. A place was found for him in the bed of the lorry and Dushansky squeezed in between the first of the Pioneers of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. They were so small, chirping like sparrows, their eyes clear and trusting – the embodiment of naivety.

As they drove along he was happy in the open lorry bed, alongside the children. There were songs, roughhousing, jokes, and cards. The wind gently caressed their faces, their hand, their chests. It made one want to breathe in deeply – the air of freedom, of peace.

Without a care in the world the school excursion rumbled along the gravel road. Aaron told the children stories about the Party, about cinema, about the proletarian Gorky, the underground, the 16th division, Yagoda, Vyshinsky, Stalin, the Sun³, and Beria. Time passed without notice.

Towards evening, as they were driving through a forest, they heard a shot.

A second shot rang out.

The bullet lodged into a pine – the tree wept resin. A deer standing nearby took fright. A woodpecker, throwing aside his crucial duties as nature's helper, spread his wings and disappeared into the depths of the forest amongst the branches.

The post-war years!

The quick-witted Aaron Dushansky understood immediately: they were in a trap set by bandits who called themselves green forest brothers. Dushansky wasn't frightened by the bourgeois nationalist gang, and pulled out his own weapon.

He fired back, urging the driver not to slow down, and the surprised children not to lose their self-control and remain Pioneers no matter what.

³ This is a reference to 'Stalin's Sun' (Lith. *Stalino saulė*), as it was called, 'brought' from Moscow to Lithuania when it was invaded and occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, supposedly signalling a brighter future. [Translator's note]

A stray bullet hit the Komsomol group's secretary, sitting next to the driver. The boy's lifeblood left his body on his birthday. Still young, not yet having known a woman's love – barely sixteen.

But Dushansky, no, he wasn't scared and defended himself valiantly. When he began to understand that the odds were not even he took hold of a Pioneer who had fainted and held him in front of his chest, shooting with accuracy at the bandits. He wounded several and shot one to death – he was left to lie on the moss next to a lingonberry bush.

However, the bandits were not about to allow the schoolchildren's excursion through the forest to Leningrad.

Many children from the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic fell.

Even the one who had served as Dushansky's shield perished.

When that boy all pale collapsed, felled by a bullet to his forehead, Aaron grabbed another child – this time a blue-eyed girl – and hugged her to him. She looked death bravely in the eyes and understood that even if she died it was more important that Aaron Dushansky make it to Leningrad and gain some work experience, and that uncle would be ten times more useful to the Soviet republic than she – a silly slip of a girl from a village.

After some time the bandits' resolve began to wane but not Dushansky's valour.

Hiding behind the child's body, the fearless Aaron fired back and soon he was the one on the attack. He did not hold back on his bullets and kept changing the clip. He urged everyone on – himself, the young people, the lorry.

Aaron's hand did not shake. The most aware of the children, understanding that there was no other way out, offered themselves to Dushansky to be his human shields. Aaron didn't dare to contradict the little ones. He knew that if he did not make it to Leningrad, the bandits would celebrate a victory, and would later go on to try to put into effect even more terrible acts.

The lorry did not slow down but raced on, jumping along the curving forest road.

A rye field should soon be coming into view...

There were fewer and fewer bullets in Aaron Dushansky's pistol clip. When there was only one bullet left, Aaron put the barrel against the temple of the boy who was acting as his human shield. He decided that if the child was already destined to die, he should die by a friendly hand, from comrade Dushansky's bullet and not from a bullet fired by some treacherous scum of a bandit. He was about to pull the trigger when the lorry burst out of the forest.

...into a yellow, yellow rye field. So calm, so peaceful, so pleasant. The Soviet Socialist Motherland. Only the skylarks singing in the evening were to be heard. No post-war disorder, no treachery, no shots from around the bend – just total beauty.

The bandits became scared of the disappearing light.

They stopped their pursuit.

The gang retreated on their mounts, taking their Schmeissers, Walthers, and hatred for a better life with them.

The excursion had to stop in order to bury the dead children and the Komsomol secretary, the leader of the excursion to Leningrad.

A red sun was setting in the horizon.

Aaron Dushansky dug many pits with his own hands in the field of rye. He himself buried the stiffening little bodies. He flattened the earth so that there would be no mounds to raise suspicion. He did not want the people of Soviet Lithuania, building a bright future, to be oppressed by the unpleasant memories of the past. And that is what he did, leaving to the predatory animals only the doubting lorry driver, with a bullet in his heart. His nine-year old twins also died in the ambush.

Then Aaron Dushansky sat himself behind the wheel and had the three remaining child Pioneers sit next to him. He comforted them: life isn't really that bad – they had their whole lives in front of them: Shalom!

Again they set off towards Leningrad.

Quietly.

Calmly.

With dignity.



Jaroslavas Melnikas
**The Grand Piano
Room**

2004

Jaroslavas Melnikas (born 1959) hails from Lviv, Ukraine, where he was educated in philosophy. Even though he moved to Lithuania as an adult he not only adapted well, but also learned the language of his new homeland as well as the natives, or perhaps even better since he writes rather complicated literary prose. He has published five books of fiction and one collection of philosophical essays in Lithuanian, as well as several books of poetry and prose in Ukrainian, and a novel in French. Critics describe his writing as refreshing; he often employs elements of the fantastic, though tends towards the dystopic, and explores the irrational, the subconscious, and the absurdity of reality. And though it is difficult to be original working with these themes post-Kafka, Melnikas' prose attracts praise for its clear – even rigid – narrative structures which explode when brought into contrast with the wild forays into absurdity found within them.



In his uniquely styled and original themed works, Melnikas creates a mysterious atmosphere, often verging on the absurd. His masterful manipulation of place, time, and spatial understanding achieves not only dramatic tension and artistic suggestiveness, but philosophical insight as well. By telling realistic stories in which the characters experience inner instability and chaos of the soul, the author forces us to question many of the taboos that restrict our personal freedoms. Melnikas's sentences are short and his psychological insights subtle, in places not lacking in gentle irony.

Melnikas, Jaroslavas, *Rojalio kambarys*
Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2004, 164 p.
www.rsleidykla.lt

4.

At that time, my family acted as if nothing was happening. They would stop by my study, totally unsurprised by the cramped space and chaos that ruled there (the harder I fought it, the more it enslaved me). As if it had always been that way. I don't doubt that this is what they believed. I was even afraid to talk to them about the workshop, to ask whether or not it had existed at some point. It was very clear to me *what* they would have answered. They, as was clear from their reaction, thought that it was entirely normal for one room to serve as a grand piano room, a studio, and a study. This is what shocked me most. If they had been upset like me, angered at how terribly cramped it was in here, or if they had talked about the grand piano room, about the studio ... But, unfortunately, the best they could do was to say: 'Really, it is a bit cramped in here – you should trade in your grand piano for an upright. That's the solution.' Trade in my grand for an upright! It's as though I'd started to disappear, bit by bit I felt that something undefined was emerging in place of me, a ball of nerves, it wasn't clear what.

This was the worst thing of all. How could I draw when there, in front of my eyes, in the same room, stood both the grand piano and my writing desk? These were two different, entirely different, worlds. Did no one understand this? These worlds couldn't be and shouldn't be brought into harmony. My father once said to me: 'You don't understand life yet.' What did he have in mind?

After a few months, I began to understand. Summer was approaching. I tried my best to get used to my study – there was no other choice but to learn how to ignore my surroundings. I needed to realign myself psychologically. 'I needed to' is an easy thing to say, but that realignment drained all my energy! Nothing was left. You'd see for yourself, if you, who lives like a God, spent all your time in a 'fight with yourself', in a 'fight with your circumstances'. It was intolerable! I quietly cursed my fate and my position. And I couldn't imagine it could get worse still.

But, alas, I soon experienced just that.

On one of those critical evenings, after dinner, in a vile humour, I retired to my office, but ... I could no longer find it. I mean I simply could not find it. To tell the truth, I almost expected this; it somehow seemed logical. But for some reason I just could not imagine this kind of perfidy. I could understand that my space was *narrowing*, but that it

could disappear? Entirely? How was it possible? This time I did not touch the wall with my hands; I kicked it with my foot, even though I knew it was futile. That's why I kicked out, because I knew.

– What's going on, Yuri? – my wife came out into the hall. – What's all the racket?

– The neighbours, – I said, swallowing a hurricane of feelings through an superhuman effort of will.

– They're always renovating – my wife grumbled unhappily. And it was only then that I understood *what* I had just said. What neighbours? We lived in our own house! I froze in horror at my wife's reaction: she hadn't expressed any surprise at my explanation! Did this mean that we really had neighbours, living there, behind that wall? But I don't want them there. I don't want someone living on the other side of my wall. I'd find it stifling to know that on the other side of the wall some stranger's life exists. After all biorhythms exist. They – the biorhythms of strangers – would affect my brain. Everyone knows that.

I ran into my study – to shut myself off, to calm down, and to think it all through! I rushed over but stopped immediately: I no longer had a sanctuary, not even in my cluttered little study, even though it was mine. All I could do was kick the solid wall there, where there had once been a door.

So where was my place now? I strode over to the billiard room – it too was gone. In its place was a living room with a television and soft armchairs. And no fireplace. My writing table and my books on the book-stand. On the book-stand! What? This is where I'm supposed to work? I turned around and retired to the bedroom. Our bedroom was piled high with my canvases and paints, and in the same room, pressed up against the wall, stood an upright piano – and not a grand! So that's how it was.

This meant that now I would have to listen to the television and work at my writing table at the same time. Either that, or my children, my wife, and my parents wouldn't be able to use the living room or the television, which would be impossible. However, equally impossible was the idea that I could find sanctuary here. Better the bedroom. But... no, there's no room in the bedroom for the table, what with the bed in there, and the piano, and my stacks of canvases.

I slumped into a chair. No, *this cannot be*. I suffered in silence. I had reached my limit. Done. Enough.

I stood up and went to see my wife in the kitchen.

– I can't do this, – I said to her. – I need a study.

– What do you have in mind? – she paused her dish washing. – Is it really that bad in the living room?

– Lucy, everyone watches television in the living room.

– But you're used to it, – said my wife. – You never used to complain.

I don't remember ever having worked at my desk in a room full of people, let alone people watching television. But you see, such a thing was possible (was it really?), because my wife said so. God forbid. But it was possible and so I'd just have to get used to it. I'll become the kind of guy she's talking about, if only because there's no other way. Perhaps I used to work in a living room in some other reality which is what my wife must have had in mind. But why? How could I have?

– You know there's nowhere else.

She said this like it was self-evident. She acknowledged a reality that any sober, thinking person had to acknowledge. Only, what reality was this?

I left the kitchen for the bedroom. There was no sense in looking over the woodworking shop; if it had survived this long, I would have made my study there – anywhere but the living room.

In the bedroom I began to inspect every corner, trying to understand the conditions I had found myself in, how I came to live in the reality in which my wife lived. And soon I discovered my lathe. It was in the wardrobe, under the coats! This means that even in this reality, I am me, with all of my needs. I'm still the same, only somewhat more pathetic. What has changed is that in place of a woodworking shop I have a windowsill in a bedroom to which I can affix my lathe. The paint is peeling there. Is there any point in going on living?

6.

There was no point even thinking about painting. In order to pull my easel out of the closet, for starters, I would have also had to take out my lathe. Then I'd have to dig out my paint box from a corner,

behind the hats. The only chair in the room would have to be lifted onto the bed, otherwise there would be no room to set up the easel. But the most frustrating thing was that I couldn't step back and look at my canvas from afar. There was absolutely nowhere to step back to. Behind me stood the children's bunk bed. My Lora was already almost fully grown, almost a woman – and yet she slept in a child's bed, on the upper bunk, above her younger brother. Was this normal? And if it was, was it normal for the children to sleep in the same room as us, their parents? Was this possible? Once, reaching for a paintbrush, I upset the chamber pot standing beside the bed. Now is this normal, my wife and daughter converting the room where they sleep into a toilet?

– But Yuri, – my wife said that night, surprised – do you really want Lora running to the outhouse in this cold? You know how that will end.

There was one thing I couldn't understand – how could they stand this? Where did they get their unending patience?

– Where did our toilet disappear to? – I asked, unable to stand it any longer. – We had a toilet. We had a bath.

My wife looked at me like she'd been struck by lightning.

– What are you talking about, Yuri?

I left. I knew that the next thing I would hear would be something like: 'We've always used the outhouse – what's wrong with you, Yuri?' And to prove that not so long ago (it seemed to me) I had seen my wife and my daughter using the bath and sanitary fittings in the apartment – to prove this – would have been impossible. And the thing was that I didn't for a moment doubt my wife's sincerity – she didn't remember anything. But there used to be a bathroom. I knew this. Just like there used to be a grand piano room.

After several months I stopped being surprised when I ran into my parents in the corridor with their chamber pots. And though I clearly understood that their situation was hopeless, in my eyes they had lost some measure of respect. Inexplicably. Could that be my father, who always used to dress to the nines – I remember his delicate fingers, violin at his shoulder – could that now be him groaning away in the living room on the chamber pot, no less (because my parents no longer had their own 'bedroom') and I have to listen to all of that. What kind

of respect can there be after that? Pity and understanding – yes. But it's enough to see a person pathetic and powerless once, and he loses something irrevocably – the something that I valued so much in our relationship. And all that furtive sneaking around (dashing out with the chamber pot so that no one would see him), the tell-tale smell of cheap eau de cologne in the living room after it all...

– I see how much this is bothering you, – my wife would say guessing the reason for my mood. – Be patient, spring will be here soon. And then summer. Things will get better.

She calmed me down! I used to pull out my old pictures and gaze at them: God, what freedom! What flights of fancy! What inspiration! And yet they tell me I've never had a studio?

I've long stopped painting. It would be pointless even to try. In the time it would take to find everything and lay it all out, there'd be nothing left to express. Or the children, wherever they've come from, would barge in to grab something. Or else they'd hang around and listen to their tape cassette player. (It's their room too, after all!)

The kitchen shrank too. I understood this from the fact that we had not been eating together for some time; instead, we ate in turn: first my parents, then the children, and finally my wife and I. My wife, children, and parents insisted that it had always been so. But this isn't a kitchen, it's a pantry! I give you my word. And it's the storeroom too. Above our heads hung various bowls and basins. On the kitchen table, which was small to start with, stood a sewing machine case with the sewing machine under it; and also on top of it were the iron and some dirty forks.

– You're unhappy again, Yuri? – at times my wife sensed my mood but never fully understood. – And where should I put all of this?

What could I say? Where was my piano? I couldn't even run my fingers along the keys in order to remember. I had sold it myself, it seems (so said my wife), when the kids had grown bigger and needed a bunk bed. I could do that? Even when forced by circumstance?

7.

Meanwhile, life went on, and I understood that this was the only life I had, that I would not get another one. But I idled it away: every day. I didn't draw (where could I?), I didn't play (what could I?),

I didn't write (my desk went to my children, who used it in turn). I didn't waste my breath describing what I felt, what I experienced. I spent whole days solving 'household problems' – I just barely managed to extend the top bunk for Lora's legs (it had already been a year since she was able to stretch out in bed), and repairing the iron, which burnt out once a week. 'We should buy a new one.' – 'And with what, Yuri?' It seems there was no more money. Earlier on, for some reason I never worried about this.

The only thing that saved me was an odd feeling that someone was experimenting on me. I couldn't stop being surprised by myself: how was it that I hadn't cracked, smashing everything in sight. This nightmare wasn't my life. My wife valued my relative patience, but she didn't understand how I came by it. It was as though all this wasn't serious; well, yes, of course. How could it be serious to heat water in pots and later, having poured it into basins, to wash in whatever corner of the flat you can find? For six people to play cards in the living room, night after night? I was just getting ready to begin with the king of diamonds, when all of a sudden a thought stopped me cold: what am I doing now? Who is this person cutting the cards? Even in the most nightmarish of dreams I couldn't imagine such a vision. Another time, I caught myself with my wife and parents – all of us drunk – sniggering and gossiping about the neighbour's wife, who was having an affair with her boss.

I got up at once, went into the kitchen and stuck my head under the cold water tap. 'Where are you, Yuri?' – I heard my drunk wife's happy voice from the sitting room. My Lucy never drank alcohol. Wet, with water running down my face, I went to the doorway. In the smoky room, slumped on the table, my drunk father was mumbling something. Beside him sat an old woman with a silly smile whom I'd never seen before.

– What's up, Yuri? – she hiccupped loudly. – Here, have some more drink.

– Lucy, – I said, – when did you start drinking?

– Oh, I can't believe this, – she started to laugh, shaking her enormous bosom. – You're such a joker, my little Yuri. Sit down.

But I just turned around and went into our bedroom. (Our older daughter was standing in the kitchen with some guy I had never seen.) I tried to get a handle on what was going on. But I wasn't ever destined to find

out. In the bedroom a filthy man was sleeping on my bed, still in his shoes.

