

SAMPLE
TRANSLATION

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ABSOLUTION

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The New World of Mister G.

Some, strangers to us, forgive to help others. Most of us forgive to help ourselves. Others forgive only because they are convinced that they will save the world by doing so. What inspires their belief? Who assigns them their unique role? Who whispers their thoughts into their ears? Dangerous thoughts that surface at specific places and times? We don't know, but does it matter? Would knowing change anything at all? Isn't all that matters the thickly-woven brocaded stage curtains, the weight of the fog that falls through the dusk, the moisture, the cold? Silence. Darkness. The stage curtains open, and all

we see is a man who glances furtively from behind a tall winter coat collar, a black briefcase dangling off

his right wrist and hands burrowed into the pockets of his coat. He staggers lightly. He tries to balance his way through a narrow-beaten track on an un-shoveled sidewalk. He nearly falls. Behind him, a

stretch of unkempt Jugendstil façades, drizzling rain turns into snow in the pallor of the street lights. The

few passersby are quietly spat out by the dusk, only to be quietly swallowed again the very next moment. A female silhouette has long been at the man's heels. A figure draws near them, and it looks like Satan. And so it is. The ice plates, narrow snowy path and a bottle, exhausted of its content, which he carries in his devilish hand, cause him to stagger a meter before the man. His feet sail high into the fog. The wet cuffs of his jeans, hidden under his costume, slide out for a brief moment. A chain jingles against the curb, the bottle rolls away across the dirty snow. Satan tumbles over. Cursing.

A church belfry strikes ten. The man hears the woman, still close behind him, say: der arme Teufel. Next, a neon sign, NEW WORLD, burns faintly through the frozen fog. A sight that no one would expect on nights such as this one. It feels as though it is an epochal discovery, even though the restaurant has been tucked into the same street corner for over thirty years. The man turns around and gestures to the woman behind him. They have arrived.

The automatic door closer slowly closes the door behind them.

After all these years, nothing has changed, says the man quietly, in German.

The silhouette behind him takes off the hood of her coat. Instantly, the room submits to the sway of her long, black, curly hair.

They're gut, says the woman in coarse voice, looking around the inn.

The wooden pillars, fishing nets entangled with corals and shells, anchor-shaped chandeliers, the dusty wicker fish traps, a wall clock with a nymph pendulum, pastel-colored marine sunset on the wall. The restaurant is empty. A frying sizzle from the kitchen, the air heavy with fish and oil. A poster with a red cross against black background, from under which the words AND PEACE peak out, is glued onto the wooden bar. Part of it is covered by another poster of four happily smiling sailors, announcing a Dalmatian a cappella performance.

The kitchen is already closed, echoes through the sultry air. The waiter vanishes through the swinging doors. Before him, two crystal goblets full of ice cream and sweet cream, two flying plates that pull the waiter's hands across the room. The restaurant seats only an elderly couple in the back corner. The crystal goblets land on the table in front of them. The woman raises her spoon, and buries it deep into the cream; the man counts his money and places it on the table.

We're closing for the night, I'm sorry, the waiter says again, without looking back.

We're looking for your boss, Mister Gram, says the man in the winter coat. The waiter points to a cascade of three shallow wooden stairs that lead up to a booth. The black-haired woman looks and follows the man with his black briefcase. The squeak of the staircase.

Good evening, says the man.

The owner of the NEW WORLD restaurant, Samo Gram, known as Mister G., sits alone by a big table, hunched over a newspaper. White lush brows rise above a pair of gray spectacles that perch on the tip of his nose. As always drops of sweat scatter across his forehead, made worse by the overhead light suspended low above the table. His presence inspires people around him

to be unusually intrusive. Though Mister G. runs a fish restaurant, his body odor is more porcine than aquatic. And the more he sweats, the more he stinks like a pig.

Good evening. Gram, visibly tired, greets them back, and examines them from head to toe. May I help you?

You probably don't remember me, replies the man. My name is Adam Bely, and this is my colleague, Rosa Portero.

Gram gets up and shakes their hands. They all sit down at the newspaper-covered table.

Originally I'm from Maribor, though I haven't lived here for sixteen years. Back in the day, I used to be one of your regulars. Now I work as a journalist for the Austrian national radio. Well, actually I'm just an assistant. My colleague here would like to do a portrait of the city. Austrians are very interested in Maribor, now that it's become the European Capital of Culture. We figured it would be best to start with a place that is well-known among the locals and can serve as a good departure point for our report.

