



# ULYSSES' SHELTER 3 / 1

Ruqaya **Izzidien** (Wales)

Marek **Torčík** (Czechia)

Esyllt Angharad **Lewis** (Wales)

Ivana **Maksić** (Serbia)

Tonia Tzirita **Zacharatou** (Greece)

Jan **Škrob** (Czechia)

Sergej **Harlamov** (Slovenia)

Tibor Hrs **Pandur** (Slovenia)

Ognjen **Aksentijević** (Serbia)

Jake **Buttigieg** (Malta)

Marios **Chatziprokopiou** (Greece)

Matthew **Schembri** (Malta)

Sven **Popović** (Croatia)

Marina **Gudelj** (Croatia)

Ajda **Bračič** (Slovenia)



Co-funded by the  
Creative Europe Programme  
of the European Union

This e-anthology was prepared by Mercator International in cooperation with **Literature Across Frontiers** as part of the **Ulysses' Shelter project** of exchange residencies for emerging writers and translators, co-financed by the **Creative Europe Programme of the European Union**. Views and opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect views of the project sponsors.

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

Aberystwyth, 2024

© authors and translators

Edited by Alexandra Büchler

Typeset and designed by Marek Tarnovský



# Content

<b>Introduction</b>	.....	4
<b>PROSE</b>	<i>Being There</i>	
Ruqaya Izzidien	<b>Walls and sea</b> .....	8
Marek Torčík	<b>Soon all this will be a picturesque ruin</b> .....	12
Esyllt Angharad Lewis	<b>This is my first time abroad alone</b> .....	18
<b>POETRY</b>		
Ivana Maksić	<b>Daughter, can't you see I'm burning</b> .....	25
	<b>People are silent</b> .....	27
	<b>Waiting</b> .....	28
Tonia Tzirita Zacharatou	<b>The world within</b> .....	31
	<b>My sister as princess Elsa</b> .....	32
	<b>My sister as Serena Williams</b> .....	33
Jan Škrob	<b>our memory...</b> .....	36
Sergej Harlamov	<b>Nihil's Hymn</b> .....	39
	<b>To give up, yes, to give in, no</b> .....	40
Tibor Hrs Pandur	<b>Postscript on the reception of the last film by Orson Welles</b> .....	43
Ognjen Aksentijević	<b>tender for phase two of life</b> .....	50
	<b>despite the spring of birds</b> .....	51
	<b>silver bog</b> .....	52
Jake Buttigieg	<b>I spoke to my sister bee</b> .....	55
	<b>I am spending the last spring with you, spring</b> .....	56
	<b>Slovenia, you took me in with an embrace</b> .....	57
Marios Chatziprokopiou	<b>Ballad of the Willows</b> .....	61
<b>PROSE</b>	<i>And other stories</i>	
Matthew Schembri	<b>All this because</b> .....	68
Sven Popović	<b>Roadsigns</b> .....	80
Marina Gudelj	<b>The Witch</b> .....	85
Ajda Bračić	<b>There's no one like you</b> .....	91
<b>Permissions and acknowledgements</b>	.....	95

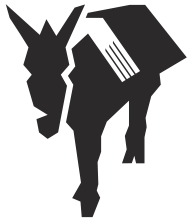
# Introduction

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

The programme not only offers the opportunity to connect with a literary scene in one of the partner countries, but also to have one's work translated and published, whether in a magazine, on a website or in an anthology. *Ulysses Shelter 3/1* joins this effort with work of the authors selected for the first year of the third project cycle in English translation, with two more such anthologies to follow. The *Ulysses Shelter 3* collections follow the print anthology of the second cycle published under the title *Ulysses' Cat* by the Welsh publisher Parthian Books. With more partners joining the third cycle, we decided to present the participants in each year of the programme separately in an e-publication which can serve as a valuable reference point in the absence of other English translations.

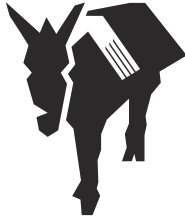
The current selection is a mix of existing work and texts written during or after the residency, and it gives us a sense of the variety of topics and concerns shared by emerging authors across Europe. What is remarkable about this and the forthcoming collections is the number of writers who are capable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

Alexandra Büchler



# **PROSE**

*Being There*



## Ruqaya Izzidien

is an Iraqi-Welsh writer and journalist. She grew up in Wales has lived in Gaza, Egypt and Morocco, before returning to the UK. Her debut novel *The Watermelon Boys* (2018) is being translated into Arabic, and she has completed her second. In her blog *Muslim Impossible* she reviews prejudiced and inaccurate depictions of Muslims in TV, film and literature. Her journalism has been featured in *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera English* and the *BBC* and publications focused on the Middle East. Her residency was in Valletta.



*Photo: courtesy of the author*

## Walls and sea

Walls and sea, that's what I think of when I think of Valletta. Wherever you are in the city, you are never more than a few minutes from the sea, and always standing by bricks, usually mashrabiya – windowed balconies that overlook the streets. It's a city of repetition, the cobbled roads a grid system where narrow alleyways seem duplicated over and over. In a high-rise city it might be overwhelming, but on this small island, its endless sandy limestone buildings are all charm; its echoes an embrace of comfort. When you've lived years in coastal cities, surrounded by medieval and Arab architecture, it's hard for Valletta not to feel like home.

I venture outside the capital to Mdina, endlessly warred over but now a mostly vehicle-free tourist spot; its fortifications render more walls, and its hilltop lookout offers sweeping views across the island, all the way to that persistent sea.

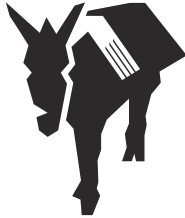
I was drawn to Malta for its history and language, the latter a descendent of Sicilian Arabic, all but preserved in time for ten centuries, which must be some kind of geographical and globalisation miracle. Perhaps 'preserved in time' is going a bit far – it has evolved with the influence of Latin languages – but it's a unique experience to hear a sentence you can understand in a language you don't speak. Arabic speakers aren't accustomed to being able to decipher a sister language the way that Spanish and Italian (or French and Catalan, or Welsh and Breton) speakers can. So Maltese fascinated me, and so did its historical Arab rule, and the complex Maltese perception of its former British, Arab and French rulers.

Arab history is all but absent here, which wasn't a surprise, but it was still a disappointment. While you have English post-boxes, telephone boxes, and pubs, all traces of its former Arab rule are intangible, in the language, and surnames, and even the existence of mashrabiya in seemingly every city home. They have persisted despite their lack of acknowledgement, at odds with the threads of the British history in Malta that is celebrated today. Whether Arab history is something to lament or take pride in is for the Maltese to decide; I myself fall on the side of the preservation and education of history – a necessity for an informed, whole identity. At least that has been my experience.

But back to the walls. Beneath Valletta is a network of tunnels: cisterns and water channels that were knocked through to build air raid shelters during the Second World War. Moist stalactites live side-by-side with primitive drawings of spitfires, Adolf Hitler, and The Virgin Mary. It's curious, eerie, and chilling to explore, but I can't help the uncomfortable feeling I start to develop when I see the industry created out of this sort-of British identity. Isn't it odd to view your coloniser with such rosy-eyed wonder? In the gift shop, I browse the children's colouring books chronicling the history of Malta. The two hundred years when the Aghlabids ruled are completely absent.

I explore the ancient city of Rabat, visiting the Roman temple. I'm guided by a professor of history and local legend in his own right. We barely pass through a street without someone hailing him down or shaking his hand. It's a bizarre but enjoyable experience being on the sidelines to his local fame. He tells that he's pushing for British phone boxes to be taken down, wishes that they didn't serve English breakfasts everywhere. People come here to experience Malta and Maltese food. When we spot a phone box that has been repurposed with a defibrillator, he snaps a photo, happy to see this symbol of the past being put to use rather than preserved simply for the glamour of being British. The Roman temple has a small section on the Aghlabid rule. He tells me it's a new addition and is impressed that, slowly, Malta is beginning to acknowledge its Arab past. A Muslim cemetery was discovered on the site of the temple, and a grave has been relocated into the temple museum, casket ajar for all to see the bones. It's no different to mummies displayed in museums across the world, but the sight of it makes me turn away. Of all the ways to recognise a history, these feel so undignified. I race through the rest of the temple, uninterested in the mosaic flooring, urns, amphorae and oil lamps. The quiet solemnity of it all.

The warmth of the city envelops me as I return to Valletta, grand wooden balconies, sandy walls turning gold late in the afternoon. The damp of the sea hanging in the air. The heat is uncomfortable, but the familiarity unmistakable. I suppose that's probably what has me on edge. Language, weather, customs, it's all so familiar, but, to Malta, for better or worse, I am not.



## Marek Torčík

is a Czech poet, novelist and cultural journalist living in Prague. His debut poetry collection *Rhizomy* (Rhizomes) was published in 2016. His first novel *Rozložíš paměť* (Memory Burn, 2023) received wide critical acclaim, winning the most prestigious Czech literary award, Magnesia Litera, as well as the Jiří Orten award for authors under thirty. His residency was in Caernarfon.



*Photo: Barbora Maršíček Votavová*

## Soon all this will be a picturesque ruin

It was foretold already by an ad plastered on the back of a seat on my EasyJet flight to Manchester. Make OMG Memories sounded like an omen then, soft whispers from whatever gods there are, promising good times. I took a picture, and now all that remains of my two weeks in Wales is just my memory of it.

I had no idea what to do before meeting my co-resident Ajda and catching our train to Caernarfon, so I just walked around Manchester for a couple of hours. When we eventually met, the first train we boarded was somehow the wrong one. Either it was my fault, or one should never trust the employees of any train station. When we found the right train, our coach was so packed, I had my face pressed against the door to the bathroom. There were so many people that the train conductor's voice came roaring down the intercom, saying those without assigned seats ought to get off and wait for the next service.

I looked at Ajda, she looked back at me, and we both stayed where we were.

In contrast, our place in Caernarfon was almost too idyllic. The small white cottage sat in a valley just on the outskirts of the town, cut off from the nearby road by trees and a wildflower field guarded by chickens roaming freely around. At night, I could hear the cries of Afon Seiont river; bird song woke me up. Back in Prague, it would be sirens and drunk people screaming in the middle of the night.

Later, we learned the location used to be a slate factory making writing tablets for schools. The current owners rebuilt everything from ruins, starting a workshop, converting camper vans. There was an overnight parking lot for motorhomes, along with accommodation for tourists like me.

On the first night, we found a cycle path lined by gorse bushes and overgrown grass. It led us straight to the centre of Caernarfon and I saw the newly renovated castle for the first time. It was flooded in blue light, making it the only thing still visible in the dark.

I soon found out there was almost no escape from its constant gaze. Built by Edward I partly to remind Welsh people of their new king, of the fact they were no longer free, it looms over the town, sneaking into any picture.

"Sometimes, I just want to tear it down to be honest," somebody said to me one day.

I applied for the residency because I wanted to find time, hoping mostly that I will be able to work on my second novel. What I didn't know was that time melts when it has no clear structure to hold on to.

Turning tidal, like the sea, it comes in waves.