– Get the hell out of here this instant! – I said to him, barely able to control myself.

– What the heck, Feofanov, – he said, surprised. – I understand, I understand, – he looked me over carefully.

– I'm totally sober! – I said. – And I demand, I demand... Get out! Get the hell out!

The man's face changed in an instant, and he sat up in bed.

– You get the hell out, – he said angrily. – You didn't even knock before coming in.

I shot out of the bedroom like a bullet.

– Lucy! – panting, I stuttered to my happy wife – There, there...

– Well, what is in there? – my wife asked, somehow deviously.

– There's a guy in our bedroom.

– That's Konkin, our neighbour, – she said, hauling herself up and staggering towards me. – My dearest, there's something wrong with you...

She pressed herself against me and burst into tears.

I understood that this was all a dream, and I started to laugh. Was I to believe that another family was now living in our bedroom? That someone had put them there? When? Who?

– My dearest, – said my wife, – they've always lived here with us. Have you really forgotten?

– Who are they?

– Konkinas, his wife, and their child.

– And where are their children?

– They'll be back this evening.

– Where do we live? Where do we sleep? Where do we eat? Where do our parents sleep? Our children?

– Here, – said my surprised wife, and pointed to the other side of the room. – We sleep on the sofa. Your parents sleep there, behind that screen.

– And Lora?

– Lora sleeps with Lyosha behind the wardrobe. Where else?

I approached the wardrobe. Behind it, on the floor, there really was a mattress. A cradle was rocking above the mattress.

– Shhh. Verochka is asleep, – whispered my wife.

– Verochka?

– Yes, our granddaughter.

– Where do we eat?

– In the kitchen.

– And where do the Konkins eat?

– We have a communal kitchen, Yuri.

My wife, though drunk, sincerely pitied me.

I ran out into the corridor. This was where the door to the grand piano room used to be, and here the corridor continued deeper into the house. There, that is where my study used to be and the stairs up to my studio. And here, on the other side of the corridor, farther on, was the billiard room and my father's study.

– Lucy, – I found my wife in the same spot, by the doorjamb, smiling her silly smile. – Where are my paintings?

– What paintings?

– The oils that I painted.

– So you're an artist? – My wife laughed nervously.

– I used to paint. You must remember that.

– When did you paint? A hundred years ago?

– Never mind. Where are they?

– Maybe in the kitchen, on top of the cupboard?

I went into the kitchen. There was my daughter, dressed in her nightgown, arguing about something with that fellow.

Without uttering a word, I strode past them and clambered onto a stool. I found several dusty, rolled-up canvases covered in cobwebs. I brushed off the cobwebs and examined them: nothing had changed! Everything was still fresh, bright and free. Those pictures were painted in my studio, in a huge empty room that breathed sunlight and paint. They

could have been painted only there. This was the best proof that I wasn't crazy; nothing could explain how I could have painted these pictures if I had spent my whole life in one room with my parents, wife, and children. God had sent me this message, so that I wouldn't fall into total despair. He had preserved the paintings as proof that you don't have to believe in the life you're living.

– Dad, what are you bawling about? – I suddenly became aware of my daughter's voice. – It's bad enough as it is. You need to see someone about your nerves, I noticed that long ago.

– Yuri Vladimirovich, – interjected the guy with the little beard, – I have a friend who is a neurologist. I swear to you.

I went back out into the corridor without answering. My wife was waiting for me in the living room, and my father who had almost snoozed off. So, the Konkins did live in the bedroom. I paused in the corridor. I had nowhere else to go.



Translated by Medeinė Tribinevičius, edited by Romas Kinka



Essay

Alfonsas Andriuškevičius

Later Works

2010

FOUR EPISODES FROM OUR PROTAGONIST'S LIFE

for *Vytautas Skripka*

Episode One: He serves God and Satan

Alfonsas Andriuškevičius (born 1940) is well known and admired in two fields: art criticism, which he teaches at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, and poetry. However, when he first tried his hand at essay writing, as part of a collective experiment, he discovered yet another vocation and soon published a collection of essays, and a collection of texts, including essays, translations, and poems. As befits an art critic, his work is very visual offering a host of colour play, reflections, and shadows. Nature often figures in his writing, but in the deep, Eastern-influenced way where a few words can speak volumes. While Far Eastern poetry is an easily acknowledged source of inspiration (he translates it), many of his poems echo with motifs from Lithuanian folklore as well. His essays can seem ponderous – a fellow essayist and literary critic states that he is constantly thinking about three things: loneliness, the other world, and death – but they are marked with a transporting quality and offer an entrancing, aesthetic pleasure that is hard to match.



This is the eleventh book by poet, essayist, translator, and art critic Alfonsas Andriuškevičius. It contains his newest poems, essays, and translations of Eastern poetry. As essayist Giedra Radvilavičiūtė states, 'A. Andriuškevičius's essays and poetry have a two-fold effect – they pierce emotionally while at the same time are decipherable intellectually. It is from this uniqueness that we derive pleasure when reading his prose and poetry.'

Andriuškevičius, Alfonsas, *Vėlyvieji tekstai*
Vilnius: Apostrofa, 2010, 307 p.
www.apostrofa.lt

On Sundays, our protagonist serves as an altar boy at Holy Mass in our small wooden village church: he carries the missal from one side of the altar to the other and, when needed, rings the chimes. He doesn't like everything about being an altar boy, but he does like some things very much. For example, the red stole that the priest wears for special holidays. The protagonist knows that the red colour stands for the blood of the martyrs, but it is so beautiful, both in colour and shape that, being a child, he is childishly happy that those martyrs existed. He also very much likes the tabernacle – a round, golden abode, inside of which is kept the monstrance and the host. It is only on special occasions that the priest turns it towards the people for any length of time. Afterwards, he turns it away; the golden container disappears into the other side of the altar, and in its place appears a niche painted in a dull blue where there stands a brown cross. But when the tabernacle is on this side, it's very pleasant to warm your gaze with its golden aura, even allowing a thin wisp of thought: what if He really does live inside ...

But on weekdays our protagonist serves Satan. You see, he attends the third or fourth form in the small wooden school in the village. Not too long ago, a Young Pioneers group was established there. The young teacher, appointed to the wooden school only this year, suggested that he volunteer to become both a Pioneer and a detachment leader. She gave him a red silk necktie, which shone more modestly than the stole, but still... And besides, it became clear from her lessons that this red was connected to martyrs too. Some were even Pioneers, and this is why our protagonist became both a Pioneer and a detachment leader.

However, he isn't to tell a living soul – neither his parents nor his neighbours. This is why our protagonist only ties on his red silk necktie when he reaches the school's boundary, or more precisely, the outhouse at the edge of the schoolyard, which stands right next to the path that leads there from his home. So he becomes both a Pioneer and a detachment leader. At home he keeps that beautiful handkerchief hidden at the bottom of his rucksack. In truth, it occasionally crosses his mind that it would be safest to keep the necktie in the tabernacle, but he knows that this is impossible.

In our protagonist's little silken-haired head, just like in a little

nest, two eggs have been laid – one by God and one by Satan. They are similar: both are a very beautiful blue colour, and both are perfectly formed. Maybe this is why our protagonist sometimes becomes very anxious. However, there's something that comforts him too. Evidently, it's the fact that he – although he does not yet realize it – is already participating in the beauty of the world.

Episode Two: Our protagonist commits his first sexual act

He loafs about the Kaunas railway station with his school friend, Algimantas N. They are both seventeen. They've both been drinking 'Chartreuse', purchased with ill-gotten funds. It is already nearing midnight, yet they can't think of a more inviting place in Kaunas than the railway station. They glance at the women. Our protagonist notices a very red-mouthed sylph winking at him from the shadows. When he approaches her, she asks, 'Want a slice, little boy?' And because he really does want it, he hurriedly answers, 'Yes'. Then she asks him to buy a box of candies from the snack bar, as she puts it, for her sister, and invites him to accompany her to nearby Upper Šančiai. They walk across the tracks, stoop under a stopped cargo train, and then climb up a hill.

When they reach a house surrounded by a high wooden fence she, having ascertained his immaturity, abruptly says: 'We're not going any further, boy. If you want this, it'll be here, standing up.' Because he really does want it, he meekly agrees. She stands with her back against the wall and raises her skirt with one hand, while holding up the candy box with the other hand. Where her panties disappeared to, our protagonist couldn't say to this day. He begins to try to work his way into that long-dreamed-of cavity, but he is hindered by her coarse, tangled pubic hair, which he quickly finds himself injured by. 'What are you wandering about for?' she asks. Finally he somehow finds his way into the cavity and injures himself even more. Everything ends very quickly, but our protagonist still hears the candies rattling in their cardboard box several times. This means he gets to see the situation not just from the inside but also a little bit from the outside. He sees her, disinterestedly, as they say. Though he doesn't yet know that this psychic movement – when you engage in doing something that you are very much interested in but, at the same time, observe yourself doing it from the sidelines, that is to say without any vested interests – is the foundational condition for understanding aesthetics. That evening he goes home somewhat bloodied. For the rest of his life he will never forget the sylph's prickly hairs. And he will absolutely never remember any of the soft ones.

Episode Three: They are seized by the need to break through the wall between self and other and see what happens

Night. A street. A streetlight. A pharmacy. It's not winter, but not really summer either. It's twelve o'clock. Our protagonist and his friend Vytautas S. are in a resolute mood: they need to break through the wall between self and other and see what happens. There is no wall between the two of them, but the wall between them and others seems very big indeed. Perhaps even unbreakable, but regardless, tonight these two will try. They are at the intersection of Algirdo and Partizanu streets. The rules are simple and firm: one stands in the shadows, the other in the light. When a citizen approaches the intersection, punch him in the face with all your strength. Don't lay a finger on the elderly, women or children. After landing the blow, behave as circumstances dictate.

They take turns standing in the light and in the shadows. Both keep to the rules firmly: they strike only with the right hand. The citizens behave very similarly: regardless of age (thirty to sixty), height (one-metre-fifty to one-metre-eighty), or weight (sixty to ninety kilograms), almost every single one, in a low voice, exclaims: 'Hooligans!' Or, 'You should be ashamed!' Or, 'I'm calling the police!' Then quickly disappears from the intersection. The bravest appears to be a young lad who he cries 'Pussies!' and then runs away. No breakthrough in the wall has been achieved, and nothing has happened.

After creating about twenty martyrs, our protagonist and his buddy Vytautas S. return dejected to their rented room. The light of the streetlamp reveals our protagonist's fist reddened with someone's blood. 'Cunt, I got bloodied,' he says. For some reason Vytautas S. quotes Yesenin: 'Goodbye, my friend, goodbye / My love you are in my heart.'

Once home, they stand by the window without turning on any lights. In the street, of course, there is no Yesenin in sight. In the street there is only Blok. Only night, a street, a streetlight, a pharmacy.

For one of them, these two poets are on the university curriculum. But they both know they'd just as happily study Blok and Yesenin in their spare time.

Episode Four: It becomes clear to our protagonist that the stars are closer to us than people

He attends a soiree at a well-known artist's studio. He expresses his opinions insolently, posturing endlessly (and always about art, always

about art), and he shamelessly shocks the wife of the evening's guest of honour. He feels that there is no real contact between him and the others, but he behaves as though this contact was as close as it ever could be. Despite all this he's offered cognac, which he drinks enthusiastically. He imbibes that cognac very enthusiastically, with Coca-Cola, which he is tasting for the first time. As he gets drunk he feels the wall between him and the other guests and his host, though remaining transparent, grow thicker. At some point he leaves; no one begs him to stay.

Below, in the yard, he bends over and begins to vomit. He vomits in a unique, unfamiliar way. (Although he has vomited many times before – he is, after all, already thirty–something.) To make himself throw up he shoves two fingers in his mouth and touches his tongue (this is a familiar gesture); but having started to vomit he lacks the energy to pull his fingers from his mouth, and a muck of cognac and Coca-Cola, mixed with his stomach juices, oozes down along his bare, tanned hand.

Afterwards, he sits on a wide windowsill, assuming the Pensive Christ pose. As he is perched, the other guests begin to leave. They pass by him, suspiciously ignoring him. Last to leave is the well-known artist with his little girl. She, upon seeing our protagonist, pulls her father by the hand, saying: 'Daddy, daddy, that's our guest over there.' But the well-known artist grabs her hand firmly and says 'Let's not imagine things', and leads her away.

Somewhat revived and having cleaned himself up, our protagonist crosses Lenin Square diagonally, at a slow pace. The red roses blossoming there remind him of the blood of all sorts of martyrs. Besides this he also notices that Ilyich's hand does not just point into the distance but also somewhat upwards. Our protagonist resolves not to look up; he walks with his eyes fixed on the reddish earth of Lenin Square. Still, having left the illuminated area, he cannot help himself and he glances upwards. He sees the golden glittering stars. There are a great many of them. Our protagonist fancies that there is no wall separating him and the stars. For this reason, they are closer than people. With traces of vomit still on his lips, he begins to recite Vincas Mykolaitis–Putinas: 'Oh stars, stars! Big and small / How you shine, it's so moving, oh God of mine'.



Translated by Medeinė Tribinevičius, edited by Darius James Ross

Laurynas Katkus
The Cellar and Other
Essays

2011

Laurynas Katkus (born 1972) has studied literature in Lithuania and abroad and has published three poetry collections. His poems seem to have found an audience – they have been translated into both English and German. Katkus is also a successful translator, and in 2011 he published an essay collection – a reminiscence and reflection on the Soviet and post-Soviet experience that seemed to speak for a whole generation. He is also one of the most active literary critics in Lithuania, offering fresh, invigorating insights on individual books as well as on the general situation of literature and literary criticism in Lithuania. His own work – both the poetry and the essays – often includes reflections about the artist’s position in our contemporary, overly consumerist society.



In this essay collection well-known poet and translator Laurynas Katkus delves into his personal experiences to ponder a variety of social and cultural phenomena. His most important themes include the opening up of Lithuania to the world after the re-establishment of independence, the Soviet legacy, the post-communist experience, relations with Western Europe, artistic creation, and the meaning and function of writing in this day and age. This an interesting and professional cross section of life in Lithuania over several decades from a personal perspective with the author relating, remembering, and analysing events in an intriguing fashion.

Katkus, Laurynas, *Sklepas ir kitos esė*
Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2011, 182 p.
www.rsleidykla.lt

PLANET OF THE TEENAGERS (SONGS OF THE PUNK ERA)

The rules were strict at our school’s disco nights. Perestroika was in full swing, but we were still going to dances in our uniforms. We had already come of age and received our red Soviet passports, but we still had to shut down the disco at nine. The teacher on duty would turn on the light in the hall and tell the students, whose eyes would be blinking from the light, to disperse. When you wanted to organize a dance you had to enter into long negotiations with the administration, and, right up to the last minute, even if you put up an ‘approved announcement’, it remained unclear as to whether official permission might still be withdrawn. It was old custom that a poster was just an allusion; we could only get more trustworthy information from the oldest form of media, word of mouth via the privileged few who knew the disco organisers, or from the distant thunder that followed each lightning bolt of a decision by the leadership. A number of factors could lead to an unfavourable decision: a smoky lavatory or a visitor from another school who had managed to sneak in. In this morally slippery zone we all had to answer for the misdeeds of one person. And when reasons were in short supply they were invented: the hosts of the disco nights were accused of having hidden non-existent speakers (our school didn’t have its own equipment) – expensive state property – or it was announced that the disco nights consumed too much electricity!

The living symbol of this order was the school’s headmaster – a stout older man who walked with a limp. He was rumoured to have been a Soviet partisan during the war; however now he seemed more like a Protestant pastor. He wore the same suit every day, pedantically ironed and buttoned up; he was always freshly shaved and the pronounced wrinkles on his face had a bluish tint. The headmaster’s appearances at the school had something hieratical about them – his figure slowly limping along the corridor was reminiscent of a statue of a god being carried around an ancient city.

The headmaster’s one true religion was pedagogy. Nobody had ever seen him relax or have fun (his fits of good cheer were so tumultuous that they scared you just as much as being scolded); no one, not even the teachers, knew what his extracurricular hobbies were. He rarely attended school festivities, not to mention disco nights, though there was no

doubt it was he who created the 'rules of conduct'. When the director spoke at the school assembly hall it seemed as though Lenin's words, 'Learn, learn, and one more time, learn', like the caption on some poster, came directly from his mouth. He stoked this fire tirelessly even though our school was highly ranked in terms of the percentage of graduates who went on to pursue higher education. (I fear that it ranked highly in other categories too – the number of students who transferred to other schools, and also of those who went on to develop psychological disorders, but such statistics were, understandably, not recorded.)

