Mirroring darkly

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Editor-in-chief Roman Simić
Assistant editor Jadranka Pintarić
Proofreading Tomislav Kuzmanović

Croatian Writers Society
Basaričekova 24, Zagreb, Croatia
Tel.: (+385 1) 48 76 463, fax: (+385 1) 48 70 186
www.hrvatskodrustvopisaca.hr
ured@hrvatskodrustvopisaca.hr

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Ivana Rogar

Mirroring darkly

(selected stories)

Newcomers

They began coming in even larger numbers, and, upon waking, we found many of their bodies beneath our beds and beside windows where they entered at night. They lay with their legs in the air. The survivors scrambled along kitchen tiles, hid beneath an old cupboard and chests, and looked for cracks in the walls. "I have never seen so many of them," said Marta, disgusted. She was afraid they would creep up into her bed at night, and she often woke up to check if her sheets were clean. The invasion was harder on her than me.

I did our grocery shopping. The shop was three miles away from our rented house. Walking down the road, I noticed hundreds of those insects slowly crawling in rows along and across the asphalt. They were black and large; even the smaller ones were big, and, watching them, one would involuntarily

think that things would not be so bad if the insects were not so big. Their bodies glistened in the sun like polished metal. Eight tiny, relentlessly twitching legs protruded from their bodies. Many of them died on the road, because every now and then, a car went by and crushed their hard armour. We stomped on them, too, because in July they were already everywhere, and we could not watch out all the time to see if any of them were under our feet. Nevertheless, we tried to avoid them, since the sound of their bodies tearing was awful.

The summer was hot, without rain, and the cloudless sky gleamed like a mirror. Raising our eyes to see the sun was difficult. We slept separately, because our joined bodies produced double amounts of sweat. But the sheets that were wet in the morning dried by noon and looked fresh again. Marta got up at six, while it was still chilly, and wrote beneath a plastic awning on the porch. In four hours she would write a few pages and then read them through. It was her third novel, a tool

for whitewashing the remains of her previous life, which she did not want to talk about. She would say, "You will know it when I'm finished." I did not want to push it, so I waited for the day when she would show me what she held inside herself. I woke up late, like back at home, when the sun had already heated up the narrow patch of asphalt that wobbled by the house. Marta would sit in the shadow of the awning and fan herself, drops of sweat trickling down her neck and breasts. I would look long at that beautiful body, so much prettier than mine, thickset with small breasts. I imagined some other hands touching it, whether male or female, I did not know.

When she raised her head and looked at me beneath the awning, I would sit down next to her and put my head in her lap, still dazed from sleep.

"How much have you written today?"

"Little. The bugs are distracting me. They're giving me the creeps."

The bugs had been laboriously moving since

dawn. They scurried across the porch and disappeared down the stairs, as if on a mission known only to them. Down there, across the road, they ventured into corn fields and vegetable patches. Day by day, they became wiser. They started climbing the stems of corn, wheat and rye, and on fruits picked among the grains. In the village grocery shop and in the bar, nobody spoke of politics anymore. Confused villagers protested and shook their heads. The harvest was uncertain.

Marta suggested that we should return to Zagreb, because it was obvious that the number of insects grew larger every day. But the rent for the country house, isolated high on the hill, whose flower-pots spilled green asparagus, had been paid two months in advance. I knew she talked about returning just to remind herself that she had a choice.

I was trying to forget that in two months' time I would be going back to teaching history in an elementary school. Long holidays were the only

good side of the job. I had not yet learned how to deal with eighth-graders who jumped around the classroom and fearlessly yelled out offensive stuff at each other and at me. My parents, with whom I still lived, called me every day to ask if the condition had improved and to persuade me to come back. Our current residence served as a home twenty years ago. The interior was full of beds with moldy, coarse canvas sheets, and shaky cupboards where foggy glasses cowered next to chipped, rose-patterned plates. Those glasses were once filled with wine from local vineyards, which still ran uphill. The stench which reminded one of a stagnation in time, hung in the air like a curtain. Still, my neighbor, who lent us the house, came every summer to check if everything was the same. Marta said that she cultivated oblivion here, that she came here to remind herself that she should forget.

On my way to the shop, villagers passed me by in their cars, but they never stopped and offered a ride, as if I was some kind of vermin. Five years ago,

the way to the village had been a plain dust road, trodden only by tractors and a few cars. Then the workers came and paved that cow path, which led from the village high up into the hills. Now only a few secluded little houses faced gravel roads that sloped steeply through the greenery.

There were two grocery shops in the village: one at its entrance, where I always went because of the proximity, and the other one in the center, near the church. Their owners openly competed, putting signs on the entrance like, "It's cheaper here," and each observed who went to their opponent's shop. Villagers in work clothes or worn-out trousers always lingered in the shops and discussed daily events, drinking beer from the refrigerator. On the main road that split the village in half, the bugs had scattered, hiding in the shadows, running away from the sunlight, nimbly looking for holes in asphalt and walls. Older villagers sat on the benches under the trees and played cards. The sun mean-

dered among the leaves and branches and the shadows made awkward shapes on the villagers' faces. Thus adorned with war paint and motionless, they looked more like lizards than humans. In the tiny shop stacked with boxes of milk bottles, I pushed my way through the bunch of people who were resting from the morning's work and drinking beer. The faces on sturdy shoulders were burnt-red, which proved that they did not waste time hiding in the shade. Somebody was yelling in a high-pitched voice that he had put poison on his house's doorstep, but bugs crossed it without difficulty, completely unaware that they should have died. The rest of the people agreed in a single voice, and then began polyphonously describing their own situations at home. While I was taking sugar and coffee from the shelves, I heard that the minister had claimed during his sermon that there were fewer insects in the church than anywhere else in the village, an indisputable proof of its sanctity. On

the other hand, the bar and the landfill behind it had the most. The bar keeper was obviously not religious.

Day by day, the number of pests grew conspicuously. The new generations were more adventurous than their ancestors. They not only crawled across the floor, but climbed up the smooth walls and slippery lacquered furniture, adorning it with various patterns. Corn leaves became full of holes, and bug bodies blackened the lettuce and cabbage in the gardens as they rummaged devotedly among them. When one of the villagers fell sick and vomited for three days, a rumour spread that the vegetables were poisonous. On the square in front of the church, old stooping women with head scarves said that the man's wife had to hold a bowl beside his head because he could not get up to go to the bathroom. Savoy, lettuce, and broccoli were soon transferred to garbage disposals.

When he realized that the insects were no longer avoiding the church, the minister had to

unburden his mind. He said that every evil occurrence had its beginning in a human being. If God was punishing us, then we must have been doing bad things. After the sermon, villagers talked to each other in front of the church for a long time. Many of them had to put special poison around their houses because the pests went everywhere. They found them in flour jars, in drawers among underwear, and in children's beds. The postman Kovačić told people that the bugs spilled out of his bag when he was taking out the letters. Although he was notorious for his stories about attacking a bobcat with his bare hands and straddling a two-hundred-pound pig before cutting its throat, nobody laughed at him now. The village doctor's opinion was that the insects had come from the city, where they had multiplied, and that it was a natural migration of organisms. But the people in the village were seldom sick and almost nobody was intimate with the doctor.

One afternoon Marta and I went down to the

village. I had to persuade her to go. She dreaded the trip, telling me that we would only encounter more bugs. That morning, the rain had cooled the road, so we walked lightly, holding hands. A few cars went by. The village was even cooler because of the many trees that shielded the ground from the sunlight. The puddles that remained slowly evaporated under the trees, encircled with sparrows and blackbirds who drank reverently. Walking down the main street, I noticed that the villagers were watching us carefully. As we passed them, they became silent, as if that was their way of letting us go by. We came across the small square with a stone church, whose pointy, narrow tower jutted from the heavy building. Its sun-bathed stone reflected the light and kept the square warm. On the right side of the church, in a shade of a walnut, villagers sat cross-legged on the benches of a nearby café and smoked. They stared at us, unblinking. The bugs were running across the concrete industriously, and the sparrows were chirping and

pouncing. But inspite of that, it was as if everything stood still. "Good afternoon," said Marta, but the villagers did not reply.

Marta was not making any progress with her writing. She had wanted the quiet of nature, where the silence is disturbed by a bird's pecking around the garden, or by the buzzing of bumblebees and crickets, but this nature was hyperbolized and its epic proportions frightened her. She could not relax, and the story about the other life, which was waiting in the chest of her heart, did not budge. Each morning I would secretly look into her notebook and see it empty.

The next day, I went for a walk in the woods. I climbed up and down the slopes for a long time, following the wavy line of the hilly landscape. I waded across moist leaves, hidden from the sun by huge trees, and listened to birds that called from one side and another, as if in warning about an intruder. I was thinking about Marta, about our differences, as well as the things that drew us

together. Leaving the forest, I came across our neighbour's corn field. I passed through the rows while the sunlight slanted and revealed black spots on the corncobs. When I got back, Marta told me that some people had come by while I was away and asked for her husband. She was confused and said she was not married. Then they said they wanted to talk to her fiancé. She told them that she was spending the summer with her girlfriend. Then they left.

When I entered the store a few days later, the people inside were talking about the most recent sermon. The minister had preached about the corruption of the soul, about disobeying God's word and about impending doom. One man was hollering and waving knobby hands darkened by the sun. His corn had gone to waste; his garden was eaten up; he had nothing to sell on the market anymore. He had lost a load of money and he could forget about grape gathering. The clerk looked at me as if

he did not want me in the store. When it was my turn, I put the groceries on the counter and gave him a fifty kuna bill. He put it in the till and kept watching me. I wanted to tell him that he owed me two and a half kuna, but his look became even more penetrating. The conversation ceased. Suddenly, under the heavy weight of air, one could hear breathing and rustling of clothes. I turned around and faced ten people who were staring at me. There was something firm in their looks, like an oath, something that would not give in. I pushed my way to the street.

The ascent home was especially hard because the sun had became hot again. Drops of sweat formed on my forehead and tickled my nose, forcing me to put the bags on the ground and scratch myself. At one point, a white car sped by me. An egg flew out of its window. Thrown with insufficient force or will, it cracked on the ground, the yolk spilling like sick yellow blood.