For the first time in my life, I had freedom to write and think of nothing but writing. I became so fascinated by this privilege that I completely forgot about the outside world. I guess this is how art becomes separated, grows self-involved – you take it out of time and space, and it turns into just another artefact to put on a shelf, a funny story you tell your friends. All neatly safe and beautiful.

It's hard not to feel ashamed about this.

The two weeks in themselves were full of dualities, mirror images, repetitions. Like when we decided one day to walk to Bangor, following the cycle path all the way through, stopping only in Y Felinheli for a while.

We hoped walking would bring something nicer, something more transcendent than the few trees and the highway it eventually turned into.

When we finally got to Bangor, the town was almost completely empty. We passed a few boarded-up windows.

By the time we sat down at the only free table in the back garden of the Black Bull, it wasn't even 3pm and the pub was filled with a distinct wet smell. There were elderly couples drinking, holding hands silently, staring deep into their pints. A man in his thirties just next to us blasted music on his phone. A group of teenage girls, each with a beer of their own, chatted loudly just a few meters next to him. I became occupied for a while with a spider's nest above my head, but when I looked down, there was a different man in a bright yellow T-shirt standing at what was arguably the best spot in the garden, demanding that the guy there moved. Even though he spoke Welsh, I think I could make out what he was saying, simply because any language tainted with alcohol eventually slips to this deeper, more universal tone.

Ajda noticed him, too. We have both met these men before. They look broken on the outside, but it is in their fragments where anger grows, waiting to lash out.

He went away, came back again, lighting a massive cigarette each time, blowing out the smoke right into the other man's face. Later, his partner appeared, wearing a dress of similar colour to his shirt, trying to get him back to their table.

Perhaps I would forget this experience if I didn't drag Ajda to Bangor's Saint Deiniol Cathedral just a few moments before. It was completely abandoned except for a choir girl and her teacher, practicing evensong. The girl's voice sounded so cut off, not woven from the same yarn as this world. It's the contrast between the two that still lingers in my memory, even now as I write this from the comfort of my home.

I wonder whether it would be easier to speak only of the beautiful things. Describe:  
the way on Sunday, soft rain reaches for my body  
I stick my tongue out, taste the warm  
light trickling down from the clouds  
later: the thousand tiny ripples on the surface of lake Glaslyn  
I lie down while Ajda has her cigarette, watching  
a sky not too dissimilar from the surface of water

But that is my problem with poetry. I miss writing it, although it no longer feels like it's enough. Instead, I circle back to a different kind of memory.

One day, I walked around the town and stopped at Llanbeblig graveyard. The slate tombstones there were overgrown with weeds, some broken so badly you could almost see inside. I picked up my camera and quickly put it down.

There was a group of kids and a man nearby. He was bulky, lifting gravestones with his tattooed arms, pretending they were heavier than they must have been. The kids screamed each time, scattering around, only to come back quickly, curious to peak in. I noticed one of them carried a plastic bucket and I saw a bone sticking out.

Later, I tried telling this story during a dinner with some of the writers based around Caernarfon, but perhaps I should have kept it to myself. I still think it must have annoyed my hosts and I was quickly overrun by shame.

But why should I remember the beautiful things more and turn my head away from those I perceive as lesser? The painful ones. Why talk more of beauty and less about the pain, the wound that often swells up underneath it?

The truth is that often, it is beauty itself that is the source of our problems. Like when governments invest millions to renovate castles while real people blur in the shadow of all these picturesque ruins. Landmarks are simply more visible. I learned this already in Prague: beauty gentrifies, drives out all that is alive, until what remains is just memories, postcards for the visitors to share.

And for two weeks, I was part of this problem, too.

After we returned from Bangor I became more aware of people telling us that the university and tourism there had a negative effect on the town. Driving rent higher, it "priced out people from the areas they grew up in". Similar thing is happening in Caernarfon, and all over Gwynedd, which has one of the most extreme concentrations of

holiday homes and holiday accommodation. A few days before I came here, around a thousand people gathered in the square near the castle to call for affordable housing. One research states that just between the last census in 2011 and 2022, the resident population in the area dropped by 3.7%. That is roughly 41 second homes per 1,000 homes and this figure doesn't even include Airbnbs and various holiday lets. The reality is much higher. I found an article on the seaside town called Cwm-yr-Eglwys, claiming that out of 50 properties, only two have permanent residents.

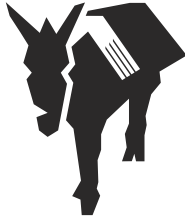
It feels weird for me to write all of this when I know next to nothing about Wales, having only spent a brief moment there. Why would a Czech writer feel entitled to ever talk about such things?

I always laughed at the stories from residencies being all romantic, using the area as a background for unrelated writing. But now, I find myself ashamed and guilty of the same literary tourism. I, too, have spammed my Instagram with pictures of the castle, the mountains, lambs in the rain. I stayed in a dreamy Airbnb in a place where many locals cannot afford a decent home. Precisely because of people like me. A proper tourist, I walked Yr Wyddfa thinking only of beautiful sceneries, and realised too late that the top is littered with people, waiting to take a selfie.

I jot down "driven away by beauty" in my notebook and immediately cross the sentence out. As with this text, it's too pretentious, artificial. Would it be truer to write about the reports of growing child poverty, failing health services and public transport? Brexit haunts any article I try to read. And not only that. On the beach just outside Caernarfon, there is a defunct tractor with a YesCymru sticker and a pro-EU one next to it. Nici, one of the residency organisers, and her partner tell me one day that only some Welsh people want independence, and the media call them nationalists. "We feel more European than British."

To be honest, I don't know what being European means to me anymore, when in my own country, we face the same issues. Even refugees are being turned away just the same as anywhere else, and people claim to protect Czech borders, too. I don't believe writing can change that, but I still promise myself I will always keep trying.

On my last day in Caernarfon, we sat at the Anglesey Arms with Ajda, drinking beer and watching the sunset. A seagull plunged from the castle's walls, dived for a stray fry left on one of the tables, then laughed above our heads, and I ran out of things to say. It was almost dark, there at the end of the day. The castle was clothed again in its signature blue light. Its hue spilled on the cars parked around it, on my and Ajda's faces. For a minute or two, everything looked the same colour, even the sky and the sea. It was so peaceful. All differences finally erased.



## Esyllt Angharad Lewis

(\*1996) is a Welsh artist, translator and editor. She co-edits *Cyhoeddiadau'r Stamp*, a Welsh-language independent press, and *mwnwgl*, a journal of experimental artistic writing. Her work is often collaborative and includes exploring subversive literary translation and tailoring a unique approach to creative translation for arts organisations such as Peak Cymru and The (Future) Wales Coast Path. Her residency was in Valletta.



*Photo: courtesy of the author*

# This is my first time abroad alone

Planning Application /07229/22. This is my first time abroad alone. This is my first time alone abroad. This is my first time alone abroad on a residency. This is my first time in Malta, alone abroad on a residency. None of my family have been here and the friends who have been speak in general pleasant platitudes. It is in this sense a virginal land for me, untouched by others' preconceptions, a place ripe for my creativity to juice. Being here alone means that I have no one to bounce off, no ally from my own culture with whom I can gawk at the scenery. The wonderment and confusion remains internal, splashing in the sea is a brief release. I'm here to attempt to translate, what I see, what I read, the conversations I have. Into a language that I can understand. Rhwbeth fi'n gallu deall. Bilingualism. Maltese. English. Welsh. Manglish. Wenglish. Wemanglish. Chaosish.

I am here on a translation residency, my languages being Welsh and English. As a first-language Welsh speaker with the name 'Esyllt' living in Glasgow, Scotland, I spend a lot of time translating my identity for others to understand, to close the gap (or open?) between myself and the context within which I find myself. My loose proposal coming here was to translate pieces of text from English into Welsh and vice versa, with an experimental and radical view of translation. But truthfully, rather than translating pieces of specific texts in Welsh and English, I have spent more time trying to translate Valetta into a language that I can understand, into my own conception of truth and beauty, morality and nature through writing, drawing, speech. I have been thinking about bilingualism, how a country sustains two languages and two windows on the world, and how this puts my bilingual identity into relief.

So I soak it all up. I want to see it as a place of neat dualities, dry stone, wet sea, Maltese but English, eclectic but stuck in its ways, traditional architecture but modern abominations, one country but a bilingual culture with two ways of seeing things. Something like my country. And in many ways, this is what I have decided to see. Within the grid system of Valetta, I put a lot of effort into creating a singular vision of this duality – a traditional culture and a colonial culture that are butting up against each other, or living separate lives in harmony, like lovers in different time zones. But all the tourists from all over blur this clean translation that my brain so desperately wants to reduce the fortifications into. Mae'n fwy na deuoliaeth, mae'n benchwiban melysgybolfa gythreulig hardd a hyll. Y cychod cruise enfawr sy'n tra-arglwyddiaethu dros y baeau, y bobl glên o Montenegro, the angry Germans waiting for their food for 45 minutes at the blue grotto, puce spreading across their cheeks. The English pensioners complaining about queue jumps, and "these people are clearly not British", a'r dynion Indiaidd sy'n dechre sgwrs gyda fi ar y stryd a finne'n ateb I come from Wales. Is that in Australia? A cherdded i ffwrdd yn sydyn. Nothing like saying you're from Wales to get ajman off your scent.

Many Maltese persons I meet here tell me wildly different things from one another, and sometimes even within the same person, the conversation will fork and twist, opinion and truth becoming conflated and swollen. Go to the Malta Experience, DO NOT go to the Malta Experience, I meet Marica who tells me I must be assertive. Dwi'n dal fy anadl. That she has never had bad experiences with men. That she was harassed on the bus often as a young woman and is still slapping people on the street.

I meet Amanda who says that she once saw a tiger in a squat in the building we are standing in now. In Welsh we hear smells. Clywed arogl. Above me at night I hear the scent of burning rubber and smell animal sounds way past when the Bombi stop shooting.

I worry that I am a tourist here. I meet Elizabeth who tells me that feminists are too extreme in this chauvinistic patriarchal culture, where the beautiful balconies were a way for the Arabs to keep her indoors. That the Maltese are obsessed with penises because that's the only thing they know how to sculpt, and I will find a penis on most roundabouts. She tells me that her husband has a village mentality and that she hates code-switching. Dwi'n dweud wrthi mod i'n ofni mai twrist ydw i yma. Mae'n hurtio. She exclaims NO that I am not, you are here doing research, no no no you're not a tourist.

But what is a tourist other than someone doing research? Breaking off bits of the world into their own conception, like a child gnawing on a hunk of chocolate. Getting away from your familiar field of knowledge to see it better, seeking external reference to validate your own way of being, your own argument for living. When we experience anything different from ourselves and take it into account, reflect on it, even for a quarter of a pastizz, is that not research? The Hawaiian hat I bought with Malta EST. 1967 is a souvenir of a place distinct yet amalgamated in the fantastical splurge of this globalisation.

