THE
CONTINENTAL
LITERARY MAGAZINE

Planet

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Eva Horn
Peter Frase
Ursula Kovalyk
Attila Veres

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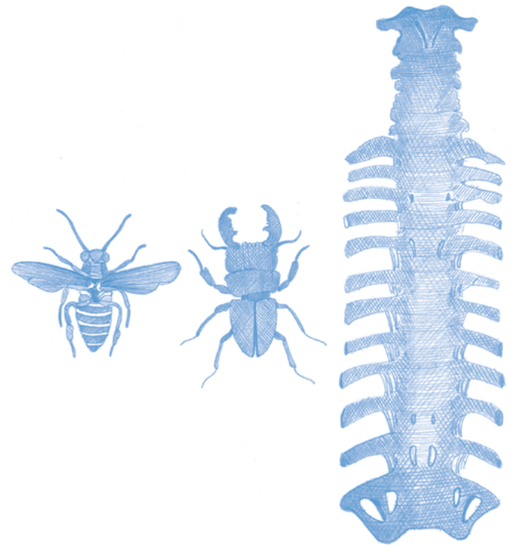
C O N T E N T



EDITOR'S NOTE

The Planet We Write On

In this issue of *The Continental Literary Magazine*, we confront the theme of "planet," a term which has gradually come to have echoes of both grandeur and fragility, a space which evokes thoughts of hearth and home on the one hand and threat and peril on the other. We share with our readers a collection of stories, essays, poems, and discussions that remind us that to live on planet Earth today is to grapple with profound questions of responsibility, belonging, and survival.

Slovak writer and theater artist Milo Juráni invites discussion by considering the ways in which scientists and artists wrestle with the challenges of the Anthropocene. As Juráni observes, we have responded in an array of ways to the crises of this epoch, ranging from outright denial to notions such as Organism Democracy, a movement of sorts with its own constitution which "lays down that all organisms enjoy equal rights, conflicts are resolved through collective bargaining, and decisions can be appealed." Were we to embrace Organism Democracy, Juráni writes, humans would be "obliged to know the needs of the species they represent."

And it would be impossible, of course, to think or write about the planet without confronting the ongoing climate crisis, which is in the background and often the foreground of many of the contributions. To confront the climate crisis is also, unavoidably, to confront the alleged debates concerning this crisis, yet as Eva Horn reminds us in an interview with Róbert Smid, this so-called debate has been little more than a ruse "aimed merely at prolongating itself, at gaining time for the fossil fuel industry." Horn's words capture the frustrating asymmetry between the pressing need for action and the machinations of power.

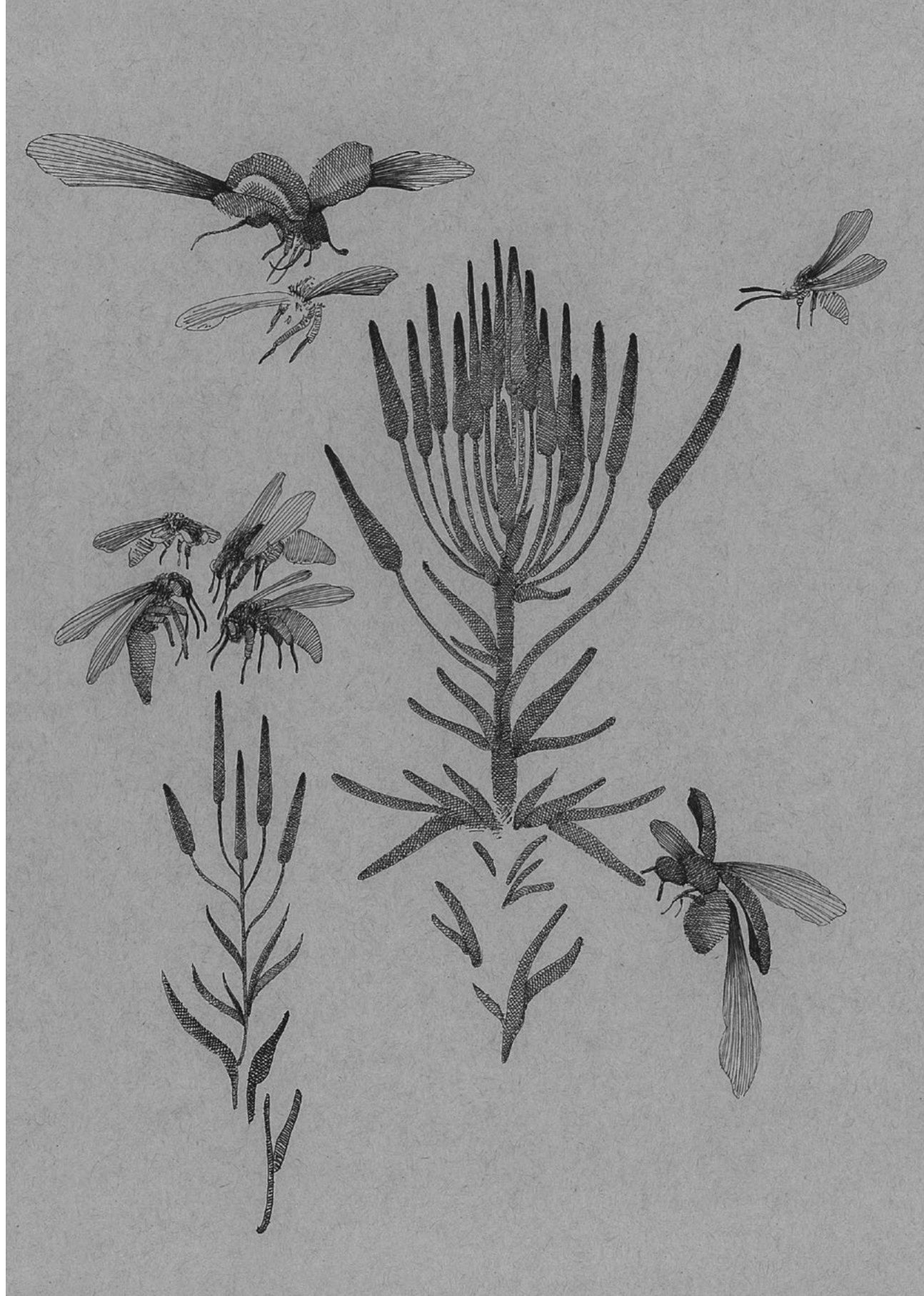
Hungarian writer and professor of theater and film arts Róbert Smid touches on similar tensions on the abstract levels of discourse and conceptual thinking. Smid calls attention to the ways in which neo-liberal and neo-Darwinian thought insist on seeing biology and economics as sciences of optimization, thus inevitably casting the struggle for survival as a struggle "for the acquisition and accumulation of natural resources." We may well have developed a sort of "ecological consciousness," but this consciousness at times seems to amount to patterns of discourse

well-nigh tantamount to an "act of forgetting about the genealogy of ecological thought." Polish author Adam Robiński offers a counterpoint to this forgetfulness, however, with a fascinating look at contrasting ways in which the world of nature has been perceived over time. With the outbreak of the First World War, the forests of Central Europe, he notes, were seen as little more than a piggy bank: "Trees fall and are cut into planks, which are used to build trenches." Once the Polish nation had risen to its feet in the wake of the war, however, the forests suddenly become a national treasure to be dutifully preserved.

Our contributors also confront the unsettling psychology of detachment and privilege. Slovak writer and playwright Uršuľa Kovalyk shares a story in which, for one character, nature has become "a backdrop to a good selfie, or a suitable holiday destination." Peter Frase, author of the boldly prophetic 2016 book *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*, cautions us never to underestimate "the capacity for delusion among the ultra-rich." Yet as he notes, the escapist fantasies of the wealthy contain a kernel of truth. "It's understandable to fear and hide from the masses," Frase remarks, "when you intend to perpetuate a system that ensures their intensifying misery and your continued comfort."

Many of our contributors share visions of a disquieting future that conjure echoes of the title of Eva Horn's 2018 book *The Future as Catastrophe*, in which Horn offers a critique of our fascination with disaster as a symptom of our anxieties about the future. Hungarian author Ilka Papp-Zakor writes of a world in which people live in space and carry with them cherished little globes that remind them of a world that belongs to the past. Poet Urszula Zajączkowska offers a warning from the planet earth, who reassures us that she will gather into her depths the many beings "who give you breath and water to wash your faces… while here you grow ever more alone." Author Balázs Farkas even suggests (in devastatingly casual phrasing, whether ironically or not) that we embrace our catastrophic future. "Extinction is inevitable," he writes. "It is completely normal. Like, totally okay."

We hope to have presented, with this collection of writings, an issue that is inspiring, if also at times unsettling. The planet, of course, is not just a theme for our issue. It is the only stage on which we, for the moment, can play our many parts. Perhaps it is worth considering ways in which we could make revisions to the script for the next few acts before the curtain falls.



ART

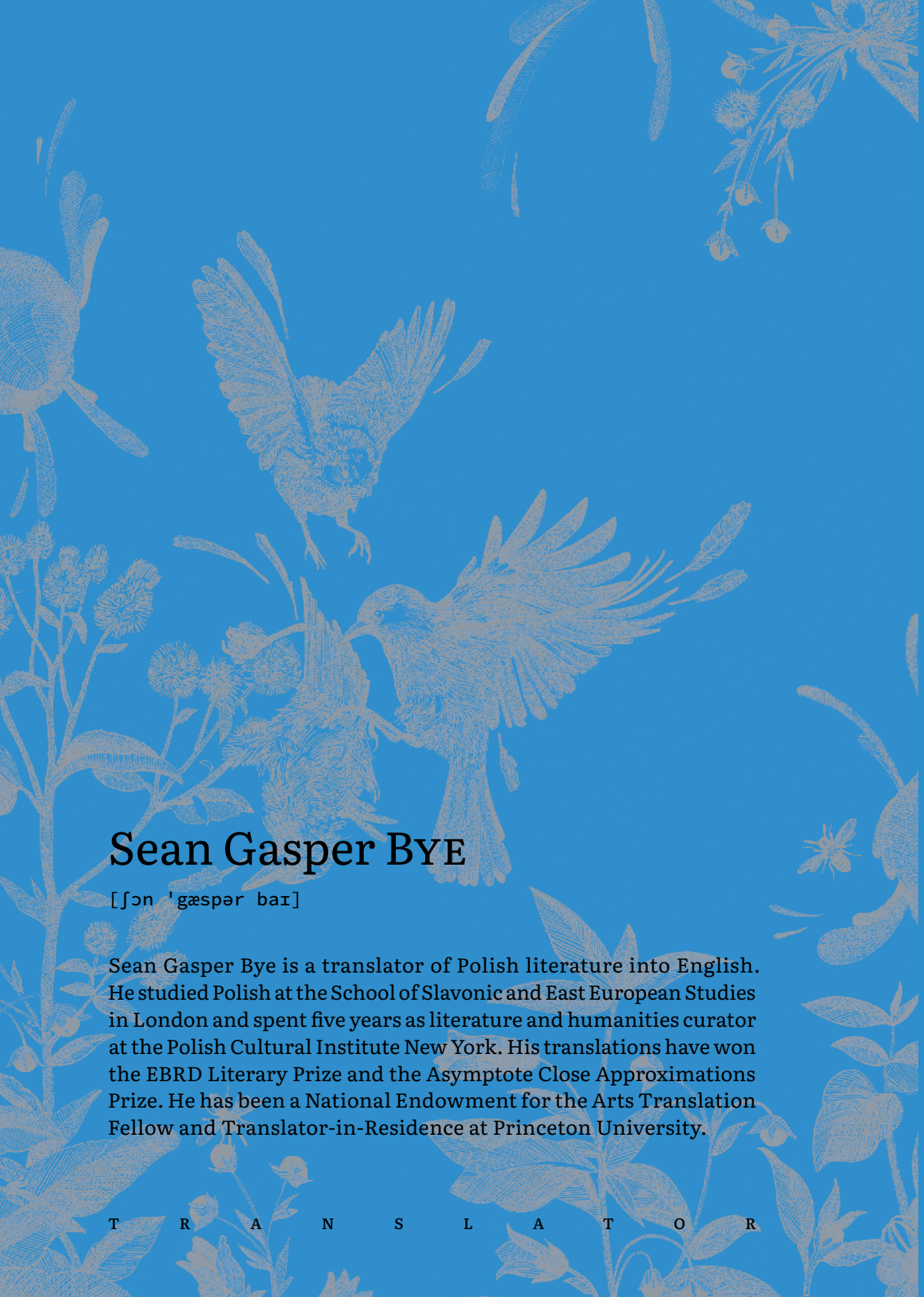
Garden of Catastrophy

Robert GABRIS

['rɔbɛrt 'gabrɪs]

Robert Gabris was born in former Czechoslovakia and currently resides in Vienna. Gabris' artistic focus revolves around critically confronting identity issues, particularly those involving marginalised groups. Although he is of Roma descent, Gabris questions his identification as a Roma artist. Instead, his art consistently delves into broader themes of diverse and changeable identities, the queer body, and its various physical and mental manifestations. Gabris prefers conceptual drawing and its experimental applications, often deconstructing forms and pushing the limits of artistic expression, while using this medium as a form of resistance against exclusion and racism. His creations are largely autobiographical, reflecting a continuous and obsessive quest for precision and symmetry. His recent exhibitions include the 2024 Biennale of Sydney, the 2024 Biennale de Lyon, and in 2023 *This Space Is Too Small For Our Bodies* at Belvedere 21, Vienna.

A R T I S T



POETRY

From the Earth

Sean Gasper Bye

[ʃɔn 'gæspər baɪ]

Sean Gasper Bye is a translator of Polish literature into English. He studied Polish at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London and spent five years as literature and humanities curator at the Polish Cultural Institute New York. His translations have won the EBRD Literary Prize and the Asymptote Close Approximations Prize. He has been a National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellow and Translator-in-Residence at Princeton University.

TRANSLATOR

Urszula Zajączkowska

[ur'ʂula zajɔnʈʂ'kofska]

Urszula Zajączkowska is a poet, botanist and video artist. As a botanist and an Assistant Professor of Forestry Botany at Warsaw University of Life Sciences, she researches the anatomy, biomechanics, aerodynamics and movement of plants. She has published three volumes of poetry: *Atomy*, *Minimum* and *Piach*. In 2019, she published her essay collection *Patyki*, *badyle*, which was also nominated for the Polityka's Passport Award and the Witold Gombrowicz Award, and it received the 2020 Gdynia Literary Prize in the essay category.

AUTHOR

If you were seeking on scorched slopes and dead rivers
My vengeance for all I let you do—you will not find it in me.

I am from all the others! I form myself from others—in others!

My motherland is rock, my movement water, my strength the grasses' fiber.
I am molded from lumps of loam, tiny webs of blood vessels and leaf-juices.

I am from all the others! I form myself from others!

In condensations of air all your filth soaks into me.
Oh how cruel is your bitterness. With it I poison my vessels.

But after all I am from all the others! I form myself from others!

Swarms of beings on the brink of life and air, death and rock
who give you breath and water to wash your faces—
These I gather into the depths—to someday be reborn.
While here you grow ever more alone.

Because it is I who am from all the others! I form myself from others in others!

NON-FICTION

How to Describe a Forest in Ten Thousand Steps

TRANSLATED BY SEAN GASPER BYE

Adam Robiński

['adam rɔ'bʲiɲskʲi]

Adam Robiński is a freelance journalist and writer. Author of *Hajstry. Krajobraz bocznych dróg* [*Hajstry. Backroad Landscapes*], a collection of essays on the links between humans and nature, which was nominated for the Warsaw Literary Award, the Witold Gombrowicz Award, and the Jopseh Conrad Award. He has since published a number of books, continuing to explore how human and more-than-human worlds mix. He lives and works in Warsaw.

