



ULYSSES' SHELTER 3 / 2

Virginia **Monteforte** (Italy)
Kristina **Nesvedová** (Czechia)
Natassa **Sideri** (Greece)
Ivan **Antić** (Serbia)
Jacobo **Bergareche** (Spain)
Efsthathia **Paliotzika** (Greece)
Aljaž **Primožič** (Slovenia)
Nežka **Struc** (Slovenia)

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Laura **Torres Bauzà** (Spain)
Ryan **Falzon** (Malta)
Megan Angharad **Hunter** (Wales)
Dora **Šustić** (Croatia)
Jelena **Žugić** (Serbia)
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Introduction

Ulysses' Shelter is a project of exchange residencies for emerging writers and literary translators from around Europe, originally launched by the publisher, literary agent and organiser Ivan Sršen on the Croatian island of Mljet, where, according to legend, shipwrecked Ulysses found refuge. Adding the modern literary reference to the mix, the idea of providing 'shelter' for those who wish to spend time working on a literary project and find inspiration away from home was born. What makes the programme particularly valuable, as opposed to the many other residential opportunities for writers, is its capacity for connecting literary scenes of the participating countries and growing a network of literary practitioners (writers and translators) and professionals (curators, festival organisers, publishers, and magazine and web editors) who remain in contact and plan other projects and exchanges. Now in its third cycle, each of the partners annually selects two candidates to be awarded a fully paid residency in one of the participating countries. Starting with three European countries in 2018, the programme now has partners in eight locations with over 50 writers and translators benefitting between 2022 and 2025.

The programme not only offers the opportunity to connect with a literary scene in one of the partner countries, but also to have one's work translated and published, whether in a magazine, on a website or in an anthology. *Ulysses' Shelter 3/2* joins this effort with work of the authors selected for the second year of the third project cycle in English translation. The *Ulysses' Shelter 3* collections follow the print anthology of the second cycle published under the title *Ulysses' Cat* by the Welsh publisher Parthian Books. With more partners joining the third cycle, we decided to present the participants in each year of the programme separately in an e-publication which can serve as a valuable reference point in the absence of other published English translations.

Each selection is a mix of existing work and texts written during or after the residency, and they give us a sense of the variety of topics and concerns shared by emerging authors across Europe today. What is remarkable and worth highlighting is the number of writers who are capable of translating their own work into the contemporary European lingua franca that makes it possible for us to have conversations across the vast and varied European cultural space and opens the doors to a wider readership and possible translations into other languages, without diminishing the importance of Europe's multilingualism.

Alexandra Büchler



Being There



Virginia Monteforte

is an anthropologist, translator and photographer who studied at the Faculty of Arts at La Sapienza (Rome) and earned a PhD in Social Anthropology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris). Besides being an author herself of prose, poetry and academic essays, she has been working as a collaborator of literary events and published translator for poetry, prose and children's literature from Maltese, English and French into Italian. She has managed various community cultural projects about women, material culture, mobility, displacement, alternative cultural heritage and memory sites. She has worked as lecturer at the University of Malta, and tutor at the Italian Cultural Institute of Valletta and ISIT in Paris. She lives between Malta and Rome. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Caernarfon.



Photo: courtesy of the author

**Extract from "The anti-diary. Or rather, strenuous
(read: unsuccessful) strategies of resistance
to the autobiographical odyssey."**



[...] And rare to grasp, it seems,

*the smell of the Caernarfon sea,
it eludes, I approach it,
but not so much
with a caution
that surprises me.*

*If there is a smell it is the smell of stone,
and its colour is that of stone,
with flaky waves
to cleave the air
the pebbles so many rivulets of undertow
that has lost its way back out to sea, rivulets
of waters that in the dry have crumbled
into drops of stone,
and so they remained.*

*And with those stones
they built a castle
because long before,
Macsen the Roman
on the shores of another sea
saw in a dream these blue lands,
and a woman he already loved.
And I would like to touch that waxed sea
colour of a restrained storm
that brightens the sky
sea without smell
– no perfume
will wrap itself
in the wefts of my bag*



*asking to be taken elsewhere –
to make sure that it is sea made of water and not rock,
but the fear of knuckles cracking against the surface
makes me hesitate.*

*Grey sea, sea of slate,
where ancient stories written in chalk
have melted into foam, and return
in a language that sounds
like the crackling of a fire
on a November afternoon
when they are all around a fire telling each other
what they dreamt the night before.
Intricate branches, a barrier of wild garlic,
perhaps the salty smell gets caught in it.*

*Sea of dark paper blades, hatch,
burn the phalanxes that finally grazed it,
rocky sea: it does not flow tepidly into the nostrils,
does not wrap the head
and shoulders with its shawl of salt and woods,
weave of thyme, glasswort, myrtle and mallow.*

*In this water where Ellen was a master of sailors
and a beekeeping monk sailed with Welsh bees
when he returned home to Ireland,
in this water of shadows, harp strings and slumber
I don't even know if I could swim.*



Shipwrecking

Ulysses passed through the Pillars of Hercules, his ship unwrecked, and he has headed for the British Isles; he first stopped at the Isle of Anglesey where he collected three seashells and then went down south to Caernarfon, where he has decided to stay in his hut; his men have picked the flowers in the garden and have been turned into chickens, and they scratch around outside the gate, they fight over food with the seagulls. Ulysses no longer scans the horizon, no longer thinks of the sea, of the sea that has no smell, of the one that does. Instead, he scrutinises the objects he has around him, that he has collected, that he has brought with him, he dwells on the surface of things, which, as Palomar noted, is inexhaustible¹. The only Pillars of Hercules he wants to cross again, these days, are those that lead him to a stream. "The story of a stream, even one that rises and falls among the moss, is the story of infinity," wrote Elisée Reclus², and like him, the only knowledge I need to have, for now, is that of this stream, of its gurgling, its every drop, of the water that sounds different when it meets a rock that emerges and breaks into a small waterfall, or when it creeps and swirls in a recess of grass and rocks; of the light that slips from the leaves of a willow tree and floats over the water, darkens, returns; of the soft, warm snowfall of the poplars, of the



opposite current half a metre from the water of a myriad of tiny insects; of a duck with its five young, two that stay behind, and hurry to catch up with the others; of a spring that I can only see if I close my eyes, that I can only travel to, if I close my eyes.

Don't tell me anything Tiresias, because everything has already been revealed, told, shown; and the resounding, often repetitive cacophony of stories we find on social media, the objectification of the self and every step it takes beyond the threshold of the house, or from room to room, has made travel impossible, or has trapped us in the idea that any movement not conceived as a repetition of the already-seen, or as a commerce of one's own experience, is something useless. It takes a great deal of inner strength to decide not to do something already suggested when travelling, in order not to "buy" someone else's journey.

I tried not to read what had been written by others about their residencies, and also carefully dodged: the ten things to see in Caernarfon; Caernarfon in a day, two, three; the best Welsh food restaurants; Manchester, what to see in a day. And so on.

The Odysseus-in-me (I always liked the name better than Ulysses) hums *Wake up the dawn and ask her why / A dreamer dreams she never dies / Wipe that tear away now from your eye*,³ comes to realise that not having an internet connection is not that bad, after all, and decides to stop; to stay and write, smudging watercolour sheets regretting to not have learnt how to use them, reading by the side of a stream; lazing on the soft, cool mattress of a hotel room ten minutes from the airport. And spending the next few nights dreaming of drifting through the terminals and missing the flight.

Hence I am not interested in taking note of a list of traditional stuff, or getting the *real* Wales on my taste buds. I am interested, however, that a group of people, including the owners of the cottage I am staying in, devote their time, and thus give importance, to the preparation of a costume dance show to perform during the annual, and rather chaotic, Food Festival; or that Nici invites me and Kristina, my fellow resident, to her home for dinner, to be the one to cook Welsh dishes, and thus intentionally choose to be the material mediator of this knowledge that she has also written about in the past. Mind you, she did not write about *traditional* Welsh cooking, but about *her own* cooking. I think there is no such thing as typical, traditional, even national cuisine, and never has been. Every cuisine is imaginatively collective, but always individual. At most familiar, if we think of it as an (imprecise) ritual of re-enactment of past ties. And as I watch Nici cook, the hint of a memory worms its way into my mind (the *fake rabbit*, the good *Rarebit*, which I thought contained meat, always makes me think of the horror I felt, before arriving in Malta for the first time, on discovering the existence of fenkata, the Maltese rabbit meal. At that time I shared my room with a beautiful white, blue-eyed rabbit).

And I can also feel free, despite my love of myths and legends, to leave out the books dedicated to Welsh legends winking from the shelves of the *Palas Print* bookshop.

But at the same time I listen spellbound to the fairy tales which Kristina narrates as we walk along the paths of Beddgelert. And I feel that flicker that these kinds of stories always arouse in me, for the way they colour places, make them shine.

But then, when the story ends, I wonder: are anthropologists, in essence, people moved by enchantment for the elsewhere, by the consciousness that there is no radical elsewhere (and certainly not as of now) individuals *now* incapable of enchantment? But without enchantment, what is the point of looking? And how does one find enchantment?



Should I fall asleep under an oak or elm tree, awaken in fairyland where time flows differently, and then return to a place that is now a temporal elsewhere, new and untouched by my own gaze?

It seems a beautiful thing, to end up in fairyland, - Kristina had concluded at that time - but it is not at all: when you wake up, you find yourself alone [because those you loved are no longer there.]

Even in Caernarfon, time flows differently, and I forget which day of the week it is.

*"What I am is almost nothing dear. Almost mortal, almost a shadow like you. It is a long sleep that began who knows when, and you have come into this sleep like a dream. I fear the dawn, the awakening. If you go away, it is awakening."*⁴

And like Pavese's Calypso, I too fear awakening, unless it means waking up somewhere where the writer in me can put aside, for a while, the anthropologist-me, in order to be able to create a radical elsewhere that is able to bring about in me that astonishment, and then another, and yet another. In other words, (as Alberto Sobrero, my Anthropology and Literature professor would have said when talking about anthropologists who eventually become writers and poets), *shipwrecking*.

And so, in order to disperse and de-centralise the self, for the strategy of the object, in order to magnify, to delay awakening, while I was still in Wales, I set out to shipwreck in all the places elsewhere which cannot be seen with the naked eye.



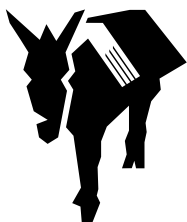
Note:
to find the smell of the sea again:
forget you can swim.



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2. Elisée Reclus, *Storia di un ruscello (History of a stream)*, Elèuthera, 2005 [1875].
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Translated from Italian by the author



Kristina Nesvedová

is a Czech author of children's books. After her studies in French and Portuguese philology, she started working as a book editor and has been preparing books by Czech and foreign authors for publication for fifteen years. In 2023, she published her first novel for children, *Kdo spí ve spíži* (Who sleeps in the pantry). She lives in South Bohemia with her family and two cats, and when she is not helping others bring their books into the world, she is writing her own stories or trying to improve her skills as a performance storyteller. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Caernarfon.



Photo: Julie Jahelková

The land of the red dragon

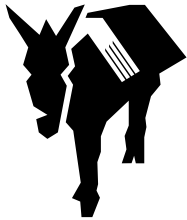
I'm sitting on a bench, looking at the rocks exposed by the tide. Two seagulls walk among them, resembling an old married couple. They walk together, he a step ahead, she trotting behind him. They whistle repetitively, he once hoarsely, she twice thinly, over and over. The flag flutters on the highest tower of Caernarfon Castle. It bears a red dragon on a green and white field. The red dragon fascinates me, I envy the Welsh for having such a flag. In Caernarfon, dragons are everywhere. Green Wales, the land of fairy tales and myths, stories of the Mabinogi, of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

Suddenly I'm not sitting on a bench anymore, but on a carpet, my back against a big armchair. I'm about seven years old, and I've been stitching a long banner by hand all morning; it's white and covers me like a blanket. Someone else, I don't know who, has sewn a second one, this time red. Then my dad painted a dragon on each one in gold paint and attached both banners to a long wooden pole. In my memories the banners are very beautiful; my dad, an artist, was generous with Celtic ornaments and the dragons were like some decoration of an old shield. In the afternoon, my brother, me and the children of our friends fought a great battle with those banners on a stack of hay. This was before the Velvet Revolution, at the end of the communist era, before hay began to be harvested in bales and wrapped with plastic sheeting. No, back then it was just piled up in a huge pile, four metres high and ten metres long, and it used to be the best playground. That's how old I am... Some of us conquered the pile and others defended it, we threw hay at each other, climbed up and rolled down. We were all sweaty and laughing. We re-enacted the famous fight between the white and red dragon from Merlin's prophecy. I don't remember who won the battle, only that at the end my mother came and said that my youngest brother sitting in the pram was Merlin the magician himself and that he had come to settle the fight. At home, for a snack, we were given dragon eggs – coloured pudding that my mother poured into round bowls and put together when cold so that it looked like a strange colourful ball.

