

Slovenian Lesbian Literature

FOUR VOICES

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Nataša Sukič

Suzana Tratnik

London, 15 November 2019

Slovenian Lesbian Literature – How Bad is it Really?

The first Magnus gay cultural festival in Ljubljana in 1984 marked the start of an organized gay and lesbian rights movement in Slovenia. At that time so-called “alternative culture” (that is, alternative to the prevailing socialist ideology in Yugoslavia) was very visible, although mostly in Slovenia. It consisted largely of the peace movement, punk music and culture, and the feminist movement. The first women’s group Lilit was established in 1985, and the lesbian group Lesbian Lilit (LL) in 1987. All these groups were organized around NGOs and were generally recognized as “new social movements.” The gay and lesbian movement was surely the newest one as before the 1980s there were no groups or even known gay social circles. Gay life and culture were silenced in Yugoslavia. Male homosexuality was criminalized in the Republic of Slovenia until 1977, while lesbianism was invisible and understood as less dangerous due to the prevailing patriarchal conception of sexuality. The first media representations in the 1970s appeared in writings on psychiatry and crime. Due to the suppression of gay culture, which was understood as a phenomenon of a rotten Western capitalist world which encouraged negative individualism, was prone to decadence, and opposed

to the workers' ideology and the spirit of collectivism, there was no information on homosexuality as a life style, let alone any positive representations. The mid-1980s generated the production of punk, gay, lesbian, and feminist fanzines, although these had limited circulation. The alternative movements did not appear in the rest of Yugoslavia, except for the emergence of feminist/lesbian and gay groups in the Croatian capital Zagreb and the Serbian capital Belgrade.

The 1990s saw the evolution of a lesbian and gay press: Revolver magazine (Publisher Društvo Škuc – Students Cultural and Art Centre) closely followed in 1991 by the publication of the first book by the newly established gay and lesbian publishing house Škuc-Lambda. The aim was not only to present gay and lesbian culture but also to bring out books in the Slovenian language that had not yet been translated by the mainstream press and to give a chance to Slovenian LGBT authors. The Lambda series has now published more than one hundred books and is widely recognized in Slovenia.

Škuc-Vizibilija selection for publishing and promoting lesbian-feminist works was established in 1998. One of the main criticisms typically levelled at Lambda and Vizibilija by heterosexual writers and critics is that there is no need for a “special lesbian and gay literature,” which is, according to them, obsolete because there is only one distinction to be made in literature: good or bad.

One of the appraisals of my writing said that, with the quality of my work, I have “overcome lesbian literature”. Does that imply that LGBT literature is not only viewed as something bad but also as a kind of a lesser literature? I am afraid that it does.

So let us continue with some of Slovenia's contemporary LGBT writers and poets who are writing this bad literature. Most of them have published at least one of their works at Škuc publishing house, Lambda or Vizibilija, and many of them are also widely published by different Slovenian publishers. And, of course, there are also authors which avoid

the LGBT label or decline any connection with LGBT literature. As they may be authors of better literature we are generously avoiding discussing them or their work here.

Contemporary gay fiction writers and poets are Brane Mozetič, Jan Grabnar, Gašper Malej, Gojmir Polajnar (Boris Pintar), Milan Šelj, Aljaž Koprivnikar, Uroš Prah, and the late Ciril Bergles. Most of them were published by Škuc-Lambda. Mozetič is certainly one of the most prominent poets, writers, translators and editors in Slovenia, his poetry collection in English translation was nominated for the Lambda Literary Award 2019. He edited two monumental anthologies of contemporary European gay and lesbian poetry, translated into Slovenian: *Moral bi spet priti* (2009) and *Brez besed ji sledim* (2016).

Lambda was a starting point for lesbian authors such as Nataša Velikonja, Suzana Tratnik, Teja Oblak, Alenka Spacal, and Vesna Liponik. Kristina Hočevar and Vesna Lemaic published their first books with mainstream publishers and only later with Lambda.

Škuc-Vizibilija published debut works by lesbian authors Nataša Sukič, Urška Sterle, Sara Lubej, Petra Hrovatin, Maja Predatoria, Nina Dragičević, and Simona Jerala.

Slovenia is probably one of the few countries in the world with very strong lesbian fiction and poetry, much more prominent than gay male literature. We tend to believe that the reason for this is the fact that two of the founders of the lesbian movement, Sukič and Tratnik, both went on to become prominent fiction writers. The lesbian movement in Ljubljana has always had a strong connection with art, especially literature and film. Lesbian identified authors are recognized within the LGBT scene but also within the mainstream world of Slovenian literature, including several awards for their work.

Gay's the Word bookshop is kindly hosting an event by contemporary Slovenian lesbian authors. Suzana Tratnik, one of the founders of the lesbian movement and literature in Slovenia and a recipient of the na-

tional Prešeren Fund Award for Literature, the Novo Mesto Short Story Award for best short story collection and the Slovenian Writers Association Desetnica Award for Youth Literature. Nataša Sukič was nominated three times for the Kresnik Novel of the Year Award and also nominated for the Fabula Award for short stories. Kristina Hočevar is a recipient of the Zlata Ptica Award from the Liberal Academy and the Slovenian Writers Association Jenkova poetry award. Vesna Liponik is a rising poet whose first collection was published this autumn.

Suzana Tratnik

For a country of about 2 million people, there is an enviable number of English translations of Slovene literature. Many English translations of Slovene literature are published in Slovenia, often with support of the Slovene government (*The Slovene Book Agency/Javna agencija za knjigo*). There is also a growing number of small publishing houses interested in bringing Slovene literature to Anglophone audiences. The London-based publisher *Istros Books* (founded 2011) has been instrumental in exposing contemporary Slovene authors to a British audience in recent years.

For small nations, it is especially important that their literatures get translated into large languages like English. This is not only for authors to gain international recognition, but literary translation is one of the best means for a country like the UK to gain insights into the culture, history, and contemporary issues of places that are less familiar, such as Slovenia. It is also refreshing that *Gay's the Word* is presenting four female and LGBT Slovene authors, Suzana Tratnik, Nataša Sukič, Kristina Hočevar and Vesna Liponik. Female and LGBT voices are unfortunately still neglected in translation. Although there are many accomplished Slovene female authors—and this goes for poetry, prose and drama—the vast majority of titles translated into English are by male authors. Such events, which highlight women authors, and from small countries, are thus important on multiple levels.

Translation is itself a creative act, which brings in new participants and facilitates cross-cultural exchange. As the Slovene lecturer at University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, I have seen this process first hand. I organized several literary events and readings with Slovene authors and academics before which students translated texts and discussed different translation strategies. I don't think any other learning activity engaged the students so profoundly or encouraged students' creativity to the same extent. I am excited for events featuring Slovene authors and their translated works to generate interest for Slovene literature among the wider public in London.

Maja Rančigaj Beneš,
Slovene lecturer at UCL SSEES

Kristina Hočevar (1977) is a poet with BA in Slovenian Language and Literature and General Linguistics. She enjoys teaching Slovenian and Literature at a secondary school in



Photo by Elisa Weinkötz

Ljubljana, proofreads translated literary texts and recently has started translating prose and poetry from English. The author of six poetry collections, she received the Zlata ptica/Golden Bird Award for her third poetry collection *Little Tails* (ŠKUC Lambda, 2008), and her fifth book *Aluminium on the Teeth, Chalk on the Lips* (ŠKUC Lambda, 2012) won the Jenko Prize awarded by the Slovene Writers' Association. In 2014, Zavod Gulag published a three-way art book combining her poetry and original graphics by Gorazd Krnc. Kristina Hočevar is also one of the poets involved in the poetry platform Versopolis. Her poems have been featured in numerous anthologies and translated into fifteen languages. A German translation of her fifth book has been published under the title *Auf den Zähnen Aluminium, auf den Lippen Kreide* (DSP, 2017). Together with Tomaž O. Rous, she is exploring silence in the sounds of chaotic music-poetry performance.