AUTHOR

First, you have to imagine a river. Wild, unruly, and a dozen or so kilometers wide. Its channel contains archipelagos of windswept sandbanks. Crystalline torrents stream down into its current from the face of a retreating glacier. This is what allows the river to swell to such dimensions. Meanwhile, the world on the great ice's outskirts is harsh tundra. Lichens, creeping shrubs and dwarf birches are all that the earth is able to give forth in such an austere setting. But life blossoms alongside the river. A herd of reindeer makes its way from south to north. Each migration season unveils to them yet another vast stretch of land until recently covered up with ice. There are humans as well—paleolithic hunters following the animals' every step. The tabula rasa of Central Europe is filling up with their stories, plans, dreams and survival methods. But we know nothing about them beyond what we can deduce from their simple tools. The hand axe is the Swiss army knife of the stone age. It's sharp and can be used for almost anything, but its basic functions are so-called butchering activities. It is used to split bones, slice skins, scrape out and clean animal carcasses. But hand axes and flint arrowheads tell us nothing about the people.

We can ask helpful questions: if we suddenly disappeared, what would be left behind? What would a researcher from the future think at the sight of credit cards, phones and plastic straws? The Belgian artist Marteen Vanden Eynde toys with this question. He uses modern rock to sculpt imitation petrified technological relics. In Berlin's Futurium, a museum dedicated perversely not to history, but to the future, we can see an old Nokia embedded in malachite. Yet for our objects to become technofossils, they will have to sit in the ground for thousands of years. Maybe on the way someone will dig them up and wonder: were these people with smartphones Poles? Poland is not yet lost, so long as it has smartphones? Not at all. Fossils tell us more about people's day-to-day lives than about their identity. Identity is difficult, fleeting and averse to any kind of preservation.

Even the briefest reflection leads us to appreciate the artistry of paleolithic artisans, and their precision and persistence in making something out of nothing. Shelling flint into a sharp arrowhead above all demands skill. But how in an unforested tundra can one find a straight stick of uniform thickness, suitable for an arrow shaft? These shafts are the most valuable elements of a hunter's equipment. He will want to recover an arrow fired from a bow at all costs. But flint? It's like a pencil—when it goes dull, you just have to sharpen it.

Still, no method of survival will last forever. A new idea might come out of the blue, though probably not as literally as the stone monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Or it might come from outside, copied from someone else, bringing with it the insight that this same raw material can be used in a different way. A pencil with a replaceable graphite insert is an invention in the spirit of the Mesolithic. Blades are now made up of flint microliths placed side-by-side. When one crumbles, another can replace it. This is a very practical solution—you no longer need a large flint lump to repair your weapon. You just need some small shards: chips or refuse from making other tools.

A few thousand years ago, when the great ice is a more and more distant memory, and the climate is warming, the fauna and flora in the neighborhood of the ancient river are beginning to resemble those of today. The tundra sprouts oaks, lindens and birches. Pine trees take root in sand dunes. In summer, the meadows bloom with a carpet of colorful perennials. Deep underground, where water sits for most of the year, layers of peat build up. A neighborhood like this is friendly to alder trees, and wandering among them are elk, red deer and roe deer. Beavers, whose warm and waterproof fur is incomparable to any other material, erect dams and build lodges. The ponds their labor creates are oases of biodiversity. To live as they do—settled, connected to the land for better or for worse, as if they were a plant, not an animal—is another revolutionary idea. The Neolithic brings the birth of agriculture. Fertile riverside soil is like a magnet for humans, who arrive with a readymade model of cultivating a space. It is based on the conviction that the land can be persuaded to yield harvests at will. Hunters and gatherers, who are still numerous in the primeval forest, watch this carefully. Some quickly come around to the new methods. Others prefer to live the old way, to wander, and to be here and there. Dunes and peat bogs retain mementoes of both groups. But what traces will a house, a campsite leave behind? The story of how humans once lived is composed of leftovers. Things that no one needed, that someone forgot to take with them, and that were later eaten up by dunes.

Time flows in closed cycles that condition human existence. The warm season is a time of plenty, the cold one—of the struggle for survival. On the other hand you can measure time like a ruler. In this era, it's unlikely anyone counts years, so let's do it in steps. And so—the first step through prehistory is the disappearing glacier. Then, five thousand or more steps in pursuit of wandering game, and

a decision to settle permanently in one place. The next two or three thousand lead to using an entirely new raw material. Bronze has the quality of being easy to recast. This limits how many discoveries can be pulled from the earth centuries later. It also makes us think about the second life of objects, about something made into something else, just like wanting to convert the aforementioned Nokia into a smartphone. Bronze Age humans, with their practical approach to life, cover their tracks. It's hard to reconstruct even their day-to-day lives. The clearest trace of them in the primeval forest will be burial mounds. A group of regular hillocks rises in an open space, beside a stream. Whoever built them didn't see a forest all around. A primeval forest is more than dense shrubbery, it's made up of a mosaic of landscapes. But after all, the reason you erect something so impressive is to brag about it. Such a construction is supposed to be eye-catching, to be visible from afar and to send this message all around: here lies someone important and wealthy. Someone whom all this belonged to. In the future the very shape of such a burial mound will say much more than what is buried inside of it: teeth, bones and remains of pottery decorated using a prehistoric technique.

A thousand steps later, bronze will be displaced by yet another raw material. Iron is longer-lasting and can be produced in bulk. At the edge of the primeval forest, a metallurgical basin grows. To smelt 20 kilograms of iron at a temperature of 1,200 degrees Celsius takes 200 kilograms of bog ore and just as much charcoal. The soot from 150,000 bloomeries is so intense that we have to wonder about the costs of this enterprise. Building them must certainly devastate the surroundings, not least because of mass deforestation to turn the wood into charcoal to fuel the furnaces. There are many more questions: who was behind all this? What social structure leads to producing iron on such a massive scale? Who rules this society, and who is only cheap labor? We can find answers to many of these questions in the pollen of plants preserved for two millennia in the surrounding peat. The so-called palynological profile is arranged in layers—digging deep takes us on a journey into the past. Moreover, future specialists will be able to identify the pollen and attribute it to a specific species. Sometimes they will come across larger grains or specks of charcoal that, after dating, will allow them to draw an obvious conclusion: there used to be a forest here, and then it was gone. Someone cut it down and burned it up.

The Middle Ages are a period that leaves behind not only tools, but oral and written traditions, as well as toponyms. The primeval forest now has a clearly defined topography. Stretching along the rivers are alternating parallel strips of dunes and swamps. On a sandy rise neighboring a southern bog, a small, fortified settlement is founded. It has an elliptical shape, with wooden gates and towers on the longer axis. The walls are built of large wooden boxes filled with earth, which then have dirt heaped up around them. Inside, the settlement contains simple farming structures: an oven, tents, shacks. No buildings. Visibility is important. The garrison of the settlement watches the horizon; their alert will be a campfire and smoke signals from similar settlements scattered around the area. They themselves must also be ready to raise the alarm. They are defending a forest trail that hostile Baltic forces could use to cross from east to west. Every year, like clockwork, they attack the region, which by now is called Mazovia. The Mazovian princes do their utmost to prepare for these invasions. The forest now has many petty landowners and many names. No one yet calls it the Kampinos Forest, although that is how it will soon be described.

Like mushrooms after the rain, villages spring up inside the forest. They are founded by woodmen, settlers who are given free rein to exploit the landscape. They make beehives in the hollows of trees, from which they collect honey. They cut down trees and use the wood ashes to make potash. Dutch and German masters of water management, granted special privileges, settle in the marshes. They build huts there, and then also cemeteries. Though they believe in a different god than subjects of the Polish king do, the crosses they place on the graves are the same. The crown, Polishness, homeland, religion, tax and serfdom are now concepts you might hear on the forest roads. Hunting pressure causes large animals to disappear one by one from the forest: elk, bison, aurochs and, following them, wolves and beavers.

The history of the primeval forest intertwines with the fate of a low-lying land at the heart of Europe. Partitions of this enormous country take place, which bring geographers speaking foreign languages into the forest. Maps are drawn by foreign cartographers. Uprisings break out, the ground soaks up the blood of peasants and soldiers. The first global war sees the primeval forest as a piggy bank. Trees fall and are cut into planks, which are used

to build trenches. A network of narrow rails crisscrosses the forest, and train cars go back and forth between sawmills and lumber yards. In 1918—dates are now recorded carefully and with solemn dignity—the Polish nation rises to its feet in restored independence, and people arrive in the Kampinos Forest who speak of the necessity of preserving the woodlands. Across the ocean the first national parks already exist, so maybe it would be worth creating them here too, on the banks of the Vistula, the mother-river of all Poles. A student at Warsaw University in his early thirties, Roman Kobendza, and his future wife Jadwiga, who is a decade younger, also share this conviction. They go to Kampinos week after week, exploring its every nook and cranny. He is a botanist, she, a geographer. He is researching the phytosociology of plants; she, the dunes on which the local pine trees try to survive. The love that connects them will leave no trace behind. They will describe and photograph their surroundings, but not themselves. Archives rarely capture emotions, even if they are the building blocks of something significant.

In any event, a mustachioed Austrian by the name of Hitler has his own plans for this area. The primeval forest again swarms with soldiers. Warsaw, the conjoined sister of the Kampinos Forest, is bleeding to death, and one hiding place for those who have taken up arms is among its trees. In forest villages, an ephemeral government arises. The Kampinos Republic numbers a few thousand citizens. In its open-air movie theaters, they play newsreels on the domes of captured German parachutes, but in reverse, so that viewers see the invaders seemingly not marching forward, but retreating instead. Maybe humor can also win you a war. In Ławy, a village of a few dozen farms in the middle of the forest, founded on a mineral rise above the swamp, the Wehrmacht burns down house after house. But suddenly a solitary woman comes out onto the road holding a child by the hand. She is now greeting death, but at the sight of her, the armored convoy halts. Not a single shot more will be fired in Ławy.

When all the salvoes fall silent in the forest, Roman and Jadwiga will return there. They are now serious scientists dedicated to an unambiguous goal. As neighboring Warsaw rises from ruins, the Kampinos Forest is to become a national park. The thriving capital of this developing country will need green lungs. Northwesterly breezes are meant to freshen the air in the city,

and its inhabitants will find quiet and solace in the woodlands. But in 1959, only Jadwiga will cut the ribbon. Roman's heart stops a few years earlier, as if unable to simultaneously contain his love for a woman and for the forest.

The park is being created but few know what to do with it. What does it mean to "protect the forest?" Forestry is excellent at growing and cutting down trees. It's harder when hundred-year-old pines, perfect for making wood planks, need to be left alone; or to watch as the forest is left to its own devices, as it goes wild. Going wild becomes the guiding principle of the national park. The state authorities equip it with powerful tools and funds. Inhabitants of villages inside the forest are offered money to move away. People accept, and the farms empty out. Przemek was born in Ławy in 1975, but six years later he no longer lives there. Only a small number stay behind. Ruderal grasses grow over the walls. Where cows once grazed, nettles now grow thickly. White storks, accustomed to living alongside humans, leave too. On cultivated fields, foresters plant trees in straight lines, pine beside pine, oak beside oak, because everyone thinks a forest must have as many trees as possible. Elk, introduced after the war from the Soviet Union, once again run among the trees. Beavers reintroduced from northeastern Poland keep house in canals. Two wolf families have arrived on their own, and now they keep the local deer population in check. All that's left of the old villages are cellars, and the park's chiropterologist converts them into hibernacula for bats. Brown long-eared bats and Natterer's bats do excellently in these places where preserves, jams and homemade liqueurs used to be kept. Once a year, in June, the former inhabitants of Ławy gather at a clearing left from one of the farms. Under an expansive linden tree, they set out tables. They feast amid the perfume of wild lilacs. In the evening they walk to the bridge. Someone pulls out an accordion and the others dance, tapping their heels on the steel structure of the crossing. And for a moment they feel as though Ławy had never disappeared.

More or less at the same time, a thirty-something-year-old photographer from Kolkata—Indian by birth, Varsovian by choice—stands at the edge of an artificial lake near the village of Truskaw. Clouds sparkle on the surface of the water; the hostile silhouette of a sewage treatment plant looms in the distance. Sayam wonders why this place so reminds him of his home neighborhood of Picnic Garden, with its colonial architecture; and why this

forest outside Warsaw reminds him of the forests of the Sundarbans, where Bengal tigers still walk. He can find no rational answers to these questions, yet his heart knows. Sayam sees the forest as a cathedral, erected by several generations of builders like Barcelona's Sagrada Familia, reacting to changing natural conditions and adapting their research and experiments to new times. Cathedral thinking requires concern for one's descendants, for being a good ancestor. The photographer takes a few pictures of what he sees among the trees, and he lies awake at night thinking: what will come next? What will the forest be like tomorrow?

In fall of 2022, in a parking lot in Palmiry, an archeologist eagerly explains to a certain writer the elaborate range of settlements in the Kampinos Forest and the neighboring area. They make plans for a trip. The writer's mind is tinkering away: what if one step were exactly one year? Then in ten kilometers you'd be able to reach the last glaciation. The paleolithic, a time of reindeer and their hunters who would traverse the local tundra with flint arrowheads. A time when there was not yet a forest. If Kampinos National Park had been founded ten thousand years ago, jokes the archeologist, instead of an elk its logo would have a reindeer. The writer plays along. He can feel his imagination running at full steam. Now he knows how to describe the forest, its yesterday, today and tomorrow.

That same excitement also finds him when a few days later the two of them meet at the State Archeological Museum in Warsaw. The scientist places a flint hand axe in his palm, from a site located dozens of kilometers away. He explains that it's hard to tell how old it is, sixty or eighty thousand years. But there's no doubt of its Neanderthal roots. These were people like us, says the archeologist; today they'd successfully melt into the crowd of *Homo sapiens*. Those tens of thousands of years are much more than a post-glacial region's landscape memory is able to contain. The hand axe is light, it probably weighs as much as a modern phone. And yet the writer's knees buckle under its weight. Especially when he realizes how perfectly the tool fits into his left hand. His fingers easily locate the appropriate grooves, just as if it were a glove made to measure. It doesn't matter if they belonged to a Neanderthal or a human of the species *Homo sapiens*. A flint hand axe older than the forest says: my owner was left-handed.

POETRY

the birth of the gnatte

Owen Good

['oʊwən gʊd]

Owen Good is a translator of Hungarian poetry and prose. Seagull Books published his translations of Krisztina Tóth's short story collection *Pixel*, Zsolt Láng's collection *The Birth of Emma K.*, and most recently Pál Závada's novel *Market Day*. His poetry translations have been published in *The Moth*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, and *The Poetry Review*. He edits at *the Continental Literary Magazine* and *Hungarian Literature Online*.

TRANSLATOR

Kata Győrfi

['kɒtɒ 'ɟøːrfi]

Kata Győrfi is a poet and bilingual playwright from Romania. Her first book of poems, *Te alszol mélyebben* (*You Sleep More Deeply*), was nominated for the György Petri Award and the Péter Horváth Literary Scholarship in Hungary. Her current poems depict a post-apocalyptic natural world. In her dramas, she is interested in loneliness, in people who think of themselves as a mistake in the seemingly perfect system. She studied philosophy, aesthetics and contemporary theatre theory. She is currently represented by Jelenkor Publishers in Hungary.

AUTHOR

I. the gnatte's wings are air-
pools held by invisible-thin
membrane threads, which in the heat
can carry her body for example
while it remains motionless. the lonely gnatte
drifts in the heat, her movements,
a wingbeat, *a tremor*,
beckon closer the feathery male.

the gnatte is thirsty, surrounded
by water after water, surrounded by sap,
she must suck blood, lest her eggs
be conceived only to die of thirst.
nothing could be as nourishing
as the sweet claret water,
as the wild furry mammal's blood.
the thirsty gnatte follows the male.

her invisible-thin wings swim
through the hot air, as from the marsh shore
she hears the wind at a drowned hide.
her bead eyes harden, honing in
on the fragrant hot gut of the turned
animal, she extends her sucker, and
before the male's eager bead eyes: sucks.

her brow is parallel with the hide,
among the strands of hair as if deep
in a forest, in perfect silence,
her breath is steady, her head bobs
slowly. her body is motionless,
clinging fast, cannot
even feel the caress of the male.

with a final jerk of the head she pulls
her sucker from the carcass's hot gut,
spreads wide her invisible-thin wings,
and her body lifts in the wind. the lonely gnatte
drifts in the heat, the dead blood
has swollen her body, and the male's
bead eyes track her in the air.

