



ULYSSES' SHELTER 3 / 3

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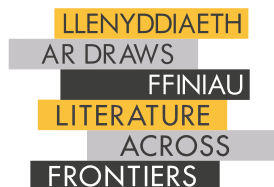
Ulysses' Shelter is a three-year project coordinated by **Sandorf** (Croatia) in partnership with **Culture Reset** (Czech Republic), **Inizjamed** (Malta), **Literature Across Frontiers** (Wales, UK), **Krokodil** (Serbia), **Thraka** (Greece) and the **Slovenian Writers' Association**.

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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 3/3* joins this effort with English versions of work by authors selected for the third year of this project cycle. The *Ulysses' Shelter* 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



Luiza Bouharaoua

is a writer, translator, producer and cultural worker. Her first book *Jesmo li to bili mi* (You, me, us, 2019) won several awards for the best debut at national and regional level. She is currently working on her next book, a novel with the working title *A Brief History of Blue*. She is also the founder of NGO Skribonauti that has been implementing artistic programs for children and youth in children's homes and for adults in prisons across Croatia since 2011. As a result of her direct work with marginalized groups, she produced short documentaries *Free Weekend*, the first documentary filmed by inmates in Croatia, and *The Right to Work: The Way We Left It*, winner of the Ethics and Human Rights Award at the Days of Croatian Film 2016. For their work with female inmates Skribonauti has received the SozialMarie Prize for Social Innovation in 2021 and the Prix Art Explora awarded by Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 2024. Her Ulysses Shelter residency was in Caernarfon, Wales.



Photo: Ema Bednardz

Notes on elsewhere

There is a river that runs right down the side of the house. In just two nights I master the delicate balance of cracking open my bedroom window just right, so I can listen to the river murmuring in the dark without its cold breath waking me up in the middle of the night.

Beauty, and the unease of it. How self-evident and self-sufficient it is. The last I find most disconcerting of all: the bare fact that the immense and varied beauty of this place asks nothing from me, requires nothing from me, doesn't need me at all.

To understand the unease, you must get to know the narrator. I always work. I sometimes fear it's the only thing I do. I have two jobs (or three, it's difficult to untangle one from the other), and each is a calling. I care for a parent who cares for my other parent who has cancer and at least two other life-threatening conditions. I am a mother to a small child who has always been a mother to her own mother. I care for two cats - one of them is my best friend, the other an overly dependent son. I have it all, except working hours. I am exhausted and the only thing that scares me more than that is the fact that I might not know who I am if I were stripped of all this work.

I have an inherited fear of beauty (love is a subset in this category). The fact that I can name it, doesn't stop me from feeling it. I have been taught that of all the tragedies that have befallen and could potentially befall the tiny piece of this Earth I come from, the tragedy of experiencing beauty just might be the worst. The English language has 'the haves' and 'the have-nots' and they exist as two very separate groups. My mother tongue has the ultimate curse 'dabogda ima pa nema'. In its deadly sequence the tragedy of your life lies in the fact that for a brief moment you have, and then you don't. In Croatian it is not about being this or that, it is about the art of losing. As experts, we know that the darkest tragedy lies in the fact that a memory, that body-rooted sensation of other possibilities we once experienced, is the one thing that cannot be lost.

There is a garden in bloom in front of the cottage, a meadow in bloom in the back. In the morning when I look through the kitchen window or sit down to have my coffee in the garden, birds, large and small, gather around me.

But I am elsewhere. There is another reality I brought here, I found here, one deeply rooted in fiction. I was so thoroughly colonized by British culture at such a very young age that every first feels like a return. If I redact fear, financial hardship, war and the desperate need for shelter, I could tell this story in more delicate terms. I could say: Imagine watching a really engrossing series or a film and falling for the lead. My lead was never a person, it was a place, centuries of its past and its present, and a language that babysat me: there was always too much to do,

both at home and at work, so first it was cable TV and Cartoon Network and then books that took care of me. There was a lot to be impressed about this *elsewhere* that opened up in front of me: the country was large, the landscape abundant, but it was through language that it became my true *elsewhere*, expansive and magnificent. I soon understood, even if I could not verbalize it, that language is not just words, not just a different way of saying the same things, it was a different way of seeing, thinking, being, the whole desperately needed package. Over time, this *elsewhere* expanded from the island of England, Scotland and Wales to the island of Ireland, but despite the call of the language, it never crossed the ocean.

Living in Caernarfon means feeling tightly intertwined with the fictional worlds that shaped my reality. They are there in the terraced houses, the bay windows, and the slate roofs, in the deep passion for the garden, in the font of the street sign, and the fact that every cup in the house is a mug. Every first is a return here, and each takes me further back. TV series I was too young to really remember come flooding back, memories alive and invigorating. The warm midsummer days and the blooming meadows of the 'Darling Buds of May', an abundance of life, and the safety of a large, boisterous family, a complete elsewhere to my own three-person family, with two wrong surnames in times of war when surnames could decide if you live or die. a black conductor's hat and the whistle of the engine approaching the train station, the same Oh Doctor Beeching whistle I hear when on my first morning I walk into town right past a steam engine. The humour of the Snowdon station cafe in Bangor run by a Ruth, who everyone calls Ruthie, and who greets an old friend with a: 'Looking good for a Tuesday'.

I have always been guilty of judging reality by standards set for fiction. I know it's all sorts of fallacies wrapped up into one, but how could I resist? a mere glance reveals how faulty reality really is: see the lack of character progression (at times an absolute lack of character), the plot lines that go nowhere, the lack of motivation, causation, and sometimes, the utter lack of vision and meaning. That is why, when describing the most complete moments of our lives, we say, more often than not, 'it was like in the films'. That is, probably, the reason why I first started turning reality into fiction, but there is something else at play here. This is fiction turning itself into reality.

There is a tiny room on the first floor, much smaller than the bathroom. I call it my room. I fully appreciate the need for a house on the river, a house near the sea to retain a strong connection to water. There is a powerful rain shower. There is a bathtub that can swallow you whole and still has room for more.

During the day I trace a fictional map of Dublin on an actual map until I reach the shore. I read about flora in and around the Irish Sea. I take the two-page folder with pictures of wildflowers growing in the large garden, put together by my host, stare out of the window, and read the names in English and Welsh. I have long conversations with myself. I write notes, pages and pages of notes. I hear the characters from my novel speaking in English, they

have never been this at ease. I walk. Five, ten, eighteen kilometres on my best days. My poor right ankle, fresh out of physiotherapy, doesn't protest in the slightest. I walk everywhere and would walk anywhere given half a chance. In my stride, first I move through the town, the countryside, and the shore, then through time and knowledge. I walk so much and for so long that I actually start moving on the inside.

The first word of Welsh I learn is 'croeso'. It means 'welcome'.

There is so much beauty everywhere that I become so keenly aware of the privilege of this fleeting moment. I then set to work to dilute the guilt. This privilege, any privilege, unnerves me because I am not sure if I have earned it. My friend calls me and tells me that I earned all of this with my work long ago. I believe her, she is to be trusted, but I can't feel it. I know the dictionary definition of the verb 'to be entitled', but in reality, I can't grasp the feeling or the scope of it. When you come from next to nothing you always have something to prove. You always doubt. You always work, just in case.

At night I go to my child's room and sleep, a slumber so sound, so rarely accessible in adulthood. Until now this kind of sleep was only a memory. Of summer days spent playing in the heat of the street, of long days jumping in the sea. I wonder how I slept in other seasons when all these memories are memories of summer. This is in fact a memory transformed into a story so as to be remembered.

There are six chickens in the garden, they are the fluffiest hens I have ever seen. Their soft feathers jiggle as they walk freely about the garden. The first four days they ignore my presence. After that I only have to call them and they come running.

I quickly progress to a five-year-old version of myself that sometimes speaks only in one-word sentences: Robin! Magpie! Heron! Squirrel! Wood mouse! In my tiny room I can literally feel myself expand on the inside. Is this the reason why children's rooms are always smaller – a single bed, a desk, a stool for a nightstand? Is it really not about the size of our bodies or the amount of things? Could it be that this architectural habit takes into account the relation between the actual physical space of the room and the immense internal expanse, the realms of the imagination of a child? The multitudes that constitute life at that age.

It is precisely these multitudes we narrow down to *one* as we grow up – one job, one hobby, one person. Is this the reason I write, why I always, when asked, define myself in terms of verbs not nouns? I never say 'I'm a writer', I say 'I write'. Is this my way of allowing myself to continue becoming, my way of squeezing through the demands of adulthood and retaining the possibility of multitudes I now remember so acutely?

The wi-fi is only strong enough at the kitchen table, in my bedroom the signal bar is empty. I quickly give up attempting to connect. At first, I read under the light of the lamp clamped to the stool that serves as a nightstand, but I turn the pages slowly, the story loses me and I lose it. Then I slip into the luxury I have not had in years. I daydream. Of places, things, and people that are just my own. I am transported to the place all of my fiction originated from.