More about: www.versopolis-poetry.com/poet/16/kristina-hoevar

* * *

my sky is lit and the windows are clean,

skyscrapers are gleaming.

loosen up (I loosen up) your forced posture, a dog is accompanying
you, loosen up
(I loosen up) your forced movement.

to place a piece of flesh in the sun, you know you won't. to lift one's
arms up, you know you don't.

alternately

you're looking at your lit sky

but again

you're putting on bands.

(Rush, I, 2017)

you don't talk to yourself in public

(perhaps this is

part of dying), you cease talking to yourself. being vigorous, so that
in the evening, while looking at the recordings of happy returns, the
toddling cubs or noble speeches by noble people

invisibly enough, there appears, among the forwarded mail,

a videotear drop.

(Rush, I, 2017)

my chest is flattening.

words are

ripping like a wire

from this flute chirping into the tea.

(Rush, II)

break, with a stone you threw as a child at some girl in the yard,

the guilt for all further girls

whom you didn't protect.

(Rush, II; 2017)

what is it to say that someone died – there's only an indefinable
absence,
gathering cancelled documents, unpaid numbers,

the shirts maintain the smell, they were still
much too large
for dancing and new year parties, the smell till the first washing, why
say

that someone died, why set up the new imaginary – reality, ease the
imagined,

already long ago an early closeness, wasn't talking anymore, but
looking;

you two the same in the tuning of strings;

the screen is displaying the same face, writing out
the same name, just the undelayable absence,

you deserve this gain, deceased,

unclenching oneself, deceased,

why the word, this verb sounds like betrayal,

like writing all over love – like betrayal.

(Rush, II)

* * *

my love is made of difference.

of the irregularity of pendulum swings,

it began at age eleven.

the season now doesn't pan out it is joined with our hands now.

at one time, without you I would have already left;

of following the moon, exposing oneself to the sun, of making up, of
imagining one's neptune.

the third and fifth undulation of sound.
also lie down, eyes shut.

you can

in seek-and-see are its finds.

one day it will be welcome, it's reclining and it will be grace.

(*Rush, III, 2017*)

All poems from Rush I, II, III translated by Barbara Jurša.

* * *

this

un solitary heart is flammable plastic lined with fur. set on
a window ledge:

rustling among the discharge of children into the bungalows and
their hermetic silence.

Translation Jernej Županič

From Aluminium on the Teeth, Chalk on my Lips, 2012

* * *

only these walls are your walls. teams change, sounds alter;
girls get younger. only behind these bars your body unfolds – there is no
other dance floor.

you watch all of them - yours and the presumptuous;
they spawn and hands slither, you breathe and the black sun above

us revolves, you electrify
and there's no need for difference, in this territory you breathe scar-
let, no one can throw
iron around these silken necks, there is night and it's day, when we
are, we write, when we dance,
we write and sounds sway the hips.

and you can only wipe the cocoa powder off my lips.

at these walls you lean with a bent leg. on these vaults
you lean with bare hands. there are girls,
hints of boys hints of girls. pomegranate nights are washed with
glasses of water
and here stands your shelter: even though it is sinking

from underneath these vaults you rise:

here your kisses are,
in these walls – for only these walls
are your walls.

Translation Andrej Zavrl and Anda Eckma
Aluminium on the Teeth, Chalk on my Lips, 2012

* * *

a husband
you were walking beside her – your
husband your tearful woman,
past on a bus,
and it's nothing, glass seals
two decades of love,
shadows, stuck together inside a wall;
a husband you
were walking on zaloška,
a darkened body, and most of all
lowered arms
and two bags,
a trapeze coat:
a dark husband
you were walking beside her

Translation Jernej Županič
From Aluminium on the Teeth, Chalk on my Lips, 2012

* * *

what does jewish origin tell you – not on your bosnian or dalmatian
side,
what do you get from employment history, from misguided
education, what should
you get from eastern europe, what do you take:
as someone who doesn't believe in maps
or trusting in illusions.

what do you take, where you're not in a factory and neither will you
be in orion: you won't be in orion:
what do you take:
somebody that you're not because you are.

Aluminium on the Teeth, Chalk on my Lips, 2012

* * *

green on green becomes wrinkled. messages are
part marzipan, part iodine. as bad tastes,
so the hymen of trust. unravelling in slow motion, red with thinning
consciousness.

* * *

on screens, streets, in the studio: all too many dolls.
spotlights are powerful, penetrating through
the moon. I hold
the bat ready in someone's arms

wrinkled and grey-haired,
the dolls don't outgrow the chairs. not yet. they stare at their profiles
with samples of grains.

* * *

you're a child because your cry runs under the classroom desks like a
guttural spring.
a child, your cold is larger than your breath. seats crack as you rock.

and you don't sleep for nights nights. you saw the hand, somebody
didn't extend it from their clothes.
you heard the words, somebody didn't put them into a tree. and
games and words are not
softness that resolves.

a child, you are finished. in all boiler rooms
you will be a child, ever more gray.

From Aluminium on the Teeth, Chalk on my Lips, 2012

you're leaving. it seems you'll be doing it
all your life. although we'll be gone from velvet covers,
back rows of movie theatres, staircases in the night,
you will, so it seems, always be clinging to my bitter

bitter tongue, my grieving figure. repeating sentences.
recoiling, with equal fervour, because of an ancient ancient
loss. right before death – yours or mine – you'll dream of a new be-
ginning
which is the reason I cower every day. I conform in vain.

* * *

we talk (she talks) about nazism and aesthetics and neither of us
is a nazi, but because of aesthetics and my fears and
I don't have a political discourse, we suffer, her with blinds over, me
in the corner,

with tears on the brink of our eyes, late at night, almost morning, we
finally
screw, both totally undressed.

Translation Jernej Županič
From Repki (Little Tails), 2008

* * *

you change clothes when you go work. draw your eyes cause you
go work. and cause you work noble things. you straighten yourself,
spread your gestures when you go work. you speak more than you
have words for. even laugh. laugh even more readily than elsewhere.
your shadows are in the other set of clothes. shadows without lip-
stick or much blood. you build foundations. build yourself. you don't
know anymore whether you're disbodied or not.
you change clothes and keep quiet

Translation Jernej Županič
From Repki (Little Tails), 2008

* * *

I will not have a long gray braid, my hair is too thin already.
under collisions, the kisses of planets and in between the clamps of
stars, I will be bald-headed.

where my teeth will keep falling into the washbasin, where my body
will define the choreography of
the day for me;

i will have a sense of humor; where my fingerprints on door handles
will

be replaced by holograms on plasmas.

i will not restrict my wardrobe to pastel, beige. my t-shirts will in-
clude a hood.

my eyes will have more and thicker curtains;
what will make their creases deeper – i wish to capture every un-
marked commitment.

will my forearms be wobbly, will i know how to offer grace
differently;

my people, will our ears be closer

will the intervals be

even more elaborate,

even more;

my tongue, rancid, isolated, veinless or fiery with adhesions;
will blood be again

my favorite trace;

more prominently my ancestors or closer to others, to myself, will i be
a mass of memories or their

loss, what;

will the spine be, still standing upright, following its own pattern,
well, coir pads, my words

a blunted katana.

will i be more of a boy or more of a girl: very much both or both molt-
ed;

will i be a larch or a meadow,

will words be

stores for her consideration

will there be questions

or will there be carcasses,

and before all that – will i be at all:

Translation Andrej Pleterski

From Aluminium on the Teeth, Chalk on my Lips, 2012

* * *

I separate waste as if believing,

I drink from the tap as if helping, I buy

fair trade as if it were true,

preferring paper to plastic, I'd rather travel

by bus or by bike:

as if being cleaner, sometimes, not always:

yet still

leather shoes, softener into the laundry, for dogs

the food from chicken farms;

and I no longer give

junkies change, I no longer give the poor

a share, I don't adopt animals yet, I don't offer lodgings to the abandoned,

and this world is boiling, roaring, revolving;

so you learn symmetry, but not balance.

you yearn for smell, fence off the green, sprinkle with blood, pass, loosen, tighten, think, block, rise,

and there are years: life: humour,
when you don't go for a revolver.