II. the gnatte is above the dark marsh,
seeking a water surface for her eggs, when
the cold rushes through her body and a shiver
sends a sup of blood to her sucker again.
her thirst has passed, the sweet claret water
has chilled inside her, and now she feels its taste:
the male lured her to a death-fragrant animal.

her head grows stiff, she tries to heave it up
from her middle, her thorax bends double,
her invisible-thin wings
settle softly in its hollow,
she comforts the eggs inside, and hugging
her own body, squeezes in an upward
motion to hurl the carrion-blood.

in the dark night the marsh water
reflects the gnatte's double-bent body
writhing in the air, when in an instant
between two pushes she spits
the risen blood from her sucker,
she moves the water surface
and her bead eyes fix on the ripples.

the time has come: the restless eggs
beg for their release from the body.
the double-bent eggs begot of
fragrant hot death have sucked up
the carrion-blood and demand life.
she settles at the ripples' centre
and lays around her an egg islet.

at one end of the marsh upon
the islet the tired gnatte rests, covering
her eggs with her invisible-thin wings,
and her sucker extended into the water.
the dawn air moves, and as though
she had not borne living dead,
the lonely gnatte drifts in the heat.

III. a tranquil marsh, on its crystal-clear
bottom there bubble springs,
which bring the water filtered
within the mountain, which nourish and pull at
the egg islet begot of carrion-death.
every gnatte flown afield for days now,
only the lustless bead eyes of postmating
dead males watch the unhatched eggs.

the nest of blood-stained eggs
bursts, and invisible-thin dead larvae
wrench their bodies into the water.
their eyes are claret, their feelers are fragile,
their thirst for life is boundless, and they shove
one another aimlessly, as if discovering
where their heads end, their bodies end,
how it is to feel caressed, to feel afraid.

the claret eyes become fixed
on the marsh bottom, on the bubbling
white sands, the mountain sediment
carried by underground springs, rolled
in soft dusty billows by the water.
shedding their blood-nest entirely,
the living-dead larvae hang from the surface
heads towards the springs, and stare at the dust.

there's calm for the first time since they hatched,
not a flicker of movement, slowly they close
their invisible-thin eyelids,
and a larva breaks from the surface. then
a second. one by one
they fall to the white dust, as if dead,
the mountain sediment rolls them like rods,
the water draws them into the soft dusty billows.

the living-dead larvae form pupae on the marsh bottom,
in cases of white stone sediment, their claret eyes
dart in rapid movement, and if they jerked awake,
in stirring: they would molt. the bubbling though
rocks them back to sleep,
caressed and afraid, because to be neither
alive nor dead for a larva begot of carrion-blood
sucked from a hot gut is: cruel.

IV. the claret-eyed undead pupae are light,
the stone sediment caresses into them fear,
bloodthirst, and carrion-memory. they aren't lifeless
but they are motionless, they desire no fare
but they are hungry. the current carries the pupae
and though immersed in water and water,
immersed in sap, only in carrion-blood —
in the blood of hot thirst-killed animals — will they be born.

from the crystal-clear marsh bottom
they can see the surface, the shore, while
the water can instantly sense another's
touch. the pupae tumble towards the white lake
in safety, while inside the cocoon there form
invisible-thin membrane threads, head,
bead eyes, sucker, undying thirst for carrion-blood,
and soon-to-die non-living.

upon arriving at the white lake bottom,
the claret eyes glow in the heat
and lure towards them all living creatures,
for nothing could be as nourishing
as these sweet white waters, for all
will be reborn who never died.
mammals come down from the mountain
thirsty, and gather around the shore.

they stare into the water, straight
through to its bottom crystal-clear,
they stare into the pupae's claret eyes,
and those, in perfect silence, breath steady,
slowly bob. at once the mammal tongues
all touch the water surface,
their eyes swell with blood, and all
are pulled into the white lake's embrace.

the pupa rises to the blood surface,
its case of stone sediment cracks and out pops
the head of the undying gnatte.
its dead claret bead eyes feel the light,
the thorax slips from the cocoon, its legs
balance on the blood surface while
the blood on its invisible-thin wings
dries: *a wingbeat*, *a tremor*.

FICTION

Take Me Skyward in Your Teeth

TRANSLATED BY OWEN GOOD

Attila Veres

['ɒtil:ɒ 'vɛrɛʃ]

Attila Veres is a writer and screenwriter who is a pioneer of Hungarian weird-horror literature. His light, yet suggestive style is a model of sophisticated genre literature. After the publication of his first two volumes, *Odakint sötétebb* (*It's Darker Out There*, 2017) and *Éjféli iskolák* (*Midnight Schools*, 2018), he quickly became popular among Hungarian fans of genre. His anthology of short stories, *The Black Maybe*, was published in English by Valancourt Books in 2022. His second novel, *A valóság helyreállítása* (*The Restoration of Reality*) was published in the same year.

AUTHOR

Each morning at dawn my sisters and I walk the edge of the forest and gather up the things left behind by the tourists. We find valuables often enough. Cell phones. Wallets. Engagement rings. Wristwatches. Occasionally we venture into the clearing, but only if the sun is shining brightly enough to nearly blind us. That's when we come across the truly peculiar items.

I once found a book someone had left in the brush. A bookmark protruded from page 118. Why would someone come to the forest with a book in their hands? What happens if night falls and you're unable to finish it? The book has been in my closet ever since, but I've never read it. It's more a sort of reminder not to leave things unfinished.

My sisters and I live with our father. He says it's impossible to sire otherwise in the forest; only girls. Our mother doesn't live with us. Our house has two stories. In the six guestrooms on the second floor we can comfortably board several families, and the house is nearly always full. Though I live close to nature, it's the din of humanity I know the best.

The forest at dawn is like cold steel. At noon, like a spyglass that lets you see into dreams. At night, there is no forest. At night, there are only teeth.

Where we live is popular. Many people come to us, which is precisely what makes all the garbage they leave behind so maddening. Not just because the garbage defiles the forest, but also because it ruins the experience for the next batch of tourists. Over the years, we have learned that nothing upsets the tourists more than finding trash left behind by their predecessors, and so we gather everything up each morning at dawn. We don't squabble over the valuables. We share the money equally amongst ourselves, because we too are equal.

We find things of greater and lesser value. One morning, for example, we heard crying coming from the bushes. Lying alongside a discarded shopping bag, a cola bottle, and an elegant women's coat, was a baby. It was bawling, its arms practically blue. It had probably spent the night, or at least part of it, outside.

'Why would someone bring a child into the forest?' my older sister asked. I shrugged.

My younger sister stepped over and clasped my waist.

'How do we count it?' she asked. 'Garbage? Or human?'

We looked at the infant. My older sister knelt down beside it. My younger sister nudged my shoulder and pointed toward the base of a nearby tree. A baby stroller lay there, wheels broken, frame splintered.

My older sister lowered herself onto all fours and sniffed the baby. She giggled and buried her nose into the infant's belly. This only made the child wail all the louder.

'Cut it out,' I said.

'Should we bring it home?' asked my younger sister. I shook my head.

'It's not ours. It's not anybody's anymore.'

My older sister lifted the child off the ground. She pressed it to her chest, goo-gooing and gaa-gaaing.

'Still cute though, isn't it?'

All babies look the same as far as I'm concerned, but my sister was now at that age where a person so easily gets sentimental around children. My back itched from heat and boredom. There was still work to be done back home. My sister sensed my impatience without even looking at me. She had picked the child up, so it fell to her to decide what to do with it.

She walked to the edge of the clearing. A light breeze drifted across the space. Rain's on the way, I thought. I could tell from the scent of the earth.

My sister set the child down in the grass, which set off another round of crying. A moment later the crying stopped. My sister returned from the clearing and we continued picking up garbage.

For dinner we made mushroom stew with dumplings and salad. My father, though not a drinker himself, always kept red wine on hand for guests.

Our guests gathered around the table. I never make note of their names. A man was talking with my father and the other

guests. Though not so much talking as orating. They're the worst sort, because they're afraid, and need to steel themselves. I've seen and heard many forms of this steeling, but its essence is always the same.

'We owe this to nature. To try to understand it. To know it. To live it.'

He took another swig of his wine. An unshaven man. He looked the sort to have a big gut, but he didn't. You just had to imagine it.

He spoke eloquently though. Very eloquently.

I live with my sisters, but we do get youngsters coming by. They come and go with their families. No longer children, but not yet adults, or only just so. One look is all I need to know if I can have them. It was no different for the girl sitting at our table, just one look. For my older sister it's only boys. My younger sister isn't sure yet. Either-or for me. When I feel that blunted thunderbolt resounding in my chest, I know that I need this other person, and I know they need me too.

She said her name, but I don't remember it. I don't remember any of their names.

Veronika. Always Veronika, if it's a girl. The boys don't have a name.

The man was still hovering over his glass, rambling on about how we've strayed so far from nature, how the burden weighs so heavily on humanity's shoulders, how much there is to pay back, and how wonderful it is that more and more people are seeking the path back to true, everlasting harmony with nature, when Veronika slipped out of the kitchen. I showed her the way to the room, which stood empty. I opened the door, then closed and locked it behind us.

'So they don't hear us,' Veronika whispered.

'Then don't scream,' I replied, and threw her onto the bed. Veronika made no such promises, and so there was nothing for her to break.

An hour later and we were sitting in the window sharing a cigarette. Veronika caressed my sex, I looked out at the trees.

'I'd give anything to live here with you,' she said. 'I love this house. I love how it smells. I love how each of its walls ripples with muscle.'

I smiled and rolled another cigarette.

'Let's just say I've never thought of it like that.'

'Do you like living here?'

I nodded.

'Could I live here with you?'

I wanted to deflect with some inane joke, but then I saw the sadness which had welled up from within her depths.

'No,' I told her. 'We're the only ones who can live in this house.'

She wiped her eyes.

'We had a house too. Not as beautiful as this. It was in the city. A townhouse. And…'

Her lips trembled. She seized my arm.

'I want to go home. Take me home!'

I kissed her. Her tears were salty. Her saliva bitter with smoke.

'You'll be home soon,' I said.

She laughed amidst her tears.

'Really? You mean it?'

Her hands were shaking.

'Back home, when we talked about coming out here for… for this trip… I was all for it. I told the others, my friends, everyone… that I wanted to. That I wanted to set right the things I'd ruined. That I wanted to become one with nature. To find my way back to the path we'd lost long ago. But now… now I'm afraid.'

I took her hand. It was cold, and clammy with sweat.

'You're so good to me,' Veronika said.

'Like hell I am,' I said. 'I envy you. When are you going? Tonight? Tomorrow?'

'Tonight.'

I clicked my tongue as if I were surprised. As if I didn't know we'd rented their rooms out to someone else arriving tomorrow.

'Tonight, you will be a part of something spectacular.'

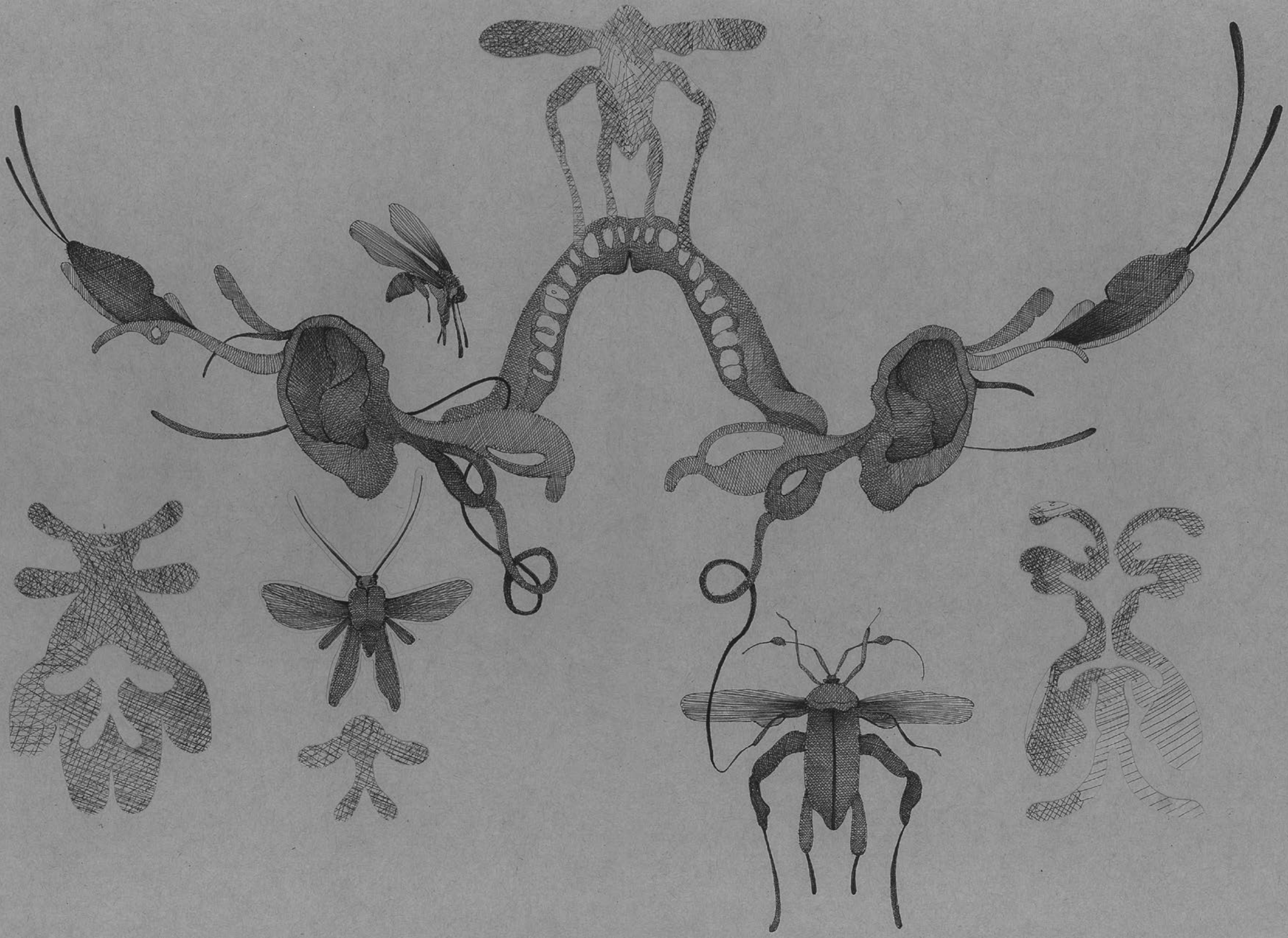
Her eyes widened.

'Really?'

'Really.'

'Like they all say?'

'Even more sublime.'



I don't understand them, I really don't. Why do they come out here for these trips if they haven't convinced themselves beforehand? Why do they want to settle their debts now, while still wanting to live as they did when they were expecting some payout from nature?

'Sometimes I sneak out,' I lied, as if I would ever have to do any sneaking, in this house, in this forest. 'I sneak out with your kind, with tourists, to the clearing. To see what you will see tonight. To experience the peace which will remain forever afterward.'

Veronika's vast, watery eyes widened. They shimmered with a longing for home, but not her home in the city, not the home which had been her nest for so long, but for the clearing, for harmony everlasting. For the lair of nature. This is my primary task in the house, and I revel in it. I am good at it. I shoo away the fears and doubts, I guide the tourists down the proper path. The path of peace, upon which they embark with glad heart. My father dispels the doubts of the heads of family; my little sister the children's. My older sister best speaks the language of the mothers.

