

VERSOPOLIS / **Review**

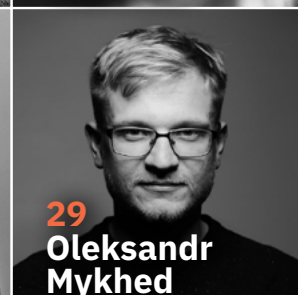
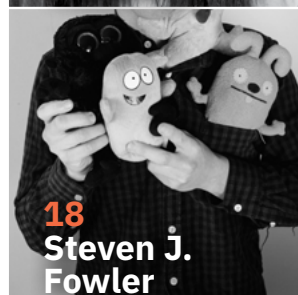
# European Reliquary

**COLLECTED TEXTS ABOUT  
EUROPEAN CUSTOMS**

Edited by **Ana Schnabl**



# Contents:





# The Apprentice Healer

By **Emanuela Valentini**



**Emanuela Valentini** lives and works in Rome as a freelance editor. She has won numerous awards for short fiction. *The Healers*, her first thriller, is being published in various countries around the world.



It's past midnight. The old woman, with the name that reminds her of the rustle of dry leaves and the sound of pouring rain, prays silently at the back of the empty church.

Clouds of incense float in the heavy air, filling the spaces between the peeling-away angels and the worm-eaten benches.

Claudia takes off her mittens and looks down at her hands. The healer is waiting for her. She walks down the short candlelit nave, the snow still falling outside.

Everyone knows that the secret is handed down on Christmas Eve. In the church, even though its roots have little to do with the church. It has more in common with ancient wisdom, far older than any church. The root that binds, the leaf that cures, the sign that chases the shadows away.

The caress that wards off the evil eye, the word that heals the sprain, the string that aids the upset stomach, the chant that eliminates worms.

The flower that cleanses the soul.

"Can I do it?". For a moment, her resolve falters and an icy draft of fear creeps into her coat and up to her heart.

Almost as if she'd heard her, Brigida, glancing over, beckoning her silently.

"Come," her eyes say, grey pearls against a wrinkled background.

"Fear has no power, it's just a ghost. You can blow it out. Puff. Like a candle."

Claudia forgets the draft and hurries over, sitting down next to her.

The scent of lavender envelops her like a song.

Soon the old woman will place the secret in her lap and she too will become a healer. She too will be able to recognise evil and drive it out.

The women of these mountains have passed it down from mouth to mouth, from hand to hand for centuries, like a piece of bread or a ripe fig. They have carried it in their pockets or locked it in their hearts. In their bones. Because once you learn the secret, it stays with you forever.

She was born "in the caul" so she had already received part of it: she knows she has the gift. Now she is ready to learn the signs and the words.



“Why do you want to learn, child?” Brigida whispers, her clasped hands like terracotta.

“For my dad.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

Her question cuts a swathe through the icy air and Claudia peers through it. At her father, curled up in bed, unable to work. Or eating in his room, all alone, with the door closed, whenever they have guests over, or standing on the balcony, sobbing, staring down at the dark courtyard below, as if trying to find the courage to end it all. At her father, who for the past few years seems to have disappeared, replaced by someone else, a stranger.

“He’s afraid. Ever since the accident on the site, when they fell off the scaffolding and his friend died.”

“And you want to make him feel better?”

“Yes.”

For a long moment, the sibilant sound of that final “s” hovers in the air between them, like a butterfly that has lost its way and finally finds a place to rest.

Brigida takes Claudia’s hands in hers and a smile creeps out from under the black veil that covers her head. “The signs aren’t magic,” she says. “Even if many of us know how to charm the ailments of this world, it’s not magic. You need to remember that. We’re not saints, and we don’t perform miracles. That’s why we pray. Forget all talk of miracles.”

In the pause that follows, Claudia nods. The old woman’s words are reassuring, and the enormous feeling of responsibility that had gripped her throat so tightly loosens a little.

“We use signs,” continues the old woman with the name like the rustle of dry leaves and the sound of pouring rain, “together with words, to speak to these ailments. They hear us, understanding all too clearly. That’s why, if we’re good at what we do, they leave. We have to scold them, scare them, tie them up and tear them out, drowning them in a bucket of water



and throwing them away, far from home. Most of all, my child, there are some ailments that can't be seen: these are the hardest to find and the path you've chosen won't be easy. Remember that if someone deep down in the valley or on the other side of the hill needs you, you have to go. And never, ever, ask for money in exchange for signs. You can, however, accept any gift that is offered, and don't forget to come to me as often as you can. I'll teach you about how plants work and the ailments. Where to hide the bad things and where to find the things that are lost. Will you do that?"

"Yes," Claudia nods — her voice is firm now.

"And the most important thing, remember...", Brigida rubs her cold hands. She immediately feels the heat, glowing like the embers of a fire. "The signs are fine, times have moved on. Things have changed. For some ailments, you need the doctor. So, if you see your father isn't getting better, take him to see one. One doesn't cancel out the other, I can assure you. Promise?"

"Yes." Claudia nods again and feels a tear falling down her cheek. "I'm ready."

Brigida moves her fingers and nods. "This is what we do for fear. You surround it. See? Three times."

Claudia watches, observing the signs that she will never forget. She copies the old woman's movements, feeling the ancient power flowing beneath her skin.

"And then, you say...", Brigida looks at her and finally whispers those secret words which, like stars, like seeds, like crusts of bread, fall into her eyes, her heart and her mouth.



# State of Trepidation

By **Mitka O. Malzahn**



**Mitka O. Malzahn** is a radio journalist, a poet, a novelist and a playwright with a PhD in Russian Philosophy. She hosts a podcast - artistic audio form titled „Journal of Changes”. She debuted in 2001 with a volume of short stories *Baroness Late Autumn*, after which she published another 8 books. She has forged her literary presence with works that reflect her vast interests in forms of consciousness.

<https://www.milkamalzahn.pl/english-biography/>



Poles like to say, “When in trepidation, go to God”<sup>1</sup>. For hundreds of years. Centuries ago, there were certainly more of these gods, which doesn’t change the fact that at some stage of trepidation they helped determine what to do next.

I was in a state of second-degree trepidation. Just about. For a couple of months. The first degree can usually be pacified by doctors who get at the effects of the problem. Those afflicting the body. Thus, the effects disappear with time, and in the meantime the reason for the affliction goes into “stand-by” mode. It’s somewhat better. The problem’s somewhat gone.

The sources of the problem, however, are renewable. How do you get to the source?

I had to get to the source right away, because doctors weren’t treating the effects seriously. Second-degree of trepidation: in my case it was ordinary but burdensome insomnia, small but annoying panic attacks, light but infrequent dizziness. The doctors said: *everything’s normal. Go on vacation. Vacation said: since you can’t get enough sleep, go see a doctor. I said: I’ve been to the doctor. Vacation said: well then I, vacation, can’t help.*

Checkmate. Second degree of trepidation downloaded.

We say, “When in trepidation, go to God”. In Source Matters, you can rely on God, and in dealing with God on these matters, you can turn to a Szeptucha<sup>2</sup> — a woman who heals the wounds of the soul using water, fire, and air. The primordial forces of nature. By and large, forces that have

<sup>1</sup> Polish: *Jak trwoga, to do Boga.*

<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: Szeptucha is usually a woman healer in Eastern Poland who treats using prayers. The word Szeptucha comes from *szeptać*, which means to whisper. A Szeptucha whispers incantations to God to help a person who has come to her. There are similar healers in Eastern Europe and Russia.



sometimes been forgotten. Szeptuchy<sup>3</sup> have always whispered prayers so moving, beautiful and incomprehensible, and yet so simple, that the feeling lasts for many, many days afterwards.

Holy water, salt, Candlemas candles — that's all that's needed. And home rituals that save the human in a human. You can still find Szeptuchy here. There used to be one in every village. But they're dying out. People know them. Sometimes they're afraid of them, sometimes they respect them. Whereas, they live in harmony with the seasons, and if they're lucky, in harmony with the priest. And if there's an Orthodox church and a church in the village, then in harmony with the presbyter.

The most important thing is that she should be in harmony with herself. And this is what people know and see. Though they don't always understand.

Szeptuchy have specialisations: for example, in women's diseases, in fear, confusion, the evil eye... People always know what a specific Szeptucha is the best at.

I'm in a state of trepidation. I don't know where from, I don't know what kind, but it's what ails me.

My Friend looks at me from above her coffee mug and says, "Go to the one specialising in fear. I'll go with you, so you're not afraid".

After another tiring night, I get in the car, go to her house and the two of us set off. We have 97 kilometres each way. And light years to cover the black holes of our civilisation. I'm in a black hole. I'll do any cosmic thing to

<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: Szeptuchy is the plural form of Szeptucha.



feel good again.

\*\*\*

You can't make an appointment to see a Szeptucha. You simply go to a Szeptucha. The finger of God — will there be many people in front of her house and a good few hours of wait? Or will you arrive, knock, and... the Szeptucha will be sitting over tea. And she'll be in a good mood.

That's important. Infuriating a Szeptucha is perilous. You should arrive open and honest, otherwise, she'll quickly point out what we're doing, why, and what we're really like there, deep, deep down in layers that we don't even show ourselves. And that hurts. Thus, infuriating a Szeptucha hurts.

Meanwhile, we're driving: my Friend and I. We're open and honest! We want to meet with Antonina, who's about 70 years old. Long ago she buried her husband, a drunk, she's raised her children. Four of them. Now, she lives alone, in a village with one store. In the store we ask for the exact address, because we don't know it. A Szeptucha doesn't advertise on the Internet. She doesn't advertise anywhere. The finger of God sends people to her, and she helps them. God heals. She helps. Each one will say that. All you have to do is ask. And a Szeptucha doesn't tell fortunes; she doesn't have the time for such trivialities as wiping away tears. She knows what she's doing, just as her mother and grandmother knew. Because the gift is always passed on the distaff side. She improves the world. Through healthier, calmer people. A Szeptucha will look, listen, and get down to work, that's what she does.

Meanwhile, we're still driving. We ask in the store; we're shown which house it is. What nice people, in that store! The shop lady even called Antonina, telling her that we're coming from afar, *from the city, there's two of them. Come out by the fence, because they're ready to get lost.*

We, meanwhile, are ready for anything.



And indeed, we drive slowly through the village. It is melancholic, empty and peaceful. It's an autumn afternoon. The warm sun is shining and the world seems friendly, warm, cozy.

By the fence there's an erect, tall elderly woman wearing a headscarf and a dirty apron.

"I'd time to visit the chick'ns", she says. "Now come in, come in".

We greet each other warmly. Really warmly. By the veranda, a small fluffy dog wags its tail — very friendly and very old. We take off our shoes and go straight into the kitchen.

But we cross a much more important threshold. Much more important than we think.