Translation Andrej Zavrl

Aluminium on the Teeth, Chalk on my Lips, 2012

* * *

75

this is a mouth of war. we're hanging from hooks. not as artists, not as circus performers, not fantasy dolls.

this is a war mouth. here is a war mouth. no-where a butcher to unhook us.

only flies are getting stuck to the wet blood.

90

if we build a house together, let it have separate entrances: for each of us a mirror arrangement. if we live together, let us be separate: in ten years at the latest, when you find a new person for yourself. for sex, for sport, for recreation, for inspiration.

if we're together, we must be kind to each other. we must fuse bone breaks.

neither of us must break her teeth in mud bathing, in counting humans out, or in darkness.

if we're together, and where we're not together.

Translation Andrej Zavrl

From Little Tails, 2008

* * *

Remove my name from the text.
Carry out the necessary violence.

Nothing will corrupt us.
Moths will not infest.
Nothing will be inconsolable.

Remove your name from the text.

Translation Anda Eckman
From *Fizični rob* (*Physical Edge*), 2007

Photo by Tanja Završki



Vesna Liponik (1993, Maribor) is a postgraduate student of comparative literature and literary theory and Slovene language at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana.

Her work has been published in several literary magazines including *Idiot*, *Literatura*, *Dialogi*, *Apokalipsa* and *mosaik22*. She has been translated into Serbian, German, Hungarian and English. Her first poetry collection *Roko razje* was published this autumn by Škuc-Lambda. She is a member of the Lesbian Quarter Festival Collective and works with For the Animals!, a society for the assertion of animal rights.

but don't you want to run sometimes
run through something
hidden so nobody sees you
however
let them all be there
to watch

humour

one night
in the orchard
I see
my father
lying
interred in the innards
of an absent apple tree
and out of his
torn back
sprouts
a scabbed twisted
trunk
he laughs
and I know
he'll turn the whole thing
into a joke

Translation Erica Johnson Debeljak

I.
during the evenings you wait at the shore
for them to swim by
you catch them
and kill them
pound them against a stone
until their bodies are silent
until they stop twitching
then you wrap them
so that they will be safe
so you won't see them
shining sliding visions
so that there are fewer
fewer of them
each day

Translation Erica Johnson Debeljak

interventions

without removing
the cut-off head
without ever removing it since *then* at all
from the rising terrains
(softness lumpy sticky
oozes into voice)
I grub out *the old elstar* roots
divaricated filaments
fresh warm sticks

(inside still pliancy)
in moderate plunges
hands stimuli
an exposure
like a draft
of believing
a timely seizure
of matters
that dashing slip
into something fixed
listening
how the voice is not part
how it shines
without filling without head
on knees
with crawling hands
from throat
to shudder postponed
dwindling

I fold
a hole again
gnarled heads with round
necks
I stroke uprooted
skin I pull
to
(eat)

I fold again
a hole
this is
after when
hands hurt

the forest burns
have you named the forest
my -
do you think that's why it burns

for paka
and she keeps me
she clings
with traps of all hair
above water
she bursts sharpens
vegetation
wet quiet
body with all the weight
to
the fur
I accelerate
she pulls
the paws out of the blanket

take off
 so things
 so
 in the face of
 they fall apart
 enormous
 and
 clumsy and
 take off
 so with their
 so
 hands
 against
 only to
 in the face of
 explosion
 bare and
 to
 I feel like
 in breakthrough
 enormous and
 enormous and
 clumsy and
 in the face of
 they fall apart
 so
 I hold
 bare and
 take off

if death is not utopia
 you stick together
 hours are hands the apple trees
 are thwarting them do I
 press them enough into
 language
 sonja's topaz
 head
 all hands
 and hole and
 blood

little one
 you scratch
 a trough hard plastic and
 I'm afraid it will be in the sea then
 it will
 you know
 I'm so small now so
 I'm all
 there I like you again before
 little one
 I don't know what you think
 what racoon I did
 wash you
 close to morning
 give you to bed

then again
I ran
again
a room a night and bambo and
I think I know
we are both there
through nose body the night
returns to a tunnel
between hands
bent tumescent and
you seek me
there where hands

she goes completely mad when she's
above me I'm above her all
of her mouth
tongue and hand and all
I still don't know how to still can't
undo
rather I
disperse

the rabbit ran with rabbit mask he was touching the death

The rest of the poems translated by Vesna Liponik

Nataša Sukič (1962) is a long-term lesbian activist, DJ and the first openly lesbian Member of the Slovenian Parliament. She was a co-founder of Škuc-LL, the first

lesbian group in both the former Yugoslavia and in Eastern Europe (1987) and she is currently a member of the Lesbian Quarter Festival Collective. She made her debut as a writer in 2005 with her short story collection *Desperadosi in nomadi* (Desperados and Nomads), followed by another short story collection *Otroci nočnih rož* (Night Flowers' Children) in 2008 which was shortlisted for the Dnevnik Fabula Award. Then came a change in direction from short stories to novels: 2010 saw the release of her novel *Molji živijo v prahu* (Moths Live in the Dust), followed in 2013 by the novel *Kino* (Cinema), which made it into the top ten for the Kresnik Literary Award, and *Piknik* (Picnic) in 2015, a finalist for the Kresnik Literary Award. The latter is Nataša Sukič's fifth literary work that is elusive in form as it can be read both as a novel and as a collection of short stories. Her latest novel *Bazen* (The Pool) was published in 2018 and again made it into the top ten for the Kresnik Literary Award.



Photo by Vesna Liponik

Nataša Sukič is fascinated by dramatic visions, erotic madness, frustrations, obsessive reminiscing, gallows humour, divine beauty, reaching for the unknown, and confronting nothingness, to which she adds allusions to modern pop culture (either film or music). In addition to innovative images and an atmospheric feel that doesn't seem forced even when the setting moves from Ljubljana to Paris or New York, Nataša Sukič makes use of gargantuan multiplication and randomly assembled stories.