When I wake up, I realize I have been exploring this exquisite *elsewhere* only in places that relate to my novel. I have turned my daydreams into work and there are consequences. I walk through meadows, fields, and country roads to get to beaches, cliffs, lighthouses. Wherever I arrive I turn around and search for Snowdon's towering shadow. The consequence is that I simply don't understand the meaning of the word leisure. I am not even sure it can be fully translated into Croatian. In my mother tongue you either work or you're lazy. In this linguistic and social constellation, a lazy woman is the rarest of creatures. In Croatian 'vrijedna žena' means a good woman, a worthy woman, but also a hard-working woman. This is another reason why English is my *elsewhere*, in it all these words can live independent lives.

The second word of Welsh I learn is 'môr', which means 'the sea'. I had to seek that one out.

There is now a note in the visitors' book and it says: 'Thank you for the easy mornings, soft nights, and the right kind of balance between solitude and company. Being here really is the stuff of dreams.'

On the penultimate day I finally google Snowdonia National Park. The mountains, the lakes, the waterfalls. Thirty minutes at the top of Snowdon for my family of three costs 120 pounds in train tickets. The poor work so the rich could fully comprehend the meaning of leisure. Before I go, I let go.

Everything here is absolute present, a memory of a distant past, a storyline from a work of fiction and in a matter of hours it will be handed over to the past. As the last day recedes, I feel it all morphing into a daydream, a new fiction, returning to the realm of *elsewhere*. Cherry-picking, mixing and matching, condensing whole weeks into an instant, a cinematic moment or a sequence which can now be relieved indefinitely.

The third word of Welsh I learn is 'agored'. It means 'open'.



Đorđe Božović

is a Yugoslav anti-fascist, linguist and translator, residing in Belgrade, Serbia. He was born in Titovo Užice, SFR Yugoslavia, not long before both of those toponyms ceased to exist, and grew up in his family home in the town formerly known as Partizanske Vode, in a time when the old world was dying and a brave new world struggled to be born. Currently he lectures in theoretical and Balkan linguistics, specialising in Albanian, at the University of Belgrade, his alma mater, while also actively translating from the languages he does research into and critically writing about the process. He has translated into his native Serbo-Croatian at least one piece from each genre of contemporary literature from Albanian – novels, short stories, poetry, essays, memoirs, and drama. His Ulysses Shelter residency was in Valetta.



Photo: Medija Centar Beograd

My sweet Malta

Jiena sejjer, ħelwa Malta, se nħallik.

'I'm going, my sweet Malta, I shall be leaving you.' As I was leaving Malta, I was thinking of the opening verses of the poem '*Għanja ta' Malti sejjer isiefer*' by Maltese socialist and strong advocate against British colonial rule Manwel Dimech (1860–1921), in which he contemplates on his forced exile by the colonial authorities, following a decade and a half of his influential activism among the Maltese people. I was intrigued to discover that just at the beginning of his activist campaign, not long after his release from imprisonment, where he had spent some twenty years of life between the ages of thirteen and thirty-six, Dimech travelled to Montenegro in 1903, where he stayed for almost three weeks to study its history and politics. No doubt this small former Yugoslav republic which prides itself on never becoming a subject of the Ottoman Empire, just like Malta, which resisted the Ottoman invasion in the 16th century – a turn of events that will profoundly shape its identity in centuries to come under the jurisdiction of the Order of St John – has influenced Dimech's own sense of freedom, too. No matter how small they may seem in the long, dark shadow of empires, 'Montenegrins do not kiss chains' – as a famous saying, attributed to 19th-century Montenegrin prince-bishop and poet Petar II Petrović Njegoš, puts it. Nor should Maltese.

I have spent two weeks in Malta, visiting various places in the archipelago. In a central location, in the old town of Valletta, right next to St John's Co-Cathedral – a peculiar landmark, more magnificent on the inside than on the outside – facing the busy Triq ir-Repubblika stands a neoclassical monument by Antonio Sciortino (1879–1947), commemorating the Great Siege of Malta in 1565, an unsuccessful attempt by the Ottomans to conquer the island held by the Knights Hospitaller. Now it is made into a makeshift memorial to journalist and anti-corruption activist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was assassinated for her outspokenness in a car bomb attack in 2017, at the age of fifty-three. Rising above candles and flowers in tribute to Caruana Galizia, the three figures – one male and two female – featured in Sciortino's Great Siege monument, are said to represent courage, faith and civilization. How ironic.

Nowhere echoes *memento mori* more – and so vividly, at that – than while walking inside St John's Co-Cathedral, literally standing on the knights' colourful marble gravestones all over its floor. In the Chapel of the Langue of Aragon, a funerary monument to the 17th-century Grand Master Nicolas Cotoner blatantly depicts an Asian and an African slave kneeling at the bottom while supporting the pedestal with the Grand Master's golden bust on their backs, just like the mythological Atlas, who was punished for rebellion against Zeus to hold up the heavens on his shoulders for evermore. *Vae victis!* Even in death and in eternity, there is no make up for racism, earthly injustice, inequality and oppression.

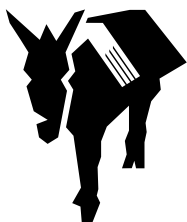
One of Atlas's daughters was the nymph Calypso, who resided in Gozo, where she kept Odysseus, the Mediterranean storyteller – as the Maltese philosopher, emeritus professor Peter Serracino Inglott (1936–2012) calls him – for several years on his way back home. She offered him immortality if he stayed with her, but he chose instead to return to Ithaca, where his wife and son awaited him to drive away the greedy suitors. Was he just homesick, or was he aware in fact that the false promise of transcendental, divine justice is but an illusion, and that we alone are responsible for this world of ours, that needs fixing?

Then there is Caravaggio! He was expelled from Malta, too. It made me think how the greatest among us often end up contested and persecuted by their surroundings. I found another Montenegrin link inside the Co-Cathedral – the Chapel of Our Lady of Philermos was where the Order of St John kept the icon of their patroness, brought here as a war trophy from Rhodes. When Malta was invaded by Napoleon in 1798, the icon was taken to Russia. In the turmoil of events following the October Revolution, it ended up in Montenegro, then part of Yugoslavia, where it was eventually hidden from the public for several decades. Today it is exhibited in the National Museum of Montenegro, in a totally dark room illuminated only by Philermosa's gold and diamond covering. Indeed, strange are the ways of destiny.

Another historical event brings together Malta and Yugoslavia. In 1945, Hajduk, then the official football team of the Yugoslav partisan resistance led by Josip Broz Tito, embarked on a tourney through the Mediterranean. On 25 March, they met with the team of Malta at the Empire Stadium in Gżira. As only the Yugoslav and the British national anthem 'God Save the King' were played before the match, thousands at the stadium rose up in protest and sung the Maltese anthem, '*Innu Malti*'. This has inspired Ružar Briffa (1906–1963), who was in the crowd on that day, to write what's arguably one of the most patriotic poems of Maltese literature, '*Jum ir-Rebħ*', in which masses, united, stand up and shout, demanding equal treatment and an end to humiliation: '*Jien Maltija!* – 'I am Maltese! Woe to him who mocks me, woe to him who laughs at me!' Is there a more noble cause?

Yugoslavia, the land of my ancestors, exists no more. Like Odysseus, we, too, are left in troublesome search of home, in a permanent state of exile, but ours is an eternal punishment by the devious gods. As Yugoslavia broke into a myriad of pieces, we are now condemned to finding them recurrently all over the world – in Malta, too – whilst knowing for sure, however, that no human should ever be able to collect them all. Still, each piece tells a bittersweet story of a lost civilization that once resisted the chains of colonialism and oppression.

Translated from Maltese by the author



Gabriel Schembri

is a former investigative journalist, writer, and communications coordinator for a human rights NGO. He published three books *Esklussiva Dotkom* (2014), which was short-listed for the national book prize, *Patria* (2017) and *Kafé Kolombja* (2024). His writing featured in other projects, including in a collection of short stories published by Klabb Kotba Maltin. He has also written and performed a number of poems at literary events, with the most recurring theme being migration. His Ulysses Shelter residency was on the island of Mljet.



Photo: Gianluca Schembri

The municipality of no choice

The sun makes everything on the island better. The sea is more blue, the green bush more lush. The mood a little brighter. But it's 'the Bura wind that makes everything clearer'. Or at least that was what the ferry worker told Gustav once he landed from mainland Croatia. And it was this blizzard cold wind that pushed him all the way to the island of Mljet.

The wind vents violently in between the tiny inlets of Babino Polje, Mljet's main village, right in the middle of the 50km-long island. The village is home to less than 260 people in winter, including a fireman, a nurse, a visiting chaplain, half a dozen teachers, a librarian, a bus driver and a baker. And for a couple of months, this community will now also have to count Gustav among its pack.

It's the early months of the year 2005. Gustav is by now a seasoned writer and researcher who was, some years back, commissioned to write about the Slav coast and its islands following the war of the early 1990s.

He has been touring the coast on this side of the Mediterranean since 1995, producing a handful of well-researched books. One island, one coast after another. All the way from the Cursed Mountains in Albania, to the tiny rocky islands littering the coast of Croatia.

With the population in winter being so small, everyone on the island knew that there was a stranger in their midst. In a matter of days, he worked on understanding the machinery of the island. The location of the only shop, the one restaurant and, very importantly, an illegally run bar which housed very decent local red wine, made by the owner himself.