In spite of the minister's spiritual efforts, the insects continued destroying crops and vegetables in the gardens. It looked as if gangs had ransacked the village. One morning in mid-August we woke up and found a mad crowd beneath our window. About thirty people shouted that we should go home. They yelled that they did not need us there, that we were filthy, corrupted and perverted. They waved their sticks, rakes, axes and shouted. Marta calmly watched them from behind a curtain as if she had been expecting this all the time. I panicked, trying to think of what to do. The closest police station was ten miles away. There was no second exit from the house. When they saw us watching them from the window, they started swearing, threatening, and went for the door. Somebody threw a stone and broke the window. Shards of broken glass fell on me, and, suddenly, I was covered with blood. I screamed, which encouraged them to start throwing everything they could get their hands on. Stones, dirt, flower pots and beer

bottles flew in through the window. We cowered in a corner. Marta's face was distorted.

We sat in the corner for a long time, holding each other, listening to roars and thuds from outside. My heart was thumping madly, my body shaking.

"Let's call the police!" I yelled.

"They'll go away," Marta said.

"How do you know? They can break in. They'll thrash us," I protested, but I did not move.

The shouts finally stopped, the voices started to fade. I peered through the window and saw the people going away, leaving a mess of broken bottles, flower pots and earth.

While she put alcohol on my wounds, Marta held back her tears. We cleaned up the mess and packed our things. The next day, we went to the bus station, where once a day the bus stopped on its way to the city. It was early morning and fresh air breezed above the meadows, above yellow and green fields. The forest breathed heartily, not

knowing that before noon it would be shrouded in a thick veil. From the bus station on the hill, we could see the tiny village with people crawling through it like insects on the ground.

Nastya

When I saw him after three years in the stationery shop, downtown on Petrićeva Street, it was precisely on his birthday, and I almost managed to avoid him without him noticing me. He was peering at mugs and cups of various shapes stuck onto the shelf, like Gollum watching the ring. As I slowly passed by, careful not to brush against him, I heard, "Daisy, your mama is lazy!" Damn.

I made a surprised face and responded, "Oh, Petar! Long time no see. How are you?"

He was well, in fact, because, good God, when wasn't he well? Without prompting, he briefed me on what had been going on with him in the last three years, although he believed it had only been two. He had moved into his own flat, he wasn't living with his parents anymore, and he felt reborn. Three years ago he tried to get me to rent a studio

apartment with him. As I remembered, that was the last straw.

"Well, happy birthday!" I said merrily.

"Oh, you remember. How sweet of you." Petar looked younger than the last time I saw him. "I feel so old," he said. "I feel that my body is falling apart. I think my flesh is spiritually dying." He was thirty-two. He worked as an English and German teacher in a foreign language school and he philosophized a lot. He presented his ruminantions to his students also.

"By the way, would you come to my birthday party? I'm actually doing it to spite my insolent landlord." Petar caught me off guard. "C'mon, Daisy. There will be dancing and a little company. My flat is not far. It's in Vrbik, in the greenery, with trees all around. You still live on Trešnjevka?" He had moved from a less desireable place to Vrbik. Not bad. I told him I might attend, but I didn't mean it. I didn't feel like talking to him, there was nothing to say.

After Petar left me, I heard stories about myself: they called me the one who couldn't bear closeness, an emotional Alaska. Mostly, the comments implied that Petar had done a good thing getting rid of me. After all, a woman who couldn't live with her man after all those years and start a family, even if it was just the two of them, wasn't normal. There was something wrong with her. Riding on a tram to Trešnjevka, I thought about what would happen if I simply didn't show up; if I, for example, texted Petar that I was in kind of a mess. I could've found myself in an uncomfortable situation the next time he saw me in town. Mutual friends and acquaintances would say, "She can't attend a simple party, he hurt her pride so much." Or, "She never got over him."

"Since when do you care about other people's opinions?" I asked myself silently. "Especially people you hear from so seldom."

However, to show them how strong I was and that, in fact, I loved Petar as a friend, that I wasn't

really a total bitch, on Friday night, the 25th of February, I went to Vrbik with a bottle of Merlot to ring at Petar's door. The winter hadn't waned yet, and I swerved as I walked under gusts of strong wind. From the tram station to Peter's flat, I experienced pure horror. I walked towards the wind that pushed me back and groped my face. I wondered whether the temperature was below zero or if it was cold only because of that panting misfortune.

I dragged myself to the fourth floor of Petar's building, and sat heavily on the bell. From inside, I could hear muffled noises, a mixture of music and human voices. As I pondered what on earth possessed me to come over, the door opened, and before me stood a guy with a fake nose and mustache. A colorful paper-cone hat perched on his head.

"Are you on the guest list, ma'am?" he asked.

"What?" What goddamn list?

"I'm kidding, come on in. You're a friend of Petar's?"

"Yes."

"I'm Martin." I took off my jacket, peered around, and adjusted my dress as I looked at myself in the mirror. The living room, which was connected to the kitchen, was full of people. Most of them were standing, because the sofa and the armchair were taken. Several people sat on plastic chairs that they likely took from the balcony. They all stirred their drinks, shaking their glasses.

I noticed Petar in the kitchen and waded my way through to see him. I gave him the Merlot and wished him a happy birthday once again. He drew me close and slobbered me with two smooches before starting a trivial conversation with me. "Did you find the flat easily?" and "I know it's a pain in the gluteus to climb up to the fourth floor, but there's no elevator. What can I do? I couldn't afford a more comfy place. You know teachers' salaries."

I wanted to offer my condolences, but thought better. Many of the people in the room were acquaintances of mine, at least. Petar chattered on.

When he reproached me for never calling him, I realized he was already tipsy. I searched with my eyes for another person to talk to.

Niko came over, hung one arm around Petar and the other around me, and said, "Ohhh, the doves are together again!"

"They're not together; the doves are friends," I replied.

"Mwahaha," said Niko, as if he had just seen through my bluff. I spotted Jurković and went to say hello right away. I was on good terms with him while Petar and I were together, but I lost contact after the break-up. In fact, I lost contact with most of Petar's female friends and the girlfriends of his male friends after the break-up. In the blink of an eye, the group deemed me an unsuitable girlfriend and an even more unsuitable friend. Her cynicism cost her, they had decided.

After the third shot of Jägermeister, I realized that either these people were really boring, or

I wouldn't let myself relax. I drank two glasses of wine, too, just to invoke a good mood, but it didn't help.

Petar pounced danseur-like from one group to another. I doubted the appeal of their conversations. What could they be talking about? Parties at the last New Year, favorable arrangements for trips abroad, some Bruce Willis movie. I took a moment to get a grip and admonished my own cynicism. It didn't last long, though. When I took another shot of Jägermeister, a wave of peevishness washed over me again.

I won't last till midnight, I thought. These people annoyed me. To hell with the shoes they bought and the CCs of their bikes. I searched my purse looking for my cell phone, but it wasn't there. I went to the coat hanger at the front door and searched for my jacket in the pile of coats, but I couldn't find it. Across the room, I saw Martin roll his artificial mustache, still wearing that

ridiculous mask. I pushed my way through the crowd to him.

"Where's my jacket?" I asked. He looked at me baffled, and rolled his mustache. "Where did you put my jacket when I came over?"

"Oh! If it isn't on the coat hanger at the door, it's in the bedroom," he screamed. We were standing next to the speaker which was blasting Prodigy. Keith Flint was molesting the microphone, "Smack my bitch up!" That song was also getting on my nerves.

In the bedroom, I found another pile of coats, so I started digging. Suddenly, something large moved beneath them, nearly frightening me to death. I backed away five feet. A dark Persian cat crawled out of the pile and ran for the door. At the door, it turned its head and hissed at me. I had a feeling I had met the fiend. Behemoth. I left both the jacket and the cell phone and went to grab another Jägermeister.

I told Petar, "Your cat scared the shit out of me."

"Realleeeeey? She's the reason the landlord hates me. He says that she leaves her hair on the stairway. The old twat. The cat is a purebred! She even has a pedigree."

"She looks lovely."

"Yes, just watch out. She doesn't like being petted by anybody. She needs to get to know you first."

"Oh." I didn't intend to pet her.

Petar screamed into my ear conspiratorially, "Her name is Nastya!"

I rolled my eyes, "Well, that's a simple name for a cat."

"After Nastasya Filipovna!" Petar liked Dostoyevsky. Soon, a commotion started in one corner of the room. People had noticed the cat and stroked her. "She's gorgeous!" But the cat slunk away and sat on her cushion in the corner. She looked at us with disgust.

"I have to tell you to be careful with Nassy, because she's pregnant," announced Petar. He approached the cat, lifted her and kissed her snout.

"That's why she's so capricious, isn't it, Nassy?" he held her in his arms and nuzzled her face.

"Who's the lucky father?" asked Niko. Petar pretended not to have heard him. She was probably seduced by some ragged street tomcat without a pedigree. Petar sat down next to the cushion and stroked the cat. It dawned on me again that the party was actually dull and that I wanted to fetch my cell phone. I went back to the bedroom. My quest amidst the pile of blue feather jackets, black coats and yellow ski blazers lasted several minutes. Upon finding my jacket, I saw Nastya's picture on the wall with a heart drawn at the bottom. Her indifferent eyes stared into the lens as if to say, "Fuck off." On the desk near the bed was another photo. This one was framed and showed Nastya as a kitten. I took my cell phone and left the room.

At the balcony door, I saw puke and automatically turned around. There were no new messages on my cell phone. I logged onto Facebook and posted the status, "At a most boring party. Alas

& alack." Petar would find out about it; somebody would tell him. But I was so drunk that the thought of it made me laugh.

"Good God, haven't you made a mess of yourself..." Niko said to me, reeling near me and spilling his wine. Then I noticed it was already 4 AM. Half the guests were gone. Jurković lay sprawled in the armchair, blacked out. After my fifth shot of Jägermeister, I dimly saw Petar standing over the cat, talking to her. It looked like he was explaining Hegel's idealism, gesticulating. I got a cramp in my stomach. Luckily Petar didn't see my hysterics on the sofa. Everything was funny.

Petar went to the refrigerator and came back with a bowl of cat food. "Here's something for my darling." That was the last thing I remembered.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up in the bedroom beside Petar. The coats were gone and we were sleeping in a tight embrace. I jerked and checked to see if I was dressed. Fortunately, everything was in its place. I quickly got out of the bed

and went to drink some water. The living room and kitchen stank of cigarette smoke and stale alcohol. Dirty glasses were everywhere. The cold had got in, because the balcony doors were open, rattling in the wind. Getting closer, I saw that they couldn't be closed, because that vomit had frozen overnight.