After all, it's the restaurants that keep the history of this city alive, and I'm sure yours must be well-known among Austrian listeners.

Yes, of course, mumbles Gram. Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat, drink? A glass of wine? Tone! Gram shouts out before they can reply.

That is most kind of you, we're not hungry, thank you, responds Bely. At that moment Tone walks in, bringing dinner and flatware for one.

Please forgive me, I've been on my feet all day long, and haven't had a meal yet. Please, let me offer you

something. It's on the house, of course, adds Gram.

Tone sweeps his hand across the newspaper-clothed table and places the plate before Gram.

Thank you very much, we're not hungry, but I'll have a glass of mineral water if you insist, says Bely. You can't be from Maribor if all you drink is water, although your accent sounds like you could be,

replies Gram. Don't you know that mineral water isn't good for the teeth? And you, madam? He softly

lays his eyes on Rosa and the dark orchids that weave diagonally up her crimson dress.

Ein viertel Weisswein, Riesling, bitte, Rosa places an order, her voice like that of a man, surprisingly coarse.

You know, Miss Portero speaks only a few words of Slovene, but she understands a lot, Bely explains. Of course, responds Gram, noticeably startled by her voice. He tucks a napkin behind an unbuttoned

collared shirt, out of which blooms luxuriant silver hair from his barrel chest.

Please, don't let us disturb you. Bon Apetit, adds Bely, and looks at his companion.

Guten Appetit, adds Rosa deeply.

Gram looks at his grilled octopus, its arms hanging over the edge of the plate. Around the cephalopod's

body, an arrangement of roasted potatoes, and half a lemon.

I love octopus. You? Gram asks and continues, as if his question wasn't meant as a question. Did you know that they have three hearts? Three! Gram calls out theatrically and wields his knife like a knight who brandishes his lance before a battle. And how exceptionally dexterous they are? Giant specimens, like this one, can squeeze through crevices as small as my thumb.

Gram raises his right hand, clasping the fork, and extends his thumb toward Rosa. Not to mention how intelligent they are. Devilishly smart, says Gram.

Tone comes in with mineral water and two glasses of wine, white and red.

Boss, would you like anything else? If not...

It'll do, you finish it up, I'll close up, says Gram, and relieves the waiter of his duties by waving him off

with the knife.

So, where was I? Right, at octopi and their intelligence. Do you think that intelligence has anything to do with our brain? Think again! We believe that we wouldn't be able to think if we had no brain, but just look at octopi. Their brain is tiny, still they're intelligent as hell. Do you know why? Because they have intelligent bodies, their whole damn bodies are intelligent, not only their tiny brains. Then look at us, brainwashed by our blind faith in science, which sells us a skewed view of the way things really are.

Gram wipes the sweat off his forehead, and leans back on his squeaking chair, visibly upset.

This is a rather interesting line of thought, says Bely peacefully, and takes a sip of his mineral water. Look, man created computers, Gram continues. But, instead of taking the computers as a largely

simplified approximation of human functionality, we take them as a model for us to look up to. We imagine the brain as some sort of a hard drive. Wrong, that's all wrong! Gram cries out and lays down the knife and fork which, just a moment ago, he held pressed against one arm of the beautifully grilled octopus. Chicken doesn't come before the egg, do you get me? The truth is: nothing is stored in the brain. Nothing! The brain functions only as a converter, transformer, a switch, the current that flows, the current that doesn't flow, that's all. You don't believe me? Just look at the octopus, it'll tell you everything.

All three of them direct their attention to the plate. For a moment, they can hear the ticking of the wall clock next door.

Gram grabs hold of his flatware again, and picks up where he left off in a whispering, almost conspiratorial voice.

Octopi are a wonderful example of how things really stand. Just look at how they perish, they don't die of old age, they always die after mating. They are either killed or they die on their own because of fucking. Male octopi die a few months after they detach their penis tentacle, while females, meine liebe Dame – Portenjo, right? – the female octopi starve themselves to death while guarding their eggs.

Gram finally makes a cut across the center of the octopus. A big chunk of juicy meat that perches at the top of the fork drifts into his mouth. Chewing with delight, Gram nods to himself. The guests say nothing. Shamelessly, he eyes Rosa Portero's beautiful hair. The thick of her black curls falls across her right cheek. He seduces her with a smile and, bashfully, her chocolate-colored left eye blinks lightly.