However, the headmaster's attention was focused greatest on the morality of his pupils. Forcing them to study well, to listen to teachers, and to play sports would have been too dull and minimal a programme. Our leader wanted to achieve more, so he focused on questions of personal morality. At almost every school assembly he couldn't wait to tell us a story that turned out to be a lesson about immorality and its consequences. Listening to him, it seemed that any communication between the sexes that didn't occur in the classroom hid the seeds of evil. One time, by accident (was it really by accident?) having espied pupils on a balcony who appeared to be talking, and who also appeared to be kissing, he stormed into their flat and informed their parents, then afterwards he yelled at them during assembly telling them in front of everyone that they were degenerates.

Oh what a strange mood would come over us when on the crowded, pulsating dance floor we heard the echoing chords of a guitar and a saxophone breathed life into a sleepy, dreamy melody; this was a sign that the next stage of the disco was beginning – the slow dance. Couples would hesitate, listening to the rhythm to see if it would speed up or not, and then make their decision. A few girls, heads hung low, left the dance floor. Everyone else would get close and embrace, starting their first experience with the anatomy of the opposite sex.

Oh those short minutes; the slowly swaying pine-tree-like patterns on the parquet floor, the warmth of another body – you hadn't felt this close to anyone since childhood, since your mother's embrace! Her softness pressed up against your chest, because you are a lot taller than she is. The bra strap on her back... Standing like boxers in a clinch, her hands around my neck, and no referee could break us up; we barely move during the entire dance, that punk-like foxtrot. How could this be? Where is the hundred-eyed deity of pedagogy looking? Has she fallen asleep?

You hold this familiar but incomprehensible body like a glass vase, sometimes exchanging short phrases. Your senses are heightened, registering data. She breathes (her breasts rise), she moves her hand, she laughs. Her school uniform lies beneath the mist of a black pinafore with buttons down the front. A few minutes more and you'd begin to disassemble her like a toy.

Slow dances, dubbed 'trees die standing up', were not played often, maybe three or four times in an evening, and perhaps this phenomenon held some sort of evidence? In response to their friend's requests the deejays would select the longest songs – slow, rough metal ballads. In the panoptical new neighbourhoods where we lived there were too many windows and too few hidden corners, so the disco was perhaps the most convenient place for the examination of new dimensions of experience.

And how we craved that experience! Surrounded by silence and vigilance, it seemed like a drink that when imbibed transformed your daily life into tropical colours, a tonic for all ills that was right beside you, within reach. How even the most innocent of allusions electrified us! Joseph Brodsky wrote that in his youth he was tormented by one detail of the painting *Admission to the Komsomol*: a few centimetres of the upper leg of a blonde woman. And since we were living during the peak of Socialism there were even more of those sparks of arousal. The air raid sirens took on the voices of divas like Madonna and Sandra. There were comic books trading hands illustrated by Bidstrup, an old Danish communist, which in a few places alluringly depicted erotic escapades; some private libraries even held Latvian sexology guides. However, this was all just an allusion, just a reflection in the mirror, and Eros would nonetheless pounce with the same primordial power. I remember one of my early epiphanies: a phrase from a spy story published in a popular magazine (the name, author and plot of which I have forgotten, if I knew it at all). It bore witness to the temptations faced by the hero in a capitalist country: 'Jazz music was played, and the young people began to shake their behinds.' The chapter ended with that sentence but you didn't need to read any further because it called to mind an image of dancing bodies and of the decadent Western atmosphere, and that was intoxicating because we could not attain such wholeness of experience.

During the Soviet period, eroticism – especially of the teenage variety – had a similar status as homosexual relations in Cavafy's Alexandria. Of course this enhanced its appeal, and our curiosity, a hundred times over. And since it was never talked about in 'good' schools or by families who 'served the government', most often rumours reached us from courtyard lore, jokes, and, a little later on, videos. Sometimes a group of drunks would stumble into our courtyard; they would find a spot behind the bushes, drink a bottle, and do whatever crazy things came to mind. This silence around sexuality forced us to create our own theories, which often crossed over into the realm of science fiction. And though while in conversation erotic quests took on unusual proportions, most often they were limited to a few minutes in a dark stairwell. That said, we never would have admitted this: to us it seemed that being two-faced was an inseparable part of the game.

Gradually, we started to think it was sexuality that was precisely the meaning of life for adults. Otherwise, why would they have had to hide it? And, after all, in what way were they different from us? They were part of the same system, perhaps even more so, because they had not only to obey instructions but also identify with them. (Who could fail to notice the drips of sweat on the forehead of an elderly teacher when he explained the essence of the new Soviet peace initiative?) They were even more dependent on the institutions because they couldn't justify any misbehaviour on the basis of youthful indiscretion. It began to seem to us as though the measure of maturity was found not in the freedom to make decisions, or in independence, but in knowing all about those sexual mysteries. We were still watched over by puritans, Tsarist boarding-school disciplinarians, and the followers of Makarenko, all standing hand-in-hand. A strange and two-faced nineteenth century still existed in this part of the continent, and in truth we were the last graduates of that century.



Translated by Jayde Will, edited by Darius James Ross

MOSCOW'S PELMENI

For us, Russians played an important role not only in our games, but in another sphere – our vocabulary; obviously, from them first of all came curses: the word '*matai*', a shortened form of the Russian curse word meaning 'fuck your mother', appeared on my tongue before I even understood what it meant, I didn't need to wait until I was in the army, or at a '*proftechas*' vocational school; (on the other hand, in our circle these words didn't come into daily usage, something stopped us – the fear of adults, perhaps? Shame? Only a few of us swore freely, Muckas¹ for example, from building No. 144 and dubbed so because of his small, almost Lilliputian height and who was perhaps the only one in the courtyard who didn't have '*basketkia*', or sneakers, and played football in ripped-up sandals – quite well, by the way – Muckas, who spent about as much time in a juvenile detention centre for hooliganism and stealing as he did at home); however Russian was an inexhaustible source of phrases without which you would never be accepted in the courtyard; we looked at kids who spoke correctly, without them having done anything wrong or having butted heads with anybody, as *slabakas*, weaklings, and we evoked around whoever we wanted that person to be the laws characteristic of all youth speech – you must have a code which when used surrounds the group with an aura of differentness and exoticism, that when used allows you to separate your buddies from the morons, (this youthful snobbishness is currently satisfied by MTV English)

all the more that the innocent Lithuanian swear words, those '*po velniui*' (to the devil), or '*rupūžė*' (toad), and other slow-footed agrarian comparisons, so far from urban reality, bookish interjections that simply couldn't keep pace with the bare, harsh, laconic Russian words, and I wasn't the only one who thought this way (once, when I was maybe six years old, my mother and I discussed what word you could possibly use in place of '*davai*', meaning 'alright' or 'let's go'; there were no suitable alternatives) – all the kids my age mixed both languages, putting Lithuanian endings on Russian words, translating idioms word-for-word, kind of way that characters created by comedian Algis Greitai talk now, no matter how you sliced it, Russian was everywhere, in films and on television, in the institutions, on the streets and in schools; those who lived in the cities grew up in an

¹ Mažasis Mukas, or Little Mukas, was a character in a Lithuanian cartoon. [Translator's note]

almost bilingual environment, starting from the first grade when we studied in small groups, just like the Party ordered at the Tashkent Conference, and our cheerful teacher Anisimova, instructing us to write lines and lines of 'spiders', the Russian letter ж, kept our attention with her broad, brightly painted face and finely groomed eyebrows

but still there was something not quite right with them; the *budenovka* hats, white school pinafores the little girls wore, the iron teeth of the reserve soldiers; they were somehow different and they could feel it and the elderly women and soldiers' wives would raise scandals in the food shops when they couldn't get their Kostroma cheese or Moscow dumplings, or some other products with Russian names that were made in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, screaming with their blaring siren voices, trained by the long years fighting for survival, a deafening sound that would freeze you in your tracks – '*Ja pozhilaya zhenshchina, kak vy smeyete! Ja veteran otechestvennoj voiny, kak vy... Govorite na chelovecheskom jazyke!*' ('I am an elderly woman, how dare you! I am a veteran of the Great Patriotic War, who are you... Speak in a civilized tongue!') – it always seemed to me that this expressive rage came from feelings of uncertainty, of foreignness

you felt it rather acutely when you became a teenager; ethnic borders became pronounced, almost insurmountable; I vaguely remember how once, as a teenager, I went out to the field behind a nine-story apartment block to play football with some Russians and we fought tooth and nail, though peaceably, and later when we were discussing the results near a newly-built apartment block, standing in the cement square bisected by steel rails on which the trash containers were pushed, it seems that Arvydukas said that the Russians are '*kacapai*', a derogatory word for Russians; and one heard more and more stories about attempted robberies and fights, and when you had to go past the *kacapai* schools, or through their yards where several pairs of eyes would stare at you from the benches where they sat eating '*semkes*' (sunflower seeds), a nasty tension arose – mostly because though they were likely outnumbered they were unusually good at organizing themselves, gathering in '*šaikas*', gangs, from morning till night; no matter where they went or what they did you'd never see them alone, it seemed as though they ate and slept together (Barygas was never among them; he lived elsewhere)

this gang of men, this social formation, that had roots back at least to the '*mir*', the tight-knit community of the Russian village, or maybe even back to the Stone Age, a few years ago manifested right before my eyes in some Swabian town where I was waiting for a bus; suddenly, out of nowhere a gang of young Russians occupied an otherwise empty bus stop; they couldn't sit still, were shouting, swearing and telling stories at full volume, certain that no one understood them: how he got horribly drunk when he was called up for the army and threw up on the commissariat; how in Paris they paid for one person for a booth at a peep-show, but three jumped inside, and so on and so forth, snickering and laughing aloud, always looking around to see if anyone was watching how cool they were, looking intently at me: I guarantee you if they had known that I understood Russian they would have struck up a conversation, the leader of the gang would have sidled up to me and asked in a fake friendly way what I do, where I'm going, who I am, and all the others would have stood there, as if nothing was happening, but in reality they would have been listening intently to my replies, deciding if I was worth beating up; gang behaviour and its rituals have been honed to perfection by the Russians; other nations are no doves of peace either, but no one can match them in this respect

in my teenage years, which coincided with *perestroika* and the Reform Movement, national, as well as all the other tensions suppressed by the government, were pushed to the surface and at the time when *perestroika* was still only happening on the television screen, that is in Moscow, the clashes that spread during the 1980s in Vilnius between real punks and Montana Jean-wearing punks, between Lithuanian and Russian youth, were a sign that the social brew had started to sour where we were living as well; and when we beginners, the as yet uninitiated punks, discussed our latest fights in Kalnu Park or by the Bizonų Valley, rumours more often bore witness to the fact that victory had not been on our side; and usually the reasons behind the losses were surprise attacks, superiority in numbers, and our crappy punk weapons (and really what chance did punk piano strings have in the face of the Montana-punk chains? and of course regular punks couldn't appropriate chains for the obvious reason that it would confuse the two punk styles); in short, conditions weren't the best and your only hope for help was from the new neighbourhoods, from the lads in Karoliniškės or Lazdynai who were legendarily fierce and powerful; even our shop teacher, Mazolis, who looked like he himself was carved

out of hardwood and who would guard the school entrance during our discos, enforcing 'face control', once went into the yard after dark for a smoke and got pummelled by a group of Montanas who had been circling the area like a cat around bacon, that was the rare occasion that the militia came to our school



Translated by Jayde Will, edited by Medeinė Tribinevičius

Sigitas Parulskis
Naked Clothes

2002

Sigitas Parulskis (born 1965) is one of the most important presences in contemporary Lithuanian literature. He debuted in 1990 as a poet, but soon produced his first plays, one of which raised a scandal for its shock value. In 2002 he published his first novel; in the following years he wrote less poetry and more prose including short stories, essays and several more novels. His work often contains elements meant to shock – violence, blasphemy, and rather cynical attitudes – and therefore the reception of his work is often ambiguous. However, even his critics admit his work is true literature and not simply an adolescent fascination with some sort of forbidden fruit. Some critics feel that his turn to prose implies a certain pandering to mass taste or an aspiration for popularity. However, in interviews Parulskis comes across as one of the most professional of Lithuanian writers, matching the polish of his style and narrative structures with his personal expression.



In his book of essays *Naked Clothes*, Parulskis paradoxically and provocatively gives an accurate account of the spiritual condition of contemporary Lithuanian society. In his texts the author asserts that though it may appear that we are clothed, it is our clothing which exposes our nakedness. Parulskis parodies the stereotypes of thinking and behaviour found in society, poking fun at the confused intellectual. An ironic examination of someone else's text often turns into an auto-ironic self-examination and becomes self-parody.

Parulskis, Sigitas, *Nuogi drabužiai*
Vilnius: Baltų lankų leidyba, 2002, 220 p.
www.baltoslankos.lt

WAITING FOR THE PLUMBER

*Bridging the gap between the ideal and reality
is the ontological function of beauty.*

H. G. Gadamer

So I'm sitting, waiting for the plumber. I'm in my temporary dwelling; it's not hard to believe that all our dwellings are temporary upon examining the most cosy one of all, your own body, what with the growing threat of weakness, the multiplying signs of old age, and so on. And so, strange things begin to happen in that aforementioned dwelling. Upon turning on the cold water, warm water pours from the tap, sometimes hot water, even. Maybe this is connected to global warming, or maybe the glaciers are melting somewhat faster than computers and the almighty Internet can register, but it's a fact. Even if it's a somewhat unpleasant fact. This is why the note hung above the door using the most ordinary thumbtacks and containing the following information did not come as a surprise: 'Dear Inhabitants of such and such particular flat, we kindly request that you be at home between 7 P.M. and 8 P.M. on such and such a day of the current year. The cold and hot water supply will be checked at such and such a time.' Since the same note is pinned up on each door throughout the entire floor I almost believe in the seriousness and legitimacy of this information. Though. Once an Angel of the Lord came to my office at the newspaper. I don't know if he was real, but he said he was. He was huge, with a crooked-nose, greasy hair and a muddy jacket – in other words horrible, like all angels. He informed that the end of the world was coming in a few weeks; he also yammered on about all kinds of apocalyptic filth and, after ordering me to take care of the protocols for my sins, he took off. No, actually he only left after I suggested he visit me after the end of the world. Since the Angel did not appear at 'the end', after this incident I began to view all information sceptically.

However, I am waiting for the plumber in good faith, earlier than the indicated time, even. The origin of plumbers, much like roaches, is not yet fully known, but they are an inseparable part of these landfills of stinking bodies known as high-rise apartment complexes. Actually, plumbers are somewhat more mystical subjects than any other living creatures. The word for plumber in Lithuanian is '*santechnikas*', and the root word 'san' already holds a certain meaning. In a way they are like spiritual guides, priests of the squalid palaces of the everyday.

There are a number of similarities: while working they always ritualize their practice, in their portfolios, that are quite similar to portable altars, they always have some sort of ‘tabernacle’ of an indistinct colour from which emits, just like from their mouths, the scent of daily ‘sacraments’ – after all, priests, whether they like it or not, are required to tipple a few times every day. And as far as the purpose of plumbers goes, sometimes they are more necessary than priests, especially when you have hot water gushing out of your cold water tap. On top of that, plumbers are perhaps the only breed of utility worker whose members are constantly moralizing and sermonizing, but who are in fact cursing.

H. G. Gadamer cares about bridging the gap between the ideal and reality; I care about what the plumber is going to say so that afterwards I can stop thinking about the everyday and start thinking about the bridge. I sit and wait. And I think: in recent years specialization has certainly grown in our society. Earlier, for example, writers were extremely knowledgeable in agriculture, politics, light and heavy industry, fishing, poultry farming, and many other things; the field of art wasn’t particularly secret to them either. It was besides the point that they took refuge in metaphors and similes, spouting nonsense. Now don’t you even dare to poke your head into a field that isn’t yours. Statistics are viewed as more prophetic than imagination. Everything is correct, but boring. In this world imagination is shrinking and stunted, and it’s precisely ‘the imagination, the power of man to imagine an image – this is where we should direct our aesthetic contemplation’ (this is courtesy of a very wise H. G. Gadamer). But me? Instead of bridging the gap between the ideal and reality, that is, instead of creating beauty, I sit and imagine a plumber. And what’s more, I make poor comparisons between his work and a priest’s mission. What misery.