"Christ," I sighed. I could go and leave Petar in his pig-sty. I would simply slip out; he wouldn't even know that I was the last one to leave. In the bathroom, I found a bucket, a mop, a scrubbing brush and Domestos for rinsing toilet bowls. I poured hot water into the bucket and went to the balcony. I scrubbed the doorway, and threw the water into the toilet.

After this, I said to myself, I might as well wash the glasses that sat on the bookshelf, and in the armchair, and the one in the ashtray on the table; the sink was crammed full. My head ached as if somebody had been sitting on it while I was asleep.

Washing the last glass, I heard an unnatural sound from the bathroom, a meow mixed with

howling. I walked in and saw the cat sitting in the corner with a kind of a strange pulp in the centre of the room. I drew near and stared at the slimy mass: cat fetuses, covered in dark blood. Two little bodies laced with capillaries huddled together. They were quite big for cat fetuses; too big. They had two legs and a kind of face without the muzzle. Nastya was watching me. She looked as if she'd scorch me with her gaze.

I went to the bedroom, where Petar was drooling on the pillow, and shook him. "Huh? Aha?" he started.

"Petar, are you awake?"

"Yes?" he said rubbing his eyes.

"Your cat had a miscarriage."

Petar looked at me. I didn't know whether he understood what I said or thought he was still dreaming.

"I found dead kittens in the bathroom."

He removed the covers and ran to the bathroom. I heard a scream and then his whining.

I came after him and saw him crouching over the fetuses. I tried to lift him and hold him, but he wouldn't give in.

"What am I going to do now?" he was crying. "How could this have happened?"

"Alright, it's not that terrible. There will be other chances. These things happen." I tried to start a conversation, but he wouldn't listen. I went for the broom and dustpan to remove the fetuses from the floor, but Petar wouldn't let me touch them. Whimpering, he repeated that nobody would touch them.

I watched him from the doorway, crouching over the bodies and shaking. I don't know whether the alcohol finally started working on my stomach, but I felt like throwing up.

The Grand Maestro

The building in Ilica Street seemed to be proud of itself; its past, its name, its address, and the angle under which it faced the main square. The windows were tall, made so as to point at their own grandeur; the curtains, propped in waists with bows, let waterfalls of afternoon light pour into the room. The light, in turn, indulged the curtains, as an example of cosmic nepotism, in their infinite requests for abundance. I sat on a stool and watched ancient, huge, shabby paintings on the walls with scenes of hunting and breakfasts on grass, that still surely served, although unduly, to make their owner proud, when behind me someone's footsteps entered the room. I stood up and saw an overly upright elderly man in an ironed grey suit that was slightly worn out at the edges. His beard, however, was unbridled and ruffled and he looked as if he

wanted to leave the impression of an artist who did not care about anything except his art. He dryly offered his dry hand, "Reliković." Looking at him, I thought I noticed a hint of mischief in the corner of his eye.

Since the old school in the Upper City was being renovated and the lessons cancelled, my mother busied herself with the quest for a new, worthy tool of my qualification for other peoples' pastime. She thought that each member of the family had to possess some ability that would single him out from the crowd. My brothers studied law and medicine, and I was to play piano. In those queries at the climacteric gatherings and tea-parties that my mum regularly arranged, Reliković's name was mentioned several times. He was once a big pianistic hope, who had played Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 5 in the Lisinski Concert Hall before turning twenty. They said that he had enthralled the audiences so much that once Tito himself threw a rose at the stage. Our old aunt

reminisced with hoarse nostalgia in her voice that on one occasion the stage floor was completely red. However, because of his affinities toward cognac and vodka, in only ten years, Relikovi'ć's hands had become too disobedient and unpredictable, and it was more and more dangerous to let him perform great compositions at important places. He began playing at lesser known and less demanding shows, and eventually even at weddings. And then, realizing he had become an embodiment of failed expectations for others, he completely withdrew from the public eye and opened a piano school for aspiring musicians at the beginning of the '90s. People said he was so eccentric that he even turned his bedroom into a music room so as to have two pianos in his apartment – one for ordinary students, the other for advanced ones.

I was not an aspiring musician. Playing and listening sometimes brought me to tears, but I knew my limits and my hopes did not look like an exotic garden with white poppy flowers and

oriental lilies. Instead, I put my efforts, like every ordinary high school student, into ordinary high school classes: history, geography and math, intending to study law afterwards. However, my family and relatives deemed anybody who could correctly play *Für Elise* a musical talent. My mother was therefore happy to set aside money for what amounted to nothing more than people's musical whims; fortunately, such disbursements were unnoticeable in her wallet.

That January afternoon in 2002, Reliković sat next to me at the piano and opened up Czerny's etudes. "Let's do it *allegro*." My heart thumped while I briskly crossed octaves in variations of the same theme, but it seemed that he neither looked at my hands nor listened to me. With his face stiff as last week's bread, he absently looked out the window. At six-thirty, without any comment, he decided that "it would be enough for today" and left the room.

Next Tuesday, the same picture: complete indifference, his nose pointed towards the ceiling, his eyes towards the window. He looked as if he was mentally suppressing a strong discomfort; his cheek capillaries widened and his cold blue eyes motionlessly stared in one direction. I struggled with Chopin's etudes and blushed as I made mistakes, knowing that not only did he hear every one of them, he also knew them thoroughly. Still, he made no comments. At six-thirty, he stood up again, nodded and vanished from the room. He was, above all, a strange person. Putting my music sheets back into my bag, I saw a broken glass on the bookshelf. The shards looked as if they were carefully lined around the full bottom.

For weeks, the teacher rarely deigned to offer me even a somewhat significant comment. Always dressed impeccably and self-contained, he would look through the window without any interest, or he would walk behind my back, so I thought that

he was not listening to me at all and that his hearing had gone to the dogs together with the nimbleness of his fingers. But one January afternoon, when I clumsily played Mozart's *Alla Turca*, he hissed crossly: "The finger placement is not *arbitrary*, Miss! It is not *arbitrary*!" Saliva drops sprinkled the lacquer of the piano.

As the weeks progressed, he was more and more comfortable with throwing some acerbic comments at me. But my playing undoubtedly improved. I was afraid of that strange appearance who barely showed any sign of social intelligence. During classes, I was constantly anxious, for I did not know what to expect, so I unconsciously tried harder and practiced more often at home. My mother was thrilled. She presented me to all of her guests as a child prodigy although I was in the twelfth grade. I became a mascot of her affluent friends, who dressed in Gaultier for morning coffee. I played at the evenings she organized for this or that superficial occasion. I smiled at their

empty-headed flattery, and in turn, I was blessed with a loose curfew.

I usually hung out with my friends in a pub near the main square, a dark niche where we could barely make out the waiters' faces. There we talked noisily until two, when they threw us out. One such weekend in February, I found myself at a party of an acquaintance from the former music school. In the basement of his house, a bunch of young musicians gathered – trumpeters, violinists, cellists, bassoonists. Each instrument had its ambassador. People sat scattered in old armchairs, plastic chairs, on pillows on the concrete floor. Amid cigarette and hashish smoke, they relentlessly discussed the latest performances at the Music Association. It was said that Bijančić blundered in the last movement of Purcell, and that Albinoni was turning in his grave because Mačkulin had mangled his concerto for oboe. Many of them were smart asses and showed off, as it usually goes, sitting nonchalantly with a glass of vodka in hand and rolling their eyes

at a mention of this or that musician. One of them imitated his teacher, grimacing hilariously, "Finger placement is not arbitrary, young man!" "Relikić!" I gushed, laughing, and he looked at me curiously.

Ranko attended the music school in Gundulićeva Street, and he had been having additional classes at Relikić's for three years. That year, he should have graduated, and he intended to enroll in the Music Academy. Relikić suited him because of his proximity to the music school, but Ranko did not like him because of the cynicism which emanated from the teacher like the smell of alcohol. And there he added that he had never met such a vain person.

"Why don't you look for somebody else, then?" I asked.

"Because the old man knows his stuff. However cynical and sardonic he was, he's not a charlatan. Out of all of our private tutors, he's got the most sensitive ear for acoustic nuances. You'll learn more

from him than from all the other teachers together." Then he added somewhat dejectedly, "He could've been a great musician were it not for such a ruin," and gulped another glass of cheap vodka.

It was as if Ranko had foretold the future that night. The subsequent classes saw heightened intolerance from the old man; he was becoming nervous and caustic. The initial containment was waning, revealing new characteristics. My skills lagged behind his fancies, my hands were not quick enough, my hearing was not refined, and my reflexes became "so to speak, nonexistent." Once, when the spring began penetrating the pores of the organic world, at the entrance of the music room, I saw crisp rose petals on the rug, strewn like a flower carpet for some dignitary. Seeing me standing incredulously on the threshold, he snapped, "Will you, eventually? Anyway, *you* can go around it."

Coming to my class one day, I stumbled upon Ranko at the door. He had stayed at the teacher's

for an additional practice. We decided that he would wait for me to finish and afterwards go for coffee. His parents did not have the money to pay his piano lessons, so he worked weekends loading supermarket shelves with bread and juice, and mounting beer crates one on top of the other while the Folk Radio blared from the speakers. He practiced whenever he could: at six o'clock before school, which caused fights with neighbors; at three in the afternoon; and again at night, which again caused fights with neighbors. Finding anonymous messages in the mail box was not unusual: "kid you wont live to see you're first concert" or "fuck you and your Betoven". We went for another coffee, then a third, fourth and fifth. We began to meet during the breaks between classes.

Ranko's thinking consisted of notes instead of pictures. He would write down on staves the traffic noise of Gundulićeva Street, the complete polyphonic statement with cars, motorcycles, horns and drivers who shouted obscenities at each other. For

each of my skirts, he made up a different musical arrangement, which he would then sing every time he saw me in one of them. He took me to his favorite places: deep into the greenery of the Tuškanac park, and then through the obscure streets of the Upper Town, where, hidden among decrepit houses, lay his favorite café. Even his smile was clear, unambiguous, and it reminded one of the safety which he would surely provide without hesitation when the other would need it. We began to meet after my classes, and then even before his, and, eventually, we enveloped whole days with our meetings. And then the nights too.

At one of my mother's soirees, garishly adorned with cocktails and canapés, which she arranged in our big salon for useful friends, she made me play the third prelude from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. She shushed the guests and forced them to gather around the piano, while she herself stood on the side, almost crying tears of joy, embracing Ranko with one hand and with the other dabbing her eyes

with a handkerchief. Next to them there stood an elderly lady with thin glasses and a fattish face. When I finished playing, she pushed her way through the swooning ladies and asked if I was willing to perform with two other young pianists at the Glyptotheque of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts. She was the manager of the Glyptotheque, Lorieta Saski. She must had seen that there was nothing more than a routine correctness in my playing, but her offer was genuine.

