Dušan Šarotar

Author's Catalogue

Beletrina

About the Author

Dušan Šarotar, born in Murska Sobota in 1968, is a writer, poet and screenwriter. He studied Sociology of Culture and Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana. He has published two novels (*Island of the Dead* in 1999 and *Billiards at the Hotel Dobray* in 2007), three collections of short stories (*Blind Spot*, 2002, *Bed and Breakfast*, 2003 and *Nostalgia*, 2010) and three poetry collections (*Feel for the Wind*, 2004, *Landscape in Minor*, 2006 and *The House of My Son*, 2009). Šarotar also writes puppet theatre plays and is author of fifteen screenplays for documentary and feature films, mostly for television. The author's poetry and prose have been included into several anthologies and translated into Hungarian, Russian, Spanish, Polish, Italian, Czech and English. In 2008, the novel *Billiards at the Hotel Dobray* was nominated for the national Novel of the Year Award. There will be a feature film based on this novel filmed in 2013.

Billiards at the Hotel Dobray

Murska Sóbota, a town on the Slovenian-Hungarian border. In the once acclaimed Hotel Dobray that housed a casino and a brothel on its first floor, on one night towards the end of the Second World War the fates of numerous people meet and clash. As the Red Army is about to reach the borders of this hidden and forgotten land between the rivers Mura and Rába and the liberation of Sóbota itself is only a few hours away, a last game of billiards is being played at the Dobray.

The following morning the sleepy town wakes from a nightmarish dream to find a number of wandering souls have descended upon it, amongst them the shopkeeper Franz Schwartz, one of the few Jewish deportees to return from Auschwitz.

The author sets his narrative into a somewhat unusual framework, and rather than ending with the liberation, he prolongs it for another month, just long enough for his protagonist returning from the concentration camp to engage with the Partisan liberators. A novel that reopens the subject of literary rendition of life during the Second World War.

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from the media

This segment of Šarotar's prose can hardly find any literary parallel. What does come to my mind, however, is a cinematic one: the Hungarian master of slow-moving shots Bela Tarr and the scripts of Laszlo Krasznahorkai.

Petra Vidali, Večer

Billiards at the Hotel Dobray is a book written with masterly skill. Šarotar takes his time and his narration glides slowly through the stories and people's destinies and across the landscape; a book bereft of all radicality. The eye's gaze from way up in the air is cool, distanced, almost indifferent to people's destinies; as if they were being looked upon from a great distance, temporal as well spatial, and the destinies of individuals were almost entirely insignificant specks in a much bigger picture.

Matej Bogataj, Literatura

The first specific poetic trait of the author is his stressed synergy between the lyrical and prose rhythm. With its dense apocalyptic imagery, the poetic quality of the language assumes the role of the fable.

Petra Jager, Sodobnost

The work genuinely reopens the subject of the literary treatment of life during the Second World War.

Bernard Nežmah, Mladina

Well practiced as a narrator, Šarotar skilfully interweaves all the aspects of narration together, which results in a fresh, enjoyable and carefully reflected approach bringing together two great literary qualities: lack of pretence and authenticity.

Mojca Pišek, AirBeletrina

excerpt from the novel

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Only rarely did the girl stay at home alone on a Sunday. She used the excuse of the rain and not feeling well because she didn't feel like going to Mass. Her mother tried to convince her that it was not appropriate to leave her alone, but surprisingly, her father stood up for his daughter, for once managing to overcome the doubts and fears he carried within. He couldn't explain this to himself, let alone to his wife who relentlessly drilled him about it with questions she had not run out of even when they reached the churchyard. It was still gnawing away in his mind when the local choir started singing. That Sunday they were particularly out of tune, something the organist must also have realised since he just stopped playing, raised his hands and joined in the singing with the congregation. The sound from the organ pipes echoed above the nave for a moment, like an invisible eye watching over everything. Then only the sound of discordant singing, of great sadness, pain and lamentation, lingered in the vaults, around the choir and above the heads turned towards the painted King wearing the Crown of Thorns.

Géza the tailor took hold of his wife's hand and squeezed it. She was singing so quietly it sounded as if she was just breathing loudly. They had the feeling that this was a question they might never be able to ask, but, at this moment at least, regardless of what it was, they no longer doubted that somewhere lay the answer, even if it remained a secret for eternity. Maybe The One they were both looking at was not crowned in vain.

The girl lay in her bed looking out of the low cross-barred window. She had promised to stay in bed and was still there despite her restlessness. She could feel and hear her heartbeat. She felt a need to go outside, to go for a walk and think about things. Nevertheless she could not find the strength to get up and anyway, where could she go with the town full of the enemy army. She wished she could hide by burying herself under the blanket until the long, difficult days were over. Maybe she should have gone to Mass with her mother and father, to soothe her fever with singing and words amongst the crowd gathered within the cold walls of the church. Of course that was not at all what she really wanted. She was thinking about a totally different kind of music now.

Again she counted on her fingers the days till the concert at the coffeehouse.

"Monday," she began counting silently and stared at the sky hanging over the town, pressing down upon it with an invisible thumb; "Tuesday," it looked like the clouds were also tired and slowly began to fall towards the silent land, still cold and bare; "Wednesday," abandoned even by the birds as if they were taking flight from the eye. She could see it, floating above the window, high above the wooden cross-shaped mullion, opening slowly.

Edina would often stare at the clouds. She had fun herding sheep, counting bears and blinking at the sun, and would admire the mountains that appeared above the flat landscape out of the dark, early evening haze, coloured deep red by the rays of the setting sun, especially since she had never seen any real mountains. But this time it was different. Of course she was no longer afraid of the black storm clouds and understood all about thunder and lightning, but looking at that eye becoming ever more defined she had the uneasy feeling she had seen it before. As if it was pulling her in towards itself, ever deeper and ever stronger. The clear patch of sky with which the eye was looking down on the world seemed ever more beautiful, perfect and exciting. It was like Isaac's music the other day in the garden. Yes, music was all she could compare with the feeling that was overwhelming her. As she seemed to be getting closer to the vision, feeling as if she herself had floated through the cross in the window, it seemed the music was drowning into silence, words merging into a monotonous sound, full of great sadness, not death however, neither rapture nor weeping. Perhaps it was love, but she couldn't bring herself to say this.

After Mass, when people were already standing up and the place filled with whispers mixed with the screeching of wooden benches, stamping of feet and the smell of burnt-out candles, the tailor was still holding his wife's hand. They remained seated and stared into the emptiness, as if the words from the Bible were still echoing inside them:

"They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment."

The men had already put their hats back on, the children had to be held back to stop them running out into the churchyard where they would normally tear around and play hide-and-seek before their overly concerned parents would find them and caution them. "It is inappropriate," they would say, "to play so

loudly around here". The women, heads bowed, humble and seemingly rapt, as if still listening to the faded song, poked around their little handbags for hankies and small change for a candle, a prayer, a petition and especially for the donation towards a new embroidered altar cloth. Surprisingly, none of them even thought about the World War, the dead, the wounded and the missing, as if it was all still happening somewhere far away, in some other world, or perhaps no one dared to think about what awaited them all, about what they would not, especially here, be able to hide from. Or perhaps the words from the reading were still echoing in their minds: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

A row of people, tall and short, proud and humble, was pushing towards the door that remained shut. To start with no one complained, no one raised their voice or even their gaze from the floor. As if they carried patience, tolerance and humility inside themselves. But they kept moving on towards the door.

Slowly they shuffled their feet, shifting their weight around with their backs turned to the gold-framed image from which The One they had once crowned and then abandoned watched over them.

"Open up, open the door, let us out," someone said after a while. The voice would have been lost in the crowd, in the mass of bodies pushing towards the exit, had not someone else at the back of the row shouted out the same.

The tailor and his wife were still sitting in the pew. They were the last ones to get up.

The excited voices and complaints, spreading fast among the crowd and flooding over the hall made the pair look at each other. They didn't understand the commotion, their minds still serene.

"I am the gate," said the voice of a child who had bolted the door as a prank. The church was filled with genuine laughter as if no one understood.

"So from that day on they plotted to take his life," was written and was whispered even after these silent, good people who could still talk about the soul, poured through the door and streamed down the steps. "But," someone might have thought, "were they ever really forgiven?"

Finally, stepping out into the bright light, being the last ones out leaving only emptiness behind them, still holding hands, the couple stood still just as on the day they had first stood together on the top step, him in the same suit with a hat, her wearing a veil.

It had been a misty April day, just like this one, thirteen years ago in 1931. Like now, they were more or less alone, but then they were laughing. They were young and expecting a baby which was already kicking in its mother's womb. He lifted his wife, carried her down the steps and they bravely set off into the mist. Now they have almost forgotten all that had happened after that.

Though a mist just like it, impenetrable and creeping, engulfing anything it approached also waited for them at the door on this day, they felt that things were different now. It was as if the outlines and shadows moving away and disappearing into the distance, and especially their incomprehensible voices, all had something sinister and secretive about them, like a premonition. From where they were standing, or indeed from anywhere, they couldn't see anything, let alone understand.

All they could hear from the road leading straight to the park and on through the tree-lined drive to the castle was the stamp of marching feet flattening the ground beneath them. Everything else in the whiteness of this milky apparition was hidden, even to the eye still floating above the town.

Stepping towards the road they came across a group of people standing and talking at the exit from the churchyard. After Mass it was normal to go for a drink of wine or some good fresh coffee at any of the coffeehouses near the Lutheran church or, more frequently, at the Hotel Dobray. This time they tried to excuse themselves that they were in a hurry to get home. They wanted to have a quick pint at the Sočič place and then really go home where Edina was waiting for them and, despite it being Sunday, Géza wanted to press the suit he had made for Schwartz's son again before lunch. He intended to take it round to the customer's home in the afternoon for him to try it on.

But the others, desperate for a drink, insisted. They wouldn't normally join the Barbarič couple or the Karases, but now they were the only ones they met outside. The mist that Sunday had really taken its toll.

"The priest spoke well today, but did you see his wife and the fur coat she

was wearing," Mrs Barbarič started off with her usual comments that no one was safe from, especially since her husband had been promoted in his job at the town hall.

"Of course I saw it, how could I not have! The poor woman was so cold she just had to keep stroking her coat, even during confession," Mrs Karas added. "Well, your hubby will be able to take you down to Berger's shop where you can choose something very furry and heavy. The Jew is sure to have something to suit you in his shop."

"Barbarič, did you hear what Mariška said?! You see, this is what it is like with us, I'm unworthy, no one at our house ever listens to me. It's as if I wasn't there."

"Come on, yours is at the Registry now! He's sure to take you somewhere nice now."

"Knowing my luck, by the time he gets round to it they will have closed down all the Jews' shops," she added and laughed.

"At least there'll be some order round here, like elsewhere in the world," Barbarič, the new registrar at the Town Hall Land Registry, raised his voice. "The Germans know what they are doing. Not that I have anything against the Hungarians, but they could never deal with these Jewish money mongers. At the town hall everyone is saying how things need to be put in order. You can't have everyone in Sóbota opening shops here, there and everywhere, charging whatever they like. We've all had enough. We'll show them, you'll see!"

"The other day our boss, Mr Benko, was saying that the Jews should be left alone. Though we get quite a lot of business from German butchers, the boss says the Germans haven't got the right policies. We should be talking to them. The Jews are strong. We need their connections and markets. Who else can we sell to wholesale if not the Jews," said Karas, a sales representative for Benko's Butchers.