But a plumber is not the end of the world, nor is he the Christ whose arrival Samuel Beckett’s beggars await. The plumber arrived earlier than the appointed time. His appearance is hard to describe, as is his age. But the smell from his mouth is unmistakable (aftershave? moonshine? is there a difference?), as is the hang of his arms. He reminds me of a penguin who has hit his tailbone or is mildly concussed – his arms, in the elbow area, have a tendency to bend toward his back, not towards the front. He pokes around in my dwelling’s plumbing system as though looking for some sort of device with which I’m warming, on purpose, the cold water for the whole building. Not finding it, he’s astonished: *Vat, you no do something?* Nothing, I say. And it’s so unpleasant to look

into his eyes flooded with surprise and gray sadness. Maybe I should try gnawing on a pipe with my teeth. Maybe I would, but I know that for sure my false teeth would fall out and such an unaesthetic image of my mouth would surely anger the plumber. He’s already sad enough as it is. He turns the faucets once again, and then he asks me to turn them, watching my movements suspiciously – perhaps I am turning them in some special way and putting the entire system out of order? No, my movements are standard, and he is hopelessly waving his hand: *ven you break through ze pine tree, zen de two meters vill move*. And he goes out, leaving both me and the stream of hot water from the cold water faucet. In any case I didn’t understand those last few words, whether my ‘pine tree’ was broken through or not. My personal attempts show that everything is okay, but those damn specializations prevent me from guaranteeing myself a calm future. At least until Christmas. So, I’m still waiting for the plumber. And he will come, and I will do something wrong, and then he will take me away. Off to the domain of ‘Worms and Co. Ltd’ or something like that.

H. G. Gadamer was right: regardless of how godforsaken reality becomes, the ideal, in the shape of beauty and truth, is coming to meet us. Somewhere above the network of pipes and putrid open-mouthed waste bins.

SOLITUDE

I haven't been able to eat anything all day, I sit on a stone lion not far from the Stuttgart *Staatstheater*, which for some reason I've taken using as a bench, and stare at a fat swan loitering near the cement edge of the pond. It cannot make up its mind: nibble on the blades of grass that are just starting to shoot up, or throw itself into the shallow but transparently clear water of the pond. A swan of such contented form that it begs for someone's fingers around its neck. A typical artist of the day – feeding from the hands of strangers, acting as though she's exceptionally important, as though she enhances her surroundings with her mere existence, or even with her faeces.

On the other side of the pond is Diana with her nose broken off, and someone has yanked off both of Niobe's arms; the two of them appear messy in a most un-German way, plaster darkened, the contours of their bodies have lost all eroticism, and besides all this a string of figures on the cornice pederastically stick out their bums towards the early, but already quite warm, March sun.

In my opinion, comparison isn't used to discover the superiority of one side over another, but rather to reveal deficiency – it's impossible for a nation to view another nation as superior to itself and the same goes for people, natural phenomena, and ontological concepts. Manure made out of shrimp or lasagne is no different in essence from manure made from kefir and potatoes. Sitting on a stone lion in the middle of Stuttgart I understand some kind of satanic rule concerning alienation – not only is it not necessary for me to speak to them, to become like them, get used to their mentality, to get to know them as intimately and in as many different ways as possible (according to the cliché a German is a sentimental SS officer, alternating between listening to Wagner and butchering people), it's not even necessary for me to visit because each trip is more exhausting than alcohol. I don't need the world, I don't need Europe, its culture, or its money, I don't want to imitate it; it's enough for me to have its books, its myth of civilization, but not 'it' itself, alive and terrifyingly alien. I used to think that this was a provincial complex, a language barrier, or something else entirely, but now I understand very clearly: it's about phobias, distrust, anxiety, and I've been carrying around this bouquet within myself, it has driven me through life like a mad Hölderlin through the fields, and there is no particular surroundings

that cancel it out (in truth, changing surroundings aggravates things).

Life continually thrusts the stupid illusion upon a person that there is one more time, one more chance, an opportunity to fix things; death is perfect because it doesn't recognize illusions and bludgeons your skull with the club of 'never'. I will never be German (or English, or French) and this is irrevocable, untameable, like death itself. For a moment I feel comforted, but at the same time I'm just as lonely and useless as Schiller, who is standing near the *Altes Schloss*, covered in green as if he has been throwing up bile onto himself for at least a century. How alive the flowers look, brought to the square on Saturday morning to be sold in front of the monument, when compared to him. Against this background the monument is a mockery of the spirit its creators claim to propagate.

I am a piggishly unappreciative guest, a totally lame 'cultural salesman'; I don't give a shit about my culture, what's this culture? The integration of my work into Europe? (Who thinks up this nonsense? Nobody needs our culture, and if they do it's only to launder money – in the form of support – in order to reduce taxes).

A sedentary person is more natural, perhaps even more humane. The barbarian Attila the Hun, the ambitious Macedonian King Alexander Magnus, and the biggest failure at geography Christopher Columbus, who collectively invented tourism, were not driven by a desire for recognition, but by a thirst for wealth. They stand as a solid argument as to why journeys by land, air, or water are totally worthless; the only possible map that is worth being interested in is the one inside; there is only one world, the inner one, my love, I quote Rainer Maria from memory, and afterwards, in the emptiness of rising air pockets I tell her about my lair, where upon waking in the morning I'd feel like an angel just banished from heaven, so many feathers around my shoulders and head, don't piss yourself, she says, your pillow has a hole in it, I've never had the pleasure of talking with a fucked up poet before, she says, but her irony is soft, without malice...

When you see that a text is starting to go off, switch to the theme of women right away – a woman can save you from banality, in the same way she can trivialize your most subtle feelings. I'm attracted by a hidden coarseness, toeing the line of vulgarity and cynicism, especially when it's mixed with melancholy and a barely discernable egotistic capriciousness, traits characteristic of old-fashioned cafeteria workers

and emancipated female artists. She led me through the labyrinths of the Frankfurt am Main airport, and I called her Beatrice, opening the space to a greater light, don't piss yourself, she calmed me (where did she get these appalling sayings?), we'll find your train, though right now, sitting by the pond and staring at that swan, I understand that the most important thing wasn't finding the train, nor the words spoken then or later as we sat under a huge glass cupola, drinking beer while above our heads, an arms-length away, greasy arteries of rain ran across the glass, connecting us and separating us, appearing just like solitude, together, would look.

By the way, that's also the name of my play from which two German actors performed excerpts in the lobby of the *Kammertheater: Einsamkeit zu Zweit*. The name sounds aggressive in German, just like the language the actors used when they spoke to one another in the words I had written; it sounded like a married couple fighting in the kitchen of a communal flat, though the text isn't about that at all. And I doubt if all of this has anything in common with program title: 'Contemporary Theatre from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania'. I am neither contemporary, nor theatre. A man and a woman – it's so banal it's eternal.

Perhaps this is why my sitting by this pond feels so empty; I feel no different than a character in a play – like an urn that the wind has just emptied of ashes.

Not far away glimmer the billboards of the 'daimlerchrysler-mercedesbenz' buildings, and I'd suggest they hang themselves with all of their captivating luxury but I know that they won't, even though they don't like my indifference, they still won't hang themselves. In truth the Germans, the southern Germans, are not just bankers and businessmen but also peasants: the slopes surrounding the city are covered in endless cascading vineyards that in the autumn gush with a deluge of wine, and when you travel by train you pass fields marked with the footprints of agriculture.

The English pilots did their best towards the end of the war – there's only one small quarter left of old Stuttgart, a few old buildings, and it's precisely in that quarter that the 'red lights' have set up shop. The people of the world's oldest profession are attracted to the oldest buildings, the power of tradition, fundamentalism. However, instead of spending money on prostitutes I act like a snob and slowly make my way to an art gallery that has just opened a retrospective exhibition of the classic surrealist Yves Tanguy. Inga, a Latvian playwright, declared him horrible

and sick, but to me he looks particularly gentle, child-like, drawing on the already seen as boring and trite techniques of 'dreamscape' and 'stream-of-consciousness'. In my mind I compare him with Šarūnas Sauka: it's as though Tanguy's figures are trying to assume physicality, but do not dare transgress the border of a more tangible (bodily) form; Sauka's work attempts to leave the body, to get rid of the body's mass, and what dominates his paintings is an overdose of physicality, of 'flesh', suggesting the idea that there is another pole, an opposing substance to physicality. I don't know who's travelling the right path, but I choose Sauka – he's more plot-bound, there are exploits and adventure in his work. Tanguy is dangerously abstract for a consciousness that likes structure.

The swan doesn't give a fuck about the power of my moronic glance – she never did come near me and we parted ways not having shared the splendour of our feathers, while the Korean girl (or perhaps Vietnamese) standing on the other side of the counter at McDonalds is not at all like the swan; black as a crow, small as the hamburger which I ordered on my way back to the hotel because I don't trust the 'kebabs' the Turks are selling; American plastic is better than ground kitten meat, and I worship unnatural food, Coca Cola, alienation, and eternal indifference towards reality.

Having passed through the final security check at the airport, while waiting to be seated in that flying washing machine, I had one more chance to experience love towards Lithuanians: he had a mobile phone and in that phone had enough numbers stored that he could have talked for twenty minutes to all his friends in Lithuania. A person with any sense of shame, surrounded by thirty people listening, would have been embarrassed to call an ambulance, but this guy – no, he's modern, he's screaming how 'nice' everything is, how 'cool' everything is, how good it's going with the 'cash', and so on. And I can't even wish that his plane would get taken down by the Taliban.

As the Boeing 747 is climbing, having already mastered gravity's pull, sometimes there's a moment when the turbine engines go quiet and it seems as though the whole body of the plane is going to fall back down to earth. In that moment you're stunned quiet, clenching your teeth so you don't choke on your own manure.



Translated by Jayde Will, edited by Medeivė Tribinevičius

Rolandas Rastauskas

Private Territory

2009

Rolandas Rastauskas (born 1954) is a favourite character in Lithuanian literary circles. Known affectionately as RoRa, he is a genuine dandy. He studied English in university and first debuted as a playwright in the 1970s; he went on to publish several poetry collections in the 1980s. He has received the National Prize for his essays, of which he has published several collections; these volumes include many of the essays he has published as a columnist for a wide variety of newspapers and magazines. That said, theatre has always been his true calling and in addition to writing plays, he is also a director and performer, often producing smaller-scale, but nonetheless impressive and innovative projects. He currently teaches at Klaipėda University.



In Rolandas Rastauskas's essay collection the reality being formed and expanded with the help of new media is revealed through the eyes of a rather ironic 'EuroLithuanian' observer, a reality which is filtered through the inner prism of the author's experience. The essayist focuses much of his attention on descriptions of the journeys he has made, and continues to be one of the best travelogue writers in recent Lithuanian letters.

Rastauskas, Rolandas, *Privati teritorija*
Vilnius: Apostrofa, 2010, 311 p.
www.apostrofa.lt

AT THE SAME TIME

1.

This midsummer, after midnight, as fate would have it, I encountered two strangers for whom my poor head had all of a sudden become an object of attention. Or I should say my lucky head because a slight concussion is better than a one-way ticket to the other side. After beating me around the head the two tracksuited gentlemen snatched my half-empty purse and, without even saying goodbye, beat a retreat. It is better to have to come to terms with a fiasco such as this than to have to come to terms with a fiasco of the aforementioned other-side type, with which it is impossible to come to terms. 'Welcome to the club!' – wrote the son of some friends of mine a few days later, having at one point also been knocked about under similar circumstances in the summer capital¹. His cheek had to be sown up, in my case just the skin on my broken nose. Up till then I had never realised that there were so many of 'us', people who had been beaten up, most often just for sport, in courtyards, in the streets, on bridges or under them. Unlocking the doors to their homes or returning home carefree while still able to walk after a session with friends.

Even without conducting any sociological surveys what is clear is that you are not likely to find a family in Lithuania without at least one member who has not experienced street violence of one kind or another. (Their children also experience exactly the same kind of violence; only in their case it happens in the hallways at school.) What is worse is that they sweep their misfortune under a thick Lentvaris² rug. In every case it is a punishment for falling into a state of obliviousness, for a brief moment of being disconnected from the concreteness of the present, for sacrificing the HERE AND NOW and slipping into thoughts or dreamscapes that have little to do with reality. For, as my more educated friends would say, being ignorant of the context. And that context, it goes without saying, includes society, family, children, the power of example, and so on. This context is the mirror image of *us*, but only from the other side.

Violence against another is always a humiliation whose sweetness is experienced by the perpetrator at the moment he inflicts

¹ Palanga is called the summer capital of Lithuania. [Translator's note]

² Lentvaris is a town in Lithuania, home to a well-known carpet factory. [Translator's note]

bodily harm on another. In that instant a punisher takes hold within him, and with a hail of blows he vents his discontent with the structure of the world and his position in that world. Action takes the place of reflection. The action is reflection. That momentary act of retribution bestows on him the blessing of omnipotence, even when the victim who has suddenly been attacked is left without any possibility whatsoever to negotiate or retreat. The absence of words in this transaction is the precondition for the punisher's trance. Even if he were just a junky, after money for a dose to extend his impossible existence. In order for the impossible to become possible, as the poet has it.

2.

And everything in the world around you happens at the same time. Syn-chron-i-cal-ly. Over here someone has just finished turning you into a punching bag and over there, on the other side of the street, someone is enthusiastically making love. And at the same time airplanes fly above. The likelihood of being beaten up in an airplane is very small, but there still remains a chance of them coming down. Let's say if lightning strikes. Or a missile off track. It would be desirable for the airplane to land on an uninhabited island. It would be desirable for it to land on one with good company. And with emergency supplies of drink, which never dry up only in a dream sequence in a film. And, for good measure, stewardesses without broken legs. Okay, let's get serious. You lose consciousness after that punishing Keds kick to the temple and that many-voiced 'synchronicity' is turned off for you, you become a-synchronic, deaf to the polyphony of existence. Trains stop running, planes stop flying, and the radio stops churning out shit, the lovers on the other side of the street lock together as if in a freeze-frame from a porno film advert, their father/mother/boss having suddenly appeared behind their backs, and sunrise does not turn into sunset. Well-fed gulls can't tear themselves away from the tower crane used on a construction site where building work by the seeker after truth has been stopped.³ But other systems come into play: the ambulance, the A&E department, and the police. Later, the police station's offices stuffed full of old computers and young suspects. Youths, holding numbers in their hands and being photographed for inclusion in the mug shot book, can't stop snickering.

³ This refers to building work on the Palanga kurhaus (a spa complex), an historical symbol of the seaside resort and the victim of an arson attack in 2002. Gediminas Jacka, one of the owners of the building, the 'seeker after truth', appealed against a court judgment which awarded him only half of the sum he was seeking in compensation. [Translator's note]

In those mug shots all of them will look like hardened *zeks*⁴ (face and 'function' automatically becoming one), which one day quite clearly they will in fact become (the young inspector photographing them says in a calm voice that he could easily put all these handsome young men in their place, but this means absolutely nothing to them.) You are being pulled around like a stuffed puppet, playing the role of someone who has been murdered. You can barely see through your swollen eyes, and it is hard to understand the questions being put to you, but you know well enough that they will soon patch you up and throw you out. I remember how, in the 11th form, suffering from appendicitis, I was being driven to Klaipėda's Red Cross Hospital and, even though I was lying down flat (!), I could see some tousled-headed girls probably in their minis through the ambulance window, left suddenly behind, and managed to drool at them, and even fixed in my field of vision my classmate Jonas (he left the land of the living long ago), licking an ice cream cone. The world lived for *itself*, and I was being driven away from the humming hive like a drone about to breathe its last. Now the Raggedy Ann being driven home from the hospital by a friend felt nothing: the world had turned into a completely dead piece of decor with no effect on any action. And there was no longer any action, for the 'continuum' had been replaced with the 'postfactual'. Only one topic still had any life: the nurse in A&E in filling in out her form noticed that your passport expired two weeks ago. In other words, you were beaten up as a person whose validity had run out. Probably for being so forgetful.

3.

Everything continued as before, only you scabbled about in vain searching for the mains power lead. But the lead had disappeared. And this is how it begins, the loneliness of the modern-day biped – from a mobile telephone battery dying and no charger in sight. At that moment the world could no longer give you a charge. Somewhere, on the margins of your consciousness, you recalled the words of a Muslim mystic: 'God did not make anything more terrible than our world. This is why he began to hate it so much and why from the very first day of its creation he has not even glanced at it again even once.' But why did I remember those words? It's clear why. It's because if I (or someone like me) is 'disconnected', someone or something has to take over the 'synchronicity' of the hive of the world. There must be a systems

⁴ Zek is Russian slang for a prisoner but especially a Soviet labour camp inmate. [Translator's note]

operator, mustn't there? The administrator of that bubbling cesspool. But why, then, does no one stop a suicide bomber from walking into a market in Tehran? Why do football fans so enthusiastically lash out at one another with metal rods? Why do teenagers kick an old woman on a landing, after yanking the Tsarist earrings off her ears? Why, when my girlfriend's son's classmates put him in a coma, did their parents offer her money to keep silent about it? Why do exemplary boys with good parents decide to set fire to a tramp? Why does a sixteen-year-old girl write: 'Teachers don't want problems, believe me. It's not even worth going to them to ask for help. They won't help. They'll nod their heads and say that something must be done, but they won't help. They'll just talk about it over coffee in the staff room. They have no idea how vicious kids can be. I keep repeating and I don't understand why they couldn't and can't do anything to me physically. I'm no longer some weak little girl. I can defend myself. Words and psychological violence are the most terrible ways of killing of a person from within. They don't have a conscience. Kids don't have a conscience. Popularity is what is important to them. You have to be popular because if you're not you're lower than everyone else.' Have you noticed that all those on trial for violent crimes, posing in the cage in the dock for the cameras, are laughing? Laughing no doubt at us. Before they disappear into the non-existence of prison life they bite off with their teeth their 15 minutes of infamy which they see differently. And that album of infamy grows before their eyes, sparkling in all the colours of a bruise. Someone who does things the wrong way round pulls away the umbilical cord connecting him to the light, the truth and other... phantoms.