Confessions of a Diseased Mind

Hidden

A woman, who is just reading about the Romanians who steal bank card PIN codes from ATMs with skimming devices, sees a figure coming down the street, shamelessly, completely shamelessly, I must say, swinging his hips, like one of those blond bimbos lining up in front of the train station, although, of course, it's not just those kind of hussies that loiter around there but also boys who love to suck other boys' cocks and this scum bag in his silk skirt with a lady's hat and a powdered nose who, despite that pecker down there, imagines he's a broad, must be the main attraction in the park behind the station. He's actually the kind of slut that not only sucks dicks of various jerk-offs but also walks around showing off his muscled ass in that silk skirt he's wearing. No respect, I must say, and shamelessly, he struts his stuff to various punks, who, of course, have nothing else on their minds but foolish thoughts, really foolish, and we all know what that is. Anyway, this one here, who thinks he's a broad, as if he had a fanny and not a wiener, and even if he had it cut off he would still be a deformed man, is parading the streets in the middle of the day, right in front of the noses of these pimped punks high on testosterone. What is that if not a provocation? Yes, it's a provocation, no doubt about it. In broad daylight, instead of doing it at night, at least, somewhere where people like

him gather. The world we live in. Gypsies multiply like vermin and beg on every corner, and on top of that, this feminized pussy! People like him need one of those bikes without a seat, a big fat bar for his faggot chimney, and away he goes down the hill to the station and straight on the train for deportation! That would put an end to it. And our lives would be normal again, like back in the day when this was a respectable neighborhood free of crime. How can devoted parents raise their teenagers, pumped up on hormones, if these cocksuckers keep ruining their efforts to bring up their children right? It can't be done in these conditions. No wonder all parents are so nervous. All sorts of things are going on. Pedophiles, faggots, gypsies, all sorts. Like that woman at the market, the one that the punks call Sister Square, said the other day, when I told her about this one, who dresses like a woman, life is like that, that's just the way it is. She just sighted and said, you can't do anything about it. But to hell with it, something has to be done. You can't just take things like that. The worst part is, he comes here every day, same time, and every single day, I must say, he squeals with that sweet little voice, how awful, when he asks for two packs of blue Gauloises. What a voice, like listening to a goat giving birth, it makes your stomach turn. And his eyes wander and he keeps turning his head here and there and is not capable to concentrate for two whole minutes. It's best to stay clear of those who don't look you in the eyes, that's what the janitor's wife would say, God rest her soul, because you can't trust them. She had a nose for these things, I must say. When that girl, the doctor's daughter from the third floor, was kicking the ball around with the punks on the playground, the janitor's wife knew straight away that something wasn't right there. Girls don't play soccer and don't walk like cowboys. That one didn't even brush her hair, it was all one big knot. A beehive, like the janitor's wife would say, and she was right. She really had a nose for these things, I must say. The poor mother of the girl gone wild, who acted like a boy. What a mess. And this one here

wants to be a broad, even though he's a man. The world's gone mad. That classy lady was also right, the one that comes by every day on her way to lunch at The Ole Traditional, a really classy woman, a person of principles, there aren't many of those around in these crazy times, she was right when she said that everything was wrong because girls wore pants and boys had long hair.

You never know what a man who never looks you straight in the eyes is capable of. Two packs. When does he have the time to smoke them? And where does he get the money? Once you're retired, you can't even afford bread and this one is on welfare and treats himself to two packs of cigarettes every day. Expensive ones, for that! Maybe he uses them to lure punks into the bushes, we all know punks like to smoke but don't have the money to buy cigarettes every day. He's sly as a fox. Using cigarettes as bait. That must be it! People like him shouldn't be allowed to smoke. If they could limit alcohol for kids under eighteen, they might as well make a law that those who dress up in women's clothes and have a wiener between their legs are not allowed to be sold cigarettes or alcohol. These are dangerous people and they should be forbidden from as many things as possible. Even public transport because there are a lot of kids there. And access to school areas. These kinds of regulations are necessary, I must say. Where on earth did you see that laws were equal for everybody; rights or no rights, let them whine about rights, we didn't even have those in the time of the Commies!

Rage

“Why shouldn’t I start bitchin’ and actin’ like a gypsy or a cefur¹ or a muhammad and they’d build me a house. Fuck they would. They take care of ‘em gypsies like they were angels. And hundreds of citizens ‘re homeless and no one gives a shit.”

“There ain’t no equal justice under law, cookie. Just like there ain’t no roof over a goat’s ass. It’s all fucked up in this here Looney Land, seriously fucked up. You’re not the brightest bulb in the house, cookie, if you haven’t figured that out! You have mosques all over Europe, from London to Paris, ain’t that right? Have you been to Londonstan? And whatta you know ‘bout Paris? That there ain’t no more Parisians! You see, cookie, that’s how it is. That’s the fucking situation. You did right coming to us, cookie. Ask yourself how many people got their citizenship for a couple of thousand fucking tolar² and can’t even say five words in our language. Whatta you think, cookie, should we get ourselves a Catholic church in the middle of Baghdad? You see, cookie, we just wanna be left alone. We’ve had enough of ‘em Commies and the last thing we need’s the islamization of our beautiful country. We always were and always will be nationalists. You know, keep your foreign shit out of our country. It’s like that, cookie. And you’re wrong, cookie, if you think the only problem’s those gypsies and faggots and cefurs. You forgot ‘bout those muezzins. He won’t just sing for you at seven in the morning. He’ll sing for you at four a.m. in the summer. You’ll just be comin’ home from a club and then even this muezzin won’t leave you alone. Be happy the fucking mosque isn’t standing yet. When a camel’s drinking water from the Ljubljanica³, it’ll be too late. These are facts, cookie. Facts.”

1 Derogatory term for immigrants and their descendants from other Ex-Yugoslav countries [Translator’s note].

2 Former Slovenian currency [Translator’s note].

3 The river that runs through Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia [Translator’s note].

“I heard you do nothin’ but whine and cefurs just keep on multiplyin’. All ‘cause some smartasses think you can’t do nothing against cefurs. They should be taught a lesson. We went to the seaside during vacation and this one guy was yelling raus⁴ and jebem ti mater⁵ and then when we parked the car in front of this grocery store, this one cefur spat on our car on purpose and no wonder my old man went after him and almost killed the bastard. So no wonder I’m bitchin’ and my old man’s bitchin’. People’re so stupid. Kiss the Germans’ asses and clap to the Chetniks⁶. No wonder things are the way they are. Looks like those who fuck people in the ass ‘re better off.”

“Calm down, cookie. I’m with you on those cefurs. And that faggot that comes by here every day ‘s really one sick bastard of a queer. We’ll come up with something and clean up the neighborhood a bit. I know this one dude that took one of ‘em out. The kid’s weird and doesn’t really wanna hang with the boys, but he mummified that guy in cement like it was nothin’. Smart kid, good student too, they never caught him. And he’ll think of somethin’ to do with this faggot, don’t you worry. And we’ll take care of the rest. That’s why I’m tellin’ you, you did the right thing coming to us. And you have what it takes, too. I just want you to understand we have to take all of these problems seriously. You don’t solve the mosque problem by knocking out a fag. And it doesn’t make the gypsies and cefurs any more afraid of anyone. The police don’t have no rights these days. It’s fucking crazy, cookie. When the gypsies trashed that bar and the police got there, this one cop flipped out and kicked that gypsy’s teeth in and he almost lost his job for it. That’s why the police’re afraid to do anythin’ ‘bout it. Who’ll do it, if not us, cookie?”

4 Go, get out, originally from German [Translator’s note].

5 A swear word used in Serbian, Croatian and Slovene, literally “fuck your mother” [Translator’s note].

6 Members of a paramilitary unit who collaborated with the occupying forces and fought against the Slovenian Partisans during World War II [Translator’s note].

That's how it is. No one wants criminals, the mafia, queers and liars for neighbors. No one in their right mind, cookie. That's why we're gonna do somethin' 'bout it. The more boys we have, cookie, the sooner we take care of 'em scums."