"It's all politics, big politics. Now we have an opportunity to show who we are! At the Town Hall we will do what we see fit!"

Géza the tailor and his wife were holding each other under the arm and stayed silent. It was as if they didn't have anything to add to this strange conversation, one that probably only the mist was truly touched by. With every

step they made they felt that they really should find an excuse this time and escape this company before they reach the coffeehouse, where they expected to have to sit around sipping wine with this lot all day.

"Are you going to the concert on Wednesday?" the tailor's wife asked just to change the subject.

"What concert?" everyone asked surprised in unison.

"At the Dobray, Schwartz's son is giving his first concert! Géza has even made him a new suit for the occasion. It's sure to be brilliant. We have been invited, Edina is looking forward to it and it has been ages since we've gone somewhere to listen to music, in fact I can't even remember the last time we went anywhere!"

There was a moment of silence among them. Perhaps they were trying to think of something to say, perhaps they didn't quite hear what she said, or maybe it was embarrassment, misunderstanding, a confusing unease. In any case, the silence was more revealing than any words. They all stared into the distance, down the empty road towards the town, hidden by the mist.

The coffeehouse at the Hotel Dobray was full of people treating themselves to a glass of good wine after Mass. The men would order a strong wine from Lendava and mix it with mineral water. Their wives and the ladies' tables sipped on a sweet Traminer from Radgona. Those who came here early in the morning for a coffee and a shot of something stronger, skipping their religious duties without a single drop of guilty conscience, reading the newspapers or flicking through illustrated German magazines, were by now already waiting for the goulash the waiters would soon be offering. On seeing that there wasn't a single chair available amongst the crowd, let alone a table to sit by under the tall windows where they liked sitting on such occasions, Géza the tailor and his wife looked at each other thinking this might be the opportunity to get away from the annoying company and go off on their own somewhere. They no longer fancied that beer now, let alone excessive empty talking, and they didn't really feel at home in lounge-bar politics, another reason why they didn't often come here. The Hotel Dobray was best known as a distinguished place for the Sóbota elite, but on Sundays it was frequented by a mixture of

students, professors, tradesmen, newspaper men, civil servants together with workers from fast-growing local factories, Benko's butchers, tailors like the Cvetičes and the Šiftars, carpenters from Hartner's saw-mill and others, their voices, their complaints, their joys and their silences all contributing to the coffeehouse atmosphere, incomprehensible to many.

Maybe these people, the souls of these rapturous people, starting endless debates over and over again, playing cards and beating each other on black and white chequered boards were most like fishermen, travellers on abandoned stations, even poets perhaps. All with a feeling that they are waiting for something big, an inspiration that never returns.

Occasionally someone, well after nightfall and when the gypsies came to play music round the tables and heads were emptied and quiet again as if they were slowly being filled with gentle whispers, let something slip. On such occasions the thought that the secret was still around somewhere maybe just crossed the minds of those who had been sitting there for a long time.

The company stood in the doorway, constantly moving out of the way of the skilful waiters, serving customers from large trays they carried high above their heads from the bar across the hall into the lounge area.

Géza Šiftar was already saying goodbye to Mariška Karas and Trezika Barbarič when Laci, the hotelier and coffeehouse manager at the Dobray, intercepted them, saying with astonishment:

"I don't know what's going on!? Today we are busier than ever! Please, sirs, ladies, do step in and we'll find a corner for you. Please excuse us, it's a Sunday and it's a madhouse in here!"

They were seated in the corner next to the back window at a table reserved for the musicians. Barbarič ordered wine and mineral water for all of them without asking the other men or even looking at the ladies.

"There, everything is possible, so long as you see the right person," he bragged again and placed his large wallet in the middle of the table as if to say the bill was on him today. "You just need to know how to deal with people, particularly waiters. I keep telling my Trezika this, don't I, just tell them!" he said turning towards his wife.

"I was just about to say how different things are today, especially since

this clever husband of mine has been promoted. Well, I'm not just talking about the pay rise, it's also the attitude. Just see how they all respect him. Yes, I prayed long and hard for him. As soon as I met him I knew he would become great one day!"

Mrs Šiftar, sitting next to the window, turned her gaze outside. The mist still hung about the road, but seemed to be slowly thinning away, reddening around the morning sun above. Not used to drinking wine her cheeks warmed up and the paleness of her face shyly vanished with the onset of a gentle smile. Géza noticed the sparkle in her eyes.

On the other side of the road, right opposite the Dobray, Mr Ascher and his son were cleaning the window of their family shop. The son was wiping away the dust and shifting their wares around and the father, smoking a pipe, stood outside on the road, pacing up and down as if he was waiting for someone.

"Oh, my husband is stuck at that Benko place. No chance of promotion there. They still send him out and about. He rides his bike around this unfortunate land of ours all day long. All his business is with farmers and Jews. I keep telling him he needs to stand up for himself more. Mind you, he is quite well paid. Elsewhere he would struggle to get by with the pay offered. Still, just look at how thin he has become. Just skin and bones and he works for a butcher!" she concluded and looked over the faces in the coffeehouse floating in a cloud of bluish tobacco smoke. Then she bent over the table with the typical frothy look of envy in her eyes and hissed: "Just look at Benko over there. Looks like he's about to burst open. Fat as one of those pigs of his!"

"Laci, bring another one, the ladies are thirsty," Karas ordered, obviously feeling that burning sensation again, a fire inside him that his Mariška will never be able to extinguish.

Géza was still silent. He was no longer counting the glasses of wine but looked at his pocket watch after each one. Every so often he smiled politely as if he was following the conversation, or winked at his wife. They were now both aware that they would not get away any time soon.

"The next round is on us," he said and instantly returned to his thoughts as Laci placed fresh bottles of wine and mineral water onto the table. Though he knew it wasn't very polite, he was trying to listen to the conversation at the table behind him.

"I knew this Hungarian government would scatter as soon as smoke appeared above Budapest. Now the first English bomb has fallen from the sky and the landlocked Admiral Nikolaus von Horthy is already retreating his invisible fleet. I wonder where they will hide, perhaps at the bottom of Lake Balaton?"

"I'm more interested in what will happen to us. Slovenes are in no better a situation, trapped in this unfortunate land of ours. We can't rely on our elite any more. Hartner is already changing his tune. His Magyar Élet Part where he made us all out to be Hungarians no longer toes the same line. Now they're falling apart he would pass us on to the Germans for free. I am telling you something, our final hour is fast approaching. We will all be forced to perform on a larger stage!"

"I am afraid. I fear that it is far too late for us. Maybe today is the last time we shall sit here like this at our good old Dobray. The Germans are very different. They have hardly arrived and they are already showing their teeth. They are bound to find a way to subdue the lot of us. If they don't manage it, no one ever will."

"What about the Russians?" said a third voice at the table, but before Géza could catch his train of thought he was disturbed by the voice of his wife, still looking out of the window.

"Look, look at what they are doing to them," she exclaimed. Géza turned to see her pale face for a moment. He could see her shaking in shock and fear. They were both standing up now. He in order to try to calm her down and she because she could no longer just sit there. Surprisingly no one else even moved. It was as if they didn't hear or see anything.

Across the road from the Hotel Dobray an army motorcycle with a sidecar stopped in front of Ascher's shop where the merchant and his son were still standing. A German Officer in a long black coat and a swastika on his sleeve stepped out of the low sidecar. He swiftly walked up to the two men who stood there paralyzed in front of the shop and pushed them against the wall with a short stick he held in his hand. Then the driver also got off the motorcycle and, holding a small bucket he took from the bike's handle bars, approached the officer.

"The SS," someone in the coffeehouse said out loud when they recognised the soldiers in the street.

Géza held his wife's hand. They saw the officer use his stick to draw an invisible star onto old Mr Ascher's chest as he was leaning against the wall of his shop. The driver in the meanwhile poured black paint over the just polished shop window and then using a thick paintbrush messily drew out a large Star of David.

"Disgusting, this is disgusting!" a lone voice was heard in the coffeeshop left silent by the going-on across the road. "Damn you gentlemen, are your own arses all you can think about," young Gašparič started shouting. He was a student, and this outburst was encouraged both by the wine and particularly by the Mladi Prekmurec journal, a publication in which young and upcoming intelligentsia studying in Maribor and Ljubljana regularly and bravely expressed their opinions, which the students at the Dobray liked to read. "Can't you see, you miserable lot, that this is what's in line for us Slovenes too! The world is falling apart and all you can do is sit around waiting." He kept shouting despite knowing that the Gestapo had already marked him out and that they had their informants in the coffeehouse.

They halted on the doorstep of the hotel. The earlier mist in which the town was hiding had been dispersed by the midday sun. The roads around the main square were empty. All was calm in front of Ascher's shop now too. The black star had dried onto the glass and it would be impossible to wipe it off. It would remain there for some time yet, and perhaps it would never again be possible to truly delete this dark stain.

Géza the tailor wrapped his wife's coat around her fragile figure as they both glanced from the corners of their eyes at the poster displayed on the door, inviting people to the violin concert on Wednesday. He felt his wife shudder, as if she was standing naked in the mist.

Before they stepped out into the road, Géza dropped some loose change into the palm of a gypsy woman who appeared out of nowhere. They both knew that Sunday was not the right day for fortune telling.

At that moment music came streaming out of the hotel. It was one of those sad tunes that only tired musicians are capable of playing. Musicians with gnarled fingers, bending dusty roads, recalling places where no roads exist, the only way to reach the other side. They were well aware that this was music to bring a lump to any throat and soften any heart. Just for a moment they seemed

to be on the trail of a lost soul and the thought that should never have been allowed to get lost followed closely, that somewhere the secret still remains.

4.

The girl stayed up late spooling black thread and listened to her mother reading out loud. Stories of good people and mysterious places wove into the wonderful garment being created by the hard-working hands of her father. She carried on winding even when she ran out of black thread and was already dreaming.

The purring of the sewing machine was replaced with the splashing of the large wheel rolling along the water. If seemed as if she was part of the eye, floating high above. She could see a boy riding a bike along the river. The black tracks he was drawing on the surface of the quiet and slow Pannonian river were like a sharp resounding string. She knew he could not see her, but could feel she was with him. He was leaving, sinking into the evening and disappearing round the riverbend. Soon all that remained above the dark river was the resonance of the sound that never really fades.

On Wednesday the twenty sixth of April 1944, just before five o'clock, a small group of people gathered on the steps of the Hotel Dobray. Few remember just how dreary and cold the day was. The greyness covering the sky blurred all shadows. As if the town had wrapped itself up in silence and gone into a long deep sleep for the afternoon.

"That's a Siberian wind blowing," the men whispered as they paced around their wives who were trying despite the cold to keep their dignity. They waited patiently to be invited inside. Silent as if the distance inside them was already growing and they were the only ones that could hear the voice carried on the wind. It must have been luring them somewhere far away to where this cold spirit that pushed itself under their coats came from. Though they couldn't show it, they could feel their souls freezing over.

Maybe it was just a feeling, the unease of seeing this handful of frightened people clinging onto hope despite the events of the last few days. They all tried to think about the concert and the music of the young Isaac Schwartz who

would soon be giving his recital for the first time.

"They will take everything from us and destroy us," Mr Hoyer said. "They have already closed down our shops. How are we supposed to make a living?"

"Forget it, so long as they leave our children alone. I have heard they have started rounding up people and sending them away. I don't believe the Hungarians would allow them to imprison us. What have we ever done to them? We were always fair and correct in the way we dealt with them."