Gram winks at her and drinks out of his wine glass. Rosa smiles kindly. Her hands are still hidden in a pair of thin leather gloves. Her left glove adheres to her glass of Riesling, which she drinks up in two infinitely long and insatiable sips.

Adam Bely pulls a fountain pen out of a buttonhole of his jacket and moves it about the newspaper. Rosa puts down the glass, the red crescent of her lipstick plastered over its rim. She fingers the corners

of her mouth and brushes a stray strand of her hair off her cheek.

Is it only his imagination, or does Gram really see a green-glazed eye staring at him? He feels as though it is about to strike at him, like a snake, and devour him. He feels as though he is about to forever fall

into the green depths of her eye and never see the light again. Bely picks up his fountain pen, which he ticks to the rhythm of the clock next door. The eye, there it is, the eye as the mouth, and a glazed voice within it. Mister G. may be as courageous a little boy as he wants, running barefoot across the meadow into the unknown and away from home – but he can't escape. A sharp stabbing pain in his feet, a mild vertigo of fear, and amazement over his reaction.

Gram chokes. He coughs. Bely leans forward and hits him hard across his back. A bite of octopus shoots out of his mouth back onto the plate, and coagulates with both sides of the halved octopus. Its arms

now budge and curl up around the edge of the plate, with life, they stir, and the octopus darts under the table. All that remains is a plate with a few potatoes, and a damp trace of the octopus' suction cups that meander across the newspaper.

This can't be happening, is Gram's last thought as he tumbles into the depths, deeper and deeper. He clutches at this thought, his last splitting straw, as he falls through the green-glazed layers of glass. The entire landscape falls into the depths of the green, tick-tock, the meadows grow lighter, the haystacks, the trees and the green mountain tops far in the distance come toppling over. No, there is no way back, home is no more. No longer can he gaze at the grass that trembles and sways in the wind as if it were alive, as if it sprouted all around Gram and swaddled him, pulling him deeper and deeper into a landscape of no escape.

Listen to my instructions and you'll be fine, says Bely, and removes the plate, the glasses and the flatware from the table.

Rosa stoops and clicks her tongue at Gram's face.

He's deeply hypnotized, says Bely, there's no way he can lie. I'll plug him into the E-meter just in case. Rosa nods in approval.

Bely pulls a leather case out of his black briefcase. In it is a metal box with a few buttons and a gauge, which he connects to a pair of wires that end in cylindrical metal electrodes. He hands them to Gram.

Squeeze hard, orders Bely.

Gram obeys. He stares ahead, absent-mindedly, clasping the electrodes. Start recording, says Bely.

Rosa retrieves a voice recorder from her fur coat. She presses the record button. Bely bows his head and, softly, he asks Gram a question.

Who are you?

Samo Gram, answers Mister G. What do you do for work?

I am a customs officer. What else?

Depending on the situation, I've had a number of names, real and fake.

Who do you work for?

For myself. Now I work for no one else but myself. Who did you work for in the past?

For the customs, and also for the Yugoslavian National Security Service, later on I worked for the

Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency, Sova.

During the interrogation, Bely keeps track of the E-meter needle that consistently floats in the middle of the dial.

I see you're telling the truth, says Bely.

Rosa gets up and disappears behind the door. Nothing but truth, says Gram.

What comes to mind when you hear the word "lie"?

My kitten. One day he went missing. I searched everywhere, around the farm where we lived. I searched the fields, even the nearby hills. I cried inconsolably, and my mom promised me that he would come back. I knew right off that she was lying.

What's the first thing that crosses your mind when you hear the word "happiness," asks Bely?

I remember. The slaughtering of the pig at the border. What about it?

I was young back then, a customs officer. It happened in the Koroška region, at the border between

what was then Yugoslavia and Austria. I walked the woods all day long, I made good money, and there was lots of messing around. If I look back today, I know I was happy, but back in the day I didn't know that.

Go on. .