We are happy here, and our life is whole.

I blew smoke into Veronika's mouth before kissing it.

'Should we go to the bed?' she asked.

'Here's just as good,' I replied.

All the same, we ended up in the bed. This time she asked me.

'Will you go with me?'

I knew she would ask. I always know.

'Of course,' I said. 'You won't see me, but I'll be there with you.'

I could have lied, but I told her the truth.

The tourists usually start getting ready around ten. Veronika and her family set off at eleven. I slinked after them; more for pleasure than because it was forbidden. I like to pretend that I too am a thing of the forest. A predator that's small enough to also be prey. It's a childish thing, but it brings me joy nonetheless. I've learned how to move as silently as the snow falls. I flit from tree to tree, often using my well-worn paths through the branches to slip in amongst the foliage.

If one of the tourists happens to spot me as I'm clambering along the branches and padding through the underbrush, I go black as velvet. They look at me, but they do not see me, and an exuberant

joy inevitably bubbles up inside of me, a happiness both childish and searing. I show nothing of myself, only the darkness.

It's the same tonight; Veronika spotted me as I skulked among the branches. She looked at me, but she did not see me, even though I caught my own scent on her, and I knew she caught hers on me, despite how thoroughly I'd licked myself clean.

If someone were to see me at night, behind the trees, if they were to cry out to me, say my name, it would be tantamount to a confession of love. Then I would know I had found my other half, and I would not allow them out to the clearing. Maybe this is why I slink along after the tourists so often. Maybe this is what I'm hoping for.

Veronika looked at me, but she did not see me, and that was enough. I waited for her gaze to move on, then continued climbing among the trees.

The tourists wept a great deal that night; but the more they wept, the lighter became their steps, as if with every rolling teardrop, every hitching sob, the burden they were forced to carry grew lighter. This was, after all, precisely what they wanted. To be free of any and all burdens that separate them from nature.

They reached the clearing. How many clearings like this are still out there, I don't know, but ours is featured on Tripadvisor. Our guest house is there too, but not many people leave a review.

The tourists, on reaching the edge of the clearing, sat down and pulled out their thermoses and sandwiches, retied the laces on their blister-inducing hiking boots, and looked uncertainly into the clearing, now made infinite by the night. It sometimes happens that a tourist will perform a ceremony in the clearing – whether religious or some invented new-age pagan nonsense – in the hopes of making their atonement with nature – or their subjugation to it – more successful. It sometimes happens that someone brings a weapon with them. It sometimes happens that they are seized by desire and devolve into orgy.

Veronika's group were vanilla tourists through and through. Their glances into the night were fearful, yes, but full of hope nonetheless.

This is my favorite part. Night after night.

It's just the garbage I don't understand. Why not return to nature the way you arrived? It's inevitably how you're going to leave.

I've read about tourists' views on atonement. Most fantasy depictions feature stags. A soft, golden light which fills the clearing, purging the sorrow which has congealed into petroleum in their hearts.

Veronika turned to face the clearing. The others followed her motion. I knew it had begun. It's the one thing that remains unknown to me. I am deaf to the siren song of the clearing. It's why I'm still alive. This song speaks only to those who would, in the clearing, make their peace with nature.

They are not afraid when they enter. This is when their hearts are filled with wonder, when they are ready to purge themselves of the muck and filth of their cities, to again be one with the living, breathing biosphere.

Nestled among the branches, I sought Veronika with my gaze. I owe her that much, I suppose, in remembrance of the hours we'd spent together.

The night stirred, and only then did the tourists notice, when it was already too late. Even then, they continued to hope. They always do. They are prepared for the miracle; they are prepared for the experience of the miracle to wash away all, themselves included. That it will make them more, better, one with world around them.

And they're right, of course.

You can't tell them apart from one another in the darkness of the clearing. Whether it's this tourist or that, they're all just flesh, bone, and nerves. Nutrients waiting to be digested. Maybe there's a soul nestled somewhere deep down; that too will be feedstuff for nature.

The first tourist doesn't even have time to scream.

They only scream when they see, or maybe when they sense, their first companion has been snatched. Then the second, and the third. This is when the tourists try to escape. They make a mad dash for the trees. Veronika runs too. She always runs. Now I am certain she is not the one.

She tears toward me, her face a mask of horror, and behind her I can finally see the predators. Thousands upon

thousands of teeth, paws unfazed by distance, pure muscle, pure want. The wolves are silent the entire time; only their eyes glint, ecstatic with the joy of carnage.

My mother is there, seething among them. Some of those thousands of teeth are hers. More than wolf; less than human. This is when I feel the love I had for her seeping out of my heart into the blood-soaked night. And I know there is no place for love in my mother's heart. If there were, she'd be dead.

And yet she knows that I'm here. It's why I don't hear the clearing's siren song. It's why I slink invisible among the trees. This too is a sort of love.

I always imagine that it's my mother who gets Veronika. For me. When the vice of teeth clamps down on Veronika's neck, it's clear in her gaze that after a split second of terror, something in her burns out. But she's not dead. No, there is no death in the clearing, as ready as the soul might be to fly from its nest. The gaze now offers naught but a window into an empty room.

Veronika's legs lift from the earth as the wolf surges toward the treetops with its offering. This is when I am closest to them. They race over the crowns of trees, tourists longing for atonement between their teeth, and I smell their fur, reeking of summer and blood and rot and life. If I reached out, maybe I could touch them too, but quickly; so quickly, afraid that if I touch them, they will take me with them, up, up into the sky, to where man and world can at last look on one another in peace, sharing in the gentle song of digestion.

Only when I can barely see them anymore; when the final tourist has left the clearing and is up on high, so very high – only then do the wolves release what they don't need, and down they rain, like a heavy midnight deluge, the phones, bracelets, hiking boots, glasses, smart watches, all for me and my sisters to gather up each morning at dawn.

Money drifts down like snow, and I think about how no one will be the richer for it.

NON-FICTION

Representing Catastrophe

June 2024

Peter Frase

['pi:tər freɪz/]

Writer and journalist, Peter Frase is the author of *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (2016) in which he takes humankind's possible futures into consideration. His book has been translated into several languages and it has become a basic entry point for future research. Being a devoted humanist, he's the member of the Jacobin Magazine's editorial board. He lives in New York.

A U T H O R

1. The Map and the Territory

As I write these words in the summer of 2024, the world is on fire, and humans have set it ablaze. In immediate and visceral terms, as war sweeps from Gaza to Sudan to Congo to Ukraine and beyond. But also, of course, on the more abstract geological scale of climate change. Atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, which was below 320 parts per million as recently as the 1960s, surged past 400 just over ten years ago, and stands at 427 today.

We have been warned, for years, of the consequences of this accumulation, the inevitable result of a constantly growing, fossil-fueled global industrial capitalism. But in recent years, these effects have, if anything, appeared more rapidly than expected. According to a European Union monitor, May 2024 showed the highest global surface temperatures ever recorded for the month–and the same was true of each of the 11 months preceding it.

Within this general environment are many vicious particular effects. In 2022, Antarctica experienced an unprecedented heat wave that drove temperatures up to 40 degrees Celsius in places, while by March 2024, Antarctic sea ice was measured at 20% below its 1991-2020 average. In May of this year, New Delhi recorded its highest ever temperature of 49.9 degrees Celsius, and dozens of people died as a result.

Climate change is an ecological crisis, and an economic and political crisis for the societies that will struggle to deal with it in coming years. But it is also a crisis of *representation*. The scale of what is happening, the disconnection between causes and effects, and the uneven and random nature of climate events, mean that both reporting and fictional narrative struggle to convey it.

In his writings on postmodernism, the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson argues that the postmodern stage of capitalism, characterized by the permeation of the globe by financialized relations of production, is accompanied by a crisis of representation. The very ubiquity of capitalism, paradoxically, makes us unable to think outside of it: "the waning of our sense of history, and more particularly our resistance to globalizing or totalizing concepts like that of the mode of production itself, are a function of precisely that universalization of capitalism". Unlike many postmodern theorists, Jameson did not give up on understanding the capitalist totality, but he proposed the need for new forms of "cognitive mapping", to which we will return below.

The ecosystems of the Earth are, for us, the ultimate boundaries of our totality, the limit within we exist as a species. The crisis we face arises from

the "metabolic rift", to use John Bellamy Foster's term, between that global capitalist system and the equally global ecosystem, and thus all the same problems of representation arise.

The difficulty can be seen among climate scientists themselves, who in some sense are on the "front lines" of the emergency if anyone is. For years, many cautioned against overly alarmist warnings about what was to come, for fear that audiences would dismiss or tune them out. Either soft-pedaling the problem to make it seem more tractable, or emphasizing solutions that would be minimally disruptive to present ways of life, were seen as the prudent course. But as things spin further out of control, and decarbonization targets continue to be missed, some have started to worry that they weren't being alarmist enough.

There's no easy way out of this trap, if we take the problem of representing the totality seriously. But we can examine a few alternatives: a wishful liberal humanism, a ruling class revanchism, and the class project of mapping a sustainable future as a "minor paradise."

2. The False Family of Humankind

In 2022, director Adam McKay, best known for comedies featuring Will Ferrell and the financial-crisis adaptation "The Big Short", released his ambitious climate change allegory, "Don't Look Up." The film, which was not very well received by critics, uses the threat of an asteroid hitting the Earth as a stand-in for the threat of climate catastrophe. Two astronomers try to convince the dysfunctional institutions around them to take the danger seriously, only to by stymied by the myopia and ignorance of our political and economic leaders.

Although it lands some palpable hits on the institutions it skewers, many of the limitations of the film stem from the allegorical device itself. An asteroid impact represents a genuine existential threat to humanity–a big enough impact, if it didn't lead to total human extinction, would at least reduce the species to a tiny pre-modern remnant. And this is the way many liberals would like to present climate change: as something that affects us all, rich and poor, north and south, left and right.

Paradoxically, the existential frame is a form of climate *optimism*, and I would argue it's an unwarranted one. It is an optimism because it looks out at a world that is manifestly unequal, and becoming more so every day, and dreams of a threat

so large that it will force even the world's billionaires, who exert so much control over our politics, to care as much about global parts per million as the people dropping dead in the street from a New Delhi heat wave.

But this neglects both the appeal and the practicability of another approach. In some very politically salient ways, climate change–even if it is accelerating faster than even the scientists anticipated–is not at all like an asteroid impact. The end of humanity, or even of technological civilization, is not what we are likely to see. Nor indeed can we expect the Earth to put capitalism out to pasture all on its own, even if it is the relentless commitment to fossil capital's business as usual that is driving us forward into the crisis.

3. The Dream of Escape

A peculiarity of our present moment is that, faced with an all-consuming—though as noted above, not existential—planetary crisis, some of our leading titans of industry have promoted a different, entirely fictitious type of existential threat to humanity. I refer to the panic over "Artificial General Intelligence", and its alleged threat to humanity, which in recent years has emerged from the sweaty corners of the Internet and Silicon Valley, after the explosion of interest in OpenAI's ChatGPT program and the flood of investment into related generative models for text and image creation.

The loopier fantasies of the so-called "AI doomers" need not concern us, entertaining though they are. In the hands of impresarios like OpenAI's Sam Altman, claims of imminent sentient machines serve as marketing hype for language models that, after having trained on every scrap of text that could be found on the internet, turn out to be little more than predictive-text engines of plagiarism and confabulation. (And, on top of that, monstrous consumers of electricity, the exact opposite of what a decarbonizing world requires.) Altman, it should be noted, was promoting the cryptocurrency scheme Worldcoin before he came to prominence for his AI company, and the current AI bubble should be seen less as a world-historic breakthrough than as a sequel to the crypto bubble, with the same venture capitalists chasing after short term profits.

What's noteworthy about the fantasies of AGI, and of total automation of everything, is that they're of a piece with the ruling elite's fantasies of escape, of walling themselves off from desperate masses as the world continues to boil.

Altman himself is reportedly a survivalist "prepper" who has bragged of his remote bunker supplied with guns and supplies in case of apocalypse. Others, like Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergei Brin, have invested in private islands around the world. Silicon Valley investor Balaji Srinivasan fantasizes about launching a new country on an offshore platform. And Elon Musk, of course, wants to colonize Mars.

One should never underestimate the capacity for delusion among the ultra-rich, but their fantasies contain an unsettling rational kernel. If the rich want to maintain their carbon-intensive lifestyles, it will be at the rest of our expense. It's understandable to fear and hide from the masses when you intend to perpetuate a system that ensures their intensifying misery and your continued comfort.

4. Real Utopia as a Minor Paradise

What the previous two approaches have in common, whether it's the liberal fantasy that we're all in it together, or the ruling class dream of escaping from the global surplus population, is that they are predicated on the power relations that structure our world staying fundamentally the same. A radical approach that challenges this premise is Ajay Chaudhary's recently released *The Exhausted of the Earth: Politics in a Burning World*.

Within the politics of the Left, Chaudhary can be seen as steering a course away from two recurring discourses, commonly referred to as "degrowth" and "eco-modernism." The former emphasizes economic growth as the the thing that needs to be combatted in order to restore climate stability, while the latter places its faith in technological innovation to get us through to a post-carbon future without reducing anyone's material standards of living.

Chaudhary hits the degrowthers for a tendency to moralistic and austere politics, one which offers the masses only a future of "less," and for conflating a general concept of "growth" with the specific form of capitalist growth specific to our era. But he is far more scathing about the ecomodernists, or as he refers to them, "climate Lysenkoists", after the notorious Soviet pseudo-scientist. These are critics who can do no more than place a plus where degrowth places a minus, assuring us all that the future will in fact be "more", *and* it will be green.

What neither pole of this debate fully contends with is the possibility of living a life defined by a different standard of wealth, and a different kind

of luxury. The title of Chaudhary's book refers to "exhaustion" across all scales of planetary life—not just the exhaustion of resources or the environment, but the mental and physical exhaustion of the planetary masses themselves, overworked and under-rested.

Chaudhary, following the sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard, speaks of the "implicatory denial" produced by a fundamental disconnection between the scientific realities of climate change, and the social transformations that would be necessary to act upon these realities in a serious and adequate way. These transformations don't have to entail a romantic, anti-modern turn as in extreme forms of degrowth, but neither will we maintain the status quo through technological magic as in the fantasies of ecomodernism. What is proposed instead is "the minor paradise of the sustainable niche."

What that minor paradise looks like is, by its nature, fragmentary. It is a cognitive mapping of diverse practices in everything from agriculture to housing to family structures, things that exist in the present and that could be reconfigured into a different life. The point, Chaudhary emphasizes, is that we have to get beyond the idea that it is "simply 'more' or 'less' of this life–of 'wealthy' capitalist modernity–that defines the boundaries of the politically possible."

We return once again to the problem of representation, but this time not just because of the scale of the problem under discussion, but because a truly humane, liberatory approach to the exhaustion of the Earth will not follow a single grand narrative. It looks more like the dismantling of the existing grand narrative of capitalist progress, but not to return to some pre-modern arcadia.

Rather than remain trapped in the "more" vs. "less" paradigm that defines growth only in terms of *capitalist* growth–the growth of value, of profits, of share prices–we can talk of growing other things. Most of all, growing the time we all need to recover and rebuild from our exhausted present. The demand for a four day week, which has gained some renewed prominence in the United States and elsewhere, combines the ecological imperative to scale back the relentless production of commodities, and the human need for time outside of work. For as Marx once said, in imagining the post-capitalist future: "the measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time." The choice before us is therefore not between human existence and extinction, but about who will survive, and how. We either fight for disposable time, or risk ending up as disposable people.

FICTION

The Earth Inside Our Hearts

Tímea Sipos

['ti:mɛɒ 'ʃipoʃ]

Timea Sipos is a Hungarian-American author and literary translator with an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and a certificate of translation from the Balassi Institute. Her writing and translations appear in Prairie Schooner, Passages North, and Joyland, among others. Her work has received support from MacDowell, the Steinbeck Fellowship, PEN America, and more. Her poetry chapbook, *The Shapes Our Tongues Make* (Bottlecap Press, 2024), is all about her love for Budapest, Hungary and the Mojave Desert.