Mr Blau, whose shop the Germans had sealed off a day earlier, confiscating all his wares, was still hoping he would be successful with a petition to Budapest where he had good connections with lawyers and Horty's officials. He would regularly visit them on his business trips to the capital and supply them with the best wines and 'little treats for their ladies', as he would say.

"This will not end well. Don't you listen to what they are saying on the radio? This is the end of Hungarian daydreaming. The West is no longer going to appease them now that they have clubbed together with the Reich. They no longer need us and will sell us out to Hitler cheaply just so their lot can go on dancing."

"I know, I know all that, but the Hungarians are afraid of the Russians who will take everything anyway."

"We will have to join forces. Our elders will have to do something. People in Budapest have left the Jewish Councils to deal with all their papers. We must prepare to leave if it won't be possible to live here any longer."

"Where can an impoverished Jew go?" young Hirschl said a little too loudly, wakening the group as if a forgotten alarm clock had been set off. "Why should we wander about like the lost man rabbi Dr Roth keeps telling us about?"

"Now is not the time for storytelling. We have already packed our bags and are leaving on the first train out, anywhere," Mr Ascher said decisively. He had had everything prepared on Sunday, as soon as the SS ruined his shop window.

"But where, where I ask you! Can't you see all the trains are full? There is no place or peace for a Jew in this wretched land and the Jerusalem they kept promising us is further away than ever. Don't you read what is written? Many are willing, few are chosen!"

"Well, Madame Judith, do you know what young master Schwartz will be playing? It doesn't say it anywhere," the ladies talked amongst themselves

as if they did not want to see or realise that this was no longer about music.

"I heard that the young man plays Brahms' Hungarian Dances exquisitely. He will be supported by a whole band, a gypsy one of course. That'll be something for us!"

Šiftar the tailor's family arrived at a few minutes to five. A handful of people dressed in their Sunday best were huddling in the doorway of the Hotel Dobray. The door was still locked. The curtains in the tall windows looking onto the chestnut trees in the garden were half drawn. There was only a faint light behind the heavy red hangings but the colourful chandeliers that normally stayed on all day to brighten up the coffeehouse remained switched off.

The people pacing at the entrance had been chilled to the bone by the wind. The men standing on the top steps kept taking off their hats and pressing their noses against the glass doors to see down the empty corridor. There wasn't a soul to be seen in the area where the hotelier Laci would normally be welcoming his guests.

"It's dark even in the grand salon where they are supposed to be playing," people soon began saying.

"It can't be true!"

"What do Hitler's lot think they are up to? What now?"

"Has anyone seen Mr Schwartz? It's him we should talk to!"

"Someone should tell us what's going on. They can't just close the Dobray like this."

Edina stood between her parents. They waited under the last chestnut tree in front of the hotel, feeling that they somehow didn't fit in. Though they never thought themselves apart, Edina felt uncomfortable and strange, a nuisance even, in being there. She could not understand why of course. She had that burning feeling inside her again, thousands of thoughts burning. She felt ashamed. Her cheeks blushed as she was not used to such company, to the coffeehouse atmosphere, the chosen words and innuendos. At the same time her heart quickened with an anticipation she could hardly hide, of seeing young Isaac and hearing his heavenly music. But there was also the anger, her first unhealed wound that she could not forget, let alone forgive. Who could

possibly understand all this or stand for it, she thought. She smirked when she remembered how he had never appeared when she went to his house on Sunday evening with her father to deliver the suit. She knew it wasn't really appropriate for her to accompany her father when he was visiting people for business, but she went only because she appreciated that Father did after all understand her, and then he went and hid from view for the entire visit. Mr Schwartz politely apologised for his son by explaining that he was practising. It was as if someone had dunked her into freezing water, or killed her and dumped her in front of the door, she thought, though she didn't have a clue what that might really look like. It felt like that. She could hear him playing upstairs and knew he was in the middle of the living room, right above her. It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever experienced, and despite him playing the same tune as last time in the garden shed, it seemed quite different now. Today the tune was weighted, painful, deep and slow as if it had no beginning and no end. She felt like she was being ripped open. It hurt with a pain that would not draw tears, with a beauty unrecognisable to the eye. An angel never dies, she thought. This music is from another world. She just wanted to see him once more, she lied to herself a little. Standing here between her mother and father all that was on her mind was how she would see him and for the first time there was no one she could tell how she felt. With these feelings, she waited.

At five o'clock exactly the bells in both the Sóbota spires started ringing and the motorcycle with the sidecar appeared on the road in front of the Hotel Dobray. The noise and the clanging pierced the ears of the concert audience. They were used to such scenes now so it only attracted their attention for a while. They were sure it was just another case of vanity and an attempt to show their power by an army not yet settled in this small corner of the world, in a town that was still getting used to the new uniforms.

But the motorcycle didn't stop, nor did it continue on down the dusty road. The uniformed soldier sitting right down in the sidecar suddenly stood up and pointed towards the hotel to the driver who suddenly turned the handle-bars and drove straight into the crowd of people instinctively pushing towards the door.

The Šiftars stood under the chestnut tree in shock. A vast emptiness now gaped between them and the people standing in the doorway, suddenly they

were further away than they ever thought they could be. That was when Edina noticed that they were a marked people. Only now did she comprehend why they were made to wear the yellow stars sewn onto their garments.

People who were neighbours, shop keepers, acquaintances, friends or even just strangers only a few days ago were now just Jews. All of them, without distinction, without a name, face or language. And in this crowd of now identical people she could think of only one. The name Isaac was stuck in her throat.

"Let's go," she said grabbing hold of her mother and father, "let's go over there," she pulled them forward. But she could feel they were rooted to the spot as if they were tied to the tree. "Wait," her father said quietly. She let go and before her father could catch up with her she was right in the middle of the crowd.

The figure in the elegant black uniform looking as if he had dressed for the concert carefully stepped out of the sidecar right next to the entrance to the Hotel Dobray. The waiting group of Jews huddled up together and made way for the officer who in his polished boots slowly, somewhat arrogantly and indifferently walked towards the entrance. It was as if the scene had long been rehearsed, as if this was just a repetition. Perhaps it was just theatre, something surreal, but at the time no one knew who was in the audience and who was on the stage.

Without turning around or stopping in front of the door the apparition in black uniform pushed it open. It was as if a mysterious power was hidden in the gesture. A sigh escaped the crowd as if they were relieved. At the same time one could feel an inexplicable respect and loyalty in these voices, as if something had just revealed itself to them. Spellbound they stood there. The door they had so long been helplessly waiting to enter was now wide open. All they had to do was step inside. In the meantime the black figure had disappeared. The man in the uniform walked up the stairs to the first floor.

The girl, caught squashed amongst the bodies couldn't breathe. Drowning in this murky mass she could feel sharp elbows, shoulders and knees trying to hold people upright in waves of sighs, coughing and murmuring, she caught her name as for a moment she managed to swim to the surface, before she was engulfed again in the human whirlpool that pulled her back down to the bottom.

Father and Mother are looking for me, flashed through her mind as she tried to get up onto her knees. She looked up towards the light that shimmered in the gaps between the rims of black hats, frightened and surprised faces and clenched hands. Beyond it the dark façade of the Hotel Dobray towered like mighty underwater walls, cavernous openings, cathedrals or concert halls. Just before she fainted, somewhere above all this the mighty eye she had been observing from her bedroom appeared. Once the pressure was released the bodies moved away from her as if all the water had finally drained away, she lay there under the steps in darkness, thinking that the mighty eye through which she looked upon herself would probably never ever leave her.

5.

Only a year later did Edina find out what happened on that fateful night on the twenty sixth of April 1944 when Isaac's first concert at the coffeehouse was cancelled.

The Jews who gathered in front of the Hotel Dobray never entered the coffeehouse.

A few minutes after five o'clock the Nazis loaded Isaac's family together with the entire audience waiting for the concert onto a lorry and drove them to the railway station where they crammed them into a train. The coffeehouse gypsy band was there too, playing like they had never played before.

That same night they were moved to Čakovec, from where they went on to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland the following morning.

Children were separated from their mothers, wives from their husbands. Those able to work toiled away, dying in inhumane conditions.

The rest were stripped naked, their belongings confiscated, their hair shaved off and forced into huge washrooms. Deadly gas rather than water flowed through the pipes in the chambers. The bodies were then burnt in crematoria, which ran day and night like large factories.

In one single night all 400 Jews from Prekmurje were deported to Auschwitz and other concentration camps. After the war only 26 returned. Amongst them was Franz Schwartz.

The Sóbota Jewish community, one of the largest Jewish communities

in what was the Kingdom of Yugoslavia before the Second World War, never recovered.

Decimated, impoverished and heavily stigmatised, the returning Jews were not able to form a minyan, a quorum of ten male Jewish adults required for the ritual reading from a sefer Torah at the synagogue, so the synagogue remained closed after the war.

After the synagogue was repeatedly broken into, looted and destroyed, the army began using it as a stable for its horses.

In 1954 the Sóbota authorities ordered the demolition of the synagogue. Soon after, according to plans by the architect Feri Novak, the first modern housing block in Murska Sobota was built on the site. To this day it is known locally as the 'Jewish block'.

Nostalgia

Nostalgija (*Nostalgia*) is a collection of four short stories. The first story *The Alleyway,* is connected to Šarotar's previous work, the novel *Billiards at the Hotel Dobray*. They both share the basic theme of the tragedy of the Jews from Prekmurje and present the character of the grandfather who survived the holocaust. This time he is joined by his grandson, who through recollecting small details of his childhood memories discovers the tragic hidden truth that was never spoken of. In the process, the grandson also senses a link between the past and present, a door opening into the beyond, giving the whole collection a dream-like quality. The second and longest story, *The Swallow,* maintains the same tone and is a melancholic tale of love between a Sóbota Slovene and a Jewish girl who wants to find her former lover after returning from Auschwitz. The last two stories continue to ponder the confrontation with life's finality (or perhaps infinity) in the present. *The Return* from the myth of Icarus and is the story of Herman travels by plane to reach his pregnant wife, which is connected to the previous stories through the theme of a return journey. The last story in the book, *The Ship*, takes place during a demonic storm and its enigmatic concluding notes continue to ring in the reader's mind long after they have closed the book. All are tales of nostalgia and longing for a home that has probably been lost forever. This writing is bound to enthral even the most demanding of readers.

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from the media

As its title suggests, *Nostalgija* (Nostalgia), is a tale of returning through memories to a lost home. Within this realm, trains disappear into the distance, characters linger by railway lines and airports, and experience homesickness, all expressed in fluid sentences that are often reminiscent of poetry. It is precisely these self-questioning sentences, substantiated by the multilayered themes of each story that despite their rich symbolism hardly ever steer from the narrative thread, the only exception being the final story, *The Ship,* which, despite its fluctuations, still fits into the framework and that point us to the fact that for Šarotar art is a sanctuary and refuge. Specifically, in *Nostalgija* the 'soul' and 'sensation' finally become the central themes of his *literary work*.

Gabriela Babnik, DELO

Stories woven from fragments that ignore all rules of space-time are probably amongst the highest peaks of prose inspired by the melancholy of the Pannonian steppe. Linguistically refined, they are written with a consistently blurred subjectivity and an omniscient undertone that is still filled with a degree of unease in the face of the transience of life. The writer tells the story at his own pace and there is hardly a sentence in which he lets up or tries to force anything for the sake of pleasing the reader or further substantiating the subject, frequently giving a hermetic feel to his writing. Magical, mature and well thought out.