RYANAIR TAKES OFF

1.

The speed of life and communication, and the very content of human relationships have, thanks to technology and globalisation, sped up over the past decade at an inhuman pace. Marshall McLuhan's vision of the 'global village' has become tangible; one only has to hold an iPod in the palm of one's hand. Or a telephone with which one could possibly... even make a phone call. (I'll never forget that old, excellent Swiss watch commercial: 'It even tells the time!'). It's no surprise that the Nokia strategists forbid their 'Nokia-ites' from calling telephones 'telephones' – only 'multiple media computers', if we're to believe the *delfi*⁵ translators, or 'multimedia computers' (Lith. *multikompi*). And so you get the itch to play around with different names: 'pulti-multi', 'compu-mobil', and so on. And so the cold Finns joke, relying on sociological surveys, that using a mobile phone has over time turned them into babbling Mediterraneans. A solitary person speaking (or texting!) to himself, a character now commonly found in bars and on the street. I remember visiting probably one of the most beautiful churches in Northern Europe, built in stone at the very height of the Secession style – Engelbrekt Church in Stockholm. We had come to listen to the pipe organ but instead we heard an attendant apologize: 'Our organist broke his arm while riding his bicycle while at the same time talking on his mobile and not paying attention'. We regretted that a mobile pipe organ had not yet been discovered – he could have played it from his house. Or from A&E. I once stood before a stoplight 'altar' at an intersection in the same capital city and counted the drivers turning the corner with a telephone against their cheek. They were legion! Both drivers and devices. Or to be more exact, there were as many drivers as devices. Those who were more technologically advanced had switched to hands-free devices long ago. One can only dream about silence in this world. And let's not forget e-mails and SMSs, both of which are already a separate genre of 'real' literature and art, with its own classics and its own critical texts. Using two thumbs on a telephone keypad is the newest form of fast texting, best mastered by teenagers. And the PR people at publishing houses have gone even further, recommending that writers use this technique to write... novels, suggesting that the 'author', having been bitten by the bug, poor man, instead of trying to put something down on a sheet of paper or poking

⁵ A popular news site in Lithuania. [Translator's note]

away at a laptop, pour out a mini-novel on a palm-sized computer screen instead. E-mail has spawned millions of 20th century haikus, none of which has anything to do with their ancient Japanese precursors. And if you don't answer an email or a ring (although we call those terrible sounds rings purely out of inertia) you experience a new feeling of guilt, one unknown even a decade ago. Quick SMSs have become the most popular means of communication between lovers, and an undeleted text message from a mistress is now a frequent cause of domestic strife and separations. In everyday slang the English verb *to delete* (in Lithuanian '*dylytinti*') stands next to the verb *to deal* (Lith. '*dylinti*'). For example: 'Don't forget to delete the last deal, Dima!' Or even better: 'I was faithful to you up to the last delete!' Or: 'Just don't forget to *dylt*, Dalia!' Or the Hamlet-esque: 'To delete or not to delete – that is the question.' We fall asleep with our mobile phones on the pillow where our partner's head should be.

2.

At the same time this speed very much reminds one of onanism: quick informational satisfaction does not allow one to stop and reflect on an experience as a state leading to continuity. This fullness does not become a phenomenon of dispersion but rather of fracture: the broken pieces no longer remember the vase. A fragment no longer searches for safety in the whole: it sees itself as the whole. There is no memory bank any more, only quick transfers. Who now remembers waiting for weeks on end for a letter from a loved one far away? A letter that would finally find its way into that collective post box, the one with the broken locks and dented body? Or handed over by the neighbour: 'This was put in our box by accident.' And finally, like a spy who has sold his services to a foreign power and with a message from the centre that has to be decoded, it would be just the two of you: the letter and you. And you would read those sentences, for which the paper had been specially chosen, a hundred times with your eyes and your fingers. The envelope in the pocket of your jacket warming your breast on the side where your heart is. Everything on the side where your heart is! And now, everything at eye level. And not one inch deeper.

I remember the cultural shock I experienced the first time I found myself in a *yahoo* chat room ('*Do you yahoo?*'). The night flew by in the blink of an eye. I was particularly taken by the ability to invite someone into a separate little square in the corner of the monitor, as through into a private room at a strip club where a third person

would not be welcome. I took ‘Ayala66’ from that night’s square and corresponded with her for a couple of more years. She said she was a anthracitic Afro–American from LA (though she never did send me a photo), who was once in the military and now sold antiques. I couldn’t verify her sex or her skin colour and, to tell you the truth, I didn’t want to. Maybe it was all only a night theatre of solitude, a refuge for disguise and dress up, a drama of fast sex where the written word can take you further than the body can. That said, in this instance writing was the purest body talk, and conversation – the purest writing. It was a fantastic drama school! And later, the performing arts would use the dialogues born as if here and now on bigger screens for more than one performance – it couldn’t be any other way. New characteristics of everyday life enjoy being recognized in the cultural galaxy. In fact, they beg to be included and praised. They are used, particularly successfully by, for example, such incomparable champions of multimedia performance as the Danish theatre *Hotel Pro Forma*.

However, let’s not forget that the speed of communication (if you’re not a broker but a joker) does not diminish the superficiality or banality of interaction. I once stood behind a young lady and read her correspondence over her shoulder as she chatted in the ‘friendship’ portal www.pazintys.lt favoured by good–looking people. I have never read anything more banal in my whole life (my tongue couldn’t be made to call them letters). At the same time I can’t blame anyone: from morning till night these young people buff their bodies for the images they send and they no longer have the energy for verbal communication. Their life is happening in the wordless arena of symbols, where sensuality gives birth to emblems and not a string of sentences. To be brutally frank – it’s the lexicon of comics. It’s as though they involuntarily, as if sucked up by some kind of tornado of fashionable communication, become images on a virtual deck of cards. And there is no doubt that they are being used to play with. And no doubt risks are taken by betting on them.

But what motivates the person who is placing the bet and taking the risk? That’s the same fear of loneliness, my friends. Because coming together in the virtual world does not lessen loneliness. You’re right – it only increases it. Or multiplies it.

3.

Is it possible to ‘unplug’ oneself? To write with a fountain pen on graph paper, to live without a mobile phone, to tap on the keys of an old pre–war typewriter with two fingers and not experience internet addiction which simply eats the time up? To pass the day without having information stuffed down your throat? To read a book and not some piece of rubbish. To watch something by Almodovar and not some violent trash? To go out for a walk only so that you can call a friend from a telephone booth by the sea? To discover a café where instead of laptops on the tables there are people talking, their heads held close together, propped up by their elbows. I’m afraid that it’s no longer possible to pull the earphones out of our ears, to take our noses out of our monitors, and keep our fingers off our keyboards. OK, let’s just say, that if by some miracle you found a working telephone booth by the seaside and pulled out an antediluvian phone card with the face of Saulius Štombergas⁶, let’s just say you managed to get connected, and let’s just say your friend is not away on a business trip, in the background you hear children crying and a Labrador barking, and let’s just say that your friend turns down the volume on the television – and now you can talk! It is at that moment that it strikes you: what the hell! You’ve phoned someone on a Sunday without any reason, you don’t have any urgent business, you’ve just celebrated his wife’s birthday (and so what if you didn’t talk at the party – no one talks at parties). To hell with it, maybe I am sick in the head?! But at the last second you grab onto something, like a life preserver: ‘You know, I just wanted to tell you: I flew Ryanair from Karmėlava to Stockholm. The ticket on the Internet cost me, you won’t believe this, only one hundred and sixty. And in litas – at the old rate.’ And totally unexpectedly, with a tone of interest in his voice, he replies: ‘Come by, tell me about it,’ he says, ‘As it happens, we’re looking for a cheap flight to Stockholm.’



Translated by Romas Kinka

⁶ A famous Lithuanian basketball player, now retired. [Translator’s note]



Drama

Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė

Lucia Skates

2003

Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė (born 1976) received the European Union Prize for Literature in 2009. Her prose is very feminine and often deeply psychological, even Freudian. She often portrays people in difficult, unusual emotional situations, seeing them through their disentangling, and analyses families and the relationships between men and women. In her works painful and difficult experiences usually turn out for the best as they inspire – or even force – necessary changes that make her characters better people. In this sense she is a very optimistic writer with a strong faith in human beings. She has written three novels, several collections of short prose, and is also quite successful as a playwright. Her play *Lucia Skates* (*Liučė čiuožia*) has been produced both in Lithuania and abroad.



In her work this young prose writer and playwright describes the intricate and unique nature of relationships as played out in a variety of social milieux and reveals their complexity in an original style full of feeling. In Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė's play *Lucia Skates*, irony and humour transform the story into a somewhat absurdist creation. The work pins together fragments, and these lyrical and gently comical 'little scenes' are arranged like variations on the relations between men and women. The resulting creation, it seems, could be infinitely rearranged.

Černiauskaitė, Laura Sintija, *Liučė čiuožia*
 Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2003, 237 p.
 www.rsleidykla.lt

SCENE 3

Felix and Lucia return home. They sit in the dark and stare at the television as though in a trance. It is clear that the images moving on the screen are unimportant to them. Wet bags full of purchases lie on the floor. The rain has soaked their hair and clothes. Still, they pretend to watch the film. Lucia – sitting on a chair by the table. Felix – in the armchair.

FELIX – Shitty film.

LUCIA – Unrealistic.

FELIX – Americans like those kind of films. Country of popcorn idealists.

LUCIA – We idealize things differently.

FELIX – What happened to the colour? The picture's gone blue.

LUCIA – It looks like it's under ice. The frozen American ideal.

FELIX – Shitty film on a shitty television.

LUCIA – When is it finally going to break down?

FELIX – (*hits the bedside cabinet with his fist. Lucia flinches*). Go and cook the fish!

LUCIA – I won't.

FELIX – You said you were dying for fish.

LUCIA – I don't want it anymore.

FELIX – Go and cook something! For God's sake! Don't just sit here.

LUCIA – (*bursts into tears*) I'll tell you a story...

FELIX – I'm watching a film.

LUCIA – It's shitty. Listen to my story.

FELIX – You're going to go and cook something.

LUCIA – A cloud of warm rain hung over the city. Rain, rain! An umbrella isn't going to help you. Hurry home and watch it through the glass. Go, so it won't soak you, so it won't carry you away... So it won't fill your ears with... the elements. In the morning you can go off to work like all those people with dry shirts and unventilated minds. Why ventilate them? It's strictly forbidden. There's a lot of useful

information in there, contracts and anniversaries... But what's this? Here, in the centre of the city, inside a telephone booth, a fat young woman, ignoring everything else in the world, devours cherries... They taste so good to her that she swallows them stones and all... She simply forgets to spit them out... On her upper lip – a drop of red juice. The water murmurs on the other side of the glass. Inside the telephone booth – it's like being inside a test-tube. Warm. Dry. Inundated with the smell of cherries, the smell of the fat young woman... It's damp, sweet... Something like this only happens once in a lifetime...

FELIX – Is that young woman... you?

LUCIA – No, she's not that fat. She's chubby. Like a little cake with a cherry on top. Pretty, pretty... They're like that only once in their lives – she will finish the cherries and that will be it... More cherries... She'll greedily swallow the last one – stone and all – and then she'll wake up. She'll look around – oh, look at all that rain! She is completely alone in the glass test-tube where she has been encapsulated by the desire for cherries... And that test-tube is inside a big, empty city... And a rainstorm whips around that city, the likes of which has never been seen before... She will remember that her mother is waiting at home, as are her father and her brother. Angry and anxious as to where she's disappeared in such heavy rain just when they are all getting ready to go out...

FELIX – Will she be scared?

LUCIA – No... I don't know. Right now I don't know anything. Who is she? Where did those cherries come from? Did she buy them? Did someone give them to her?

FELIX – Let's not get carried away, now. They're only cherries.

LUCIA – Maybe they weren't washed? No one washes cherries before giving them to someone. They're full of pesticides! Can you imagine what kind of hands touched them? The dirty hands of some Georgian at the marketplace.

FELIX – Look, do you see? The rain's passing. The first passersby appear on the street.

LUCIA – Felix... I'm in love.

FELIX – Is that why you're leaving?

LUCIA – No.

FELIX – Who is he?

LUCIA – You don't know him.

FELIX – You're exhausted. I'm going to turn the television off.

LUCIA – I don't know him either. Cherries. I'd like to eat cherries and not think about anything.

FELIX – I'll run to the shop.

LUCIA – No. It's night. And it's raining.

FELIX – You want cherries...

LUCIA – I said that? Nonsense. I don't even like cherries. I just don't want to think about anything... He works at an ice rink. He rents out the skates. We talk only about the ice and our skin touches only in the instant when I pay for my hour of happiness, skating before his eyes. I come home and repeat to myself: I don't want anything from him. I don't even like to skate... I hate skating. It doesn't bring me any joy. The ice makes me so cold... I come home frozen, prepare the fish and repeat to myself: I don't want anything from him. What could I possibly want? What do I want from him? Nothing. Only for him to watch me skate. Smiling from the corners of his mouth... I like to think that he waits for me. I don't have the strength for doubt... Only for belief. Often his wife sits next to him – young and tired out. She pushes a stroller with a little baby in it. She sits and watches how we etch words onto the ice... Watches but doesn't read... And why should they read them? They have everything. His woman... She's so young, and her eyes – they're like cherries. Her eyelids heavy with tiredness... He needs someone like her. I don't have the right to want anything.

FELIX – I can still make it to the shop...

LUCIA – You're not listening. You never listen to me, you idiot. You should be hurt. Aren't you hurt?

FELIX – I'm not an idiot.

LUCIA – You don't love me if you aren't hurt.

FELIX – Don't call me an idiot, okay? I'll buy you cherries. If it'll help you not to think.

LUCIA – Tell me that it hurts when I call you an idiot.

FELIX – It doesn't hurt. I only want for you not to think.

LUCIA – But then I won't even think of you. Do you want that? You're tired of me, aren't you? You say you're going to get cherries. But the truth is that you want to be alone. To get out of this test tube.

FELIX – There's only enough room in here for you.

LUCIA – Why don't we have children?

FELIX – You said it wasn't time yet.

LUCIA – I've been saying that for five years. Doesn't that seem suspicious?

FELIX – Yes, I suppose.

LUCIA – So why don't we have children?

FELIX – Maybe we're afraid.

LUCIA – What?! What are you afraid of, you coward?

FELIX – I'm not a coward.

LUCIA – You're a coward. And an idiot. In five years you haven't managed to make a child.

FELIX – Ask the guy with the skates...

LUCIA – What, you're jealous now? Is that the only way to get a reaction out of you?

FELIX – I'm not jealous.

LUCIA – You're not a coward. You're not an idiot. You're not jealous. You don't pick your nose. You don't fart. You always use a condom. When you really need to, you close the bathroom door and politely come in your hand. So that you wouldn't have to bother your wife too often with asking for sex. You don't get angry and you don't bite. You're the ideal man. So why don't we have any children?!

Felix bursts into hysterical tears.

FELIX – Shut up, you...

LUCIA – Or else?

FELIX – Or else I won't be responsible for my actions...

LUCIA – Then hit me, hit me! Maybe then I'll finally have an orgasm! *He hits her.* LUCIA *freezes.* *Then she calmly stands up and locks herself in the bathroom. All is quiet inside.*

FELIX – You're delirious. How can you say you love a man you don't even know?

FELIX – (*opens the bathroom door and talks through the doorway*). I ask myself the same question.

FELIX – And?

LUCIA – It's a good question.

FELIX – Logical.

LUCIA – Especially when I ask it with my brain. But I love with my heart.

FELIX – You're delirious. Child, you're delirious.

LUCIA – Felix, I understand that you're...

FELIX – For how long?

LUCIA – For how long?

FELIX – 'The ice, the skates, I don't have the right'... When did it start?

LUCIA – A year ago... But that's not important.

FELIX – Oh, you really have lost it! You're sick. You need professional help

LUCIA – What kind of help?

FELIX – A psychiatrist! Get your skates and go! Do it tomorrow!

Lucia closes herself up in the bathroom again.

FELIX – You... You've got everything.