One of the reasons why doing 'research' in Malta is so difficult for me is because half of it is so familiar, which instead of anchoring me, adds to a feeling of distance and confusion. Even though one of the few things I knew about this island before I came here was 150 years of British colonial rule (I google the amount of years as it feels like it could be longer, or much less), part of me is annoyed that Malta is not a clean break from everything, everything I know. And yet if it was I would never have understood about the penises, or the tiger, or the old boatman in his seventies trying to give me his number. English here is easy and available and everywhere, people with accents implying that English is their second language come here because they wish to speak English. It delineates what I believe to be 'foreign'. When I walk down from the parliament along republic street I hear a teenage girl with a thick scottish accent moan "what kind of McDonald's closes at 11pm", then groups of people drinking with scandinavian, italian, canadian, irish, maltese, welsh accents all speaking together in English. The universal tongue flattening difference, easing small talk, a non-political unifier, both sapping and swelling cultural variety. This global English is

not the English I understand to be true. When I start feeling frustrated, I see red. Postboxes, telephone boxes, 'colonial stores' in Sliema. Coch oedd fy hoff liw. Bits of Sliema feel like its identity has been chewed up, pulverised from within its own diarrhoea.

I swim in the sea most days, stung twice by jellyfish. I swipe my card to get the venom out, I tap my card to pay for spritz. In Welsh jellyfish are called cont-y-môr, blobus, or, as the English like to mock, pysgodyn wibli wobli. Pysgodyn wibli wobli is one of those made-up Welsh words used specifically by English people to make fun of the language. Emma invites me to a stand-up comedy night at a place called King's Gate Pub in Msida and there are sheep-shagger jokes, just like Wales. Or the ones made about the Welsh. It's all in English.

When I sit drawing Valetta from Fort Sant Angelo, Birgu, drying salty skin from the cruiseship sea, I see all her arches and structures more clearly, the mass of windows, angles, colours, lack of colours, stressed trees jutting out above the fortifications and I think: is it easier to draw a place that is familiar or foreign? What language do the walls of Valetta speak? What part of Wales are you from? Oh yes I've smelled of that.

The main actual tangible text I have translated whilst I'm here is 'A Manifesto For Ultratranslation' by Antena, a call for radical translation that resists making things easy for the dominant language (in my case English). In struggling ymbalfalu am ystyr ac eglurdeb, I have tried to keep the dominant message of the manifesto in mind in my interaction with Malta and her landscape. Not to superimpose, to extract, to take away from, to smoothen for my own benefit and for my own culture her nuanced chaos, her choosed nuance, but to respect the fact that there is a gap between me and the place, that there always will be a gap, that the gap that the gap but in the gap there is the potential for new understandings, different readings. Tourism that's healthy, research that's trashy. Achos does dim math beth ag ystyr llythrennol gair. Would you like tal pepe with that?

People often speak of language being 'irreducible', rendering translation an impossible task. Malta, in its multitudes, cannot offer me a smooth translation sensible sips like a straw in a milkshake. I feel her chaos on my burning skin, the overdevelopment in her jellyfish stings, the slivers of authenticity in the crawl of her spider underneath my pillowcase when I arrive.

Maen nhw'n cyfri mewn saesneg fan hyn hefyd, ynghanol Malteg.

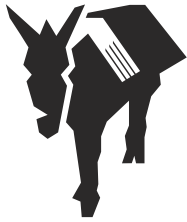
In Rabat, before entering Mdina, yn chwyslyd o'r bws ac angen pisio, dwi'n mynd i fwyty crand yr olwg i ddefnyddio'r tŷ bach ac archebu espresso. I sit out in the afternoon sun looking over one of the best views of my life, fields and green and orange like a thought from early childhood, like what I imagined maybe being an adult would be like. It is a plane of patterns that I draw and I want to cry, mae'n atgoffa fi o adre. An early place.

Tell me what's Maltese for Maltese? That's the type of thing I should have learnt by now. Y geiriau dwi wedi dysgu hyd yma: Luzzu, grazzi, ciao, pastizzi, triq, tal pepe, mdina. Ftira. Exat. Wy y. Bombi. Manglish. MemshimNiche. M danone!

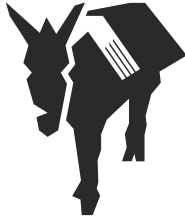
In Welsh we have a word. Mela. Sometimes with an 'n' added at the end. It means to interfere, disrupt, meddle. Paid â mela gyda hwnna! Mae hi wedi bod yn melan eto. Well iddyn nhw beidio â mela gyda'r llwybrau swyddogol. It is mostly used in West-Walian dialect, and I have never ever heard it being used in a positive way, it is disparaging, telling-offy, disdainful. But I've always thought its sound was joyful, kind, delicious, fizzing. Mela.

Planning Application /07229/22 rejected.

Diolch yn fawr.



**POETRY**



## Ivana Maksić

(\*1984) is a Serbian writer of poetry, short prose and non-fiction, and a translator from English. She has published poetry books *O telo tvori me* (Oh body em-body me, 2011), *Izvan komunikacije* (Beyond communication, 2013) and *Kćeri, zar ne vidiš da gorim* (Daughter, can't you see I'm burning, 2020). Her texts have been published in various anthologies and collections, regional literary magazines and periodicals as well as in the UK and the USA. Her latest book is being translated to German. Her residency was in Larissa.



*Photo: courtesy of the author*

## Daughter, can't you see I'm burning

on that day, here, horses are dying  
all the riders, mine, through the fog, with spears,

through the water, blood, forest, fire,  
fire, oh you fire, I'm burning, they say

ivana, they say, her, that woman, a woman, me,  
on the edge, till the end, always through secrets

of a whirlpool, a whirlwind, the boots were destroyed,  
the wave was breaking, never, you know,

slave drivers from a previous life  
hadn't backed away, my daughter, fire,

little flames are rolling, swim,  
go away from me, swim

through all the sea storms, be an ice-cold lump of coal,  
be an invisible diamond,

just don't drag the baggage of incestuous  
sons behind you, don't talk much,

change, transform yourself, turn everything down  
make it quiet

not the fire though, awake with fire, burn, don't look  
for a ladder, avoid funerals, don't wear

shoes, away from every sickroom,  
pay morality no heed,

you, my faraway friend,  
don't wear white, do not, ever,  
like a defiance stay, a rock, a pomegranate flower

don't wave to anyone, not even me, not even from afar  
don't wave, despise goodbyes,

don't stretch your hand as a hello,  
don't grow a bullet in your palm,

don't break the arrows, let them, in the flesh,  
the others don't see them

don't hug when you leave  
others don't see

don't devise departures and hurts  
others don't see

daughter, fire, mine you are not, run away  
just disappear, others don't see,

just disappear

*Translated by Ana Seferović*

## People are silent

Maybe some could even  
sway in the rhythm of the assembly line  
compiling manuals for future former  
idols, carrying people out of parks  
in body bags in the morning.  
Maybe this neutrality  
was what he never had enough of, so he was  
always cold, and wouldn't wrap around himself  
not even one of the entrails  
so readily available  
and so equal, skilfully and purposefully  
prepared pieces for an entire  
nation, so that one could easily  
screw up and not wrap himself in  
that flag of warmth that daily and nightly  
abundantly flowed over his  
cousins and neighbours,  
in front of whom he was somehow  
too desolately naked, too much  
a slave.

*Translated by Svetlana Rakočević*

# Waiting

Murderers live among us.

People who instead of "recover" say "escape".

Against pain, longing and anger, they have the same word – migration.

Oblivion of all the faces, all the suffering bodies, everything is justified by the escape.

They repair consensual blindness by running away.

Displacement of the body migrates the soul indefinitely, contractually. They think: when they run, they leave no traces. Traces that are then seen by the sick, those who (deathly) remain and whose souls linger nowhere except in the bodies.

There are bodies whose souls cannot escape.

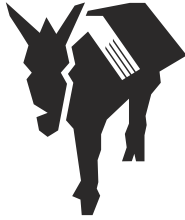
Bodies that are workers. Workers whose souls are the drowned in the waves breaking on the beaches without a lifeguard.

To cave in back into yourself.

To be where the waiting means falling and rising again.

Waiting is a glass that you cannot overfill. It is never empty enough.

*Translated by Ana Seferović*



## Tonia Tzirita Zacharatou

is a Greek poet based in Athens and a PhD student working on comparative readings of C.P. Cavafy and works of modern European literature. She has published two collections of poetry with Thraka Editions: *Δεύτερη νεότητα* (Second youth, 2020) and *Εμείς και ο κόσμος* (We and the world, 2024). Her translation into Greek of poetry by the Portuguese poet and classical scholar Tatiana Faia, Adriano, was published in 2023. Her residency was in Ljubljana.



*Photo: Emma Louise Charalampous  
for RUNONART 2021*

## The world within

Yesterday was the day  
I forgot to water the pots and I let  
The laundry clothes imagine  
A new color in my fountain.

I can't say for sure if it was  
The beginning or the ending of the week  
Though I have been taught the difference  
Between days and how important it is  
To attach yourself carefully to the present  
With impalpable threads. But I left  
The bread in the oven and still there was  
No one I knew in the emergency room  
No sudden knocks on my door, only branches  
From the backyard tree intruding through the window  
And a burnt smell nobody could eat.

There was a world inside my house like a thorn  
That is stuck in the paw of the fox  
Whining, itching, crying, scratching, and for  
The world's sake I forgot myself  
And I leaked the world in my flesh  
Hard with a hard tongue trying  
Never to let its syrupy flow exude.

## My sister as princess Elsa

I love my sister from a distance, from behind  
a frozen door. The secret is never to touch her

but to look for her in the cornflakes  
stuck at the bottom of the box. From what material is a sister made?  
She sings when she is happy, and she becomes a vegetable garden

that survives the frost. On winter evenings, she spins around  
like a dragonfly with no legs. Yesterday it snowed at last and the city  
disappeared for a time. I write snowed, whereas I should have written

*my sister is a witch and temperature, a hammer of ice.*

My sister is constantly shapeshifting, following  
the patterns of the snowflakes. In place of her heart  
a small Swarovski animal is slowly melting. But every time she sees  
me come closer, she wears a dog mask, and then it's impossible to caress her snout

without being afraid of the teeth. One day, when my sister gets lost for good  
I will no longer trust the footprints of the rainboots.

## My sister as Serena Williams

Watching you play has always been a delight  
so aggressive that I could feel your hands around my neck  
even though they were only gripping a racket.

How do you teach somebody to lose – I practiced in between dust  
and falling on a field where somebody had drawn

a line of dried mud in the middle.

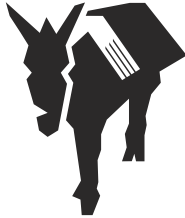
To lose to your sister – look, the ball became a comet,  
its tail is burning my eyelids. I lost to you  
all the finals I managed to reach, but I come to all your games  
just to see muscles stretched under the sun – how beautiful you are today  
so beautiful that they kicked you out – out they cried, and they didn't mean the ball  
like hostile referees who impose short skirts in every match.

You are an aggressive rain; you blaze.  
Whoever crosses the line loses and eats  
the soil of the summer olive grove.

You are my young sister who used to graze  
her knees here, and now she is reflected  
in the metal of useless trophies.

None of these have any taste  
and it's impossible to sleep inside them.