Hate

The man with a puffy face and pouches under his bulging eyes turned the telescope towards the sixth window from the left on the third floor of the brick apartment building by the river. The woman with whom he had been sharing everything in life for the past thirty years just went out for shopping, which meant he had at least two hours all to himself. Two hours of peace, pure luxury. She did not like him to spy on other people through this tube with magnifying lenses, she did not think it right, some sort of weird morale kept her from doing such things, even in secret. And she did not believe him he had the telescope for watching the stars. He had bought piles of books on astronomy, the star chart laid spread out on his desk, but she knew he was lying, that he did not even know where the North Star was. Her disdain, which she had inherited from the old toad, that icy stare of hers when she let him know without saying a word that she thought he was worthless, enraged him. He did not have the strength for all that.

"She'd always thought she was better than me", thought the man with a puffy face and pouches under his bulging eyes bitterly. "These Protestant snobs like to think they're something better, that they're fancier, more civilized and smarter than others." He would never forget the day when she first introduced him to her folks. A man could never forget the icy scorn flashing from her mother's eyes. But the old toad

knew how to restrain herself. With a cool air, she served them biscuits and coffee in the glass porch, where they had a beautiful greenhouse, full of creepers and exotic plants. He noticed the red spots on her neck. She was reserved and coolly polite. It was only years later, in one of the fierce fights between him and the woman with whom he had been sharing everything in life for the past thirty years, that he found out the reason for serving them on the porch was because she was ashamed in front of the other relatives who were there for lunch that day, she was ashamed they would see her daughter got involved with a Papist, like they called the Catholics there. This got straight to his heart. He was deeply religious and a devout Catholic, he went to confession and mass regularly, he knew all of Father's sermons by heart, he prayed every day. He adhered to Christian teachings as much as he could. With a true heart, with his body washed in clean water, he stood in front of her and her daughter and the old blowfish never liked him; she was looking up at him from Hell even now with those crossed icy eyes, wondering how her daughter could make such an unfortunate mistake in her life.

The man with a puffy face and pouches under his bulging eyes did not want to remember all this. The old toad humiliated him on the very first day and continued to humiliate him for ages, until she finally croaked. Her stony look let him know how deep her contempt was, time and time again.

"I don't have to take this, I really don't", he told himself every time when they were driving to the town forty miles away to see her folks. He was humiliated and infinitely furious at the old hag, but he did not have the intention of fighting with the woman with whom he had been sharing everything in life because of that wicked crone.

Pure luxury awaited him now. He would have two hours all to himself and do all the things the woman with whom he had been sharing

everything in life for the past thirty years found annoying. He would turn the telescope towards the window of that lowlife who dressed like a woman. The broad with the hairy ass who did what the brother of the woman with whom he had been sharing everything in life for the past thirty years did.

“But of course, this fairy, this perverted fruit of her body was, no matter what, something better than him in the eyes of the old toad; he was an esteemed French professor at an esteemed university. Who cares if mister professor hides garters and silk panties under his man’s suit. Who cares if he fools around in toilettes and bushes with little boys who would do everything for some cash.”

He had seen him in action, this dull, immaculate mamma’s boy. It was sometime in the summer, when the family gathered to celebrate the toad’s birthday. He had to admit the old hag hid her age well. Seventy years old and hardly any wrinkles, she only got bloated around the waist as if the old cheapskate was hiding a register full of cash. She never gave them anything, not even when they were broke as church mice for a while. The old hag hated him so much she didn’t even feel sorry for her own daughter when the money was tight.

It was at that birthday celebration that he saw him with a boy. He and mister French professor drove up from the city in a shiny red Peugeot convertible with the top down. These two were fooling around behind the house and, looking at this obscenity, he was overcome with rage. He saw them flapping their horny tongues, touching down there and, for the first time, he realized how few people there were who were still searching for God.

“There’s no one, almost no one who would do good, people are full of swears, lies and bitterness”, he thought. “How sick is this world, pure horror, and we, the people, are supposed to be one in the body of Christ? With this pansy, I am supposed to be one body, to serve the

Lord together with him? Never. With scum like that, never!”

As a devout Catholic, he always tried to do good to all people, but what he saw behind the house was too much. How could he defeat evil with good when he felt like a pile of burning charcoal had been poured onto his head? How could he love this lewd deformation of a faggot like himself? It was just not fair, it was not fair that the old witch loved this pervert, who fornicated with little boys, and despised and hated him, an honest and devout servant of God, from the bottom of her soul.

Translation Špela Bibič

*From short stories collection Otroci nočnih rož (Night Flowers’ Children),
Škuc-Vizibilija 2008*

Freedom (An Excerpt)

It’s nice to look out onto the mighty Manhattan from Jen’s Brooklyn window while listening to the sounds of jazz and bebop. Driving here from the airport, that crazy Cuban kept repeating – Don’t you worry about a thing, this is America. The radio was just playing full-blooded black bebop and the taxi driver – his name was Juan – was snapping his fingers and tapping out the rhythm on the dashboard in excitement ... Yeah, yeah, yeah, he sang, and I had to admit that the syncopated rhythm of the great Dizzy Gillespie was deadly contagious; and although thicker and thicker beads of sweat were forming on my forehead, from exhaustion and from sheer excitement, my feet were itching to dance. I grabbed for my sunglasses and cigarettes to hide behind the dark lenses and a cloud of smoke. That Cuban guy

was completely crazy; the whole ride there, he kept fluttering on his seat like some bird, groaning and cooing, tap, tap, tap ...tapping on the dashboard, shaking his small bird-like head sitting on top of his bamboo-like neck this way and that, singing his lungs out, all the while anxiously repeating his mantra of the promised land of America – Come here, he said, all my friends and relatives are already here ... don't you worry about a thing, this is America ...

His enraptured face creased into a broad smile ... Yes, yes, yes ... It was nice to see someone who was so happy; the cars were honking, the avenues were blaring and he expertly navigated his way through it. Where did you say you wanted to go? he screamed ... Vanderbilt Avenue 147, just drop me off at the entrance, please ... I'm soory, wheere? The pale sun is quivering, half-hidden behind a rain cloud, disappearing crescent by crescent behind the sharp edges of box-like rooftops; a tortoiseshell mass, cinnamon brown, funhouse mirrors, carnally-tinted tea with milk, the cup is a glaring abyss ... I instantly flush at the thought of Ana's lobster-red nipples, her sweet buttons in the shape of snail shells. To hell with it, I'm going to beat the sun like Jack, the screwed up boxer from that Charles Bukowski story, I say to myself, I'm going to leave behind those days of tepidness and, blending into the rustling rain coats and capes, in the heat of the drizzling morning spilling onto feverish avenues, I'm going to kiss that pale sun, really, to hell with it. I'm exhausted from my long-haul flight over the Atlantic; all I want is a refreshing shower, some tobacco and a bed. Hey, Jen, do you smoke in the bedroom?

Um, I don't but you can, you can do anything you want, she laughs, I'll be damned if you can't. But don't go taking too much advantage of it now that you know, she says, grinning, fixing her hypnotic brown eyes straight on mine, making me turn away in embarrassment for a

moment. I won't, no, I say, putting on a theatrically meek face, I know, I know, I'm really lucky and I'm deeply grateful for it, I go on exaggerating. That you are, exclaims Jen, laughing, really lucky! What can I do, I like you ...you've always been my weak spot, it's awful, but what can I do ... Jen never misses an opportunity to have a little flirt with me; she's like the wind blowing from all sides and is very persistent in her coquetry, she doesn't let up, not for anything. She's standing right behind me and I can feel her breath on my neck. No, I say to myself, not this. But Jen has a heart of gold, it's hard to turn down someone like her. She already tried something when she and Christine were in Ljubljana. I play dumb, pretending not to understand her hints. Every time she gives me that look my face turns red as a beetroot. It drives me crazy, I don't want her to think I'm like some poor girl from Kentucky or South Carolina, scared to death because her path has unexpectedly led her to New York, to this incredible festival of light and freedom.