There was a farmer who had a house right on the border, which ran right through his kitchen. He would have to use his passport to be able to leave his kitchen, which lay in Yugoslavia, and go take a dump on the other side of the iron curtain, since his toilet was in Austria. Anyway, this guy wanted to slaughter a pig. To slaughter a pig in a forbidden border zone! He asked us, the customs officers, if we could find him an illegal butcher. First we brought him a butcher and then, a few hours later, when the swine was

already open and chopped to pieces, we showed up with some Austrian customs officers and scared the hell out of him. Not only because he had organized the slaughtering under the table, but because he could have been accused of an attempt to help the butcher cross the border illegally which, at the time, was punishable with twenty years behind the bars. The farmer begged so hard that he fell on his knees out of sheer fear and pissed his pants. Goodness, we laughed like crazy, along with the Austrians. But

the farmer, he didn't feel like mucking about. He was kneeling in his piss and kept on begging. In the

end, we split the pork between us, in exchange for not denouncing him. All we left him was the swine's head, which lay right on the border. It didn't make much sense to argue over whether it was Austrian or Yugoslavian.

That's what made you happy?

You have no idea. I also became quite rich, well, I earned enough that, after ten years of working at customs, I was able to buy this restaurant.

What's the first thing to cross your mind when you think of something sad, asks Bely and stretches towards the door to see what Rosa is doing? The sound of clattering glasses from behind the bar resounds across the empty space of the restaurant.

Football.

I mean, what hurt you on a personal level?

My mother beat me up because I would bring home bones. Supposedly they were human. They were all over Pobrežje, where I grew up, jutting out from the ground. The kids, we would pull them out and play hockey with them in the fields. But I was not allowed to bring them home. I still remember the crackling sound of the bone she hit me with, as I crouched over her knee.

That's as sad as it gets? I don't know.

You don't know?

There's something worse than that. But I don't know if it happened to me, as in, me in this life. Who else then?

It happened to my mom. I can hear her screaming. Everything around me gets tighter, it's smothering

me. I feel something meaty banging at my little head. Where are you?

I'm in my mom. I haven't been born yet.

Is this your father?

No.

What happened to this man later on?

I don't know, I've never found out who he was.

Why not?

Fortunately I didn't, otherwise I would've had to kill him. Who are you?

Samo, Samo Gram. The kids at school were teasing me, they called me Little Gram. Who's Little Gram

now? I showed them all.

And who were you before that?

I see green light. I'm blinded by the meadows. They will burn to the ground, can't you see?

I will ask again: Who were you before you were born as Samo Gram? Many.

For instance?

I'm a rafter, here on the Drava River. The river, its current, my life. Wonderful years of my life, but I

don't see it. I just miss my family too much, my four sons and my wife. We love each other. More, says Bely.

I smell darkness, it's damp. My bloody cough eats through my lungs and nostrils. I see a small lamp that

flickers down the tunnel, where I work as a mercury miner. Yesterday, three miners were killed in the tunnel adjacent to this one. While I dig, I keep on seeing the images of those disfigured bodies that I helped to carry out. They were so cold, even though we dug them out right away.

Go on.

I was also a nun in a convent. It was before the First World War. In a convent?

I was healing lepers in Bavaria.

Gram giggles.

Bely looks at the dial. The needle floats in the middle. Why are you laughing?

I was a lesbian but, fortunately, nobody ever found out about it, except for Ana. Ana?

She was the other Benedictine sister, my lover. What truly scares you?

Calvary.

From behind the bar comes the sound of rattling bottles. Rosa flings a bottle onto the floor, so it shatters. Then she brings one in and places it on the table before Bely. Jack Daniels. Bely looks sternly at her, and continues to interrogate Mister G.

What Calvary? Bely continues. Calvary.

Do you mean Christ's Calvary?

You must be kidding me. Not that Calvary. I meant Calvary, the hill above the city of Maribor. I thought you were from around here, but I see you know shit about it. I'm scared of Calvary and the power of the Great Orc.

What's the Great Orc?

Great Orc, the thirteen guardians of secrets. Gram giggles again.

What's so funny again, asks Bely?

Some people don't even know they belong to the Orc, replies Gram seriously. Most of them don't know who the other members are. The thirteen of them run this city, and they don't even know what and why and...

Rosa tilts back the bottle, takes a deep hit, and puts the bottle back on the newspaper. Her cloudy brown eye hangs at half-mast.

You know a lot, says Bely.

That was my job, to know a lot. Without knowing a lot, I wouldn't be here today.

Namen, wer sind sie, Rosa cries out?

I can't, the Great Orc, they will kill me, shrieks Gram, petrified! Trembling with fear, he emanates an

oppressive stench of swine.

Don't worry, we'll save you, says Bely.