The conglomeration of men smoking at the corner of the bar appeared like a theatrical scene from a Greek tragedy. Their unrelenting puffs of smoke smudged the dim light from the electricity bulb in the middle, engorged their shadows against the ancient wall of the bar and produced a cloud of mysticism to a bar on an island which was already mystique, in every literary quality.

Although, as Gustav would discover, there wasn't much of a literary culture to speak of in Mljet. And the men looked at Gustav as if he were committing some bizarre atrocity when, after ordering his wine, he sat in a corner and opened his notebook and landed his reading book on the table.

'You're a writer?' said an aged voice in one dark corner. Gustav only managed to make out his wrinkled face through the flame at the end of his thick cigarette.

'I am, yes. I came here to research...

The man interrupted him. 'Nah nah nah... if you are into books, you ought to speak to Ivana.'

'Who is Ivana?' Gustav asked.

'The lady who opened the room with books.'

'You mean a library?' *That was a weird way to describe a conventional library*, thought Gustav.

'It's a room... with many books. Ivana runs it. Speak to her. The rest of us here, we are not into books,' the man said dismissively.

'Ok... thank you.' Gustav wanted to extend the conversation and perhaps explain that one way to learn about the island was to speak to the locals. But given the omni-directionality of the conversation, it was clear that this man was not willing to tell much.

His evening at the bar did not, however, leave him empty-handed.

As he went to pay for his wine, Gustav asked about Ivana, the lady of the many books in a little room.

'Yes, her room is just down by this same road. The main road of Babino Polje. How are you travelling?'

'By foot,' said Gustav, very matter-of-factly.

Then the owner behind the bar shouted at the four men sitting in the smoky corner and yelled something in Croatian. After a couple of minutes, the man behind the bar told him: 'That guy. He will lend you a bike. But good luck with cycling here. It's many ups and downs. And Mljet has had many more ups than downs in recent years... you'll see.'

-

'Are you Ivana?'

The woman in her late forties emerged from between the tall piles of books like Godzilla between the skyscrapers of Manhattan. She was wrapped in a thick chequered blanket which looked heavy and stained with years.

'So you're the writer?'

Of course, like everyone else on the island, she knew Gustav was the latest addition to the odd popolis of Babino Polje.

'I am. I've come to Mljet to research on the recent years of the island, after the war of the nineties.'

'I know who you are,' Ivana muttered, as she scrambled for two glasses in one corner of the small room. She continued before Gustav asked for more; 'I've read your books. I probably have them here somewhere. You're good. You seem to go to places which tend to be overlooked. And Mljet is particularly overlooked, even by our own compatriots.'

Gustav could tell that this was an old building, but he could not see the traditional rubble walls that most of the Mljet old houses were made out of because of all the books.

'Quite a collection you have here,' he said as she passed him a cup with some red wine.

'It is the only collection of books you'll find on this island. The people here are not of the reading type. I have tried, believe me, to revitalise the literary interest here, but oh, it's been a struggle. I might as well keep the door open at night, cos no one will set a foot inside.'

In the limited space there was between them, Gustav tried to walk around and have a look at the titles. Ivana sat down and put some music on her newly acquired CD player. There was one book called *Parallel islands: Mljet and Malta*. Gustav grabbed it and asked Ivana if he could borrow it.

'Sure. This is an open library. Borrow what you want. As long as you get it back before you head to wherever you came from.'

And so he did. The book was a treasure trove for his research and Gustav devoured it in a couple of days.

Over the next few weeks, Gustav became a regular at this 'room with books', as the barman put it. Because that is what it really was, nothing much else to it.

Ivana grew accustomed to this stranger and she herself enjoyed the company. Although she did not speak much. Her mouth was often occupied downing glasses of red wine or holding a rolled-up cigarette. Notwithstanding, having another person sharing her space was pleasant, even for an eccentric like Ivana.

'I'm heading home soon. Do you want to stay more?' she asked as she grabbed her thick coat and a warm beanie.

The room was small but not very well lit. In fact, the only source of light was a yellow, warm-coloured bulb in the middle that provided this intense chiaroscuro effect on the myriad of books that cluttered these walls.

Ivana noticed that her departure was going to go unnoticed. 'Mr Gustav, I said I'm going home. Feel free to stay a while longer.'

Gustav emerged from an obscure corner of the room holding a thin book, of not more than a hundred pages.

'What is this book?' Gustav moved closer to the light. The title and the text inside were handwritten, not printed and the cover only contained *The Municipality of No Choice* as a title.

'Who wrote this? And why is it handwritten?' He looked at her.

Ivana was already holding the door open with the jacket in her hand, ready to leave. She looked towards the outside. Bura wind was persisting and the cold outside made it unbearable to just stand in anyone's doorway. It was either out or in. And by the looks of Gustav's discovery, she had to stay in.

'Ah, I see you found this library's precious manuscript.'

Gustav pulled over a small chair and sat down under the one source of light. Ivana closed the door shut, and Gustav opened the first page of the book.

Like many of you, I was born afflicted with the freedom of choice. As I grew up, I exercised myself into abolishing this burden, and piece by piece, I managed to live a simple life, free of anxiety, fear and insecurity.

'What is this? Who wrote this? Is it a draft of some sorts?' Gustav fired his questions without looking up at the only other person in the room.

Ivana pulled a chair next to him and grabbed the book in her hand. She opened a random page:

To make my life even more simple, choiceless, I became vegan. So when I came to the only restaurant open on the island, I got myself absolutely no option, unburdened with a redundant choice from a needy menu. I made my life simpler. I was, here too, free, completely.

She smiled and shook her head as she read this.

'You know the author,' said Gustav as he saw her smile.

'Yes. Yes, I did.'

Gustav was waiting for some more elaboration from her.

'No one bothered to come here for a very long time. In fact, he was practically the only one attending this blessed library. You remind me so much of him, actually. Sitting here in these dark corners, reading.'

'Well, I am intrigued. I'd love to read it. Perhaps I'll take it home with me, Ivana. I know you were on your way out. I don't want to keep you.'

'No,' she said immediately.

'This book does not leave these four walls. The people out there... they wouldn't understand.'

Gustav didn't quite get what she meant by that but the woman in front of him seemed adamant not to have the book moved from here.

'Let's revisit this tomorrow, what do you think?' she asked, holding the book close to her chest.

-

In the few weeks living on the island, Gustav's flat got populated by newspaper cuttings, history books and little pieces of loose paper with handwritten notes. He had newspaper clippings of developments in the past decade, infrastructural improvement on the island as well as a number of odd disasters which stood out in an otherwise very uneventful island scenario.

There was a fire which destroyed most of the carob trees on the island, leaving many households dumbfounded as to how such a tragedy happened. The olive trees' owners, which constituted the other half of the population, helped out the families financially as their production never seized fire – the fire literally only destroyed the part where carob trees grew.

The newspaper clipping next to it spoke about the increase in population of goats and how it was affecting the human inhabitants who would randomly find goats grazing on their front lawns and destroying their crops.

The oddest of stories was preserved on a newspaper clipping which described the vanishing of a lone tourist who came to visit the island. There wasn't much detail about the woman. She was in her late thirties, and at the time of the visit, in January of 1997, she was practically the only tourist on the island. Her last known whereabouts was the olive passage which led to the Odysseus cave in the south coast of the island.

So many stories to occupy his mind. But nothing, nothing, caused more intrigue than that handwritten manuscript he found at the library.

So, the next morning, right after his first coffee, he got onto his bike and sped down towards Ivana's library.

Gustav found Ivana at her usual seat, sipping coffee this time, not wine. And in her hands, piles of loose paper. *The Municipality of No Choice* was there next to her, unopened.

'What are you reading?' Gustav asked.

'Letters I received over the years.'

He smiled at her reply. In the weeks he'd known her she never gave in to any deep human sentiment. But today, this morning, the woman in front of him seemed to carry a warm, loving look. Albeit Gustav noticed a twinge of melancholy weighing on her smile.

'You're here for the book. Here.' She passed on the handwritten manuscript before he could ask more questions about the letters she was clenching in her hands.

Gustav sat down, poured himself some of the freshly brewed coffee and opened the book. The handwriting was refined, clear enough for anyone to read.

This book was the final version of multiple writing try-outs, thought Gustav. The author didn't sit down for one long night and cover the whole thing. Whoever this person was, he or she must have written it after compiling little pieces of texts, of information, or in this case, arguments in this 'manifesto'. And it was well written. Being a writer himself, Gustav could appreciate the craftsmanship of the language used.

At first Ivana sat a few metres away from him, reading her letters. But at one point, after some time, Gustav lifted his face and eyed her with curious intrigue. She deemed it wise to give this man some space.

Or, perhaps, she was the one who needed space to breathe.

She got her coat and left. For once, Mljet was blessed with a nice sun and no wind. a walk would do Ivana a lot of good. And perhaps right now, a long walk was the only thing she needed.

A couple of hours later, she headed back to the library. Gustav's coffee mug was replaced with a glass of red wine. The book was closed in front of him. And his face was stunned. Ivana knew he had devoured it all in one go. She had barely any time to put her coat on the hanger; Gustav turned to her for questions.

'You knew the author?'

'I did,' replied Ivana as she sat down.

'I met him the first time when I used to work at the local mini-market. The manager called me to go clean the aisle where the clothes detergents were. I walk there and I see Igor – that's his name – lying on all fours. He had just thrown up.'