My friend speaks first. For me. Because she's the healthy one and I'm the ailing one.

But Antonina calmly turns towards the sink and, in silence, washes the dishes without looking at us. "Sit down, girls", she says with a beautiful local accent. We don't look like girls. "I'll make some coffee", she adds after a moment. "You've come a long way".

And then she's silent.

And we're silent. We look at her, at the holy picture in the corner, hung with rosaries, at the kitchen table with bread crumbs, at Antonina, or rather at her back.

"I don't got anythin' more", says Antonina. "No cookies".

"But...", we bashfully sit on our chairs. "We don't want cookies. Coffee, with pleasure, but we're here for another matter...".

Antonina carefully puts the water in the electric kettle, checks if the hearth is warm (it is). She generously pours coffee grounds into our mugs, and then pours the boiling water over the coffee, sits down and sighs, "Well, speak".

My friend's silent. She's talked out, so I begin.

"I'm afraid of my life, although I have it pretty good. But I'm afraid. It's



a little scarier every day, even though no tragedy affects me. My health is deteriorating a little bit, but all is well. A decent husband...”

“You love your husband?”, Antonina interrupts me, piercing me with her gaze.

This completely surprises me. Unawares. In a stranger’s kitchen. Such an intimate question! Here I am talking about my health, about fear, I’m looking for something for my trepidation. And she’s like this...! I stare at her, and Antonina begins to laugh. And this laughter is loud, contagious, and after a moment the three of us are laughing. We exchange knowing glances and reach for the coffee for courage.

“Good”, says Antonina. “You must pray, remove the charm you probably put on yourself”, she winks at me knowingly.

She gets up and puts a chair in the centre of the kitchen. I sit. She heats beeswax in a pot on a small gas stove.

“My mother used this pot”, she says. “Grandmother too. Old pot. But the best one”. She approaches me; I can smell bread and hay.

She leans over me very, very closely.

“Do you know the Hail Mary?”, she asks.

“I do”, I say.

“Pray with me”.

And we both whisper the first two stanzas. Then she repeats them softer and softer, in a more and more singsong manner, whispering, wishing over my ear. It sways and soothes me.

Antonina takes a bowl of water and holds it over my head; praying, she pours the wax. She pours it concentrating. Then she goes to the sink. My Friend and I wait in suspense. What will she say? What’s the diagnosis? What matters has the wax brought out to the light of day?

Antonina picks up the flat wax from the surface of the water and says, “Everything’ll be fine, I can tell the decision comes from God; but without love, because without love you won’t feel good”.

“Without love?”, I repeat unwittingly.



“You love your husband?”

“No”.

“So let him find his love. You open yourself up to yours, cause you don’t do it, you don’t do it. You run away”. Antonina sees that my eyes are turning glassy, she comes over and hugs me tightly.

“You know what to do”, she says. “Now you know exactly. I’ll ask for protection for you. Sit under the picture”.

I sit, wiping my nose loudly. And Antonina, praying, humming incomprehensible phrases under her breath, although somehow known to me, ties a red thread around my wrist. Cotton. Every knot means something.

When she finishes, she turns to the holy picture, raises her hands high and gives thanks fervently. She thanks God for helping this unfortunate woman (i.e. me).

This woman (i.e. me) sits silently, swayed by the prayers, and offers very secular thanks to this Szeptucha, who in two hours has dealt with a state of second-degree trepidation.

We finish our coffee. We talk from the heart, about life. We laugh at the matters that connect all generations of women. For ages.

And we drive back.

My trepidation has never returned since I admitted to myself that I did not love. Since then, everything’s a bit different, although it looks very similar. And the melodies of the prayers remained with me for the next few, difficult and beautiful months — right here, in the centre.



# The Beet Parade

By **Astrid Haerens**



**Astrid Haerens** is a novelist and poet. She lives and works in Brussels. She published her first novel *Stadspanthers (Urban Panthers)* in 2017 (Uitgeverij Polis) and is the creator of [Iedereendichter.be](http://Iedereendichter.be), a multimedia poetical map of the Northern Westhoek. She is currently working on a new collection of poetry.



The wind hadn't stopped blowing all night long. It was the same wind that made the bare branches tap my window like fingernails, as if to gently wake me up. I looked up at the shadow play of silhouettes dancing on my bedroom ceiling and realised what day it was. I clasped my hands, squeezed my eyes shut and started praying.

It's now six o'clock as the twilight dissolved into the dark. I slide closer to my brother Jan. He is standing still, stiff like a penguin, engulfed in our cousin's oversized coat with a red forage cap on skirting his chubby cheeks along with a scarf knitted by my mother. Silently, we watch children pour into the field, shrieking and singing excitedly. The air smells like fire.

I dip the toe of my boot in the swampy black soil. I'm looking for the hand of my brother, but he's hid them in his sleeves. Two girls jump around wildly and shove me in the back. I close my eyes, hold my breath and count. Every time my stomach hurts, I count.

I open my eyes again. Foliage lays scattered across the field. We harvested the last beets of the season two weeks ago. My father and mother impaled beets to their pitchforks and swung them into their cart where they always landed with a thud. Jan also helped out. I got to sit on the cart and watched the pile of gnarled beets grow.

Olga and Stella, our draught horses, greedily ate whatever they could find on the field. On the way home, I watched from the top of the pile how their shining, muscular thighs moved up and down, their sweat evaporating as they pulled the cart through the streets of the village. The sound of their hooves echoed against the cobbles as they trotted home. I felt like a queen.

The crowd of kids around us has grown. Cold raindrops fall onto my neck as the wind blows the rain against my face. It's hard to recognise faces



in the dark, the dancing light of the candles is the only thing I can see. Some boys shout, “The bad ones get nothing! The good ones get a lot!”. They’re holding strings onto which big carved-out beets are attached. The beets have triangular eyes and crooked mouths spreading light. I can’t look at the unnerving beet-faces for long, they remind me of the village ghosts people whisper about.

Yesterday at the kitchen table Jan and I also carved a beet while my grandmother silently peeled shrimps. My brother sawed off the head of the thing with a handsaw. With all our strength, we tried spooning out the white stuff inside. Using an apple corer my brother made holes on the top and on the sides, through which we pulled a few strings. We lit a candle inside. I look at my own lantern, which is smaller than the others, with protruding and skewed holes that are meant to represent the eyes. God, have I been good enough?

We are being pushed together. The procession is about to leave. René stands in the front. He shouts through a megaphone, “Mother, I have seen Saint Martin, behind the trees, behind the trees!”. I get pushed forward by the kids behind me. Softly, I whisper along, “And he stood there so funnily, with his mitre, with his mitre”. I look at my feet, trying not to trip over the feet in front or behind me. With full concentration I count my steps, from twenty to one and over again. We are going to catch up with Saint Martin, he’s being accompanied by helpers with their sacks to store the kids who have been naughty.

I’m nervous. In search of my brother, I look up, first left, then right. I don’t see him. I stand still and make a spin. The children behind me bump into me and almost knock me over, but I keep spinning around, standing on my toes. My hands and feet start to tingle now. I turn around again and now try to walk faster than the kids, squeezing myself between the people



singing, I stoop and try to crawl between their legs. I quickly slip forward, past the grinning, burning beet faces and the children chanting loudly. I breathe deep and fast, until I reach the front of the procession.

A loud bell rings. The parade comes to a stop, but I keep on running, around the corner, into the town square, until I abruptly stop.

Right in front of me stands a huge white horse. It looks like it glows in the dark. A man with a long, white beard, wearing a red mitre on his head, and a cloak on his shoulder is seated on the horse.

Saint Martin. I gulp.

He's surrounded by a dozen black-faced men. They are carrying flaming torches as their teeth flicker in the light. Everyone is staring at me, Saint Martin, the helpers, and the horse. In the distance, I hear the procession shouting. Behind the helpers, in the town square, a big fire is burning. I'm trying to say something, but my throat is dry and no words come out. I feel my heart pounding. Softly, I count from twenty to one. The helpers start laughing. They scream, jump and dance. Saint Martin gives me a long, hard look. Then he nods. He continues high on his horse right past me, towards the procession.



# Mummery

By **Steven J. Fowler**



**Steven J. Fowler** is a writer, poet and artist who lives in London. He has published eight collections of poetry, five of artworks, six of collaborative poetry plus volumes of selected essays and selected collaborations. His writing has explored subjects as diverse as prescription drugs, films, fight sports, museums, prisons and animals. He is the director of the European Poetry Festival.

[www.stevenjfowler.com](http://www.stevenjfowler.com)



*The custom of Christmas masking, “mumming,” or “disguising” can be traced at the English court as early as the reign of Edward III. It is in all probability connected with that wearing of beasts’ heads and skins of which we have already noted various examples—its origin in folk-custom seems to have been the coming of a band of worshippers clad in this uncouth but auspicious garb to bring good luck to a house. The most direct English survival is found in the village mummers who still call themselves “guisers” or “geese-dancers” and claim the right to enter every house.*

*Clement A. Miles (1912)*

Who plays the champion and who plays the villain? Local men. And who plays the doctor? Sometimes George, sometimes Tommy. Sometimes Nelson, Bonaparte, Bessy. Sometimes a dragon, sometimes a Turk. Sometimes Father Christmas? Mummers plays have a typical form, weeding out the incomers from the village-born. A hero is killed in a fight and then is brought back to life by the doctor, who is standing by. Standing by, beside the fool, in cap and bells. Sometimes Father Christmas does the resurrection. I have had a search, these past few years, for a lineage of weird English poetry performance - for the eccentric English quasi banal madness that permeates my own work in historic, permanent, organic, vital outputs by English people who weren't 'artists'. I could not believe, when I discovered the Mummary tradition, that I had not known of it before.

In Mummary, all the players are masked. They wear cowls, caps, mail, beards, masquerades, animal faces, heads, paint and makeup. They are 'guised' from their fellow villagers and townspeople. They are known but not known, as they play. The plays are written, sometimes, with couplets and typical addresses, based on some lost, long-abused original, older than 800 years, by all accounts. But more often, this standard is just a guide, and the Mummary is improvised. It is made up by the villagers in dress, in both the cavorting and the costume, and the poetry of this bawdy, gaudy



theatre. Sexual innuendo, violent apéry, modern asides, dark jokes – they spring from the players, mixed in with new exclamations, songs, poems. It is those, concealed by their masks, drawn from the audience, that appear, for one day, as the Id of the community. And where needs a public Id more than England? The Mummers play is the outpouring of a crude dramatic and literary instinct that seemed to once work upon us all and seems far more familiar in other, nearby, European nations. The remains of a traditional ritual, that perhaps we need, as a collective, unpackaged, community low brow.