The Great Orc will kill me. No one, no matter how powerful, can escape the Great Orc! Do you believe in absolution?

Absolution? What do you mean by that?

It doesn't matter, says Bely. Just keep in mind that you'll be leaving here absolved. You'll be alive, and

the Great Orc will do you no harm.

I'm too old to run abroad. Besides, there's nowhere I could be safe.

Don't worry, we know of place where you'll be perfectly safe. You've never been this safe since the day

you were born. Now, just tell me their names. I only know a few, not all of them.

Bely notices the needle on his measuring device. Every once in a while the needle swings violently to the

left.

Namen, wir wollen Namen, shouts Rosa! She dips her left glove into the whiskey stain that has eaten through the newspaper addresses, columns, photographs, and draws a big circle.

Gram blurts out six names: Tine Mesarič, Ivan Dorfler, Laszlo Farkas, Pavel Don Kovač, Anastasia Green, Magda Ornik.

More, we need all thirteen. This is all I know.

The needle on the E-meter sways heavily to the left.

He's deeply hypnotized, how can he be lying, mutters Bely?

Rosa bites into the cork and pops it out of the bottle, she spits it out, tilts the bottle and smashes it against the table. The whiskey splatters all over Gram. He doesn't budge. Shards of glass lie scattered across the soaking wet newspaper. Rosa sweeps them off and points at a photograph.

Yes, him, too.

What do you know about him?

Too much. We used to play together as kids. Later on he was my roommate at cadet school, which I failed to finish because of him. Somebody stole the director's wallet and slipped it into my locker. We haven't been able to stand each other since then. When he was appointed mayor, he tried everything to drive me out of the city. But I'm no easy target. I have my own information, which is why he lets me be now. He knows very well I could harm him, or even bring him down.

Rosa looks at Adam.

Is he telling the truth, she asks in Slovene? Adam examines the needle and nods.

Do you have more?

That's it, I don't know any other names. Bely and Rosa look at each other.

Rosa turns off the voice recorder, and wipes it off against the black orchids on her dress.

We've got something for you, you old soul. Take it and you'll be absolved all your pasts, says Bely. Rosa lays a silver compact full of tiny brown oyster crackers onto the wet newspaper table.

For thirty years I've been eating only fish, no crackers, says Gram.

What's thirty years compared to eternity, replies Bely, and shoves an oyster cracker into his throat?

A few minutes later, the NEW WORLD neon sign outside turns off. Two pairs of legs. One pair staggers mildly. Trudging through the heaps of snow, which comes down as if it were forever to consume the city, the world. The belfry bells strike thrice. Posters, red crosses on black backgrounds. A cat dashes across the desolate street. Midnight is fast approaching.

Death from the Pohorje Mountains

In the outskirts of Maribor lies a cemetery, disproportionately large in relation to the size of the city. From the front portal a lengthy, paved tree-lined path leads to the main building which contains a florist, a small shop, mortuaries and the cemetery administrative office.

This cemetery is like Wagner. Only in Wagner is the Gesamtkunstwerk, an inseparable unification of all art forms, truly embodied. From music to word, sculpture, theater. In Wagner and cemeteries. Just ask people. The cathartic experience of the Gesamtkunstwerk is one of the main reasons why they love to come here so often.

Rosa Portero checks her voice recorder. Meanwhile, Magda Ornik, the director of the Maribor Funeral

Parlor, readjusts her short skirt and smiles at Bely. Classical music in the background.

LohenGreen. I choose the background music for the cemetery based on the weather, the color of the treetops and proximity of holidays. If it's bothering you, I can ask them to turn it off.

Bely shakes his head.

If you need photos for the interview, I can e-mail them or give you the link to my website, says Magda

Ornik.

Thank you, but it's a radio interview, says Bely.