Awfully proud, at the end of the next lesson I bragged about it to the teacher. My excitement dropped out of my mouth in the shape of awkward sentences. I wanted to invite him to come and listen to me, and give me his support. But he raised his eyebrows so much that they reduced his forehead by half. In that most ordinary human gaze, there was pressed all the contempt that a person could feel toward another being; all the disdain pointed toward me, my bourgeois family and their ridiculous boldness with which they encouraged me to

learn piano. I felt my face capillaries fill with blood and the unwilling blushing; my face became red-hot, tingling as if somebody had slapped me. I turned my gaze back to the sheet music and stared at the staves. Saliva in my mouth acquired a metal taste and the staves blurred. My eyes filled with tears. The metronome gravely beat left and right. The teacher mumbled some pseudo-praise and exited the room, slamming the door. I sat on, staring in front of me, not seeing what I was looking at, and feeling that my inside would burst out with shame, when, in the other room, someone started playing. At first, the music undecidedly loomed in the ether, but then it transgressed into pure euphony and comfort from everyday toils, something that carried you beyond this world. It poured from heights into depths and conquered peaks again, where it celebrated happiness or joy or something else, invisible, unreachable, and, in fact, nonexistent. Somebody was playing Mozart's Piano Concerto in C-major and it seemed that he was pulling

mislaid tones from the composition, known only to the composer who had hidden them there, knowing that the true pianist would find them. All the feelings and sensations were contained there, each event pressed into one note and blown into the ether; nothing, and then again everything, surrendered to chance. Yes, that was the way to play. Amid that acoustic feast, I heard the teacher's derisive voice, "Miss is still here?" He was standing at the door straight like a rod and waiting. I gathered my things and left the school.

Walking down the Ilica Street towards the main square, I thought about the sonic waterfalls that had just poured into my ears, without paying any attention to a completely different sound effect created by passing trams. Someone Prokofiev-like played upstairs, somebody who would one day raise whole halls to feet and unite thousands in applause. Maybe that playing was not perfect, but it came from deep down, not from the fingers. A greedy curiosity overwhelmed me, and on our next meet-

ing, I began pestering Ranko about Relikovi'ć's other students. He counted several of his friends who, besides Relikovi'ć's classes, attended the music high school. There was also one truly, recognizably talented student. "There is, right?" my eyes widened. But Ranko did not know him. Yes, he had heard him on several occasions, but he had never seen him. That guy was predestined for big things, he said a bit sadly.

Ranko introduced me to the other students. The boisterous company often met in an Ilica pub near Relikovi'ć's flat, thus paying him an ironical homage. Besides the music school, they all attended high schools and practiced at home in that narrow period between one and another school. When they were all together, the tall and skinny Daniel would step out and begin imitating Relikovi'ć's pompous voice. He was so comical that even the bartenders split their sides, laughing.

Sitting on the piano chair during next classes, upright and staring at the fine curves of the treble

clef, at the eighth and one-sixteenth notes that rose and fell in wavy gusts, I could not help thinking about something different from my fumbling that could come through the right wall at the end of the class. "Do you understand what I am telling you?" the teacher asked me, having noticed my stare at the wall. I nodded and drew closer to the sheet music as if I would reach the essence of the sharp. Those days, the minutes and notes passed one by one, they appeared manifold; six-thirty was nearing, but the neighboring room remained mute. I nervously watched the clock hand which insensitively did its job, and when it stopped on six, a *coda* would resound, "That would be all, Miss."

One May afternoon, when Relković was standing behind my back and listened to me racking Chopin's etudes, I finally got what I wanted. My fingers felt the cynical gaze of the eyes which were terrifically trained in foretelling the future, telling you that you will never live up to anything. I was just trying to handle a particularly difficult passage

when he told me, "Not all of my students are untalented, you know?" Instead of feeling humiliated, I was happy that he spoke about the student and almost attacked him, "You've got someone special?" "Mhm... Special. Yes." And he said nothing more. He was really a difficult man. What a lack of nerve for anything less than excellent. What a concentration of egotism was in that pose. Still, in rare moments, I felt sorry for him. He suffered a bunch of untalented fools like myself, their constant repetition of the same mistakes, identical hours during which one thing eternally pronounced itself: although he told you what to do in the previous class, you still have not progressed one bit.

But then, as if on cue, another wave of music washed from the neighboring room. At first I did not hear it because of my lousy playing. But when my class finished and the teacher left the room, I started listening carefully. The music quietly twisted and intertwined with the air particles. I sat

motionless, not moving so as not to miss a tone. It sang unstoppably; it gave and claimed simultaneously. Somebody was again drawing out his feelings, which then gathered, joined into an inseparable mass, and demanded to be let out, and yet still remained inside you, thus constantly repeating the beauty of ambivalence, and the ambivalence of beauty. I listened through the whole passage and wanted to keep listening, but I was afraid that the teacher would come to see if I was gone. I stood up and slowly left the room. Walking by the door which concealed the music, I drew near as much as I could, almost pressing myself to it. I remained like that for a moment, as if resting my head on somebody's chest and listening to the heartbeat.

That somebody had the gift of which I could only dream; he played more boldly and with more spirit than Ranko and other high school seniors whom I had heard at concerts, and the word "effort" did not go at all with his nimble darting along

the keyboard. Although they did not know who it was, all Relikovi ć's students had noticed a long time ago that there was somebody who played better than them – somebody foreordained for concert halls. They had seen him several times from distance. Apparently, he was tall and seemed quite ordinary. "He probably doesn't get his rap," Ranko commented, irritated. "The old man even compares us to him. Whenever that guy comes along, the old man starts beaming and says we'll never be like him." I was annoyed that the old fart had convinced Ranko he was a certain failure.

During my next few classes, when Relikovi ć was not in the room, I stalked arrivals through the window. At last, I noticed a young man coming into the building almost every time before the start of the music from the next room. A tall, thin guy with black hair, always dressed in a green trenchcoat. Voices would ensue from the hall. I got out of the room a few times just as Relikovi ć was opening the front door, but each time I only saw him,

who would then banish me from the apartment with a cold look. When I did not try to see the teacher's favorite, I listened to fragments of Beethoven, Bartók, Prokofiev, Grieg, and Mendelssohn. It was a multitude of languages, but each intelligible; unpredictable, and yet recognizable. At moments, they celebrated numerousness, ran from uniformity, burst onto fields where they celebrated the feast of diversity and dispersion, the eternal movement and creation. Another time, they spoke about a misunderstanding; a disturbance streamed out of their seething tones and overflowed its own brims; it boiled and reared in energetic waves. Next time, they described big happenings that were going on right now: honest or dishonest, they progressed with full speed, and out of their immense energy, entire cities were born, civilizations which would then collapse in only one cadence. Or, they spoke about insurmountable desire that rolled over your heart like a ball, leaving a deep trace that would fade only when you were

old. The parts were always played out with so much pleasure that I questioned my purpose of attending those classes. On one occasion the teacher even quipped: "That's the way to play, Miss."

Having summoned courage, I peered through the keyhole of the other music room on several occasions, but I saw nothing except the piano leg that softly rested on the carpet.

More than half a year had passed since I began attending Relikovi'c's classes. I practiced twice more than before, spent time with Ranko even more than that, and reduced my studying for high school. Ranko and I went to theatres to watch movie classics, and in the evenings we sat in the Zrinjevac park, discussing the differences between Petrof and Förster. At Tuškanac park, we rolled on the grass and tickled each other, disregarding the discomfited older people. I was content and happy; however, Ranko seemed worn out. With each week, he had less will for exercise, even for playing with me, when he would perform feats, change

tonalities within a second and make up his own endings for famous compositions to impress me. Graduation was near, and finally, one evening on Zrinjevac, he said he did not know if he was going to pursue a music career. Maybe he was not cut out for it after all. Probably for the first time in my life, I felt hard, genuine anger. In the wish to grab Relković by his head and pull out all of his remaining hair, to kick him in the ass and tell him he was nothing but a jerk, to laugh in his face and say he could stuff his notes up his ass, I vented my frustration on Ranko. It was the first time I raised my voice at somebody. I told him not even to think of leaving playing, because I would not forgive him that. A couple who were walking further ahead turned their heads. I told him many other things I should not have; however, he did not budge. He was not even moved by my uncharacteristic burst of fury. While someone else would say, bewildered, "What is it with you?" Ranko sullenly concluded

that he overburdened himself, thinking that all there was to it was practice.

That Friday the lesson went as usual. The teacher sat in his chair dignified as a tsar and stared at the cornice. Stoically, I made mistakes at one and the same spot, and he always made me go back and start all over. Before the end, he abruptly stopped the lesson. Without a word, he got up and left the room. Through the window I saw that same guy entering the building. Then I heard Reliković opening the door and greeting someone. The conversation was warm. I knew it was his best student, the future grand maestro. The teacher returned to my room in a few minutes and told me to go on. I started again at the same place in the wretched Czerny's etude when out of nowhere, another stream of music ensued. With tenderness and melancholy, it spoke to the one thing we all have – musical and nonmusical, educated and uneducated – rooted in the heart. The class finished and

Reliković left the room without a goodbye. I did not get up but listened to how the music was telling the truth and only the truth, so gently and yet so vividly. It was Shostakovich's Concerto in F-major. It spoke about the sadness and hardships that are worth the effort, because they are an unavoidable part of life; the part that shows us that the world is not only what we see, but a myriad faces, each of them having a myriad smiles; a billion hearts with as many different nooks; a variety of directions, and innumerable different gazes falling down each of them.

I stood up and left the room. The dark hallway was empty. I followed the sound to the door from which came the revelation of life's wisdom. The world is not one; it is a myriad different things: a myriad unanswered and unasked questions; a myriad nuances in whose folds we will one day sleep. I pressed the knob and slowly opened the door. The wider I opened it, the wider I gaped.

There was no piano in the room. What is more, it was too narrow to contain one. I stared dumbly at a table whose leg on a wheel I had mistook for a piano leg. I looked at an antique chest standing against the wall. In it were loudspeakers spreading the magnificent revelation of life.

Moon's Landscape

The wheels turned in big, gasping swings. The whole brown-fabric landscape was scattered with naked stones. The rocky landscape went on monotonously, like a gauze unwinding, without interruption, without fields or trees bursting suddenly into the field of vision. My mother sat with her head resting softly in a nest of gray hair, her small watery eyes peering out of a wrinkled face, staring at some spot on the ceiling.