*Translated by the author*



## Jan Škrob

is a Czech poet and translator. He has published the poetry collections *Pod dlažbou* (Under the Pavement, 2016), *Reál* (Reality, 2018) and *Země slunce* (Land of the sun, 2021), and contributed to a number of anthologies at home and abroad. German translations of his selected poems by Martina Lisa and Jana Krötzsch appeared under the title *off topic* (hochroth, 2020). He translates mostly English poetry by authors such as Wole Soyinka and Denise Levertov. His residency was on the island of Mljet.

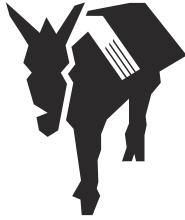


*Photo: Maria Schormová*

## *our memory...*

our memory  
during exercises with light  
i imagine relationships  
like arteries in the body  
i stack tables  
singing words  
in a language that  
that no one has known for a long time  
everything is coming together  
into layers of other voices  
i catch it in flashes  
a ship that's wrecked  
off the coast  
the beginning of a journey  
i know where i am i can feel the surf  
our memory is colour  
caught in stone  
something still  
is set in motion  
i feel the surf  
gusts of wind  
the tables shake heavily  
we're getting back to the subject  
of pain but differently  
it's the power of the voice  
our memories are places  
where the sea  
passes through our bodies  
sand presses against the waves

*Translated by the author*



## Sergej Harlamov

(\*1989) is a poet, sociologist, literary comparatist and publicist. His debut poetry book *Jedci* (Eaters) came out in 2011, followed by his second, *Mnogoboj mitologij* (Melee of mythologies), in 2019. His third poetry collection of experimental, concrete-abstract poetry entitled *Hypomnemata ali Obnovimo osnove pisanja* (Hypomnemata or let us relearn the basics of writing) came out in 2022. His residency was in Larissa.



Photo: Robert Marin

# Nihil's Hymn

I.

*(motto)*

this is no life  
i would die for

in the manner of the dead man's float  
i'm swimming against the current

II.

don't care to where  
the branches  
or roots  
of your family tree reach  
don't care from whence  
you crawled  
even less where  
you want to break through  
don't care  
how much nor what  
you already have under your thumbs  
or expect  
from your investments  
don't care if you compose  
your hands in prayer  
or articles of a tract  
by a method of logic  
don't care to whom you belong  
or if you stand alone  
seemingly belonging to no one

just body  
and circumstance you are

but if uninvited and intentionally  
you intervene into my body  
its predicates  
which are vital for it

i can kill you without regret

and you do the same  
with me in such a case  
if it lies  
within your strength

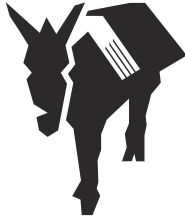
## **To give up, yes, to give in, no**

this insignificant yet  
decisive difference between

raising arms and  
raising arms upon yourself

*(Velika, 20 August 2023)*

*Translated by Lucija Tratnik with advice from Lukas Debeljak*



## Tibor Hrs Pandur

(\*1985) is a Slovenian poet, translator, dramaturg and playwright. From 2009 to 2018 he was the editor-in-chief of the magazine and paraliterary organisation I.D.I.O.T. he co-founded, where he published poetry, drama and theoretical writings. He gives spoken word performances in Slovenia and around Europe. His award-winning first play *Sen 59* (Dream 59) premiered in Ljubljana in 2008. His poetry debut *Enerdimašina* (Energymachine) was published in 2010, followed by *Notranje zadeve* (Internal Affairs), 2017, and *Psyops*, 2022. He translates from German, English, Serbo-Croatian and Spanish. His residency was in Belgrade.



Photo: Andrej Petelinšek

## Postscript on the reception of the last film by Orson Welles

It remained in his head  
with flashes of footnotes and cut scenes  
empty spaces  
by force of circumstances  
that you can fill in yourself  
A heap of ridiculous unrelated images  
which, without your own contribution,  
you'll never be able understand.  
Because what's missing,  
what seems to be missing,  
is the input of your brain,  
which must dream, imagine  
and fantasize them to a close,  
without judging them as objects  
of a performance to be consumed  
in order to describe, interpret, evaluate it  
but to re-experience it as a text  
that flows with you  
in you now  
My dream simply triggered  
your dream  
just as my dream  
merely triggered this text.

Your potential rejection  
or ignorance of this dream  
is an avoidance to participate

in this text  
of the world  
in this mutual feedback loop  
of text and flesh

How you experience this text  
does not depend so much on the text  
and how you think about it when you read it  
but more on what it triggers  
or how it makes you think when you read it  
Don't you think you're part of it?  
Don't you think that your brain is playing it  
for you now and that they don't participate  
in how it will make you feel?

Do you think you're exempt?  
Do you judge it as a preference  
according to what you think that,  
given your specific reading history,  
this text should be and is not?  
Perhaps the way you read these dreams,  
how you allow yourself to be read  
will reveal how you engage with the world:  
As a series of unedited flicks of film  
that Orson, for lack of money  
or trust, never managed to complete  
and needs your imagination, your input  
for his last unrecorded masterpiece

to conclude forever and ever  
his *magnum opus* synchronically  
in each individual brain  
of every attentive spectator worldwide?

Or as a bunch of sketchy images  
that strove for something and failed  
and are now mere artefacts, part of history  
at which critics snub their noses  
or praise sky-high,  
categorise, index, classify  
Because the messenger behind it  
no longer poses a threat  
like the mysteries of nature  
like the self-propelling force of nature  
no longer threatened Darwin,  
crouched over a lantern in his dim cabinet  
arranging herbaria of dead insects  
with a magnifying glass  
in order to prove his theory of evolution

What is missing in these flashes of stories therefore  
is You, who are incorporated into it  
That's why I'm not going into details of oversized mock-ups  
or trains pursued by the Ku Klux Klan  
forbidden films of the birth of nations  
Tilda Swinton and her daughter  
who lives behind private cameras  
of her mother's rooms  
because you can imagine it all by yourself

In short:  
The text is fuel  
running on the reader's brain  
modifying  
both the reader and her brain  
including itself (quite unpredictably)

Every text is therefore no longer the same text  
as the text you started reading  
and your brain after the text  
is not quite the same  
as before it

But the wonderful thing about this actually is  
that objectively no one will ever know  
what this poem is or even is about at all  
since it fuses itself and yourself  
every time  
and is therefore as much about you and yours  
as it is about me and mine

On the basis of this, we can safely conclude  
that the entire field of literary science and criticism  
as they are too often superficially practised  
are completely inadequate to the challenge  
of making a satisfactory contribution  
to the development of  
or to even adequately map  
the complexity of the reading experience  
of the 21st century dreamer

*In summa:*

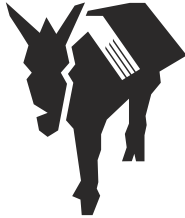
The greatest film that Orson Welles never made  
is running now simultaneously  
in the brains of his countless viewers  
who are only now, with this act of reading actually  
right now  
inevitably  
absolutely

and indestructibly  
now  
literally  
just being born

To judge this poem  
therefore means  
to judge the very consciousness reading it  
including the effects your organism  
produces  
for You  
based on  
its fusion with your consciousness in real time  
of this unrepeatable moment of union  
of this text and flesh  
every time

From which inescapably follows:  
Without You  
there is no poem  
This poem is You

*Translated by the author*



## Ognjen Aksentijević

(\*1994) is a Serbian poet, literary curator and publishing editor living in Belgrade. He has published two books of poetry *Um za morem, smrt za vratom* (Mind on the sea, death at the back), 2017, and *Rezervat odbeglich ptica* (The fled birds reserve), 2021. He used to edit and host a podcast on trending political and cultural topics in the Balkans region, with special emphasis on the possibilities of reconciliation, and is co-founder and editor at Raštan Publishing. His residency was in Prague.



*Photo: courtesy of the author*

## tender for phase two of life

stablemen in the stalls with steel brushes  
groom horses before the slaughter  
the world they had prepared me for no longer exists  
yet, I still know very well  
the smell left behind by carnage

when we cough loudly  
soft figs rippen in the lungs  
with sharp pitchforks stuck in their chests  
they hoist tame horses skyward  
pile them up like haystacks

we observe in silence  
with our hands gripping the handles  
always choosing the safer one from the options given

I would never quarell with horse thieves  
rot sleeps in the fingers of stablemen

## despite the spring of birds

the bass inside me is deep and drawn out  
dark as a bull digging through the dead habitat  
I seek respite on dry shores  
overlooking the fossile horizon  
before me twists a cone of forked tongue that makes me  
unpatriotic in the eyes of the fathers

an immigrant in the eyes of the grand metropolitan gates  
actually, an unmapped watercourse  
on the worn facades it is written, and I am reading, it says apatrid  
people have nothing to do with their names

my journey and the hump on my back suddenly appear in all breaking announcements  
most of our sites are well camouflaged pits  
pulsating molehills, inside them  
I dream of warm tight hearts, their smooth wounds  
ossification continues in the chest

terrified, I burned down the forest to block the aircraft range  
after a while the planes flew away  
the forest never got up  
more and more often, under my feet I see a carbon paper  
just walk, they say  
this is only an internal record

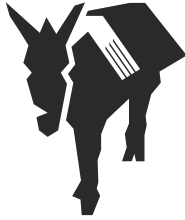
## silver bog

it's as quiet as when  
after centuries of noise the machines stop  
we've inhaled too much air  
as the grip loosened around our body  
and felt: we are finally growing till we burst

I unlaced my throat to swallow the whole fish carcass  
suddenly the land in my pupils  
widened even more and I was so sure  
everything shall cough with me for a moment  
some days are drowsy before the ice that carved itself into life and then I think to myself  
better full to the brim  
than starving

this might be silver-plated feathers that are gliding  
from the rooftops towards us  
a long wound in someone's arm may be stitching under the crust  
but here, around our feet  
only a frozen swamp stretches endlessly,  
a blurred map  
inhabited junkyards

*Translated by the author*



## **Jake Buttigieg**

is a Maltese writer and translator, and a graduate in law. He writes mainly in Maltese, and translates poetry from English, Italian, French and Russian, as well as contemporary Maltese poetry into English. His residency was in Ljubljana.



*Photo: courtesy of the author*

# I spoke to my sister bee

I spoke to my sister bee  
tired black body  
heaving from Carob to Bougainvillea  
"Will you take nothing  
home with you?"

"all dust,  
in sleep winter  
comes to me as image  
of the Christ"

Black body small  
against selfishness of summer and laments.

In long summer the Olive tree, with  
reserved desperation, bears childless.  
Sister bee carries on.

Tomorrow will see the garigue turn more orphan.  
"this bee sees

lampposts bear  
image  
of the Christ"

A fire hangs on a rubble wall  
teases leaps into wheat fields.  
Spring flowers (too dry/too dry)  
in contrapposto/contorted forms longsummered  
abandoned on stalks we  
bear image.

# I am spending the last spring with you, spring

I am spending the last spring with you, spring.  
The thyme looks tired,  
gone is the violet,  
he would make by the arar trees and the gulls.

In the shade of the tamarisk,  
the land is in rags begging the sea,  
beach by beach,  
a mountain of saffron.  
The layers of its sediment like ribs.

For you there is salt sweat,  
and thyme flowers.

I will spend the last spring with you, spring.

## Slovenia, you took me in with an embrace

Slovenia you took me in with an embrace,  
a reserved foreigner's embrace,  
a summer rain embrace.