I once was given an impromptu tour of Paris at night by a poet called Martin Bakero. We'd just done a show together, sound poetry. Screaming and wrestling in a basement. He said he wanted to show me the occult places in the city that occasional visitors rarely saw. If I'm honest, I was too polite to say I just wanted to get back to my room, and hide. My public Id was exhausted. Martin's was not. And never seems to be. I remember him telling me about how poets used to be, in a specific historical setting, and how we were part of that lineage. I can't remember if he was talking about troubadours or medieval poets, but that's the point – all the specificity of history eluded me, when it came to poetry. As it does not when other facets of history appear to me as necessary for us all to know. Is poetry in time frayed and misty to me because of my own refusal to place myself in a grandiose tradition? Or because that tradition is utterly severed for the English?

As Martin talked, I listened, but I wasn't listening closely enough. He told me why poets were important once, why they were valued by people. Because they told them what they knew about themselves, but could not say out loud, in public. They recited, what was known, but also unknown, unsaid. That which needed to be better known. And that was a kind of service. The purpose of the poets was immediately obvious, and recognised.



Not for material value, but something deeper. Later on, staying in Spain, I was told by another friend about the carnival poets, or “maestros” (Meistersinger is a possible gloss, in Germanic countries). Often illiterate, their words are sometimes taken down by scribes or by literate friends and printed on broadsides (folletos) for sale during carnivals, which go on now, as they have for centuries. These poets are local men, who lambast and celebrate in their villages and towns.

Ernst Cassirer wrote “nature yields nothing without ceremonies.” So I asked myself, growing up in rural Cornwall and Devon, the celtic, bucolic, rural boot of England, where were these poets, in the villages of my home? They certainly weren’t the patrician, clinical, sexless, staid poets fed to me in my school, that I instinctively ignored. So as a grown man, long since writing, I came across the tradition of the Mummers plays, searching through and past Morris dancing. I found revivalists, troupes of Mummers players all over Devon, in Lympstone even, the village along from where I grew up. I heard never even heard the word. Why was I not aware of it when I was younger? Was it too weird? Grotesque? Working class? Uncommercial? Mummers plays were likely around me as a younger man, they often perform in the street, or sing in small pubs, nowadays to raise money for charity. I would’ve mistaken them for folk singers, or amateur dramatics. I would not have connected them to the feast of fools tradition, the satirical, rambunctious, pagan shedding of social contrivance to ritually, psychologically cleanse otherwise tightknit and codified communities.

As it has always been, for hundreds of years, all over the United Kingdom, sometimes extremely prevalent and popular, sometimes regional, Mummers is generally performed seasonally, often at Christmas, Easter or on Plough Monday. It is strange though, more akin to Guy Fawkes Night (where we celebrate fire, and torture?), Wassailing (where we make Harvest Incantations), Pace Egging (where Medieval Mystery Plays are performed),



First Footing (New Year Traditions, dating back to the Viking era) and Halloween (which is descended, in part through guising, from Mummery) than it is to our contemporary, post-Christian, plasticised holidays. Mummers' are essentially folk plays performed by troupes of amateurs, also known as guisers, rhymers, soulers, tipteerers, wrenboys, and galoshins. Once, their performances went beyond a public play, Mummers were bands of masked men who during winter, paraded the streets of villages in England, and beyond, and entered houses to dance or play dice, in silence. But the basic plot of the play, the mythical, ubiquitous story of death and resurrection, is likely a graft onto an older game that stemmed from a more primitive ritual. Mummery is a melting pot.

Held in winter, over the centuries Mummery has blended with numerous traditions in England, overlapping with The Feast of Fools, though very different. More light-hearted, less savage and satirical. This feast was celebrated later, on January 1st, throughout Europe and particularly France. Mummery seems a more English thing than the Feast, which was parodic, aggressive, unleashed. Mummery seems silly, light, its menace is held back, lurking. It is still practised now, unlike the Feast, which was, and is, bound to the religion mostly disappeared from the UK. Though perhaps toothless, Mummery remains a peculiar liminal space, a ritual of minor rebellion that allows a controlled, release of tensions in a time when it is undeniable that there has been a loss of festivity in English culture.

When observed, and I have sought out a few to watch in villages in South Devon,, avoiding those that seem well advertised or thoroughly produced, Mummers plays are stranger and more ambivalent than they seem when recorded. They are symbolic, yes, and easily patronised as quaint and quintessential and harmless. But they are funny, crude and occasionally horrible. They are very much alive, they call on the audience to clap and cheer and chime in, and sing. The Mummers stare at you, fix



people in the crowd. They are a public kind of poetry, ludic, comic and animated. Like carnival, they can be scatological, defamatory and laudatory. But like England, they are essentially ambivalent; closely combining praise and abuse, glory and humility. Mummery revives and renews at the same time, for its bare negation is not possible to anyone with a sense of humour. Again, pure England – to be the first to apologise, self-denigrate, but to quietly murmur about a seething pool of resentment and ambition and power. Mummery just wants to make a bit of space for degradation and anger in charming, cheerful village life. This is an old poetry we need now, more than before – full of the contradiction and inconsistency so ready for us in our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives.



# Suroki

By **Volha Hapeyeva**



**Volha Hapeyeva** is an award-winning Belarusian poet. Her works have been translated into more than 10 languages. She writes poetry, prose and drama, as well as occasional books for children. Volha has published a number of books to date, and has participated in numerous literary festivals and has been a holder of international residency scholarships in Austria (City Writer of Graz 2019/2020), Germany (a.o. Villa Waldberta 2020), etc. A member of the Belarusian PEN Centre.



An invisible blanket of magical thinking that stretches from archaic times still covers the part of Europe where Belarus lies. Words play a very important role in this type of thinking which makes it so appealing for me as a poet. In spite of all technological progress and inventions, people in Belarus still spit three times, do not speak about their plans, and try not to praise their children. And one of the reasons is *suroki*.

A mysterious illness, or better to say a hyper-illness, which is well-known all over the country and can reveal itself in dozens of diseases from headache to being paralysed, has the name of *suroki* — the action or the verb being *suročyc*.

Today kids have all possible toys and computers, but back in my childhood, our main capital was words. Lots of games were connected with words. “The broken telephone”, for example, when the first person spoke a word to the ear of their neighbour, and the latter passed on to the next what they had heard. Often words were deliberately distorted for a more comical effect. Then there were numerous rhymes for every occasion. Like healers many centuries ago, we invented our own charms to mock somebody or to put up with a friend in a fight. Words had real value for us then.

The belief in the power of words (or the phatic function of language, as linguists would call it) is so strong that it influences the communicative behaviour and makes people invent different protection mechanisms.

You open one novel and read: “Either the mare was affected by *suroki* at that fair, or the owner didn’t feed it, but it barely moved its legs. The Mare snuffled, stopped, and looked at me piteously.” You open another and see: “Big happiness did not come out of the big love. As if someone *suročyŭ*, as if someone was too envious. Nothing came out of it.”

You talk to your publisher and he says: “Volha, I have good news, but I will not tell you now, we have to wait, not to *suročyc*.”

You read the newspaper and see how the football player complains



about stupid traumas which were caused by minor accidents and the interviewer asks him: “Do you believe in *suroki*?” And the football player answers: “Earlier I did not believe in things like that, but now I started to think more seriously about it. What if there is something about it? Well, now I am fine – touch wood.”

By the way, in Belarusian, instead of *touch wood* (which is also used) you must say *cfu-cfu-cfu* – the sound that imitates spitting, since according to magical rules you have to spit three times in order to avoid causing the evil eye or endangering your success. This is another manifestation of how to protect yourself from bad luck.

As you may have already guessed, *suroki* is a kind of evil eye, a bad word or thought that causes sickness, damage or misfortune. It includes evil spells and jinxes and any kind of praise which could endanger one’s success. The most dangerous ones are considered to be caused by special curses. But *suroki* can happen not only when a witch/wizard or some bad person curses you – you yourself can bring it to life unintentionally if you pronounce something good (like a praise or a positive surprise) at a so-called “bad hour”. A bad hour is a transitional time (on the eve of some holiday or at midnight, etc.). Such *suroki* could even take place within the same family: father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, brothers, sisters, etc. Then, the voiced praise has opposite, negative consequences in the future (for example, the animal praised ceases to gain weight or to give milk, children get sick, etc.).

A friend calls me and says that I forgot my scarf at her place. I go back and, standing at the threshold, she will not give it to me. I have to enter the house or she must go out. Because you cannot hand in a thing while holding it over the threshold – it will bring bad luck. The threshold is thought about as a place of transition between the worlds.

I dress up in the morning, put on one sock and the other is missing. I



walk with one sock on across the room searching for the missing one and hear my mom shouting at me from the other room – *Volya, do you want to become an orphan? Why are you walking with only one sock on?* The same applies to shoes. You cannot walk with one shoe or sock on, as it can make you an orphan.

My granny says to me and my cousin, as we are drying our hands with one towel, that we are doing something wrong, because if you do not want to quarrel with a person you should not dry your hands with the same towel at the same time.

My grandpa asks me not to whistle in the house – or there will be no money in this house.

I put all my textbooks and notebooks under the pillow because tomorrow I am having an exam and this is how I help knowledge to stay in my head.

In a “serious” world they call it superstition. Superstition is so deeply imbedded in our lives that we do not even notice it. But this superstition has an important function: it reminds us to be humble in the face of nature and its sacred power, because a human is just a part of this cosmos, not its ruler. *Suroki* is a big part of the traditional culture of superstition in Belarus, which remains today. That is why it is better not to brag about or praise something or somebody too much; otherwise you will scare the good luck away. For example, traditionally it was forbidden to praise a small child, to say that they are healthy, beautiful, fun, etc., because these words can make the heavenly forces angry, and the child will get sick.

It is also one more reason why it is so hard for our people to get used to an American approach, where you have to sell yourself in any field, as it was with me when I got into the finals of one prestigious American programme. They called me for an interview, where they asked me to prove that my project was better than the others’. I tried. But when they asked why I thought humanities were important and why they should support them –



tears went down along my cheeks, I felt humiliated, I felt like a beggar who had to ask, prove and explain obvious things. I definitely do not belong to that type of world. My world is an archaic and superstitious one, where it is shameful and even dangerous to boast about your achievements.

In spite of centuries of Christianity and the development of science, people in Belarus are not eager to forget their magical heritage, wherein words can heal or harm. Perhaps that is why Belarus is more a country of poetry than prose.



# Wedding Night

By **Oleksandr Mykhed**



**Oleksandr Mykhed** is a writer and curator of art projects. He lives in Kyiv, Ukraine.

He is the author of 7 books. The rights for his recent book *“I Will Mix Your Blood with Coal”*. *Understanding Ukrainian East* were sold to English and German.