A woman with two children sat across from her. Their dark eyes told me they were not from here, since their mouths had not uttered a word from the moment they entered the compartment. They sat fidgeting, leaning on each other. Above them, on the luggage shelf, their suitcases bumped along, gilded buckles glistening in the afternoon sun. My father's ring had glistened like that when

he sat in the rocking chair in front of the house, dozing off after lunch.

On and on. The waste land unfolded on each side, and you were lucky you could only go in one direction; otherwise you would get lost on the dusty brown board. It was 1969, and all the newspapers were reporting that man had finally landed on the Moon. "The surface of the Moon is waste, without any water," they were saying. It was like the landscape we were going through. The woman with two children blinked as the wind blew dust particles in through the window; her black eyes became even longer and looked like two dark cuts in the flesh. She put her red hat on the seat beside her. She wore a silky red dress with white blossoms whose stamens tickled each other. Those flowers seemed so out of place in this surrounding; it was hard for me to look at them. Flowers do not grow in desert. Hadn't she thought about that while she was putting on that dress?

Foreigner.

My mother leaned forward and took a glass bottle of water from her old canvas bag that lay next to her feet. She took a swig and then put it back. I had calculated that she would have enough water on our four hundred miles trip if she took two sips every half an hour. I had advised her to do so and she looked at me thankfully. We still had six hours till Zagreb.

The wheels turned evenly, repeating the rattling song with the same beat, which ecouraged you to swing in the rhythm of a rock song from the radio. *Ta dam dam ta dam dam ta dam dam*. I nodded my head in the monotonous rhythm, feeling the urge to act somehow.

The woman in the flowery dress put on her sunglasses and stopped blinking. The children had fallen asleep. They moved their lips in the sleep. *Ta dam dam ta dam dam ta dam dam*.

My mother took two more sips of water and licked the remaining drops from her lips. The rattle of the train became louder.

The two of us lived in Ružina Street, close to the center of Osijek. The house was small, full of old furniture that mother had brought as a dowry from Slavonski Brod, where, at the age of eighteen, she had met my father. He was a court official who traveled widely and often came to Brod. Those pieces of furniture, which mother was proud of, had been very expensive, made of oak by hand. Now they were just bulky pieces of wood, sticky with dirt, filled with stale memories.

When she was young, my mother worked for some time at the railway station as a stenographer, and now we somehow made ends meet with her small pension and selling homemade jam. We bought strawberries, plums and apricots at the Gajev Square market and cooked it in a huge dark green cauldron. While father was still alive, there was more money in the house since he was a recording secretary at the appeal court, but I did not remember that period well. The single reminder of him was his only photograph, which stood in the

kitchen cabinet next to the pictures of saints. It showed him sitting in an armchair, serious, with a long black mustache and a raised pipe in hand, as if he wanted to say something. My memories of him were foggy and recollections were, sadly, always tied to nausea and vague images of violence. Mother said that it was because father was killed in front of me. He was hit by a car, ten yards away from the house.

At one moment, I started and realized I had fallen asleep. The woman in the flowery dress sat angling her legs and caressing the head of one of the children. My mother had dozed off. Then I noticed that her water bottle was empty. It rocked gently in her limp hand so I got close to see if the contents had spilled, but her brown woollen dress showed no signs of moisture.

"Mum," I said quietly. "Mum, you've drunk all the water."

"Hm?" she woke up and looked at me.

I repeated seriously, "You've drunk all the water."

She said, "Ah, yes, I have," and gently took my hand, smiling. "So what? I was thirsty, don't worry."

"There are more than three hours till Zagreb."

"I know, but everything is alright. I'll be fine." Saying that, she gently squeezed my hand and looked into my eyes. I nodded and leaned back in the seat.

The Asians were asleep. I watched the child in the left corner, not able to decide whether it was a boy or a girl. Its head, leaning against the headrest, was covered with short black hair. A dark green shirt that reached the child's thighs went nicely with the soft skin. At one moment, the child opened its eyes and looked at me. They were neither female nor male, but child's irises, of someone who still was not a grown-up, emmitting wonderment. The child looked at me, unblinking, probably asking itself why I was staring. Still, I kept looking,

not wanting to let the child's alertness distract me. The child drew back in its seat. My mother then took my hand and asked me if I had fed the cat before leaving.

The waste land went on and on. It ran forward in front of us and away behind us; it sped in both directions; it surpassed us and got lost behind us, becoming a flat line on both sides. The sky was empty, without a single cloud. Dry cracks in earth gaped, begging for water, but there was no hope for them – even if the rain fell, they would insatiably swallow gallons and ask for more. That reminded me of a childhood game that I had played with father after bathing, after the water had run out through the hole in the tub. At the beginning, the water reached my shoulder. During the bat, it slowly drained. No matter how hard I tried to plug the hole with my heel, the water always eventually went away. The tub emptied; the game began.

The second class train had neither a bar nor a restaurant. The seats in the compartments were old.

The leather looked as if it had sucked in all the dirt of the world. We could eat and drink only what we brought from home, because the tap in the toilet was out of use, and the train did not stay long enough at the stations. My mother did not complain, although she drank her water a long time ago. I doubted, though, that she would not admit that she was thirsty.

The woman in the flower dress woke up and looked at her children. She took a bottle of water from the dark red suitcase above her seat and gave it to them. They started drinking greedily and soon half of it was gone, all the while tugging at the bottle, competing who would be the first to drink. Colourless drops sprinkled their faces and clothes. Then they wiped their faces with their sleeves and gave the bottle back to their mother, who herself took five or six sips. She put the bottle on her lap, letting it rest on the flowerbed.

The child I had been watching turned and started telling its mother something in a foreign

language, pointing its finger at me. The woman looked at me, then stroked the child's hair, saying something I did not understand either.

As we sped along, the soil, cracked from drought, streaked with fissures that would surely swallow entire waterfalls, annoyed me with its monotony. It was as if that even, unchanging landscape was made with a stencil – same same same same miles. It went on without variations, *ta dam dam ta dam dam ta dam dam*, as if it never meant to stop.

The Asian woman tipped the bottle to take another sip. The train jerked and the liquid spilled on her dress, watering the flowers. I glanced at my mother, but she pretended not to see it. Then I asked loudly, "Are you thirsty?" She calmly replied she was not. But the foreigner surely did not understand. Even if she spoke our language, she probably would not have grasped all the meaning contained in that question. Her impoliteness and selfishness, which she shamelessly flaunted in front

of others, showed clearly that she did not know better. Watered, the flowers on the dress blossomed even more and opened their starched white petals toward the sun.

The woman stood up and murmured something to her children. Then she got out of the compartment and vanished down the car hallway. My mother was watching the landscape, and the horizon began to show blue mountain silhouettes that looked like cold water streaming down the waterfall.

"I'm going to the toilet," I said to her. She looked at me worriedly, but said nothing.

I exited the compartment and went toward the toilet at the end of the car. The train shoved me left and right. The toilet was locked, so I waited. When the Asian woman opened the door, I pushed it towards her and got into the cabin. She looked at me, astonished, and screamed. I grabbed the collar of her dress and tugged at it with all my might. While we were losing balance in the speeding train,

the cloth ripped and I found myself with a handful of white flowers in each hand. The woman was screaming and punching my head and shoulders. She was pushing me away and screaming unintelligibly. I was losing control, so I started yelling too, "How could you? How could you?!" tugging at the dress at the same time, trying to destroy it. At that moment somebody pushed the door and pressed us both on to the compartment wall. They pulled us out of the toilet. I fought and yelled, while two men dragged me away from the woman. Her dress was now hanging in rags. She had fallen silent and leaned with eyes wide open on to the people who had gathered around her.

I tried to explain it to them that it was she who had started it, that she was insensible and cruel and that we would all die if she were to take care of us. They did not listen to me. Instead they shut me in the compartment all alone and took my mother away as if I could hurt her. After an hour, they let her in. She had a strange look on her face. I saw that

she was crying. I felt sorry for her, so I said, "It's nothing, Mum. It's nothing." She hugged me and we spent the rest of the journey that way.

It was early in the evening when we arrived in Zagreb. Passengers lugged their bags in the rosy light of the station lamps. Fatigue settled on the train and platforms. The so-called White Zagreb City was gray with dust and old age. On our platform there was a tall man with a trimmed mustache in a flannel suit, accompanied by another corpulent man. He shook hands with mother and took her aside to exchange a few words with her. Their talking was lost among the sounds of thousands of footsteps that mingled around us. They came back and the stranger promised my mother he would take good care of me.

Fern, Ivy, Moss

Mother died today. Her neighbor, Angelika, called me at 11 PM. Angelika was in charge of the peace in the building. She cried her heart out into the receiver as if expecting me to comfort her. I hung up and for a few seconds watched myself in the mirror that hung next to the phone. Wrinkles cut into various parts of my face. They circled my mouth and eyes, and there was one in the middle of my forehead. I pulled my skin tight and looked at myself with a younger, clearer gaze.

I wasn't a driver, and all I could count on was the speed of the tram. When the Number Four arrived at the station near the zoo, I got in and sat on an empty seat. The window showed blackness, a black hole out of which memories suddenly washed over me. Childhood, youth, middle age. Sewing machine in the bedroom, little bags of

lavender in the cupboards, storing food for winter and making *ajvar*. It ended with the memory of the conversation we had this morning over coffee.

Once a week, I went to my Mum's under the excuse of helping her clean the apartment. In fact, the real reason was simply getting together, listening to life's difficulties, sharing old age. This morning, she had newly-curled hair, since she had been at the hairdresser's, and she growled about not liking the new woman who made her curls too big. I guess that's the way it goes with old people: if you sell them something they don't like, it's the clerk's fault, not theirs. They are sure of their knowledge, they know what they want, and they especially know what they don't want. To me, she looked like an old Zagreb lady, a haughty and well-heeled, who took care of what to wear when she went out. Mum wasn't a haughty woman; she spent a large part of her life in a Zagorje village, where her day consisted of milking cows, gardening and cooking for an eight-member family.

Mum told the story of her youth again this morning. With each retelling, the story only changed its tone and overtone; the content remained the same. She married young, unlike me, still single at 43. She had a malicious mother-in-law who wouldn't let her out of the house. One day, during the '60s, she decided she had enough, so she moved with my father to Zagreb. They built a house, and after several years, they sold it and bought two apartments. She mentioned again that she'd never forgive herself for buying the other flat for me, because if she hadn't, I would've surely married.