You came to me in the same black that I was wearing.  
Under the glow  
of the same street light together,

"It is small here,  
you will never get lost."

When you weight your words with bronze statues of lovers in anguish  
walking apart but close as hummingbird heartbeats do  
(and not of guns and dead fascists)

I will allow you to crush me in your embrace.

Tomorrow you held my shoulders and you looked through a Blue Window for me.  
See the pines in patches of soil made yearning by their poor stone brothers, and the pine is  
jealous and only five of them were in your Blue Window.

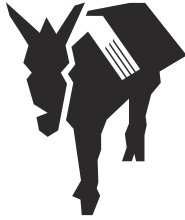
Now, sudden shivers, the light hits the pines pines pines pines pines!  
The shade of their Golgotha shapes!  
Trickles through your Blue Blue Blue Blue Window.

The rocks had been barren as in Malta (your little sister). We lie together on garigue limestone  
in uncomfortable ways and try to guess which rock knows the least war.

Forgive Malta (your little sister)  
she remembers different textures and  
her skin is puckered with limestone  
outcroppings and you hide your  
wounds with pine and she wears  
them on flag poles and  
on visible veins and  
she asks you to hold  
me as she holds me.

We have turned hostile to sober  
night-time breezes, we  
sit again, street lamp spilling wicker light onto your  
concrete lap.

"We are small,  
we need to look out for each other."



## **Marios Chatziprokopiou**

is a Greek poet, translator, performer and researcher. He has studied and worked in Spain, France, Brazil and Wales, holds a PhD in performance studies, and is Assistant Professor at the University of Thessaly. His debut poetry collection was *Τοπικοί τροπικοί* (Local Tropics), published in 2019, explores issues of queer mourning and desire in connection to oral poetic traditions. He has translated four books by the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector. His residency was in Belgrade.



*Photo: Panayotis Ioannidis*

## Ballad of the Willows

Fiercely the sun beats on the crops, the drought sings the land  
but Willowy quenches her thirst in the breath of her Braveheart

Their loving gaze locked tight, although their bodies kept apart  
by a fence, the cradle of their longing and executioner of their love

Day and night they step up to either side of the wire,  
with no way to sweetly kiss, nor give vent to desire

But Easter day arrives, the cover is lifted off the sky  
the heavens' glare softens and they are gifted with clear sight.

A hole in the fence that Willowy sees, a tiny rend, a pass  
she folds herself in two and twists and glides into Braveheart's arms.

He scoops her up and leaps and gets away in speedy flight  
leaving behind their noxious kin, the thankless earth all dried

they get to the far reaches of the world, all dusty and hazed  
near fainting from the sun but saved by the Virgin Mother's grace:

"Here, eat and drink, the blood and flesh of my one Son, your Lord  
wherever his cross takes you, that place will be your home"

The Virgin said, entrusting the sacred piece of wood to him  
and Willowy puts it round herself, as weightless as a drapery.

They drifted with the clouds, they meandered with the wind  
and reached a distant, far off land, the cross grown heavy 'n weary

Next to a hamlet, at a clearing, the wooden cross lay still  
the nails flew out and from the wooden beams a little hut was built

Willowy and Braveheart will have three years together there  
of everlasting love and friendship sweet and rare.

But a leap year lay ahead, soul crushing times  
the sun scything the crops, Death harvesting young lives,  
and Braveheart, too, an old man in his hut, now follows suit.

Like a reed in a flatland, the old woman, all alone and bereft  
calls in the neighbors, and they start the sorrowful lament:

– Oh trusty neighbor and fair friend, whose graces number many  
where are you off to, leaving your woman with no child and no kin  
while your crops are getting burned and your livelihood's strewn to the wind?

And the widow pulling out tufts of her hair, she wails  
And she beats at her breast and draws blood from her cheeks.

Then, the oldest one among the keening hags, she tells her:

– Rightly you wail and pull your hair, for you've been branded by Death  
Well may you beat your breast and gouge your cheeks,  
while the rest of us bathe, properly dress him and anoint him  
with oils and fragrances for the occasion that I keep.

Sisters, you're kind of heart, my loss has left me both bankrupt and bereft  
in all my lifenever have I laid eyes on my beloved's naked flesh.

The women they get to work with a change of clothes at hand,  
strip down the dead man, to prepare him for the wedding suit.  
Except, halfway through they are startled and they point and declare:

- Wait up, where is his ... bed snake? Can someone find his... meat sword?
- I'm looking for his ...trouser trout. Where is it, his ...love whistle, his ...wonder worm?
- Couldn't you help to get up? Just play with it a bit!
- But he has nothing to play with! Well, 'll be!! This is a woman she's been sleeping with!
- Oh come! For Heavens' sake! What is this, for the love of Christ!
- My gosh! "He" has a hole down there! He's a vagina, like we have!
- Has.... what!? Oh Lord have mercy! You, devil's spawn! May you be cursed!
- How could you? Shameless and vile! You took ... a woman as your ...lawfully wed?

As if from stone, the widow sits, no notion what they're saying  
 she's lost her Braveheart, is all she knows and she can barely stand it  
 she does remember they always lay with one another in the dark,  
 the sweetness of their tight embrace and how it would bring out the stars  
 she pulls a chair to the table and sets it out for two.

The neighbors screeching go about and quickly spread the news  
 The Priest is asked to come, he says: from me, no blessing  
 Next, the Policeman is sent for: the likes of you are fit for prison

The neighbors screeching, out of the house they pour  
 Surround it on all sides, start throwing rocks and stones  
 The Policeman shoots his gun; the Priest throws down his torch  
 And all the villagers, as one, become a fist of fire, to scorch  
 and strike the profane bitches down, deliver them unto the flames.

And, like the flames, the widowed woman's eyes are shining  
 as she kisses her dead love, tightly embraces her betrothed  
 and takes up a lament, without shifting from her stool:

Whether man or woman, saint or spirit, or not even human,  
 to me you are my Braveheart and I owe you the whole world wide  
 ashes to ashes with you I'll turn, and meet you in the other side.

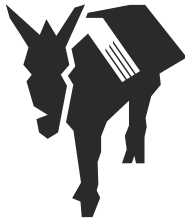
And even as she speaks, down on their heads rain burning beams  
their embrace turns to cinders, the spark of song is drowned out  
and fire engulfs the hut, throwing its shadow across the heavens.

And the villagers grown silent, they turn around and they behold:  
amid the smoke, fairy-like spirits they dart and fleet  
casting dark curses on every head and poisonous seeds.  
Fiercely the sun beats on the crops, the drought sings the land,  
there isn't milk enough for both, so mothers choke the babes in arms.  
The village gathers and bows before the vilified hut  
with no policemen and no priest, no Jesus Christ, nor Saints  
they kneel, hoping for healing from the charred remains.

For nine years they did the honors, but all they got was god's deaf ear  
A tenth year they did come, in silence now. And a miracle takes place:  
Amid the smoke, fairy-like spirits they dance and laugh out loud  
And in their midst Two Brides; the figures of two girls, embrace  
and start the wedding dance, and kiss each other in the mouth

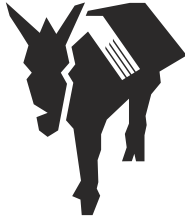
And the villagers rejoicing, they take up a song of love  
And the willow spirits cast cool blessings all around and forgiveness.

*Translated by Konstantinos Matsoukas*



# **PROSE**

*And other stories*



## Matthew Schembri

(\*1993) is a multimedia artist, writer and poet based in Malta. He was awarded The Young Artist of the Year by Arts Council Malta in 2017 and Best Emerging Author by the National Book Council Malta in 2022. In addition to Malta, he exhibited his works and was awarded art and literary residencies in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, France, Spain, Croatia and Finland. His debut YA novel, *Stessi* (Selfies) was published in 2018, and his first poetry collection, *Hassartek* (I erased you), in 2021. His residency was on the island of Mljet.



*Photo: Etienne Farrell*

## All this because

+2,646

If you had to be an animal, what animal would you be? That's what Ms Samira asked us today.

Everybody in the class raised their hand – everybody but me.

*Alex?*

*A dolphin, I told her.*

*And why is that, dear?*

*Because dolphins can choose to stop breathing, that's why.*

+140

[Sunday afternoon. In the luxurious kitchen belonging to the couple Borg. Party music, volume kept low. Everywhere you look decorations and sweets that remind you of babies. Everything rainbow coloured.

Not everything exactly.

The cake on the big table in the middle is covered entirely in white icing. And right in front of it, the couple, dressed in bright colours and wearing youthful smiles, as though they were getting married for a second time.

Norma Borg's belly is bulging.

It's bulging because of Alex.

And, standing around the couple: the guests. They're also dressed for the happy occasion, a party unto themselves, waiting on the couple to cut –

And they cut the cake.

And the horror on the couple's faces.

And the collective shocked gasp of all the others.

And the freshly cut slice of cake falls flat onto the table.]

[The cake's filling wasn't rainbow-coloured.]

+273

Even as she was giving birth, Norma couldn't stop asking herself why she hadn't just had an abortion.

A scream.

*Why?*

She was all alone. Another scream.

*Why?*

Not alone exactly.

A scream – different this time.

*Why?*

Because the scream was mine: Alex Borg.

And from now on, I'm going to be the only narrator.

+2,685

*Aunty Taylor told me, they tried to gag you before you were even born. But now you managed to make your way here, don't let them.*

+2,457

Mum had to come to school today. After talking to the Head she told me we were going home. But when she got into the car she didn't start driving. Instead, she started crying and punching the steering wheel.

Mum: I raised you right. I gave you a normal upbringing ...

+1,372

Pink! That's the colour I wanted on the walls of my room. And the furniture. And the curtains. Everything pink. Not red, orange, yellow – pink. Pink!

*They are not for you, were Mum's exact words. You have all the colours and you want that one?!*

And I cried.

I cried until I lost my voice.

I'm sorry, Aunty.

+2,671

Me: Mum, I need to pee.

Mum: But why do you always need to go when we're at the supermarket?!

Mum: Go, go on. You come straight back over here as soon as you're done, do you understand?

My legs know the way by heart.

Not to the toilet.

To the last aisle on the right.

I enter and stop right in front of them: the shelf with boys' underclothes.

And I pore over them with my eyes. I study the photos attached to them.

And I feel something, I can't explain it.

Like something strange running through me.

Something that embarrasses me, makes me sweat, makes me nauseous – but that excites me in a way.

I spend a while standing there, like that, until I feel it's time to go. Before I leave the aisle, I make sure no one's looking, and I tear off one of the photos – the one with the red boxers – and I hide it in my pocket.

+2,356

Aunty Taylor: [To me] For people like us, hiding and lying are our best friends.

+2,672

[At the Marine Park.]

Sad. Just like that. So sad that Mum paid for me to see a dolphin up close.

The trainer: You can stroke her, hi. She doesn't bite... Her name is Finnley.

I stroked her. I crouched down next to her. Face to face. When my mouth was close to her ear, I whispered my secret to her.

*I know, she told me, and I love you as you are.*

And she embraced me.

And we cried together.

+1,826

It's my birthday again, and not one pink gift. I'm used to it now. I don't cry anymore. All that matters is that you were there, Andrea.