Selected essays and excerpts from his books have been translated into 10 languages. He translated *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir* by Marina Abramović into Ukrainian. Participant of literary residencies in Finland, Latvia, Iceland, the USA, and France.



Just a little bit longer. And this crazy day will come to an end.

Marichka would have liked to see herself from aside. Was she worthy of her father? Would her mother be disappointed? Would she see approval in the eyes of her grandmother, who was always silent; and in her eyes – would Marichka bring disgrace on the family?

But they are not here. Here is her new family. Ivanko's family is now hers.

But no matter what she does, she hears her father asking, *"What will people say? Mania, how can I look the in-laws in the eye?"*

Marichka is taken to the barn where the grain is stored.

She no longer belongs to herself. Everyone she seemed to know have become strangers. As if they were no longer people, but masks – their lustful, distorted, dead-drunk and smeared faces writhing and wandering around her.

Who are these strangers? Where is Ivanko? Does he know how much it hurts?

Outside the window, women start up obscene songs. How she will milk the bull. And how a bull will pierce her with its pole.

She looks around. Ivan is seen at the door. Hovering behind him is Mikhas, his best man. He has been Ivan's shadow, and they will have to put up with always having him nearby.

The rough hands of her mother-in-law and the lasses grab Marichka. Singing is heard from afar:

*Give birth, Lord, rye.*

They tear off her clothes like the skin of an animal driven to slaughter.  
For the root of the rooted.

Then they unbraid her hair and rummage through it.

*For the spike spiked.*

She is gone. Marichka is not here. She is hiding somewhere deep in her unconscious. She is a log rolled around by the rough hands of women who have been there before her.



*Oh our girl had.*

Earrings are removed from her ears.

*Standing stung the rye.*

A rough, ringed and greasy hand checks between her legs.

*Stowed for the guys.*

The verse comes to an end. Marichka won't make a sound. Must be a good daughter. Must be worthy of her family. She must prove that she did not hide any pins or needles anywhere.

And the blood that will be spilled will be shed by the bull, and not by wiles.

She would like to see Ivanko, but she cannot see him in this vortex of either people or beasts.

A white shirt is pulled over Marichka. The mother-in-law rushes to the door, grabs the cap from Ivanko's head, and slaps it upon Marichka's head.

She's on the floor. The wind brutally strikes at her legs.

They start on the next bawdy verse. Marichka will jump into the water, wet her feet, so her shirt will be hitched higher.

Does she know these people? Was her mother preparing her for this? Has she not been to other people's wedding? Was she having fun then?

Mikhas pushes Ivanko into the barn. As if the shadow took over his body.

Ivanko is stripped, and his body is searched, to see if he has hidden anything sharp. Marichka sees Ivan naked for the first time. Looks away. Both matchmakers and girls stop their singing and mockingly laugh at what a glorious bull Marichka will milk now. Mikhas slaps Ivan's bare ass encouraging him.

Ivan is brought to her, he is wearing only boots. Marichka kneels before him. She knows what will happen next.

The way her mother taught her. Something that should be fun and everyone is already waiting for the fun to be had.

Marichka takes off Ivan's boots, afraid to look up. The right boot



contains several bloody coins.

Everyone bursts into laughter. And Ivan too though he rubbed his foot with coins to the point of blood.

Is this the last money that Marichka will see? Will he be kind, her Ivanko? Will he show her the same tenderness as at parties when his mustache tickled her neck?

Mikhas slaps Ivan's bare ass goodbye. And only a while later will Marichka remember the sound of the slap and think: did he need to touch Ivan a second time?

Matchmakers come out. Wedding night, here it is. It seems they were left alone. But all the same – there are crude voices around. The bawdy songs slow down Marichka's thoughts. Mikhas is outside the door. Ivan must give him a sign that the bull has saddled the heifer. And she didn't resist.

Marichka tries to mold a smile on her face. Like pulling dead skin in a bundle. Smile the way she can. Caress Ivanko. Wants to hear his voice, not the vulgar chorus.

He leans over her. She smells the hooch on his breath. Stinky and cheap. He has already drunk himself to death somewhere.

Ivan spreads her legs, forcefully, roughly. As if setting a trap.

- Come on already, he wheezes.

- Ivanko, honey. My darling, my sweetheart. Be nice to me. I'm so cold. I'm so lonely.

- Shut up already, you. A dirty hand with hard calluses covers Marichka's mouth.

She feels as if a dead piece of flesh is poking at her. Like a cold fish.

She tries to hug him. To say that everything is fine. That there is no need to rush.

Ivan removes his hand.

Marichka:

- My darling.

Ivan slaps her with the back of his hand.



Tears off her white shirt.

- This is all your bewitchment. You are afraid that everyone will know that you are no longer a maiden. You're the one who jinxed me.

Marichka doesn't recognise him. He has never talked to her like that. He wasn't like that. Who is he? What is this mass of blackness and evil? Would he like to hear again that he was the only one who ever touched her? Then at parties, in the dark, when you couldn't tell – whose was where. And the fact that she then found a drop of blood on her skirt, he knows that too.

Ivan tugs at something between his legs and hisses furiously: "The devil is in charge here."

And as if they were just waiting for it – the door opens slightly.

Mikhas is on the threshold. It is said that in ancient times, when grandmothers got married, the groom's best man could assist his bull friend on his wedding night. And Marichka knows – Mikhas is thinking about it now. Sees his leering smile.

A matchmaker appears from behind his back. She makes fun of Ivan. And then she shouts at Marichka:

- What kind of a woman are you that he won't take you even now? How are you even going to give birth?

And she gives Ivan the pliers.

- Come on, bull. Come on, go. Cool down.

In the light of the torches Marichka sees the outlines of figures. Women who block her exit.

Marichka listens – there is no more singing, no shouting. Ivan is walking around the yard pulling out nail after nail with tongs. A punishment for him. A lesson for her.

Marichka holds her breath. Like before a long dive.

If his flesh does not come to life, if he does not want her...

A moment later, dark female figures are advancing on Marichka.

She knows what will happen next.

Pain.



Nails and greasy fingers.

Torn flesh.

Revenge of the women for the torn apart lives, which can no longer be brought together by any mending.

There will be shame. And the grandmother's silent face.

And forever hidden in the barn the question that Marichka never dares to ask him: "Do you... Do you?"



# Ignotum per Ignotius: Never kill a house snake

By **Srđan Srdić**



**Srđan Srdić** was born in Kikinda in 1977. He's written four novels, *Mrtvo polje* (2010) and *Satori* (2013), *Srebrna magla pada* (2017), and *Ljubavna pesma* (2020), two short-story collections, *Espirando* (2011) and *Sagorevanja* (2014), and a book of essays *Zapisi iz čitanja* (2014). He's won numerous literary awards and his books have been translated into several European languages.



The driver stops the bus and I don't know where we are. Houses in the rain, the road. The driver says that I should get off, he says it would be good. Good, I say. The driver says there is nothing else ahead, and I say good and get off. Nothing good for man. The bus leaves and I stay in the rain, watching the faint yellowish glow of light inside the bus, the rain on the asphalt, I have a water-resistant jacket on, I have sturdy shoes on. I am standing on the road bend, not thinking, the hills and gigantic trees smell of the rain, someone is howling somewhere. I am standing on the road, its end is a place which is not good for man (it is what it isn't it is what it isn't), it's no good. I have a rucksack over my right shoulder and I move away from the road, the dilapidated little houses, unlit dwellings arranged asymmetrically, are sheltered by the ziggurat-like hills. The howling can no longer be heard, no one calls out in the rain any more. The eaves and a step made of smooth bricks, a glazed front door, I take shelter, and four women, four dead women, their pictures are on the funeral notices, the same four women of different ages died in the house (what is different is the same is the same the same), and I can see that and then I know, just as I know a lot about things, but I rarely speak about them, I rarely speak. I light up a cigarette, despite the rain, there are shadows across the hills, I have a watch on my wrist, but I am not sure if it is in good condition, if everything is in order with time and its passing, I know a lot of things, but I am not sure, as it is better not to be sure in front of dead people's houses, it is better to have trust in doubt, no matter what may happen. There is something behind my back, scratching on the glazed door, I am not alone because I am alive (I am not because I am), I turn towards a horrified woman with a waxen face who is eyeing me, for there is nothing good on the roads, nor across the hills, nor in the rainy nights. The woman, only a mourning disguise, only the fear of what is coming, descending, climbing down and sneaking under the thresholds, sleeping in the deep basements by day, opening its eyes at dusk, feeding on the mould from the walls and floors, giving birth, giving birth to itself in the underground chambers. I pray before the door, clasped hands, and the



grieving woman opens the door for me and I step into the dark, it's the two of us now, in the dark, I follow her and I hope that she knows, sees or at least hopes, at least hopes to know. Then she pauses and I pause, in the middle of the room (things), without any sense of space, I spread my arms to take the measure of where I am, in silence, with candles on my mind. And she takes her clothes off, with her back facing me, she lets her hair down, singing, sobbing over half-uttered syllables, the longer I am in the dark, the more I see, but I do not know if I want anything, except the woman who is surrendering herself to me or something, I do not know if I want it as I put my rucksack down by my side, by the clothes she has taken off. I see more and more, I could touch her bare back, and the four dead women are lying, one on the table, the others on the beds, four unburied sisters in long dresses with white embroidered collars, one younger than another, and one older than another, buried in the house until the time comes, until it comes. Naked on the floor, I talk with the naked woman, I don't touch her, she doesn't touch me, there are snakes, she says.

There are snakes.

She says, I've been to the priest, I've searched for him, he's gone never to return, there are snakes. He went away into the hills one night, I check if he has come back every morning, his wife stops me at the church door and says no, says no, says no no no. So my dead sisters cannot die as long as he is gone (the dead cannot die, the dead without death, just dead), my dead sisters with me in the dead house. And the woman touches my lip with her finger, there are squirrels there, in the churchyard, you can see them, I will take you. If you want. Squirrels, dew and the just-risen sun. I will take you.

I am awakened by the sun from the hills, there is no one, there is nothing. Then I stand naked, before the door, with my eyes full of the stuff from the previous night. There is no one. Dew, daybreak.

Nothing is possible.



# Janjevo Chronicles

By **Erëmirë Krasniqi**



**Erëmirë Krasniqi** is a researcher and curator based in Pristina, Kosovo. She completed her bachelor's degree at Bard College Berlin in Aesthetics, Philosophy and Literature and earned a master's degree in Comparative Literature from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, USA. In 2017, Krasniqi completed Exhibiting Contemporary History – Representing 20th Century program, a year-long study in museology and curatorial practices at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany. She has extensive professional experience in qualitative research, curation, and cultural project management.