TRANSLATOR

Ilka Papp-Zakor

['ilkɒ pɒp 'zɒkor]

Ilka Papp-Zakor lives in Budapest. She is a writer, translator, and doctoral student in the Polish department at ELTE. Her volume *Angyalvacsora* (*Angel Dinner*, 2015) was published by JAK+Prae, and her books *Az utolsó állatkert* (*The Last Zoo*, 2018), *Majd ha fagy* (*When the Frost Comes*, 2021), and *A hasbeszélő visszhangot keres* (*The Ventriloquist Seeks Feedback*, 2024) were published by Kalligram Publishing.

AUTHOR

The Boy rounded the corner to the housing complex from the school. Around him, large copper butterflies with open, red wings, melancholically iridescent. Farther off, a group of Serbian spruces dozed, bathed in green light. On their branches, flying foxes put on their leather wings, well-fed dodos rested by their trunks, blue antelopes and two Siberian tigers shining with dignity drifted off to sleep beside one another.

The Boy had to wade through spotted, striped, clawed and shady, fragile, spongey, grainy, crystalline dreams. In their dreams, the trees snuck over to each other and grabbed hold of the other; the whitebeam tree crept on tiptoe behind the three-toothed orchid. The Cyprus cedar dreamt it was needle grass while the wild calla dreamt it was a star that became a comet. The animals dreamt of meadows with swaying grass, overripe fruits, nectar dripping down the chin, lurking behind cliffs, tense muscles, and hot, salty scents. The Boy saw these, too, as they floated, all lit up, around the sleeping beings. In the web of fungus-dreams, like on nerve fibers, information blinked as it circulated.

In space, every species continued what it had been doing at the time of The Big Bye. Most beings had nothing better to do than steal sunlight while the people worked, played, or rested beside their families. Because the people were awake during the day, only one or two old folks taking a siesta floated before the Boy in their armchairs, with their heads hanging forward, arms dangling by their sides, clunky house slippers on their feet. They dreamt of languages long dead, sometimes more than one at once; mixed-up dictionaries; tangled sentences that painted a labyrinth of various worlds; a motley of loose phrases; intelligent sentences that fell apart from unintelligible words; phrases that clattered on the floorboards, rolling like glass orbs into the corners, becoming an obstacle for those walking by.

There was no need for other languages in space, because there were no countries or ethnicities, and the names *drosophila lanaiensis, ninox albifacies, nesiota elliptica, coregonus nigripinnis* and *loxodonta africana* were untranslatable anyway.

The dreams murmured and rustled with a soft hum behind the Boy, and, just like in dreams, they glowed neon (neon yellow, neon green, neon blue, neon purple). The air had a sweet-sour-spicy smell to it.

Nearing the housing complex, the pedestrians along the road multiplied too. Startled, blinking children clutched their parents' hands, groups

of giggling young people walked to and fro, and officials in suits raced beside the Boy on their jet-powered bicycles. The locals chatted on the haphazardly placed benches. The other old folks toddled clumsily in the nothingness while their house slippers repeatedly slid off their feet from the weightlessness – they headed toward the supermarket, or a recently opened exhibit. Some of them had a globe: an old woman, for instance, held a crone-tank in her right hand, with an azure-blue globe shining under her left armpit as she hovered above the sidewalk.

The Boy's Grandpa Cube always got mad at this – people holding globes – because he didn't agree with keeping memory alive in this way. "The fact that we take the globe for a walk won't bring it back to life. Carrying it with us at all times makes our relationship to it more mechanical, and thereby becomes a tool with which to forget; even though we try to convince ourselves that we're just simply airing it, there's no atmosphere in space, so the globe can't be aired out." According to Grandpa Cube, the locals were entirely selfish as far as the planet was concerned.

The Boy gave Grandpa Cube his name because of the shape of his slippers. All four of his grandparents came from *there*, and they all had two things in common: these distorted, completely fur-lined shoes that most resembled clogs, because the old folks could not adjust to the cold *here*, so they were sure to have their feet, around which a green halo glowed, always well-wrapped – and the same went for their globes, which they all received during Departure. For this reason, the globes and the slippers differed from person to person.

Grandpa Cube's globe recorded the period just before The Big Bye: it was gray, yellow, and blue-black. It stood in the living room on a shelf on its drooping support rod in the company of a fading wallet, a tie that hadn't been worn in years, and a remote control that Grandpa used to turn on the TV floating in the living room to watch the entirely uninteresting news broadcasted long ago. Grandpa Cube never brought up the Earth on his own, and even when asked nicely, he didn't like to discuss it much, got nervous, cleared his throat, and tried to change the topic unnoticed. But this was not possible because, like the locals, he was always secretly thinking of the Earth, and this was evident in every one of his sentences.

Grandpa Striped on the other hand, always, loudly and assertively, spoke of the years spent *there*, without being asked. His own globe was locked

away in a cupboard, but Grandma Pink's always stood at his disposal on the coffee table, on the lace tablecloth, as decoration. Grandpa Striped used this one to show the large, green land masses, the forests, the mountains, the jungles, and the blue ocean, the lakes, the many, many snaking rivers, while he said things to Grandma Pink like: "The kids these days don't even know what fishing is. They dunno how to bake a trout," and sneezed loudly from the stardust.

His globe, which the Boy had only ever looked at once, was even bluer than Grandma's, with one overgrown green spot.

"See how big we were?" said Grandpa. "This was all one continent. We called it Pangea."

Finally, there was Grandma Dotty, Grandpa Cube's ex-wife, whose globe was as yellow and gray as Grandpa Cube's, since it showed Grandma's childhood as she most liked to remember it. This globe stood in a glass cabinet amongst highly valued knick-knacks. Because these were what Grandma brought from *there*, a suitcase full of little porcelain statues that had been handed down to her grandmother from her great-grandmother and to her great-grandmother from her great-great-grandmother. The statues represented jobs there was no need to do in space: pastor girls, chimneysweeps, ballerinas (because what would be the point of dancing as if floating in space, for instance?), and exotic animals that must've stayed on Earth at the time of Departure: something called a cat, frozen into porcelain; a lamb with a red bow and a bell around its neck; and a furry mut with bangs covering its eyes and a lame back leg.

The Boy was on his way to this grandmother of his. He turned to her because, a number of times, the schoolteacher assigned her favorite topic with minimal change: bother those you know who were born *there* with all kinds of ridiculous questions, draw all kinds of conclusions from their responses, and be sure to act as though this were a deep interview. As if depth had more of a role in space than, say, ballerinas.

Grandma Dotty's house floated among sleeping rose bushes. Grandma glowed phosphorescent in an armchair in the living room. She did not sleep, she merely rested lazily, and, upon seeing her guest, her face stretched into a wide, mocking smile.

"Don't even tell me," she nodded. The mockery, naturally, was not directed toward her grandson, only the wide smile. She rose diligently, bobbed toward the Boy and smooched the crown of light around his head.

"What does the faculty want to know this time?"

"What it was like when you divorced Grandpa," claimed the Boy, while Grandma kept on smiling, because she was still on very good terms with Grandpa, and she merely looked at the divorce as part of their shared history. She bobbed out to the kitchen and made a hot cocoa for them before starting.

Then the Boy laid down on the rug, or rather, floated one finger-length above the rug, settled his mug before him, opened his notebook, and waited for his grandma to take the feather duster out of the bottom drawer. A part of their mutual routine was that she would dust the knick-knacks while telling him stories. They both knew that this was a radically useless task, that there was no winning the war against stardust, as the little statues would turn gray again within a day's time, were soon blackened by the debris that bypassed the glass wall of the display case, and within two days even the rougher outlines would disappear. But the tasks helped Granny gather her thoughts; and the globe—which is where she always landed—worked to catalyze her memory.

Thus, Grandma Dotty opened the sliding glass door of the display case, grabbed the duster, and began an old story she'd told a thousand times about the day that she and Grandpa decided that despite their mutual attachment, habitual relationship, or how much they valued the other, their presence in each other's lives had become burdensome, even destructive, so they found it better to let each other go – and about how they both came back to life as a result, while of course they were both saddened by the separation, since relief and grief are not mutually exclusive. Granny usually explained all this in much more detail, fully animated but at once with a healthy distance, and she always ensured that the Boy would understand the lesson of the story.

But that day an unexpected event interrupted the story. The constant buzzing heard in the background, which emanated from

the surrounding dreams, suddenly ceased, which could only mean one thing: that the dreamers had woken up. And only one thing could wake them: rain.

Granny grabbed the globe and she and the Boy ran out to the yard. The space dwellers never missed a single rainstorm, whether they were born *here* or *there*.

The cause of the rains was unknown, but every sign pointed to the fact that they had followed those born *there* here, but exactly how was unclear. They occurred once or twice a year, and then, it would pour with a mighty, relentless force, like now, from every direction, since there was no sky in space, nor ground; not above, nor below. The space dwellers loved these big, black water droplets, loved the many little explosions with which the droplets splashed onto their skin, and especially loved the rainbows that blossomed to life all around after the rain, entangling each other, a rainbow network.

Granny's rosebushes stretched. The ginko bilboas growing above their heads straightened up. The dodos and the moas shook their feathers, the Tasmanian wolves splashed around as they chased one another, and a Tiger shark swam happily, nearly prancing, before the Boy. The Boy floated in place, unmoving, enjoying the water splashing on him from every which way. He kept his shoes and socks off, so that the water droplets could tickle the soles of his feet. His grandma didn't move either, plopped down, rocked back and forth, as her grass-green halo of light waved underneath the rain's blows. She held the globe with her two arms raised high above her head, so that it too could get soaked. A white-tailed stick-nest rat flew above her head, bent down, and curiously sniffed the dry, gray earth resting atop the globe's surface.

The rain drew more and more blinking figures out of the neighboring homes. The older ones came out with their globes, moving their azure-blue, gray-blue, and brownish-yellow orbs before them, so that the rain could reach them. Washing the globes with the rain was such an important tradition that even Grandpa Cube followed it.

Then, about as long as it takes to stir two hot cocoas and dust an army of knick-knacks, the storm came to an end, the rainbows dispersed, and Granny went back inside with the Boy to pick up where they'd left off.

After rain, a strange and complicated sadness ruled over the old folks. The Boy was familiar with this sadness, and liked it to some extent, since it belonged to the way of that old world, so he wasn't surprised when Granny placed the Earth back on its crooked support rod, straightened up the knick-knacks around it with slow, careful movements, then pointed to a small point in the grayness: "See, darling, I was born right here." Then another: "And your grandfather was born here." Then, finally, to a third: "This is where we met and married. We bought a tiny little apartment. If you only knew how much we loved living there!"

The Boy, of course, knew, since this wasn't the first time this had come up.

"We renovated it with our own hands and made it just like a fairytale. Back then, we didn't need to work much, so we always had time for each other and our home. Your grandfather gardened. There was a potted geranium on the balcony, which stayed in bloom all summer and winter long."

Geranium was considered an abstraction, but the Boy jotted it down anyway. Difficult words looked good on his homework.

"Look at that red dot. That's where the balcony was. I drew it there. Do you see it?"

The Boy strained his eyes, but to no avail. In front of him on the shelf, the knick-knack dog stared at the globe, in fact, not only him, but all the now-useless porcelain beings fixed their gaze as one being on the Earth in an attempt to discover the red dot in bloom all year long. The Earth hung on its crooked axis, blind and lame.

"Back in our day," Grandma shrugged her shoulders pensively, "they told everyone: there's too many of us, don't have children, it harms the biodiversity if one species overpopulates. But your grandfather and I wanted to lead a normal life. We didn't believe in biodiversity, we didn't see the point, since every life is itself its own world, don't you think? We wanted to make life, and the events justified us in the end," she fixed the order of the chimney sweep brushes, "because, you see, all of us who are here each have a way of keeping the Earth alive in our hearts in our own unique way. And if this is not diversity, then what is?" she caressed the duster along the wide, open eyes of the knick-knacks.

TRANSLATED BY OWEN GOOD

POETRY

Forbidden Forestry

Ferenc ANDRÉ

['fɛrɛnt͡s 'ɒndre:]

André Ferenc is a poet, slammer, translator, and editor of the poetry section in the Hungarian speaking journal *Látó*. He has performed and organized more than 200 literary and slam events in several countries in Romanian, Hungarian, and English. He is also actively involved in talent development. He has won several literary awards, and his new book, *Kaddis Radnóti Miklósért* (*Kaddish for* Miklós *Radnóti*), will be published in 2025.

AUTHOR

one troubled morning in march
spring stormed into the nursery
and barked my saplings all of you
are doomed to fail because forests
no longer yield any profit your field
has long been dying out there will be
no more pruning done by gardeners
in silken gloves tenderly squeezing
at secateurs for coming this way are
the machines the robots the callous
botanists of artificial intelligence
with zero capacity for compassion for
what you feel how the cellulose throbs
in you the bast bends and the fibre squeaks
naught not a nanobyte my leafy angels
they are coming and their metal jaws
will gnash up your every budding
hope as easily as aphids

they will raze you and ravage
from your bark the trace of a bear
who once used that spot as a rubbing
place the love from the initials once
engraved there with a cheap penknife
will scour nests from your crowns
like plaque then chop you up
and lay you in a log pile for ever after
because they have no need for you
none at all my gaggle of little groves
a sweeping order has nullified every
conifer conker treebeard swingathon
bog-barrow race and every suckering
acacia my angels the mechanical men
are coming and you will be rubbed out

no more nursery its site
will be donated to the empire's foundations
and by the laws of robotics all of you
will cease to exist independently spelling the end
of swaying the end of standing
because the department for deforestation
will be planted here admissions have begun
of the greased logger hands that will soon strike
order among you root out your roots
leave clearings in your stead
tundras deserts moss

no more seasonal changes spring
too will face the axe with immediate effect
there will be a wet season and a dry season
if there are any at all if a candidate
can be found for the post thank you
my forests we had a good run
long and prosperous thank you
for sticking with us but
the school year is over and summer
slouches towards you on chain tracks
my leafy angels

NON-FICTION

Eras and Dilemmas in Ecocriticism

Robert Smid

['ro:bɛrt 'ʃmid]

Robert Smid is an assistant professor at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest. His research interests include psychoanalytic theory, the philosophy of technological media, cartographic cultural techniques in literature, the figurations of monsters in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, and ecocriticism. His first book *Paper Machines of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan: The Inherent Media-Archaeological Discourse of Psychoanalysis* was published in Hungarian in 2019. His second book *Dilemmas in Ecocriticism: Genealogies of Contemporary Ecological Thought at the Discursive Intersections of Literature and Technology* came out in Hungarian in 2023. He is currently researching island topoi in English- and Spanish-language literatures.

A U T H O R

The term "ecocriticism" was coined by William Rueckert in 1978, but it did not become widely used until the 1990s. Originally, Rueckert did not discuss works of literature that depicted nature, but rather suggested ways of applying the terminology and approaches of ecology as a discipline to literary criticism. Almost two decades later, ecocriticism became a viable alternative to the study of "nature writing," a genre that has its roots in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), for scholars who were interested in the representation of nature in literature.

The first wave of ecocriticism as a new subdiscipline of literary studies was characterized by heated debates in English and American academia in the 90s. The two groups involved in the debate had radically different views on how ecocriticism should be practiced and what its main focuses should be. One group suggested that instead of a coherent theoretical and methodological framework, the practitioners of ecocriticism should be united by a common ideological goal, namely environmentalism. The other group, however, insisted on developing a mode of interpretation characteristic of the literary school of New Criticism: close reading. They argued for a focus on the poetics and rhetoric of a text, fearing that ecocriticism would become a victim of political turmoil. However, both trends in the first wave of ecocriticism based their respective frames of reference on the hypothesis that nature, as the object of their interpretation, can be considered as a delimited space, both empirically and textually, inhabited by authors and readers. In this sense, nature in the act of reading is not simply represented as a cultural topos, as a cultivated space, but literary reception is also influenced by forces of nature. As Herbert F. Tucker argued in his editorial for the journal *New Literary History* (vol. 30, no. 3), nature makes possible the act of reading—by providing not just topics, but light and air too, for example, but it also survives authors and readers.