Gustav had no idea where this story was going. Ivana continued.

'I asked him if he was feeling sick. His face was wet with sweat. He was... beautiful.'

Igor had stood up abruptly and left the mini-market without looking up at the shelves, eyes on the floor, as though ashamed, but mostly angry.

'I knew something was off with this man. So I followed him out.'

Igor had turned to face her. She had realised then that she had never seen him on the island before – which either meant that he had just arrived or that he didn't interact much. It was a small population, and everyone knew who was inhabiting the village.

'Since when do you have so many different brands of laundry detergents?' That was the first thing Igor asked Ivana.

'What? That was his opening line?' Gustav asked, intrigued now more than moments before.

'Yes. I sat with him for a while. He looked traumatised, poor man. He explained to me that he had thrown up upon seeing so many different choices on the detergent section of the mini-market. You see, he later confessed to me that he suffered from severe anxiety. And that his main trigger was choice.'

'Choice?'

'Options, alternatives... to things which could otherwise be clear and straight forward. For Igor, choice was like a looped prison. a source of tremendous anxiety and tension.'

Ivana recalled how the two had sat under an olive tree. Igor had opened up, as though talking to a long-lost friend, divulging every little detail of this particular malaise of his.

Back at the library, Gustav looked at his book in hand. *Choice. The Municipality of No Choice.*

'So this book, this manuscript is...'

'It's his manifesto. To live in a world free of choice. Unburdened by alternatives. That is why he had travelled to Mljet. This was to be his perfect, safe ground.'

At this point Gustav needed to stand up, to make sense of what he had just learned and what he had read in the small book.

'Do not judge him, please. He was a sick man, taunted by an obsession. Whatever you read, whatever you may have understood from the words he wrote, don't rush into anger or judgement.'

'Choice...' Gustav said, although he wasn't even sure if he was talking to Ivana or himself.

'At some point he had to choose more than a simple laundry detergent, did he?'

And he recalled the passage of how he would become so annoyed when, while hiking the Olive Path which goes all the way under the village of Babino Polje, he would find two paths which would take you to the exact same destination.

Why are people so obsessed with handing out alternatives? Stick to one path. Why should there be two paths to the same destination, if the one that is already there is perfectly fine? So I went, one night, and chopped down a big tree and closed off the alternative roads. I slept better that night, knowing that I made my life simpler.

Gustav recalled this particular passage now as he walked around.

'But then his obsession grew wilder, didn't it?' he said. 'Choice of food, paths... who to love, even. These choices burdened him deeply.' He was no longer sitting down, pacing around, and his brain was on a fast track of joining the dots and making connections.

Then he stopped and looked at the woman in front of him.

'Oh my god... the woman, the tourist who disappeared in the cave back in '97.'

Ivana looked down.

'And these letters. They're from him. Right?' he asked.

Gustav's eyes on her made her uneasy, but she had an accepting, resigned look on her face as he continued to fire questions towards her:

'You did not only know him, did you? He fell in love with you, that's why he did what he did... he eliminated his alternative, the other option. He wanted to get rid of any form of choice... including who to be with, who to love.'

The newspaper cutting in his little flat suddenly flashed before his eyes as he said this.

'Igor was a romantic. He was, like you, a writer. He stole my heart, writing to me poems about Mljet, beauty and the sun. He used to get inspired after long walks round the island. He only carried a bottle of water, a reading book and a writing notepad. I was in love with him too, yes. But I could tell that, despite his love, he could not relax and simply be with me. Something was holding him back.'

'It was his woman back home,' blurted out Gustav.

'He had only just started seeing her,' Ivana added.

'It destroyed him, poor man,' she proceeded. 'To know that he came all the way to Mljet to eliminate choice, but left being unable to deal with the harshest of alternatives – who to love. That is the biggest choice of all. And Igor wanted to deal with it.'

Gustav could not utter much after that. His mind was picking up pieces of little puzzles from the things he learned while on the island, and collaged them with what Igor wrote in his manuscript.

The burning of the carob trees incident – was it him? Did he want to eliminate even the choice of produce of the island? It sounded too crazy to even speak of it in front of Ivana, although she would, indeed, be the only one who could possibly understand him.

'The letters you were holding this morning...'

'They were all his, yes. This island inspired him. And he produced some of the best pieces of literature I ever saw.'

Then Ivana walked towards the desk and chose one from the pile of handwritten letters.

'I've never shared these with anyone. But I gather you will appreciate the words, even if they were written by a madman.'

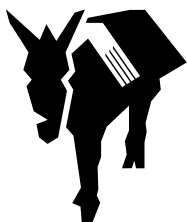
Gustav took the letter and started to walk back home. He stopped at the highest point of the village and sat down for a while, opening the letter he had just been handed and read the last bit of a very long poem.

*Loving you is not fate's embrace,
but our choice made in time and space.
No stars aligned or destined ties,
but steady hands and willing eyes.*

*Each day we choose to stand or stray,
To mend, to trust, to give away.*

*Not just a dream, not just a voice,
You are my heart, my choice.*

The sun was about to set but the golden ball of flame it produced did not make things brighter. The Bura wind, however, did not disappoint. The cold gushing wind, just before the dark, made Gustav's stay on Mljet now clearer.



Kat Storace

is an editor, publisher and literary translator from Malta. She is the co-founder of Praspar Press, a UK-based small press dedicated to publishing Maltese writing in English and in English translation. Her first full-length translation, *what will it take for me to leave* by Lorraine Vella, published by the press in 2021, was shortlisted for the Society of Authors TA First Translation Prize. Her translations have appeared in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *The White Review* and *European Stories*. She is the recipient of a PEN Translates award for her English translation of Lorraine Vella's prizewinning novel *Rokit*, forthcoming from Praspar in 2025. Her Ulysses Shelter residency was in Belgrade.



Photo: K T Bruce

SIGNS AND WONDERS*

Prologue

There are no endings. If you think so you are deceived as to their nature. They are all beginnings. Here is one.

— Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*



I arrived in Belgrade yesterday morning and I've been out once so far, to pick up some groceries from the supermarket. It feels strange and defamiliarising to arrive again in a place where you know no one yet. I promised myself I'd use some of my time here to draft up a translator's note alongside redrafting my work-in-progress translation of Loranne Vella's novel, *Rokit*. So I'm keeping a notebook – a second notebook, I should say. The challenge, as it stands, is to write down the things I want to say, and so, each day, to open myself up, little by little, to what's around me. To allow myself to absorb it without fear or resistance.

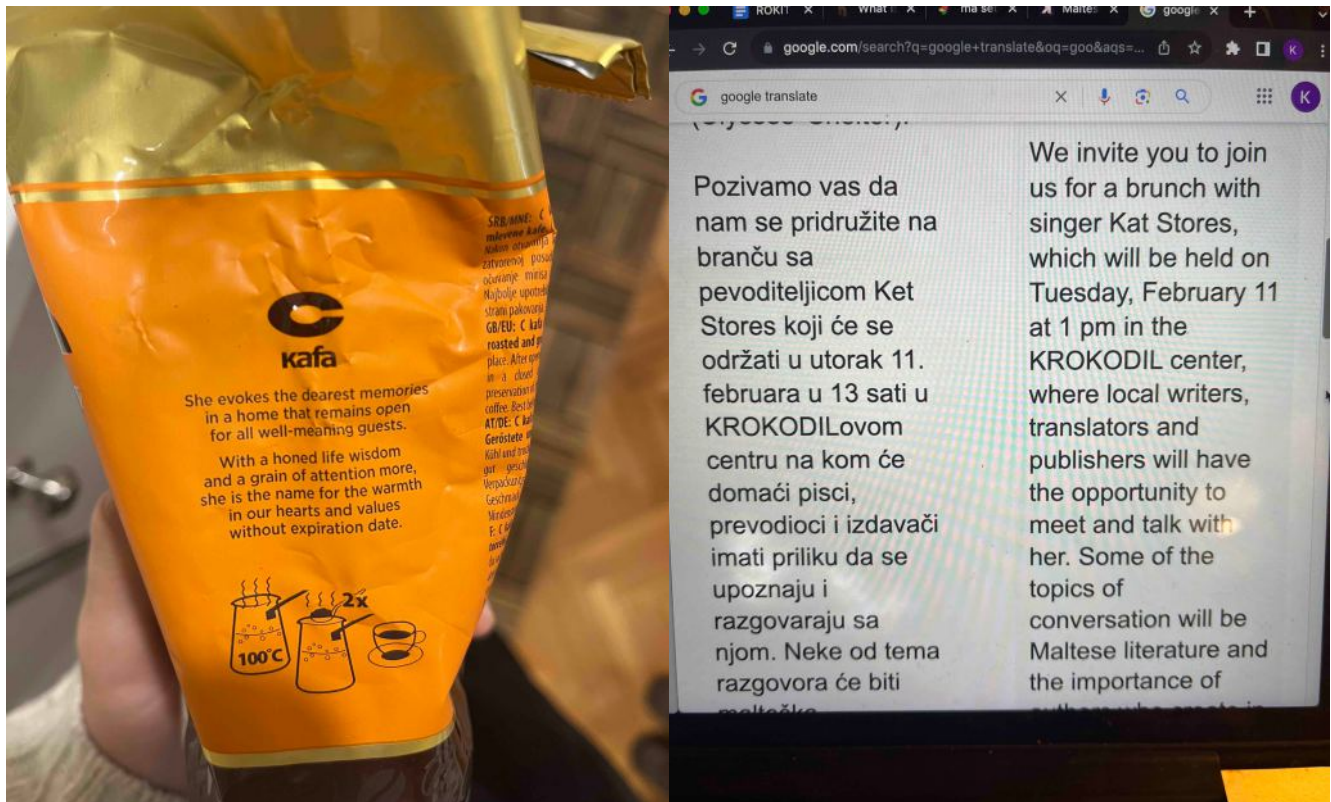
Over the next couple of weeks, as I work on my translation, I wish to probe my curiosity at being surrounded at all times by a new language that feels so unfamiliar in my eyes, my ears and my mouth, as I grapple, in the meantime, with transferring the cadences and nuances of Maltese into English. I feel my mind stretching in directions I've always wished it would, but had perhaps stopped reaching for.