### Tadej's story

Every Saturday, at noon, the town's priest gracefully would walk through the narrow streets of Janjevo, saluting the townspeople and taking this opportunity to invite everyone to Sunday mass. His long Franciscan cloak would caress gently the cobblestone streets, reminding them of their religious duties. He carried himself and that cloak with such grace and splendor, thought the young Tadej, the twelfth child of the Palić family, the most renowned and economically powerful family of Janjevo.

The rich vegetation in the Palić family garden was not only a place where the seasons wore off, but a way of feeling the fullness of time. During Spring and Summer, it veiled Tadej's voyeuristic inclinations, while in Autumn and Winter, it laid them bare. That little heavenly place, dense with large leaves of exotic plants that his merchant father brought from Yugoslav coastal cities, allowed him to comfortably observe the priest and take note of his bodily language, so that at times it felt as if it encapsulated the memory of the entire universe.

This information gathering was not the only thing that captured Tadej's attention. In the years to come, he would find his own path to God, becoming the town's priest. The children called him Don Tade, and regardless of age, he meticulously corrected each and everyone about the additional "j" to his name: "My name is Tade-j-". It made you wonder why he insisted on that "j", was it that which kept him close to home, heritage, and God? Ah, those tiny letters that vanished into thin air, yet so significant, carving out a sense of purpose and belonging for him.

Tadej's mother would wake up early every Saturday morning to wash every single cobblestone in front of their doorstep. She wanted to make sure that the cleanliness she produced with her labour represented her



domestic capabilities well, but also that the priest's cloak would not catch dirt as he walked past their door. This was an agreement that women of the neighbourhood had among themselves, each took care of the street at their doorstep, and above all, they made sure that the holy man's stroll was a delight.

### Friday market

Friday was a market day in Janjevo. All surrounding villages came to the town's *Çarşı* to buy goods that Janjevo people produced in their home-based factories. What mostly motivated them to come to town were the stories that the Janjevci told about their travels. Their eyes had seen worlds beyond belief. They were great storytellers and overall great hosts. They appreciated drinking and, in their cafés, *rakia*, as well as homemade sausages, were always served.

Though well-accustomed to the urbanised setting of the capital, people from Pristina travelled to the interior of the country to get their hands on the local produce. They, too, had heard of this small town that celebrated life and had the ability to share that self-knowledge with others, and moreover liked to call itself Little Paris.

The *Çarşı* had many stores, lined up one after the other, each specialised in providing a well-defined line of products, offering an ultimate consumer experience. But that was only a part of it. *Çarşı* had funny people who liked to joke around and make everyone laugh. It was the place where all discussions about hardship, prosperity, and happiness took place — a place where money, goods and feelings circulated. It was in *Çarşı* that the townspeople found community support and a sense of ongoingness.

The *Çarşı* was a safe space and the market day was a pleasant event,



during which one could lose a wallet and find it the next day at St. Nicholas Church. The Janjevci always made sure that belongings that had freed themselves from their owners, were taken to the church to be later picked up by them. So, nothing was ever lost in Janjevo.

### **Anton's story**

Anton Glasnović, the town's painter, translated the forms of the natural world using squares, triangles and circles. No one felt he did them justice when they sat for a portrait. Their eyes, windows of the soul as they liked to think of them, through his brushstrokes took triangular shapes. Everyone in town tried to discourage him from painting, but he did not find any truth in their words. The truth, as they knew it, had deserted the small town a long time ago.

The Janjevci had modernised their home-based factories and started living a cosmopolitan life, but kept the traditional family unit intact. The producers and merchants needed the nuclear family for their businesses to prosper. They needed a wife at home and their many children to work at the factories. As they liked to say quite often and out loud, "Money and children, never enough!".

The crafts that were cultivated in Janjevo were many and their legacy was passed down across generations. The townspeople were always in need of new apprentices to join the workforce in the family-owned factories. Yet, Anton was obsessed about representing the world with geometric shapes and called them portraits of modern life. To many, what Anton did seemed to be unproductive labour.

In early Spring, women of Janjevo painted their house facades with



white paint. It was a marker of their internal purity. All of the women invited Anton to do the work for them. Some even offered payment for the job. He worked really hard to keep a line between the two: painting as an artistic practice and wall painting as menial labour. No one understood it, because both explanations that he provided sounded just about the same, narcissism about small differences of sorts. He liked to think of it as a question of approach as well — painting as an end in and of itself, and painting for the purpose beyond itself.

Either way, it invited abstract thinking, and the ladies of Janjevo had no time for that, they had too many children and hardly any help around the house. After they were done with the house chores, they were involved in the gathering of plastic or metal products that were produced in their home-factories. If one of the female children was above the age of ten, the chain of command was passed on to them, and they ran the household and followed up with other children. So this Anton thing about painterly approaches to life always sounded frivolous to the ladies of Janjevo. “Just paint the damn wall!”, Marta would say to him.

Marta, a close cousin, would give him so much grief about the choice of words about his future profession. She insisted that he dropped all the signifiers that elevated the status of his art from simple, menial labour. It was all in vain. Anton moved to Belgrade to study painting and never returned to Janjevo. Upon his return to Kosovo, he moved to the capital where he stayed with his artist friends. At the time, in 1979, Pristina’s Art Gallery had just opened, and he became one of the most renowned modernist artists. His art — the squares and circles — found a world where they were appreciated.



### **Marta's story**

Marta was a very bright kid, early on in her life; she understood that she had an important role to play in her family's continuation. Every year, her mother Andja had a newborn. Held out of school to help her mother with the kids and the workload, she never managed to complete elementary school. It was like this with each sibling, house chores kept her confined at home, removed from a childhood filled with joy, play, and school. Her mother's pregnancies became hers in a way. Marta was not impregnated with babies or thoughts, but with silence and anger. She was too knowledgeable about the affairs of the world to feel as illiterate as she did in the presence of her peers. In and out of school, at one point, she could not go back anymore. When she wanted to go back, she was too old and too unstructured to pick up where she had left off.

Marta married a member of the Palić family. From her house up in the hill, she moved downhill to the centre of Janjevo. A large white house with neoclassical features that overlooked the town's *Çarşı*. Part of the Palić family had migrated to the States at the end of the 19th century without the intention of ever coming back. Having been hit hard by the Great Depression, the Palićs decided to return to their tightly-knit community of Janjevo. Upon their return, with the little money that they had, they redesigned the facade of their house. At the time, neoclassical architecture was popular in the States. To commemorate that life and the promise of prosperity that they had left behind, the house in Janjevo took on the features of a neoclassical mansion. Though ontologically European, even today, everyone refers to it as "the American House".

For Marta, the hardships that the Palić family went through were otherworldly luxuries. With the little education she received, she felt that in a lifetime she could not evoke failures of such magnitude. What connected



her and Sebastian, the fifth child of the Palić family, were their drinking games during the two-day celebration of St. George. Soon enough, he lined up with the town's alcoholics, while she withdrew into the domestic sphere to take care of their two daughters. For the longest time, Marta would remember herself as miserable at home and, out of it, forced to laugh and show good humor. She had to ensure that everybody was maintaining the fantasy of her leading a good life.

Sustaining such fantasy killed her inner world and attacked that bit of confidence she had built as an industrious child that she was all her life. What everybody knew about Janjevo men was that, when they left home, there was nothing done in between; they either worked or drank hard. At the cafés, there were always Janjevo men who had been drinking since the night before. In the morning, it was almost impossible to go out for a coffee and be alone in *Çarşı*. They were always there, too loud to ignore and too present in your head with their drunken-tired nonsense.

### **Šešelj's visit**

Mehmedali, who made plastic toys for a living, was working at the shop that day. His friend told him about the visit of Vojislav Šešelj. He thought he was joking, "You're joking? No, way! Why would Šešelj come here?". His friend swore to him that was the truth. This visit was unthinkable to Mehmedali: Šešelj was a well-regarded politician among nationalist voters in Serbia, what could he possibly want in the small town of Janjevo? Food tourism? Sightseeing? Little did he know that Šešelj's visit was the end of his community. The next day, Janjevci packed their lives in trucks and left Janjevo.



# Small Gods Among Us

By **Ondřej Buddeus**



**Ondřej Buddeus** is a Czech writer, translator from German and Norwegian, poet, organizer and literary activist, editor and essayist. He published several books in a variety of genres e.g. poetry, prose, multimedia experiment, children books. Former editor in the journal for contemporary poetry *Psí víno* (2011–2014 editor-in chief), from 2017 to 2019 head of Czech Literary Centre. Ondřej is currently working at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague.



Big countries used to have great history and colossal traditions. In smaller countries, even though history and traditions feel much bigger, they are in fact more home-grown, as pocket-sized as a family photo from your grandma's and grandpa's wedding. You might say that size is relative and the feeling and impression determine how big the horizon you're heading to is. And you'll be right. But I tell you, my friend, nothing compares with the moment when you realise that the country you grew up in, that gave you its sweet versions of the past and a bitter present, that has framed your experience from kindergarten until you're a step from being retired from your whole adult life — when you realise that this homeland is nothing but a tale. A special kind of fiction you've been told is true. My beloved motherland exists only then, when you picture it with the words of a fairy tale. And then just imagine, my dear friend from a remote yet true place on the mother Earth — how do you think a priest like I am can serve his neighbours in the name of god? What kind of divinity lives in such a place that was not created by him? Or rather should I ask — what kind of gods?

A priest in such a land is a *persona non grata*, his service is unwanted, his call is unintended, his mission is secret. Moreover, the missionary drudgery to come remains usually unknown to him for many years. Until something happens, until the moment when Saul becomes Paul. But such affair might occur in a land that is real as leaf on a tree, or even better: that is real and great as a deep forest. In a land with a big fat god making substantial signs to at least a part of humankind. Just think of the ones you've certainly heard of — Allah from Arabia, Jehovah from Israel, Vishnu from India... All of them have changed a lot in your world. But not in mine, they are not here, most of us have not even heard their names. In fact, these gods are way too attracted to the struggles of reality. And that is simply not the case in the land where I come from. My land is just a fiction. And our gods are small so as to appear and disappear only if you summon them, only if you call into a story by throwing sheer attention to them.

On the surface, I'm not a pronounced priest, not a church clerk



wearing some ridiculous frock and wedding-cake-like hat. I'm just an ordinary gas repair man. Waking up early, travelling the whole day from one house to another. Where gas leaks and a scared single mom or a cautious father of a family of five calls our customer service, there I go. One might think I deal with whatever gas pipe issue, but that is not exact: I'd rather say I deal with their fear of a potential blast — the fear of losing their closest ones, their homes, memories, and entire livelihood, the fear of devastation, of explosion. But fear, my friend, fear is not real, fear is real only in one term: it's a fiction. And at exactly that moment, when I realised that, when I bodily experienced the epiphany of this thought, I became Paul instead of Saul. That was my call, that turned me into the priest of those tiny little but divine inhabitants, who stay in these family houses as in their shrines.