After the turn of the millennium, what might be considered the second wave of ecocriticism no longer accepted the axioms of the first wave. They argued that nature did not always prevail, since we could read about species that had become extinct since the time of writing, such as the Javan tiger in Indonesian folk tales. Therefore, the second wave began to problematize the overall concept of nature as well as the different types of referential relationships between the literary text and the environment. Finally, ecocriticism was freed from its bucolic illusions by realizing that if we had mistaken nature for something idyllic, then technology, which has traditionally been organized in a binary opposition to nature, should not always be schematized as evil, harmful, impure, and so on.

The publication of the book *Ecology without Nature* by Timothy Morton in 2007 marked the culmination of the second wave. Morton argued that ecocriticism would be better off without nature as a concept inherited from Romanticism, and that it should undergo a serious critical reevaluation. He began his own examination by distinguishing between instances of nature in modern literature. Sometimes nature is nothing more than a fictional (re) construction of a particular space in the interpretation of literary texts. Then there are cases in which nature is omitted from the text, so that nature is presented as something that cannot be represented, often signified by apophasis, the trope of "mentioning by not mentioning," or litotes, in such descriptions that emphasize, for example, that there are no birds, no bushes, etc. The latter can be associated with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which is considered an eminent work of eco-fiction, in which the absence of nature is manifested by the absence of sounds. In contemporary Hungarian literature, the novel *The Birds of Verhovina* by Adam Bodor rewrites this motif, presenting Verhovina as a zone affected by ecological catastrophes through the banishment of birds. Finally, nature is often embodied as a force of resistance to representation that makes the text reflect on its own unnaturalness, while nature as we know it is still constituted as something based on a text that is an unnatural replica of nature: the copy comes before the original, so—like in the Nine Inch Nails song: "*Copy of a*", it turns out to be a copy of a copy.

What is happening today can be called the third wave of ecocriticism: building on Morton's take on the problematic presence of nature in literary texts, it articulates a critique of the foundations of ecocriticism. The third wave reflects on the two main directions that research has taken in recent decades: one focused on the transactions between nature and culture, the other examined constructions of nature in a historicist manner. Both approaches, however, were interested in the question of why different cultures at different times have regarded nature as a source of ethical norms for society. The third wave's examination of this question led to the realization that contemporary neo-Darwinian and neo-liberal thought pit the theories of biological and economic optimization against each other, rewriting the common roots of economics and ecology in terms of logistics, order, and prediction. This is why the struggle for survival, for the acquisition and accumulation of natural resources, etc. has become a dominant figure in today's ecological discourse. And in a parallel way, when the evolutionary

struggle in nature and the war against nature—through pollution, deforestation, etc.—were recognized as parts of the same ecosystem, the economization of ecology occurred. This is characteristic of what I call "white ecology," a way of thinking that dominates our ecological consciousness today.

I distinguish between ecological consciousness and modes of being ecological. On the one hand, ecological consciousness is linked to the act of forgetting about the genealogy of ecological thought and that all the distinctions and identifications that we think by are already products of metaphorical transactions and transfers. Therefore, by ecological consciousness, I mean a network of discourses that govern our thinking about environmental issues and provide us with discursive patterns for their interpretation, which almost always omit historical analysis. On the other hand, I propose being ecological not as a critical stance that is in a dichotomous relationship with ecological consciousness, but as a kind of adaptation, a set of practices that do not necessarily aim at equilibrium—which would mean imitating the supposed equilibrium in nature—but at maintaining agencies in interactions. Being ecological can be in opposition to ecological consciousness, but it can also enhance it, operate independently of it, or even overlap with it.

When the two overlap, it suggests that it is time for ecocriticism to face the end of an illusion: the goal of ecocriticism can no longer be the examination of (disciplinarily, historically) neatly separated concepts and representations of nature, or the search for solutions to our ecological crises in literature. Not only because a tool for measuring ecological effectiveness is a product of the social imaginary, but also because ecological thinking should begin to reflect on its own historically specific conditions. For example, how ecocriticism became obsessed with measuring ecological effectiveness in the first place—and its consequence, ecocriticism's firm belief in the positive consequences of literary interpretation for the cause of environmentalism. Ecocriticism's ambition to actively participate in our struggle for survival in the midst of ecological crises has unfortunately led it to adopt a quantitative method from the sciences, which has resulted in the economization of ecology: a utilitarian view of nature on the one hand, and on the other, the production of delimiting concepts based on this view.

This can be seen as the main source of the major dilemmas in ecocriticism, such as: Can national parks that have clear boundaries be considered nature/natural? Where does nature end between two towns? Are islands

insular if they are ecologically, economically, etc. connected to the mainland? The other source of problems is to forget the genealogy of ecological thought as far as ecocriticism is concerned, that is, to overlook the various transfers that have served as the basis for separations and identifications, especially the double bind between modern life sciences and literary criticism. The former used language and text as metaphors when talking about the "genetic code" or the "book of life", while the latter held that the network of rhetorical devices and poetic figures in a text possessed an ecology of its own. As Timothy Morton noted back in the 2000s, if we zoom in on life forms and see text, then text itself has already become a "dead metaphor"—whose metaphorical nature is no longer noticeable—because of the fluent transfers between biological and textual compositions that smooth out the difference between how a thing exists in an environment (in nature) and in the text. Consequently, we overlook the actual lack of convergence between biological and textual processes, despite the fact that it was us who proposed their identification through metaphorical correlation.

The work of ecocriticism today is to examine the limits of ecological consciousness in every sense of the word: whether they are limits imposed on our thinking about environmental processes, or the inscription of limits in terms of conceptual thresholds, such as those between human and animal, life and death, or literal ones, such as the borders of an island, the fence of a garden that separates the cultivated from the wild. As I have suggested, the white ecology that dominates our contemporary ecological consciousness is an obstacle to thinking about the ways in which processes can overlap; to seeing how the drawing of one boundary simultaneously suspends another. For white ecology privileges certain terms, such as "extinction," "warming," "globality," "equilibrium," "future," while it delimits the use of others, such as "nature," "nonhuman agency," "dehierarchization," "apocalypse," or omits them altogether, such as "sovereignty," "logistics," "scaling," in ecological discourse. Not surprisingly, the means of "scale critique" proposed by Derek Woods has not been unanimously accepted in the humanities, but it could solve many of the dilemmas of ecocriticism concerning the relationship between the local and the global, especially the connection between weather and climate.

Instead, we chose to have an obsessive fixation on the end of the world, about which Eva Horn in her monograph *The Future as Catastrophe* concluded that humanity had developed a desire to see what it would leave

behind—hence the popularity of (post)apocalyptic fiction, which is at once frightening and fascinating as a kind of dark sublime. Jacques Derrida, in his "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy ", already warned us of the consequences of such a disposition when he observed that the voice of the oracle has a paradoxical, delirious effect: it simultaneously supports fear and gives way to skepticism. And when the discourse of white ecology is articulated in the voice of the oracle, for example, in the case of the public dissemination of scientific results that are supposed to raise the alarm about an almost inevitable catastrophe, we tend to forget that making everything calculable does not necessarily imply a perfect convergence between results and reality, scenario and event, and so on. This is how white ecology works, when the relevant models are (mis)taken for the phenomenon being modeled: if such a correlation is posited, then we can rightly assume that the processes that played out in a certain way in the simulation will also play out in the same way in reality. However, as Herman Kahn already pointed out in the 60s, the scenarios and theories of those charged with risk management and crisis prevention are merely a synthesis of analogies and metaphors. Moreover, success is measured by the feedback loop between the theoretical framework and what appears rationalwithin a framework already purified of discrepancies and contradictions.

Absolute exactness can only be achieved by distilling the conceptual framework so that we can more easily make identifications or construct dichotomies. Instead of the fuzzy logic and uncertainty that usually leads to a state of despair, calculations, however bleak the result they may produce about the end of all things, still have a soothing effect and satisfy our desire to foresee the end and have a factual vision of how we might come to perish. Asking questions about our sovereignty, let alone imagining the sovereignty of nature as Michel Serres or Bruno Latour did, would diminish the absolutist tone of the oracle that is so pertinent to white ecology. Similarly, although posthumanism has recently become one of the leading academic trends in cultural studies, another of the main dilemmas of ecocriticism is that it ultimately associates responsibility with human agency: one of the leading conceptualizations of the Anthropocene in the humanities has established the subtle connection between us causing the destruction of the planet and the hope that we can still do something about it—we can only *hope* that this is the case.

INTERVIEW

Everything We Do, We Do Inside This Ocean of Air

Interview by Róbert Smid

Eva Horn

['e:va hɔrn]

Eva Horn is a professor of Modern German literature at the University of Vienna, and the founder of the Vienna Anthropocene Network. She studied philosophy, German and French literature in Bielefeld, Konstanz, Paris, and has since taught in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the US and Taiwan. She has published on espionage and political secrecy (*The Secret War*), disaster fiction (*The Future as Catastrophe*), the Anthropocene (together with Hannes Bergthaller: *The Anthropocene*), and, most recently, on the cultural history of climate (*Klima: Eine Wahrnehmungsgeschichte*).

A U T H O R

While we frequently use climate as a metaphor when discussing the political climate of a country or the atmosphere at a meeting, even the most comprehensive research into social practices and cultural techniques tend to ignore the basic context in which they come to life and develop: climate. In her recent monograph on the cultural history of climate, Prof. Eva Horn argues that we have much to recollect from our climatic intelligence; the first step of this process can be getting acquainted with the history of climate as an influence on cultures.

When someone looks up your list of publications, they can see that you wrote your dissertation on the Age of Goethe, then you moved on to media studies, you knew Friedrich Kittler, the father of so-called German Media Theory, in his prime. Your current field of research is environmental humanities: you published *The Future as Catastrophe* in 2018, and your book on climate is coming out this year. Would you consider your overall arc in research as organic?

For me it is. I have always had a broad curiosity, and I have a deep personal relation to each of my research topics. Even though they may not look connected, very often one led to the next. Sometimes I think that I am done with one subject and then another aspect of it emerges and gives birth to an entirely new project. Maybe one thing that links all my work is that I have often looked at somewhat topical subjects, things that affected me personally or that marked a specific historical moment – sometimes in the past, sometimes in the present. I use literature as a lens to take a deeper look at them. For example, my first book, dealing with texts from the so-called *Goethezeit*, was about mourning and a historical shift in our relation to the dead that was happening around 1800. Mourning is a very personal subject, but at the same time I saw it as a human affect that has a cultural history. Yet, for seeing things from the "inside," i.e. from the mourner's position with all its contradictions and ambivalences, literature is a fantastic medium, because it connects cultural symbols to very individual poetic forms and tropes. I see literature as a "prism" for looking at life, at society, culture, history, and even very dark and impenetrable things, such as mourning. This darkness also very much marked my second book. Initially I wanted to write about the First World War, but after a few articles I wrote I found it depressing and boring. By chance, I discovered a different aspect, the "secret war," i.e. the war behind the frontlines: treason, espionage, political secrecy, betrayal. So, I decided to write on the epistemology of intelligence in the long twentieth century. This project, *The Secret War: Betrayal, Espionage and Modern Fiction*, was written after 9/11 and during the so-called "war on terror." It very much reflects an era when political paranoia reigned. However, my book was a way to historicize this paranoia. It is a historical look from the First World War all the way through the Cold War and the McCarthy era to the wake of 9/11 and its obsession with secret terror networks or swarm warfare.

I published it in 2007, and then, only nine months later, the financial crisis hit in 2008. This was traumatic. Personally, I felt that we can't really plan for our future anymore. Why save for your old age if a lifetime's savings can be lost within days on the stock market? I started thinking about our relationship to the future and felt that it was changing radically. We are losing the idea that we can plan our future or provide against certain dangers. The idea that we shape our future was one of the foundational elements of the modern age. Now it is crumbling.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Aleida Assmann and other scholars in literary and cultural studies stated that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, our relationship with time has fundamentally changed. We can no longer see the future as an open horizon of possibilities, but rather see it as a threat.

Yes, the future has become volatile and unmanageable. This led to my book *The Future as Catastrophe,* about the history of disaster imagination and the paradoxes of prevention. Of course, it had to have a chapter on climate change. But after writing this chapter, I wondered: what is "climate" as such? I noticed that everybody was talking about climate *change*, but nobody had a clear idea of what climate is and has been for thousands of years. How did historical cultures conceive of the "climate" they were living in? How did they see weather and atmosphere? The standard definition, "climate is average weather," didn't satisfy me. What was climate *before* modern meteorology? Before we connected it with weather? The answer to this question is long, almost 600 pages, and has just been published as *Klima: Eine Wahrnehmungsgeschichte (Climate: A History of Perception*) this October. It is a book on climate, not just on *climate change*, but of course, including it. It aims at a bigger picture of what climate meant for people, for their bodies, moods and forms of life throughout occidental history; from Antiquity to, say, Bruno Latour.

Your approach is similar to what is labelled in German academia as the poetics of knowledge, considering your belief that literature can be a medium reflecting historical practices, attitudes, anxieties, and forms of knowledge, be it scientific or otherwise. When eco-criticism became a discipline in its own right in the late eighties and early nineties, there was a clash between academics. One group proposed the close-reading of texts, the other, that in order to practice eco-criticism you have to have a special bond with nature. I remember that you told me that in your twenties you spent a few months in Spain grooming horses. So, do you need to love nature to get into environmental humanities?

I think that's a misunderstanding. Eco-criticism has nothing to do with a closeness to or distance from "nature" – if you want to call grooming horses engaging with "nature." Eco-criticism is a reflection on the ways we approach nature. Nature writing may be a form of literature that seeks immersion in nature. But reading texts "ecologically" has nothing to do with it. I love "nature," even though I am very much a city person. I grew up in the countryside, and I can milk a cow (if it is patient enough), and ride a horse, clean a stable, or walk for miles through a tropical rainforest, as I did this summer. In fact, what gave me the incentive to write the climate book was my experience with extreme climates and landscapes. The first time I arrived in Singapore, the tropical heat literally brought me to my knees. It was thirty-three degrees Celsius, eighty percent humidity, and my body went into shutdown, I could not eat, and hardly be outside. However, as I kept returning to Southeast Asia year after year, I got acclimatized – and I learned how to behave in the tropical climate. Today, when I step out of the airport into the open air with all its fragrances ranging from spices, food, cut grass to humid soil, frying oil or mold, I am just in heaven. It feels like home, I notice the smells, the winds, the feel of the warm, moist air on my skin. But the experience of "extreme" climates, be it tropical heat or a New York winter blizzard, made me realize and think about the massive effect of climate – or more generally, of "atmospheres" – on the human body and mind. We cannot think of cultures or cultural techniques outside of their specific climates and landscapes.

This is when I started to be interested in climate – not climate change or *The Day After Tomorrow* type of disasters – but really "climate" as such, as an important and pervasive element of the environment. What does the air do to human bodies and souls, to a culture, its habits, and ways of life? How does architecture, food, clothing or urban planning, but also certain practices (like the famous *siesta*) or holidays (like the cherry blossom holiday in Japan) help people to live with their climate, give it meaning? A lot of vernacular architecture in Asia has found brilliant ways to cool the house through ventilation, water and the use of cooling materials such as marble or tiles – without the use of energy intense air-conditioning.