Her apartment was impeccably tidy, the rooms vacuumed, the bathroom scrubbed, the curtains she had crocheted herself clean. There was no more talk about me doing things around the flat when I came to visit. But we made arrangements over the phone: "Come wash my windows." Mum wore black a vest over a black shirt, and a cross necklace. When she opened the door, she hugged me as if she hadn't seen me for a long time. She inspected me

carefully, adjusted my hairdo, and then told me to sit down on the bench in the kitchen where she was making an apple strudel.

I smelled the strudel already from the third floor. I also heard a commotion from upstairs, unusual, misplaced. On the fifth floor, Angelika, the police officers, and some people in civilian clothes all jostled one another. Angelika was taking care that nobody knocked down the large ceramic vases near the entrance that were overflowing with bouquets of dried flowers.

I stood in front of the door for some time and finally one of the police officers asked me who I was.

"The daughter, Lea Serkut."

"Come with me," he said, and he took me to one of the people in civilian clothes. He passed the body that lay in the hallway as if it wasn't there. I stopped next to it and looked into the wide open eyes, their color resembling mine, left hand thrown back, seeming to reach for something. Maybe she

fell down in the middle of a thought about the bad hairdo that needed fixing, in case she was to go out. Who knows what was looming in those green eyes? Were I to lift the skin on her face, she would've looked like me. Her legs lay slightly apart, as much as her skirt allowed. Her right hand was clenched and lay by her side. She might have held a pen. Or a magazine. A notepad with phone numbers.

"Mrs. Serkut?" It was the inspector. He offered his condolences and asked if I was the only child. "Mrs. Staničić saidyou were here today." Angelika. She saw me coming because she had to sweep the threshold on her front door. "What time were you here?"

"From 11 AM till 2 PM." I told him the reason I came and what I talked about with my Mum, and that I left around two in the afternoon. That was what I always did, every Saturday.

"Your mother passed away around 6 PM," said the inspector. "It was her heart, it seems. There are no signs of violence or breaking and entering. We'll

put it that way in the record." Even if somebody did break in, they would be pretty disappointed. The most valuable thing in the apartment was a broken wall clock that was so old, it could have been sold for a smaller amount. However, everything was in its place, not like what you'd expect when you come home after a burglary and see ransacked drawers, panties and undershirts on the floor and smashed plates in the kitchen.

Angelika stood at the front door, watching me. When she caught my look, she turned her head. She hadn't offered her condolences. But other neighbors had arrived and formed a line to shake hands with me. We dealt with the procession next to my mother's corpse in a transactional fashion. Each neighbor cast a glance, then backed up and got out of the apartment.

The inspector waited for the neighbors to leave and then said, "Mrs. Serkut, you said that you left the apartment at 2:00 PM."

"Yes."

"We have a witness claiming to have seen you leaving the flat at eight at night - three hours ago."

My face flushed hot. The damned witness could've only been Angelika, the one who's always at her door, watching through the peephole, and monitoring entrances and exits from the building through her window.She who sweeps the five times-swept threshold, who opens the door accidentally at the very moment when you're at your own front door to ask you how you are, inspect what you're carrying in your hand, and see whether your pants are ironed. Angelika, like the narrator in *Anna Karenina*: even when you close the doors on her, she sees. I could've said that there had been a mistake and that nobody could've seen me because, I left at two. I know when I left. There was nobody who could confirm my story. She probably didn't have anybody to confirm hers either. One worthless word against another.

"Nobody will accuse you of murder, Mrs. Ser-

kut. There are no signs of violence. You only need to explain why you didn't call the coroner," said the inspector. Apparently a simple question that could've been uttered with a smile: why on earth didn't you call the coroner? But the police officer was dead serious, focused, his brown eyes staring at mine, and it was so obvious that he wouldn't back off, that I myself didn't understand my hesitation. Why didn't you call anybody?

"What were you doing when your mother died? You were in the apartment, right?"

What was I doing? The thought of her hands, slightly wrinkled, crossed my mind. One of them thrown above the head, the other laid by the side as if clenching a pen, the new one which lay on the table near the phone. I wondered if she had been dead already, as she was falling, or whether her body, on the floor, still tried to hang on. How did she experience death? As a blow? Or simply as a cessation of everything? Would she get a bruise on

her bottom and back from the blow, in spite of being dead? The blood stops flowing, and some things change.

When she fell down, she was on her way back from the bathroom, and I saw her collapse from the beginning to the end, the whole two seconds. What was going on during that time? Was she aware that she was going? What would she have said if the fall lasted longer? I ran to her and grasped her shoulders. Her eyes moved together with her head. They were green, deep, streaked with light brown, and in the middle of each, a black hole dove into the eye sockets, ending somewhere in the unknown.

Do doctors know where the pupils end? Probably.

I passed my fingers in front of her pupils, now closer, now farther away. I wanted to make her blink, even though she was dead. I wanted to see if there was an eye reflex. Her face was lax, the skin around her mouth flabby, and she didn't speak.

I smelled her mouth opening. It stank of unwashed teeth. I peered long, long into her irises, into the greenery of youth that prevails even after it's gone. They were like a muddy soil full of fresh grass and weeds, pennycress growing everywhere, entangled fern and soft moss. Forests spread uphill and downhill, their treetops clinging to each other. I drew back slightly and noticed that her eyelids weren't completely lax, but the muscles of the lower lids were tense. She was watching me distrustfully, reproachfully, as if she had known before dying how I'd react and prepared that expression to send me a message: I know you.

I turned around and saw people from neighboring flats crammed against the front door, nobody daring to enter. They were all looking at me. The police officer was looking at me. You wouldn't understand, I thought. I made my way silently toward the exit, and the neighbors fanned out, as though evil approached.

The Passage

Since I stopped going the old way, I went through one narrow passage, somewhere near the eastern part of Zagreb, where tall buildings kept darkness captive deep at the bottom. It smelled of moist and memories of playing with your friends when you were a child. It was always quiet there, only an occasional cat padded softly around as if it didn't want to wake the tennants. Walking through it, I gathered up my coat so as not to brush it against grey walls, my heart pounding with expectation.

* * *

From there the distance was larger. It took double time to cross it. Side streets, tangled in a knot, branched messily towards the west and transformed into wide avenues along which I walked towards the bus station. Then I'd arrive much later,

in the late afternoon and entered quietly like a shadow. I would crawl near his doors and cowered on the couch in my room. Through the thin wall came sounds of a sitcom and guffaw with cough. Although he knew that I would by that time be at home, he didn't come out. In the evening, when the sunlight didn't show emotion on your face anymore, we would accidentaly meet in a hallway or in the kitchen and turned our heds away from each other as if we were caught in some mischief.

But one Friday, somewhere between winter and summer, while we were standing in the kitchen, looking each in our own direction, he asked, "Where have you been?"

"I was taking a walk."

He choked on a cookie. He was stirring soup from the can in a saucepan, warming it up on the stove, which we still hadn't paid off, and staring at me.

At the table, not looking at him, I ate the meat which he half roasted. I listened him chewing and

I knew he was eating with his fingers because he wasn't scratching the plate with his fork.

I didn't try to soundlessly get into the apartment because the TV was now turned down. And the questions like that one were becoming more and more frequent. I stopped coming in late.

* * *

But the day before May 1st everybody left work early. At one o'clock, factory lines stopped, rooms emptied, sausages were hung in refridgerators. Men threw away their plastic gloves and washed hands in big tanks. Women took off their uniforms, untied their hair and put earrings back on. Chatting merrily, like children after school, we rushed out of the factory. I went my own way, apart from the rest, who were walking towards the tram station. I walked down the pavement for a long time, watching the landscape made of asphalt and walls. As I moved on, they became darker and more hopeless, streets became narrow like straits where you

could shout out and your scream would shoot up to the sky. Finally I came across that passage, narrow and dark, made so that only two people could walk next to each other. At the other end there was a human silhouette. I went toward it.

* * *

I must had been away for hours. When I came back, the sun had fallen long ago behind the skyscrapers at the west side. The supper was cold. He was sitting on the couch in his room and staring in front of himself. He was breathing slowly. Then he said, "You'll stop that."

"No, I won't."

"It's over, you got it?"

"Fine," I said.

In the kitchen I warmed up the supper leftovers.

* * *

I'm reading a book. The light is grey. But here it is is never bright enough for reading. The last thing

I read was some adventure novel. Those are my favorite kind because they talk of vast spaces and travels; of diversity of landscape, faces and events. But I don't read often because I have no desire. Desire doesn't exist here. Only time.

Yesterday I secretly watched one women. She had beautiful breasts. Full rounded, like big apples. Her nipples were like chocolate pudding with a coffee grain on top. The soap is coarse.

I don't each much. They tell me I've lost lot of weight, but I haven't noticed it. I don't even have a mirror.

Sometimes I hear grunts coming from above, sometimes quiet crying. Mostly I don't hear anything. I try not to make problems. There are those who do make them. But those people can also be found in places where soap is soft.

I'm going to see my Mum on Friday.

At 9 PM the lights are being turned out. There are four years, two months and seven days left.

Sunset in August

They usually went out at sunset, as the sun and reflections were losing their power of revelation, so they walked along the meadow more confidently and breathed in the air saturated with floral scents. That year the sunsets were blood-red; each evening the sun died from its wounds and that death, which repeated itself from one evening to the next, was probably the most beautiful sight they had seen in their colorless lives. The grass lawn stretched for miles, only here and there held down with a hay stack like a weight that kept it from flying into the sky under a gust of wind. It was the time when bugs went to sleep, the air became still and negotiable, like roads before night. They walked for a long time and for a great distance, circling on their way each stack seen from the porch, slowly, silently, as if

performing some task important for the survival of the household.

I never ventured after them, but I watched them from the porch as they shrank and grew against the bright-red backdrop.

The four of us ate dinner in silence. Jaro would occasionally say something about a neighbor's calf he had delivered or a stray dog whose wounded paw he had bandaged. They ate as if speech had never crossed their lips, gazing with the same expressionless face into their plates whether they contained broth or a piece of meat. Then they would mumble a thank you and go back down there, and Jaro would lock the door behind them.