These small gods live in our homes, in almost every corner of our apartments, they create generations of small gods inherited from mother to daughter, from father to son. In contrast to the big gods you know, these do not have names, you cannot worship them, but you'll serve them without knowing it your entire life. They are numerous, different from house to house, from man to man and family to family. There you see the god of dust in the form of a dust cocoon under the bed or refrigerator. Here the gods of falling hand towels sit in a flock on the bath rim. The territory of the god of the nibbled pencil might be on the writing desk or under it. But hold on, there are thousands of them — the goddess of the slightly open windows, the deity of the missing glasses, the god of the fingerprints on mirrors and display cases, the goddess of the unpaired sock, the god of unreplaced bulbs, the god of half lemons with the flying prophets of fruit flies, the god of the half spoken words and unpromised expectations, the god of never-to-be-written emails and the goddess of lost letters... There are literally thousands of them, as soon as you start to be aware of them, you cannot remove the call they've put in your head and mind, heart and soul.

The priest's task has always been to be conscious of his god and to care for the colloquy with god's majesty, even a modest one. Awareness is



the duty, and care of that awareness is the ritual. From Monday to Friday I go from house to house and I'm attentive to them, I offer our small gods — whose life the inhabitants of this country have the honour to accompany —, the loving care of awareness. There is no big alpha god among them, they're not competing, they're the peaceful observers of our daily life and the guardians of chaos in our everyday fictions. I have to tell you, my friend, if you visit this land (and oh! you already have when reading my letter) and if you accidentally see them, don't call them by name. Please remain silent. That is what we need, since everything here exists only if you name it, the sacred gods of this place stand above this all. They do not deserve names for they are the only real entity we have here, in the land that is my home, that is as fictitious as you are and as I am.



# Presents and Punishment

By **Mascha Dabić**



**Mascha Dabić**, born in 1981 in Sarajevo, has lived in Austria since 1992. She studies Translation and interpreting studies (English, Russian) and Political Science. She teaches Russian simultaneous and consecutive interpreting at the University of Vienna and translates literature from Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian into German (e.g. Barbi Marković, Svetislav Basara, Goran Ferčec, Damir Ovčina etc.). Her first published novel *Reibungsverluste* (edition atelier: 2017) deals with the interpreting in psychotherapeutic encounters.



“Der Krampus kommt!” — you might hear frightened kids whispering or shouting out this sentence in the streets of the Tyrolean capital Innsbruck, around the beginning of December, “The Krampus is coming!”. And bear in mind, people in Tyrol have a special “K” that seems to come from the deepest depths of their Alpine souls, and so, pronounced in the Tyrolean dialect, it might sound rather like “Da Kkkrampus kkkimmt!”.

It was in late Autumn 1992 that I heard about the Krampus for the first time. Since I had arrived in Austria only a few months earlier, my German was still very poor when all the girls in my class started to talk about the Krampus and how he might punish them, so I had to make great effort to understand what they actually meant. Punish them for what? What misdeeds could they have possibly committed, all those eleven-year-old girls? It turned out, in the Catholic world, the month of December was crucial when it came to calculating the good deeds and the bad ones.

If you had been a good girl, then the generous Saint Nicholas would bring you gifts, usually sweets, on 6 December, the so-called Saint Nicholas Day. However, good cop Saint Nicholas would not come alone. He would bring along his side-kick, the Krampus, a figure from hell. The Krampus, a half-goat and half-demon, wore a fur suit, had hooves instead of feet, horns on his head and, worse of all, his face was covered with a gruesome demon mask. For me, fresh from a war-torn wannabe-ex-socialist country, it was hard to figure out whether my classmates were serious about their fear of the Krampus run, but it seemed that yes, their fear was real, and so was mine, consequently. I could feel the fear physically, in my stomach, in my chest, in my head, in my shaking knees, notwithstanding my common sense telling me clearly that witnessing a Krampus run could not possibly be more dangerous than being stuck in a besieged city.

The thing is, as I gradually found out, with the help of my patient classmates and my little yellow Langenscheidt pocket dictionary, the Krampus not only had his face covered with the above-mentioned gruesome mask, he also carried chains and bells, thus making a hell of a lot of noise,



and, what is worse, he would carry *Ruten*, bundles of birch branches, to swat and whip children who had misbehaved during the year. He might also have a basket strapped to his back, to cart off an evil child. And he would not come alone; on 5 December, the night before the good Nicholas would appear, a whole bunch — no, a whole horde! — of shouting and violent Krampusses would run around the old town, but beware, they might also show up in other parts of town! And they would chase you down and beat you up with their *Ruten* — they would have no mercy, and nobody would or could help you, and then ... Well, that's what the Krampus would do anyway, and so you had to make sure, absolutely sure, that you didn't find yourself in the city centre on 5 December after school, when it got dark. Well, even before it got dark. You just did not go there, on Krampus day, under no circumstances. And of course, I would follow the recommendations of the locals and run straight home after school, hoping that the Krampus would not, in some miraculous way, show up at our doorstep.

But late Autumn and Winter was not all about the Krampus and the punishment that he would bring along. It turned out there was another, less frightening tradition in the so-called Holy Land of Tyrol, namely the so-called "Wichtel". The system behind this tradition was hard to understand for me back then, both due to my still poor knowledge of the German language, but also due to the fact that I had never experienced a social game like that before. First, you would have to draw a lot — the name of one girl in the class — and then somebody else would draw your name too. So then you would be a "Wichtelmutter" to somebody, and a "Wichtel" to somebody else, which meant, you would have to bring four gifts to somebody, each week one gift, and place it secretly on your Wichtel's desk to the surprise of your Wichtel, and at the same time you would find four gifts from your mysterious Wichtel mother, miraculously waiting for you on four school mornings in December. What was a suitable present though? Usually the girls would get nice little things such as a candle, some sweets or colour pencils, but sometimes even a piece of jewellery could be hidden



somewhere near the desk, waiting to be found by the lucky Wichtel.

The Wichtel period was magic: you would know your own Wichtel and you would somehow have the urge to tell somebody about it, yet trying to make sure that your Wichtel didn't find out, because the secret had to be kept till the end, and that was actually a challenge; at the same time you would be dying to find out who your Wichtel mother was — who was the one observing your comings and goings so as to be able to surprise you with her little gift. You would find out only during the very last week before Christmas, when the Krampus was long forgotten.



# The Night Watch

By **Katja Perat**



**Katja Perat** is one of the leading poetic voices of her generation in Slovenia. Her first poetry collection *The Best Have Fallen* (*Najboljši so padli*) came out in 2011 and received both the Best Debut Award and the Kritiško sito Award, an award bestowed by the Slovenian Literary Critics' Association for best book of the year. Her second book of poetry *Value-Added Tax* (*Davek na dodano vrednost*, 2014) was also extremely well received. Currently she is a doctoral student of comparative literature at Washington University in St. Louis, USA. *The Masochist* (*Mazohistka*), published in Slovene in May 2018, is her first novel. In October 2020 it was published by Istros books, London in an English translation by Michael Biggins.



You come to a creative writing workshop with a story about rape. Your mentor tells you it is unrealistic. He is a man and much older than you are, so you believe him, but feel funny. But you have heard this before, and you will hear it again: *Realistic* and *true* are not interchangeable. You stop writing fiction for awhile.

\*

Your boyfriend tells you there is something wrong with girls who watch torture porn. There is, you think, but can't help but wonder why *wrong* turns to *guilty* in his mouth when, in fact, it should sound more like *hurt*. You say nothing.

\*

You are almost bilingual now. This is how you know certain concepts don't survive the move from Slovenian to English. You don't know how to translate *pust*. Especially when *mardi gras*, the first expression you can think of, is not even in English. Wikipedia suggests *Shrove Tuesday*. You don't know what shrove means but there is a demonic Bruegel's oil-on-panel attached, so you feel hopeful. You google *shrove*, just to make sure. It leads to *absolution*. *Absolution* leads to *forgiveness*. You know what that means.

\*

They are called *škoromati* where you come from. You won't even begin to hope you could ever translate that. UNESCO says they are a unit of intangible cultural heritage, but you know what they really are. Drunken men in masks, this is what they are.

\*

You are very young when you see them for the first time. The word *realism* has yet to gain meaning for you. They are dancing up a mountain in the tiny village you are from, these men adorned with flowers, covered in fur, their faces full of dirt. You fear them but to you fear is still very abstract, as nothing has ever hurt you yet. Or even more than abstract – it is alluring. You are captivated by them because you don't yet know what they really are. To



you, a child starving for fascination, they are magical. Seeing them through your childhood eyes, you remember the word for *pust* you were looking for: it is *carnival*.

\*

Bakhtin teaches: 'The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which the grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretence of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities'.

\*

But there are also other eyes to see them through.

\*

You have never thought much of *intangible cultural heritage* but now you can't take your eyes off it, *intangible* stuck in your throat like a bone. The sweat, the scent of alcohol, the leather, the muscles, the cock, they are so *tangible* to you.

\*

*Škoromatija*, the main event in your village where nothing ever happens, is a carnival of multitudes. Masks that belong to it don't necessarily belong together or even to the same tradition. Some seem happy. Some are uncanny. Some are culturally questionable, like *the Turk*. The Ottomans were a great imperial power, these villagers were not. Yet these villagers see themselves as Westerners and the West thinks the East is barbaric and culturally inferior – hence wearing a mask of a Turk always carries a potential for insult. But then, the West doesn't see these villagers as Western. As said, *questionable*. But there is one mask that is indigenous to *škoromatija*, since it's been outlawed in the town of Civitale del Friuli in 1340. Italians call him scaramatte. In German, he is *scharwächter*, the night watchman. Some call him *kleščar* for the man-sized tongs he carries. These are for catching virgins, you are told as a little girl. In your village he is *škopit* – the castrator. There are crow feathers on his hat and a leather coat across



his shoulders. His face is covered with ashes. He is your man.

\*

These are the boys from your village: Alpinists, physical labourers, drunks. Some, like you, will move away, a footnote to the depopulation of the rural areas in Eastern Europe. Some will stay. They will work in Italian factories, marry women they won't love, hate them for it, beat them up. Die from cirrhosis at fifty. But now, they are your friends and you're in this together, riding pimped-up mopeds, drinking cheap beer in front of a convenience store that will close down in the next couple of years. You take care of them, knowing they're kinder when they feel loved. And in a way, you do love them. They are all you know.

\*

What is *unrealistic* about your story about a girl who gets raped during the carnival season by a boy she loves, you are told, is that rape and love can't coexist. You are also told this is a critique of your style, not the emotions attached to it, realism being a formal category rather than an epistemological one. You nod, good student that you are. And you understand. What you handed over was romantic rather than brutal. You should have done better. But you couldn't. You had to protect your love, once love itself proved unable to protect you.