In an indigenous house in Sumba, a grass-thatched hut on stilts, I noticed a fire burning in the middle of the room. When I stayed for a while, I understood why. The fire creates an airflow, so the hot air goes up and sucks in cooler air. So you have shade but also a constant, comforting airflow. These forms of climate intelligence fascinate me. Europe also has a long tradition of climate intelligence, but nowadays, in the age of central heating, heavy insulation, and air-conditioners, we can only find traces of it. So, my starting point in environmental humanities was not "loving nature", but rather the experience of being totally overwhelmed.

But I would not call my work "eco-criticism". It's a cultural history or a history of perception. It is this history of perception and knowledge that I discern in the works of literature or art. A term that is central to my last book is "perception" or "aesthesis." This is neither eco-criticism nor a "poetics of knowledge." What I call *aesthesis* is a form of rich perception, a perception with all the senses, vision, smell, touch, taste, hearing, and even the use of imagination – a perception that can be conveyed, and even trained, through art. My book is on the "aesthesis of the air" or of atmospheres – a sensitivity for the atmospheric qualities around us. I wouldn't call these atmospheres "environment" because the word means something that is separated from the body and the soul, environing, but different. Yet, the air *enters* living beings, it's not just an outside. Eighteenth and nineteenth century doctors, poets and patients firmly believed in the profound "effects of air on human bodies," as John Arbuthnot, a literary critic and medical doctor, had it. Meteorological medicine, as it was called, is concerned with the ways in which winds, certain weather conditions, temperature or "miasma" in the air could bring disease, ranging from physical illness to epidemics or nervous breakdowns. A classical case in point is Friedrich Nietzsche. He was constantly travelling between the high Alps in the Engadin and the Côte d'Azur looking for a healthy climate. He once remarked that he felt like a human barometer. – Today, we have totally desensitized our bodies and souls from weather conditions. "There is no bad weather, just the wrong gear," as the adage goes. We long for "thermo-neutrality," a state in which we neither feel cold nor warm. We want to feel nothing, and keep atmospheres and the turbulences they could bring at bay. This is why we depend so much on heating, insulation, air conditioning, outdoor gear, etc. But the enormous sensitivity of past times and cultures fascinates me profoundly. What if, instead of staying inside in climate-controlled rooms, we expose ourselves anew to the elements and their effects? What if we, in times of changing climates, try to attune to the states of the atmosphere instead of discarding them into the background of our attention?

In your book, you mention climate theory – the idea that climate influences cultures and mentalities – and the stereotypes it produced. This type of theory of the climate was popularized by the Enlightenment, and still persists today when we think of people from Scandinavia as hard-working but distant because of the cold weather they have, whereas we regard people from the Balkans as laid-back and passionate due to the semi-tropical climate they live in.

The stereotypes you mention have a much longer history, you can already find them in antiquity, in Hippocrates, Aristotle, Herodotus, or ancient geography. Essentially, they deal with the question of cultural differences: peoples are different because they live in different landscapes, temperatures, and other environmental conditions. This is the central idea of climate theory. These stereotypes will often sound jingoistic, but in fact climate theory primarily suggests that cultures are very much in tune with their location. The idea is an underlying harmony between social and natural living conditions. That's why climate theory is part of most political theories until the end of the eighteenth century. The most famous example is certainly Montesquieu. In his famous treatise *The Spirit of the Laws* of 1748 he includes chapters on the relation between climate, geopolitical location, resources, trade etc. and social institutions, such as the legal system, the government, the structure of families etc. in his theory of an Enlightened government. In the modern age, he therefore became infamous as a "climate determinist." But despite Montesquieu's relatively crude idea of the human body, I read these chapters as a form of thinking about the relationship between social institutions or policies and the natural environment they are located in. Thinking about the relation between political institutions and the natural environments goes against a universalist strain of political thought. The latter presumes that all humans and life forms are essentially the same, no matter where they are located on the planet. For example, Hobbes in his *Leviathan* thinks of a commonwealth as a contract between citizens – and such contracts work for everybody, everywhere. Montesquieu on the other hand, following Jean Bodin, does not believe that "one size fits all." He asks how laws and social institutions can refer to the "*esprit general*," i.e. the mentality of a people, their customs and bodies, the environmental influences on human ways of life. In modernity, we tend to discard such thoughts as deterministic, stereotyping, or even racist. But taking a deeper look at Montesquieu, as some recent scholars, such as Gerard de Vries or Richard

Spavin have suggested, one realizes that at the core of his theory is relationality. Laws regulate not only the relations between citizens, but they also need to have a relation to nature.

One of the most important concepts in your recent research is "the air as medium." The mediality of air has been analyzed by John Durham Peters, Stephen Connor and Tim Ingold, among others. You take these thinkers, specifically the media-theorist Peters's concept of "elemental media" as your point of departure. The air is an elemental medium in the sense that it is the precondition of many forms of perception, of movement, of transport, etc. The anthropologist Tim Ingold, in turn, points out that air is not so much an object of perception, but a medium which can – in wild weather – put itself very much to the foreground. Since the healthiness or unhealthiness of air is still a persistent concept today, and people still believe in the healing powers of aromatherapy, basically the manipulation of air, I wonder if we have ever been modern in this aspect. What did the study of air contribute to culture?

Aromatherapy has got nothing to do with it! The phenomenological tradition to which Ingold, the cultural theorist Connor, but also the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, the American environmental theorist David Abram, and the Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro belong, has always been fascinated with atmospheres, the air, the weather, climate and so on. Their idea is to see perception not so much as the perception of an object by a subject, both being essentially distinct, but rather as a form of immersion or contact within a shared medium. "The medium is where most of the action is," writes Ingold, and what he means is the medium of air as the medium of life. Weather brings the medium of air to the foreground, e.g. in a storm, in bad weather, in polluted air, smoke, in fog, and so on. It is not a distinct object, but it envelops, touches, and even penetrates us. Only when the air is very still, transparent, thermo-neutral and imperceptible, do we tend to think it's "immaterial," or "the matter of the immaterial," as Steven Connor writes. The environmentalist and phenomenologist David Abram sees perception of the atmosphere not as a subject-object relation but as "communion" or a "communication." We are immersed in a common medium, through which we touch, a medium which has its own dynamics and affordances.

What I learned from them is that thinking about climate is thinking about space and place, and what they do to us if we don't see them as fixed and given, but as a dynamic, singular and active medium of our existence. Climate not only marks spaces and places but also has its very specific form of temporality, e.g. in the cycle of the seasons. Think of the incredible cultural productivity of the seasons, in painting, music, poetry, seasonal holidays, foods, rituals and habits, not just in Europe, but also in extremely "season-centered" cultures such as Japan. Culture, as Watsuji and the British geographer Mike Hulme have pointed out, is a collective way of "being in the air." Societies not only share the same climatic conditions, weather and seasons, but they also collectively influence the state of the air by polluting or emitting greenhouse gases. We are bound together by the air, for better or worse. The seventeenth century physicist Evangelista Torricelli found a fantastic image for this condition: "We live," he wrote to a colleague in 1644, "submerged in an ocean of elemental air." For centuries, the "ocean of air" was the accepted technical term for what we today call the global atmosphere. The term emphasizes the mediality of the atmosphere, the fact that we – all land-bound organisms – live in it and depend on it like fish in water. Everything we do, we do inside this ocean of air.

You also coauthored a monograph, *The Anthropocene* with Hannes Bergthaller. In its conclusion you argue that while in Asia the term is not as widely used as in Europe or the U.S., Asia is maybe much more on the forefront of both the ecological crisis and its solution. The Chinese, for instance, are better at managing pollution, and engage heavily in renewable energy. I think it is very provocative. Many scholars have criticized the term for its generalizing implications. Why do you nevertheless think that it is a productive and helpful concept to address ecological disaster?

The Anthropocene is not about Asia, nor Europe or the US. First and foremost, the concept is planetary, as it brings it's the many different aspects of the current environmental crisis into one single term. It is a shorthand for the potentially disastrous ecological outcomes of the present, and a cry for action. Its alternatives, such as the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene, etc. are, in my opinion, not so much criticisms of the term, but contributions to the debate that the Anthropocene concepts wants to trigger. However, just repeating "its Capitalism, stupid!" over and over doesn't get us any further. For me, the best shorthand for the predicament we find ourselves

in – as perpetrators, victims, or bystanders – is "Anthropocene." It might be sad that the *International Union of Geological Sciences* has rejected the well-researched proposition of the *Anthropocene Working Group* to formalize the Anthropocene as a geochronological epoch. But essentially it is sad for Geology, which has missed the chance to place itself as a discipline at the center of this important diagnosis. For everybody else, the concept is very much alive! We cannot speak about the present without it.

When environmental humanities analyze the current ecological crisis, it often introduces activism into the academic discourse, along with post-colonial criticism. Do you think that they are necessary, or can they be neglected, especially in your current research going back to Montesquieu's theory of different climates and different peoples?

I am neither an activist nor an expert on post-colonialism. I read Said, Bhabha and other authors who seem to now be left behind in favor of decolonialism. And I consider the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty one of the most important thinkers of our time. But it might not be by accident that he moved from his early work on "Provincializing Europe" from a post-colonial angle onto the Anthropocene. – In my book, I look at colonialism as a context for the discourse on "foreign" or "extreme" climates. Yet, what might be even more interesting than analyzing the remainders of colonialism, is a non-Western, indigenous relation to nature. Amitav Ghosh has elaborated on this in his recent book *The Nutmeg's Curse*. He sketches out an understanding of nature that sees landscapes, plants, animals and even the air as "persons" or "subjects," just like humans. The indigenous world, he points out, is filled with spirits. I have personally encountered similar ideas in Indonesia. People there are certain that specific areas are taboo or dangerous because of the "spirits" (*roh*) who dwell there. You may not want to walk past a certain bamboo bush after sundown. When people warned me against these things, I always felt they seemed to see or feel a presence that I had been *trained* not to perceive by my Western upbringing. The core idea here is not that indigenous people live "in harmony with nature" – as Westerners like to put it – but of a nature that is a living subject. A tree, an animal, a landscape is a person with whom you need to communicate. I think this is a sensitivity and a mode of thinking that we should try to understand better, as an alternative to our idea of nature as pure matter.

As for activism, I am certainly no activist. Writing books is not activism, even though some theorists like to frame their work as such. But I have a lot of sympathy for environmentalist activists. I deeply admire them for their bravery in the face of so much hate they encounter. The *Last Generation* activists who glued themselves to streets and runways have been treated with an incredible amount of aggression, despisal, or at best condescension. They were treated as rebellious teens – yet they have the most important political agenda of our time! In my book, I have tried to provide a theoretical framework for climate activism as a new form of civil disobedience, but also as a new type of social solidarity and care. I am very impressed by what they do, politically and intellectually.

Circling back to literature as a way to understand the world better, to understand our present, the popularity of older climate fiction works has recently skyrocketed: people are rediscovering J. G. Ballard and H. G. Wells. Contemporary cli-fi, however, while doing a decent job in raising awareness of our ecological crisis, usually leaves much to be desired aesthetically. Do you have any recommendations for people who would like to read good contemporary cli-fi?

There are so many books coming out, it's a flood of "Cli-Fi" these days! Only a few of them are aesthetically interesting, I am afraid. I would like to recommend something else, not a difficult poetic experiment, but a very straightforward book with some quite radical ideas: The Ministry for the Future by Kim Stanley Robinson. It is both a novel and a non-fiction book. It tells the story of a political institution, the "Ministry for the Future," designed to solve the many problems of the ecological crisis, social inequality, climate change, greed-driven financial policy, fake news, infringements of privacy, and many more. The book presents an array of ideas and projects to do so. So full of information and ideas, it can easily be read as a handbook for saving the world. Yet, at the same time, it is a tale of the world in turmoil.

It presents a form of activism that is much more violent than the very gentle protests of the Last Generation or Extinction Rebellion. In Robinson's world, there is outright climate terrorism: targeted assassinations of fossil fuel company CEOs, bombed planes, sabotage to oil rigs, cruise ships, or other highly polluting technologies etc. The novel's protagonists discuss the legitimacy of such violence in all seriousness. If the world is on the brink of climatic catastrophe, is it legitimate to kill a few of the people responsible? Is it acceptable to dispossess the ultra-rich? Or to create a climate of fear strong enough to make people really change their patterns of consumerism? Robinson seems to be dead serious about these questions.

In his later works, Bruno Latour noted that the contemporary ecological crisis is unlike previous crises in that you cannot be outside of it. One of the most captivating aspects of your work is that you are not afraid to reference skeptics, for instance Michael Crichton, the author of Jurassic Park, who even appealed for a hearing at Congress to present his own results on climate change. And in your book, *The Future as Catastrophe*, despite clearly stating he is not right and climate change is real, you urge us to think about how we can make our communication about the crisis more efficient. Were you not afraid of a backlash from the academic community?

But why should I not deal with the climate skeptics? I am not the first academic to do this. There is a lot of very good analysis of how climate change denialism has worked in the past thirty years, most famously Naomi Oreskes and Eric M. Conway's *Merchants of Doubt*. It is important to understand that this "debate" about the veracity of climate research was never about science, but aimed merely at prolongating itself, at gaining time for the fossil fuel industry. "As long as there is no consensus in the scientific world, we can keep emitting freely," this was the rationale for the climate change denialist lobbies. What is more interesting to me is the belief that economic progress and wealth are more important than climate stability, and that climate policy should not be an obstacle to economic growth. This may be an understandable position. Yet it is still wrong. We need to engage in a debate about moral and social priorities, not "alternative facts."

FICTION

To Leave the Solar System

Balázs Farkas

['bɒla:ʒ 'fɒrkɒʃ]

Balázs Farkas has been publishing various prose works and criticism in Hungarian since 2005, and has had six books published. In 2015, he received the Móricz Zsigmond Scholarship, and in 2024, he won the Alfabéta Prize and the Futaki Prize. He lives in Budapest with his family and works for a game development company.

AUTHOR

"My world, my Earth is a ruin. A planet spoiled by the human species. We multiplied and fought and gobbled until there was nothing left, and then we died. We controlled neither appetite nor violence; we did not adapt. We destroyed ourselves. But we destroyed the world first."

Ursula K. Le Guin: The Dispossessed (1974)

"You like science fiction, don't you?"

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard this question, put to me with a dash of sarcasm or hopeful condescension. This is why I usually got strange presents from my relatives as a child and even stranger invitations to serve on panels and contribute to anthologies as an adult.

But there was a grain of truth in the question.

By the time I turned ten, I was gladly reading anything with spaceships and robots in it, and I was happy to put books with nonsensical titles on my shelf. I even came across a book called *Easy Journey to Other Planets* by a certain His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, which, I must admit, sounded very impressive. Who wouldn't want instructions for interplanetary travel? (Unfortunately, that little book is about Krsna Consciousness and yoga. Still, I'll take it.)

The truth is much simpler. I fell in love with literature. I fell in love with science. I know that seems like a very straightforward way of thinking, especially in a world that wants to overcomplicate things with labels and genres and all the tribalism that comes with such things.

No, I don't *prefer* science fiction. In fact, I am deeply terrified by its existence and its separation from everything else .

I only dare hope that people who are concerned with depictions of life on earth are also genuinely concerned about life on earth, if that makes sense.

***

It is now May.

It's hot, and we keep the window open at night. My favorite star has finally appeared. It is the only star in the sky that manages to shine through the light pollution above Budapest, and it twinkles in various colors as if it were winking at me. I know this star well, though I do not know its name. I stare at it from the moment I go to bed until it disappears, roughly seventy minutes later. As I watch it go, I can almost feel the earth's rotation. That star is visible from my window

from May until around July before it completely disappears under the horizon. Then I forget about it, at least until the next year.

When I look at the stars, I don't really see them as they are now. Light doesn't travel instantly. When I look at the night sky, I am looking at a long-lost past. As I look at the light just arriving now from a star more than 37 light years away, I am actually observing a moment before I was born.

It is almost comforting to realize that the stars will be here long after I am gone.