In the morning we were more careful about getting up, putting on our clothes, brushing our teeth. Jaro had given them each one old shirt and a pair of trousers. They took them without a word, looking neither at the clothes nor us. From their bowed heads I was sure that they would not know

what to steal even if they wanted to. I washed their clothes on weekends together with the rest of the laundry. The summer progressed slowly, and the month of August dragged on like an old dusty truck. It was the longest month of the year, a period of one hundred thousand days. After our house, the road did not lead anywhere and passers by were rare, but I did not put their clothes out to dry in front of the house.

When they knocked at our door one month ago, it was pitch dark. Jaro got up from the bed, drowsy, and, swearing, grabbed an oak bat that was kept behind the door. Under the porch light, he saw two thin and dirty men.

They were travelers and were looking for accommodation for the night. They would leave early in the morning.

How did they get here? The closest town was seven miles from here.

They got lost.

Jaro looked at them askance. They were not carrying anything.

Peering from behind Jaro's back, I said they could sleep in the cellar on the pallet if that did not offend them. Jaro turned to me, surprised. They just nodded. He silently showed them the way, and when they lay down, he quietly locked the cellar door. For a moment he stood in front of them frozen, then approached me and stared furiously at me with eyes that bulged under bushy eyebrows. I took a step back. After a few seconds he turned and went back to bed. We fell asleep each on our own side.

The next day they asked if they could stay another day. The countryside was beautiful, and they would like to get some rest from work. Jaro was silent. They would pay us for the accommodation. Those shaved heads, faces that had felt hard wind, and worn-out, clumsily-matched clothes refuted everything they said. Another day became two days, and two days became a week.

When Jaro and I got married sixteen years ago, we were practically kids, newly-graduated veterinarians who wanted to save all the animals in the world with the help of endless energy and will. Whatever idea came to our minds back then, it seemed perfectly authentic and justified. So when the idea of visiting India occurred, we went for it. We had heard and read about the miserable conditions of the country, about its illnesses, famine, high unemployment rate, and the shortage of housing. We had also heard about its tea gardens, green, rising over hills, about coral atolls by the southwest coast, about the Indo-Gangetic Plain where rice and wheat spread out to infinity, about great rains carried by monsoons and native monkeys and frogs. We planned to take some money we had earned as interns, hop into Jaro's twenty-year-old Dyane and take off across Budapest, Bucharest, Veliko Tarnovo, and Ankara to Isfahan in Iran and Hyderabad in Pakistan, and then to Bombay. We expected to feel the spirit of life over there, become one with

nature and sense our real work. We did not know whether we would find a job or where we would stay, but we hoped that with the abundance of Indian fauna we would not only cure pets, but also investigate the lives of antelopes, Bengal foxes, and gray langurs. We made tons of preparations. We got hold of the maps of Indian states, regions, and cities, and marked them with stations - places to sleep, purchase gas, and get fresh water. We got vaccinations against malaria, diphteria, and typhus. Despite our parents' objections, we took off one foggy morning toward the border with Hungary. Two days later, the Dyane drew her last breath on some road just past Budapest, amid yellow fields. It was probably her biggest adventure. We came back to Zagreb abashed and lay low for a few months, pretending to look for a job. Then, suddenly, we again affronted our parents with a bold plan: to open a private veterinary clinic. It was 1990, the beginnings of private ownership in Croatia. The city saw an increase in private clinics for

treating people, but a veterinary clinic was something unheard of and bold. Through an advertisement we found a place on Selska Street and used the money we had borrowed from our parents to set up a biochemical laboratory, an operation room, an X-ray machine, a sterilizer, and a waiting room with a little shop for selling animal food and medicines. We spread the word and our friends helped. Jaro and I got down to business. We found clients among acquaintances, distributed leaflets, and worked nights. In the beginning we had quite a few patients, there were frogs, terriers, Labradors, Siamese and ordinary cats, Angora rabbits, and a cockatoo. But time was not on our side and animals in Croatia did not get ill so often. Less than a year passed before we had to close down the clinic because we could not afford the rent.

A few more months went by and Jaro got a job in a national veterinary clinic in Zlatar, a small town fifty miles from Zagreb. "You'll get a job there too. People don't apply for jobs there because

everybody wants to work in Zagreb. Come on, when we earn enough, we'll open our own clinic again." Although it was not a dream destination, Zlatar was nice. As if it were touched by something transcendental so as to be constantly fresh.

"We'll be OK," Jaro said. "The house is practically new, the furniture is new, and the owner says he'll sell it to us cheap." The house was really beautiful, with spacious bedrooms on the second floor and the kitchen on the first. I'll start my life here, I said to myself. Nature spread all around, the green, white, and yellow colors mingled on the ground and in the trees. The fields went so far that it seemed you could go around the world traveling them and come back at the other side.

I soon acquainted myself with Zlatar shops, hairdressers, the market, and clerks. The groceries were cheaper than in Zagreb and people were kinder. Jaro worked during the day and returned in the evening, spent. I made friends with neighbors at the beginning of the road where we lived.

The wife, Jana, started coming over for a cup of coffee, bringing along delicious homemade cheese. There was no excitement, but there was some appeal in the calm that enveloped the days. The stress that had accompanied our early enterprises was gone.

After awhile, I realized I would not find a job in my field. I told myself it was not important anymore. The landscape, which changed its colors methodically throughout the year, became interesting enough for the time being.

Now I spent mornings watching them come out for breakfast silently and wait to be served fried eggs and bacon. They never looked around or asked questions, the house they slept in did not interest them. Their rough-skinned hands rarely showed upon the table before the food arrived. Their faces were expressionless, without any hint that underneath the coarse features there might be emotions; as if they wanted to forget they were human. Jaro would finish first, move to the corner, and observe

them from there. They sat, not looking up. When they were done eating, they would return to the cellar the same way they had appeared -without a word. Jaro would then go to work. The afternoons went by like morning, hour after hour, pressed by nauseating silence. Washing the floor, I would kneel in front of the cellar door and listen attentively. But no sound came from down there.

Then one afternoon Jaro returned from work with a newspaper whose cover blared "Two Lepoglava Jail Fugitives Still on the Loose." Jaro did not even look at me, he just left it on the chest of drawers where it would constantly be in sight. Throughout the day, we both passed by it without a word and each time our gaze stumbled upon the black letters. Finally, I took the paper, folded it, and put it on the shelf above the chest. Jaro took it, spread the front page, and returned it to the top of the chest. I reached for it to put it back on the shelf, but Jaro cut me off.

"I want it seen!"

"I've had enough of seeing it. Besides, they'll be coming for dinner any second."

"Exactly, let them see," he shouted.

"See what? Are you mad?!"

"I want them to know!" he yelled.

Soon enough they climbed up the stairs carefully and, without a word, took their places at the table. I put bowls in front of them and poured them bean soup. We all ate in silence. After the third mouthful, the one facing the chest saw the newspaper. For a moment his eyes rested on it, then dropped to his plate and, after a mouthful, went up to our faces. It was a calm, seemingly unperturbed look. Jaro's large shirt hung on his bony shoulders. Jaro returned the look. He painstakingly chewed every piece of the sausage. The spoons rose and fell evenly. The big hand on the wall clock struggled to go forward. Swallowing the last mouthful, the one in Jaro's shirt looked at us again and thanked us for a *delicious dinner*.

Stories about the police combing nearby areas,

thickets, and forests began to circulate. They searched the brook banks and knocked on several doors. People said the fugitives could not have gone far because there would have been a report of a stolen car. The town bars became sites of speculating about their hiding place. Many wondered why police dogs had not found them already. Jaro visited the town less and less, he avoided neighbors and left our house only when friends explicitly asked for help with animals.

When he got a call from Šimun from Donji Breg, whose mare was about to foal, Jaro sullenly sat at the table and scratched at the black cigarette burn on the tablecloth.

"Aren't you going?" I asked.

"Mind your own business," he snapped.

"It could die."

"You think I'm doing something wrong?" he looked at me spitefully.

I left the room and sat down on the porch. The porch was the boundary of my world. Although

nature and its vigor amazed me, I had stopped going to the forest for walks. I had nothing to see around the house anymore. The sun was probing the earth; on the crimson background, in the distance, I saw two silhouettes slowly walking through the grass, as if checking that the flowers were properly tucked into the grass on that vast space populated with mice and grasshoppers. The sky was again a flush with the blood of the day. The sun committed a new crime with each sunset.

Another week passed. The police searched the surrounding forests and slowly narrowed the circle. They announced an imminent discovery of the fugitives. Once they almost caught them when Kata from Kardaševec called them in the middle of the night because she heard some shuffling outside her house. Unfortunately, they arrived too late and found only rabbit turds in the kitchen.

That evening the table showcased a roast chicken and loads of potatoes. Jaro was telling us about Šimun's foal he had brought forth, white

with a black spot on its snout. The two of them ate, listening. The story was interrupted by the doorbell. Jaro and I looked at each other and then at them. They just kept eating quietly. Jaro slowly got up and went to the door.

Later stories said that Sergeant Slavek could not believe his own eyes seeing the two of them relaxed, feasting in our home. They said the police stood at the door at least a minute and stared at the scene and that Jaro invited them to join the dinner since it was the biggest chicken from our coop. I will say only that they did not put up resistance, they let themselves be handcuffed and taken to the police car. As they were walking out, one of them gave me a look that summed up all the meaning of a hopeless life pressed between four walls.

Appearances Can Be Deceiving – On Ivana Rogar's Stories

Born in Zagreb in 1978, Ivana Rogar is an eminent writer and the recipient of the Janko Polić Kamov Award for her second collection of short stories, *Tumačenje snova* [The Interpretation of Dreams]. She is an editor at several Croatian literary magazines and at Durieux Press, a translator, a poet, but also an academic writer. She graduated in Comparative Literature and English Language from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb, where she is currently a Ph.D. candidate. Her first novel, *Grad, pepeo* [City, Ashes], was published in spring 2020 by OceanMore, and has already received a remarkable number of reviews, even abroad. (Denis Derk)

The literary critic Jagna Pogačnik on Ivana Rogar's first book, Tamno ogledalo [Dark Mirror]

The joy of reading only grows when one discovers not just a good literary text but also a new author, a literary debutant whose potential guarantees that the first encounter will surely not be the last.

This was how I felt reading the short story collection, a form proverbially far more neglected and underappreciated than the novel, by the young author Ivana Rogar. Although she has been present, for quite some time now, as a very active editor, contributor (of poetry and prose) to literary magazines, and a translator, she only recently published her first book, symbolically titled *Tamno ogledalo* [Dark Mirror].