\*

You are thorough. You leave the village, the country, the continent. When you come back, your grandmother, a communist, still gives you three carnations each time before you leave and names them: 'Faith, hope, love'. She has lived through the two great wars, like this mountain has, and doesn't speak about either. A teacher in an illegal school organised by the resistance and raided by the Serbian collaboration, she was raped herself but doesn't talk about that either. There is just this song she likes to sing, and you know that *we used to have a ball, but we have none of that here anymore* is a really poor translation for *včasih je luštno blo, zdaj pa ni več tako*.



\*

On a different continent, you find yourself in the middle of an argument. Referring to your home, you start talking about the *culture of alcoholism* and somebody says *alcoholism is not a culture, it is a disease*. You would like to respond rationally but what you really think is *Westerners have no souls*.

\*

*Nostalgia* is a stand-in for missing something you really shouldn't be missing.

\*

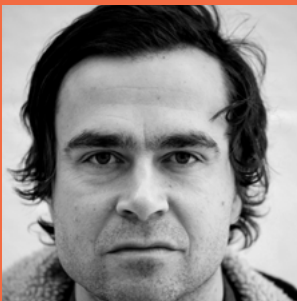
Your village never leaves you. You can smell it in the wet grass when the night falls. You read for it in all the texts on decolonisation you are reading, even though hardly anybody talks about decolonisation on European soil. Seen from afar, its rituals begin to organise themselves into units of meaning and feed your nostalgia. Some of this can be understood as forgiveness. The rest is resistance.

You begin to write fiction again.



# Bear

By **Sigbjørn Skåden**



**Sigbjørn Skåden** comes from the Sámi village of Lánjtdievvá (Planterhaug) in Troms County, Northern Norway. He writes in both indigenous Sámi language and in Norwegian and made his debut in 2004 with the poetry collection *Skuovvadeddjiid gonagas* (*The King Of Shoemakers*). Since then he's published three novels, one children's book and one more poetry collection, as well as having written numerous performative works for stage and collaborative art projects. Skåden has among other things been named young artist of the year by Riddu Riddu Indigenous Festival, he's been the prologue writer for the Arctic Arts Festival, one of the key speakers of the indigenous forum at the Medellin Poetry Festival and has been selected as a feature writer for the European poetry platform Versopolis. For his books he's been nominated for the Nordic Council's Literary Award, The Norwegian Broadcasting Listeners' Award and has received the Havmann Award for best book by a North Norwegian writer. His latest book to date is the novel *Fugl* (*Bird*) from 2019.



In the afternoon, a hunter returned to camp, sweat steaming from under his fur from the heavy skiing. We sat down with him around the fire, offered him drink and dry meat. He had located Bear half a day from our camp, a lair deep in the forest by an ice-capped river. What shall he be called, we asked? Big Brother, said the hunter. I want us to call him Big Brother. From then on, we stopped calling Bear by his real name, to shield ourselves from his power, we sat up feeding the fire, talking warily about Big Brother and how the pieces would fall. Has Big Brother been circled in, we asked of the hunter? I have done so myself, said the hunter, three days I was with him, narrowing the circle around his lair every day.

At dusk we set out on skis, half a dozen of us, the rest remained in camp, preparing for Big Brother to be brought home. Light snow had settled on a hardened crust. We flew quickly over the plains once we'd reached the summit, keeping steady on our long ski, while skating with the short, gradually downwards towards the thicker forest on the other side. When the first line of solid trees appeared, we slowed down, gliding quietly in among the branches, the hunter first, the rest of us in a line following his tracks. Frost had settled on the pine needles, wrapping them in a bushy layer of white. At this slower pace, the frost smoke from our breathing became more piercing, as we advanced through the woods without a word, steering steadily towards the lair of Big Brother.

Deep in the forest, the hunter stopped by a grove of alder trees. We all took off our skis and sat down in the snow. Over us, the trees stretched out their leafless branches, grey cracks in the whiteness. The hunter took out three pieces of silver from under his fur and put a piece each under three trees. From each of the trees he cut several small bits of bark, which he put under his fur. When we got up, we continued by foot in the shallow snow, slowly walking among the trees with the skis in our hands, until we came to the river.

At a sign from the hunter, we put down our skis by the bank and started slowly climbing up a small slope towards Big Brother's lair. At a sunken



scree half-way up, we found the entrance marked by the hunter in between the rocks. For a long time, we stood looking at the opening, saying nothing before each of us moved slowly into position. Two of us took out sharpened wooden poles and positioned ourselves on each side of the opening, three positioned themselves in a formation in front of the opening, with spears hidden under the arms of their furs. When we were all in position, the hunter took forth an axe, and went right in front of the opening, hardly a step away from the exit of the lair. He nodded at the two at each side, then lifted his axe. Big Brother, he bellowed. We tightened our bodies, but nothing stirred. The hunter looked around at us again. Big Brother, he bellowed a second time. And then a third time. No movement. We looked at each other. One of the men behind the hunter nodded, he put down his spear, the other two moved in closer to one another to tighten the gap of possible escape. Slowly the man walked towards the mouth of the lair, laid down in front of it, and started crawling in legs first. The hunter lifted his axe as the man crawled further down the hole and disappeared from sight.

The wait felt long. Small flakes of snow had started falling, a light drizzle came down over us. We all stood there stiffened, staring into the mouth of the lair. Then two screams, one after the other. First a scream of rage from Big Brother, then a scream of terror from the man in the lair. We all crouched. The hunter tightened the grip on his axe. Out the mouth came first the man, crawling in panic past the men at the opening then, moments later, the head of Big Brother appeared, roaring furiously at the daylight that fell on his face. The two men on each side of the lair reacted swiftly: With all their might they drove the wooden poles into the neck of Big Brother. For a split second, he looked surprised, even puzzled, giving time for the hunter to swing his axe forcefully down on Big Brother's head. A deep sound escaped Big Brother, he took two steps towards the retreating hunter, the men with the poles hanging on for dear life. Then he shook his head, looking around at each one of us, before he fell down on his belly and remained lying still, only breathing heavily, until the breathing also ceased.



It was dark when we returned to camp, gliding in between the huts on our skis, with Big Brother strapped onto a sled behind us. In one of the huts, the light from a fire flickered, but no people were to be seen and none came out to greet us. We lit a fire in the yard between the huts and slowly started to skin Big Brother with our knives. We put his hide back on the sled and started parting his flesh, carefully cutting chunks all the way to the bone. When the knives had done all they could, only the flesh in between the bones of the skeleton remained. Carefully, we lifted the skeleton and hung it over the fire to roast slowly. When we had done all this, the hunter sat down on Big Brother's hide. He took forth the pieces of alder bark from under his fur and handed it to one of the men. The man walked over the yard and into the hut where the fire burnt. When he returned, we all sat down in a circle on Big Brother's hide and waited.

Soon the women and children started emerging from the hut, slowly walking towards us with their faces downwards, none of them looking directly at any of us sitting on Big Brother's hide. Each of them was chewing on a piece of bark. They started to walk around us in a circle, slowly increasing their speed until they were running. We eyed straight and waited. Then the first one spit in the face of the hunter, then another, and another until red bark saliva was running all over his face. He closed his eyes and laid his head back, breathing deeply. Then they turned to the rest of us and did not stop until all our faces were covered with red spit.

At daybreak the next morning, we carried Big Brother's skeleton through the woods. The night before we had feasted on the roasted remains of his flesh. Now only bones were left. We walked until we came to a mount where a huge ledge stuck out. Under the ledge the ground was bare and brown. No snow had yet covered it. We sat down on our knees and started digging in the half-hardened ground with our tools, children digging next to their mothers, fathers, grandparents. Little by little, we opened a grave. When it was deep enough, we put the remains of Big Brother down in it and slowly scraped dirt over until he was covered.



The following night there was a heavy snowfall and gusts of wind breathed snow in over Big Brother's grave, covering it all with white.



# Waiting in the Room, Masturbating

By **Arvid Jurjaks**



**Arvid Jurjaks** is a Swedish journalist, since 2015 based in Berlin. He contributes regularly in the Swedish daily newspapers HD-Sydsvenskan and Dagens Nyheter, where he mainly writes about culture and politics.



Sweden is known for its hospitality. At least when it comes to welcoming migrants into the country. During the refugee year 2015, for instance, Sweden was one of the countries in the EU that granted the most people asylum.

An unambiguous sign of generosity.

However, this is an image that gets somehow complicated when you cross the threshold of Swedish homes. In the realms of the private, with no guidance from the state, hospitality can suddenly turn into a neurosis. No, I am not talking about expectations that visitors should take off their shoes, a fully uncontroversial requirement in a land of mud and snow. The demand to bring your own sheets if you stay overnight is also in order. You just don't question it. Also, few expect to be offered alcohol at a party. This explains why the refrigerator and the area around it are quickly filled up with similar bags from the state monopoly liquor store, with its socialist reverberative name 'The System Company'.

The in other countries somewhat arguable requirement from a guest to get a 'husesyn', that is, to be shown around all rooms, is something you shouldn't even need to ask for. No matter how messy it is. To open the door to the bedrooms and its unmade beds in order to give your guests the opportunity to judge the most private spaces – in Sweden, you just can't escape it.

No, what gives rise to both trauma and shame in the area of Swedish hospitality is something else. Namely, the question of whether you should invite your children's friends to join the dinner table or not.

Ask any Swede and pay attention to the effect this has on them.

To join a friend at his or her home after school and then have to wait in the room when he or she is going to have dinner is something every Swede can relate to. It's a Freudian ur-scene in our cold, restrained areas, handed down in way that made me suspect that no one had actually really experienced it. In other words, a situation of mythical qualities.

My own memories of not being welcomed to dinner tables are vague.



The occasions that I can recollect, I now assume have more to with the fact that I, a shy kid, simply didn't want to sit down with strangers. With excuses such as 'not hungry', or 'gonna eat at home', I managed to escape awkward conversations, or even worse, disgusting food.

A self-chosen estrangement, later on projected on the hosts as simple cheapness?

Or maybe it was at my home that friends had to wait upstairs for me to finish my meal. With four children and two gardener incomes, perhaps my mother didn't have enough of her hashed potatoes to feed another hungry kid?

Asking myself this, I felt the Swedish self-consciousness taking over, with its fear of being perceived as something other than basically likable.

But no. 'Of course, friends were invited to eat with us,' my Mum said when I asked her. 'But then there were some who didn't dare to eat different food than what they got at home.'

Different food? I kept myself from digging any deeper into that.

Instead, I began to ask around among friends. And a flood of testimonies rushed over me. Stories of being left alone with Lego and Turtles, or just to, literally, your own devices – 'we used to masturbate in the room, out of revenge for not getting any food,' a friend told me.