My shyness is truly impossible; it hangs from my foot like a ball and chain. At the sight of my spotty neck and red cheeks, Jen lets out a teasing giggle and gives me a slap on the back. Well, she says in a somewhat disappointed voice, puckering up her lips, why are you looking at me like that? I'm not a ghost. With a sort of sadness, I watch her tiny hips and the fine lines of her shoulders and neck, cursing the cruel fate that has made me so inept. Contact for Is this freedom, I say to myself, girl, have you ever been truly free, even for a minute?

Translation Špela Bibič

From novel Piknik (Picnic), Škuc-Vizibilija 2015

Suzana Tratnik (1963, Murska Sobota, Slovenia) obtained

her BA in sociology from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana, and her MA in gender anthropology from the Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis in Ljubljana, where she lives and works as a writer, translator and essayist. She has been a lesbian activist since 1987, and is a cofounder of Škuc-Lezbična sekcija LL, the first lesbian group in Eastern Europe, and a programmer for Ljubljana's LGBT Film Festival. Tratnik has published seven collections of short stories: *Pod ničlo* (Bellow Zero, 1997), *Na svojem dvorišču* (In One's Own Backyard, 2003), *Vzporednice* (Parallels, 2005), *Česa nisem nikoli razumela na vlak* (Things I've Never Understood on the Train, 2008), *Dva svetova* (Two Worlds, 2010), *Rezervat* (Reservation, 2012), and *Noben glas* (No Voice, 2016), three novels: *Ime mi je Damjan* (My Name is Damian, 2001), *Tretji svet* (Third World, 2007) and *Tombola ali življenje!* (Bingo or Life!, 2017), a children's picture book *Zafuškana Ganca* (The Hany Rattie, 2010), as well as a monologue *Ime mi je Da-*



Photo by Nada Žgank

mjan (My Name is Damian, 2002), a radio play *Lep dan še naprej* (Have a Nice Day, 2012). She has also published two non-fiction books, one on the lesbian movement in Slovenia, and another on lesbian literature, a memoir *Lezbični aktivizem po korakih* (Lesbian Activism Step by Step, 2013), and an essay collection *Konec strpnosti* (The End of Tolerance, 2013). In 2007 Tratnik received the national Prešeren Foundation Award for Literature, in 2017 the Novo Mesto Short Story Award for best short fiction, and in 2018 the Desetnica Award for best youth fiction. Her books and short stories have been translated in more than twenty languages, while she herself has translated into Slovene many fiction and non-fiction books and plays by British, American and Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian authors including Jackie Kay, Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstein, Eileen Myles, Dorothy Allison, Michael Cunningham, Helen Zahavi, Jeannette Winterson, Ian McEwan, Truman Capote, Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Nora Verde, Lejla Kalamujić, Philip Ridley and Edna Mazya, The two main themes in Tratnik's fiction are the marginal destinies in contemporary urban life and presentations of childhood in 60s and 70s Yugoslavia.

A selection of Tratnik's stories were published in English translation in *Games with Greta and Other Stories* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2016).

www.suzantratnik.si/

In One's Own Backyard

»What's on the sea?« I asked during lunchtime. My father and my mother didn't raise their eyes from the plates, but my grandfather and my grandmother looked angrily at each other. Of course, the house we were living in was theirs, and the kitchen was theirs, and the table, plates and lunch were theirs as well. And so were the words. You weren't allowed any if you were five years old, especially not during *their* lunchtime. And you certainly could not be the one to introduce a subject during family talk. That's why my grandfather and my grandmother looked angrily at each other. Because they were angry with me. They magnanimously tolerated less deserving souls, and became angry with those who did not respect their kindness, and more particularly, their property.

»You never mind the sea!« my grandmother said. »Where do you get these

ideas? Mind your soup, it's going to cool off. And again, why do you eat the noodles first and drink the soup at the end? One should eat both at the same time. What has been cooked at the same time, has to be eaten at the same time.«

My grandfather removed his lips from the edge of a plate out of which he had just efficaciously sipped his clear soup. »There's nothing on the sea,« he said, »nothing that would be of any interest to us. Only heat, salty water and stones.« He looked at me and added, »And we have all that at home.«

For a while we just kept on sipping and sucking and no one said a word.

»That's quite right,« my grandmother finally said. »You don't have to go anywhere because you have us here at home. You have everything in your own backyard.«

Translation Suzana Tratnik, English edit Beth Adler

From the short stories collection Na svojem dvorišču (In My Own Backyard), Škuc-Lambda 2003

The Good Jeans

Dara called me from the Gorizia to Ljubljana train. "I'll be coming straight from the station."

For the past few weeks I've had a bit of a headache and a slight fever, but no way could I disappoint Dara. The day before, while I'd been with the gang at the Marilyn Manson concert at Križanke, she'd been on trial in Italy.

"They told me, '*Tu sei libera.*' Just wanted you to know, because I'm on a borrowed cellphone," she added quickly, hanging up without saying goodbye.

Persistent fever and swollen glands most likely meant mononucleosis. The so-called kissing disease. It had been a long time since I'd kissed anyone as much as Lena and I had a few weeks earlier.

Dara was acquitted and clean. In prison she was regularly given sedatives, a different kind each day so she wouldn't get used to any one and succumb again to addiction. All she had were cigarettes and watching the prison guards, whom she was convinced were all lesbians—at least latent. At least around her.

She came to me in the latest jeans, totally low cut, and with a half-empty backpack that she'd filled with a few of cans of beer on the way from the station. She held me tightly. She smelled of fresh fruit.

“Do you know how a prison guard searches you in the prison yard if she's a lesbian?” she asked me as soon as she sat down and opened the first can.

I swallowed a teary lump in my throat and curiously shook my head.

“Get up!” she ordered. “An ordinary prison guard searches you like this.”

She slid her hands from my neck down, avoiding my breasts in a discreet circle, and finished on my hips. The tickling was fun.

“A lesbian, like this.”

More decisively, she grabbed me by the neck, pressed her hands on my chest, and pinched my bra, somewhere below my nipples. It was a firm grip, this was no joke, a combination of cruel pleasure and passion. Within a moment, I felt a rush of blood into my labia, just like a few weeks ago when, during a routine search at the airport, the customs agent with her white-gloved hands, passing with skillful subtlety, touched my crotch. It wasn't her fleeting touch that excited me, but the

thought of Lena's texts arriving on my cell phone till my flight took off for England.

“And where is Anja? Did you tell her that I came back to Ljubljana?” Dara looked around our flat, as if, courteously, she wanted to know a bit more about my prison.

I looked at the wall clock, as if I'd find the best answer there. “She's at work.”

Explanations suddenly seemed terribly exhausting; for a long time they'd all reminded me of apologies, or slander. Maybe I only knew by chance where Anja was. As I had for a year or more, actually all the years since she began kissing someone else. That is, since I knew it for certain. But by then Dara had been on horse for eight years and it had been about that long since we'd hung out together. For those eight years we had barely spoken. And now, too, I'd rather be silent. Her eyes watched me without expression, and just as before, I couldn't guess if she didn't understand my signals or preferred, good-naturedly, to overlook them. She wasn't yet stoned, certainly.