LUCIA – (*from the bathroom*) By 'everything' – you mean you? (*opens the door*). You seriously think that you're everything?

FELIX – I seriously think that two people committed to one another have to take care of one another. And everything else will follow.

LUCIA – That everything, Felix, there's enough and to spare. I can't swallow it. I'm choking.

FELIX – I don't understand.

LUCIA – You can't allow yourself to understand. You wouldn't have anywhere left to hide.

FELIX – Lucia, listen to me, child. I had a feeling that this could happen to us... That you're that kind of person. The kind who chooses to be unfulfilled. If it is somehow possible not to have something and to suffer – great. It's too hard for you to have something. But to suffer, to fill your head with these things – yes, please! It'll always be that way. You're built that way, Lucia. I've been waiting for this to start... That's why today I was only a little bit surprised. But do you understand that you're raving? Good God, Lucia?

LUCIA – I'm raving. Okay. Maybe I am... But just let me go! Let me go with all of my ravings. They're vitally important to me.

FELIX – Where are you going?

LUCIA – Abroad. I found a job. All my papers are in order.

FELIX – When?

LUCIA – Monday.

FELIX – No one does that!

LUCIA – Aha.

FELIX – Why are you only telling me now? Maybe you weren't going to tell me at all? You were going to run away? Yes?

LUCIA – Felix, I'm trying...

FELIX – But you'll come back.

LUCIA – I'll come back to Lithuania. But not to you.

Pause

FELIX – Why does everyone leave me?

LUCIA – Because you're unbearably light. Unbearably comfortable. There's nothing to do when I'm with you. I don't know how to live like that.

FELIX – You're raving.

LUCIA – I knew that you wouldn't understand.

FELIX – You're bored of me?

LUCIA – (*Gently, as though apologizing*). Extremely...

FELIX (*Bursts into tears*). Me... too...

(...)

SCENE 6

Six months later. Two o'clock in the morning. Felix sits in the dark and stares blankly at the flashing television screen. The programme has ended. All that's left are flickering lines and static – the image looks like speeded-up waves crashing on the shore. We hear the sound of footsteps in the hallway. A key rattles in the lock. The door opens slowly. In the doorway is Lucia, dressed in a light-coloured suit and hair shining in the half-light. The only thing she's holding is a key.

FELIX – (*not looking round to see who's come in*) Close the door. There's a draft.

Lucia closes the door.

FELIX – What are you watching?

FELIX – The sea.

Pause

LUCIA – Want some tea?

FELIX – No.

Lucia goes into the bathroom. The sound of running water. After some time she emerges dressed in a robe, her hair wet. She stands in front of the television.

LUCIA – Enough of the sea. Look at Lucia.

With some difficulty Felix raises his eyes to look at her. Their eyes meet. He flinches, as though he's received a blow, and averts his eyes.

LUCIA – You've gone grey.

FELIX – From the sea.

LUCIA – Do you watch it often?

FELIX – It happens.

LUCIA – What else do you do?

FELIX – Bite passersby.

LUCIA – You were right. People have to take care of one another. Otherwise everything passes us by.

Pause

LUCIA – I didn't choose you. Do you believe me? You were chosen for me.

FELIX – Lucia...

LUCIA – It's easier when all you have to do is surrender yourself. Do you need me?

FELIX – Lucia...

LUCIA – How did you live?

FELIX – I howled. I howled the whole time. I found your fingerprints on the dishes. They wouldn't wash off. I had to smash them. I stopped turning on the lights. Stopped opening the curtains. I ate only ketchup. I'd stand in telephone booths waiting for a heavy downpour until someone would ask me to leave. I'd go to the market and watch women buy cherries. I found one of your blond hairs in the bath and I ate it. I didn't shit it out... And at night, Lucia, you'd come to me and put me inside your stomach. At night I would float around inside you like an embryo. Without limbs, without sex, without skin... Weightless and trusting. Feeding only off of you. I would fall asleep all folded up in this chair... Loneliness – it's barren, Lucia. It's useful only for cleansing yourself. Everything else we have to share.

LUCIA – Forgive me for forgetting my hair.

FELIX – Forgive me that I wanted to kill myself with it.

LUCIA – I missed being bored with you. There is nothing more amazing in the world than this gift of boredom.

Pause

LUCIA – Comb my hair.

Felix combs her hair.

LUCIA – Now I feel that you've forgiven me. Your fingers and my hair – they're one and the same.

FELIX – It's easy when you forgive.

LUCIA – You need only to surrender yourself...

FELIX – We take our whole lives to learn this...

LUCIA – Lightness. It's a reward.

FELIX – Lightness and boredom. Amazing!

LUCIA – Felix... Promise me that we'll live a boring life.

FELIX – I promise. I'll be the most boring guy that you've ever met.

LUCIA – Incomparably? Fatally?

FELIX – And the skates?

LUCIA – Skates? I hate skating.

FELIX – Me too.

LUCIA – It's great that we don't have to skate.

FELIX – It'll be like this... fatally... boring!

They laugh and imagine that they are skating.

SCENE 7

Twelve years earlier. Father is on his deathbed. Mother sits on the edge of the bed and stirs his tea loudly and for longer than needed.

FATHER (*in a weak voice*) – Re-gi-na... Put down that cup...
She puts it down. Pause

FATHER – Re-gi-na...

MOTHER – Will you drink it?

FATHER – No... Lie down next to me...

Mother lies down on the edge of the bed. Father turns his head with difficulty and breathes into her temples.

FATHER – White light above the sea...

MOTHER – Yes.

FATHER – Cool sand... A pebble in your shoe...

FATHER – A heart-shaped pebble. And you said – that's not a heart, those are lungs.

FATHER – I said – barefoot... barefoot you're even more mine...

MOTHER – Barefoot I'm naked.

FATHER – Shake out that pebble...

MOTHER – No.

FATHER – Shake it out, you silly thing... You're limping...

MOTHER – Look away. I'll shake it out. I kick off my shoe and wait until you look away. You look at my naked foot. There wasn't any pebble there. Desire made me limp. Desire still untamed...

FATHER – In that light... How grey your hair is... Through me you've gone grey, Regina...

MOTHER – Forgive me for shouting at you.

FATHER – Forgive me for not making it to the bedpan in time...

MOTHER – Forgive me for shouting! Forgive me for shouting!

FATHER – I wasn't angry... I was shouting at myself... In my thoughts... Oh, how I'd shout at myself!

MOTHER – You whispered. Only whispered. Not to us.

FATHER – We tormented one another... Enough... Sleep calmly, Regina...

MOTHER – I don't want to. I don't want to sleep. Will you drink it?

Pause

MOTHER – Paul! Will you drink it?... *(She pats father on the cheek)*

FATHER *(barely audibly)*. We overcame...

MOTHER – What are you saying?

FATHER – We protected her...

MOTHER – What?

FATHER – The sea...

Mother sits down

FATHER – Where are you...?

MOTHER – I'm right here. It's hard to breathe. I'll sit for a bit.

FATHER – Lie next to me...

MOTHER – I can't. You're dying.

FATHER – Lie down...

MOTHER – You're breathing in my ear.

FATHER – Lie down...

MOTHER – Then we'll die together. I don't want to yet.

FATHER – And I don't want to...

MOTHER – Don't tell me you're afraid? You?

FATHER – I don't want you to die... You'll just lie here... I'm the one that's going to die...

MOTHER – I'm not going to lie down. I don't want you to stop breathing into my ear!

Pause

FATHER *(tries to touch mother's hand but can't reach it)*. Re-gi-na... Give me your hand...

MOTHER *(doesn't give it to him)*. No. I'm not ready... Wait a bit... I'm not ready... I'm not ready...

FATHER – I can't reach...

MOTHER *(shouts)*. Wait! I'm not ready!

FATHER – I am... I am...

He dies

END



Translated by Medeinė Tribinevičius, edited by Romas Kinka

Marius Ivaškevičius
Banishment

2012

Marius Ivaškevičius (born 1973) once described himself as belonging to ‘the found generation’, and has effectively risen to the challenge of being a young writer in a young country. Reasonably optimistic about the contemporary situation in Lithuania he can safely be called the hardest-working writer, journalist, playwright, and theatre and film director around. He debuted in 1998 with a short story collection but his most scandalous book was his first novel which told the story of a famous leader of the freedom-fighters, portraying him as less heroic and more human than was usual at the time. In spite of the controversy surrounding that book Ivaškevičius continues to explore and question issues of national identity and historical events in his books and his plays, which have brought him success both at home and abroad. He has recently tried his hand at filmmaking and has produced two documentaries, with a third in the works.



Playwright Marius Ivaškevičius’s new play *Banishment* tells the story of the search for identity undertaken by immigrants in London, coming both from Lithuania and other countries. The play is built upon a base of true stories collected by the author on visits to the city. What is emigration? What hidden meanings does the word have? One of the most important themes in this play is the loss of identity. *Banishment* reveals many possible ways of answering and resolving this question. Emigration is generally conceived of as a horizontal spiritual journey ‘into happiness’, but all too often it becomes a vertical journey, down ‘into unhappiness’. The National Drama Theatre of Lithuania, under the direction of Oskaras Koršunovas, produced the play at the end of 2011 and immediately after the premiere it was named the biggest theatre event of the past decade.

Ivaškevičius, Marius, *Isvarymas*
Vilnius: Apostrofa, 2012, 161 p.
www.apostrofa.lt

Enter Ben, dressed in a black suit.

BEN – I’ve heard it is possible. That there are lots of people who live like that. But three hundred pounds...

You see, for example where I work now, a club off Oxford Street, that’s what a bottle of champagne costs. Obviously, it’s an inflated price, but still – you can’t compare a bottle of champagne to a human being... It’s not right. Of course there are more expensive ones. Ten thousand, for example, gets you a full entry in the database and all that. You know exactly whose passport you have, and no one is after you with a big stick because you know exactly where his grave is. You’re more or less the same age, only he died when he was a child, it’s only his particulars that are still alive... Miracles like this do happen, so many of them that they’re that I can’t afford them all. Besides, it’s still too early for me. You have to work on your face first, perfect your pronunciation, and get rid, get rid of the shit... In other words, there’s still work to be done.

For now I’m Marek. Officially, of course, I’m Marjusz, but not many people can pronounce that. There are some people who still remember Ben... But you know what – I’ve already forgotten her. I don’t have her taste in my mouth and her smell doesn’t turn me on anymore. In a word, she’s a client, just like any other, coming here to lap up her fill. Her owner threw her out so she keeps hanging around here. This is the kind of place where a girl can find a new owner to hook onto. All that bared flesh... The men who come here want to see what they’re getting.

I work security. I start at ten p.m. and finish in the early morning. She likes to remind me of that, if she shows up that is, by saying ‘good morning’. Only it’s when she’s already on her way out, hanging on some guy’s neck, totally danced out, spent, her feet askew. She’s so lyrical, and so cynical, all at the same time.

EGLĖ – Could you bite my lip?

BEN – What do you mean?

EGLĖ – Until it bleeds.

BEN – Don’t be crazy.

EGLĖ – I need to. I’m so hungry...

BEN – And then she laughs, suddenly. So angrily, so unpleasantly that I'm afraid to think about what exists there, inside her. It's clear that it's a Mongol, but I suspect that it might be Genghis Khan himself. If she were a man...

EGLĖ – How do you like my Japanese?

BEN – He's Japanese?

EGLĖ – Uh–huh. You know what's the funniest thing about him?

BEN – And she laughs again, unpleasantly, like she despises everyone here.

EGLĖ – Imagine – I'm finishing up and he says to me: I lab you. (*laughs*) I lab you, honey, I lab you... (*laughs*) And I, fuck it, I almost lose it, I get a cramp in my leg from laughing. You can pull your cock out, I say. I lab you too, but enough is enough – we've already 'labbed' enough today (*laughs*)...

(*She composes herself*) I can't manage to finish things here. I've bought gifts, and it always seems like this time I'll be going... No, really, next month... I've thrown away so many tickets...

BEN – And she always leaves with a different guy. I saw she was falling into a hole, into that same London jungle where I started. It's as though we, she and I, moved in opposite directions.

EGLĖ – Ben, he's a footballer. Is he very black?

BEN – He's just black.

EGLĖ – Do you know Arsenal?

EGLĖ – He slipped me something, you know. You can't get like that just from champagne...

BEN – What's up with you?

EGLĖ – I'm floating. You'll, if something happens, you'll remember? From Arsenal. Black.

BEN – What – if what happens?

EGLĖ – If I don't come back.

BEN – Then don't go with him.

EGLĖ – So who should I go with? He chose me.

Pause

Who should I go with, Ben?

BEN – Get a cab.

EGLĖ – Never mind. You don't understand.

BEN – I see a lot around here.

EGLĖ – You see a lot, eh?

BEN – Trust me...

EGLĖ – I know. What – I'm special somehow? This place is full of women just like me, right?

BEN – All sorts come here.

EGLĖ – Obviously. You've seen it all. I can just picture it...

Pause

Wow, you know what, I'm floating...

BEN – So float to your bed. I'll give you cab fare...

EGLĖ – No, he's from Arsenal. I've got to try.

BEN – Try what?

EGLĖ – My luck.

BEN – I have an earpiece. It's not very big. It's inside my ear. Everyone thinks that Marek decides who gets in and who doesn't. That's why everyone respects me: 'Marek, hey, goodnight'... but in reality, it's not me who decides. There's a camera up there and everything is decided by someone else... I've been worried for a long time that it'd come to this, she's gone downhill...

EGLĖ – Hello, Ben.

BEN – Hello.

EGLĖ – How's it going?

BEN – Fine, thanks.

EGLĖ – Today I'm feeling like...

BEN – (*puts out his arm*) Sorry, madam. You're not allowed in.

EGLĖ – Why am I not allowed in?

BEN – Sorry. It's a private party, madam.

Pause

She didn't immediately understand I was being serious.

EGLĖ – And what's so private?

BEN – Madam, step aside. Let these people pass.

EGLĖ – Don't push me.

BEN – I'm so sorry. But you're blocking the way.

Pause

EGLĖ – Ben, enough with the joking...

BEN – Madam, I told you: you can't come in.

EGLĖ – Why?

BEN – It's a closed evening.

EGLĖ – You're joking, right?

Ben turns away.

You arsehole, this is just a job to you, this is my life... Let me in.

BEN – No.

Some people might think that this was some kind of delayed revenge on my part that I found sweet... But I was simply following orders...

Go home. It's time.

EGLĖ – But I'm totally... sober. Want to smell my breath?

BEN – For good. That's what I mean.

EGLĖ – What do you mean..?

BEN – Go back home to Žvėrynas.

EGLĖ – Ben, fuck it, what are you to me?

BEN – I'm giving you some advice.

EGLĖ – You're nothing to me.

Pause

Ok, I'll think about it. But not now, okay. Right now I'm going inside...

BEN – Madam, I told you...

EGLĖ – Enough with the madam, I'm Eglė...

BEN – I'm sorry, Eglė... You're not welcome here.

Pause

EGLĖ – This is about that morning, isn't it? Forgive me, I'm an idiot, I got scared... I felt so ugly...

If you want, today I won't drink. I'll wait until you're finished here. I won't pull anyone. I won't even dance. Ok? Where do you live now?

BEN – Oh, how I understood her situation...

EGLĖ – I wouldn't even try to pull you if you didn't want me to...

BEN – ... it was like this for me with Eddie, with that battleship... And then it started to rain and she was standing there, soaked – and everything was just the same as back then...

EGLĖ – (*Standing soaked in rain*) Ben...

BEN – I can't.

EGLĖ – I'm very cold.

BEN – I can see that.

EGLĖ – But I'd dry off quickly in there. I dry quickly...

BEN – I know.

EGLĖ – Can I go in?

BEN – No.

Pause

EGLĖ – Is that final?

Ben nods.

What about in a month?

BEN – No.

EGLĖ – Not even in a month?

BEN – No way.

EGLĖ – But you'll be standing here, right? I'd still try...

BEN – Listen, have some self-respect. This is just a shitty club. Why are you so obsessed with it?

EGLĖ – People know me here.

BEN – So what? Go somewhere where they don't know you...

Eglė stands in the rain.

Little by little she seemed to melt. All her makeup started to run down her face, her clothes sticking to her body, her nipples sticking out... She looked miserable, without a shred of self-respect... I couldn't believe that she'd try one more time...

EGLĖ – (*suddenly coming towards him*) And what are you going to do? This is my home, understand? Fuck it, this is my life...

BEN – (*struggling to hold her back*) Then you're dead...

EGLĖ – What? Are you threatening me..?

BEN – You, little shit, you're not going in there. Never, fuck it.

EGLĖ – (*coming towards him*) Let me in...

BEN – Go back where you came from! Isn't there enough room in London for you?

EGLĖ – I'm telling you...

BEN – (*shouting*) Get out.