I know, I know, I'm asking just in case you'd like to put a photo or two on the web. You know, in this digitized world visual images are more and more important. Which, of course, is wrong. We all know that the material world shouldn't matter, but you can't lock horns with technical development. You

know, our cemetery was chosen as one of the neatest in the entire European Union. Not only because of its beautiful landscape architecture, flower arrangements and professionalism, but mostly because of

the extent of our advanced services. Included in our package are tiny, decent video-cameras that let you

to see your family grave online, any time you like. We call it "Attendance at Rest," a service that's unique to our cemetery. As a result, our gardeners must keep the graves in perfect shape at all times, which could be hard to maintain. Of course the service comes at a price, but we believe that it adds to our clients' peace of mind. Another innovative service of ours is a speaker with voice recordings of the deceased. This one people found to be noisy, so we were forced to restrict its availability, especially during holidays and in the pet cemetery. It was awfully popular with dog owners, but cat people weren't thrilled about it. You may say that we're taking this too far, but thanks to technical advances, we can pinpoint the exact spot where people are buried. We can come to terms with our loss, as long as we can rest assured that our beloveds are well taken care of. That's the paradox of loss, don't you think? We miss the deceased as long as they have a grave. If they have no grave then they, and their death, are forgotten.

Magda Ornik takes a sip of her chamomile tea, pondering her words.

Before my post here, I never spent much time thinking about our ties with the dead. But now I'm more and more understanding of those who choose condensed cremation, in order to reunite with their lost ones.

Condensed cremation, asks Bely?

You've never heard of it, asks Magda Ornik, throwing Bely a seductive glance from beneath her long eyelashes? It's a special post-cremation procedure that compresses the ashes of the deceased into a small graphite stone. The remaining relatives most often use it as a necklace pendant. Some have it fitted into their rings or they might carry it as a brooch. This way they can preserve the most direct, material bond with the deceased through an aesthetically pleasing decorative stone.

Are you saying that people wear their ancestors as jewelry?

That's right. You'll see women here in Maribor, walking around with their parents or grandparents around their necks. Most often they go for their parents in combination with their pets. Especially popular these days has been the so-called extended family memento, where daughters-in-law have their deceased mothers-in-law made into a central stone, with other family members taking the space around it. We've got an in-house jeweler who's an expert in this sort of thing. Swarovski crystals for little girls, ancestors for us adults.

Magda Ornik changes her seat. Her long legs, fragrant floral arrangement of dry wildflowers and magnolia, wall covered in photographs: Ornik with the president of the nation, the president of the European Union, the prime minister, the mayor and a Maribor show business celebrity.

Does that mean that the ancestors-turned-décor don't have graves? No memorial plaque or something like that?

Of course they do, but the only thing buried there is a memory of their remains, not the remains themselves.

Bely leans toward Rosa to interpret Ornik's last words. He notices a long cut behind Rosa's right ear, which disappears beneath the collar of her sweater. The change in his expression does not go unnoticed.

Mr. Bely, are you alright, asks Ornik?

Yes, right, of course, mutters Bely. Where were we? Right, the memory of our ancestors. Your cemetery is special also because a part of it lies above the antitank trench from the Second World War. A subterranean survey revealed that this trench contains at least fifteen thousand, and according to other estimates, up to fifty thousand people, most likely soldiers from former Yugoslavia. Covertly slaughtered by the Communists at the end of the war. In a way, this cemetery lies on yet another cemetery of the unidentified.

Look, Mister Bely, let's ask ourselves what memory is. Memory is only what's tangible. Objects are memory. Houses are memory. Tombstones are memory. That which is within us is nothing more than our desires, our frustrations. That's not memory, that's our psyche. When we remove a memorial plaque, we remove the memory. And if this memorial plaque is never erected, then there's nothing to

remove. Let the dead die. Why should the young generations be polluted by questions about events that took place more than half a century ago?

What about the bones of the dead, are they also tangible?

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, Mister Bely. What's the point in uncovering what was covered? Our society has always been divided by the question of the post-war massacres. Every politician, left or right wing, profits from these unresolved questions, from discovering new burial grounds which only give rise to new phantasms and hatred. If you ask me...

Ornik bows and turns off the voice recorder.

Off the record, in my opinion all the cemeteries should be plowed through every fifteen to twenty years. People only remember because they go to cemeteries all the time. We should limit their visits or

prohibit them altogether. You can look at it from two perspectives. The first is that our entire country is nothing but one big burial ground. You tamp a shovel into the ground, and you'll find a grave or even a mass burial site. The Romans, the Middle Ages, Turkish invasions, the First World War, the Second World War, the post-war massacres. Slovenia is right at the crossroads—everything meets and fuses here, and every era provides its share of dead. In this respect, the only difference between an ordinary

field and our cemetery is in people's perception, and in whether graves are marked or not. In our cemetery, you know exactly where you are every second, you know that you're surrounded by graves. That said, we forget that we sow wheat over graves, plant flowers and lettuce, that we build houses atop them. It's hard to admit that all the dead are, in fact, just fertilizer for future generations. A rather morbid perspective, I know. The second one is more optimistic. It focuses on life, on everything that's alive here and now. I don't know about you, Mister Bely, but I'm

happy to be alive, to see the sun rise every morning, to do my wonderful work, to help people accept their loss through quality service. I am

happy that I can move freely, that I can plant, cultivate my land, that I can breathe, jump, and be excited about life, the biggest gift of all, like a bird.