There are several reasons behind the use of the phrase "joy of reading" at the very beginning of the text on this literary debut, though not as a potential marketing hook, but as a truly honest remark on

what her book reveals after the reading the very first story in this collection.

Before anything else, Ivana Rogar writes formally embellished and masterly dosed, well-rounded stories while the background layers of her refined style bear testimony to the many great works of literature the author has read and seamlessly sublimed in her stories.

Likewise, she tends not to deconstruct the so-called classical or even a bit "outmoded" storytelling nor shy away from it; she refuses to give in to the current trends in prose, those, allegedly, trendy and widely read.

She is, simply, restoring the dignity of that which made us read, or even fall in love with some of the narrative classics of both world and national literature, and while the topics she explores may not be as loud and as angry as we have recently seen in the prose of our national writers, they are all the same more than indicative not only of the present moment but also of a much wider context.

The characters in these stories are often young, educated people – students, professors, writers, musicians with education in classical music, ergo, the members of some potential urban stratum that move around the "attractive" places in Zagreb, be it the Upper Town, Opatička Street or Ilica Street; gathering in bachelor pads or family homes, lecture halls, and music schools.

By doing so, Ivana Rogar does not fit into the mould by which one who attempts to write about various deviations and catch the "spirit of the time" has to descend to the lower levels of the social scale, plunging deep to the very bottom only to catch a glimpse of what takes place on the surface. Everything in the world of Ivana's stories is seemingly ordinary; characters attend student parties, the piano is played, and new apartments are bought, but the narrator focuses on the moment at which her characters take a look in the dark mirror that reveals the invisible – prejudices, cruelties, callousness, bourgeois mindsets, domestic violence,

whether in its literal or metaphorical form, spreading like the disgusting black insects from the very first story of the collection.

At first glance, the world of *Tamno ogledalo* seems normal and innocent, but it is at the moment one closes the door on the victim, a dead mother, or the two lesbians on vacation, everything seems more cruel and dark since at that point it once and for all becomes clear this darkness comes from within and cannot be changed, nor anything on the outside erased. Ivana Rogar peeks into the intimacy of her characters, neither sparing them nor trying to find a justification for their actions outside themselves.

These people have both a bright and a dark side that shows when they face unusual situations and emergencies. Everything seems usual and ordinary, only to turn sick and weird in a second, and that is the end; no contextualization, explanation, evaluation, no justification, leaving the reader with a cold and dark image which always has an aura of

something mystical, unspoken, and thereby slightly provocative.

The author is keen on veiling the end of her stories in bizarreness and mysticism, making the reader feel the tension, close to having the potential for fantasy or thriller. Generally speaking, *Tamno ogledalo* tells the story of life and death, love and hatred, trust and mistrust, and in the web of these "major" subjects wriggle and turn up numerous indicators of tiny, human stories and repercussions the contemporary society leaves up to the individuals who are often themselves surprised and distraught at their dark, yet inescapable side.

Ivana Rogar is most certainly an author that has proved more than the usual potential and energy of the debut book, and the least that can be said is that it is one of the best short story collections published recently.

The critic Vladimir Arsenić on Ivana Rogar's second, award-winning short story collection, Tumačenje snova [The Interpretation of Dreams]

This year's short story collection by Ivana Rogar, a young Croatian author, titled *Tumačenje snova* [The Interpretation of Dreams], directly references perhaps the most influential work of the twentieth-century culture, published at the very end of the 19th century (1899).

What was revolutionary in Freud's masterpiece was not his insight into the world of dreams, nor the precision of his interpretation but its exegetic courage and innovation.

Without this work, which was the basis of psychoanalysis, our understanding of the world and how we reflect on it today, especially on the social and cultural phenomena, would be utterly different. Freud's courage to step beyond the manifested and to interpret it according to the Oedipal model,

first conceived in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, might seem naive, perhaps even outmoded, but we must bear in mind that we perceive these things today, especially the methods defined by Freud, as a matter of course. They had been given to us, but from the perspective of history, they had, indeed, been a novelty. However, a fundamental novelty in his *magnum opus* is the way he linked the occurrences to their interpretation, his willingness to get beyond the visible. In this regard, Freud, in many ways, remains unparalleled and still immensely relevant.

Hence, using the title *Tumačenje snova*, Ivana Rogar immerses her stories in a complex intertextual game. Consistent with the Freudian framework, she suggests to her readers at least two things in advance: nothing in these stories is as it seems, and, following the paragon, they represent fulfilments of wishes. The same way Freud strived to uncover the hidden desire behind every dream

listed in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, not refraining from any theoretical, conceptual, or exegetic stunt that would support his argument, so the readers of the seven stories in this year's collection must stretch their imagination and identify the argument underlying these texts, which is clearly not a model of Oedipal complex. Even more so, if these texts are the dreams of the same dreamer (or perhaps seven different ones), then they should stand for only some of the symptoms used to define the mental state and profile of the person/s dreaming them.

This point possibly stands as a direct link between what these stories are and what their title suggests – symptoms announcing the position of an individual within the contemporary society and calling for its interpretation. *Tumačenje snova*, in this way, takes Freud as a starting point with the utmost respect, yet ironizing and neglecting him, tricking him into something he would have never

accepted: an entirely female perspective, devoid of the male principle, and since its protagonists are mostly young childless women, it is to the largest possible extent devoid of the context of the Oedipal complex.

Ivana Rogar's seven stories address the major problems her protagonists encounter, while in each of them, there exists an underlying physical symptom: mouth bleeding, obsessive cleaning, obesity and overeating, bleeding gums, shaking hands. As occurrences, they are indicative of the much more serious problems they will continue to face, but not only of that. They bear testimony to the repressive apparatus that is making the physical symptoms appear, bringing them out. And here we come to the Freudian exegesis; indeed, repression includes more than the repressed wishes and their unfulfillment (although it includes that as well), yet one has to take a step further, whether or not it be the direction the author herself wants us to take – what conditions these repressions is a very clear, almost

deterministic principle: society takes repressive actions over the individual, who, in turn, does the same against one's own body, most often unconsciously.

In other words, the repressive actions of the society against the individual in this case result in palpable evidence, an outcome of the fact that these are solely women characters, making Ivana Rogar's *Tumačenje snova* a distinctly feminist work, in the sense it precisely detects the aggression of an extremely heterosexual, male and Catholic social environment, even when not explicitly indicated, that is, when this is not the focal point. A woman must suffer simply for being a woman, and this is the fate of her existence in the here and now.

This clear-cut ideological matrix, possibly suggested in the texts, becomes most evident in the way stories symbolically end, or, to say, do not end. It is not only the question of the open ending, which reached its literary affirmation in modernism, but it is also about, let's call it, the spurious

infinity, the fact that the stories have no end, but are, instead – as suggested in one of the titles – "Repetitio ad absurdum."

Or in the first story, when Klara eventually loses her job and her husband, the narrating time slowly glides into the so-called narrative present, the one that still lasts, yet the bleeding does not stop. In other words, the narration stops at one point, although it could go on a while longer. It disrupts almost arbitrarily, though this only seems to be the case, as this is, in fact, a premeditated narrative strategy. The protagonists' conditions do not end, the narrated events are not over but continue, so the stories lose the traditional form based on exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement, the so-called narrative arc. In Rogar's stories, some of these elements are continuously present, while others are non-existent. More likely, it is the steady aggravation that characterizes her stories, or even if there is some sort of narration arc, it seems to be turned upside-down.

In that sense, the collection is painful and hard to read, thus belonging to the group of literary works adorned by negative aesthetics. The literary value, which it most certainly does not lack, is contained in the p overeating and vomiting scenes of the protagonist of Kronika obične mladosti [A Chronicle of an Ordinary Youth], the longest story in the collection, in which the repressive apparatus is brought to an almost perfect perfidy, so that in an ironic twist, she at last blends in, becoming its part, a cog smoothly functioning in the oppression machine.

When compared to the previous collection, *Tamno ogledalo*, which is more intimate and geared towards individuality, *Tumačenje snova* takes a turn in a different, perhaps unexpected direction. The stories such as "Sućut simetrije" [Sympathy of Symmetry"] or "Stanica na cesti" [A Stop at the Road] illustrate the impossibility of changing the situations that affect the protagonists. It is not only because they are incapable of doing so, but also

because they are deprived of such possibilities; they are underprivileged. Since the protagonists are women, they will never act on it.

The collection is indeed not abundant in optimism, quite the contrary. Yet this does not limit its revolutionary potential. The collection requires readers to participate, and the novelty in its form points to a path that one could take to go further, despite the fact the enlightenment is non-existent, to paraphrase the end of the story "Stanica na cesti". In this sense, Rogar's *Tumačenje snova* can be read as a wake-up call, the starting point one must not go back from, but proceed further on. It is an image of the bottom. Perhaps not the social one, but undoubtedly the psychological, and, indeed, the physical.

Her protagonists cannot get much lower; they had reached rock bottom and can now do nothing but last, exist, or act. The choice is up to them, and what they will decide upon remains to be seen.

The critic Karmela Devčić on Tumačenje snova [The Interpretation of Dreams]

Ivana Rogar often describes the solitude of her characters, the lonely women – even though some of them live with a partner, or with a husband and a child, they long for understanding, for an embrace, a human touch. Some of these solitudes, she says, are their inner experience of the world. Rogar, among other things, writes about activists who, when it gets rough, leave the troubled ones behind, about people who quickly and irrationally blame their problems and misfortunes on the lesbian couple who had nothing to do with their misery but found themselves in a neighbourhood as an "ideal victim" of their narrow-mindedness. She writes on the mental set of the victim, a beaten woman who, despite the terror she had been through, says, as Rogar writes in the story, 'he is all she has.' Devčić concludes by saying that these

stories portray "an impressive range of human fears, difficult emotions, insecurities, vulnerabilities, an introspective wrestling with the self and the world."

A Note on the Author

Ivana Rogar was born in 1978, in Zagreb, Croatia, where she studied comparative literature and English language. She is an editor in the publishing house Durieux and at the literary magazines *Libra Libera* and *Quorum*. Her short stories have appeared in many Croatian and Serbian journals. In 2014 she published her first book of short stories *Tamno ogledalo* [Dark Mirror] which was awarded by the Croatian Ministry of Culture as one of the best Croatian fiction books published that year. Her next collection is due early in 2016. She translated several books of fiction and nonfiction from English to Croatian, including Kiran Desai's Man Booker winner *The Inheritance of Loss.* She also translated poetry from Serbian to English which appeared in the American journal *The Café Review* along with a poem she wrote.

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