In Merlin's prophecy, the red dragon symbolised the Welsh, while the white represented the Anglo-Saxons. And Wales has Arthur's dragon on its flag to this day. My co-resident, Virginia, who is an anthropologist, told me that anthropology tells us that people, when they are in a foreign environment, subconsciously look for something familiar. The Welsh word *draig* sounds almost exactly like the Czech word *drak*. It is certainly closer to the Czech than the English dragon, although the same Latin basis is evident in all three. I believe Virginia is right, because although I had a lot of fun discovering things I didn't know in Wales, I was most pleased when I discovered something I actually knew. Places from the stories of my childhood, the grave of the faithful dog Gelert (even if it is fake), the druid's island Anglesey, the mountains of Eryri where the faeries have lived since time immemorial. An evening of

Welsh storytellers in Barmouth, where the story of the bard Taliesin was told. These stories are part of an imaginative base from which I draw inspiration for my own writing. Not just those, but also Indian and Chinese stories, myths of native peoples, of American Indians, classic European tales... But Celtic stories are particularly deeply embedded in me. I don't know why. Maybe because they are often melancholy, there is a kind of sublime beauty in them.

I'm fascinated by how it is possible that I grew up with elements of the culture of another country that I didn't visit until halfway through my life. It's possible because of books, collections of stories that even in the communist era were allowed to be published in Czechoslovakia because the regime considered them harmless, fairy tales for children. Behind them is the work of clandestine Czech translators who translated them, often under false names, editors and publishers, excellent Czech illustrators... Today culture flows freely, as do people, thank God for that. Our children take the opportunity to travel for granted. I was eight years old when the regime changed and my parents went to the first democratic elections; I was a little girl, and yet I don't take it for granted. I am extremely grateful for this opportunity. I'm grateful that at a time when the situation in Europe is so complicated, someone thinks it is worth supporting emerging authors. And I am grateful for the warm welcome I have received in Wales. It is no longer a distant exotic land from old stories, but something familiar and close to me. In Czech we don't say goodbye, we say *na shledanou*, which means something like may we see each other again. So *na shledanou*, Caernarfon, may we see each other again soon. *Hwyl am y tro*.



Natassa Sideri

was born in Athens in 1981. She is a playwright, writer and translator. Her first plays were written and presented in English, including *The Island of Immortality*, awarded by the Ronald Duncan Literary Foundation and subsequently staged by Certainty of Chance Productions in the UK. Her play *Τιτανομαχίες* (Battle of the Titans) was staged at the National Theatre of Greece as part of a programme showcasing new voices in contemporary Greek theatre and published in 2017. In 2018, she won the Best Debut in Fiction award of the seminal literary magazine *Ο Anagnostis*. In 2021, her play *Δεσμώτης* (Bound) was awarded first prize at the Mythos?! playwrighting contest, organised jointly by the Theatre of Regensburg and the National Theatre of Northern Greece. In 2022, she wrote the texts for the performance *Μάγισσες* (Witches, dir. Thanasis Dovris), which premiered at the now defunct Tavros Municipal Slaughterhouses near central Athens. She is also the author of the short story collections *Κυρίαρχοι Πονηροί Λογισμοί* (The seven wicked thoughts, 2019) and *Το μόνο ζώο* (The only animal, 2025). Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Belgrade.



Photo: Cyril Albert-Gondrand

Belgrade

First time in the Balkans. Whatever that means. Don't know what exactly I was expecting to find but what I am finding exceeds it. A mishmash of remnants from every era of the past spread across streets where concrete peels off the façades of buildings, next to new builds and people dressed from H&M and Zara.

A Zara branch at a central location, the window display was hidden behind an array of religious icons. The seller seemed relaxed, no looks over his shoulders like the migrants selling fake designer bags at Athens metro stations. Religion playing capitalism on its turf and coming out victorious.

I can't remember the name of the street. Or of any street. It's been a long time since I last experienced this level of linguistic isolation. Last time was in Poland. Yet, bizarrely, the Serbians feel familiar when they speak this unfamiliar language. It's the words I don't understand, not the people, at least not the ones closer to my age. In the faces of the older ones, I read or project something darker. The idea, the knowledge that, not long ago, people here went through a war. And that there is another one happening right now, closer to this place than to where I came from. Yet out there, on the streets, the same capitalist joy, the colourful clothes, the same ones my children are wearing and the children of friends in France and in the UK. Do the elders talk to the children about the war? My grandfathers didn't talk to me about the war. Only my grandmother once, after I prompted her, and I soon realised the dates didn't add up. Her war was a blend between WWII and the Civil War. I pointed this out, she didn't seem to bother.

There are no stray dogs and no stray people in Belgrade. There are buildings peeling off, bricks exposed, museums with foul-smelling toilets, but there are no stray dogs and no stray people.

People in shops, cafes, restaurants don't seem to care much if you're a tourist. A refreshing change compared to the wild tourist funfair my country has become. When I tell people I don't speak Serbian, some smile benignly, with curiosity, a recognisable smile from my childhood years, when foreigners in our neighbourhoods were a scarcity. The younger ones reply in good English. And when they speak Serbian and I pay attention, I can hear a lot of English words. They too have bought their clothes at H&M and Zara. The waiters take my order, then go and chat to their friends; it's convivial, it's warm, it's very close to home.

Saying that you come from Greece doesn't earn you brownie points here. People don't look at you like you're a direct descendant of Plato or talk to you about their favourite classics. They remember their holiday, name an island or a place in northern Greece, usually with a sigh. They go there every year, have been many times, would like to go back. Such a beautiful country.

One of the books I've brought with me is Fleming's on Ali Pasha, where he traces the evolution of orientalism and the trajectory that lifted Greece out of the Orient and threw it into Europe's lap. Is Greece part of the Balkans or isn't it? I've been hearing this question all my life. Can I answer it better now that I finally made it to a bona fide Balkan country?

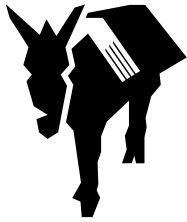
The little cultural production in Serb Croatian language I have managed to get my hands on, my eyes in, is mediated. The plays in French, the novels in Greek or English. If it weren't for orientalism, I wouldn't have been able to read in these foreign languages, travel as widely, live in different countries, be treated as Plato's niece. I met a translator in Krokodil; she told me she can't translate a Greek text into Serbian if it comes to her through English. There is something common in our respective cultures that doesn't translate into Western languages. Once the contact is direct, she said, the structures are ready. I believed her, or rather, trusted her. I'm an Ottoman subject too.

Apparently, there is also a Serbian version of the mythological song with the bridge demanding a human sacrifice (though I think they said in the Serbian version it's not a bridge).

Witnessed a minor car accident on the street. A white, shiny, clean but now very new car scratched ever so slightly the rear of a black, shiny newish passenger car. The light was red, everyone got out. I was expecting a fight but the older guy in the white car, once he saw the damage was negligible, took out his wallet and gave the two younger guys riding in the black car some money. They took it and went back into their respective cars, all jovial. It's better not to have dealings with the insurance companies, the banks, the tax authorities, the police, the state in all its forms and shapes, if you can help it. They will complicate things and make you pay more. I know all this. I'm the niece of Plato and, did I mention it, an Ottoman subject.

Last day in Belgrade. Booked a cab over the phone, after two fake cabbies tried to rip me off when I arrived, right in front of the taxi booth at the airport. I am an Ottoman subject too, so, luckily, I saw through it, yet was quite shocked by the breeziness of it. Last night in Belgrade and I will celebrate like I always do when I'm leaving a place I called home for more than a couple of days: by emptying the fridge. Went down to the supermarket to grab something I needed for my meal of leftovers, and when I came back, I accidentally climbed one flight of stairs too many. As I was about to put my temporary key in my temporary door, I realised this wasn't my temporary door. For a few seconds, all the possibilities went through my head, including the one that during my five minutes of absence somebody had come into the building, changed the lock, fitted a new door, stolen my things including my computer, my passport and the phone I hadn't taken with me, and that I was therefore trapped in this country where I don't speak the language, away from my family, my work, my permanent door. Then I climbed down the stairs, calmly, and found my temporary door. One of the things that has shocked me the most since I became a parent is how willing

children are to believe any kind of horror. One day, we were driving on the highway, and they were typically and very annoyingly screaming in the back seat, so we pulled over to tell them that this trip would not continue until they calmed down. As the car came to a stop, my daughter asked me if we were going to leave her there. Too young for Hansel and Gretel to have reached her from any other source (we hadn't read it to her), she was writing the fear of abandonment, her own carsick version of it. Welcoming the unthinkable as one possibility among others. Circling back to the war, so present in my mind due to my projections about this country and the massacre in Gaza, in retrospect I am finding it hard to blame my daughter, or me, or anyone, for doing exactly that. If atrocities do happen, that's because they are not unthinkable, that's because we are hardwired not to trust, not even our parents, let alone the state and the laws of warfare. This mosaic of a city, razed to the ground and reconstructed over and over again, stands as a perfect testament to that.



POETRY



Ivan Antić

(*1981) is a Serbian short story writer, poet, translator and editor who has lived in Ljubljana since 2012. His publications include short stories *Tonus* (2009) and *Membranes, membranes* (2016), a novella *O tempora, o mores!* (2023) and a poetry collection *Kaisernühlen Glitch* (2025). His stories and poems have been translated into English, German, Greek, Polish, Romanian, Macedonian, Slovenian and Albanian, and included in numerous anthologies. *Membranes, membranes* was among the ten best fiction books chosen by the literary critics of the daily magazine *Politika* for the year 2016. He won the Miloš N. Đurić prize for his translation of Dane Zajc's poetry collection *Down down* and edited an anthology of young Serbian poets published in Greek by Vaxxikon in 2021. His residency was in Prague and led to the publication of a selection of Serbian poetry he edited in the Czech magazine *Plav*.



Photo: Brina Škvor Jernejčič

His right hand as he walked

If the poet's car breaks down
he needs to fix it.
Listening to Sons of Kemet, even a Balkan rasta
raises his hands like people at a turbo folk party.
The sweetest way for blisters to develop is while idling.
What it all reminds him of: mind-numbing anxieties
and ferns, burdens and moss, gall
and deer, perhaps even the exhaustion of the Cenozoic type.
Like when you had to halt the erosion
and I was afraid, my dead friend,
that I would lose you forever.
I'll be a maple, you said, but only for a little while, don't worry.
However, it's Monday and no matter what,
I'm looking forward to Bach.
We're dancing to the gigue,
a branching visceral selection has taken place.
You won't be tricked either,
it's overflowing, there's always something for you and for her and for him.
But yesterday I saw a miniature father.
He sought confirmation from his children
at every step (*bravo, bravissimo*).
As he walked he visibly waved

Plants

We live in an imaginary house with a huge lawn,
we grow while we are not there.
Why didn't you say you hang out
on Tuesdays and every other Wednesday?
We don't have such habits. I go out
to examine the compactness of the clouds
and on the way to the fence I notice a silo
with three vertical elements
resembling an excessively modern church. In reality,
I contact some badger
and meet him and his children,
and (if the opportunity is right) my own children:
everything is in motion, the chimera of animal
parenting; you never call, there is no way
to see you, you stick to your working hours,
and everything is cut off from us,
experiences with others,
contents, curiosity,
even the memory of my grandfather's shoe cream.
You have no choice but to plant

You are leaving

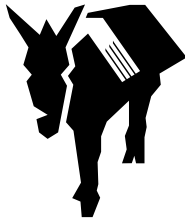
There is neither a poetess nor dog
that would urinate on the serenity of this
Sunday morning.
Nevertheless, the alley of trees bends, a tree
falls out of the row and reluctantly
rises.
And you are still slack,
your children are slack too, you emotional
acrobat,
you who passively receive messages. And recordings.
Your phone hasn't been charging
all day, as a warning,
and now silent swarms
are bursting from mobile data
and the system, slightly numb,
irrevocably awake,
comes too close to you and gasps:
some people see a butterfly in a Rorschach stain,
others a revolution.
You clean yourself, put on a cap and

I've become an ermine

I'm also reluctant to expose
my soul, an assortment of pathological
structures, to the given part of the city,
to the clientele of unhygiene,
to the bristling cafe planters
and black ostrich eggs on the ceiling.
But all this unites us.
Sonja always has rehearsals in the morning (she spits out
her guts), I don't understand that, and you
drink and fight (dance and rage).
I was her in that book,
in that skin, many times,
don't talk about the awkward gene
that will someday...
Because even objects drink all day long,
and sooner or later
they acquire proportions (and cameras),
and from vanity they become symbols.
There may be a few lucky ones, I won't say.
Like when you mischievously order the wrong tea
in front of someone you respect.
In short, I didn't know how to appreciate it
while I was unsurveilled
and reddish-brown. It sounded
ridiculous and exaggerated
to say: Mom,

In the mirror

I said I would like to
outplay this small town, but you
ask me three times if I really
want to (the ambience
doesn't whisper to you
like it does to me, probably) and then desire
creeps back into its lair,
frightened by the rulers,
enriched by the complex of amorphousness.
You're trying to put a chain (just
made up) on cogs (nothing
older) to make anything
make sense to you. And springs
are the moment's worst enemies,
they snap ribs into viaducts,
so enthusiasm evaporates in an instant.
Give as much as you can,
anything more
will turn you into a beast
unrecognisable



Jacobo Bergareche

(*1976) is a Spanish writer living in Madrid. Born in London, he studied Fine Arts in Madrid (Universidad Complutense) and Writing, Literature and Publishing at Emerson College, Boston. He has produced, written and created several fiction shows and docuseries for the main Spanish networks, and he is a regular contributor of columns and stories for Spanish newspapers and magazines. His debut was a collection of poetry, *Playas* (Beaches, 2004), and his prose publications include the autobiographical *Estaciones de regreso* (Stations of return, 2019), and novels *Los días perfectos* (Perfect days, 2021) about the love life of William Faulkner, which won the European Union Prize for Literature, and *Las despedidas* (Farewells, 2023). He has also published a children's book series *Aventuras en Bodytown* (Adventures in Bodytown) and an essay *Amistad* (Friendship, 2025) with neuroscientist Mariano Sigman. His Ulysses' Shelter residency was on the island of Mljet.