The topic seems to hit a nerve made up of poor Swedish self-esteem and a masochistic desire to emphasise these experiences as a national peculiarity. A true Protestant act of self-mortification.

To find out if this is something that is isolated to Sweden, I asked around among my non-Swedish friends in Germany, where I now live. It didn't matter which country they came from. Their jaws all dropped.

Who denies their children's friends permission to sit at the dinner table? The custom, if it can be characterised as one, is like the urban phenomenon to call everyone else a hipster, but never in your life define yourself as one.

'It is strange to spontaneously invite someone you do not know for



food,' another friend speculated.

How can it ever be considered strange? I wonder.

'This no longer exists,' I heard from someone who asked around at his workplace. Yes, everyone can relate to it, he said. But modern Swedish parents would never be able to exclude their children's friends from the dining table.

I'm not sure.

In Swedish internet forums on parenting, the issue is still being vividly discussed. If you have not prepared more food than suffices for the family members, are you still expected to invite your child's friend, an anxious parent wondered? I don't want to make meat sauce every night for an extra hungry teenager, another complained.

Finally, a friend came forward. In his family, dinner was something sacred, for the family only. And his parents expected the situation to be the same at his friends' places. Eating was something you did with your closest ones. And like me, escaping the intimacy of dining with strangers, his parents felt the same with inviting his classmates to the table.

The result was having them wait in a separate room, leaving everlasting memories. As another friend told me: 'Food never smelled as good as when you sat up in your friend's room and waited'.



# ... for the black ox has trod upon my foot, my dear friend

By **Marija Andrijašević**



**Marija Andrijašević** is a Croatian poet. She holds MA in Comparative literature and Ethnology and social anthropology (2015) from University of humanities and social sciences in Zagreb. In 2007 she was awarded with „Goran for young poets“ for her book of poetry *david, they did things to me*. Before and after that, she published her poetry in literary magazines. Her poetry is included in anthologies of contemporary poetry (*I u nebo i u niks, Hrvatska mlada lirika...*) as well as Italian selection of poetry from Balkans *Voci di donne della ex Jugoslavia*. Her poetry has been translated to Slovenian, Italian, Ukranian, English, Polish, and Romanian. In 2015/16 she attended and finished Centre for Women's Studies Zagreb programme.



All the packing, wrapping, dismantling, throwing away what is not of use anymore. People, people in locomotion, people talking, casually conversing and laughing, people unstoppable, solitude impalpable. I need help but I also want them to be gone. Moving is stressful. Daily life awaits. I want to sit down and in great detail write to you about my recent discovery. But for now, here is the gist of it.

I found this article about the revived custom *kumpanjija* on the island of Korčula, while roaming through stacks of old newspaper and magazines the other day. *Kumpanjija* is the traditional sword dance performed in five different villages (Blato, Pupnat, Žrnovo, Čari, Smokvica) on the island and it is interesting for its historically most poignant component – the decapitation of an ox. This component is now left out of the custom (should I say retired?), partially forgotten, quite controversial by today's standards, umm, bizarre as well, and – may I add – not to my liking, but who knows, tastes vary...

So, in our not so recent history (and I am talking about the years 1997 and 1999) the custom *kumpanjija*, with the component of the decapitation of the ox, was revived in Pupnat village, after more than thirty years. Last known *kumpanjija* that involved decapitation was in Žrnovo in 1966.

In Pupnat, in both years, *kumpanjija* took place during the celebration of Our Lady of the Snows on 5th of August, a Catholic feast day. The preparation took weeks: electing the men in charge, decorating the Church with oranges, processing the village alone and with the ox... Pupnat was full of curious tourists and itchy locals.

On the day of Our Lady of the Snows the men, dressed in old costumes and saddled with swords, took the streets of Pupnat with the procession and the village main square with the dance. The dance was led by a dancer waving a flag and accompanied by the instrument called *mišnice* (something similar to a bagpipe) and drums, sometimes intersected by dialogue. The dance is a sort of a mock-battle dance depicting a fight between the locals and the pirates. At least that is what the locals say about the dance:



Narratively, it goes back several centuries, when the island was under constant attack of by pirates, but the narrative can shift, and so can the enemy. Women joined men at the end of the dance, also dressed in old costumes, to dance the *tanac*, a couple's dance.

After the dance, the decapitation of the ox followed. It was done at the main square by the chosen person called voivode or the *kumpanjija's* duke. The ox was put in this wooden crate resembling a kind of a guillotine. It awaits its executioner, who comes out of the Church—he was there to say a prayer, maybe ask Our Lady for some additional strength, so the blow is effective, mortal. One swing and the head is down, the script presumed. In reality, it was more than one swing and a pretty messy one, too. The crowd was in awe and shock simultaneously, knees trembling, feet burning. But they clapped, anyway. Later on, the duke was photographed with the decapitated head of the ox and the closing dance took place. One member of the crowd said 'the ox symbolizes the final defeat of the enemy'. And the end to that component of the custom I will add, since the public went against it right after it was reported about in several national daily outlets. That happened in 1999. The *kumpanjija* in 1997 passed with surprising quiet.

The revived custom *kumpanjija* now takes place more or less regularly on the island, but without the decapitation of the ox. The dancers are there, the mock-battle is there, the swords jingle, the ox is at peace in one piece, the crowd is there still curious and itchy, and the battle is won.

Moving is stressful. Daily life awaits. But for now, this is the gist of it.



# The Christmas Soul of a Pig

By **Georgi Gospodinov**



**Georgi Gospodinov** (1968, Bulgaria) is the author of *Natural Novel* and *The Physics of Sorrow*, winner of Central European Angelus Award (2019) and Jan Michalski Prize (2016), finalist for Berliner Brücke Prize. His novels are translated in more than 25 languages. Gospodinov writes in different genres including poetry, essays, plays, nonfiction books, etc. In 2019/20 Georgi Gospodinov is fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin. His new novel *Time Shelter* has just come out in Bulgaria.



Here, from the slender branches of the plum tree, I can watch safely as the hens peck ferociously and insatiably at my black, coagulating, still warm blood. The same, otherwise meek, yard hens with whom I shared the same garbage heap until this morning. Real vultures, Lucifers in disguise, domestic vampires. Now it should be all the same to me. I'm lying (not me but my body, I must start getting used to it) in the filthy snow near the pigsty, my blood soaking into the whiteness. Death could be beautiful. The knife, inserted to the handle, is still sticking out of my neck -- they must be afraid that I might get up. Right now one of the butchers is telling how last year they knocked the pig down and, since the one who was supposed to stick the knife in didn't know his ass from his elbow, he missed the right spot on the neck, the pig jumped to its feet, pulled itself together and rushed about the yard toppling over the butchers, jerking the small pigsty onto its back and destroying everything in its way, as it ran for dear life, and nothing could stop it. Once a pig runs for dear life, nothing can stop it, one of the helpers confirmed. In the commotion the owner managed to grab a pitchfork and stick it somewhere in the top of its neck. But that pig kept running, running, horrific, with the pitchfork stuck in its neck, as if it were a dragon.

At this point they look at me, or rather at my body, that obviously has no intention whatsoever of repeating the above story. Here the one who has fed me all year intervenes by passing the jug of wine to the butcher, and then it passes on to all of them, heavily blood-stained. Hubbub, jokes, stories...

I never believed that a death could cause such pleasure. Now they will cut off my ears – to roast them on the fire: “This is the first and therefore the most delicious appetizer.” Then the kerosene lamps will start grunting, my skin will turn black like the big cauldron of those who fed me throughout the year. Then they'll wash me all over with snow, bury me under sacks, soften me a little, scrape off my bristle with a big knife, then wash me again and smear me with vinegar and salt (if my soul weren't here,



on the plum tree, it would probably be stinging dreadfully), then they'll start tearing my skin off in small pieces, chewing it loudly. I know all this, as if it has happened a thousand times, I can feel it... I don't know how to put it, in my blood perhaps, although a soul has no blood. They have slaughtered us for so many winters that all that terror and blood couldn't disappear just like that. It's been recorded somewhere.

Ha, I almost jumped because a crow just landed on the plum tree, obviously attracted by the smell rising from below, from the cold blobs of clotted blood, mixing with the snow. I thought she would peck at me, too, the way I'm all huddled up – a tiny piglet soul. I imagined it – a crow with a soul of a pig. In fact, I feel good having been given these few hours on earth. I can calmly watch, just a few pig's tails away from my body, as the butcher slowly cuts me up, actually, cuts it up into pieces. God, I really do have impressive entrails. What breasts, what a spleen, and those thin, looped, intestines... I never knew I was such a beauty inside. I'm sure the one who is cutting me into pieces right now really likes it. By the way, is a soul supposed to be rapt in admiration of such ephemera? Still, I've been a soul for only a few hours. To a young soul like me everything is so vague and intriguing. Yes, simply intriguing. It's strange to me that I feel no anger towards the people down there who feel free to do with my entrails what they like. They only set my soul free... through that hole in my neck. I don't know whether what they are doing is good or evil. A soul, especially a pig's, is probably way above those things. I even feel sorry for them, to a certain extent. I know they have a kind of hell, yes, I think that's what they call it, where everyone who has committed a sin here, on earth, goes eventually. And surely the slaughtering of a pig is a sin. Although those sort of things have been decided by someone else.

I guess the stay in hell is temporary, a kind of cleaning procedure to remove their human sins, so they can come out of there as innocent as newborn baby pigs. Maybe what they have done on earth is done to them in hell. Maybe my butcher will be slaughtered. They'll cut off his ears, roast



them on a fire, singe him, cut him into pieces – and that will be all. I don't know whether his entrails will be that beautiful. It's not all that terrible; he'll only feel pain when he's first stuck. Still, I feel sorry for them. They probably feel more pain. Once I heard a story told by someone near the pigsty (I don't know what makes them think that pigs hear nothing, even though our ears are a couple of times bigger than their own). This story is about how once the first of their kind ate by mistake an apple that he shouldn't have eaten under any circumstances. There was plenty of other food around, a real paradise, but he went and ate just that apple. Out of stupidity – something that no pig would ever do. And that's when the misfortunes of their own kind began. Because of an apple. A worthless story, I think. And quite unrealistic, if one considers the piles of apples, rotten, that's true, that I have eaten in my cloudless life as a pig. I guess from then on paradise was reserved only for animals. Only for animals. Otherwise there would be too much slaughtering and blood.

I feel so light... If I let go of the plum tree branch, I will probably fly away.



# VERSOPOLIS

Versopolis Review is a humanities magazine.

Visit [www.versopolis.com](http://www.versopolis.com) and  
[www.versopolis-poetry.com](http://www.versopolis-poetry.com)



With the support of the  
Creative Europe Programme  
of the European Union