Signs and wanders

The sun is out, so I go out in search of coffee. There's a small, cosy-looking place just down the road, and I go inside and grab a table. The coffee is delicious, as is the sunshine, pouring through the glass windows and bathing me in its warmth. I write, order a second coffee, consider my next moves while studying Google Maps on my phone.

Whenever I'm in a new city, I go in search of its botanical gardens. I find comfort in wandering around these bizarre zoos filled with trees and plants. At Jevremovac botanical gardens, just a short walk away, I find I'm almost the only person there. It's a brown time of year for the trees and flowering plants that line the pathways, so I linger at the labels skewered into the soil. I'm none the wiser for reading them, with their odd system of italics, abbreviations and language hierarchies. But it's a fun game of deduction, not dissimilar to translation. Like, the *dracaena angolensis* (from angola), for instance: the 'cylindrical snake plant', which I recognise from its Serbian denotation, 'sansevierija'.





My coffee speaks to me (and other mistranslations)

Back at the apartment, my coffee speaks to me. Or, to be exact, the writing on the coffee packet threads some English words together to try to impart something to me. You can tell immediately that the two brief paragraphs have been translated into English from an undisclosed language. Badly, at that. The text reads like a badly mangled culprit of Google Translate. But I appreciate the strangeness of the words as I'm waiting for my coffee to brew, strung together in a sequence that defies any real sense but still manages to conjure up a feeling: nostalgia, home, warmth, timelessness.

Speaking of mistranslations. I conduct my own experiment and run the details of my event at KROKODIL Centre next week through Google Translate. I'm delighted to discover that it has turned me into a singer.

The past is an island

Petrel looked around, staggered by this giant and incredible discovery he'd just made, and then at the live image, in real time, of the whole of Malta projected onto the ground in the centre of the camera obscura.

I wake up to another sunny morning in Belgrade. Not for the first time, the bright rays filtering through the bedroom curtains surprise me. I think I've mastered the method of preparing my coffee on the stove in the Serbian coffee pot I found at the apartment – it produces a dark, almost thick, unclean brew, slightly silty, but with a strong biscuity flavour. I can't get enough of it. It makes me happy, this morning ritual of waking up, reading, brewing coffee and drinking it in the sunshine. I don't kick into work until later, when the morning pivots into the afternoon and so, perhaps, lose the best part of the day. But I'm up late at night and struggle to wake up and get going before ten. I am trying, still, to be accepting of myself, my rhythms, ebbs and flows – to embrace my natural patterns and not to think of time in terms of wins and failures.

I set off toward the city centre to meet the KROKODIL team at their headquarters. The walk is straightforward. I've traced the route again and again on the map on my phone: one straight line from the apartment along Bulevar Despota Stefana. Belgrade is a place for which I have no mental blueprint – I'm still working out how to be in it. On reaching Republic Square I'm met with an unnatural quiet. a crowd has gathered and people are standing still, facing the direction of Vase Carapica in silence. I don't check the time, but I guess it's around 11.45, or just after. Later, I learn that this silence occurs everyday at 11.52 a.m., in memory of the people who lost their lives in the Novi Sad railway station tragedy earlier this year.



Later that week, I take a walk through Kalemegdan Park overlooking the confluence of the rivers Sava and Danube. As I pass under one of the fortress gates, I spot something familiar out of the corner of my eye. It is an old map hoisted on a wooden easel outside an exhibition of masterpieces of geographical history. An old map, no less, of the Maltese Islands.

'The days flow and I flow with them'**



Inside these walls that surround me I've started to find shelter – as long as there's a window for me to look outside and to allow the light to filter in and hit the wall opposite.

Since I've been in this apartment I've been making tiny observations. My life has become simpler, more predictable. I wake up around nine or ten, put the kettle on the stove and pour out a bowl of muesli and spoon some greek yoghurt onto it. I make tea and sit, eat and read until my brain starts to sharpen into focus. I text Imo, my parents, Jen, and push down any anxieties about the world outside threatening to derail my pure state of mind. Then, I get dressed, wash my face and teeth, and sit down at my desk – to write, to think and translate. On some days I plan my moves with clinical precision before venturing out. I set myself a small objective: buy pasta, take myself for lunch, visit a bookshop. I spend a few hours outside – walking, observing, breathing in the sunshine and icy air. I speak to practically no one. When I get back, always before dark, I make myself another cup of tea

and dive back into my work. I stay up late, stopping only to make some dinner or to take a shower, and then I prepare a hot water bottle, turn off the lights and climb into bed, where I read and watch history documentaries on YouTube on my phone in the dark.

I enjoy this simplicity, this predictably. I'm like my dog, who knows exactly what to expect out of each day. It means I don't worry about the things I'm missing out on. It takes discipline of sorts, an acceptance of the little things – tiny steps towards the light. There is a joy, for me, in this repetitive existence, like the soothing thump-thump of my feet on the ground beneath me during my daily walks.

And then, there's the light. Day after day of unadulterated sunshine in the middle of winter. Inside my small room where I work, the sunlight travels from left to right, diminishing in intensity as the day wears on. I've learnt its rhythms. The sun hits the balcony at around 10.30 a.m. and it's possible, by 11.30, to sit out there and drink my coffee until around midday, by which time it's moved along and reappears minutes later, blasting through the four-panelled window. It settles, like a bird, on my desk, my hands, my face.

As the days go by, I also begin to think: yes, maybe, small spaces suit me better. As long as there is a window for me to look out of, and warm light filtering through it and hitting the wall opposite.

A rocket in the museum



Everything you want to know is in the picture.

In the National Museum of Serbia, in the section dedicated to Yugoslav Modern Art, I encounter a painting from the 1960s titled 'Rocket'. I stand in front of it for almost half an hour and I'm convinced this isn't a coincidence. Later that evening, I come across the following lines as I'm translating:

Petrel saw lines everywhere. And where they were absent, he imagined them: physical lines in the buildings and structures around him, the horizon in the distance and on walls close by, outlines required to give form and meaning to nothing.

It strikes me, as I write them down, that this is something I've always done, too. It's triangles for me – tracing them into corners and edges, surfaces and ceilings. Every square or rectangle split diagonally once, twice, in search of symmetry. I always thought of this habit as a mental exercise for bringing order to chaos, or rhythm, perhaps, a sense of pattern and repetition which I find soothing. Is this what Loranne does, too, I wonder? Does she trace over the world in invisible lines? I want to ask her this right now. But it's 1.10 a.m.

Sorry, today I don't have a day off.



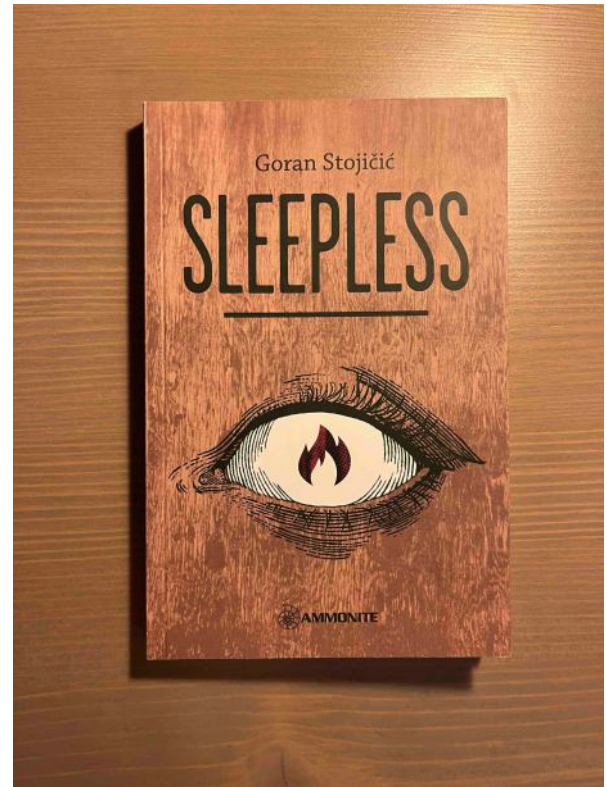
The days dissolve so that there are nearly none left. How does time do that, act like there's surplus and then, all of a sudden, it's galloping off into the distance and you can barely keep up? I regret not staying longer, but I know that's just false logic. Time speeds up no matter what, once the newness has settled into a daily routine, into a city you've mapped out in your head and with your feet. And as the sense of an ending looms, I pick up my feet and start running: the inevitable race to the finish line, cramming in words and thoughts, and all the things I want to do read think before I'm catapulted back into the real world.