Photo: Coco Davez

Nine years today

to Rita Figueroa

He collapsed a month ago,
inexorably,
like when the lightning strikes a tree.
Incomprehensibly,
like when the lightning strikes this tree
and not the one beside it.

He was the younger brother of a friend
who woke up today
under that enormous thing that won't go away,
that thing (how can I name it?)
under which I woke up
nine years ago
on this same day.

It's from this distant station,
my friend, that I try to send you
logbooks, saddlebags, roadmaps,
anything that might be useful
now that you are starting your journey
and you can hardly get up on your feet.

They'll tell you it's a wound
that time will heal,
and I won't deny it's a wound
but if you were fortunate enough
to love your brother

with all the love you had
then it's the wound
of an amputee.

And like those who had lost a limb
you will try to get up
leaning on what you had lost
and you will often fall back on the ground.

But, oh my friend,
one ends up getting a prosthetic leg,
and learns how to walk again,
and if you try hard enough
one day you'll even dance.

But in the darkness of your bedroom,
when you lie naked at night
you'll feel incomplete again,
it's then when you must remember
that if you lost part of yourself,
it is because you had learnt to give
part of yourself away,
for believe me, my friend,
one by one,
everyone will lose their brothers,
but no one loses more,
than those who did not love them
more than they loved their legs
more than they loved their hands.

A winter's night

While you slept next to me
I lay looking at you and considering
how there are those who would have you think
we've only got one life,
the one you're living as you read this line.
And there are those who will tell you
there's an afterlife too
that starts after the one
I'm living as I write this line.
But whatever it is,
there's a certain agreement between both camps
about the fact that there's only one life at a time.

And yes, of course there are many others:
Those who believe we're someone else's dream
Those who wonder if they exist,
And so on.

But as I said,
most would agree about the fact
that right now,
this life you are living
is the only one you have,
and it's a stream that flows
over the corpses

of all the other lives you could've had,
a stream
full of driftwood
that flows too fast
to mirror anything
or let the light shine through.

And it's usually on nights like this,
on beds I may never lie on again,
when the stream becomes so still and clean
that I can see someone sinking helplessly,
beneath a surface that mirrors your face.

And I just stand there watching a body
going down to the riverbed,
as I wait for the alarm to ring,
for the stream to flow again,
for the surface to ripple
and veil the depths.

The Universe as seen through my dog's eyes

But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars.

– R. W. Emerson

I don't know anymore how many thousand years
I've been staring at them,
but I remember the first time I saw them,
we had not yet invented the hours,
the weeks,
we hadn't named the days
nor did we know then that time
turns around itself
and starts again without us
stops breathing with our lungs
makes us into stones,
air
heat
shrapnel
for the next great explosion.

I don't know how many thousand years I've been staring at them
I have forgotten their names
the ones with which we baptised them
when we decided that anything
could be locked inside a word
so as to inhabit our bodies.

I sit on the patio
I caress my dog,
we're both tired of chasing through the woods
another sun that runs away from us,
and I see his ears are restless
pointing upwards,
catching a nocturnal breeze
that whistles through the holes of the old oaks,
strips the orange blossoms,
and pushes through the darkness
the croaking of the frogs
that live in all the paddles on the road.

The entire wood
is sketched invisibly
in that breeze my dog observes with his ears.

I, however, see nothing,
only my memory brings back
the remembrance of what the sun
will shine on when I wake up.

The little light that the sky still has
is sucked by the stars.
I raise my eyes again towards them
as I did thousands of years ago,
I ask myself if my dog sees them too,
and then I enter his mind,
to look at the stars through his eyes,
just then the universe sheds off the words,
the ideas,
the dimensions,
the magnitudes,
in which we have compressed it
so it could fit in our minds.

The mystery becomes infinite,
and I can't see the stars anymore.

The hilltop

Sunlight hanging
on spider silk threads
stitching blade to blade
to blade
to the entire grass
on this hilltop
where my daughter
my dog
and I
contemplate the sinking
of one more day.

And it's really only me
that pays attention to the sun,
trying to spot in its descent
a new colour for the last bird to fly against.

Neither my daughter,
– who knows but twenty words
and the sounds of the cow
the cock
the cat
and the lion –
nor my dog,
have this annoying need for beauty.

They spend the last minutes of light
with their backs to the sun,
my daughter is happy throwing a stick
and my dog is happy picking it up.

Some thoughts before moving back

I'm gone,
but my ghost stays in this suit of absence
performing circular lives I dared to imagine.
My ghost (that ethereal snakeskin)
will rehearse the farces of my unlived lives over and over again,
until they meet the uncertain limits of perfection.

The quasi-beautiful girl who ate homemade sandwiches
in the park, at two
would've just needed to spread a hundred more days
inside her two o'clock sandwich.

Then I'd see the invisible splinters of time
burying the diminishing prefix of her quasi-beauty.
Only in the methodical repetition of sameness will she become beautiful:
the park,
the homemade sandwich,
at two
(always at two)
and her eyes,
blank maps in which I had planned to find a path
out of time, out of self...

Had I been caught in the methodical repetition of sameness
I would compel myself to react,
and suddenly stop in front of her,
and say:

I finally love you.

But now I'm gone,
unmourned,
leaving an empty seat in the 43 bus that takes me to the park,
never to solve my secret five-minute love affairs
with passengers that
sometimes,
silently
sat in front of me and made me wish that the bus would fly to a desert island
where we could have lived forever.

I'm gone
never to tell the girl in the park
that I won't step off the bus anymore as she eats her sandwich.

Translated from Spanish by the author



Efstathia Paliotzika

(pen name: tria epsilon) was born in Thessaloniki in 1994. She holds degrees in literature and is a PhD candidate at the School of Drama (AUTH), while working as educator and literary editor. She has published two poetry collections *Γνωρίζω αυτές που πλέκουν στη μέση της θάλασσας* (I know those women who knit in the middle of the sea, Thraca, 2022) and *Σίνγκερ* (Singer, Thraca, 2025). Her first poetry collection was shortlisted for the *Anagnostis Magazine* debut poetry collection award and for the State Prize for Emerging Writer, and received the Hellenic Authors' Society Giannis Varveris Award for debut poetry collection. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Ljubljana.



Photo: author's archive

when it gets dark in the harbour I know
how exactly the colour pops up on the wave
and if you look straight ahead you can always find half the moon at night

if

you took a straw out of your pocket and sucked the sea, it would take me about
ten minutes to cross over

if

I didn't have teeth and soda bottles in my lap

if

we weren't swimming in the same waters as dozens of humanitarian missions
from west to east and east to west is
a breath of fresh air

you would have known that if you had been to Mytilene

Lesbos

that year with the 21 moons, no one spoke

then a whole generation went by when no one spoke, and as if
that wasn't enough, no one ever did anything until everyone
forgot the meaning of the act

save for a few exceptions who banged their heads
on the wall
testing endurance limits

reply

On the road from homeland, no
No, I forgive no one who talks to me on the road

And when I return from work I always cry

For my girlfriends, the motorised fish,
who like flowers caress me from across the river
And no
No, I don't have a homeland
I've got some medium-sized flags
that wrap around the elementary school
Bodies chained to bars

Oreokastro, Mytilene, London Suburbs

In front of national pride I'm twisting
I'm getting so small I fit on the map
The hand of God is me
I'm eroding identities
I'm tearing down borders
My will is done

Athens, Ghent, London suburbs

To and from my friends
On my way to them I'm growing
Even if I know they'll never forgive me

Transition I

well done, he says
you managed to swim across the sea
where all the terrible dead bodies live
where passion flows

he said, it's reborn so it makes sense
and I said, it blooms
that's why it doesn't die sufficiently

the pollen waters the passage
we cross to the other side
to the vast bank of death
where you kiss me and I don't care if I go

when I arrive
he says well done

Transition II

forty-five people
and sixty immigrants
cigarettes for fingers
suitcases for faces
waiting at the corner of Ioulionou and Mavromateon street
to Thessaloniki a bridge
I'm being built inside

Translated from Greek by the author



Aljaž Primožič

(*2001) is a Slovenian poet and playwright. His poetry has been translated into French, Czech, German, Russian and Serbian. His debut, *Čisto potiho* (So silently), was published to critical acclaim in 2022. In 2020, his dramatic debut, *Kamenčki* (Pebbles), made its appearance in the anthology *Tapetka!* and a year earlier he adapted the poetry collection *Trpljenje mlade Hane* (The Sorrows of Young Hana) by Katja Gorečan for a stage production, and worked on several projects with the Slovenian National Drama Theatre in Ljubljana. From 2018 to 2024, he worked as the assistant artistic director of the Izrekanja literary festival in Celje. In previous years, he also performed at the festival with theatre-poetry performances of his own work, as well as the work of other poets. His Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Prague.



Photo: LR Photography

my apartment

god
lives
in my apartment
and he's deaf and mute

when you knock on the door
he doesn't hear
when you touch my lips so silently
he doesn't hear
he doesn't hear the rhythm of the creaking bed
the burble of the morning coffee
he doesn't even hear
the buttons on the shirt
that laugh at us in shame
before we try to say goodbye

and when you leave
he leans towards me and
in sign language
almost silently
tells me that he saw everything
and that he didn't know
how to prevent it

i'll record your voice

and play it
when you're gone
so that i'll still know
how it feels to stand in the wind
and let it
once in a while
move you a bit closer
to the truth
to sit in the dark in the middle of the woods
to guess what's hiding
underneath the overgrown trees
to watch the hedgehogs and the deer
looking for love
the same way
that we are
and wondering
if the leaves feel pain
as they dry out
and fall off the trees
as they surrender
to the waiting for winter to come
and your voice
still repeating
the same words
out of the old Walkman

the burial of the pair at sungir*

they lie
facing upwards
they're painted with ochre
one of them
slightly smaller
resting their heads
on each other's shoulder

they haven't talked in a long time
dirt has filled their mouths
and the winters have cooled them down

i read somewhere
that humans start to decompose
four minutes after they die
the skin withers first
the hair and nails fall out
after three days the body
slowly spreads out
foam starts to spill
from the mouth and the nose

a few decades later
the bones fracture
after a hundred years
they look more like sand
than me

the last to stay are the teeth
a reminder that we once talked to each other

** The human skeletons
found in Sungir, Russia,
are one of the oldest
Homo sapiens remains
found and represent
the oldest complete
human burial in Europe.*

r504 kolyma highway*

they didn't bury me
they covered me with asphalt
and ran a siberian highway
over me

it was a hard day
i counted the cars
up to six hundred and twelve
then i thought about
how i would have
named my child
had i ever had a child
petya kostya or blaž
had i ever had a child

i can even hear the cars at night
i've become used to falling asleep
with the hum of machines
that's when women from Yakutsk
usually drive
caressing worn-out fur coats
on the passenger seat
trying to stay awake
until their exit
sometimes one of them cries
instead of me

** R504 Kolyma Highway is a more than two thousand kilometres-long highway built by Russian political prisoners during the time of gulags. The road is colloquially known as »the Road of Bones«, in reference to the hundreds of thousands of forced labourers who were interred in the pavement after dying during its construction.*

Translated from Slovenian by the author



Nežka Struc

is an anthropologist and poet. She has published three poetry collections, *Nihanja* (Wavers, 2017), *Do severnega sija* (To the northern lights, 2021) and *Le kaj bo rekel Ivan? Nismo utrujeni* (What would Ivan say? We are not tired, 2023). In 2017, she co-translated the anthropological classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* by Bronisław Malinowski. Her poems and short stories have been translated into Italian, Croatian, English, Serbian, German and Greek. In her role as a producer of literary events, programs and festivals, she was working at the UNESCO City of Literature in Ljubljana and Pranger Festival. Recently, she started to work as assistant researcher at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Larissa.