Matej Bogataj, MLADINA

Objects, characters and events from Šarotar's literary world await to be conclusively given a meaning. What is special about them is that, unlike so many other creations of modern literature, they also provide such vast potential for meaning.

Tina Vrščaj, POGLEDI

excerpt from the Collection

the alleyway

I.

I remember that the man in the worn-out suit sat at the top of the stairs all the time. He smoked a pipe as well as cigarettes, alternating between the two. He had nicotine-yellowed fingers, and his right thumb that he used to crumble and pack tobacco into his chewed pipe looked like tanned leather. He never parted with this smelly smoking paraphernalia. He kept it in his jacket or in his deep, wide-stretched trouser pockets. Usually walking around in warm, ankle-high slippers, even when it was hot, his pace was slow, like an old man's, his steps short. He always walked dragging his feet along without bending his knees. That was how it had always been, even when he was middle-aged, as if he had grown old prematurely. He had spent most of his life like that. He died at the age of eighty four. Slowly, just the way he had lived.

I wonder now, just as I did then when I would still see him sitting at the top of the stairs puffing away on his pipe, what he was thinking about. I cannot recall him ever having said or talked about anything. His sole speech was in puffs of thick, grey, cheap tobacco smoke that wafted in streams and rings above the old staircase.

I can still see him, his bony head slowly slipping forward. He is woken by a stub of smouldering tobacco burning his dry lips. He flinches, as if shuddering from a sudden thought or dream. He straightens up and leans with his back against the wall again. As he does so, his normally watery and empty eyes light up.

I ask myself whether it could be from the smoke, the only thing left that still manages to bring a tear to his eyes, or whether perhaps this is in fact a faint remnant of a trail that used to lead into his soul and a world which he has not allowed anyone to enter in a very long time.

I smoke myself now and have done for a long time. I am not sure whether I picked up the habit from this silent man who more and more often seems to come and sit next to me, just as I used kneel by his feet, but it feels like this is the very same smoke I smelt back then. It inevitably also brings to mind the clouds I used to observe in boredom through the staircase window as the days that probably do not even return in dreams passed motionlessly and in silence.

Yet that boy, sitting on the stairs gazing through the staircase window that opened onto a large internal courtyard, possessed a secret power then, one that

he would still be afraid of much later, even once the staircase and the courtyard were gone and the tobacco smoke had long dispersed. What would remain is the feeling that perhaps that one thought with which he could move objects and lift them into mid-air was still there somewhere. He still remembers, or rather hears the sound of glass shattering all over their yard, triggered by his look.

It was one of those countless days when he and the man in the black suit sat around in their usual spot on the staircase. The old man was silent and gazed through the smoke, somewhere into the emptiness, somewhere far away where only he could see. The boy tried to follow him. He looked through the window, trying to catch the old man's thoughts, running away like time, without a trace.

Suddenly a lorry full of beer crates drove through the alleyway, the haustor as we all called it. Maček's shop out front had its storeroom in the courtyard. The man on the stairs did not even blink, calmly puffing away at his pipe, as if nothing at all had happened, but the boy was disturbed by the lorry. He had this feeling that he had the power to move objects. Come on, overturn, he thought, break the lot!

In the next instant the lorry, for no apparent reason, started rolling backwards and hit the roof overhang with full force, causing the top row of crates to come crashing to the ground. In all his confusion the driver quickly changed to first gear and moved the lorry forward, hoping to avoid any further damage. But this only accelerated the rate at which the crates crashed to the ground, falling like dominos down to nearly the last one. With all the rattle and clatter caused by the falling crates, the man with the pipe also stirred now. He silently looked at the boy who was watching the scene in the yard with both amusement and fear, not even realising at the time what had really happened. But the look the old man gave him started to make him think. That was the first time he felt that there must be a dimension somewhere that was far greater than himself and far deeper than anything he knew.

But if there is one thing the boy knows now that he has grown up, it is that he should never abuse this power. So, whenever he sees an airplane high in the sky, he always thinks, or maybe even says out loud, fly, fly, don't ever fall from the sky!

Just like those clouds dispersed or simply melted away and then frothed up again into a thick grey trail somewhere else, the tobacco kindles inside me again, emitting a smoke that has never totally disappeared. So in fact nothing

ever changes, the dead still silently tell their story, the living make stories up in an attempt to identify and recall the memories which we are all made of.

The only thing that has thoroughly changed is that long street where our house used to stand. I still call it our street. In my memory the low suburban houses belonging to various craftsmen still line the right side of the road that slowly seemed to be engulfing them, since every time the dirt road was widened or repaired it was done by simply tipping more sand and gravel onto the pot-holed, worn-down surface. At one point it had almost reached the windowsills of these tiny old houses. I can still recall walking down the road that was too narrow to have a proper pavement and, despite being only a child, being able to peep through the veiled windows to the interiors.

The rooms on the road side were usually the kitchens, narrow with low ceilings, a large wood-burning stove at one end, a table with a plastic tablecloth pushed against the wall under the window and a bench next to it where silent people would sit around. Were I to lean against those windows now, my head would probably reach above the top frame, back then it reached as far as the handles. I can still remember those static, heavy and tired looks that followed bony fingers crumbling bread and reaching out for dried up pork crackling. In the dark, steamed-up and greasy window panes the people's foreheads and backs of their necks looked like freshly chopped tree stumps. They spent their days inside their small carpenters', tailors' and shoemakers' workshops, next to their lasts, grinders and washboards, so that their skin hardly ever saw the sun, making it thin and translucent. I often had a dream in which this thin layer of skin would become so worn it would rip open like an old shirt and only then would the true human flesh with real skin appear.

As I recall all this human transience, I have only just realized how nothing ever changed in those windows. Somewhere there must still be tiny, hard-working fingers, still burrowing into bread and fatty crackling just to feed that insatiable lifeless gaze.

Roads are much like people. Were it not for their names we would hardly recognize them years later, if at all. Faces and façades rapidly change. So and so has gone grey, or even lost their hair, their teeth, and that house has been extended, or has been rebuilt, or an entire row of houses has been replaced with a block of flats, a shop and maybe even a playground. Fortunately the street still had its name that I read out with a sense of relief amidst a whole gamut of

strange feelings. I was standing in front of a block of flats, not a particularly well designed one; in fact I would say a rather carelessly built, perhaps even ugly one. Lendava Street number 8. I was quite convinced that this was the spot where our house used to stand, though there was not a single trace of it left.

Only the translucent shadow and feeling of warmth coming from the soil would never disappear from the boy's memory, I thought. I sometimes close my eyes and stretch out my arms in front of me as if I was standing by the fire, feeling the warmth of the long-gone home, feeling the embossed wallpaper just as I used to in the darkness of my room, my fingers sliding across golden tendrils and navy blue grapes, nectar cascading down the rocks, and running in springs and streams, a young couple in love holding water jugs kneeling next to a fountain and taking a drink. Though the wallpaper is torn and has come unstuck, there is another sheet of wallpaper underneath it, blue without a pattern. Unable to sleep, I tear through it with my finger, and can feel at least two further layers underneath, as if the whole house was made of glued together layers of yellowing paper and under these just a void, and a smell of mould.

As I write now, I can again see those blank white sheets of paper in front of me, shouting out, lonely in the barren landscape, calling the words which will at some point recreate that long demolished house.

I must open the window above my bed. A veiled moonlight rests in the courtyard and the wind chases through the branches of the weeping willows growing in front of the neighbouring block of flats, right under my window. Its long, thin branches scratch on the metal windowsill as if they are whispering in a language no one wants to understand. Standing in front of our house, I can still see that willow tree under which I used to play with other children from the 'Jewish block' as it is still known today. There were many. When the old, abandoned, dilapidated and mysterious skeleton of the old rabbi's residence still stood at the far end of our yard, we liked to play hide and seek there. Anyone who dared climb the rotting stairs to the attic was never found. In my dreams I sometimes still find myself crouching in that attic, hidden behind broken beams, in the middle of a collapsed roof, gliding out into the clouds above.

This is where, milk can in hand, I used to run out through the alleyway onto the road. This tall dark alleyway we called the haustor led onto the large internal courtyard. Now that I stood there holding on to my black briefcase,

much as I used to stand holding the milk can, I recognized the unmistakeable smell of the alleyway. It was always a damp, cold smell, saturated with cat piss. It is hard to judge whether this would be the exact time I would run out into the street to collect the milk. Even the light has changed here. As if that opaque evening light that seeped through the low, glowing clouds has been watered down somewhat. Now it all somehow seemed too obvious, too prosaic, lacking any of the typical depth and magical perspective that only the lines of slanting roofs disappearing into the distance could invoke. Maybe that light was hidden in the houses themselves, or even the people who at dusk gathered round their tables, slowly starting to release this mighty and invisible silence that glowed in the darkening sky.

It was so close that with just one more step the old alleyway would swallow me and return me to the world I had abandoned. I now know that those childhood dreams were not meaningless. My own thin and translucent childhood skin also painlessly ripped open at some point, peeling away and dissolving like the mist. Though the alleyway is no longer there, what does remain, slipping into the narrowest passages through time, is the memory, so real, and much stronger and more enduring than skin.

Adults are not given the ability of being astonished, all we do is remember. I know that those silent people in all their serenity have long moved away, goodness knows to where, just as I will soon move too. We all eventually stop hanging on to our ever thinner shirt, about to disappear entirely, resigned to our inevitable nakedness.

the only question is: what will remain?

II.

When I stepped off the train, time stood still. I was right back at the beginning again, in the exact place I had boarded the train so long ago. I always knew the day would come when I would return and would wish to share with someone some of what one can never share right to the end. Now that I stand here at the last stop, here at the forgotten station with no one waiting for me, I know that I cannot add to or take anything from the past. What remains is

the memory and the feeling that the world we are leaving daily just might be preserved somewhere else. Where would all the love go, where would the touch disappear to if there was no one left around?

Still half asleep I often hear the slow sprinkle and the metallic sound as it hits the base of the chamber pot that was permanently kept under the bed, and then the slow, limping steps through the darkness, the creaking brass door knob and the man wearing a nightshirt and a large woolly nightcap with a tassel walking across the small moonlit room where I slept. I didn't move. The small room was used as a passage between the main bedroom and the kitchen. The maid used to sleep here and now they had made me up a bed on the sofa in it. The ancient, dried-out wooden floor creaked at even the softest of steps. Usually this would be accompanied with the tinkling of fine glass. The clanking sound of glasses and souvenirs rattling on the shelf in the cabinet where they were neatly stacked continued almost forever, for a long while after the man had emptied the chamber pot into the bucket out in the corridor. In the yellow light of the ever blinking light bulb that hung from a bare wire in the hallway, he then packed tobacco into his pipe and slowly started puffing away. That night-time smell of cheap tobacco from his crumpled red bag was even sharper. The smoke dragged itself into every hidden corner of the large town house, seemingly so peacefully asleep. I never really dreamt there. It was all very much real, large and alive. Every wall, painting or piece of furniture had its own character, meaning and, most significantly, a voice. I cannot remember a single night or day when the house didn't talk, as if the walls were never quite resigned to all the stuff that was dragged into the house from all four winds without any real order. The occupants changed according to the seasons, there were more in the winter, fewer in the summer. The house was always full of subtenants, people brought to live there by socialist decrees, relatives and us, many in number. And each person brought along whatever they possessed, much of which would then also be taken away when they left. What was left was all that was worthless, useless or too large to take away upon departure.