I couldn't stop staring at you.

And when we went to play and I told you I'll be the mummy and you'll be the daddy, you were the only one who didn't make fun of me.

And when everyone was gone and only you were left, and not even mum was there with us, I whispered into your ear,

*I like you, Andrea, and you, after you made sure that mum wasn't in the room with us, even though you knew that she wasn't there – as though this was a habit to you – you told me, I like you too, Alex.*

And I kissed you on your beautiful lips. And you let me kiss you. You kissed me back.

And I felt so happy.

I felt like myself.

Then you pushed me away and I got confused, until

Mum: Andrea, your mum is here. *And you...* [to me] Billie's papa called to tell me you were playing mummy and daddy!

Me: What's wrong with that?!

Mum: Don't you know what's wrong with that? You can't play that game. Not with Andrea and –

Me: Why?

Mum: Because it's not normal, okay? *And I don't want to hear another word!*

But I said another and another, and when you left she beat me and it didn't matter. All that I could think of was you.

After that day, no one would play with me.

But you.

+2,455

Today I found a word written on my desk.

A big word written in capital letters, in black marker. Permanent.

I had never seen or heard that word before.

Ms Samira wanted to know who had written it, but no one spoke up.

Then she told us that we should never say that word.

Ever.

'Cause it's rude.

'Cause it's dirty.

Like my desk, which she changed so that now it's not my desk anymore.

+2,456

Billie and Charlie and the rest spent all their time calling me that word they're not supposed to say.

+2,674

Maybe if I stop looking at those supermarket photos before I sleep I'll become like the others? I tried it. But nothing changed.

+2,458

Aunty Taylor knows that Mum won't let me visit her. So she's coming over herself.

Aunty Taylor: Remember, because you're different, you're also more interesting than they are.

Mum: Can we change the subject, please?

Aunty Taylor: All right. Alex, why don't you keep your hair long?

That was it.

Mum started shouting at her – even using that word – and Aunty started shouting more, and Mum kicked her out and told her never to come back.

But I managed to pick up one thing.

Aunty said we should wear that word as a badge of honour.

+2,459

Nowadays I can't wait for school to be over. Not 'cause of the bullying, but 'cause I meet you every day before I go home. There, by the boys' school swimming pool. Beautiful and smiling. We were always alert. Not to take too long, to make sure our mums never noticed.

You kissed me today – you bit me and you made my lips bleed.

I told you, *I want you to be my boyfriend* and you laughed. Then I told you, *I think I've fallen in love with you* and you laughed again and your gorgeous face was glowing and I knew it was true.

+2,100

Billie says that whoever is grown up and like my Aunty Taylor and me is living in mortal sin and that when they die they will not go to heaven and will burn forever in hell.

+2,460

They killed twelve people. Shot. I don't remember where.

Charlie says that it's 'cause they were like you and me.

I think here is where hell is.

+2,468

I kept going to Auntie Taylor's house, behind Mum's back.

Today she gave me a book. It's called *Romeo and Juliet*.

She told me it's a version written for children, like me.

She also told me that, for a long time, books used to get censored, which means no one could read them. Even films and music and other kinds of art.

'Cause of us.

But that doesn't happen anymore.

She told me she lived through a time when they used to burn everything, including people like us.

I gave the book to you.

I told you I wanted to be like Shakespeare when I grew up. And you said you wanted to be like Messi.

You also told me that grown-ups who love each other don't just kiss on the lips, they do other things to each other.

They touch their private bodies together and they kiss them and they put them in each other's private bodies and in each other's mouths and much more than that. *Urgh*, I told you, and you laughed and said, *no, they have fun doing that*. And you told me you saw adults doing this on your uncle's laptop. In films that are different from the usual ones. Ones for adults only.

And you let me see your private body and touch it and we laughed. You said you felt good and I felt good that you felt good.

Then I let you do the same to me.

And you told me that this is how we came into this world, 'cause this is how a man and a woman make children.

+1,571

I took Auntie Taylor's lipstick. Pink. So, so beautiful.

I hid it in my room.

When Mum goes to sleep, I put some on my lips.

And I feel that my face is beautiful. Really pretty.

And I feel happy, just seeing it in the mirror.

Then I feel something. I don't know what.

So I wash my face in the sink and rub and rub and rub it and I wash the sink until there isn't any pink left anywhere.

+2,456

Aunty Taylor: Remember when I told you that hiding and lying are our best friends? Add shame and guilt, too.

+2,470

Mum went to the supermarket. She went on her own, 'cause I told her I had a headache.

I lied.

The moment she closed the door I ran to her laptop.

She promised she'd buy me a phone for my Holy Communion.

But for now, all we had at home was her laptop.

I turned it on and went onto Google and searched for those films that you told me about.

And I watched a few.

And I felt the same way I felt at the supermarket standing in front of that shelf.

Then, that evening, the punishment.

*You can forget that phone*, Mum told me.

I forgot to clear the search history.

+2,114

We have a new teacher now. His surname is Pandolfino, like Aunty Taylor's.

I think he is like her and me, too, because he wears a wristband.

A blue one.

+2,115

Mr Pandolfino noticed that I'm getting bullied. You wouldn't believe how angry he got with the others.

He showed us a clip from the film *Love is All You Need?*

I kept remembering that name because it's sort of like that song Aunty Taylor loves. Not exactly, though.

In that film, children like you and me are the majority and the others are the minority.

The opposite of our world.

And there was a boy that the others bullied so much that he somehow slit his wrists and a lot of blood came out of them and I don't know if he died.

I can relate.

+2,200

A lot of mamas and papas went to talk to the Head about Mr Pandolfino.  
They fired him.

+2,002

I found out there's a whole month dedicated to us.

And on the TV, on the news, I saw crowds of people waving flags that were coloured pink. Or blue.

And they seemed happy.

Then Mum started yelling at them and she changed the channel and we had to watch some guy who said the same things Billie said to me. But he also said that I chose to be like this and that I can change and become like the others. The way Jesus wants us to be. So I asked Mum how I could change and she told me I didn't have to change, 'cause I'm not like them and I told her, *yes, I am like them!* And she said, *if you're like them I'll kick you out of the house and you'll be alone forever*, and I asked her something else and she told me to shut up and go to my room.

I obeyed.

I do not want to end up without a home.

Or alone forever.

+2,003

I told you about that guy on TV who said that we could change and you said that *no we can't*. And you said, *do you know that if we could change, and you just decided to change and you actually changed for real, you wouldn't be able to love me anymore?*

So I decided that I'd rather stay as I am.

+2,601

Ms Samira told us to pick an animal and work on a project about it.

I picked a dolphin, after Aunty Taylor's surname.

+3,000

I had to go to confession before my first holy communion.

And I told the nun about you and I. I was worried we'd go to hell forever.

You wouldn't believe how she lost it.

Then, before she let me go, she said, *it's just a phase*.

I'll grow up a bit more and find a girlfriend and it'll all be okay.

+3,011

When I went to wait by the pool today, you weren't there. You're always there and I got worried 'cause I thought you wouldn't come. I thought something had happened to you. Or that you'd decided you'd had enough of me. But then, after a long while, you arrived, beautiful with your wide smile and wearing your white Holy Communion suit. I had one too, 'cause all the boys and girls doing their Holy Communion had to show up wearing that suit. But I couldn't wait to get rid of it. I didn't want to wear it to Mass, let alone to school, 'cause it was so ugly.

But yours was beautiful. Like you are.

And we were supposed to have Jesus inside us, but I told you I couldn't feel him.

And we did what we usually do.

And then all of a sudden, Billie and Charlie appeared from nowhere and caught us. And when you realised, you pushed me away like that time at the party, and they started harassing us and you told them that it wasn't true that you liked me and that it's not true that I was your boyfriend and that you hated me like all the others and that you didn't want to see me again and you ran away.

And you left me alone with them.

And I burst into tears and I started shouting your name, but you never came and Billie started punching me in the face and everywhere and he pushed me around harder than you did until I somehow ended up in the pool in my Holy Communion suit and they told me to swim like the dolphins I loved so much.

And I did not swim.

And

in the Marine Park, Finnley the dolphin swam down to the bottom and refused to swim back up and she stayed there until she died.

+3,012

[At the hospital.]

All this because I'm a girl who likes boys.

+6,646

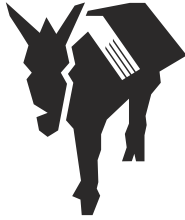
[In the therapist's office.]

*If you had to be an animal, what animal would you be?* she asked.

*A dolphin,* I told her.

*And why is that?*

*Translated by Jake Buttigieg*



## Sven Popović

(\*1989) is a Croatian writer, and cultural and literary journalist. His short stories were published in various magazines and anthologies, including *Best European Fiction 2017* by Dalkey Archive Press. His debut collection of short stories, *Nebo u kaljuži* (Sky in the gutter), 2015, is published by Dalkey in 2024 as *Last Night*. His first novel *Uvjerljivo drugi* (Loser by a landslide) was published in 2018, and his second, *Mali i Levijatan* (The kid and Leviathan) came out in 2024. His prose has been translated into English, German, Romanian, Catalan and Polish. His residency was in Ljubljana.



*Photo: courtesy of the author*

# Roadsigns

*What's the furthest place from here?*

*It hasn't been my day*

*For a couple of years*

*what's a couple more?*

– Blake Schwarzenbach

When I dial Alisa's number, a beautiful melody plays. I ride a tram to Novi Zagreb, leaning my head against the glass, and the speaker makes an unpleasant noise, crackling as if it's trying to tell me that there's no such thing as a next stop. We cross a bridge, and the Sun shines on its metal railing. The sunlight reaches me in lazy waves; I squint, I frown, but I feel at ease. I like crossing bridges, it makes me feel as if I was leaving something behind.

\*

I was arranging the books on my shelf, to create the impression that my life is less of a mess. I glanced at the floor. Various magazines, comic books, and several children's books were scattered around it; fifteen years of my life, scattered. I should have gotten rid of those, there was no more room on the shelves. I felt a bitter taste in my mouth, more bitter than when your girlfriend leaves you, more bitter than a hangover. I sat on the floor and picked up the magazine closest to me. It was a videogame magazine from 1999. As I leafed through it, images from my childhood flashed before my eyes: my best friend and I used to spend hours staring at the screen, until my mother or father said that that was enough, that it was sunny outside and that we should go out and climb some trees. There were also a couple of stolen issues of Playboy that we'd shared as kids.

That evening I made a pyre on the levee. I invited a couple of friends. We burned all our magazines and comics and watched the fire. It swallowed Tom Sawyer, Alice's rabbit along with some Playboy bunnies, Dylan Dog and Martin Mystère. They didn't scream, didn't panic; they knew they'd stay etched in our eyes. That night I discovered this: if you want to grow up, you have to preserve the child within.

\*

Alisa never talks about her dreams. She used to tell me that she never dreamed, but that can't be true. We all run from something, and we run through our dreams. Everybody's got a reason to dream. I waited for the bus, studying the Sun through the haze of my own breath, the snow was slowly melting, and a woman was standing next to me with five- or six-year-old girl. The girl wouldn't stop talking and kept asking her mother questions.