Photo: Ivan Dobnik

let's solve the report

I am in the corner of your anger
my blood on your knives
I have to kill you
you over:
abuse
hurt
break
you break glasses and smoke

I bargain for my salary
1300?
1200?
500?
next month? in two months? in half a year?
cold, you sit on my shoulders

bad worker
naughty worker
pretty worker
batboy
sadboy fuckboy badboyworker
good worker

burning fryer, trembling grinder, radio shits (my ass), mouldy cakes, mouldy food, spoiled soup, workers steal, I have to return money for lunch and transportation, boss falls in love (not with me), boss gets divorced (not with me), I translate and break my back and don't know how to use prepositions, no one needs me when everyone comes back from their holidays, parole parole, I launder bones and also money a bit and from next month on the salary will be lower!

stab me in the back, lovingly, smiiiiile, we are all friends

you didn't cut the cabbage and where is that radio??
splash splash coworker pushes head under water (mine, not his).

father said I have to write, that poetry is not my strong suit, that I really have to start writing. so I wrote that I worked for 5.5 euros per hour last month. my nail polish is going mad.

I have two floors and gloves, and garbage bags, to collect, wipe and clean the plastic carpet. plastic in my heart, plastic carpet, carpeeeeet 4evah. the best sunsets are from where I clean. and repetition in 3 stages leads to a mystery: shoe on the roof, a corpse wrapped in the carpet, finger in the snack bar. murder not out of jealousy, but because of an unemptied bin and stolen chocolates.

roses smoked opium and the vacuum cleaner furiously scrubbed the carpet. I'm not babbling. I'm learning.

who?
where are we going?
where is what
where w
WHERE IS WHO GOING
WHO IS WHERE

we are not useful to god. I miscarried the angels of traffic fines. I wish ill upon you, it smells so bad in our kitchen, did someone die here a week ago, the kingdom of flies, and their queen is an apricot pancake?

but most of all, I love pasgras at the workplace.

First part of the Ministry: I told you so

dealing with carelessness
twice I got tangled in the wheel
twice to the same song
you don't see the bruises
they are not yours because I have to fall alone and where I fall you are not there is only a big
30l pot
stainless steel doesn't rust but it can break bones

I vomit at the words freedom love solitude parallel ship phone dogs coffee silk wings
journey do you get it, you see
I vomit if someone hugs me I throw bitterness of a damaged soul with leftovers of Pfizer
because love is not care and it is not safety coexistence understanding
(these are some Christian tricks right?)
it is just tearing trampling ignoring escape and butterflies in the ass
it is an idea love is an idea

just don't touch me
so that you don't...
twice for sure

Two ladies and a security guard

lady, you are dressed in a black mushroom trumpet
can a mushroom be a person?
the security guard is very friendly – which means the situation is really bad

I told you: you're not right
I'm not a right person
of course not
palms are growing from my ears
they will plant them in Koper
above the rubble where I paid an 80 euro fine
and they didn't even know
how much of me has withered away
so it could die completely
I told you: that continents don't exist
they are part of an elevated ocean floor
a systemic error of the curriculum
even a dead bloated whale is more of a continent than land
it remains as material and food
our bodies predict the future
not our heads

I told you: that you won't be able to give blowjobs anymore once you paint your nails red
I really didn't know how I could imagine that
sure, sure, and the tea kitchen is on the right
we don't have lunch all at once
but he drinks coffee with half a teaspoon of crushed sweetener and half a decilitre of skim
milk
oh, that's why he was dusty under his nose
no, that's drugs

I told you: this form requires its sacrific

it must be laid in the genes
you have to fill it out intuitively
using the right sequence of words
magic?
but, Ms Mushroom, the universe doesn't send me information directly into my brain
shall we call Ms Biserka, the commissioner
Ms Mushroom, do we have a problem?
Ms Biserka, the commissioner, the poet doesn't believe in the cosmic intuition of this form
but it's all the same and clear
as clear as day if we disregard the double-sided boxes
how lovely
Ms Mushroom, shall we nod at each other
the security guard compassionately snorts

Translated from Slovenian by the author and Pino Pograjc



Kaja Teržan

(*1986) grew up in Slovenia and Sweden. She initially studied art history and sociology at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana and then redirected her focus to contemporary dance. She made her poetry debut in 2015 with her first book of poems, *Delta*, followed by the *Krog* (The circle, 2018), which won her the prestigious national Jenko Award. Her third collection was *Nekoč bom imela čas* (I'll have time someday, 2021). Her first poetry collection for children, *Narisati ptico* (To draw a bird), was published in 2024, and her first novel, *Obračun* (Showdown), in 2025. Her poems were translated to English, German, Spanish, Slovak, Macedonian, Greek, Albanian and Bosnian languages. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Valletta.



Photo: Naško Križnar

I must have died

What a nice cellar you've prepared for me.
Light, covered in velvet.

In the middle, there is a four-legged bathtub,
like Earth among the directions of the sky.

Wallpapers are freely hanging,

without the support of walls. Behind them, there are abysses;

I am in no hurry, I reach the surface...

Silhouettes of black crows at the top of a long birch tree.
Behind them, a dirty pink evening sky.
One by one they fly off and pull me along with them.

To Armenia – the duduk is playing.
Sadness and joy like a double helix.

The funeral has been a relief for many.

The end of worries. It's getting dark. The birch tree has become blurred.
A spruce is pointing its fingers to the sky and to the north.
I hear a violin. I see women.

Behind them, grey, black threads. Behind them, a big
dark castle; it's midway up the hill, that's why it's sliding
down. There is nothing at the top of the hill,

just the free-hanging wallpaper edges. I return
into the bathtub. I'm floating among the juices of trees,
with the mouth closed so I don't swallow the blood.

Voices are heard from the surface. I feel them
like spruce resin. They sting a bit towards the end
of the nasal cavity, towards the forehead, where there is a swarm.

Faithfulness

There must be someone who's lost and wandering.
I'm waiting for him with a stick full of love that I've kept for myself.

In an age when people are honest only in therapy sessions, it's important to remember
your childhood. Your invisible friends, demons and elephants.

There are days when you don't get anywhere with anyone – except with the elephant.

I base my practice on the elephant, as instructed by pedagogical manuals,
and conduct activities that fit him like his skin – rough, tough and wrinkled in the right places.

Soon, he'll take the lead and turn me into him.
We'll be like an old married couple – easy-going and dressed the same.

We'll plan vacations together under a white and purple magnolia.
And we'll never go skiing, and we'll never take out a loan.

Nobody will be in our care, except the two of us.
And when one of us dies, the other won't get himself another elephant.

A view above the lake

Each morning is this immobile beginning
with silence wrapped in cries
for breath, food, water.
He's been trying since morning, the woodpecker...
or there may be several – I don't know
how many blows are necessary
for a comfortable hole, a flat of one's own.

You have no idea how badly I wish
to submerge into this lake,
and finish, for a moment,
my surface existence.
Where I share everything
precisely apportioned.

This is mine, this yours;
my bed and wardrobe,
my shoe compartment and
a massive chest for colder days;
everything mine has been turned over.

Almost as if I don't exist.
I'm a view;
I've got an out-of-body experience of the lake.

We are probably noticed when we don't want to be.
Liquefaction as the call of free will.
Who's drowning?
Those who want to help see the world
as unresolved.
Aren't troubles only beings who haven't arrived yet:
a soul that hasn't covered itself in the suitable yet.

Deer

On this felled tree,
to which you are tying your next
fourteen days or more,
as many as you're about to persist
in the wilderness,
I had a habit of
laying my body.
Nearby there is a bush
which is in late August
full of
purple-blue fruits.
A cone –
just before it falls down –
sways.
There is a sound
of a door opening,
an old, heavy door.
Once a girl used to come here.
Offering fruit to me...
strange, too sweet, luminous.
You've brought spaces and time
that have made the swaying quicker.

Solo

Am I a deceiver (of whom), a traitor (to what)
or am I just dumbly blinded by a constellation watching
over me? My words have become meta-factographic;
I have sucked the juices out of life and exported them into Space.
This isn't allowed. And there's nothing special about
the given task, but I have a feeling that it requires my full presence.
How shall we do this, I ask my continuity.
As everything up to now, my learnt inner structure concurs, we will thoroughly
examine the landscape and spots that border on the Opening.
And then should happen – What?
I'm not a Robin Hood to be able to tell riches from poverty.
There is quite a lot of useless gold in my chest.
(Or do I mean unused?)
These thoughts are interrupted by a friend who asks me where he should
sit, with a great deal of confusion. (Three chairs are a true vastness.)
But it's not about that. He's been waiting to be greeted, hugged.
While I've been in the midst of Dissolution...

The water circle

I was fifteen when I (once again)
tirelessly cried in public (on a train).
A gentleman asked me if a
boyfriend had left me, or what...
'Lack of self-realisation! Lack of self-realisation!'
I replied.
Not more than a year passed
when I watched Tarkovsky's
Sacrifice at some boy's
place and cried again...
He asked me if I wasn't well.
I said I was wonderful!
Ten years later I gave birth to a child;
he cries a lot, while I dumbly ask:
'What is it?'

Translated from Slovenian by Barbara Jurša



Laura Torres Bauzà

(Mallorca, *1990) holds a PhD in Humanities and degrees in literature and art. In recent years, she has been developing her artistic practice combining writing and visual production. Her work focuses on how our symbolic and narrative legacies converge, mixing a wide range of media (photography, video, installation, performance) with writing. Her exhibitions include *Bugaderes* (Washerwomen, Palma, 2024), *Sobre la revolució* (On revolution, Barcelona, 2019), *Un amor Salvaje que arruina nuestra paz* (A wild love that ruins our peace, Madrid, 2019), *Techno Blood* (Barcelona, 2017) and *Dolor de ser i no ser tu: desig* (Pain of being and not being you: desire, Barcelona, 2016). Her award-winning poetry collections are *L'Inhabitable* (The uninhabitable, 2016) and *Els temps últims* (The last times, 2021). Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was on the island of Mljet.



Photo: Maria del Mar Torres Bauzá

Maybe the day after tomorrow
the moon will plunge

and it will be much tinier
than we could ever have
presumed.

Surviving the narrative
turns the message obsolete.

It will be then necessary to keep up us silent,

and make the words

in the language of gesture.

Even falling is
holding on
to the law of gravity.

Like the God
who in the Bible
laughs just three times,

no more,
we rummage the core

under the fluorescent glow
of the jellyfish.

Doing all we do
for the sweet pleasure of destroying it,
or to savour the metallic

aftertaste

of not being fast enough
to change our mind.

We have overtheorised the End to the point of exhausting it,

with the solemn

gravity
of ritual.

It is the silence
that gestates
the active diction
of the inert.

The mothers
who breast-feed the throats
that tear through mourning.

Knowing,
—since the world is world—
that children
always plead
for tangible answers.

To theorise about skin
is to trust
that God's face can be carved
into wood.

To accept oblivion is to tolerate
nourishing the beast

learning

from care
the scale of times.

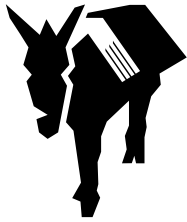
And as the snake biting its tail,
we devise space to digest

void.

Until swallowing like a stained-glass window,
the brightness,

the skull.

Translated from Catalan by the author



PROSE



Ryan Falzon

(*1988) is a visual artist, writer and art educator. His work is often abrasive and playful, and he is known for constructing narratives by arranging disparate images and texts in a collage-like fashion. Since 2011, Falzon has published several short pieces in various publications. His first novel, *SAJF*, was published in 2022. Several reviews have referred to *SAJF* as the voice of the Maltese millennial generation and it was shortlisted for the National Book Prize 2023. He was awarded the National Prize for the Best Emergent Author in 2024. His Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Ljubljana.



Photo: Therese Debono

C.

Me and C. shouldn't have met. Everything started as a half-joke test – those online dodgy ones with generic names such as *Find Your Love Today* or *Here is the Love of Your Life*. These are trivial tests, banal, the kind that appear when visiting dubious sites or pop up as adverts, with an interface reminiscent of Windows 95. Most of them give you the vibe that your laptop will soon be infected with all types of spyware. One does such tests to pass the time and follows up with a meeting just to kill time as well. When, half-arsed, we indicated that both were seeking contact with others, the result for me and C. was weak and discouraging. I have no clue how these tests work. I believe that, much like how horoscope matches are determined by planets and stars, these tests operate based on complex AI calculations.

While I'm writing this short text, I researched how to determine the probability of success in a relationship according to the zodiac sign under which we were born. OpenAI tells you that the horoscope analyses symbols, zodiac elements, and astrological data calculations gathered from the birth chart, guided by astrology, mathematics and intuition.