EGLĖ – (*shouting*) I'm telling you...

BEN – (*shouting*) Please.

EGLĖ – You're using my expressions now...

BEN – Madam, I'm asking you to leave. And don't come slinking back.

EGLĖ – (*shouting*) You don't exist. You're a composite. Of all kinds of expressions, fuck you. (*She struggles against him*) You've been glued together...

BEN – (*shouting at her*) Get out!!!

He throws Eglė into a puddle.

BEN – I didn't see her again. She disappeared into that labyrinth, just like Calm-Face before her. There are so many levels here, and by the time I go through them all... Still, he's in one of them... With that undisturbed face of his... And just like I found the Underground – a whole other city below London – I'll find him. And now I hunt for him in the Tube, as they call it. I comb every line...

Obviously, during peak hours I do it more seriously, giving it my full concentration – everything – because the whole Tube hums and you have to look at each and every person carefully... But there are times when I turn off for hours, sit, nodding off with everyone else, turn up Freddy... I've tried listening to other performers, but no one else sticks. Still, it's tricky with Freddy, you never know what else he might pull on you. Sure, OK – he's a homo and a towel-head, but I can put up with that. I was also born a shit and now I have to overcome it, this innate fault. But if something else came out, some new joke of Freddy's... Well, it would have to end, naturally – I can tolerate something innate, but I'm merciless with anything else.

I'm still learning to get my expression right. I can already tell if someone is English or not, and make the adjustment myself accordingly. I've almost succeeded in softening my gaze, though sometimes the wolf still comes out. But it's rarer now – there's no comparison with before.

I'm working on my jaw now... With them it's pulled in somehow, like they're biting down or something... Or it's fastened from within... That's the hardest part for me. I can't find the key to it. From the outside it looks easy but from the inside – no fucking way. I tried biting down with my teeth to create those hollows... but it's hard to talk and I develop sores in my mouth. Clearly I'm using the wrong technique. I've even started to read. Dickens, Walter Scott... I read a paragraph and then immediately rush to the mirror – has anything changed? But, obviously, you need to be patient... They've formed themselves over centuries, they've shaped that face of theirs, that fucking undisturbed expression, looking down on everyone, surrounded by slaves... What can I expect from reading one paragraph...



BEN – We were sitting diagonally across from one another. He was drinking whisky. Me – beer. Our eyes met several times. Obviously, many years had passed but I recognized him. Even though he had cut his hair and he was so clean, so stylish... How are you, man? Don't you recognize me?

EDDIE – No, not really...

BEN – He was flustered. And I spoke to him in English specially on purpose. To keep the tension up.

EDDIE – Do we know one another?

BEN – Brother... We served together... In the First World War...

EDDIE – Where?

BEN – In the navy. Torpedo division... You're Eddie, right?

EDDIE – Well, yes...

Pause

BEN?

BEN – But you took long enough...

EDDIE – No... Now I recognize you ...

BEN – Okay I... I really got you, eh... (*Laughs*) In the navy... First World War...

EDDIE – Fuck, I didn't understand – what World War...

BEN – Well, greetings.

EDDIE – (*laughing*) I was wondering in what world war...

BEN – It's an English joke.

EDDIE – Cool.

Pause

BEN – How are you?

EDDIE – I'm – good...

BEN – Still in the boat?

EDDIE – (*shakes his head*) Long gone...

BEN – Where are you now?

EDDIE – All over.

BEN – Something to do with physics?

EDDIE – No.

Pause

BEN – But I can see you're making money. What kind of whisky is that?

EDDIE – The expensive kind...

BEN – I can see that – it's not Teacher's...

EDDIE – No, I'm making good money.

Pause

And you?

BEN – Me – nothing special. I'm working. Security.

EDDIE – At a bank somewhere?

BEN – At a club. I was speaking to him from another life, because I couldn't find this one. In fact, to him I was another person... So what are you doing? Tell me about it.

EDDIE – I'm working.

BEN – I can see that...

EDDIE – Ben, it's a long conversation...

BEN – So let's order something. A whisky...

Are you in a rush?

EDDIE – Let's order.

BEN – Unless you're in a rush?

EDDIE – Me? No.

Pause

BEN – So what are you up to?

EDDIE – I'm a hunter.

BEN – (*laughing*) And when you're not taking the piss?

EDDIE – What?

BEN – What do you do?

EDDIE – I'm a hunter.

BEN – What do you hunt?

EDDIE – Ducks. Actually, I just bring them in. Others hunt them.

Pause

BEN – Fuck, you're putting me on. Like me with the boat, right? With that First World War...

EDDIE – Yeah, you got me with that one...

BEN – But seriously – what do you do?

EDDIE – Well, I bring in the ducks. The ones that have been shot.

Pause

BEN – Seriously?

EDDIE – Seriously.

BEN – You bring in ducks?

EDDIE – I gather them up.

BEN – Who the hell needs that?

EDDIE – It's work.

Pause

I said it was a long conversation...

BEN – And you like it?

EDDIE – I love it. I get out of the city... Clean air, nature...

BEN – And quotas? Are there any?... How many do you have to gather up?

EDDIE – As many as they shoot. Sometimes you don't find any...

BEN – What do you mean you don't find any?

EDDIE – You don't find any. Sometimes a fox will make off with one. Or one'll fall behind something...

BEN – Then they don't pay you?

EDDIE – No, they pay. Only you feel like shit. It's not nice to let down the bosses you work for... Well, you understand...

BEN – Uh-huh...

EDDIE – You want to do the best you can since they've put their trust in you.

Pause

BEN – And who are these bosses?

EDDIE – Oh-ho.

BEN – What do you mean – Oh-ho?..

EDDIE – I can't say.

BEN – Some magnates?

EDDIE – More important than that.

BEN – Russians of some sort?

EDDIE – No way. There's no one more English.

Pause

But when we're like this, in private, you don't even feel it. That it's him and you there... You totally forget that it's him there. And we're getting on so well, having a nice cosy chat...

BEN – And him – who is him?

EDDIE – I can't say.

BEN – Give me a hint.

EDDIE – I can't.

BEN – Someone of noble birth?

EDDIE – More important than that.

BEN – And who can be more important?

EDDIE – I can't say.

BEN – The royal family?

EDDIE – That's enough. You're asking too much.

Pause

Though, I will say, it amazes me how laid-back they are with you. For example, they give you a gun like it's nothing... Hand it to you to hold or something while they have a drink. And the gun is loaded. Can you imagine – they trust you. And obviously then you try your very best – money isn't the most important thing... You want to please them. To gather up as many ducks as you can. Look, can you see, here – the scar?

BEN – Uh–huh.

EDDIE – Guess what bit me.

A fox. I pulled a duck out of the fox's mouth.

I thought I was going to get rabies, but I was fucking lucky – I didn't.

He takes a sip of his whisky.

Obviously, you're run off your feet. You wade through those marshes – you get all dirty and smelly... But later, you get your reward... Servants wait on you hand and foot. You eat what you want, you drink what you want... Overall – you feel like a human being.

BEN – And what's next? What are your prospects?

EDDIE – What prospects?

BEN – Plans. When you've made a good amount...

EDDIE – I make a good amount, you know...

BEN – But when you're up on your own two feet...

EDDIE – I have everything...

BEN – Okay...

EDDIE – I rent a flat in the centre of town.

BEN – But what are your plans?

EDDIE – To keep my position.

Pause

BEN – What position?

EDDIE – My position.

For example, I don't smoke because in my job endurance is everything. I go to the pool. I swim. Because if they fall into the lake...

BEN – Fuck, and if you're injured? Or what if you came across a wolf? That would be the end of it; they'd throw you out.

EDDIE – No, they wouldn't throw me out...

BEN – So where would they put you – in a kennel?

EDDIE – We have a totally different kind of relationship. I'm like a member of the family.

BEN – But, fuck it, what are you going to do then, lie on a rug? If you're no longer fit to hunt – that's what I'm talking about...

EDDIE – There are no injuries like that.

BEN – But, fuck it, what if there were?

EDDIE – There aren't any.

Pause

Still, they wouldn't throw me out. Once they've taken you in...

BEN – And what about in ten years? Someone younger will come along, and then what?

EDDIE – And then nothing. I'd outrun them.

BEN – Well, and what about when you get tired. Or, I don't know, fuck it – you start losing your sight and you can't find those ducks...

EDDIE – I don't understand what you're asking me.

BEN – I'm asking you what kind of prospects you have? We all have a plan. A plan, a dream, something... Where are you going with these ducks?

EDDIE – Ben, I'm living. Like a human being. A worthwhile human being...

BEN – But your status...

EDDIE – What status?

BEN – Well, your, that position of yours, fuck it. You're – a dog.

EDDIE – It's just a job.

BEN – But it's a dog's job.

EDDIE – So what?

BEN – Fuck, maybe I didn't explain myself... Ambition – right, that's what I'm talking about... Where is your ambition? What do you want from all of this?

EDDIE – In London?

BEN – In your life.

Pause

EDDIE – Your thinking is too complicated, wanting to live somewhere, sometime in the future. You need to live now.

BEN – I am living...

EDDIE – Fuck that. You live as if your prospects are in the future...

BEN – Eddie, I am living... But I also think about what's further down the line...

EDDIE – And what is there – further down the line? Death. What do you think you've got planned, fuck it – there's nothing there.

BEN – For me there is something.

EDDIE – What, for example?

BEN – Plans. For example, you didn't even recognize me.

EDDIE – I didn't recognize you. So what?

BEN – It's an achievement.

EDDIE – Ben, you've aged. That's not an achievement.

BEN – (*shakes his head*) I've changed deliberately.

EDDIE – Well, and what are your plans for the future?

BEN – I'm going to change some more.

EDDIE – And so what?

BEN – You won't recognize me at all...

EDDIE – And that's your ambition? Your fucking plans for the future?

BEN – But I'm moving forward, understand? I'm becoming something... From your torpedo division to here – this is a path.

EDDIE – Okay, so you've survived...

BEN – I've cleaned out all the shit... Eddie, for twelve years I've been cleaning out the shit...

EDDIE – And further down the line? What's your plan for the future?

Pause

BEN – I want to be a human being.

EDDIE – Well, that certainly is a human desire...

BEN – And I will become one.

EDDIE – Okay.

BEN – I don't have far to go.

EDDIE – But then again – that's a plan for the future, You want to die like a human being.

BEN – And what's wrong with that?

EDDIE – Okay.

BEN – Isn't it better than dying like a fucking dog, like you're going to?

EDDIE – But you've never lived like one.

BEN – What do you mean?

EDDIE – Like a human being. That's just your ambition.

~

Translated by Medeinė Tribinevičius, edited by Romas Kinka

Julius Keleras
A-B
(Agent of Butchery)

2009

Julius Keleras (born 1961) studied literature in Lithuania and the USA, and has also completed studies in music. Since graduating he has consistently published poetry and his work has been translated into a number of languages. However, in addition to working for a variety of editorial offices and publishing houses, he has also tried his hand at translating, and has worked with complicated texts such as William S. Burroughs. His other great love is photography and he has published a selection of his poetry illustrated with his own photographs. In 2011, to some surprise, he published a children's book. Critics observe strong foreign influences in his poetry, and note lush, rich, almost baroque imagery. More recently he has begun writing plays even though he has modestly stated in interviews that he has never had a particular connection with the theatre. His plays are very textual, incorporating many monologues, and often include a political element, examining an individual's struggle against the system. Generally his works deal with communication and its (im)possibilities between people.



What is love in shattering (or already finally shattered) world?
 What is career worth in today's technocratic society?
 Is it worth living in the society, where everything is false and everything is consumed?
 Who (what) is a sane man, and who is crazy?
 What is childhood light that is persistently followed by childhood's traumas?
 These would be major points of the play's topic. In this so-called romantic tragedy, though, there is a good amount of humor, irony, elements of specific linguistic balancing act. Nevertheless this is a play about inner action, inner disturbance, where inner trains of thought painfully emerge through the dialogues of the characters who sometimes do not connect with each other. They emerge not as rational decisions, but more like painful Hamlet-type reflections about contemporary situation of a man.

Keleras, Julius, *58 sapnai ir kitos vienaveiksmės pjesės*
 Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2009, 141 p.
 www.rsleidykla.lt

Well, I thought so. One day I'll introduce you. But be careful – don't fall in love with him. He is attractive, everyone says so. It's impossible not to notice. The type Hollywood glamour girls go for, straight from a Bollywood dream sequence. A sundae with a cherry on top. And, you know, he calls to mind the glory of the Iron Wolf. His sense of justice has made him a living legend. Government leaders, parliamentarians, top executives, and even wealthy foreigners – all consult with him. Maybe you're planning to write a serious piece about him? He's worth it. Even now, he deserves a monument in Cathedral Square. And a street, maybe even a city, should be named after him; it wouldn't be too much. (*Mortified*) I'm not exaggerating. No, I'm not hysterical. I guess the veritable truth and justice that the chief bailiff embodies are of little concern to you. Our dear friend, the bailiff. Ours and mine. (*Brief pause*) Of course he knows everybody. But he has no ties to any kind of politics.

(Pause)

Frankly, the chief bailiff is especially subtle by nature. He used to write poetry. Unfortunately, all his work with the lawbreakers disrupted and ruined his poetic talent. And yet, just like me, he never talks about the blood – it comes with the job, so to speak; it's just a part of his duty to the state. And it's not far from that of the typical journalist: a sharp tongue and a pencil, some blank paper, or a tape recorder. What don't you understand?

(Pause)

Let me ask, as I would of my sister, why you are opposed to our sense of law-abiding justice? Considering that you're no longer a little girl who needs someone to braid her hair. Considering that we must have someone to bring things back into balance. Remember, as a child, you always had to take sides, either with father or with mother. You couldn't avoid it. (*Brief pause*) But now you don't want to talk about it, no. So there. It's rarely, and so little, reported by the newspapers. But you know their basic creed: *if there's no story, it can be invented!* One, two, three (*snapping his fingers*) and here we have the prescribed article for such and such an issue, which his enemies will be glad to pay for. The enemies of the bailiff. And of the nation. Enemies of humanity. And of sanity.

(Pause)

You don't get it? Well, in that case, your version of justice is really strange.

It's as if you support debtors. As if you side with the others and choose to go down with them. I don't get it.

(Pause)

(Laughing) My dear, how should I know whether or not he blew up frogs when he was a boy, or if he set cats on fire or tortured the neighbour's rabbits? It's true, and you know it, that I never did those things as a child. You know I cared only about the sheep – only the sheep. And the great ram with his head held high, remember? How proud he looked leading those little sheep to pasture, their fearful heads hanging low. As if on their way to Holy Mass or to some fated battle. (Short pause) Where do you get all this? And what would it change? Now he's the chief, the head bailiff. And even if there was something going on before, it's all gone now, rubbished into the oblivion of irretrievable history. It's no longer of any value.

(Pause)

And why should that be of any concern to me? I have no idea. Tell me.

(Pause)

I only work for him. He pays my salary.

(Pause)

No, we're not friends. Not at all. I've never been to his home.

(Pause)

No. I could swear he's not like that. I can see how his hands shake when he comes in on Monday and turns the pages listing those who've been convicted. He gets choked up. Sometimes he seems about to faint. I stand at the ready in case he needs reviving. (Brief pause) But you wouldn't believe how beautiful, just how beautiful his eyes are in that moment! Like a child whose just received the Christmas gift of his dreams. A bear. A bunny. A train set – whatever it is that little children cherish. Of course, I make it a point not to look, but it's just possible they are filled with tears. It certainly is possible.

(Pause)

Yes, he's upset. Yes, he does want it resolved as soon as possible, just where they, the convicted, are hiding their money. Yes, he could carry out the searches in person. Yes, he could conduct his own search of the

deplorable premises where they live, because once you're in debt, you're guilty, and once you're guilty, you need to be punished right away in order to save and your unfortunate self and be free. Oh, you know, I'd justify corporal punishment, too. I can see how the head bailiff's been squirming in anguish over the punishment he has to inflict. It's turned his hair grey. He's as white now as that ram was in our childhood. (Brief pause) That's something that you can't understand? Likewise, the Church is there to help fallen souls. Sins are mourned – painfully so – redeemed, and washed away. You can't say that you have no sense of this. (Brief pause) How is this like an inquisition? You don't understand, but the chief bailiff is an exceptional man of honour. Just one look in his eyes would convince you of this. He has said it often: if one of his children should break the law, he would be first to exact a punishment fitting the crime.

(Pause)

You have not seen how the debtors tremble once they realize they've been discovered and their full transgression has been pointed out to them as if by God's finger. They're stripped naked, exposed, and the banner of justice is raised. Only then do they realize how totally worthless they are. Only then the enormity of their crime sinks in, and the triumph of truth blots out the lot of them like blind puppies, at one stroke. And that same stroke also saves them.