Each day my patterns creep later and later into the night. Maybe it's the amount of coffee I'm drinking, or the adrenaline of the work itself, or a heady mix of both. Last night, I went to bed at 2.20 a.m. with my heart pounding, my legs restless, my mind racing. All this because I'd caught a whiff of the end, I'd broken through some wall in my own words. I could see the puzzle before me: X words in X amount of time. The challenge delighted me. Finishing the translation was no longer a perhaps, a when, an unanswered question. I'd almost arrived at the so-called end point and could just about hold the entire work in my hands.

Sleepless

In *Rokit*, characters disappear through time portals, bending time back and forth, so that every ending is a beginning and 'all is always now'. I have a sense of being inside this cycle, this circle, this merry-go-round.

I haven't slept in two nights. I climb into bed and watch history documentaries about the Tudors on my phone; I listen to Hilary Mantel's Reith Lectures on writing the past; I read Solvej Balle's *On the Calculation of Volume I*, which, coincidentally, is about a woman falling out of time. I randomly pick out a book from the bookshelves in the bedroom: *Sleepless* by Goran Stojičić.



The beginning of the end

Everything has its moment. Everything arrives in the end, all you have to do is wait.

And here I am during each of these days, inside a time bubble of my own. Each day repeats itself, in a sense. Would it just go on repeating, if I continued to sit here, if I had more time? This ending, which will also end on Monday, marks a new beginning.

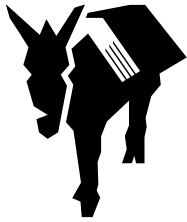
I sit with the past and contemplate its place in the here and now. I think about Hilary resurrecting the dead. I think about Belgrade and its past, echoes of it visible everywhere. I think about my dear friend Teo, whose own personal history is tied up to this city's. And I think about the imagined history of Malta Loranne has written into Rokit, which I'm now rewriting into history, in a new language, a new form.

The connections come – a soft cloud descending over my head – inviting me to grasp at the nebulous particles as they float past and to rearrange them in whatever order the story makes sense to me. It feels like an extension of the act of translation: these images, these words begetting words, traversing universes, defying time. All of them, signs and wonders.

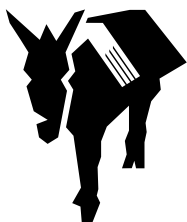


* All images are my own. All quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from my working draft of *Rokit* by Loranne Vella, forthcoming from Praspas Press (2025).

** From *On the Calculation of Volume I* by Solvej Balle, tr. Barbara J. Haveland (Faber, 2025).



POETRY



Višnja Begović

(* 1995, Belgrade) earned her BM in Vocal Performance from Berklee College of Music in Boston, and her MA in Arts Administration from Baruch College in New York City. Her poems can be found in online magazines and journals, as well as in several printed collections featuring contemporary poets of the ex-Yugoslavia region. Her first poetry book *Džet-Leg* (Jet-lag) was published in 2023. Her Ulysses Shelter residency was in Prague.



Photo: author's archive

Unsent email from New York

You refuse to use technology
I can't call you
and ask you to name
the tree that's growing by the church

Spring exists outside your yard
the muffled sound of trains
reminds me of your neighbour's engine
humming in the distance

My new friends
know how much you love apples
they recognise our similarities
even though you've never met

You wouldn't like it here
this city is arrogant
there's too much concrete

I think you'd have things to say
about the excessive portions
unnecessary food waste

Grandpa, I'm the only one
looking up at the treetops

Ms Linda wants to tell me something

She says that in Tennessee
finding a good church is everything

That's how she met her husband
dedicated her life then
to maintaining the parish plants

Her daughter is a good girl
every Sunday, she lets her forehead fall
on fragile folded palms

Unlike her sister Mary
who went to California in the seventies
in search of a real God
found a painter
and stopped picking up

It had to end badly
Mary was a wanderer

Yosemite

I was so tiny
beneath the granite cliffs

When I put my palm to the redwood tree
there was no one there to share it with

A Japanese man once told me
about his sense of responsibility towards his ancestors

Sometimes in the shower, he would massage his scalp a little longer
in case they liked the feeling, too

I'm not that noble
always looking for overgrown trails

Dragging them through the bushes,
my invisible companions, if there are any

That Thursday, the risk of wildfire
pushed me towards the water

I was thinking about the redwoods
older than my family tree

How many people fit
in their thick red rings

And when my feet finally
touched the ice cold shallow

I thought I heard
hundreds of sighs around me

Cows running through the Salinas River

At the warehouse, a stack of crates
sits under the hot dust

The American flag
seduces passers-by from the mast

I know that the workers
don't look up in admiration
while wiping sweat away with their forearms

The flag is there for people like me
who are trying to put a frame on something
even this desolation

The cows are running
careless, they stop at the first watering hole

Arlington, Vermont

I love the tender closing out of May
the gradual return of
birds and denim jackets

I've spun this web over two continents
without tangling the threads

A can opens
over in the next yard

All is calm on Cypress Street

Ode to girlfriends

Most of what I know about love
I learned from our goodbyes
the hugs that always said

Go

Translated from Serbian by the author



Josip Čekolj

(*1999) is the author of poetry books *Junaci i zmajevi u zalasku* (The decline of heroes and dragons, 2022), *Dječak pred žetvu* (A boy before the harvest, 2023) and *Doba beskorisnih umnjaka* (The age of useless wisdom teeth, 2024), as well as books for children. His short stories and poems have been published in regional and Croatian magazines and anthologies, including a series of acrostic poems entitled *Rukovet noćnih putovanja* (A wreath of nocturnal journeys), created as part of Booksa's Small Literature Review project was published in the anthology *Vrijeme misli* (Time of thoughts, 2021). He is currently pursuing a master's degree in Croatian language and early modern history at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. In addition to his studies, he works as a literary editor, and in 2022 he edited a collection of selected fantastic stories by E. M. Forster titled *The Machine Stops and Other Stories*. His Ulysses Shelter residency was in Larissa.



Photo: Ana Svržnjak

The decline of heroes and dragons

(growing up)

as caterpillars still climbed up my thighs
tugging on those first, white hairs,
saints fell from the skies
one by one

I put away my fear of stoning into a box,
but sometimes it still slithers out in the middle of the night
and licks my shivering knees with its venomous tongue

I've seen the fear of death
in the visits Grandpa would pay to the brandy in the cellar
and in Grandma's worn-out prayer book
and in spasms rippling through skin

the fear of self
lies in the hidden flintlock and the blunt knife,
in unconsumed drugs and unconsumed beds,
in forged-iron shackles on one's wrists

and all those things had to be written in the dirt with a stick
and all those things had to be passed over in silence
and all those things had to be forgiven

the moon's eyes have been swollen
with insomnia for billions of years,
sometimes we switch places,
sympathise with each other

I give him my bed, even if it's no nest,
I offer him my bed linen, even if it's no fur,
in return he gives me some violet canvas
I can draw on, I splatter the paint with my hair
and let anxiety drip
all across the universe,
Moon and I sympathise with each other

foxes sneak into my lap
and together we count violet-dusted moths,
then they tell me about swiftness and freedom,
resourcefulness and passion, I feel goosebumps listening to them,
imagining a run in the vastness of ancient times

hidden birds remind us
this isn't something we've been ordered to do,
but we enjoy playing tricks and hiding,
we love masks and being on the stage,
what else is there to do if we can't sleep

under the mask of a bear
you approach the buds of our transience,
you lick the honey clouds and grunt at startled birds

you walk slowly among the beech trees you have wounded,
lowering your melancholy thoughts, paw by paw,
onto the inconspicuous ants,
the mask suffocates you more and more and grows into your tender skin,
it's flattened your walnut-like nose and bent your strawberry ears
like the corners of a picture book, yet you don't take it off, fearing touch

fearing the noise of bells and pots you've been beaten with
by those who you watched over, fearing the ashes they've thrown in your eyes,
the ashes of your falls, stories, truces and proverbs

under the mask of a bear
you wander slowly as if waiting for Gypsies to chain you,
Circus-Performers to cage you, Whites to put a bullet in you

under the mask of a bear
you don't miss the cross-shaped villages
nor the summits of gigantic, menacing mountains

under the mask of a bear
you've forgotten to use your tongue for kisses and song,
you've forgotten to use your arms to provide warmth,
you've forgotten your crib and your mother and your roars

you've become what you'd always wanted to become – a wild animal,
yet lonely

my chest is slowly turning into white tendrils,
frightened bees swarm among my curls,
the sky has been stained by our footsteps,
a scrapbook for blue nights

how cold those riders are that have been charging through us these days,
when they pass through my lungs – I feel loneliness,
when they pass through my knees – I feel longing