A bird?

Well, perhaps that wasn't the best analogy, but you know what I mean. We're no better than animals, rather the other way around.

Rosa grimaces furtively, stoops and turns on the voice recorder again. Ornik's eyes look at her sharply.

So, you understand Slovene, Ornik asks Rosa? Rosa shrugs her shoulders.

Meanwhile Bely draws the fountain pen out of his jacket. The pen starts swinging to the rhythm of

LohenGreen, which echoes in from the reception hall.

She understands only a few words, that's all. Tell me, is this Andreas in this photograph?

Ah, Andreas! Where did you find him? What a genius he is. His plays are the closest approximation to Gesamtkunstwerk, besides Wagner and the cemetery, of course. Years ago, when I saw his Babylonia play, he inspired me to do special installation, which... Ornik stops in the middle of the sentence, then continues erratically... now accompanies our visitors... at their walks... through our... cemetery.

Ticking of the ceramic fountain pen. Wagner's LohenGreen. Tick-tack-tick-tack. Rosa waves her hand before Ornik's nose. No reaction. Bely and Rosa nod to each other. Bely removes the

fountain pen, pulls out the E-meter and places the cylindrical electrodes into Magda's hands. He turns it on. The needle sways and lands in the center of the dial.

Magda, tell us about who you were before you were born as Magda Ornik.

I can't see anything. It's all covered, Magda says quietly.

Bely keeps a close eye on the E-meter needle, which swings to the right twice and settles in the middle again.

Who's keeping your past away from you? It's me.

Magda, who are you? Many.

That's right, you're many. Tell me about them.

Magda stares past Bely. Deeply hypnotized, her hands, pressed between her knees, clutch at the cylinders. Taut facial muscles, frozen, protuberant eyes.

It's all dark. I haven't been born yet, but I'm already alive. I often hide under the brushwood. I'm scared.

Scared of what?

I'm scared of Father Frost from the Pohorje Mountains. Father Frost never works alone, he comes paired with Death. They always come together from the mountains. I can hear his raspy voice, he smells of schnapps. Any moment the palms of his giant hands will find me, they will drag me out of my hiding

place and push me into a chasm with the others. What others?

I don't know them, they're dead, that's all I know. Like my mother. She's dead, too. She too was claimed

by Father Frost and Death, who always come down from the Pohorje Mountains. Go further back, before this life. What do you see?

I'm a butcher. I work for farmers in remote mountain areas. It's hard work. I often have to walk all day

long to get to the animal I'm supposed to slaughter. The pay is bad. I'm forced to steal to support my

family.

And if we move back even further, way back?

It's all foggy, I see soldiers, Roman soldiers. Bright sky, a fire perhaps. I have many children. One of them just passed away because of a back injury. My children die a lot. My man tells me that I carry death in me, that I feed my children with death, which is why they die. Every day I'm shrouded in my children's death. Death keeps me warm, it's my gown, my body scent. I mourn my children's death and I give birth to them, I grieve and I give birth again. I see matchwood. Someone is lighting a fire. I sell bread and pray to the gods that I never have to return to earth again. But I return time and again, and wounds that have just healed open up somewhere else. Wounds, nothing but wounds, wounds everywhere.

Rosa draws near to Magda's head, shuts her eyes, and sniffs at her like a dog.

Ich mochte mehr über den Väterchen Frost erfahren.

Bely nods in approval.

Right, tell us more about the Father Frost from the Pohorje Mountains, says Bely.