Mom, I dreamed that I was a hummingbird.

How does such a tiny child know what a hummingbird is? I thought.

All right, dear, but dreams aren't real.

Since when? I thought.

The girl frowned and stared at the floor, drawing on the floor with the tip of her shoe. Her mother's phone rang; she told the girl not to move, walked a couple of steps away and answered the phone. The girl stood in place, shifting from one foot to the other as she kept drawing in the snow.

Hey, I said, and crouched next to her.

She gave me a suspicious look; My mom told me not to . . .

...Not to talk to strangers. But I'm not a stranger. My name is Elias.

She laughed. I'm Ana-Marija.

What are you drawing?

I'm not drawing, I'm doodling.

All right, what do you see in the snow?

She squinted. Africa, she said.

Africa?

Yeah, it's that country where black-skinned people live, and they wear colorful clothes and ride zebras.

Zebras?

Yes, it's a kind of black and white horse.

Are you sure they're black and white, and not white and black?

Yes, my grandpa told me so.

Your grandpa is a wise man.

Yes, he has a beard and everything.

I laughed. Ana-Marija?

What?

What your mother said, about dreams . . . that's not true: they are the other side of the looking-glass.

Like Alice?

That made me laugh.

Yes, like Alice, I said, and saw the bus approaching. Or like Alisa, I thought as I got on the bus.

\*

Last night I stepped out into the rain and went to the other side of the city, north of the river. I couldn't sleep. On my bedroom wall I saw distorted faces, grimacing, screaming. I couldn't find Jura the spider to have a chat with him, so I got up, quickly got dressed and rushed out of the apartment. My umbrella barely shielded me from the downpour. The dead walked the streets, apparitions whose faces had been washed away by the rain, leaving only outlines. I closed my eyes. I heard the tram slide down the tracks, through closed eyelids I could see the neon lines it was leaving behind. I heard the electric crackling in the wires. I could hear the screams of my dreams melting and washing down the sewer drain. Thousands of screams melting while I hid under the awning of a kiosk and waited for my tram, the famous number 31 that's always going in the wrong direction. After two in the morning, all the trams only ever go in the wrong direction.

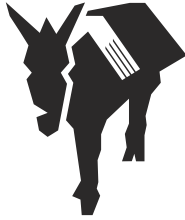
I've seen all of this before, I thought. Things don't change at all. Is every night, every moment *déjà vu*? I shuddered at the thought and laughed. The clerk in the kiosk gave me a confused look, but I paid him no mind; he doesn't know that above the closed, cruel sky, beyond the curtain of smog, the stars and the Sun shine. Then the tram came, and it was almost empty. I sat down, leaning my head against the glass, and the speaker makes an unpleasant noise, crackling as if it's trying to tell me that there's no such thing as a next stop. A drunk sat across the aisle from me.

Son, is it still raining?

Yes, but the Sun is still shining, we just need to unlock the sky.

He didn't hear me, but I think he understood me. Tomorrow would be a better day. Sometimes this world is more beautiful than we dare admit.

*Translated by Vinko Zgaga*



## Marina Gudelj

(\*1988) is a Croatian prose writer living in Split. Her debut collection of short stories *Fantomska bol* (Phantom pain) was published in 2020, and her debut novel *Nedovršena* (Unfinished) in 2021. Her short stories have published in *Words Without Borders* and *Los Angeles Review of Books* in translation by Ena Selimović. She works as a teacher of Croatian and keeps a literary blog *Straničnik* (Stakeholder). Her residency was in Prague.



Photo: Marina Pivalica

# The Witch

I knew Vinko had died even before they published a photo of his disfigured face among the obituaries. I believed that the soul of a dying person searches for people they want to say goodbye to and sneaks into those around them. I recognized him in the faces of the people in line at the bakery. I hadn't seen him in two decades and was curious why he was looking for me.

His head was disfigured, his legs stilt-like, and his spine curved to the left. Some thirty years older than me, he'd passed his days helping a priest as an altar boy of sorts, but without a robe. He was something like a friend to me, more than any of the other villagers. He'd seen hell.

They said he'd once been bright. Too young to be killed by the Germans or Italians and part of the generation that would survive.

They said that a person who touches the priest's robe during a burial would see where the soul of the deceased went. Vinko either couldn't resist or didn't believe in those stories. When his late grandfather was being buried, he grabbed the fringed hem of the priest's robe. After that, everyone thought he'd lost his mind.

They said that my grandmother drowned my father's first wife. They claimed she lured her – I didn't know what that meant at the time – while she was sleeping, to the well. They found her shoes near the well where she had left them before jumping.

They said that I am my grandmother's child, that I have evil eyes, that I scheme with fairies and talk to cattle. They said I was a witch.

Until my tenth birthday, I spent weekends in the countryside. Life revolved around funerals, where the rest of the family would fall to pieces, and I didn't understand their tears because I couldn't fathom how someone could grieve over or even love someone I didn't. I lived among poplars and wild blackberries, oaks and almond trees. I would get lost in the hills and in the damp leaves. I made friends with Vinko – whom my family feared and wanted me to stay away from – with a little calf, and with a host of imaginary sea characters.

Even now, it's difficult for me to think of those days as reality. Were they part of some dreamy, lonely child's fantasy or was reality truly different then, vibrant, colourful, otherworldly somehow. I sneaked into abandoned cottages shrouded in ivy, their insides damp and covered in moss. I would pretend they were underwater worlds, empires of a sea king that opened before me in all their eerie enchantment. At the time, I was obsessed with

everything connected to the sea; I pestered my girlfriends from the city to play sea-depths, and in the evenings I devoured episodes of Fish Police. Inspector Gil and the singer Angel. The Little Mermaid, her sisters, and the witch. It didn't matter who the characters were. I wanted to be every single one of them. I loved the captivating and desperate Angel as much as magical, naive Ariel. There was a threshing floor between the stables where I used to ride the little calf, pretending it was a dolphin. Vinko would play with us, roaring like a proper sea king.

Apart from me, there was only one other child who visited the village, a boy I saw in church. Fat, needy, showered with love. I hated him. He always sat between parents I thought he didn't deserve. The two looked constantly at each other and during the prayer of Our Father they would stretch their arms behind the boy's back and touch each other with their pinkie fingers. The boy would throw blank, hawkish glances, his eyes fixed on his mother, waiting for her to look his way. Then she would pat the boy on the head and the father would place his hand on hers. I wanted them for myself.

After mass, we would go to the old house where my dad's mother lived and there, over cherry pie that was baked every Sunday, we gossiped about church. The kitchen smelled of pepper and yeast, and grandma smelled of sherry. Sometimes relatives from the city would join us and mock the priest. Father Miro was a theatre trapped inside a man. He behaved like an actor at church, waving his arms, endlessly changing his glasses – sighted, far-sighted, near, preaching about constellations, reciting Ujević's poems. I never again heard such guttural laughter at someone else's expense. As if they were watching a stand-up comedian. I laughed with them, echoing them, as I used to do when I couldn't read the subtitles on TV and instead followed along with the laugh tracks. Neda, my father's unmarried, cross-eyed sister laughed, too, but only with her voice – not with her eyes, not with her throat, and by no means with her heart. Nights she read the poems Father Miro had recited, and days she watched the news on television. On the rare occasion she left the house, I would sneak into her bedroom and, with my heart in my throat, read her journals, which were filled with wild verses of desire. There, for the first time, I saw the words urge, passion, and groin. There were philosophy books hidden under the bed and two twigs in the shape of a crucifix hanging above her pillow. She was friends with Anka, who always smelled of burnt pig's hair and sold sausages at the Saturday morning market in Split. In Father Miro's presence, her breathing grew laboured, and she blushed.

Our little calf I loved more than any human. I'd slip out at night, untie the calf, and moon around with it over the bramble paths or sleep with my head against his, in the straw. Sometimes I went into other people's stables, braided the horses' hair, guzzled milk straight from the cows' udders, kissed the lambs, and roused the dogs.

But Mother had no mercy. I still have no idea how it all happened. I know she kept saying we needed money, and that grandma was too old anyway to keep cows. She would slaughter them and sell off the meat.

Grandma tried to silence my screams. The villagers were afraid of me. They came looking for my mother, trying to reason with her.

“Spare the calf, Matilda, for the love of God,” they begged through my sobs. Everyone, even our neighbour Mirko, who never spoke to anyone and whose wife had hanged herself. And then his brother joined in, a hunter whose dogs howled along with my screams. Then Anka, Aunt Neda, our neighbour Kata who used to clean the church.

I thought they were standing up for me, that they cared for me, but in their kitchens they whispered that a witch's cries were a bad omen. They burned incense and sprinkled holy water. While I sat for days on the old Turkish stairway outside the house loudly grieving. Vinko sat beside me and matched my every whimper.

She killed the calf. I ended up in the hospital together with my mother. I was suffering from shock and dehydration. As for my mother, she'd cut off her hand while slaughtering the calf. After that, she never looked at me again. She told grandma that some violent force had taken possession of her arm.

Two days later, an ice storm destroyed all the crops in the village. The animals fell ill, a strange disease that no vet could diagnose. Nobody whispered anymore. Instead, they loudly cursed my mother for what she'd done, and when they were near me, they threw their hands up in devil's horns.

My father, who had been living among shadows, obsessed with the memory of his first wife, now sank even deeper into despair. He barely noticed me, and when he looked at my mother, his eyes fell to where her hand had been. The longer his silences grew, the more her commands multiplied. She insisted that he would bandage her stump even though she knew it disgusted him. She asked him to drive her to her friends' place or to the store and always pestered him to reach for the mugs on the top shelf of the cupboard. Meanwhile, with me, she spoke only as a formality, as though I was an acquaintance she'd run into at the theatre.

They continued taking me to the countryside and leaving me to my own devices. No one had to chase Vinko away from me now. He ran off on his own because he was afraid of me.

I wanted that church boy's parents so badly. On Sundays my eyes would fill with tears as I watched them from the back of the church, and when everyone knelt, I knelt too, praying to disappear because they were peeking at me past their folded hands to see if I was sticking out my tongue or showing the devil's horns to the eucharist.

The incident with the boy wasn't planned. The ploughlands on the far side of the village were called Stanko's field. There, hemmed in by a stone wall, was a green pond covered in slimy grass. After the calf's death, I used to sit by it. One day, the boy appeared there out of nowhere. I sprung to my feet, ran over and started hitting him. His

weakness enraged me. I pushed him toward the pond. I truly had no intention of drowning him, I only wanted to scare him a little.

Vinko, who followed me to the pond that day, made a big fuss. The boy had swallowed a lot of water, but he was alive.

I was never brought to the village again.

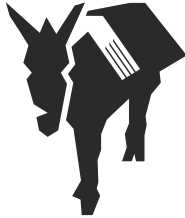
I heard that, several years later, the boy's mother died, and shortly afterwards I saw his father in the city with another woman. He greeted me as if I hadn't almost killed his son and told me that life belongs to the living, perhaps in reference to his new wife. I nodded shyly, but never managed to find the simplicity to understand that idea.

In the city I forgot all about the blooming orchards and nature's arrogance. I didn't visit when grandma died, nor after Aunt Neda was found hanging from an almond tree behind the house.