I refer to her as C. because that name appears in her profile. She told me that C. is enough, and the only true answer she gave during the test concerned casual sex. The suggestion from the test's side was for us to go to a quiet place or meet as part of an audience. We were shown an image of a couple gazing into each other's eyes amidst the quiet of a library. We were shown an image of a couple wrapped in a team scarf, celebrating some win. Cockily, C. tells me that we will be going for a short walk in a coastal village and take it from there.

OpenAI informs me that some of the coastal villages in Malta are San Ġiljan, Tas-Sliema, il-Mellieħa, Marsascale, Birżebbuġa, Buġibba, and Marsaxlokk. I was considering setting this story in either Buġibba or Birżebbuġa. Both are neglected and left to their own devices, like a scruffy student at the back of the class – clever, handsome, charismatic, aware of the potential, but couldn't care less.

Birżebbuġa is empty and neglected but still holds on to a façade of a haughty mature lady, past her prime, forgotten but still up for it. The shop signs are half-lit. The colourful paint is fading from the beautiful façades of the holiday homes facing the Freeport. The police station is closed. The restaurants are closed. The chairs and tables are padlocked to lamp posts. C. tells me that she has long been dreaming of staying in the hotel on the shore, the one protruding into the bay, but no one ever wanted to join her because AI never suggests romantic meetings in decadent, dilapidated, shabby places that are about to close for good. C. yearns to be stuck up there during a storm, rent a room on the top floor and spend the night watching the waves crashing, raging, attempting to see the sea rise

to her room and soaking the pair of shoes left on the balcony on purpose. I have never entered any of the hotel rooms until now, but I have visited the bar. There are mannequins dressed as Knights of Malta with helmets on their heads and a mismatch of armchairs. Plastic plants covered in dust. There is an enormous billiard table under white neon light. There is always a donkey-sized dog running around. On summer evenings, they organise line dancing on the parapet and play country music. They play *boċċi* amidst the scent of pizza coming out of the open-air oven.

OpenAI tells you that many of Malta's rustic bars feature local motifs, such as the Maltese cross. It's worth mentioning that the Maltese cross is not exclusively of Malta, but rather of the Knights of the Order of St John, a congregation of European noblemen who ruled the island as they pleased for almost three hundred years. It also tells you that there are cocktails and a stylish atmosphere. In other words, agents of gentrification, especially in the capital city, Valletta.

While OpenAI is accurate in most aspects, it overlooks certain intrinsic elements, such as the comical imitation rubble walls stuck with concrete, or the collection of funeral cards strewn among whisky and rum bottles. These images, reminiscent of bygone eras yet to be fully eradicated, once served as sources of amusement and, until recently, symbols of shame and backwardness. Today, even progressive individuals are romanticising them, fearing global homogenisation in tiny countries like Malta, where the echo chamber effect resonates loudly. Here, it's easy to impress a post-colonial population still longing to be like those from abroad because everything imported is better and always superior to the homegrown product grown on a dry island.

C. insists on going to the shabby hotel, fully aware that the glasses are never washed properly, and the bar staff give you the wrong change on purpose. I ask her if she wants to go alone or in company, but she doesn't answer. She just tells me that as she enters the rented room, she will lose internet connection, turn off her phone, and let the sea speak to her – allow the waves to embrace her and make her feel fragile, small, submissive, detaching her from the world. Half-joking, I tell her to say that, according to an elderly man who lived in a cave on the cliffs brewing mystical herbs, soon Malta will disappear forever. In the future, submerged, once here was an island inhabited by bigilla-wielding pirates, until finally, they met their fate and the god they simultaneously worshipped and cursed eradicated them. In a serious tone, C. tells me, joking apart, on an island where we inhale salt with every breath and our bones are weakened by arthritis, the threat of climate change feels much more real than in continental Europe.

OpenAI states that the probability of Malta disappearing altogether is minimal, but coastal villages might suffer damages, and Malta must do its part to mitigate the impact of climate change on the world. However, what difference can an overpopulated island that is often overlooked on the maps make?

There are peanuts in a small bowl on the table. C. asks if they serve snails at the shabby hotel. She tells me she wants to feast on snails. Coincidentally, yesterday my dad told me that all the snails died because it didn't rain in

September, nor in October, nor in November. The snails hibernated for a much longer period as they didn't realise that winter had started and died of starvation. Not even the traditional gobble-down-as-much-as-you-can Maltese food places are serving snails as an appetiser with beer nowadays. As soon as the peanut bowl is empty, we realise that we are tired of giving each other the eye, and that's all. Spontaneously, we decide to rent a room and get there in a rush, ready for a shag. C. reminds me that she really gets excited by these temporary accommodations. C. tells me that ephemeral states always contain a flavour of freedom.

Hotel rooms are like the internet. Yours, but not yours. Every room in every hotel feels like a virtual space, where you enter knowing that the one next door, and every other one all the way down the corridor, is identical, but with the first step, with the first click, you accept the cookies and give permission for your data to be processed. You make it yours. You manipulate it. You toss the clothes as you please or organise them on two shelves. You relieve yourself after a long day out. You open the shutters. You view obscene pictures and clips on your phone. You start scrolling and rolling in the virtual, identifying whom you will hit on, perv on, who will send you a picture of his naked body and tell you, this is for you. I am joining you in your room and I will get in your bed, even though I don't know who you are. He will come and invade your space, penetrate, and leave, pressing the X button as the door closes with a bang.

When asked about what type of pornography people tend to watch in the transient state one finds themselves in when in a hotel room, OpenAI, with a gentle tone, informs you that discussing or sharing this type of information is not the purpose of the platform.

When you're in a hotel room, you feel like you're in a place that isn't anonymity, functionality, decor, or their absence. The generic furniture serves everyone, like websites and apps.

Here, OpenAI gives you a final warning when asked about what activities couples in love or sexually compatible individuals indulge in when they are locked in a hotel room.

Here, OpenAI becomes null and useless.

Here, it is time for C. and me to leave the hotel. At the door, C. does not promise that we would meet again, neither in fair nor in harsh weather. C. tells me she might be in a mood to redo some test that comes up by surprise. Most probably, this time she will answer in the most honest manner and follow the test's advice. Perhaps, who knows, this time the test marks us as highly compatible. We will go celebrate with the crowd during some football match, or quote love poems to each other in a deserted library. Anything but cresting in a shabby hotel by the seaside where in the warm summer evenings they do line dancing, and all the plastic plants are still covered in dust.

Translated from Maltese by the author



Megan Angharad Hunter

is an author, screenwriter and children's book editor from Penygroes, North Wales, currently living in Cardiff. She mostly writes for younger people and her debut novel *tu ôl i'r awyr* (behind the sky, 2020) won the Wales Book of the Year award. Her first book for young readers, *Astronot yn yr atig* (Astronaut in the attic, 2023) won the coveted Tir Na n-Og prize for children's books. She also contributed towards the award-winning *Y Pump* (Five, 2022) series. More recently, she co-edited two bilingual anthologies, *Cymry Balch Ifanc / Young Welsh Proud* and *Beyond / Tu Hwnt*, celebrating Welsh LGBTQIA+ pride and Disabled Joy, respectively. Her first short film *Dysgu hedfan* (Learning to fly) was released in 2025 and she has also scripted drama for the national TV broadcaster S4C. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Ljubljana.



Photo: Christopher Bone & Hay Festival 2024

anest

Extract from *behind the sky*

what the fuck?

he looks at me like my hairs turned into snakes or something and jumps at least ten feet into the air, whatever liquid that was in his cup sloshing out and slapping onto the floor. he bends down til hes hidden behind the bed and i cant see him from my windowsill perch, but i can still sort of see his hands through the gap under the bed. he pulls this notebook thing out from the plastic bag he just happens to be carrying and rips a few pages out of it, trying to soak up his spillage with the paper.

im – im so, so sorry, he says in this tiny little voice like a feather trying to float towards me through a storm or something. i jump down from the windowsill and grab a tissue box from my leaning tower of pisa bedside table.

here, i say, throwing the box towards him, but he doesnt catch it. his hands close on nothing as the box crashes at his feet. so i guess you dont play rugby then?

he smiles but doesnt say anything. doesnt even look at me. just bends back down to his puddle.

sorry, he says again after dropping my wet tissues into the bin by the door, i – i didnt know you were here. really sorry, um, ill... ill go now.

no. nonono wait! i say, basically screaming at him like a fucking teacher. (ew stop.) i try again: wait, ok? please? cause like, this is basically the most exciting thing thats happened to me for like, i stop to laugh before saying, for like, i dont know. a while?

he turns round really really slowly.

um. ok? his eyes fly over every atom in the room that isnt my face. i jump back up onto the windowsill.

so whats in that? i say as i point at his notebook which is back inside the plastic bag. its still dripping. i think i can hear it.

um, nothing. just, like, i dont know. drawings? he looks down at the bag. i can see the black cover of his book his notebook his sketchbook whatever behind a crumply faded aldi logo. its literally nothing, he says.

oh, i say, so youre like, talented?

he shakes his head quickly, the skin on his neck and face turning splotchy. oh shit. ive made him uncomfortable now havent i. classic me.

idiot.

um, seriously tho, i say, you choose to draw stuff at like, 3am. in a fucking hospital. only crazy talented people do shit like that!

fuck. *fuck.*

um.

fuuuuuck

um, i say again as i try to remember some syllables that actually have meaning. um, im not trying to, like, um, im not calling you crazy or anything, obviously? you know what i mean right?

what is wrong with meeee

he just nods tho, still looking down at his bag and not at me. but the thing is right, if someones not looking at *you*, it makes it a lot easier for you to look at *them*. stare. stalk. hmm. im not weird or creepy i promise. idk idkkkk just shut *up*

he does look sort of familiar tho, like i probably saw him at that adventure summer camp in mid wales like a billion years ago or something. and even tho hes not looking at me, i can still see his eyes. theyre sort of huge and dark and grey, like how i think the middle of the ocean would look like in the winter. his hairs dark too, almost black and kind of spilling over his forehead like the oil you see on the posts people share on their insta stories sometimes, floating above the water and getting stuck in pelicans feathers. his eyes are definitely the best thing about his face, but seriously tho, how often do you hear people say that someone has a really great nose? or ears or forehead? maybe fucked up people with fucked up fetishes or whatever but no one really cares about fucked up people with fucked up fetishes right? eyes... idk. eyes can like, say stuff. i guess they even say everything sometimes. anything else about a persons face makes me think about the mrs potato head toy alys used to have. i fucking hated that toy. toy, doll, the devil in root vegetable form, whatever the fuck it was. freaked me the fuck out. who the fuck was the lunatic who decided to stick some googly eyes on a potato??

how old are you? i say. thats a normal thing to ask someone you just met, right? right.

um, 16? he says. ngl i thought he was younger. looks like hes probably shorter than me but thats not saying much tbh cause im freakishly tall for a girl. its embarrassing. they forced me to play netball in year 7 and 8 til they eventually

realised that my legs dont really move like legs and are basically more like drunk worms. i remember falling over like billions of times in one hour even though the gym floor was completely flat and smooth, watching the other girls sharing bitchy looks, hiding giggles behind their perfectly proportioned hands, and the bruises holy *shit*. id get tons of bruises on my knees which made me too self conscious to wear shorts for an entire summer. thats probably my only talent tbh: falling over on flat surfaces.

ffs.

um, so how old are you? says the boy after being quiet for a really long time, like he was using one of the ancient school computers to think instead of his brain.

17, i say, pushing the hair from my face. so annoying. id love to have enough confidence to just shave it all off, yknow? so, um, why... did you come to my room? ha.

im hoping that adding the ha makes me sound curious and not like, intimidating or anything.

he shifts his feet from side to side a little. well, um, in here – he waves his free hand at the walls – i dont like, i guess i dont like sketching in the room im sleeping in? yeah. he looks down. again. shakes his head. again. yeah, i – i know its weird and doesnt make any sense but, i dont know why but it just... i guess it just, it just doesnt feel... right? maybe? i dont know.

i nod. yeah, i say, makes sense.

it really doesnt make sense tho. not at all. not to me, anyway. too stupid to get artsy shit like that.

sorry, he says *again*. for disturbing you? and – and the water. ill um, ill leave you alone now. sorry.

no no its ok, you can stay if you want, yknow. you can like, sit on my bed to draw or, yeah. i nod my head towards the bed i havent touched yet. if you want to.

he lifts his head up at me but just a tiny bit. like a millimetre. you sure?

aye, yeah. wtf have i just said aye? to a *stranger*?? ffs whats wrong with me idiotidiotidiot. um, im probably not going to sleep tonight anyway.

he nods again and sits down slowly like he doesnt want to mess up the sheets.

i turn to the window and listen to his scratchy breathing. then i pull my too long legs up onto the windowsill to hug them. the light from the hospital car park and the road outside makes the old scars on the inside of my arm shine just a bit. ugly so ugly fucking ugly you deserve it deserve it deserve it

but i cant can i cause they took *everything*. when i came to a&e and told them that i wanted to swallow all those pills they asked what my name was and how old i was and i said catrin, 18, cause i didnt want them to call mamanddad cause they would make a big deal out of all of this and im not a big deal or anything. ill tell mamanddad that i had to stay with a friend who needed me or something idk. they wont ask much. they never really do.

so after they had me ticking a few boxes they took basically everything that i had on me. my hoodie. my earrings. my shoes. even my phone. but i dont really care about that tbh, especially my phone cause the only thing everyonell be posting and sharing tonight will be a bunch of shit from the festival and seeing all of thatll make me feel even shittier i guess. even tho i know it takes forever for everyone to choose the best picture to post and think of the most original caption (a variation of *before it got messy* and a cute emoji), its still really shit watching everyone else get drunk and high and laid in their facial glitter and cute legs in tiny denim shorts and eisteddfod music festival jumpers and pretty eyes under perfectly blended urban decay eyeshadow.

mm. at least this boy is missing out too i guess.