The handful of passengers who had stepped off the train with me instantly disappeared among the low houses. They all had someone waiting for them at the station or at home. I was left standing alone. The first thought that came to me was clear and simple, as if I had read it in a book: When you are absent

for a long time and only rarely return, you have the feeling that nothing ever changes here.

And true enough, everything looked like it had done early that morning when I departed from this very station. The pub with the garden next to the railway line where I wanted to have a drink and perhaps ask a thing or two had obviously closed down a long time ago. There were a few broken coffee shop chairs lying about on the veranda and the pigeons sitting on the fence appeared to have been there forever. With their tiny black eyes they stared motionlessly down the railway lines disappearing in the distance. Being the only one standing there on the abandoned platform, I felt like they were staring at me, everything else must have seemed unexciting, dull and meaningless, something they had long got used to, as people get used to a painting hanging on their bedroom wall.

The image of that painting suddenly appeared to me, the only oil painting that was not stolen, left hanging above the double bed in the master bedroom. The painting had long slipped somewhere into the darkness of my memory and only rarely did its massive white frame still appear to be shining somewhere in the depths, and I had assumed the actual scene it held inside its moulded borders was lost to me forever. But at that moment it suddenly appeared to me again.

A long brown table stood in front of a heavy red velvet curtain tied back at either end with a large bow. On it was a large blue crystal bowl, filled to the brim with fruit; if memory is not failing me, ripe peaches, apples, grapes and a banana. The fruit was rendered with the perfectionist strokes of a realist, its colours and shadows in as much as they stood out from the black background pedantically correct and skilfully accurate, too much so in fact, so the fruit did not look like something one would ever want to eat and the image itself was far from inspiring. I realize it was one of many still lifes amateur painters like to depict. But just as I thought the image was about to sink back down into the depths of memory where it was also bound to remain, the image of another detail flashed in front of my eyes. It had often disturbed me, but as a child I could never explain its meaning, though I kept returning to the painting to have a look at it. In the corner of the canvas was a disproportionately large knife. It lay there on the edge of the table in the darkest part of the painting, with its sharp blade and black handle that merged into the dark background. I could never understand why it was there. It always seemed to be pointless since the

fruit was there on the table for decoration, far away from hungry or greedy children's mouths and never intended for consumption. As any child I thought maybe it was there by chance and that the painter simply painted it because someone had left it on the table, or perhaps it was even added to the painting at a later stage, or its reason for being there was entirely different and I would never be able to understand it.

I still stood there at the abandoned train station in Sóbota that looked like it had always been like that and always would be, like a princess in a fairytale that people keep telling over and over again, feeling at the same time a deep, incomprehensible unease that they are in fact talking about themselves, about the fact that they too have been waiting all their lives, standing frozen in the hope that someone, sometime would save them with the kiss that promises immortality.

So once, at some abandoned railway station a pigeon extended its round neck and flapped its wings before flying off the fence at the nearby pub, suspended, wings extended for a brief moment in mid air. I immediately noticed it was the fattest of them all, showing off its puffed-up white breast, its claws suspended motionlessly below, head extended up towards the sky, ruffling its down near its collar. At that indeterminably long moment when the bird was still hanging somewhere in between earth and sky, the old pub door creaked. This disturbed the other birds, hopping about on the fence covered in bird droppings. A woman stood at the door, looking as if she had just stepped out of a different world and a different time.

There, there, you just get them, my dear pigeon, she kindly and with a mysterious frankness, perhaps even a hint of glee, addressed the fat bird which had in the meanwhile callously landed on the nearest female pigeon which started cooing and flapping its wings. The other pigeons, apparently all female, indifferently or with a trained and carefully controlled will, continued preening their feathers without making a single sound.

The lady, I cannot but call her that, in her loose pink dress that fell over her skinny body like a curtain at an open window, without taking any notice of me (indeed apart from occasionally greeting these strange, docile and rather dirty birds that sat around the abandoned train station she seemed to never take notice of anyone in the world) now stepped into the light, that mellow dusk light without real shadows or brightness. All that stood out quietly was

her wide-brimmed, soft white lace hat. She walked slowly – now I know she had not been in a hurry for a long time – and looking very much as if she was used to it, stepped out onto the platform and boarded the last evening train. After this there would be no further transport through here for a long time. I and those dirty, self-preoccupied birds were all that remained at the station.

When the sound of the whistle ripped through the apparent silence and timelessness that hung over the abandoned station, instantly shattering it as if the entire old world was falling apart, my spirit shuddered impulsively. The locomotive pulled at the empty carriages and moved along the line, through the stench rolling from its diesel engine. I just stood there and watched the rattling composition disappear into the distance, somewhere towards the Hungarian plains, and beyond all the way to Budapest. It was only then that I noticed I was missing my suitcase, beside my briefcase the only piece of luggage I had with me.

I spontaneously rushed out onto the tracks and started madly running after the train that was ever faster and ever further sinking into the horizon. I only stopped at the sounding of the second whistle. I was absolutely exhausted and shaken to the bone. I am not sure what crushed me more, the forgotten luggage, the mad running or the actual sound of the whistle. It felt as if I was falling to the ground, my knees were giving in and then the giant eye through which I saw what I will never be able to describe, opened suddenly. I lay there on the railway tracks. The wide and shallow sky hung over me, hovering above the endless plain. It was as though I was amongst the clouds which were parting like souls.

the only question is:
am i also already one of those souls?

III.

The very same sound of the whistle that triggered my collapse, an endless and continuous whistling sound that pierced my eardrum, resounded through this half forgotten railway station, the alomaš, as we called it locally, one April morning back in 1944, stupefying the individuals standing there into moving along towards the platforms automatically, almost mechanically and expressionlessly. No longer able to close their swollen eyes, they stared into the emptiness, filled with the sound of the whistle, the howling, the wailing, the crying and

sobbing, pushed along by the sounds and voices, becoming ever louder. This watery and monotonous, almost surreal landscape of sounds, filled with the steam escaping the overheated boiler of the engine, was, in the end, the only thing that remained in their memory.

They were brought here by the Germans in pressed uniforms and polished boots. The Hungarians in their hunting jackets humbly tripped alongside them. The train from Goričko blew its whistle and started panting away in the same lazy manner it had rolled out of the station today. As soon as the Hungarians got them all out of the sooty cold carriages, using excessive and deliberate brutality, the Germans meticulously separated them all. The men were lined up against the station wall and the women and children were crammed into the Černjavič pub that is still there today, next to the platform. The bar was closed at the time. The few guests, mostly workers who would come in for an early shot of brandy and regular passengers without baggage, were forced into the garden from where they could not avoid watching the scene on the platform.

I can still see them, as I stand here on this spot many years later, silently looking at this almost forgotten railway station next to which now only the poplars reach for the sky, white cumuli hovering just above their pointed crowns. I can still see them now, these people, though I am not sure whether in the sky or on the ground, clutching sleepy children and suitcases with silk embroidered table cloths, goose-down pillows, fur collars, books, oil paintings cut out of their expensive frames, all jutting from carelessly wrapped bundles and open bags like loaves of fresh bread. No one speaks; everything happens swiftly, with a certain innate devotion and attention, such as can be expected from people who have been taught to respect order. They would of course complain later when they would be able to talk to the superiors, the ones in charge, the people sitting in quiet offices … no, now was not the time to speak to these men in uniforms who obviously do not even hold an appropriate rank and it seems are only the operative branch, people with specific instructions from higher up, simply carrying out an order. No, there was little point in arguing with these people. It is all on paper. The documents seem to be in order, signed and stamped. It is probably a mistake, some huge error that these people are unable to comprehend, let alone resolve. At this stage we need to be patient, take care not to lose any item of our precious luggage, be watchful of the children who are becoming impatient and

curious and, like us, do not understand what is going on. Just as we still do not understand today and will probably never be able to understand.

The heavy doors of the freight carriages were slammed shut one by one until the only sound at the station was the singing railway lines after the train had departed, just like it had done today with my forgotten suitcase. Now I also know that the man from the top of the stairs was amongst them. I had come to find him, to sit by his side one last time, just as anyone needs to sit by someone else's side at a certain moment. When he stood there in that faceless queue in front of those carriages, wearing the yellow badge on his sleeve, he could not have known he would one day be my grandfather. He was still only a nameless Jew, a particle without mass, something that could simply be added and deducted. The only thing that differentiated this man from other numbers was a painting, a simple still life that he had managed hurriedly to cut out of the frame in the bedroom. He hid it underneath his trousers, wrapped round his leg.

… ein-und-dreißig, zwei-und-dreißig, drei-und-dreißig, time kept beating away somewhere in the background. They were being counted and it seemed like it would never end. He could clearly hear the voice, an almost boyish voice, counting on monotonously, like the ticking of the school clock. He was one of those pupils who had often been made to stay in detention and write out numbers from one to one hundred with a small piece of chalk on the blackboard whilst the other boys had already left and were running around the school yard or playing hide and seek with the girls. He could sense some of the same shame brought on by ignorance and a repressed wish for revenge in this boyish voice.

… fünf-und-dreißig, sechs-und-dreißig, he enunciated with fear and that typical uncertain pause between each number, unable to hide that he still had some trouble with these numbers.

This endless counting was repeated at every train station or larger clearing, far away enough from any forest or nearby houses where any of the deportees could hide if they managed to escape.

But there was something else in this sinister and, in a way, absurd act of calling out the abstract names of those sentenced to death. The notion of it all being a mistake that would be corrected at the next count, just as a not-too-clever child might improve his marks in maths, was still alive. In this voice the humbled, expropriated, anonymous unknowns, heading for a certain death,

were simply part of the most horrendous equation ever thought of by human reason: a million equals zero. One thing that was not reckoned on was that this voice was the voice of an idiot, not in the least convincing or to be trusted. The equation was called out by a dolt in a black uniform. He started even before the heavy grate on the livestock carriage ground open and they were all forced out onto the narrow platforms or into barren fields.

He noticed the spiderweb stretched between the ploughed furrows. Heavy glistening dew drops caught on its silky threads. This fragile image of the spiderweb swaying in the morning sun was to stay with him for the rest of his life. Despite not knowing the real reason, he saw a hidden meaning in it.

It hurt when they trudged through the soft earth and stomped along like scared wild animals, unused to human gazes and voices.

… sieben-und-dreißig, acht-und-dreißig, the voice continued when, made to walk around in circles, unable to hold on any longer and not being allowed to stop for a single moment, they urinated in their trousers.

… fünfzig …

The grate was slammed shut. The carriage was full. He was slightly shorter than the rest and was stuck amidst the bodies. Tall shoulders, bundles, suitcases, hats and all the stuff people picked up over and over again to take with them when they were repacked into the carriages where there was barely enough standing room, blocked his view. All he could see was lines, striped and shadows, flicking by on the dark carriage roof. Then it all started over again.

… eins, zwei …

the only question is: how can one so relentlessly discriminate man from man?

IV.

The sky above the station was darkening. The shadows of the poplar trees along the road lengthened and slowly melted into the evening that glowed with that unmistakeable melancholy recognized only by those who are either bidding farewell or returning home after many years of absence. All of us wounded.