But then, a single accidental encounter made my body tingle: when I caught sight of an unfamiliar blue-haired woman at a bus stop. She looked like my childhood, like my imagination, like something impossible, like carelessness. She glanced back at me and, before I knew it, disappeared. It was the first time in twenty years that I'd wanted to return.

On the day of Vinko's funeral, I arrived just as the coffin was being lowered into the grave. I made my way to the grave so that everyone could see me. I finally knew why his soul was searching for me. In the city, I never thought about witchcraft, but here, among the desolate fields, the brambles, and the smell of wet soil, my skin once again crawled with magic. I wanted to show it to them. I spread my hands, stamped my feet into the earth, and lifted myself high into the air.

*Translated by the author*



## Ajda Bračič

(\*1990) is active as an architect, publicist and editor. Her poetry and short stories have been published in various magazines. A limited edition of her poetry pamphlet *gravženroža* (foul-flower) came out in 2018. In 2022, she published her literary debut, a short story collection entitled *Leteči ljudje* (Flying people). Her residency was in Caernarfon.



*Photo: Robert Balen*

## There's no one like you

You said this once to flatter me, the way that lovers in films say it. But even then I knew that you were wrong. Everyone is similar to someone and every someone is similar to someone else. They even say that everyone in the world has at least one double, and I know for certain that I do for I have met three of them.

The first was Majda, a tall woman who used to come to our place to grow corn. Part of the land next to the house where I lived as a child belonged to her – the house stood on a low bank below which was a field. During the year she would come a number of times with a tractor and a border collie bitch called Stella. While Majda worked, Stella sat alongside her in the cabin or on the edge of the field, on the lookout for voles and field mice.

Majda was about thirty years older than me, but it was clear that she was my double. Our faces were completely alike, except that her features were a little sharper than mine. She had dimples in her cheeks, just like me, and once she let me touch them with my fingertips, and then mine. I watched from the bank how she turned the soil, leaving long furrows. At the end, where the field turned into muddy grass, the tractor made an elegant semi-circular turn, and I learn a new word: headland. When she had finished in the field she usually called at the house. We would sit on the bench under the pergola with misted glasses of iced tea in front of us. Above the stream rose swarms of tiny flies, forming transparent clouds. My parents would talk with Majda and I was allowed to play with Stella.

I don't know if Majda was aware that she was my double. Or was I her double? It seemed to me back then certain that she understood there was a special connection between us. She smoked a pipe – can you imagine! Whenever it was particularly hot, she would stand in the shade of the house, spitting fragments of roughly cut tobacco onto the gravel. In a stretched T-shirt and with a straw hat on her head, she looked like a tramp or a good witch from some story. I was peering at her sideways, from beneath my brows, the way that kids look at things they like or fancy. She called me to her.

"I've got something for you." She pulled out from somewhere a small knife. The blade could be folded away and it was already a little blunt. A small silver cross shone on the handle. "If I give you this will you promise to tell no one about it?" She leaned very close, drawing me into her smell of soil and sweat.

I nodded. I was fairly convinced that my parents would never allow me to keep it. I quickly hid it in my pocket. "Good girl," said Majda, nodding, and stood up straight again. "Tell me something," she said. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

“When I grow up I’ll be you,” I replied without hesitation. She chuckled and then frowned at me. “I hope you’re not serious,” she said. I really liked the way she laughed: with her head thrown far back and her hands on her knees. She was very different from the other people around there, who were either old and mistrustful like my grandmother, or young and constantly scared, like my parents. When working in the fields, or driving to work, or even when they gathered in the village inn, if the church bell rang they looked sheepishly upwards and quickly said goodbye. We often had afternoon thunderstorms that suddenly came rushing across the plain and struck the fields with heavy fists of hail. I now remember those times for the squeaking of my father’s bicycle on the cart track that led to the road, and the low smoke that trickled through the front door of the bread oven. Every summer my hands would blossom with cuts from sharp blades of grass and insect bites. In truth, that was all I knew: the house, the storms, the church bells in the distance. It seemed to me that’s how it would always be. Majda never married or had children. But she took care of her elderly father. When he died, she simply left one day. If I think about it, I am roughly the same age now as Majda was when she disappeared. She left the house empty and her corn yellowing in the field, and in the early morning the deer would come down and gnaw on it. But she did take Stella with her, so I knew she had gone of her own free will.

The second time was down to sheer coincidence. It was shortly after I graduated, and you and I had just met. We used to meet for lunch or dinner, as if we were completely grown up. I liked this about you: urbanity, responsibility. At that time, I was already living in a block of flats, in a small place with two flatmates and the smell of cigarettes permeating the lace curtains. I was thinking a lot about the future and my plans and about where I would spend Friday evening, but not necessarily in that order. I faithfully wrote down my dreams because I believed that they would reveal something important.

I saw her at the end of the shopping aisle, next to the ice cream display freezer. You know how much I love hazelnut cones – I wanted to take one and she was standing there. For some moments I hung around the frozen vegetables, waiting for her to move. She looked exactly the same as me, only that she was wearing a light woollen coat, interspersed with different-coloured wool. Very smart, with tastefully chosen jewellery and a stiff leather handbag. There was a child with her – a boy of about four or five. In one hand she held a shopping basket, and with the other she was absent-mindedly stroking his head, while he clung to her leg. Fascinated and afraid, I approached her slowly, the way you would approach a rare species of bird. She didn’t notice me. And then she opened the display cabinet and reached for some ice cream. Her profile glowed in the subdued neon light. We looked at each other through the glass door of the cabinet. Her face fitted completely with the reflection of mine in the glass. She smiled and nodded at me. It was clear that she was one of those types who always knew what to say. Dimples appeared in her cheeks. She paused a little, as if there was something she wanted to say to me, but then she looked away and I took a step nearer. She closed the door to the freezer and disappeared with her little boy behind the shelves of drinks.

Was this a missed opportunity? Don't forget that there is always the possibility that life lines will cross and accidentally get switched. I was ready to go after her and invite her for a coffee, to ask her what she had meant to say to me, but I was scared. I stood where I was. When I finally collected myself, I realised that she had taken the last hazelnut cone.

That there is also a third emerged only last winter. One morning, I saw her photo in the newspaper. Once again there was the same smile, the dimpled cheeks, my hair, my nose. I showed her to you – “Yes,” you said, taking the last spoonful of yoghurt from the dish, “she really does look unusually like you.”

The article spoke of the award that she had received for her exceptional scientific achievements. She was a biologist, and evidently a highly successful one. I felt a mixture of envy and curiosity. I couldn't help myself: I searched online for everything I could find about her. I even read some academic articles she had written: about the Bosphorus-Suez bird migration route and the feeding habits of quail. A few days later she was due to give a public lecture at the university. Tell me, how could I not go? I was interested to see what she looked like in the flesh. I also wanted to establish whether she would recognise herself in me. Would she be disappointed? In my mind, I played with different scenarios of our meeting. I looked at the photographs on her profiles, where she was holding a young chimpanzee on her lap, climbing in the Dolomites and watching a sunset on a sandy beach. She looked happy. She looked good. I wondered whether I looked as good as that. “Of course,” you said as you were leaving; your lips gently touched my cheek and you carefully closed the door behind you. The flat in the morning sounded empty, raw.

In the lecture hall a number of bored-looking academics were sitting on grey cushioned seats. In the first row a young man with a long beard and glasses was fiddling with a camera. The lecture began late and I was expecting that the lights would be dimmed, but instead I felt exposed in the sharp neon light from the ceiling. I would have preferred to sneak into a corner, but there were few seats and even fewer listeners. It took me some time to notice her. She was already there in the second row, looking at her notes and tidying her hair. After a few minutes, an elderly man in a check jacket went up to her and gently touched her elbow. That was the sign for the lecture to begin.

I know nothing about quail. The projector screen showed graphs and charts and precise drawings of flight feathers. She spoke in a decisive voice, smiling now and then as she talked. I was waiting for our eyes to meet, for her to perhaps notice me in the back row, huddled behind the grey chair back. She didn't. I didn't follow what she was saying, I only followed her tone of voice, as if it might tell me something about her life. Where was she born? Did she remember how the storm clouds built up on the horizon, the mosquito bites and low-flying birds? Did she like hazelnut ice cream? Where had our paths diverged? Where the hell had I gone wrong?

When the lecture was over, I slipped from the lecture room and lit a cigarette in front of the entrance. After a while she appeared in the company of the photographer with the long beard and another of those who had attended the lecture. For some time, they chatted on the pavement and then they said their goodbyes. I followed her along the street, through the snowy park to the railway station and then onto the train. I was walking a few steps behind her, still unsure as to whether I would speak to her at all. When she sat down, I chose a seat by the window and watched her reflection in the glass. It was my usual train: it went in my direction and she got off at my stop. She folded her coat over her arm and slung her cute backpack over her shoulder, and I remained in my seat. Through the train window, I saw myself crossing a patch of snow in the car park in order to get into our car. When she closed the window, you kissed me and then turned on the headlights. The snowflakes swirled in the gusts of wind.

I didn't catch any more because the train left the station, heading north. It got dark outside and soon we were passing fields. The plain stretched in both directions and the horizon was lost in the darkness. In my pocket I felt Majda's knife. It was sharp enough for me to be able to mischievously carve my initials in the wood beneath the window. Then I took off my shoes and rested my feet on the seat opposite, next to Stella, who questioningly raised her head. The steady rattling of the train was making me feel sleepy and I pushed my tattered travelling hat further down over my eyes. Before I finally fell asleep it struck me: I don't actually know where the next station is.

*Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon and David Limon*

# Permissions and acknowledgements

## **Ognjen Aksentijević:**

the three poems were published in his second collection *Rezervat odbeglich ptica* (The fled birds reserve), 2021.

## **Marios Chtaziprokopiou:**

the poem is from his collection *Τοπικοί τροπικοί* (Local tropics), 2019.

## **Marina Gudelj:**

the story is from her short collection *Fantomska bol* (Phantom pain), 2020, and the English translation by the author was first published in *Turkoslavia* Issue 1.

## **Ajda Bračić:**

the story is from her collection *Leteči ljudje* (Flying people), 2022, and is published here with permission of the translators.

## **Jake Buttigieg:**

the poems were written in Maltese and translated by the author, 'Slovenija, you took me in with an embrace' was written in English.

## **Ivana Maksić:**

the poems are from her collection *Kćeri, zar ne vidiš da gorim* (Daughter, can't you see I'm burning), 2020.

## **Tibor Hrs Pandur:**

the poem is from his collection *Psychops*, 2022.

## **Sven Popović:**

the story is from his collection *Nebo u kaljuži* (Sky in the gutter), 2015, published by Dalkey Archive Press in 2024 as *Last Night*.

## **Matthew Schembri:**

the Maltese original is as yet unpublished; the English translation was first published in the anthology of new Maltese writing *Scinitilla 3*, Praspar Press, 2023.

## **Tonia Tziritza Zacharitou:**

the poem 'Ο κόσμος μέσα μου' (The World Within) is from *Εμείς και ο κόσμος* (The world and we, 2024), the originals of two other poems were published in *Τεφλον* (Teflon magazine) 31/2024.

The remaining texts were written during or after the residencies.



**Ulysses'  
Shelter**