They say that he's a Communist, but in reality he's just a poor little man whose family was killed by members of the Home Guard. He's one of the most avid machine gunners, assigned to kill the captured Home Guard members, German soldiers, political opportunists and others who don't fit. The war is about to end. He's been working non-stop for three weeks. He's got to be well-organized in order to liquidate so many people. They herd them to the edge of a ditch in groups. It's on him to shoot them, someone else takes care of the transport, while another person operates an excavator. They cover the cadaver-filled trench with dirt as they go. They call it a human-face killing. Those who are liquidated are instantly dead: if not, they die soon after, under a thick layer of dirt. Nothing we do here can compare to, let's say, the Barbara trench. There they strip poor babies and women naked, tie them up with a

wire, and bury them alive, so they slowly die of suffocation. Or Rog trench, where many survived the fall and then played dead for weeks, to survive amid all those rotting bodies. People lived because they became vultures, cannibals. We had none of that. Only a human-face killing. The machine gunner was a professional killer. He only messed up once. Only once he was so drunk with schnapps that he mowed down a few of his assistants, but that's all.

Magda shuts up, then picks up where she left off, her voice soft and cautious.

The sound of machine guns scares me. I cover my ears, but it's doesn't help, the noise drills right through me. I try to think of piano suites I know. I wait for Schubert to save me, but there's no music that plays louder than the music of the machine gun. Father Frost comes with many machine guns, not only one. He needs to switch between them every once in a while because they heat up so badly during the shooting. Three weeks of killing. After three weeks of butchery, the machine gunner will finally become Father Frost.

How's that?

His hands are shaking. He drinks much more than he did before the war, when he worked as a forester in the Pohorje Mountains. He's delusional. The city is gloomy. Those who survived want to forget everything that happened. He talks too much, he's violent. His superiors have two options, to liquidate him or assign him something else. He becomes the leader of the 45 Father Frost mission. He brings spruce trees and moss to Lenin Square in Maribor. He creates a magical

ambience, which reminds many of his coworkers of the woods around the antitank trench, not him. But since he's the leader of the 45

Father Frost mission, he's in charge of everything. They decorate the trees, lights, red lanterns, snow.

Next to the logs stand miniature models of fairy-tale creatures, dwarfs, leprechauns and the like. This is where all the children from the city and its surroundings are brought on December 24. Everybody is excited and enthusiastic. Then the engine begins to roar and bells to jingle. Father Frost doesn't come with reindeer, he comes with a Russian tractor. He sits there in his red cape, dead drunk, long white beard made of cotton wool. The children stare at him with wide eyes. If they laugh, he slaps their faces. If he can't reach them, he aims at them with his golden wand and shouts: "Ratatata!" I like Father Frost. All children like Father Frost. He brings us candy and talks about brotherhood among the nations of Yugoslavia.

Magda's lips shudder, eyes swell with fear, she arches her back, the cylindrical electrodes now squeezed

up against her abdomen. She cramps.

Oh, no, Father Frost, don't go uphill. I don't know, I'm not there, but the image is there, I can see it clearly. Father Frost feeds us candy and drives off up the hill on his ramshackle wagon behind the tractor. He always comes from the Pohorje Mountains. That's where you find unspoiled nature, clean water, layers of marble, that's where you find our past. He comes down into the city and brings us gifts. And then he always leaves to go back up the hill again.

What hill?

Pyramid Hill. He always disappears into Pyramid Hill. One time my daddy and I run after him. The foot of the hill suddenly opens up, Father Frost disappears into it, the hills closes up again. Oh my, I'm so worried about out Father Frost. Something bad might happen to him inside that hill. The Pyramid is his home. My daddy tries to console me, but I see that he's also scared. My daddy is lying. In reality, Father Frost must always return to the Pyramid, and that's when he forgets about us children. I don't want him

to forget us. I want him with us all the time! But still he comes only once a year, to give us our candy and to slap our faces, before he disappears again. I want to know what happens to him

when he's there with the worms, deep beneath the earth. Isn't he cold? What does he eat in there?

Magda shudders.

It's alright, Magda. Can you tell me about the Great Orc, asks Bely? Magda stares ahead, shaking.

Magda, Bely calls out!

Magda shakes more and more.

The Great Orc lives in the hill beneath the Pyramid. Father Frost is his child. Father Frost is the Great Orc's child, just like we are Father Frost's children. The Great Orc can go anywhere he wants, while Father Frost can only go back to his antitank trench in the woods. And he can visit with us children, but only for Christmas. So comes Father Frost, so comes Death to push us into the chasm.

Where's this chasm? Everywhere.

Where's the Great Orc?

In the Pyramid.

In the Pyramid above the city? Everywhere.

Who is the Great Orc, shouts Bely? Everybody. We all are the Great Orc!