The town itself bowed to the silence, as if the birds, still suspended there in mid-air, like souls above a graveyard, were waiting to speak. I felt that people

here must still listen; in that dusk silence there was some of what I had left behind. I knew this was where I was at home. Everything the eye touched upon bowed; the houses, the street lamps, the mighty plane trees and particularly the people, slowly wandering away. They looked like those very same faces I had observed in the windows along our street as a child. Captured in these slow-moving stooped figures there was still some of that light that great masters try to paint in fiery reds, dark blues and particularly black tones, the extreme colours of their palette. In these unique experiments in melancholy something greater could still be detected, the trail that is the only way into the boundlessness, the silence and the sadness of people around here. And between us, all these great masters knew that feeling well, knowing it came from an internal world that was the only source of an artist's light.

I could smell fruit again and felt it was the soft smell of the only canvas I carried inside me, much as we sometimes see those who have long departed. We recognize them in a crowd, in the middle of the street or on a bus that drives past. But we never pluck up enough courage to go after them.

I saw him, slowly limping along our street. It was as if he had also just returned from a long journey. I followed him all the way to the house that is no longer there. I am not sure he knew I was there, maybe he would not even have recognized me although I know that in a way I am ever more like him. I dropped my briefcase to the ground and waved at him. I wanted to call out to him but at that moment he disappeared into the alleyway that once led to our courtyard.

I can hear those slow steps again, ascending the curving staircase. The gentle bony hand that stroked, straightened and stacked fabrics; wool, velvet, silk and linen in the small and far-too-dark textile and clothing workshop, where hundreds of times over those nicotine-yellowed fingers spread out colourful patterns in front of the eyes of penniless young girls, women with bad taste and tight-lipped men looking for something old-fashioned and cheap, were now sliding along the wooden railing on top of the metal secessionist banisters. I can see him as I sit on the top of the stairs again, first the hat, then the hand with the large signet ring, and finally his face. I can see his narrow, well kept moustache; his eyes remain hidden under the rim of his hat. He whistles and hums an unknown jolly melody. We exchange glances once more, perhaps for the last time, and the man enters what we called the great room, a former

bourgeois drawing room at the top of the stairs, puts down his briefcase, opens the window onto Lendava Street and looks down onto the road, the place I will be coming back to ever more often to hear that melody again.

Much later, when the house will have long been demolished and all that will remain will be the echo of that melody, I will discover that in fact, amidst those walls, two melodies existed. I was only ever given the gift of hearing the one. The second remained forever hidden, wrapped in the silence of memory, as if there were two truths in the world, both written by the author, one of which must always remain a secret. In fact the only thing that actually remained from this house is the violin, now hanging in the corner of my study silent, string-less, its varnish lacking much of its former lustre. This violin once belonged to another boy, a boy who left it at home, maybe as a bequest to someone else, in the hope that its melody would not be lost. He stood there at that railway station to which he never returned, together with my grandfather, who never talked about this to me on the staircase. It was early morning in April 1944. This boy was still so young, but his eyes were serious, as if they had seen his death despite not yet knowing a name for it. And ever more often, whenever I touch the hollow, empty, lifeless violin, as if I wanted to rekindle its spirit, I say to myself: Shoah.

I know that this is that second, hidden melody in which I can hear a voice, not full of sadness or despair, more of a downhearted, melancholy rustle of a forgotten wind saying: write me a song.

There is an old, worn piano in the great room. Its black lacquer cracked long ago, its fine veneer finish has come unstuck in many places and it is peeling like tanned skin at the end of a wonderful summer, but the tune of that forgotten piano remains the same.

My grandfather sits behind the piano, holding with his lips a cigarette that has almost burnt to a stub. Those very fingers that a little earlier had been stroking fabrics with the same elegance with which they would stroke the finest of wools, softest black velvet or tie a silk scarf round the neck of a beloved woman, now begin stroking the black and white keys. But as I stand in the street looking up towards the sky of the past, all I hear is the wind, bending the poplars lining the street along which I shall myself depart.

V.

Whenever I return to town I walk up and down our street, as I still call it. I still recognize it, though the low houses with the dark kitchens and all those people who silently sat round their tables are all long gone. But I am certain that somewhere there that alleyway, our haustor, still leads to the other side, even if they did build a block of flats in its place, one in front of which I always stop. Somewhere those stairs on top of which the quiet man still sits all the time, alternately smoking a pipe and cigarettes, still exist.

Once I am bound to step into the alleyway, just like that man in the worn black suit. Then I will walk for a long time. I imagine I shall probably stop somewhere half-way and think: if I turn around now I shall never know; if I go ahead, I shall never come back.

Feel for the Wind

Years ago, when I read in a meteorological book that the wind is actually about air currents, dependent on innumerable climatic conditions, I felt rather gloomy. For me, the wind has always been a poetic rather than meteorological element, though more or less unfit for use at the end of classic lines because of its poor rhyming. Now the two poets, one in verse and the other in prose, have renewed my faith in the poetic vision of the wind.

Their *Feel for the Wind* has also rekindled my feel and feelings for the plains, river and wind. Their writings speak the language of the melancholic landscape, hidden in its infinitude and incessant flowing of rivers. Perhaps the native word 'gloom' might be more fitting than the foreign word 'melancholy'; most importantly, however, we should never simply mistake the two for sadness.

After all, and only perhaps, this wind truly resides solely within us; summoned by our desires, drawn by our yearnings, cherished by our small delights, a comfort for our inevitable wounds. One could write thick novels about it (as about everything else), short tales or gentle and fragile poems, like the ones found in this beautiful book by the two poets, who are continuing to move forward and yet still look back in nostalgia.

Kajetan Kovič: This Wind

Original Title: Občutek za veter /
Authors: Feri Lainšček, Dušan Šarotar /
Photography: Jože Suhadolnik /
Publication date: 2004 /
Poetry / 74 pages /
Publisher: Franc Franc /
Rights Manager:
Beletrina Academic Press for the Author /
Rights available: World

from the media:

Their poetry is clearly much more than just a romantically inspired message. *Feel for the Wind* addresses the deepest impulses and draws out the energy from the primal layers of the soul. In a collection that would please Bachelard himself, the feeling for the wind is matched with an immensely hightened feeling for survival, a quality that transcends both localism and superficial sentiments.

Lucija Stepančič, SODOBNOST

This is a landscape lined with darkness. Eerie but beautiful. In it, both Lainšček and Šarotar have applied to a pre-prepared canvas their 'strokes of wind, desperately searching for souls in which it can resonate once more'. A book that disturbs with its lyricism and demands to be picked up again and again.

Milan Vincetič, Večer

From the collection of poems Feel for the Wind

(translated by Janko Lozar)

Watercolour

Now that everything has settled down, as among brothers, and the last birds had flown away far into the heart of the country, it all appeared all the more unreal. Poppies blossomed in unmowed acacia groves, the stone glowed in the early summer sun, the bees grazed elder blossoms and the water of the forgotten brook flowed persistently into the unknown. Everything was as it had always been, and yet, in that tiny grey cloud floating in the stillness of the afternoon, there was something about it that could be grasped by the attentive eye. All that seeming loftiness, false absence sketched into this beautiful landscape, bore witness of pain, of the loneliness of man who created these perfect colours.

Whirlpools

There is no echo here, and nothing comes back. Here everything slowly drifts towards the horizon. Only now and then would someone let it slip that he had seen the river stopping, slowing down its eternal current and for a moment, as if lost in thoughts, turning against the current. They say that's where whirlpools form. All that is above, the shimmer of light, the shadows of clouds, is pulled down towards the dark and cold ground. And all that the river has carried and hidden in itself for a long time suddenly floats to the surface. Those who have witnessed such beauty know they have to keep quiet about it.

Expecting

When you're not here and return so very rarely, you feel that nothing ever changes here. You can still feel the bygone wind blowing balloons on Sundays, spreading the fragrance of corn on the cob and gingerbread from behind the old church. You carry within you images of funny old men and the sparkling eyes of old women in their old-fashioned blouses. Their clenching wooden hands watching over tiny purses where they keep a penny for mass and another one for candy. Lonely old ladies, gathered for the sermon, marvel at children as they play boisterously at cat and mouse among the crowd. Beside the road, on the other side, market stalls with black dresses, water pistols, plastic jewellery and battery-powered watches. With gypsies behind the counters, dressed in their Sunday' best, counting money with cigarettes hanging from their mouths. From the speakers, hanging in the trees, a dull voice rings out, disturbing no one, least of all those looking around for children lost in the crowd. In the first row someone mourns the loss of his relative, and, on the other side, men stand under a tree drinking beer, behind the church boys chat bashfully with girls from the neighbouring village, high above in the belfry pigeons sit, bobbing their tiny little heads as if they were the only ones who understood the words carried by the wind into the sky.

Island of the Dead

Šarotar's first novel makes quite an unusual reading. What is particularly surprising is the author's asceticism in moulding the world of his novel. The entire story is set on an island in the Adriatic, scorched by an infernal sun and populated with phantoms from night-time visions. This cosmos of primal energies is entered by an outsider, who soon realises that his hopeful search for peace and possible adventure was an illusion. This is the *Island of the Dead*. Deprived of the elements of civilisation, beings and things are here absorbed in the elementary interplay of life and death. Fundamental questions can no longer be avoided, and more - they can no longer be raised. They are like horrible corpses in a mysterious dark world.

The *Island of the Dead* is not just a realistic description of the landscape of death, but also - and most importantly - a parable of life.

Original title: Potapljanje na dah /
Publication date: 1999 /
Novel / 160 pages /
Rights Manager:
Beletrina Academic Press for the Author /
Rights available: World

from the media:

This first book is a work of recognisable style and linguistically confident expression. It leaves the reader keenly awaiting the work to follow.

Nives Vidrih, Razgledi

This island is particularly reminiscent of *Dante's Purgatory*. The reader knows in advance it will be a place of trials, and indeed, the island Garma, where the white bell keeps chiming and where the mythical six-fingered Hadean captain Pero used to bring the dead, is a purgatory.

Milan Vincetič, Večer

This is both a first novel and a mature literary work.