“Do you have a lover?” she shot back. “A young one?”

Again I felt the rush of blood, this time to my cheeks, and the unbearable urge to answer in great detail, as if I always expect everyone to ask this one question. Like a big spender who can hardly wait for someone to ask her, finally, if she's again wasted money shopping so that she can, all aglow, hop to the closet and take out the fantastic jeans that she got at an unbelievable discount, not that it shows in either fashion or quality. But ultimately she doesn't show off those jeans because she knows, having not found out until she put them on again at home

in front of the big mirror, that they are irreparably torn. Destroyed. That's why she leaves them now at the bottom of the closet; she'd rather not take them back to the store because she remembers well that they were the last pair—the others, cheaper or uglier, she does not want. Nor can she wear them the way they are.

“No... I have no one... Why should I?” I lied, not exactly knowing what about, but perhaps just so Dara would press me further.

She nodded, as if she understood, or as if my adventures in the outside world weren't yet all that interesting to her. She was of course still strongly affected by events inside the Italian women's prison.

“What now?” With this question she unexpectedly let me know something was dawning on her, that she maybe suspected that the possible lover could be damaged goods, too, about which one should not boast, nor whine that one has spent unnecessarily. For it's somehow understood that from this question on, there can be no more discussion, the addressee will never have an answer. I tried to shrug, but my shoulders did not obey.

Then she began to think out loud, about how she must immediately, ideally this week, take up some smart business for smart money, nothing illegal and nothing temporary anymore, she has to do something that will keep her going after prison, above all away from drugs. She could, for example, initiate a European project to assist prisoners who don't have anyone outside. And therefore receive no money, no cigarettes, no visitations, not even soap and shampoo.

The day before, after the Marilyn Manson concert, I'd gone out for a drink with the group. Late that night, Lena unexpectedly sent me a text

saying she couldn't stop wanting me. That's why, in spite of the fever and swollen glands, I'd ordered a beer. To calm my shaking hands. And then I reminded myself that everything was already over by the time I landed on foreign soil, and on Slovene, time passed and Lena wasn't with me, not with me at all. Not even by herself, most likely.

Well, it wasn't completely true that Dara had no one outside while she was in prison. In two months I'd sent her about ten letters, and books and newspapers, too. A few euros for cigarettes. And nail files, the kind made from firm cardboard and rounded as required by the regulations. She didn't overthank me—the very thing I was afraid of—but she did bring us cans of beer.

“In prison I missed it so much, I wanted to get good and drunk. I had almost everything else, I didn't even lack for sex, although supposedly none of the prisoners were lesbians.”

“Well we aren't either!” I said.

As we did less than a decade before, we once again laughed heartily at our own foolishness. And we'd already opened another can each. The metallic *pop* surrounded me with something familiar, nice. With something I almost couldn't name anymore.

Lena and I often laughed when we got together in the pubs on weekends. It was a silly laughter, when you are satisfied with mere proximity, not that you were genuinely interested in the topic of conversation and the accidental jokes. Sometimes we held hands and here and there quickly but passionately kissed. I even envied the waitress—it was there for her to see, again and again. Most of the time we didn't even notice her while she cleared the empty glasses from our table.

With Lena I was always a little dizzy and lot more wet. I never forgot to mention to her that I was excited just by her texts. Even though they got on Anja's nerves sometimes, almost the way the ones she got from that other one got on mine. But I felt that my lover was only the natural result of everything that had happened in the past year and a half. But I was deceiving myself with the apparent spontaneity of events.

I was asking myself how many days it would take before Dara got high once again. I knew that she wouldn't handle being clean. She never could handle it well. There was always something on which she got wasted: alcohol, pot, acid, E, or women. Like all of us. That is, all until horse entered her daily life and replaced everything, became her one and only. But before this happens again, she will perhaps resemble the old Dara for a few days, continually daydreaming about beautiful and special women who will bewitch her with love and pull her out of the crap life. That old Dara, who had countless ideas about how to earn smart money without having to stand at the assembly line at six in the morning, killing imagination and creativity with routine work. She once wanted to set up a photo booth in a rave club, convinced that folk, high on E, want more than anything in the world just to have their photo taken. Because ecstasy makes you warm and loving, incapable of sex but in need of loving embraces and attentive lies, and everyone would want to immortalize these enraptured moments of shallow but unconditional love. She was also thinking about renting a house in the country where everything is cheaper, and would grow all her food in the garden, plant hemp in between, build tables, chairs, and kitchen cabinets herself, and buy five used computers with which she would do something "desktop." I never asked her if it would be publishing. Namely, when she toked on the doobie and enthusiastically talked about her do-it-yourself plans for the future, she never

liked interruptions in the form of annoying and suspicious questions that made no positive contribution. Earlier, when she called from the Gorizia to Ljubljana train, I almost didn't recognize her because her voice was again the same as eight years ago, before the horse stole its melody and its unique dreamy rhythm. But she never forgot to remain positive; once a few years ago she called me and said she had found out how misguided it was to speak in empty words: "I will have a good job, I will have a good car, I will live well," no, instead of that one should talk with one hundred percent faith: "I have a good job, I have a good car, everything in my life is as I have chosen myself." I was speechless. I was always the negative pole in our friendship.

When, a few weeks ago, Lena and I sat in that quiet pub for the last time, our childish laughter had ended. I had a lump in my throat when, after her carefully measured accusations, I finally asked her if she wanted to end it, and she suddenly removed her knee from mine: "I don't know. Do you?" I caught myself wanting to promise that everything would be all right, that I would sort out my recent past, close all of my wounds with an iron wire, and try harder. But of course I was silent because I was all too suspicious that the complicated situation I was stuck in was just a good excuse for her, and that my share in this fiasco only seemed to be larger so she wouldn't have to begin facing questions of her own lack of readiness for "anything more" and her instant lovers, with whom she has distracted herself, changing regularly so she wouldn't get used to just one. Especially not to me.

During our giggling—I no longer know what was once again so horribly funny—Dara said that she had to find a permanent residence. Actually she said, "regular residence." I nodded. This was nothing new with her. She was always searching for a residence, permanent or temporary, for real or just overnight. I was asking myself what the hell could

possibly be new with me. Although for eight whole years Dara and I hadn't really talked. But she was already falling into her daydreams about two guards: the one who had given her cigarettes through the bars, she named Angel; the one who roughly searched her, Dark Angel. She had always had handy angels in spliff, glasses, lines, and women. Like all of us. But in prison she'd gained a few pounds and so could, in Gorizia before leaving for the train, afford these new jeans with the low waist in which she finally has a butt.

"They are really great, girl" I said to her. "The latest thing!" I didn't ask her how she got them.

Lena and I had begun to repeat senseless lessons from dangerous liaisons that in reality are nothing more than tiring and ultimately banal. Because all you learn from them is the kind of thing you could know ahead of time. Or what you knew already. On parting, when we were stuck together in our embrace, I whispered in her ear that I had loved her very, very much. But my declaration could no longer make it into the present tense because I knew it was too late. Then we began to expect and simultaneously hate our text messages. For all our former sensual outpourings of incredible affection fell, in that moment, to the level of manufactured phrases, shamefully discounted.

When, in the court in Italian Gorizia, Dara was told that she was *libero*, she was relieved to be free and clean and sitting on the train to Ljubljana in her new jeans in which she had a butt once again. As for me, I was, as always, in the home I shared with Anja, in the home where my butt, it goes without saying, still finds its proper place.