Deian

I close my eyes, count to five, then open them. But she's still here; I didn't imagine her. She's still here.

Still here!

I lay the sketchbook on my lap without opening it because I can't, I *can't*. If I were to open it now I think that every line, every colour would slip away from their sanctuary between the pages and everything that I've created would be on the outside (my insides on the outside. Me, my skin inside out no no *no*) so I'll wait. I'll wait until my mind's not spinning like it's stuck in a washing machine and my hands have stopped sweating

disgusting disgusting pathetic weak fag sensitive quiet different boring

like they do every time. *Every single time* after talking to a stranger.

Was I too quiet? Of course I was. Of course! Every single time. We're basically the same age so she might tell all of her friends that I'm here and I'm too quiet and weird and no one in any school in North Wales will want to talk to me ever, ever again but maybe

maybe that would be ok because then I wouldn't have to talk to so many strangers? And my hands would stay dry?

I think I remember, I remember in one of his letters Vincent van Gogh says:

the portrait will tell you better than the letter how I am.

so if my drawings weren't so bad I think I would offer this sketchbook to the girl so that the pages could talk on my behalf?

stupid that's so stupid disgusting pathetic weak fag sensitive quiet different boring

I shut my eyes tight, as tight as possible without pushing them way, way back and losing them somewhere in the depths of my skull (I hope that she doesn't look up right now because I must look insane with my face scrunched up like this!) and try one of the breathing exercises again: inhale sharply, exhale slowly. Inhale sharply. Exhale slowly. After a minute (or two. Or ten?), I think I can feel my heartbeat slowing until it feels like waves on a warm day at dusk and

I open the book.

Translated from Welsh by the author



Dora Šustić

(*1991) is a Croatian writer and screenwriter, author of the awarded debut novel *Psi* (Dogs), published in 2022 by the Rijeka City Library and the following year by Fraktura. The novel is translated to Slovenian (Beletrina). Besides fiction, she has published essays, articles and poems in regional and international literary magazines in Croatian, Slovenian, English and Turkish. Having graduated in screenwriting from FAMU Prague, she also works in film and TV as a writer, script supervisor and film director. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Belgrade.



Photo: Vedran Peteh

Before spring

Excerpts from a novel in progress

When Derek Jarman's vision failed due to AIDS, the only thing he could see were streaks of blue light. His defence system was so damaged that Jarman was blind to all colours but blue –pure blue, he wrote, since being blind to all other colours allowed him to witness the appearance of the purest shade of blue.

I caught myself looking at the shoes in the shop window. I thought about going in and buying a pair, but I stopped myself. The shoes I'm wearing will be enough to see me out of life, he wrote in *Chroma*. Blue was an omen of death for Jarman, and interestingly, not only for him.

Whoever writes about blue – Maggie Nelson, Rebecca Solnit, William H. Gass, Kandinsky – starts with Goethe and his *Theory of Colours*. I want to respect the blue bibliography, so I feel rather obliged to mention Goethe somewhere in this book, and now it seems to be the right moment. Goethe wrote about blue during general stagnation and despondency in his life. *We love to contemplate blue, he wrote, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it. Blue gives us an impression of cold and thus reminds us of shade.* Hence blue's affinity with black, darkness, closure, livor mortis, death.

Wittgenstein wrote about colour, particularly blue, in the last eighteen months of his life. Mallarmé became concerned with the azure during an upsetting period of depression, replacing the word for sky with *L'Azur* in his poems. As if he wished for a reminder that death is not a voyage to heaven nor is depression a voyage into the dark, but rather an encounter with the blue landscape, free and infinite as the colour itself.

Blue is the colour of distance. Of mountains, sea, sky, faraway fog. We see blue only from afar; if you approach the seashore and stand in its shallows, the blue will abandon you. The water is transparent when you look closely; you can see the bottom, the end of things. Blue is thus the colour of hope if we think of hope as a refusal to face the end of things, to meet the closure and get to the bottom. Blue is the colour of waiting for something to happen – of someone to arrive – the colour of an invisible ink (cobalt blue) which appears only if you wait long enough. Yes, you have to wait for blue, but while waiting you are blue, just like a dead man.

Due to its short wavelength, blue disperses in all directions, and disappears in heights and distances, in yesterdays and tomorrows – blue pulls you, draws you after it, so you don't have to live in the present moment. Blue is the greatest escape artist. Blue is the colour of many things, but *here and now* is not one of them.

Losing the will to live means losing interest in the future – new images, new things, like Jarman losing interest in new shoes. The mind gets rusty, literally petrified. For the past few years, nothing much interested you. You weren't interested in new movies, new books; when I asked you what about grandchildren, you asked me back whether I can imagine you as a grandfather. I said no.

Towards the end of your life, you were repeating yourself endlessly. *I have only a few stories worth telling*, you would say. *That's all I have, a few stories*. Your mind was like a rock, impenetrable. Now I'm trying to remember these *stories worth telling*, like the story of how we met, or the story of how you proposed to Mum, or the story of our first encounter with snow when I had to pee a lot because my feet were cold so you had to carry me to the toilet every twenty minutes. I want to write all these stories down, here, in this blue-covered notebook, as an act of hope.

It's hot. I can barely walk how hot it is. As if I were walking through water, the air is thick and moist. Even the flags of Serbia hanging from the lamp posts don't feel like waving. Belgrade is tired of its evictions and amputations. The horses on the Kalemegdan carousel are dying from the heat. Savamala is in tears. Only the letters to Tito exhibited up there in the House of Flowers will remain of your world; the letters sent by the pioneers, by the eight-year-old you. I've read those letters. I've read your poems written for Mother's Day too. You were eight. You drew a purple flower on lined yellow paper and wrote:

My mother is
kind like the sun.
She loves me like
no one else in the world.
That's why Dad and I will buy her
a large bouquet of colourful flowers.

I know you won't reply to this letter. Just like you didn't reply to the photos I sent you of the Van Gogh exhibition or Bobby Fischer's grave. I hoped for the punishment of the unanswered mail. I'm writing to you knowing there won't be any answer which means, perhaps, I'm not even writing a real letter. I'm only writing a chapter of the book in the epistolary form; a fake letter. I'm writing to address a reader. You as my interlocutor were replaced by the audience. This is not a real letter.

Will there be a final letter?

I don't know. Did you tell me everything on time?

Your world is vanishing, Dad. Yesterday I visited the Museum of Yugoslavia. The country you were born in is today an archive of documents, letters, photographs, flags and train schedules. Tito's blue train, a luxury transportation once used by Tito and Jovanka to get to the seaside during the summer, today rests at the Topčider depot, all rusty and pale. The blue is gone. They even charge a fee to visit it.

Soon everything will be replaced by new ideas, like chunks of ice floating on the river are replaced by greens and flowers in spring; like the brutalism of Skoplje was replaced by kitschy right-wing neoclassicism; like a caterpillar is entirely left behind by a butterfly. Everything will melt into a new shape, better or worse. I guess that's a good thing.

It's so hot that the birds are dying. I'm not joking. There are so many dead birds in Belgrade, their wings, or what is left of them, scattered on the pavement like cigarette butts. It is scorching hot, but it's still spring, and the birds are coming back from the south. Big mistake. Here, the birds are burning.

While walking through Dorćol, I saw a pigeon on the edge of the pavement, flapping its wings. It was spinning in circles, its body frail and diminutive, dark grey, drained of colour. There were traces of red on the pavement, though. The pigeon fluttered, searching for breath, or help.

I was standing a few metres away taking notes. I wondered if the story about the dying pigeon should become a poem, a screenplay, or a novel. I gave it a name: The Death of the Pigeon in Dorćol. I crossed out superfluous epithets and wrote down bare facts as if witnessing a crime scene. I described the death of the pigeon simply, with a few sentences, as I heard and saw it – without turning it into some other being, without giving it a name. The pigeon in my story was anonymous, and it died of heat.

As I was writing, the pigeon really died: the fluttering of the wings became quieter and slower, and passers-by got used to the sight. Soon we all stopped noticing the dying creature. We got used to it. Or we just pretended not to notice, bypassing it carefully as one bypasses a dog shit.

When I gazed up from the notebook, hoping to see the body of the pigeon so I could describe it more precisely, it was gone. The body was taken by a scavenger, who removed it with a plastic bag after the car wheels had smeared its bones on the road. There was a mark left on the concrete; tomorrow morning, the street cleaners will rinse it with a hose – cold water, a strong stream – like I washed your blood off a towel.

Blue is the colour of blood loss.

It's so hot that I only eat ice cream, even though I promised myself to stay away from sweets. In a pastry shop in Skadarlija, right in front of the KOSOVO SERBIA graffiti, an old lady with a very large purple hat is eating a scoop of ice cream. Banana-split, with two orange paper umbrellas sunbathing on vanilla hills. I note it down, sitting on the other side of the terrace, wondering when the end of these notebooks ought to appear. I don't know how I'm going to type and organise all this material. I don't know what am I going to do with all these notebooks. I have fourteen blue notebooks so far.

How long will it take me to write this book? Is it even important, the time and duration of the process? Should I rush it? You're not going anywhere anyway.

You've read everything I've ever written. Even my first poems, published in 2009, unreadable. When I asked you about your opinion on the poems, your acting was so impressive that I decided to become a writer for a living. Today, if, let's say, you could read these notebooks, would you find any value in them? Would you find them sentimental? You told me (gently) several times that my texts were sentimental. Am I being sentimental right now, Dad, addressing you dead?

In Skadarlija, while observing the lady with a large purple hat, I drink beer and take notes. A young Roma girl approaches, begging me to give her some money. She has chocolate ice cream stains around her lips. I tell her *I'm sorry, I don't have any coins.*

Do you know what the word sorry means? she asks me.

No, I reply.

It means forgive me. I forgive you.

It's hot in the evening too, and I'm hiding from the heat in the air-conditioned cinema. You're sitting beside me. I can smell the city on you, the cigarette smoke, bad air, cheap beer. At the Yugoslav Cinematheque, we watch *Three Colours: Blue*. Coincidence? I don't believe in coincidences anymore, Dad. You wipe the sweat from your forehead with a cotton handkerchief. I watch your eyes become soft and glittery like a watery membrane and think about Icelandic geysers, how they round up like eyeballs before they burst into tears. I knew you liked Kieslowski. I knew which scene would make you sad. I was right.

I was convinced we were growing together, growing up together, although you were already a grown-up when I came into being. I was sure we were improving each other; teaching each other; expanding each other; although we were each part of a different generation. I told you about my generation – what we think, what we want, how much we despise sexism and tradition. You told me how much you despised communism back in the eighties, and who was a part of your generation, which bands. I learned to speak to you in your language. I learned to lower my expectations and accept your sexism as a part of your generation. You learned to speak to me in my language. You learned to be more inclusive, politically correct. This is why I liked talking to you so much. We never needed a translator.

Thanks to your fountain pen, Dad, a thickening appeared on my right middle finger. And thanks to the blue ink I found in the drawer right after your suicide, the thin curves on my finger became more obvious. A tattoo as a memory of spring, of which there are only a few days left. Yes, spring is fading. Blue is turning into purple, the colour of the ice-cream lover's hat. Purple is turning into pink, the colour of the Japanese cherries. Pink is turning into white, the colour of the blank page.

Over the summer I have to think about what to do with all these notebooks. Should I retype them and edit them as a single document, or should I just leave them like this, on paper, all messy and stained with tears and ink? Whenever you come across a small blue lake, you will know the state of mind I was in while writing. Or too many lines, cross-outs, tables, lists, diagrams – you will know that on those days my mind was stuck. I was like a block of ice. I was a caterpillar.

Where the fragments are short, sentences stripped of verbs, images described with nothing but a few words, you will know that on those days I was fine. My mind was clear, my body light as if preparing to detach from the ground. Those days, I trusted everything that passed through me. I was like a river, connected, unstoppable, ready to become the sea.