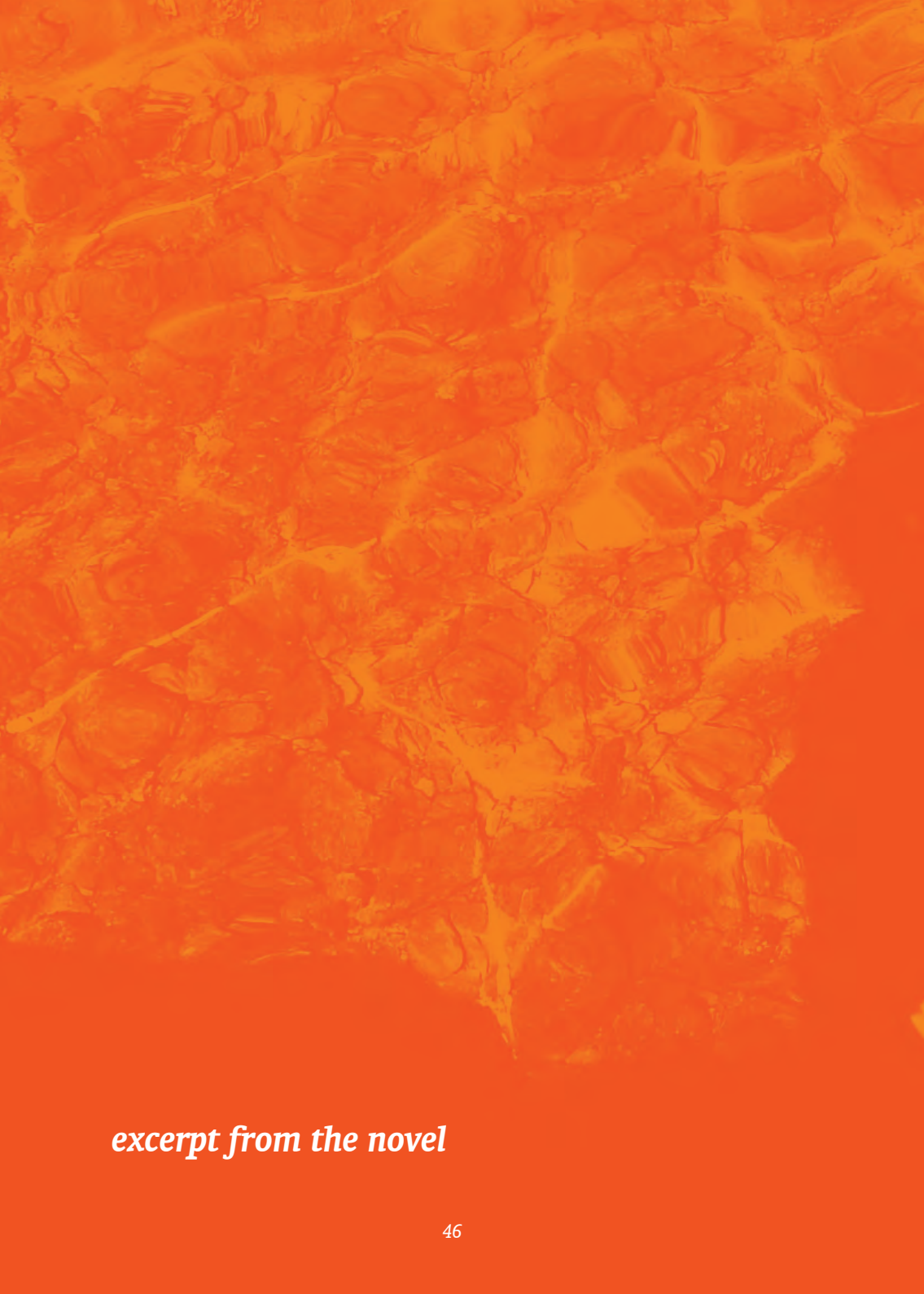
Mihael Bergant, Mladina

Garma is not a real island; the crucial events are fantastic in character and, at the same time, an allegory of Andrijan's fate and of life in general.

Jožica Štendler, Dnevnik

The fate of the individual is robbed of free will, it is just a repetition with variations, an archetypal journey that no longer brings a gnostic deliver- ance and individuation but only resignation in death, which is at the same time a diffusion of consciousness and viewpoints, similar to Drago Jančar's *The Look of an Angel*.

Matej Bogataj, Delo



excerpt from the novel

11.

The sea had calmed down. Only the tide could be heard, lapping in the village harbor. The harbor was empty, without boats, which augmented the feeling of loneliness and absence. At low tide it gave off a smell of decomposition and rot. Black seaweed oozed a brown slime, not quite covering long pieces of thick rope still remaining from the boats and smacks. On the single mooring stone there sat an exhausted seagull. It must have arrived on the mast of some fishing lugger netting far off the mainland. The other mooring stone stood in the shade of a climbing vine in front of Baraka's tavern; it had been moved there long before the har- bor was declared discontinued. Baraka would sit on it in the evening and smoke. He could see far out to sea from there. A red light spread over the horizon that evening. He waited for the women, the divers, to return from the shore.

They came around the bend along the narrow path past the lighthouse. They walked single file. The ones up front, in long black skirts, balanced their nets and empty crates on their heads.

The gull left its perch, swooped low over the sea as if searching for a catch that could not be found there, and landed on the pier the other side of the bay. It was trapped. Though a sea bird, it would have to wait for the next boat.

- We've been waiting to have a word with you, said Baraka, thankful the moment had arrived when they could finally convene the men from his tavern, the ex-fishermen, and the women, the divers from the shores. Is there any news, have you found her, he went on, with a dark premoni- tion in his eyes.

- No, replied briefly the green-eyed woman.

- Well, come on in, said Baraka loudly.

The women deposited their crates, nets, flippers, and other equipment on the terrace and silently filed inside. They were clearly unaccustomed to the environment, feeling more at home in the scorching sun or deep down in the cold sea. They nonetheless filled up the space around the bar. Although the men respectfully rose from the tables, the younger women sat down on the floor or leaned comfortably against the white walls.

Andrijan remained in the garden a moment longer, consumed by the anxiety

of not having yet confided his adventure to anyone. He felt that he did not belong in a way, that he could not take part in the pending dis- cussion, realizing at the same time that he was increasingly a part of it all. He felt a tremor inside, like the sound of the china bell from his childhood, and his heart beat louder. In the end he crossed the threshold and stepped up to the bar, into the dead center of the room.

It was dark inside the tavern. The feeble remains of daylight shim- mered way out on the sea. Baraka placed three candles on the counter and lit them, sending shadows crawling over the walls and making the women's eyes glitter. Despite the disquiet, fear, and doubt gnawing at the villagers' hearts, even Andrijan could feel the warmth which enveloped them now they were again united.

- There, you serve, said the barkeeper to Andrijan, handing him a pitcher of wine. Baraka was the first to treat Andrijan as an equal, they'd hit it right off the previous night. Andrijan had immediately sensed that Baraka, though outwardly similar to the fishermen in every respect, had a secret quality about him which set him apart, making him more open and receptive. He was interested in myriad things, also things that were out of the ordinary on the island, he was attracted to what was past and gone, he could tell tales of other places, of the big wide world far away across the sea. And he was the only one to return flush from the mainland, enough to get his grandfather's tavern going again, while the others had either taken to the bottle and lapsed into ruin or else stayed somewhere in the wide world and would some day return only to die. Andrijan had heard some of that on his first night on the island, although he couldn't remember it well, having gotten so senselessly sloshed. Those were the reasons why Baraka was respected among the villagers and his advice heeded even when it was not entirely his place to give it.

Andrijan went around the room, pouring wine for everyone. They all maintained their silence a while longer and drank with long pauses between sips, then Baraka summed up the tragic events.

- We all know what's happened, and that's why we've got to stick together. He spoke slowly and deliberately, in a solemn note, aware of the gravity of the events, of the fate of Garma being at stake. Though we may never know what drove our two people to death, we must first see to their bodies. I'd like us all to pay them our last respects. That's why we're gath- ered here.

- Yes, that's right, assented the green-eyed woman after a prolonged moment of respectful silence which followed Baraka's words. You men can take care of Vrša, and we'll go on looking for Olivia. There was a note of reproach in her words which was not lost on anyone.

- No, replied Baraka. This is something we've got to see through together, now. We'll lay Vrša to rest at sea, he was a sailor and fisherman after all, even though without his boat for so long. As for Olivia, we'll keep searching for her and if we don't find her, if the sea's already taken her, then we'll pay our last respects on the shore at her usual diving place. None of us has been working just for him- or herself all this while, this has to be clearer now than ever.

- All right, all right, but Vrša died we know how , again added the green--eyed woman.

The dialog was basically between Baraka and the green-eyed woman,

the others just nodded or exchanged murmured comments between them, but that was only the beginning, it was what they were used to, they never discussed matters noisily.

- We'll still have to find out how exactly Vrša died, we don't actually know anything yet and, as I said, that's not the issue now. We first have to bury him, then we can look into the matter, added Baraka in a subdued tone, as though the corpse, which lay in the cellar somewhere under his feet, wrapped in a white sail, could hear him.

- Look into the matter, yes, but who, spoke up Wermer, who had not gone to the lighthouse though it was already dark at sea. He had never failed to light the lamp, not on a single evening, but now he had reason to stay, even if that meant leaving ships in the dark, as all of Garma now was. I don't want any interference from the outside, I told you that before, we'll deal with this on our own, or nobody will!

Andrijan filled up everyone's glass once more, but when the big pitch- er was empty and he'd have had to go to the cellar for more, he retreated into a corner and listened, reluctant to descend alone into the dark cellar where the dead Vrša lay. He almost hid in the corner, smarting from his troubled conscience like a wound from contact with salt. He still kept to himself what he'd seen that afternoon, what he'd guessed even before, that Olivia was still alive. He thought about her, hiding somewhere high on the hill above the village. She

must be cold by now. His heart pound- ed and his cheeks flushed as she ran past him in his mind, in her blue skirt, barefoot, her body wet with the water from the cursed well. She sleeps among the snakes, she must be watching them now from afar, she must at least be able to see the light in the tavern's window, the only light on Garma

He was called back to reality by an almost girlish voice, yet confident and determined:

- You're wrong, these deaths have to be clarified, no matter who the judge, she rejoined Wermer and won approval from everyone.

- I don't want anyone here, no more strangers, it all started when they arrived, Wermer tried to defend himself although that was not what he habitually did; until then, everyone had listened to him, he had been the silently chosen judge on Garma. It was an honor bestowed by his job at the lighthouse, he was the only one who could be seen far out into the night, he was the one who put them on the map like a star on an endless black sea. Andrijan glanced at him, feeling Wermer could have been only referring to him.

- Here, bring some more wine, said Baraka, sensing the tension which suddenly electrified the room.

Relieved, Andrijan stepped outside with a pitcher in his hand, although just a short while ago the thought of the cellar did not leave him unper- turbed. Now he saw it as a means of escape.

The people were content, as was most apparent to Andrijan when he came back from the cellar with a full pitcher for the third time. Wermer was gone from the tavern.

- So, then, we postpone the burial for a few days until we've made our- selves a boat, and in the meantime we look for Olivia.

- The body will have to be packed in salt and stored in oil, somebody said.

- We'll do that first thing in the morning, maybe even tonight, the men agreed.

Andrijan still did not say anything; he poured wine and looked at the pictures on the walls. They were old photographs of boats ready to sail, fishermen at their nets, old men with pipes, young girls with crowns of white flowers, cliffs with seagulls. An old woodcut caught his eye; it was a cut-out newspaper copy, framed in plain strips of wood. It depicted the island as it was in the 14th century, or so the caption said. He could see immediately that where now the

village was there had once stood an iso- lated low stone cottage, a boathouse probably, seeing it was not far from the pier which still stood in its original place. His eyes followed the shore- line toward an enormous rampart above which a beautiful calligraphy spelled out Benedictine Abbey; the monastery immediately impressed him with its simplicity. Raised above the cliffs and hidden behind the rampart, it had stood in the spot where the lighthouse now was. On closer exami- nation of the high tower he realized that the present-day lighthouse was actually the former watchtower and steeple of the abbey. He gazed at the small window near the top. Although the woodcut was a rough piece of work with little detail and the copy faded, he unmistakably felt there was someone observing him from the dark interior. He was instantly trans- ported to the scene: there was someone standing at that window, dressed in a long monk's habit, with a hood over his head, watching the sea, wait- ing, perhaps for a boat long overdue, or else expecting someone to arrive unannounced.

With each drink, the atmosphere grew more gentle and friendly. Everyone felt they had managed to move the mountain tilting over the vil- lage and threatening to claim new victims. Andrijan signaled to Baraka that he was leaving. He slipped out of the tavern and started uphill. He was driven by the thought of Olivia. His heart palpitated. He pos- sessed an unknown power. The fact that he'd kept to himself the knowl- edge of the girl being alive no longer troubled him. He was convinced that was the way she wanted it, or else she would have given him a hint to do otherwise. That was what he expected now, a silent hint how to proceed, as he ran toward the house where the light had burned not long before.