Dara opened can after can for us, and my fever slowly rose, as it has for weeks now. I felt it in my head and in my shivering body like a day

ago at the Marilyn Manson concert, and later I couldn't remember if he had sung his version of the piece, "I Put a Spell on You." *I don't care if you don't want me, 'cause I'm yours, yours, yours anyhow.* Probably not. I told Dara that through the whole concert he was spitting because, while he was singing, his mouth kept filling with saliva and he didn't care how it looked. And that the public went crazy when he showed half of his naked butt. A little more than *low cut*. We laughed hard at this, too.

"Once we got a new roommate in the cell," she returned again to her stories. "You know, they keep coming and going. But this one was a tall, eye-catching blonde. She said that she was a ballet dancer. Everybody nodded without saying anything. But I thought: such an ample bust—almost a D, I'd say—and ballet, something here doesn't fit!"

She winked at me and slapped me on the knee, a clear sign that we could again burst into laughter.

"But after dinner I asked her nicely—you know, as only I can—if she would show me a pirouette," she went on. "Then that ample blonde smiled at me with relief and said she wasn't that kind of dancer, not one who pirouettes, that she dances on a pole."

"Was she also a lesbian?" I asked her, because judging by her enthusiastic narration it was hard to believe that she wouldn't be.

"You know, I don't know! But one Croatian in the cell was really interested in what was up with this striptease on the pole and I tricked her—you know I'm good at that—into following her into the shower and rubbing her back. They were gone a long time. The guard, Dark

Angel, came and asked harshly where the other two in the cell were. And I told her that she should follow them into the bathroom if she dared. Of course she didn't..."

I wanted to tell her a story from my life, something spiced with sex and humor, but my recent intimate past with Lena didn't seem real to me. I no longer knew if it was even really mine. For Dara the best life stories were those of love. But I was always the negative one in our friendship.

It was nothing new, after my first return from abroad, for Lena to be late for our date. It was new that waiting for her text made me want to hurl the cell to the floor. I thought I didn't know why. When she came it was all empty talk and then we went to that empty apartment, I felt a burning need, arising from a funny, belated desire to mend things, we didn't look at each other during our walk and we watched carefully so neither would take faster steps than the other. In the apartment we had sex wordlessly, everything seemed to be running smoothly, I you, you me, and when she clasped her thighs around my hips the growing restlessness in my pelvis was momentarily quelled. For the last time.

Then I became even hotter and my swollen glands throbbed. And we ran out of beer, too. Dara said that she had to move on anyhow. I knew that she had to recount her adventures in prison, not always to the same people, if possible, who'd be making the same remarks and by the end show a slight weariness or begin to show persistent signs that they'd like to say something about themselves. That's why Dara would rather go first. She stood up, crushed and cleared away the cans, thoroughly emptied the ashtray, and said she'd take out the trash on the way, so thoughtful, like she always is.

"So you aren't in love?" she asked me playfully as a last thing, but so-

metimes I'd sense when she was serious yet would rather not show it up front so as not to scare anyone. I wanted to be in love, for any fool wants to be in love and I wanted it too, and to enjoy this permitted adrenaline, when you're out with people and you keep forgetting what your friends are saying and under the table you squeeze the cell phone in your hand and read texts in which she wants you so much that she is going crazy, send feverish texts in the middle of the night, forget about food, about all banality and the redundancy of the dull everyday and live off the restlessness in your heart and your crotch... until for a moment you even believe that everything bad in the last year, two, three, was made just for this: that now you might be flying high. But no. The valves, as always, were closed too quickly. Somebody was too fast, somebody too slow, something anyhow... so that it all finally dumps into the endless abyss of persuasion, painfully ruminating on facts, clearly calculated torture, and white lies. And the morning after the Manson concert you wake up with the taste of burnt rubber in your mouth and know that you don't want to see anyone anymore. I am the one who always lacks the time to fall in love when the time is right. I always miss the deadline.

"I don't have time," I answered stupidly and Dara conspiratorially slapped me on the back as if, yet again, she knew everything and understood. Even after eight or sixteen years. Any time. Let her be.

Then she touched her forehead with her finger, as if just before leaving, she'd luckily remembered something important that had slipped her mind. She set down her backpack, unbuckled the belt on her pants and took off her jeans.

"Do you have any pants that you don't wear anymore, sweatpants maybe?" She threw me her jeans.

From the closet I pulled my ancient Adidas that I'd had for painting, which I rarely did.

"These will do nicely!" said Dara and put them on. "They are also very in right now, aren't they?"

Almost every day I wear Dara's jeans from Italian Gorizia with the very low cut. I am in my right place in them, and when I squat they reveal the top of the cleft in my rear end, so that without remorse, I cross every dead line.

Translation Kelly Lenox and Hana Kovač

*From the short stories collection Dva svetova (Two Worlds),
Škuc-Lambda, Ljubljana 2009*

Flight

Do you remember that back then it was only a few minutes after midnight? It was actually Saturday and it would have been quite justifiable to say: "Tomorrow is Sunday."

You had a very restless hand, drawing funny little people on my arm, and I couldn't put myself together. But the trouble I had putting myself together wasn't that ordinary, not the kind of trouble most people would have while sitting on the train and having someone drawing funny little people on their arms. I couldn't concentrate on anything at all. I didn't hear the train rattling nor the warm whistle of the coffee from the open flask; least of all was I aware of the taste of the salami in our sandwiches. I tried with the funny little people, but under your

hand they were running all over, folding themselves and falling down. I took the red crate out of the rucksack (we had only one rucksack and one sleeping bag--do you remember?). And then we let funny little people jump on the crate. They were so restless. Maybe I'm exaggerating a bit now, but I do remember very well that they--the funny little people--and the crate were enchanted.

The ticket inspector was checking our train tickets. His glance over his glasses told us that he'd figured out where we were bound for. (You do know that some people enjoy their ability to understand just everything.) In that moment the only things we had in our mind were the red crate with funny little people and the taste of coffee in our mouth. (You do know the taste of coffee after a sandwich with overheated salami.)

The sandwiches and coffee were rapidly consumed. Out of the rucksack we also took Travis the cat. He lazily stretched and, catlike, jumped onto the crate and lay down. By doing so he trod on some of the funny little people but that was inevitable as we couldn't have left Travis the cat at home. Immediately you started to draw new funny little people on my arm, and Travis the cat started to purr. "Why do you chatter; so much, Travis?" you said to him. You were always saying he was chattering while he was purring.

Then we invented a game of sounds. We imitated sheep, horses, funny little people, cows, and Travis. "Let's imitate people!" you said. You imitated people, you talked and talked, gesticulated wildly, the words entangled, and all of a sudden you grew pale. "That hurts!" you said. "Let's imitate fish." And we imitated fish. Usually people don't do that on trains. That was why we were traveling a few minutes after midnight, because usually people don't travel at this hour and then you can imitate fish as much as you like.

Travis jumped off the crate at the next train station. It was his time.

You said that you wanted everyone to get out at this station so that you could go on drawing funny little people on my arm while I went on imitating fish and that time would stop.

Then we imitated the time that has stopped.

Translation Suzana Tratnik, English edit Elena Harap
From the short stories collection Pod ničlo (Below Zero),
Škuc-Lambda, Ljubljana 1997

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji
Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

821.163.6-82

SLOVENIAN lesbian literature : four voices / Kristina
Hočevar ... [et al.]. - Ljubljana : Škuc, 2019

ISBN 978-961-6983-34-1
1. Hočevar, Kristina, 1977-
COBISS.SI-ID 302288640

Izdal: Škuc
Zanj: Suzana Tratnik

Tisk: Mišmaš, 100 kom



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