If, on the other hand, I occur to you sentimental, you will know that I have not managed to keep my distance. And, honestly, somehow it seems to me that given the circumstances I have the right to be a little sentimental. There are no outbursts of rage in the notebooks. Not really. I wish I had felt red, but all that comes is blue.

Tomorrow, I leave Belgrade.

Translated from Croatian by the author



Jelena Žugić

(*1989) is a Serbian writer, translator and songwriter who has studied in Belgrade, Lisbon, Sheffield and Santiago de Compostela. Her two poetry collections, *Kako sam postala flamenko plesačica* (How I became a flamenco dancer, 2021) and *Kome peva hiljadu mogućih tela* (Thousand possible bodies singing to whom, 2023) were shortlisted and came to be the finalists in some of the most prominent both Serbian and regional poetry awards for book of the year. Her poetry and prose have been widely published in regional literary journals, and individual poems have been translated into Spanish, Czech and English. She is a literary translator from Portuguese, Spanish and English, and a member of the Serbian Association of Literary Translators. She is also a songwriter, and lives, works and creates music in Belgrade. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was on the island of Mljet.



Photo: Goran Nikolašević

Songs rise like evening dresses from hibernation

You step into the storage room. Expecting scissors, a shovel. Gardening shears to maintain the rhizome of the text (in a state unalarming). Shovels to bury all the things the ribbon of the novel has been torn from. The silky tape was chopped in front of the boat's belly. Horseshoes shimmer. For the lunatic horse of the prince that will storm through. Tiny scissors that will shape all of this into a transitory apartment for summer's lemon collectors. Look, how nonchalantly they shove those suns into the crates. Or into their pockets. Intending to swallow them, store them as moon-sickles in the stomach: turn it all into a satellite. Not the primary cause of motion. Surrounding it from time to time with the unhostile darkness of their appetites. And the rest? To launch into glasses, grate fruit skin into surmountable cakes.

But the sun on your palm still threatens to bring the dangerous summer of complete permeation.

It still sings, its ejected tongues refusing to return into the sheaths. What you expect is the reliable *instrumentaria* of your craft. In July there will be tourism brimming to the top. You walk further. Instead of all those godly tools, the storage piles up – clinging over chairs and agricultural machines, like elegant clothes – all songs you have ever heard. A Mad Siren by a Portuguese rapper. Arctic Monkeys will be *going back to 505* whatever the cost. *Black boy with a firearm in his palm, and the green smell of rain*. Songs rise like vapour from the sea, like evening dresses from hibernation.

Your dictionary languages melt into one highway through a planet unknown. They rattle around, picking a co-driver. You thought this year you'd become a mother? You expected the clairvoyant in the green green kitchen? Still you're wearing the sunglasses from that movie. Your leather coat rustles over the asphalt like the sea, as you head over to squeeze the sun out of a vehicle caught in flames on a household treadmill.

Everybody here works. Summer doesn't sizzle just yet. Clouds are a steam of sumatraistic dreams over a mystery pot. Island shoulders are different from others. Everyone is welding, knocking, burrowing; some of them in their sheds and garages play stereo sounds that pierce the core sonics of this place: children and birds. Hardened fingertips, from pots and horseshoes and bringing forest fires to a halt. As you enter, each one of them tells you which part of your heart he's working on. On which of your organs he has planted a scaffolding. Like tiny toothpicks, like complicated Mikado. A house of cards. To prophesise to it some unpredictable combination; and then crash it. It will sting you, unlike acupuncture – with the precision of a beast spraining its legs behind the chapel, atop a hill thick with black woods.

On the floor above, a rooster in the soup. Wave squeaks under the lid. Crests of the sea crests of the bestiary. A mermaid arrives to taste the stew on your writing desk: it sounded like growling foam in her cave. Behind us, behind all

of this, cosy jazz streams through the screen. She is sneaking in with a razor to sharpen its tentacles. From inside the tiny tub I choose carved-out words from the landscape and stick them into *poemas*. Children chirp under the window like those that hum into Kafka's land surveyor's ear when he dials to hear the voice of The Castle. The telephone is mythical. Because in your hand it is real, because there is no screen and it glistens like an insect's armour under the neon light. It will fraternise with the eagle: an eagle I am, but I understand your tenderness. Your longing for the voice on the other side. Fingers of the jam maker congeal thousands of Latin American darknesses into one letter on the typewriter. In the womb, your tongue will glue all smithereens of sentences, melodies that pliers pulled out like a tooth. Melodies cut with hedgerow shears. And piece them into a poem that needs not be uttered. Like a piñata it spills into the neighbours' groves. It stamps itself directly onto our pores, inside the hot printing machine of the encounter.

The repairman's hands are oily and his wrath is that of Achilles. His heel not endangered, he came tiptoeing, and now ferociously he hammers inside the blacksmith's mind. You wait for him to shape your fateful tool: what more do I need, as a scaffolding under my womb? Chiselled out on an anvil. So I could go into labour, slide, seethe, cook healing soups for ancient scarlet fevers, content for poisonous bottles of passion that will shake thunderously on bookshelves? You're waiting for him to answer. The animal that pierces its horns into destiny, instead of delivering you a diary or an airplane or a violin. Just like Natália Correia sings. But, without a word, that man lays his hammer onto the reed chair. He touches your scales: takes hold of the curl of the first song his fingers reached, and ties it around his neck. The clock in your kitchen is so big: against you the repairman will measure time. Or, even better: against you, he will understand time does not exist.

This is the town of pomegranates. Each yard has at least one bush of them. You've already bitten into it, it's done. The orange juice pours out into the metro tubes. Spring is bound to come. Those palms of the repairmen are all already on you.

INTERMEZZO. Siren intercepts the radio waves 1

Now I see that the translator has no clue, he tied the world into menhirs, and the language of this writer is dancing. It shatters the glasses breaks the shell you nearly step onto on a shore and then you take it and place it against the mirror in a bar, where in the mist above the piano there's me before the sea, not the unhappy cabaret singer Lily Brown from Chico Buarque's album. You place the shell into the rustling warm cap, you carry the cap through snowstorms, you press it onto my chest we are of the same mould the same origin. Behind us buzz cars from movie screens, sketched-out night vehicles from comic books, the world rings only with us. Dreams dreamt in offices after midnight grow into the gate of the Goddess Ishtar. Long is the night. The gate of the goddess is the shape of your mouth that ejects all scrambled sounds of Joyce's siren bar. The words at last suck you into the chests of that choir, you launch yourself from their curls into mine. Mother of pearl in a leaning wine glass. Crack! Drink. Sing.

Book Club

In the library: a pirate ship, a painting of an 18th-century reader with curled hair, a primordial reptile drawn in tempera. Frame the pomegranate. Then, when the time has come, crack the frame disintegrate it sprinkle all the seeds with all the letters, as if from gun range. They will dart at you as you stand next to the blend truck for new lives you didn't feed with enough matter. It will dart at the handsome top 10 writer while he, in a land far away, next to his Mac laptop, laps up the upshot espresso in a way-too-sunlit city cafe.

On this side of the Earth, the book club members unite tonight. The woman whose aquamarine biology studies were abruptly terminated says: Even if you had said this is a Wolf Club, we would've come. *Even if you'd said we'd be making lemonade.* The witchcraft circle of multiple mothers: book club their only wild. Mother of three in a shimmering mystery-riddled car drives from a small coastal settlement. A collection of short stories and a whisky in her bag. The book is a detonator: till three in the morning we unravel giving birth and phobias. Gigantic centipedes that worm into your ear, vipers, and how many hours it took each of them to prepare their toiletry bags for dashing out into the hospital before they brought a child into being. And are there husbands who polish the house? Our giggle will motion the murderers of kingdoms. Knives and spring buds. Stands for orange juices that drip down your chin. Here we do not unmake the weavings. We crumble the neighbour's living room under our shoes. We've abandoned our studies of law and the ultramarine world. Offspring's toes lurk over the edges of our mountain beds. In the camping trailer, in the warm chaos of literature, something inside us grows grows grows. Agatha Christie was one of the pioneering surfers amongst the 'westerners'. The wind machine in the theatre where her 'Mousetrap' is staged turns and turns in us like a coffee mill. A nutcracker. And from cover to cover we go: hooray for our fears that the teeth of other women at the table will mince into roaring laugh. At the last supper, with this tea, with bitters with salty drumsticks and sliced poetry. We have abandoned our studies. Spilled the lives from our guts to fit into the tiny stools of Goldilocks. Aquamarine world, *c'est nous*. When will Goldilocks get startled by the bears?

Around ten minutes upstream, hunters set up a writing tent for the residency author. You just sit at your typewriter and the hunters immediately summon you into their cars to circle the hunting grounds. National parks. To orbit the secret paths of boars and grizzlies. These highbinders, over beer, declare their terrible desire to penetrate the book. These people drink coffee with the host. These people know how to kill. These people want to see you again. But they will spare the female of the wild boar when they spot her with her young. The young that will form their book club if you rip them away from the forest.

INTERMEZZO: Siren intercepts the radio waves 2

The essay published by Official Herald says: the Viennese newspapers were primary sources of narratives about mermaids and tritons. And from that city also comes the poem of how we will never walk into a museum again; the poem on storks and the lake that eats you whole; on how unbearable a flower is while it's still in the making. You carry Poseidon's trident you are him; it is your fork for the secret supper. We chew mackerel you bounce off the screen and already I feel your tongue but this time also your soul. You're warming mine on a gusty ferry boat. This is not a stern island, it is wild to break the vaudeville. Our legs intertwine. The gnoseology house has been broken into, and the panorama spreads onto a derelict house, the future house of poems. I feel your back tightly, this cannonball is buried into the ramparts of the medieval town like a ball in the black box of the pinball, in the mystique of the pool. Hyacinth and lily of the valley are coming to us in a few days, and on that day I will speak of poetry to children. And you, you come squeeze all your possible I's over me. Then it dawns on you they're not all in possession of citizen identification numbers, they are eggs of suns-to-be. Look, how they ring in me like cymbals. Ancient choirs with a slight touch of humour. Spawn bubbling with future instincts of salmon. Sing to them.

Salmon deep in the forest. Someone stabbed the pillar of the world, so we could suck out the core juice and lick it off the ice-cream stick. As we lay on our backs as we lay on our side, our at once foundation and danger the rock of the Ulysses cave.

Raise me high, postman

The post office antennae are turned towards the forest and the rocks on top. That's all you need to know about the post office. The pencil shadow casts itself over this paper like sundial. The postman is a surreal fairylike function; everything at this place is. Become the same thing to him. A yellow vehicle storms off from this point every day. Brimming with parcels from other worlds. Lick the envelope.

What are you to him, as he stamps and seals to no end, to bind others together? It's lunchtime. Bare are the February branches and larger than the church's cross, they caress its worn-out white head. Dog barks call for each other from one edge of the hill to the other, like DNA chains epileptically twisting, yearning to come together. The one to glue them into a crop will be the postman, licking the fatal stamp.

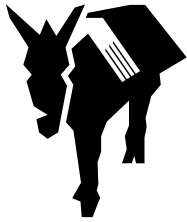
What lies beneath the hill on top of which the post office sits? Maybe down there there's fetters? Valiant outlaws? Severed head on a plate? Winder of that well on the bottom of which I pound stones? Forest ends the view. You can't see

that underneath, there's a swing. Lightly it sways in the wind, by the evergreen, as if we'd just awakened on that boat bow of yours I devoured last night.

Here everything, like bare bones, rinses itself of the screen multiplicities. Here lies the question to the answer how do I love you if we could be anyone. Post office is Post Office, church is *The Church*, cafe is *The Cafe*. Only one is the cultural centre. And only one are municipality headquarters. Single is the village school, and its football court and wooden hut with jumping ropes and the dreamlike library. Flowers are the shape of mouths. He loves me he loves me not he loves me, this visitor plucks petals from her monstrously developed greenery. In one of the collections the publisher gifted her, she finds out that there are plants called strangling figs. Under a blizzard of petals, she unearths letters of one addressee. Love me do Love me tender in the rainforest amid the jaws, love me like at the edge of the novel with the city Ulysses: and yes I said yes I will Yes. That will happen when out of all the petals that can possibly be plucked, there remains a single yellow core. The potential of honey this island is named after. Egg the colour of the sun. Shredded shapes from a magazine on the palm of a child.

And your palms, in my hopes, on the breasts. Here women, from yellow vans, deliver the mail. And, truth be told, Martians deliver it too. Look, one of them has just transferred a bag overflowing with vegetables from the post office car to her personal one. The man at the Mail reception only stamps and stamps, ceaselessly. He awaits the legion of Hermes ladies: for them to, with their jolly alchemy, use potentially nutritive murmurs of countless phones to breed nourishing fruit. Large is the post office antennae. Magnanimous are the tomatoes on the passenger seat. The Mercury girl of this fairytale, the visitor, seemingly transitory passenger, she is now a woman replete with fruits of the land, in a yellow van over which black and red trumpets are drawn. Letters glisten inside it, they tremble like thighs on a motorbike. Jolting at their new futures. The raven hair of the delivery girl wiggles out of the bun. Like an egg in the island pan, sunny side up, your post box is quivering too: that one address, more convincing than the scarlet letter, reveals itself behind the bushes trodden upon. Have no other post offices but me.