Sweaty and out of breath he entered the black room which usually smelled of smoke and ashes. The walls were grimed with soot, it was even darker than usual. He instantly sensed the presence of a different smell; there was something alive, almost wild in the air, watching him, he could feel the look emitted by the otherwise black and dead things. Not even striking a match, he made a beeline for the bunk bed, immediately posi- tive about where to look. He turned back the cover and felt about in the straw for his notebook, which he had wanted to write in that morning but had then left empty; furtively as a thief he stepped out into the courtyard. His palms were sweating and his agitation increased. He took a cigarette but did not take time to light it, he only rolled it around between his teeth. He turned the notebook to the moonlight and leafed through

it in the weak light. He went through it once without success, chancing only the third time through upon the tiny letters the size of footnote print, on the very last page, on the inside cover.

The snakes go numb in the moonlight. The well has eyes. You'll find love in the sea.

The handwriting was his own. He shuddered; when did he write that? He understood the words, but they were not his words, while the writing definitely was. Could he have written that in a drunken stupor, and not remember anything about it now? He lit the cigarette. The light had burned in the room when he looked up from the sea, he had not been mis- taken about that, he could still smell the oil.

- It was her, Olivia, she wrote this, but in my handwriting, he won- dered.

At that moment a light circled over the island. Far out on the sea the lighthouse flashed. He pictured it in flames, it would burn like a huge stone torch showing the way to cruisers, or maybe like a medieval stake at which death burned. Andrijan looked on.

12.

He twitched, drew up his legs, and curled into a ball, conscious of the sweat covering his body. He threw his head back and with blood-shot eyes slowly adjusting to the piercing daylight, looked at the sky framed in the window through which there came a voice of terror and unbearable pain, as though someone were dying inside his ears.

He jerked out of his paralysis and rushed outside. For a moment he was overcome by a blackness caused by the clear, harsh glow of sunlight. He paused, bent double; now the voice, an intolerable bleating rending his blinded head, intensified, incessantly baying and crying for salvation, he could feel the pain deep down inside, but knew the very next moment that he was only waking

up, that the dream inside him was evaporating and that it was someone else far away who was in pain.

He concentrated and opened his eyes. The bleating was now more eas- ily bearable, the pain must have subsided. He crossed the courtyard and followed the stone fence, descending into an olive grove where a few ani- mals were tethered. Again there came the bleating lament. He hastened forward but was stopped short by the sight of a donkey sinking its old teeth into the woolly coat of a sheep's neck. Blood spurted from the fresh wound and ran over the white curls. Both animals were tied on a short tether to the same tree to graze and could not separate. The sheep, bleat- ing its last, again and again tried to get away from the enraged old don- key, tightening the rope which it had accidentally wrapped around the donkey's neck. The circle of death was complete. A step forward was a step backward for both unfortunates.

Andrijan grabbed a forked stick, noticing only then that he was naked, and approached, knowing that the donkey was more dangerous than a bull fighting in an arena, since it was mortally scared and wounded, and the sheep had awakened in it the killer instinct which people had tried to destroy. The docile animal, indispensable in those parts, had transformed, not into a rose but a heedless killer. Andrijan went closer and tried to poke the donkey to rouse it out of its animalistic reality, but only succeeded in making it kick and crush the helpless animal beneath it more vehemently until the sheep collapsed, thereby undoing the noose choking the donkey. Then the donkey looked up with its big eyes, wriggled its ears, and brayed as usual.

The last thing Andrijan saw was swarms of flies resettling on the don- key's bitten old body, and even more flies starting to suck the sheep's blood which oozed from its crushed, cloven head and matted the golden fleece into balls.

The scene shocked him and finally yanked him out of his dream. He was unable to help anyone, everything here was the way it had always been. Only down in the village, among the people, a fatal noose was draw- ing tight, and the end was nowhere in sight.

He threw away the stick and started back to the house. Leaving the grove naked, bare, he felt humiliated and small. He was totally powerless, everything happened past him, he could not intervene in anything. Though knowing that it had to be that way, that there had to be events whose course he could not

influence, the smell of blood and the bleating which still made him sick at heart nevertheless filled him with disap- pointment. Everything here was out of his league.

Vrša's dead! again rang in his ears. He could taste the salt on his cheeks accumulating from his sweat.

He washed his face in a pitcher of water and ate some of the clams someone had again considerately left for him on the threshold, and his spirits revived. He drank a few long draughts of water and smoked half a cigarette; he was running out of them but did not intend to go down to the village before nightfall. The men at the tavern smoked roughly shredded tobacco probably grown on the island and rolled up in stiff paper, so he decided to save part of his pleasure for later.

The cigarette mellowed the tangy taste of raw clams; he remained standing in the doorway, leaning against the stone wall, and blowing smoke toward the sea which twinkled at him in its blueness. The sky seemed cast in silver, clear and defined, with only a heat haze far on the horizon blurring the line between the sky and the sea, similarly as the surf constantly shifts the boundary between dry land and the sea. He felt as though there were no solid ground anywhere, as though he were forever floating, slowly drawing closer to the horizon, to a dead point on the level skyline. Everything was gradually drifting toward it.

He dropped the cigarette ember onto a stone where it continued to smolder a while longer, the fire persistently looking for a way out, to flame up, but the stone not yielding, then he stamped out the ember. He grabbed his hat, rolled up his trousers, and rushed off toward the sea. He wanted to be alone, to see no-one until there was some radical change, he tried to forget, also about Olivia, he did not wish to run into her now, if there was anyone here called Olivia at all

He walked with a long, springy stride, his arms swinging freely at his sides, he was like a flying fish, he felt the sun permeating his lungs, his T- shirt was tucked in his trousers, and he winked from beneath the brim of his hat at the sea which was getting closer and bigger. He approached the first dense cluster of houses rising from the stone and quickly turned right, in the direction of the pier, to avoid meeting anyone, anyone who might come running his way, anyone barefoot, in a blue skirt He went in the direction of the place where he

first set foot on Garma, but higher up, not along the shore. Like a shadow he slunk along narrow passages between gardens and olive groves, plucking the first ripe figs which had opened their purple bellies and oozed a white honey. He wrapped a few in his T-shirt and started to look for a safe way down to the sea.

He had wandered higher than he thought. When he stepped out into the open, onto the heated stone, he noticed the sheer drop to the beach which would have made descent very difficult. He continued along the barren land, searching for a safer way. He climbed over an overhang and began to slowly descend. Only now could he feel the heat beating down on his face, and he again tasted the sharp tang of salt in his mouth. His path - which was not even a trail, he just followed a ridge dividing the shore - made another turn downhill. He knew he had to stick to the beach adjacent to the village, because on the other side, beyond the ridge, the women were sure to be diving, still looking for Olivia.

He sped along. Suddenly the sea and the sky opened in front of him. The blue emptiness, caressing to the eye, was overwhelming. Dazzled by the scene he continued more slowly and cautiously. The terrain now began to rise and the path became almost level. He was on a green terrace of sorts, high above the sea. On an unusually flat plot of land roughly hewn slabs of stone, hacked rather than cut, stuck out of the ground. They seemed strewn around without any order at all. He was looking at an uncommonly absent place, high up on the cliffs, with only the sea rip- pling in the distance, and a breeze rising from below. The shadows were short, it must have been around noon.

- The sea cemetery, he whispered.

Tufts of dry grass stuck into the air around the stones, overgrowing the slabs polished by the wind and the rain. It was peaceful there, he felt almost exalted, a feeling he had never known before. He had always been afraid of cemeteries, uncomfortable if he even had as go near them; he avoided them whenever possible. Death had a specific smell which waft- ed from graveyards, the smell of white chrysanthemums and stale water. He again heard a distant chime tho- ugh he was certain there was no bell on the island, it rang inside him, the white bell, somewhere far away men in their black Sunday best were crossing a town

He could not read any of the stones, the dates, the inscriptions had all merged with the grain of stone, all the traces had petrified forever. He was certain nobody had been there in a long time. Only seagulls watched over the sea cemetery.

He sat down and lit the other half of his cigarette, although in that spot the sun beat down relentlessly; something incredibly calming made him stay.

He dragged on his cigarette and the smoke immediately blew away over the sea. Then something disturbed him, he became restless again, agitated, as though an invisible hand had touched his shoulder while he was half asleep and could not turn around to see who it was because he was only dreaming.

He quickly finished his cigarette, got to his feet, and scanned the sur- rounding area. There was no-one in sight, only a gull high over the cliffs diving toward the sea: it's fishing, he thought. The feeling of anxiety persisted. As he started looking for a passage over the cliffs to the sea and thought of bathing, he saw in a corner by the low stone wall a mound of earth, slightly higher than the others, without a worn-out headstone, and blooming next to it a tall yellow sunflower, turning after the sun. He stepped closer; the earth had clearly been recently turned, or the mound made, perhaps simply a grave tended after a period of neglect, or else?

There haven't been any deaths here in a long time , went through his mind; it was what Baraka had told him. What could've anyone been doing here? he thought.

He slithered down a steep slope and was glad to come to the sea. Silent and dark it lay before him. The eye was free to roam far out, there was nothing but the sea, and he gave himself over to it completely.

He took off his trousers, rolled them into a ball and laid down his head on it. He lay on the small pebbles of the beach. The tide was coming in with regular, slowly increasing waves. The wash of the sea stroking the soles of his feet made him sleepy. He felt his skin shrinking under the noonday sun, becoming too tight. Something inside him grew, like chil- dren's bones in the sun.

He fell asleep, despite the voice somewhere far away in his drowsy consciousness whispering to him that he mustn't. He floated above a dark sandy landscape, slowly flapping his arms like a sea bird, he tried to lie still on the sand which clouded under his strokes. Even with his eyes shut he could feel the green ribbons of dying daylight caressing the black sea- weed and rocky castles on the sea bed. Fish flitted past his cheek, oblivi- ous to him. He knew he was dreaming, his eye floated somewhere near him and saw the kingdom of shadows into which he was diving. The air bubbles from his lungs became smaller, slowly

rising toward the silver surface where the women divers were swimming, he could see their tanned legs, like swans they flicked their black flippers and with flexible necks sunk their bills into the depth, searching the sea floor with their masks; he was playing, he knew he could always rush up for air there was less and less of in his lungs. He felt that he still mastered the skill of dream flying, the skill he had possessed on several occasions, so he now attempt- ed to drown. He watched himself as he strove to lie down on the bottom and remain prostrate like a drowned man. He spread his arms and ground his behind into the sand which slowly puffed up and soundlessly resettled. It was cold, so deep down in the sea. The less air he had the easier it was to press down into the sand, to bore into it like a hermit crab or a big noble pen shell. He contemplated this ridiculous persistent intent of the body to experience coldness and immobility. Only when I'm done and drowned will I open my eyes and look up at the light gleaming on the sur- face, he thought in his dream and watched his drowning body. Suddenly he felt a sharp burning pain in his chest, as though a fire had broken out inside him. The eye at his side which he had used for watching went out and he remained in the dark, he had an attack of panic and anxiety, he quickly opened his eyes and in the dim light which traveled through the sea to him blinked at the sun. He raised himself up on his elbows and, soaking with sweat, looked at the remains of the day sinking in a fiery sea.

translated by Tamara Soban

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