Regoč, lift me up onto your oaken shoulders,
Regoč, lift me up to your ear

Regoč the famous, Regoč the great,
lift me higher, higher, I beg you, I beg you,
lift me up so I'm taller than Medvednica and Ivanščica,
so I can see all my friends, bold yet doomed, in their gardens,
so I can see them planting new flowers, marigolds and daisies,
finding empty snail shells and seashells
from the Pannonian Sea, see them making beds
and singing to tomatoes and peppers to grow faster, faster,
lift me higher up, Regoč, so I can peep
over the edge of the bowl, oh bearded Regoč, shaggy Regoč,
lift me higher, higher, I beg you, I beg you,
so I can see my friends
weeding their loneliness

we grew up in a single swing of the dragonfly's wings
the windows haven't seen dawn for months now
and our hands have become transparent in sugar-fish water,
I waded into the rapids to catch at least one for us,
I snatched nothing out but a blue stone for my breath-islands

hands smell brown and they smell of the forest
Grandma smells of porcini and chestnuts,
we have caught the fear
of woodland mice,
we have learned
how to hide
from others

to huddle behind a tree, inside a tree, in a tree,
to transform our bodies into moss

tongues are tired from boredom,
your fingers are tired from severe idleness,
tell me a story about the explorers of warmer climes,
about their terrible machetes and tiger-claw scars,
silk tents and mosquito bites,
about the thrill of some forgotten city
or the splendour of an ancient tomb

here, darkness has already lain down on skies,
it has stretched its paws over the crowns of trees,
it has stuck silence out on its bristly tongue
and encircled us with its tail – that cruel god of ours

my lungs
are dewy fields of hellebores,
ruined white cities for fairy horses

let's go to sleep in a miraculous pistil
and wake up in the next decade,
perhaps until then Saint George will have returned from the underworld
and swung his sword toward the dragon's scaly neck,
in his helmet he might bring the earliest primroses
and the breeze from off your buds

in a dream, playful dragonflies buzz through your eyes,
and when you raise the curtain they might fly out
into our little green room,
perhaps then the wings will return
from those first, soft days

at the end of the path
there is a nest, a den, a grove,
a place, warm and tight,
that covers you, hides you, shelters you
when the fists of fathers and grandfathers go berserk
and when the heavens lose their temper
unjustly

and that place needs to be rebuilt
always anew, from picked flowers,
fallen leaves and twigs, tufts of blown wool
and a fistful of warm earth

you are afraid, I know, afraid
of the words family, dwelling, domicile,
kinship, lineage, relatives, childbirth,
all those primary cells of society,
uneasy because they're unhappy

wounded does are shot out of compassion,
fawns become orphans, and their home is now like jagged lightning,
like gasps of fish out of water, a bottomless wound,
an astonished o, an unvoiced collapse

blood is neither milk nor dew,
it is a log bridge washed away by the swollen river

during sleepless nights we rebuke our ancestors,
they are to be blamed for our imperfect shape,
it is easy to forgive, it is hard to forget,
words are bruises and cuts
taking a turn is sometimes justified so as to avoid further accidents,
crossroads are always dangerous, choices are always the wrong ones
build that den in the ravine, survive the winter

the storks are leaving us, descending into amber twilights

I kiss the top of your left shoulder,
I play with the coffee beans in your earlobes

like nesting in a belly of dewy grasses,
soft and secure – that's how it feels to enter your embrace

you recite to me
friendships are sacred, loves are fleeting,
but in the eyes of the storks everything is fleeting and sacred at once

plum jam spills over the skies and my hands,
everything is burnt and sweet,
wasps and ants are already coming,
the poems are all written, the gardens are all hoed,
a shard of the forest has pierced my chest, I've been whispering
to gentle hares let me be saved, let me be
a child, let me be a child of wax,
let me make the deserted birch groves warm again

Translation from Croatian by Goran Čolakhodžić



Klára Krásenská

(*1995) is a Czech poet, literary critic and occasional translator. She graduated in historical sciences from the Catholic Theological Faculty and Czech language and literature from the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, where she is currently studying comparative literature, and works in the Museum of Literature. She co-authored the book *Teorém kamenné zahrady* (Theorem of the stone garden, 2023) which innovatively maps and reflects on the studio and garden of the Czech pre-war sculptor Bohumil Kafka. Her debut poetry collection *Mýtinami* (Through the clearings, 2023), shortlisted for the coveted Magnesia Litera prize, was followed by her second, *Veni, veni* in 2025. Her Ulysses Shelter residency was in Caernarfon.



Photo: Karel Cudlín

The quarry

The surface blueish with rain,
spellbound fish swim in procession,
invoking their dead,
as if bodiless.

They left their clothes on the bank,
and the water lit up,
that's when she cut her foot on a stone.

The rain fell without end.
He carried her to the car in his arms,
they burned the beef,
but she only noticed the wound the next day.

They made love then in vain,
in vain without pity.

Hillock

The field trodden down with snow
only now opens up for walking.
Translucent darkness sweeps in under the moon
mist over the stream, charcoal-black fleece.

They drag the sled behind them
as if they were to renounce themselves
on the way to eternity.

It's in subtle movements
that closeness is attained, and look –
something is shining through the snow.

The field is lit by windows
like a table set for a celebration,
but the windows reflect blood
lamb's blood, sunset red.

The desk

Hasn't she noticed that she's made herself at home on unreturned land? That an inn looms at her window, that here on every hill there's a farmstead with a collapsed roof, that every secluded place contains another? Hasn't she noticed that the linden trees in the yard are unable to grow taller than the roof? Last year their branches were cut down, a hound sits on them and at night tries to force its way in through the windows. An old hag passes on her way to buy a dumpling before noon, you say: 'I saw it, cobwebs hanging all around her, she reeks of urine, fries the dumpling with eggs.' Did she ever look back from that apartment left by the dead? The hound gallops over the roofs with the old hag on its back all the way to Opřetice, where they stole your cherry orchard. She can't not know that the Žebrák hill is just the shift of a gaze away, from here, from her desk.

Celebration in white

As if it were a spring evening and the fires still burning
white smoke from chimneys and brushwood also
lingering between the hills.

Always one sound or another: the floor,
the gate, tablecloths being shaken out,
even an ambulance heading back somewhere.

Tits fluttering in the empty bushes, we call it
silence.

Setting the table and chairs for dinner
Don't let the sheets soak up all that smoke!
I hesitate in the empty kitchen. Then go to wash
clean hands.

That garden had never been there

Morning after morning she grinds coffee,
approaches the window:
will the dead man be there again, the one who
on another morning hanged himself from the walnut tree?

The son had already cut off the rope,
full of shame at the gate
terribly crosswise, begging with his eyes:
for the love of God, carry me out three times across the threshold.

The hide buyer

It's still snowing yet here they already work the fields,
you didn't even manage to change your shoes, slip off
your camisole.

After the winter the buyer came, axe into the willow and blood pours out at once.
"Hides, hides!" Of a virgin skinned, skinned with a stone.

You beg him: "Get up and hang out that soft
death of yesteryear on the fence."

A van criss-crosses the village, silently you don't disrobe,
don't beg for mercy,
a year from now you'll be still granted tenderness, still
hold each other in your mouths.

Translation from Czech by Alexandra Büchler



Ondřej Lipár

is a poet, journalist, and photographer. He has published three books of poetry: *Skořápky* (Nutshells, 2004), *Komponent* (Component, 2014) and *Retro* (2023). For more than a decade, he cooperated with the respected publisher Éditions Fra. Since 2020, together with Barbora Votavová, he has been producing *Do slov*, a literary podcast. He was chairman of the Czech Writers' Association and currently works as the Managing Editor of *Vogue CS*. His Ulysses Shelter residency was in Larissa.



Photo: Jana Plavec

Pulse

All those migraines and bloodshot eyes
the insistent urge to adjust the carpet fringe
oases of peace among pots and pans
among bedspreads smooth on the bed
of no return

Who could have guessed that the path
leads through a narrow neck
a tight chest
shallow thin sleep
not through threading softly
not through a cat's claw

Your life is not the first
that I should
kindly slip away from

Framing

Summer is half-demolished deprived
of attention by jackhammers thundering
empty streets warmed
by cooled cars prolonging
echoing huffing and screeching

We say the whole world
by which we mean
I you and the contacts
that we share

Little eggplants and sauce
underneath the noodles
After the third sip
You're finally starting to
gradually spill the beans

Matter-of-factly
you mention a tumour
and a planned treatment
cutting of hair shopping
for kindergarten paying
the rent and utilities

Ashes to ashes, code to code
Sooner or later a situation
will evolve into someone's reaction
On the surface you're Luna
Mona Lisa on fire

Off season

The tide draws lines in the stones
Rounded rocks and pebbles
Thin foam and coarse sand
Larger and larger pebbles and concrete

The tide is Hypnos
I'm a kitten in a shady
terracotta pot
I don't know where I begin
where my limbs are

The city is melting faster and faster
I dream of days in a trench coat
and of wet leaves

Translated from Czech by the author



Ioanna Lioutsia

(*1992, Thessaloniki) has a background in theatre and acting, and is a PhD candidate at the Theatre Studies Department, University of Peloponnese with a thesis on the political dimensions of performance art in the Balkans. Her latest poetry book is *Ανοιχτά Φωνήεντα και Δαγκωμένα Σύμφωνα* (Wide vowels and bitten consonants, 2022). Her play *First we take Manhattan then we take Berlin* was shortlisted in Berliner Festspiele competition (2019), she won the 2nd award in playwriting competition of the State Theatre of Northern Aegean for the play *Τη Μοναξιά και τους Ανθρώπους να Φοβάσαι* (Beware of loneliness and people, 2014). She is a member of female street writers' group 'grafoules' and of the organizing team of the Mauve Medusas Literature Festival. She has been active as a performance artist since 2013 and has received the 3rd award in Performance Art category at the Florence Biennale 2021 for her piece *Κάθε μέρα είναι μέρα της γυναίκας* (Every day is a Woman's Day). She works as actress, director, dramaturg and facilitator of drama in education. Her Ulysses Shelter residency was in Belgrade.