Translated from Serbian by the author



ESSAY



Lana Pukanić

was born in 1986 in Zagreb. She studied Comparative Literature and English Language and Literature, and graduated with a thesis on girlhood. She was one of the founders and editors of the feminist portal Muf, and since 2018 she's been editing the website Krilo. A selection of her texts and essays was published under the title *Tinejdžerke i drugi monstrumi* (Teenage girls and other monsters, 2020). Since 2017 she's been employed at the Institute for Political Ecology in Zagreb, working on topics like degrowth and climate justice. She's currently writing her first novel and trying to be a beekeeper. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was in Valletta.



Photo: Ante Zlatko Stolica

What a Beautiful Flower

When Kulturpunkt asked me to go to Hauser's concert and write a report, I saw no reason to refuse, least of all the fact I'm not a journalist.

It had been a while since 2Cellos had broken up, so I started by googling Stjepan Hauser to refamiliarise myself with his person. The first link I clicked on was *'Stjepan Hauser, who proudly bears the title of the best lover among musicians in former Yugoslavia, reveals whether he prefers Croatian or Serbian women'*.

'The best lover among musicians in former Yugoslavia.' That felt like a claim that was almost impossible to verify. I scrolled down the text, looking for the promised revelation. Serbian, it said, 'because Croatian women are like nuns'. I wasn't hurt; I was on a professional assignment. 'As I've said, I love women, women love me. It's a magical match. I won't lie, it's true. I don't mind the title,' added Hauser. Yes, I had learned enough.

The rest of the text announced his Rebel With a Cello tour, which would include his first-ever solo concert in the Zagreb Arena.

On Wednesday 25 October, I first went to a protest in support of Palestine and then asked a taxi driver to take me to the arena. He was curious about who was performing. 'Well, Hauser should be good,' he estimated. 'We'll see,' I replied mysteriously.

I was hot and I wished I had dressed in more natural fibres.

Savska Road was congested and we made slow progress towards the arena. Gibonni's 'Oprosti (I'm Sorry)' was playing on the radio and I sombrely thought poor Gibonni, but then I remembered that the man was definitely not dead. In fact, he had just sold out the Belgrade Arena. It was my turn to say, 'I'm sorry.'

The presenter started talking about the upcoming All Saints' Day and informed us that Zagreb's public transport was ready to handle people storming the city cemeteries, but that we should get to them early anyway, over the weekend.

This reminded me of how last year, right before All Saints' Day, the crematorium had an open-door day, which included a tour of all parts of the crematorium and a detailed description of the cremation process. At the end I asked two questions, one about the number of female cremators (soon to be one) and another about water cremation in Croatia (it could happen), which was practically journalism.

Before the event, I had seen a lot of online comments like 'what kind of psychopaths would go to this thing?' I recalled that as I was finding my way in the crowd around the arena. My press pass waited at a separate entrance, but when

I collected it, it turned out to be a blank ticket with my name written on the back in marker. I felt rattled as a journalist but bought a wine spritzer and went to find my place in the stands.

I was sitting between an older man and a young woman, who were in the company of their partner and family, respectively. I looked around timidly. No one seemed to be on a mission, except the mission of having a good time. When I realised I wasn't seated in a special press section, my new identity completely fell apart. My consciousness disintegrated and expanded, unfettered by the shackles of journalism. Anything was possible.

There was just one problem. We were sitting in very close proximity, but I still wanted to take notes. I had to find a way of doing it discreetly, because I didn't want anyone rudely looking at my phone, the way I was looking at the phone of the man next to me. When I glanced at it for the first time, he was scrolling down a website called Bauštela, which I had never seen before. I tucked my phone into the jacket I placed in my lap and camouflaged it. A bit later, my neighbour told his wife(?) that a protest for Palestine had taken place.

Despite my sincere efforts not to look, I would see a new website on his screen every couple of minutes.

Lajk.hr

Telegram

Večernji list

Slobodna Dalmacija

Jutarnji list

Journal

'When will it start?' he asked his lady quietly. It's literally impossible for him not to find this report.

I slowly drank the spritzer and watched the people in the audience affectionately. Here we are, together, Hauser's congregation for the night. You really couldn't tell us apart from the visitors of the crematorium open day.

It's so easy to love people and it's so easy to hate them.

Suddenly, all the lights in the hall went out and the stage lit up. Various musicians were on it, but not Hauser. He appeared on a huge video wall. First we saw him from a distance, and then the video cut to a close-up of his face, serious and somehow pensive. Finally, the real Hauser arrived on stage, in all black, and shouted, 'Let's go, Zagreb!' or something like that. I only wrote down 'let's go'. He raised his cello over his head. The show could begin.

I was sure that the first song was *The Godfather* theme, which is why I was startled when the second song was without a doubt *The Godfather* theme.

While the real Hauser was playing, the recorded Hauser was also playing, but a different cello and in a different outfit. His clothes or accessories would give us clues about the song. At times we saw the real Hauser on the video wall, and at times the other one.

The recorded Hauser looked at the camera with the energy of that TikTok genre where guys smile dreamily, run their hands through their hair and bite their lower lip, and the description is something like 'POV you come into my room while I'm practising my cello'.

The real Hauser was seducing the audience in a similar manner, with great success. He warned us that this was the boring part of the concert, and then we'd get the party started. When a song was over, he would raise his bow like a general raising a sword.

It was difficult for me to connect with the music, so I approached it by asking: would this be playing at somebody's funeral? *Godfather*: most definitely, ✓.

Hauser announced that the next song was very romantic and his favourite. 'My Heart Will Go On' (✓) began and a dark sea under a starry sky appeared on the wall.

Is this, somehow, a journey through my life? I wondered as I soundlessly sang the lyrics to the Celine Dion hit that I had known by heart since 1998, when our English teacher made us memorise it and sing together because she was really into Titanic. Apart from that, she was a good teacher and quite normal.

'You like what you've seen so far?!' the best lover among musicians in former Yugoslavia wanted to know. I worried that he thought we didn't like it enough, since he once again stressed that this was the depressing part of the show.

'And now, my favourite song' – haha, again?! – 'Caruso' (✓)!

Hauser looked like he was really enjoying himself, although I couldn't pinpoint the exact source of his pleasure. I clapped obediently after each song because a part of me wanted him to be happy.

'And now – my favourite song!' Hahaha! Truly, that joke was a killer. Just like the exaggerated drinking from a black water bottle with that sucky part. It was a wildly successful bit that I didn't wish to understand. Is Hauser a sexy baby? No, don't tell me!!

'You'll have to sing when I tell you,' Hauser threatened. It was time for 'Hallelujah', the song playing at twenty funerals this second. A group of girls near me sang like a choir of angels.

Libertango. I was thinking of Grace Jones. Really, who in the world is cooler and hotter than Grace Jones? Hauser's bow suggestively pierced the disembodied cello.

After that, yes, the *Game of Thrones* theme. The hottest person in *Game of Thrones*, I followed my logical train of thought, has to be Oberyn Martell... And a death I'm still not over. Good night, sweet prince.

Pirates of the Caribbean was next, and Hauser appeared on the wall disguised as Jack Sparrow. This is a journey through my life, through the delusions and ideals of youth. How, for example, I had once thought Johnny Depp was the perfect man, and now he's completing his transformation into a sweaty onion bulb.

I didn't know what to focus on as I couldn't focus on the music, since there wasn't any.

Hauser left the stage, and the drummer, who looked like his younger brother, launched into a boring solo that made him really happy. He got a huge round of applause; I hoped Hauser wouldn't hold it against him. Then an additional drummer from Cuba showed up in style, immediately making everyone proud, himself included. He began furiously beating on drums painted with the Cuban flag.

Hauser finally returned, now in jeans and a yellow shirt. It was clear we had entered the 'party' part of the evening.

Hauser's shirt turned golden as he sweated. I could appreciate the depravity of a mind that had planned for such beautiful and symbolic sweating; the definitive *Game of Thrones* personality test pegged me as Littlefinger.

'Let's Get Loud' coursed through our veins, the inevitable minutes of dwelling on the meaning of my life had arrived, but tonight I held it in my palm of my hand: to be here, to share my experience with everyone. Ricky Martin! 'Livin' La Vida Loca'! Hauser was shaking and bouncing with his cello, the lights were changing colour and going wild, the hall was throbbing with the worst kind of sex imaginable. I became aware of my mouth slightly ajar, so I closed it.

During 'Sway', he rocked the instrument and it was almost like making love, the audience was beyond seduced, on its knees, and then Hauser fell to his in front of the electric guitar, and moved his head back and forth, back and forth. The girls some rows ahead seized a quiet moment to scream, 'TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES!!!'

'How do you like this part of the show?!' Hauser snarled after throwing a towel into the crowd like a bride. Ecstasy. *La petit mort*. 'The next song is – "Señorita"! And I see a lot of you in the audience tonight!!' It was time for me to pee. There wasn't a scrap of paper in any of the cabins.

I bought another spritzer for 5 euros, and when I came back Hauser and the band were deep inside 'La Isla Bonita'.

Now was the time to introduce us to the musicians. He started with the saxophonist and trumpeter. I didn't write down their names, but they were both wearing sunglasses. You barely ever see people wear sunglasses at night these days. Then he turned to the string section, which consisted of eight girls, and said simply – 'Strings!' Strings (eight), no name.

My soul left my body. 'Volare' was playing at the funeral.

'Everybody get up!' Hauser commanded after he gave the men their names, and almost everyone stood up as if bewitched. My neighbour and I remained seated. Information is power.

'Bamboleoo bamboleaaa!' Eros could no longer be suppressed. Hauser handed the microphone to the people in front of the stage, who grabbed it and sang their version of the lyrics. One guy tried to get us even more aroused, shouting, 'Let's go, Croatia!' You fool, I thought, he prefers his women Serbian.

Hauser and the cello descended from the stage and started making a round among the fans, followed by the camera. The procession made me think of how I'd missed the Best Ram on the Island of Cres contest that summer. I could feel a smile on my face. Some people cheered like Hauser was the Pope. A man put a grey hat on his head. I knew he wouldn't like that at all, and sure enough, he threw it off before returning to the stage.

We were all terribly, terribly, terribly heterosexual.

'You want more?!' shouted Hauser, 'YOU WANT MORE!!!' Yes!

'Which one do you want?' he asked cockily. I would give my soul, if I still had one, for people to laugh at my jokes like that.

And then something I really wasn't expecting happened. The song emerging from Hauser's cello was – 'Bella Ciao'.

My whole life had obviously been leading up to this moment, but did it have to?

There's a poem by the poet Linda Gregg that I really like, called 'Etiology', which means looking for the cause of something; why something happens the way it does. The poem is about death and begins with the line: 'Cruelty made me. Cruelty and the sweet smelling earth', and I don't want to interpret it too much, but I think it's about how deeply rooted death is in the foundations of life and how meaningless life would be without death; not only pointless, but non-existent. It ends with one of those impossible sentences that we look for in poetry: 'Heaven forbid that I should be saved.'

It may not always be obvious, but I have my dignity, because I'm a woman/human/mortal being, which is actually all you need to be worthy of respect. I often think about how I wouldn't like to be killed because it would annihilate me too much, everything else is fine, but to be killed, by the same kind... To have some man take my life? No, if I have a say. No, thanks. Heaven forbid that I have to be saved.

'And if I die as a partisan, you have to bury me – But bury me up in the mountain, in the shadow of a beautiful flower – And all the people who pass by will say "what a beautiful flower" – This is the flower of a partisan who died for freedom.'

These are the lyrics to 'Bella Ciao', which is, among other things, a funeral song, and actually a perfect song for funerals.

If I were cynical and desperate, I would say: of course nobody sang, it was only the instrumental version, like the rest of the night, and nothing had any meaning, and all of us were free, and we knew that we would be free tomorrow, and we knew that we would eat and drink and have electricity and water and houses and read our portals, and there was no fear, the concert ended and we all just headed for the exits, then out of the arena, some in cars that immediately created a bottleneck, some on foot towards the tram, and none of us would be killed by tomorrow, most probably...

But I'm not just cynical and desperate. Things have meaning. Effort makes sense. Of course I believe in that. We can persevere and take our stands, but you probably know more about that than I. I now know what it's like to go to a Hauser concert. And I know what happens in a crematorium. Don't be afraid, you just go from the fridge to the cremation oven; piece of cake. It's everything before that should have you scared. And ciao, ciao, ciao!

Translated from Croatian by the author

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Shelter**