(Pause)

No, I'm not exaggerating. If you're unable to catch on, just go out into the street and listen. You'll hear people complaining that the authorities don't do enough, that they're stuck in the mire of the party loyalty and don't want to see the nation graze on hilly pastures. I think, and even believe, that our chief bailiff would make a really fine President. From the photographs in our files, and believe me when I say we have the prints on file – all of his fingers and toes – he's familiar with all the debtors, like a concerned mother keeping track of even their slightest faults. His Excellency can see right through them, as if they've been skinned, and in this country, which is being eaten alive by debtors and is taking their bedbug-like bites from all sides, it is the most important issue at this moment. Another way of putting it is that, in a police state, where the president is no more than an honorary wax figure, a good bailiff is a piece of pure gold.

~

Does the chief bailiff have a conscience? *(Slight pause)* Did I hear you right?

(Pause)

(Clears his throat, eloquently) It's not a phrase you'll find anywhere in the charters of European justice but, Clara, *conscience is a kind of costume*, as he likes to put it. And that's the basic feature of all his attributes, the one lifeline joining all his component parts, and without it he would be just another ordinary chair-hugger at the office. Thank God that his father, his grandfather, and great-grandfathers before him were all bailiffs. Who else do you think could better grasp the deepest needs of our society, other than your bailiffs? I don't think I'd be wrong in saying that they're in possession of an especially uncontaminated sense of hearing. Except for bailiffs, who else is there to clean out that swarming breed of immigrants, loafers, cheaters and misfits – of all those failures lost in debt?

(Pause)

Our chief, the bailiff...

(Pause)

Don't interrupt me if you want to get a full portrait of our chief bailiff. *(Slight pause)*... Our chief bailiff happens to be the head of the Light of Conscience agency, the only one of its kind in the world. If you want to know, it engages in registering, caring for, and overseeing debtors; the agency never takes days off or shuts down for the night. Who else is there to manage an agency like this in a country so consumed with doubt and greed?

(Pause)

Yes, you are right; only people with an especially clean conscience can do the work this requires. As for us, we've never had, nor do we have, debts of any kind, and as you have probably understood, we earn our money by donating our work. As it is, you don't have much money sense.

(Pause)

You must understand, just who has broken the law has no bearing on

the matter, either to me or to the bailiff. Whether it's some neglected granny, single mother, drunken teenager, or a patient who hasn't left his sickbed in more than ten years, it doesn't matter. Our premise, as always, is a clean conscience in a clean country: whatever – and I emphasize this – whatever the cost.

(Pause)

Who? *(Slight pause)* A pensioner? *(Slight pause)* What woman pensioner?

(Pause)

In which newspaper? Ah, never mind. They all tell the same lies.

(Pause)

I remember, I remember. She didn't pay her phone bill for two months. That's when the associated G & C, you know, God and Company, turned to us for help. We agreed, though usually we don't take on such small cases.

(Pause)

Ninety-five litas and sixteen cents. Unpaid.

(Pause) (Sceptically)

You say she's alone, has no children, and no teeth. Her hands tremble. She's old, a very old woman. You have a photographic memory. Congratulations, I never noticed. *(Slight pause)* There are plenty of people like her.

(Pause)

Don't take offense, but I don't find her story interesting. So what if she, as you say, was raising chickens in some outlying district and selling mushrooms and berries? *(Slight pause)* Well, and what of it? Evidently, she didn't have the proper license to conduct a small business, that's not our business, but the state received nothing in taxes from her. And, clearly, that was not justifiable. You can't be too fond of debtors yourself.

(Pause)

We did try to help her. We tried to explain what a horrible mistake

she was making in not paying her debts. *(Slight pause)* The chief only made thirty litas from her. Only thirty litas, I think. Maybe it was only thirteen. I should check our records.

(Pause)

What thirty pieces of silver?

(Pause)

Who's this Judas? *(Slight pause)* From parliament? All day today they've been calling from there, as if on purpose. Fighting each other like mad dogs. *(Slight pause)* No one I know. But they've never contacted us directly. *(Slight pause)* You see, you just don't understand what a responsibility it is, doing this kind of work.

(Pause)

Yes, she suffered a fatal collapse; I read about it. But that was not the fault of our bailiff. As usual, the papers are full of lies, because as you well know, they're after anything sensational, the one-day glory. Some of the reporters I know wouldn't hesitate to squeeze their mother and father to the last drop, if only that would earn them a by-line in the morning paper. That is the worst of it. And for that and their sister...

(Slams down the receiver; sound of disconnection)

(Telephone rings again)



Translated by Vytautas Bakaitis, edited by Darius James Ross

Gabrielė Labanauskaitė
Red Shoelaces

2011

Gabrielė Labanauskaitė (born 1980) is one of the hardest-working artists in Lithuania. She is the type of artist who cannot be contained in one field of art – or life – and is constantly looking for increasingly exotic, non-traditional forms of expression. She pursued a literary education in Klaipėda and Vilnius and started publishing poetry at a young age. In recent years, however, she has shifted towards working in the theatre and has written numerous successful plays which have been produced in Finland, Sweden, and Britain. In one interview she stated that she has two children – her audiovisual poetry band AVaspo, and her experimental poetry festival TARP. As well as writing she directs and creates video installations. She also occasionally writes literary criticism, and since 2009 she has been a PhD candidate at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre where she teaches drama theory. While her artistic work is first and foremost concerned with expression and the limitations thereof, her more recent plays increasingly deal openly with various ‘inconvenient’ topics including violence and minority issues.



Manoeuvring stylistically between political rhetoric and Tarantino-esque irony, Labanauskaitė’s play *Red Shoelaces* examines not just the global problem of the manipulation of ideology but also the psychological nuances of a relationship between brothers. Political commentary, poetry, a rap chorus, and street slang offers up a slice of the social intolerance found in Lithuania – or any other country for that matter, opening up the painful wounds of humanity, gender relations, stereotypes, nationalism, and other problems.

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XXXIII

JOHN – Joseph’s birth put me into a state of shock. The hospital was sterile and white. The only light was from the ward lamps and there was that tiny little piece of meat who was supposed to be my brother. ‘Isn’t he cute? Say hello to your little brother’ – my mother smiled, inviting me to come closer. I tried hard to suppress my bottomless revulsion and stroke his head. I knew that was what my mother expected from me because she was always urging me to pet the neighbour’s snot-nosed kids. My hand was approaching his head when I puked. My father took me home right away and didn’t take me to visit my brother any more.

JOSEPH – Once I caught John in the bathroom. He hadn’t locked the door. He was about twelve years old. I was seven. He was standing naked in front of the mirror, pulling on his little sprout. At that time I didn’t know what an erection was. The television blared, mum was banging pot lids, and the third version of a stepfather who had just moved in was trying to figure out something on the telephone about our broken down car. But here, in the bathroom, there was complete silence.

JOHN – When mum came home with Joseph I hatched various conspiracy plans on how to kill him. When I was asked to watch him while my mother hung out the laundry I’d shake the pram until Joseph would have a coughing fit from crying. I’d be singing at the top of my voice: ‘Hush a bye, don’t you cry, go to sleep my little baby’ Later, when he had grown a bit bigger, I liked to make him cry just so that I could then comfort him. That weak little creature would cuddle up to me, his delicate fingers embracing my neck, and he, it would seem, forgive me everything.

JOSEPH – I stood there frozen. John’s face was twisted and his hand started to move faster. He bent forward and... Oh – I had never seen anything like it before. He let loose a white fountain from his little tap. Straight onto the mirror. Mum called us for lunch and he turned towards the door and saw me. ‘Clean the mirror,’ he ordered. Mum’s steps echoed on the stairs: ‘Are you coming to eat or not?’ ‘Not with your hand, don’t clean it with your hand. Idiot!’ he hissed at me. Swear words were another advantage of his age.

JOHN – One time we were playing hide and seek and he tried to crawl

into the washing machine. I found him in a strange, twisted pose and tried to close the washing machine door, but he was already too big. I'm sure that I would have pressed the wash button. I watched detective shows intently in order to learn more ways of covering one's tracks after committing a murder. But the films were disappointing because all the murderers were caught in the end. I read in the newspaper about a girl who drowned her sister by sitting on her and holding her head under the water until she drowned. Psychologists explained that she didn't understand what she was doing, that she thought she was playing. I seriously doubt if her thoughts were that innocent.

JOSEPH – Sometimes it seemed that he hated me. Or was angry about something. Mama didn't understand why we had smeared the mirror with cream. That was our small, sperm-scented secret. No hand washing before eating could remove it. I tried to repeat it: I stood in front of the mirror and pulled on my little faucet but it wouldn't get hard. John had to know about these efforts of mine. I'm surprised that he didn't tell anyone. Sometimes it seemed that he hated me. Or was angry about something. When I was finally successful I made sure to lock the bathroom door. The intelligent learn from the mistakes of others, not from their own.

JOHN – When I began taking an interest in photography I would observe 'uncle' snapping away on a camera, taking pictures of landscapes, Joseph and me, and our parents. One day I found the camera under my pillow. Joseph had nicked it from the 'uncle' and brought it to me. Even though I was afraid to use the camera, and we eventually buried it behind the garage, that was the best gift I ever got.

XXXIV

ADAS – So whose shitty suitcase is this?

JOSEPH – Don't know.

ADAS – The photo?

JOSEPH – First time I've seen it.

NINA – It's driving me crazy. A homo and he's got a ticket.

The doorbell rings

ADAS – You said they were long gone.

JOSEPH – Well, yeah...

ADAS – (to Nina) See who it is.

NINA – (looking through the peephole) Some homo.

ADAS – We'll wait until he leaves.

The doorbell rings again.

JOSEPH – He's not going anywhere. That's my brother I think.

ADAS – Oh, you learn something new every day. You never mentioned you had a brother.

JOSEPH – As if you didn't know...

XXXVI

John sits tied to a chair, having already regained consciousness.

ADAS – So, are you on your way to the faggot capital?

JOHN – Joseph, what's going on. Why are you just standing there?

ADAS – Maybe you can tell us all about fucking a hole?

JOHN – What, you don't fuck her hole?

ADAS – What really matters is what kind of hole.

JOHN – Really?

ADAS – (to Joseph) I said he was a weed. You won't easily pull this kind out.

Nina jabs the tip of the Eiffel Tower into John's back, moves the tip along his spine, drawing symbols of some kind.

JOHN – What the fuck is going on?

NINA – I'm writing down the sentence you've been given: 'R.I.P....'

JOSEPH – Listen maybe that's...

ADAS – What's this – a family rebellion?

JOSEPH – He's my brother.

ADAS – Don't forget about your real brotherhood.

JOHN – Don't you see that they're brainwashing you? What kind of brotherhood is this, Joseph?

ADAS – Just listen to what that little faggot is saying.

JOHN – I'm not gay or a commie. I'm a person.

ADAS – And you still call him your brother? I'd be ashamed to have come from the same womb. Rumour has it that your mother was a wild woman.

JOHN – Don't you dare talk about our mother that way, you idiot.

ADAS – Yup, I can see that you definitely had different fathers. This kind of grub couldn't possibly grow from the same seed.

JOHN – Joseph, look, he needs serious psychiatric help. Ah! (He cries out as Nina jabs him in the back with the Eiffel Tower). Joseph, untie me! (Seeing that Joseph isn't paying attention he begins to yell loudly). Hey, someone help me!

ADAS – That was really stupid on your part.

JOHN – Hey, help...

Nina stuffs thick wads of bread into his mouth. John almost chokes.

NINA – Oh, what a fucker... Just like his brother.

JOSEPH – Maybe we can just finish this game. Listen...

ADAS – Open your eyes, my little friend. I'm protecting you, and we're not playing games here. Are we clear?

JOSEPH – I can protect myself.

ADAS – No you can't. How many years did he terrorize you for? He's a fine example to others, you see, the pride of his family. Does he have money? He does. Has he ever given you any?

JUOZAS – No. Because... I have to earn my own.

ADAS – He's greedy, Joseph. He envies you and fears you. He fears that you'll stand on your own two feet. Money is power.

JOSEPH – No, he cares about me. He wants me to learn to live on my own.

ADAS – That's bullshit. When they threw you out of school did he go to the director?

JOSEPH – He didn't know.

ADAS – Right. I don't believe that. Your mother didn't call him up and cry to him on the phone? When you were cutting your veins, did he call you an ambulance? Did he ask you, hey, dude, what's going on? Now do you see? He didn't ask. And when your mother's boyfriends beat you did he help you, even once?

JUOZAS – It was only the one time.

ADAS – It wasn't just once, Joseph. It was enough for me to see your swollen face and everything was sorted out quick. Remember? Of course you remember. It wasn't him who came and sorted things out, got rid of those degenerates.

JUOZAS – No, John is different.

ADAS – Okay, sure, faggots don't know how to fight, I agree. Maybe he found your mother a job? Or invited you to live with him? Offered you a way out of this hell?

Joseph is silent. John tries to say something and starts to choke on the gobs of bread.

JOSEPH – Take it out, he's going to choke.

NINA – (trying to take out the bread) Well, open wide... Don't be afraid, we only want to reform you a bit, okay? Hey, he's biting me! Choke, if you're such a fuckwit. Yuck.

ADAS – It's clear that you don't matter to him, Joseph. But you matter to me. So who's your family? Is he your brother?

Jonas coughs, spitting out bits of bread.

ADAS – He's an animal, Joseph, an unfeeling animal. Blood can also be contaminated, brother. That kind of blood must be flushed out. Understand?

Joseph is silent.

ADAS – Race should be pure without homos, lesbos, chinks, and all kinds of niggers. Pure, am I clear? I don't discriminate; there is no

‘yours’ or ‘mine’ here. I hate them all equally, understand? He is not your brother, he’s an ulcer. A leech sucking up your life. Should I give him a medal for that? Buy him another ticket to San Francisco? They need to be shot, eradicated like bedbugs.

JOHN – (having recovered) Joseph, don’t listen to him. He’s Hitler, before you stands a Nazi.

ADAS – Thanks for the compliment, you degenerate. And before you, Joseph, sits a gay.

JOSEPH – He’s not gay.

JOHN – Joseph, I understand that it’s not easy to find yourself. It wasn’t easy for me either, but after you overcome yourself, after you get over all your silly fears and what others will think of you, you’ll get to know the real ‘you’.

ADAS – Joseph, I think it’s time.

JOHN – Joseph, you have to live your life yourself. And be honest to yourself. Only then will you no longer be ashamed.

ADAS – You take a knife and stab straight into the heart. Look, here, don’t hit the ribs because then you’ll have to stab more than once.

JOHN – Why do you need this herd of sheep, Joseph? You’re your own master, you can go where you want! This world has made us slaves, but only because that’s how the majority think. They think they’re right. They think they know what’s normal and what’s sick. They think the world is divided up into plots of land with their own sets of rules that belong to somebody or other.

ADAS – I’ll say it again: you take the knife and stab straight into the heart.

JOSEPH – You’re going to leave me again. I know you will. You won’t come back.

JOHN – You’ll be able to visit me.

ADAS – Of course he’s trying to wriggle his out of this. Let’s finish this, that’s enough. How much longer do you want this degenerate to hurt you?

JOHN – (to Joseph) I’ll buy you a ticket, I swear.

ADAS – He didn’t buy you one to London, but he’ll buy you one to America? He’s making fun of you. He’s leaving you for someone else, Joseph. And I guarantee it’ll be some black-arsed fucker.

JOHN – Jesus Christ, I can’t believe this. How can you live like this? How narrow-minded can you get, Joseph? You need to crawl out of your cave. There’s more to the world than this fucked up village!

ADAS – Bravo, a fine death speech. Ten points.

JOSEPH – Stop it! My head’s exploding!

ADAS – What are you waiting for? You have a simple order, truth warrior. Take it, push it in, put it down. Or maybe you’re also a faggot, Joseph, is that it? Why don’t you want to fuck Nina? Maybe there’s something we don’t know about our little brother?

JOSEPH – No, no, no. I’ve got Maria.

ADAS – You’re a fucking faggot!

JOSEPH – I’m not, I’m not!

Joseph seizes the knife that is lying on the table and drives it into John. He doesn’t hit the heart immediately and Jonas moans. Nina approaches and takes the knife from Joseph, who is frozen on the spot, and drives it in a second time. John dies. Joseph stands in shock. He starts to sob.

ADAS – (offering his hand to Joseph). Congratulations. The red laces are yours.



Translated by Medeinė Tribinevičius, edited by Romas Kinka

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Photographs: Arturas Valiauga

Cover design and layout: Vaida Gudynaitė – Kniūkšta

Published by the International Cultural Programme Centre, implemented by its department Books from Lithuania
www.koperator.lt
www.booksfromlithuania.lt



Supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania

Printed in Lithuania by KOPA www.kopa.lt

ISBN 978-609-8015-24-9

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Circulation: 500