Photo: Nikos Katsaros

Women wrecks

Women, wrecks
with their feet on twin towers
travel through the night.
They cake themselves in mud
so that they are to your taste
when you see them under the interrogating
light of day.

They lighten their hair:
bronze, brown, blonde.
Little by little they open up more and more.

Women, wrecks
are hanging by threads,
men's threads
– not fabric ones.
They wake up
before their husbands and
they wait.

Their lives are determined
by a memory from the future,
an image from their familiar past,
an image of a woman, wreck:
mother, sister, aunt, grandmother.
Cast out from their own creation

Women, wrecks make the world
And dwell outside of it.

The city at night

blankets
more blankets
piles of blankets
only blankets
blankets vertically
and blankets horizontally
in all shades of woollen brown
a road paved with blankets
among the blankets you'll find blankets
above below around the man
just blankets

– behind him though
inside the big toy store on the corner
pretty little dolls with their little pets
sleep in their little beds and cots
blissfully.

If poems were medicines

If poems were medicines
if poems were nutrition
if poets were on the streets
if they sat on low stools
if I once walked past them
if I were ill and found the courage
I would ask:
—How much is one for solitude?
—One and a half euros and it's yours.
If I had a euro and a half on me, I'd buy it.
if I weren't too curious, I'd read it at home.
if it was good, when it was over
I'd feel your hands dressing my body
if, of course, poems were medicines and I
was willing to cure you.

First morning bus

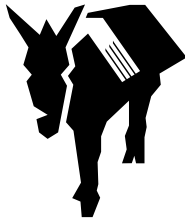
the time when the workers meet
the girls returning from a night out,
the bakeries turn on their lights majestically
for their daily premiere
and the lights of the nightclubs beside them look
dim as the day is breaking
 their people out of place
 in their ostensibly formal attire
the time is five o'clock
and a new routine dawns upon the city
unchanging;

but for someone, something might change today.

The end of purity

He who has not yet his mouth
spotted with food
holds in the first breath of youth.
The moment we start brushing our teeth
stands for
us reaching the age of the hunter.

*Translated from Greek by the author
'First morning bus' was translated by Yiannis Stamos*



Steffan Phillips

(*1987) is a multidisciplinary artist, researcher and facilitator from Wales. He holds a BA in Theatre, Music and Media and an MA in Welsh and Celtic Studies. He is currently studying for a PhD at Aberystwyth University exploring poetry films and is also involved in several theatre projects. He recently produced a zine in collaboration with artist Elin Angharad. His Ulysses Shelter residency was in Prague.



Photo: author's archive

Riddled

The peace lily's sick.

Her presence limp
at the dining table,
the twinkle in her eyes
faded.

She has no words
to explain how
we can cure her.
She doesn't know
herself.

But we talk to her,
ask about her day
as we watch *The Chase*,
before moving her
to the living room, ready
for the morning sun.

Treasures

Svalbard globale frøhvelv

I shall make a capsule.

Sift recipes –
the cawl, the pancakes, the Welsh cakes, the rice pudding,
and the nut roast.

And fold up stories –
the one about the cowshed,
the bus trips to Tenby,
nursery rhymes
and old sayings
neatly on top of each other.

And there'll be room
for birthday cards too,
side pockets for Polaroids.

Then I'll put a lid on it,
in case of dust,
and keep it
in a place I won't forget.

Square

I stuffed the tent into the boot
the pegs, the poles
with the odd crumb of soil, and
p a u s e d
in my dew-soaked socks,
to finish my grainy coffee.
And notice just there,
the sweaty, withered grass
we owned for a week
to awkwardly sleep,
cook pesto pasta,
and have silent sex.
In the tightening of leaving,
of returning to our confines,
there is a knowing that, before long,
the square will rediscover its colour,
and forget about us.

Worlds

SMACS 0723 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMACS_0723)

Stars

non-existent

by now

like last night's sourz.

Red giants, supernovas,
having swallowed planets whole,
and scattered into dust.

And here am I,
At four in the morning,
staring at them
with tomorrow's deadlines
orbiting my head.

Owning

We had to stand then,
suddenly,
so the final chords of Arwelfa
could bear us from Seion.

Some of the stories were unfamiliar
before today
And there are many more, I'm sure,
still there on her kitchen table
between the tin of pancakes
and the pot of lukewarm tea.

After lowering her, we grandchildren,
our palms burnt by the canvas tapes,
the chugging of the nearby tractor
was almost pleasant.

In the vestry, I tried to spot her
in pictures from the fifties,
requested a copy,
planned a pint.

And left
with a plate of leftovers in my hand.

Translated from Welsh by the author



Danae Sioziou

was raised in Germany and Greece, and works as a cultural manager and educator. Her books to date include her first poetry collection *Χρήσιμα παιδικά παιχνίδια* (Useful Children Games, 2016) which was awarded both the State Literary Prize for New Authors and Writers' Society Yannis Varveris Prize for Young Authors. Her second poetry collection *Ενδεχόμενα τοπία* (Probable Landscapes, 2021) was shortlisted for the National Poetry Prize. Both these books have been translated into German and published by Parasitenpresse. Her third book *Επιστολές* (Epistles), was published in November 2024. Her poetry has been translated into fifteen languages, anthologized (e.g. by Karen Van Dyck in *Austerity Measures*, 2016). She is the founder and curator of the Mauve Medusas Literature Festival. Her professional projects include collaborations with the Goethe Institute, Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, Kalk Literature Festival, Niarchos Foundation and Onassis Foundation. She has translated John Berger, Susan Sontag, modern German, Afro-American and Aboriginal poetry. Her Ulysses' Shelter residency was on the island of Mljet.



Photo: Dirk Skiba

Greek dream

I remember you driving in the mountains
on steep roads bending into hairpin turns
I am slightly dizzy
your voice fills the car
like old spring snow
there is a town next to a lake, clear as a mirror
where you return to find
everything you left behind
because it wasn't enough.

I know exactly what wasn't enough
what was left out, what you used to hold on to
if I look back, my gaze slides
to the end of the route that ripples like a ribbon
and then I see you on the balcony.

You are silent like the future.

I pass by the blond children,
the wife, the little country house,
the Greek dream
for which you gave your lives.

I walk decisively towards you
my feet bleed as if I were walking on snow
I cover your eyes with my hands and hug you:
I am ready to become all this old spring snow.

It's very simple: we don't know how to love each other.

You are silent.

I know that if you could you would return
to your childhood village,
long before the Greek dream.
I know it, because I look at you
through the eye of the talisman,
through the eye of an animal,
you keep silent like a secret
folding into itself.

You shouldn't have left anything behind
You should have just kept the secret.
Even now you can go up to the little house.
The animal inside you like the eye of the talisman
can guide you.

If you get there, you will be alone
if you get there, stay there.

It's not too late and this isn't anymore
the dream for which you gave your life
it is a dream you carry up the mountain
where once again you become no one.

Returning, you are back in your village
where you prayed to become someone.

Returning, I am back at the car
where I prayed I was your son.

Now your voice doesn't fill the car
like old spring snow.

We are silent like the future.

Translated from Greek by the author and Eera Mac

The spider

Dear Sir,

I watch you from the ceiling,
your coffee requires more sugar.
Something about the clothes and the shoes is off,
you shouldn't have patched up all the holes.
Grab the day like a knife,
the weight of your life keeps growing,
the agreement with the mirror has been cancelled
and you are turning fat.
Tomorrow I will hang before your nose,
perhaps you could feed me please?

Sincerely,
the Spider

Dear Spider,

just yesterday the bat gave birth in a corner of the attic,
her tasty babies lie blind in the net and the cobweb.
I haven't learned to drive, to debone fish, to read newspapers.
I have two useless dog teeth and a BB gun.
I have made a deal with the morning coffee,
I respect the decision of the mirror.
I no longer set traps for birds,
each day I head to the river and shoot the waters.

Yours,
K.

Translated from Greek by Panagiotis Kechagias

Poem for my birthday

When it's my birthday, I want to sleep all day long
covered in bills, W2 forms, postcards,
and I want to cry, but since I am not a crybaby,
I simply say that I will faint and then go to sleep.
Because a birthday after thirty is
like when they surreptitiously open your mail
like when you try to park
and you have blocked traffic
it's like getting a call from the debt collectors
whether you have a car, children, spouse, dog or
not, a birthday after thirty
is like you are waiting to shop the clearance sale and
you can't find anything in your size
in general terms it's not your fault
when it's my birthday I'm an answering machine
without space for new messages,
someone who hitchhikes on the wrong side of the street, when
it's my birthday I can't remember
what's the big deal I'm
unbearable
and I'm not at all afraid of metaphors
when it's my birthday, I suddenly remember
that I want to live forever
and I ruin the party.

Translated from Greek by Adam Goldwyn and the author

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