***

When I first started publishing (roughly twenty years ago), most literary editors were perplexed when they received a manuscript containing any kind of reference to current technology or non-anthropocentric phenomena. Those magazines and their celebrated writers seemed to be completely oblivious to the fact that we are living on a planet, that our bodies are colonies for smaller organisms, and that the environment is a more precise definition of a home than the country in which we live. With an almost snobbish disdain, I was horrified to learn that these people had studied at prestigious universities and yet knew nothing about the Turing test or the basics of epidemiology.

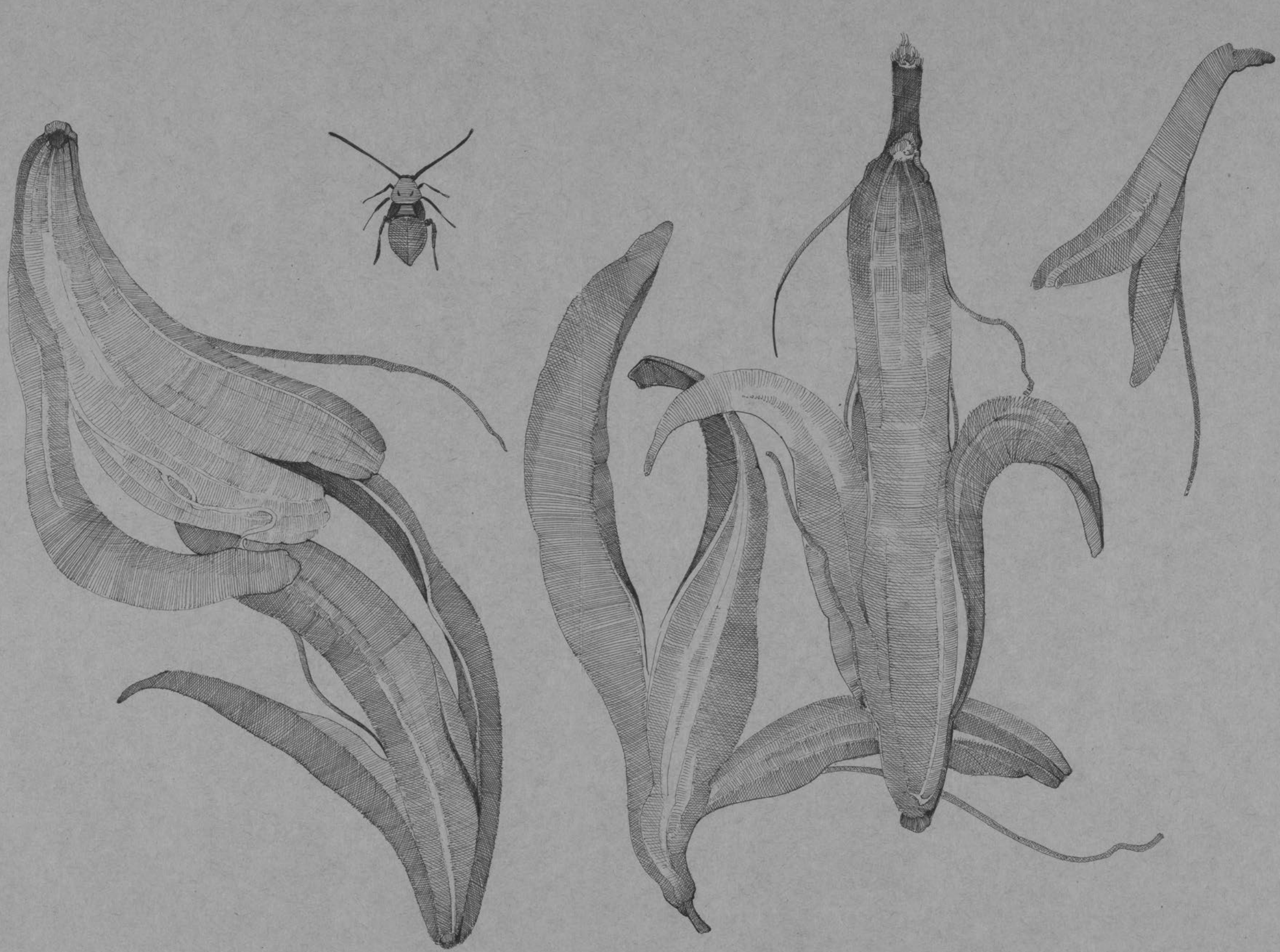
The more widely accepted *literary realism* supposedly attempts to portray reality *as is*, without a hint of fantastic or unlikely events. This definition has always bothered me. It is a blatant lie. Have you seen this universe? Life on earth *is* unlikely. There exist incomprehensible numbers of planets without life, so even the most trivial drama involving our freakish species seems like wild fantasy .

Besides, I used to think to myself, *realist fiction is still fiction. The amount of reality embodied in a character like Raskolnikov and the amount of reality in E. T. are the same.*

The separation of science fiction from mainstream literature always seemed nonsensical to me. When the COVID pandemic brought the human population to its knees, literary realists did not know what to do with it. We seem to be unable to cope with changes that science fiction warned us about decades ago. As the oceans boil, we are still more concerned about interpersonal relationships and national identities than basic survival and compassion for those who are struggling. When the machines inevitably come for our jobs, we will not know what hit us, despite having had plenty of time to prepare and adapt. It always seemed to me that ignoring science and progress in the literary world is both dangerous and foolish. Literature was supposed to help us find our place in the chaos of it all.

But here's a comforting thought.

Extinction is inevitable. It is completely normal.



Like, totally okay.

***

It is now 2024.

I get the impression that most literary magazines may have caught up with actual reality, even if personal traumas are still magnified compared to sufferings on a continental scale. There is more. Personal observation is merely anecdotal evidence, but still, I can already sense the unspeakable anxiety in the voices of poets and writers who are now unable to portray the banalities of everyday life without an undertone of cosmic dread. Gen-Z humor is characterized by general depression, suicidal tendencies, and the futility of planning for the long term. If it's not climate change, then it's the wars that get to us, but those wars are still closely related to dwindling resources and greed. Despite sensible regulations, we are not meeting any kind of environment-saving targets, we are not getting any tangible results with our renewable energy sources, paper straws and whatnot, because the priority seems to be making things profitable instead of making things work. Popular culture reflects this as well, as *Dune*, *Mad Max*, and *Sand Land* are currently among the hottest franchises, attracting people to worlds without water or civilized society. And these films and the worlds they depict are not regarded as juvenile fantasies anymore. Not even as warnings.

These are the preparations .

***

Whereas literary realism is a lie about the importance of humanity, science fiction is a more insidious lie about our prospects for survival.

I can't help but admire the efforts of writers like Frank Herbert and Ursula K. Le Guin, who risked ridicule by depicting harsh planetary and societal conditions and trying to imagine local solutions, mindsets, and tools that helped those imaginary communities. This was their plea to humanity to take responsibility. No wonder that science fiction thrived after the Second World War.

I guess we did not get the memo. We did not pay attention to the warnings, we became too mesmerized by the empty promises of the genre, the more dazzling, more entertaining notion of interstellar travel.

It is, after all, a very attractive solution to our problems. Once it becomes uninhabitable, some of these books suggest, it would be better just to leave our home, planet Earth.

To leave the solar system.

***

Well, guess what.

To reach the edge of our solar system with our current technology would take us thousands of years, and after the icy grip of the Oort cloud comes a much larger, deeper void before the next sensible destination pops up. Even that journey could be an inch (or a Planck length) compared to a journey towards a suitable new home. It would take 4.25 years to reach Proxima Centaury, our nearest neighbouring star, at the speed of light, and please, don't ask what happens to the human body at the speed of light.

Voyager 1 has travelled farther than any other manmade object. After roughly half a century, it reached the region outside the heliopause, but when it did, the damn thing started speaking gibberish, probably because it couldn't cope with the maddening emptiness of space.

The brave little probe is fine now, it seems, but… *I don't know, man.*

Is this really the lesson we want to derive from science fiction?

Why should we want to conquer the stars when we can't even house everybody on earth ?

***

This is the end.

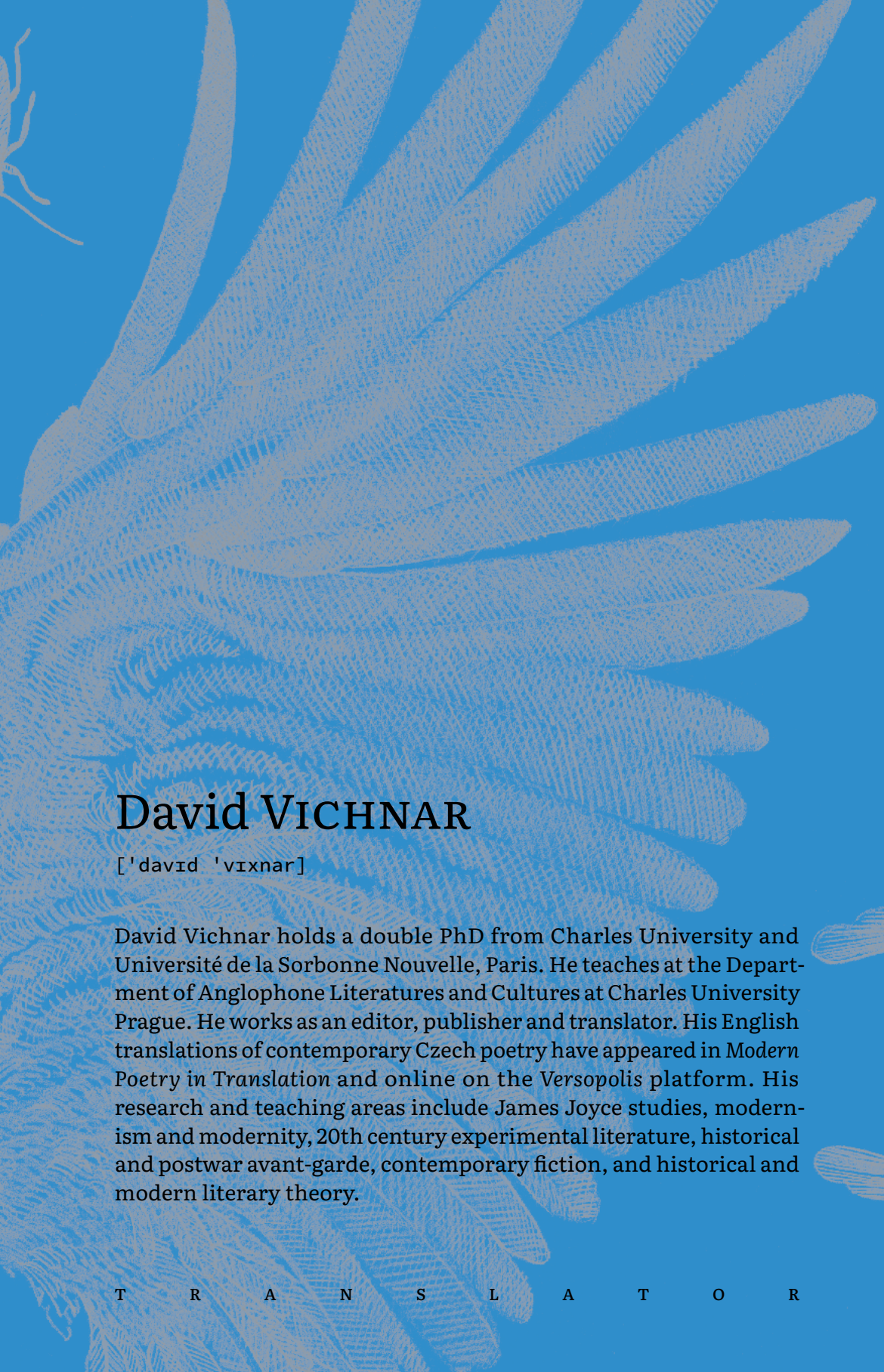
The end of my aimless rambling, at least. But more importantly, I hope that as the temperatures continue to rise and our mutually agreed upon reality continues to fray, this will also be the end of general obliviousness.

Of course, it is too late to act now, but hey, at least we still have books. We can still dream, make up realist stories about the unrealities of our comfort, fairytale versions of those old warnings. A reboot or two of something vaguely familiar, devoid of its original meaning.

Anyway. Do what you must. Read science. Read fiction. Read science fiction. It doesn't matter. We create our reality.

We can still close our eyes. All the world's a stage. The stage is on fire, but before the curtain falls, we can imagine ourselves doing the impossible.

We can still learn how to leave the solar system.



POETRY

What Mother Talks About When Silent

David Vichnar

['davɪd 'vɪxnar]

David Vichnar holds a double PhD from Charles University and Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris. He teaches at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at Charles University Prague. He works as an editor, publisher and translator. His English translations of contemporary Czech poetry have appeared in *Modern Poetry in Translation* and online on the *Versopolis* platform. His research and teaching areas include James Joyce studies, modernism and modernity, 20th century experimental literature, historical and postwar avant-garde, contemporary fiction, and historical and modern literary theory.

TRANSLATOR

Olga Stehlíková

['olga 'stɛɦli:kova:]

Olga Stehlíková works as a freelance writer, editor and critic with a focus on contemporary Czech literature. She moderates literary programmes and works as a book editor. She has put together dozens of books of poetry and prose for various Czech publishing and her poetry has appeared in many Czech and foreign literary magazines. Her debut book of poetry *Týdny* (*Weeks*), won the Magnesia Litera Book Prize for poetry. Her second collection of short poems, *Vejce* (*Eggs*), was released in unique arrangement in November 2017, along with an LP with Thomas Braun´s music. Her third book of poetry is *Vykřičník jak stožár* (Exclamation Mark High as a Pole). Her poems have been translated into nine languages.

AUTHOR

You call me Mother, omnipotent, wise,
planet you sometimes call me,
you call me God, but that's a father of course.
I say *hehe*
– that I learned from you.
Of course I'd say something, were I able to speak,
which I'd have learned from you,
and I'd say: *It's possible* and beckon
with your omnipotent meridian and wise equator
you've equipped me with.

You call me the Homeland of humanity
or Terra and Gaia,
by which you mean *strength, law, and intelligence*.
Those are big words for you.
The flow of energy, the arrangement of matter – you call me various things.
I haven't got, I'm not, doesn't matter.

You say I'm your first word.
I'm not a word, a system, a principle,
or the third planet of the system.
I'm not the father.
And besides, I don't speak.
It'd be hard to convince you otherwise.
I've no senses, feeling neither pain nor anger.
Nor love.
I'll be your mother if you wish.
Anyway, you'll do what you please.
That I learned from you, unruly children.

I don't rejoice in your sudden attempts at rescue.
I don't care. But I don't speak.
You, above all, don't matter to me, nor does my entire biosphere.
I don't cry, though you'd like me to.
I'm doing well, if you must ask.
It's a conversational question with an answer
        that I learned from you.
I'm doing might suffice.
I can be here with you or without you
and I can be neither here nor there,
and then you'll evaluate nothing.

In this speech I hope you'll notice
there are no exclamation marks.
Write poems about survival, I listen and applaud.
Feel free to divide me into mountains, airs, and waters.
Into minerals, cells, and elements.
Into soil, fauna, and flora.
Into nuclei and sheaths.
You are the ones speaking of the skies and dimensions,
you of gods and forces,
I don't divide or share.
        That I learned from you.

We've long been here together –
a good few million years
        – judged by your language and with your sigh of *ah*.
I can count myself in billions of your years,
if you wish
        – and you will wish exactly 4.6.
Whatever.

So then you were with me, on me, and thanks to me,
as would be necessary to say in your language
        that I learned from you,
and it could be said that now we are reaching pathos.
Let it be so.

Now you'd like to hear I'll miss you.
Well then, No, I won't.
Give me a few thousand of those years of yours,
and I'll be okay, as you'd say.
I'll be so okay it's beyond your wildest dreams.

No, I won't be missing you,
not because you've been that bad
– I don't judge –
but because I don't know how to miss
and you won't care anymore.

Before you leave, I can apologise.
I can say your *Excuse me*.
That I learned from you.

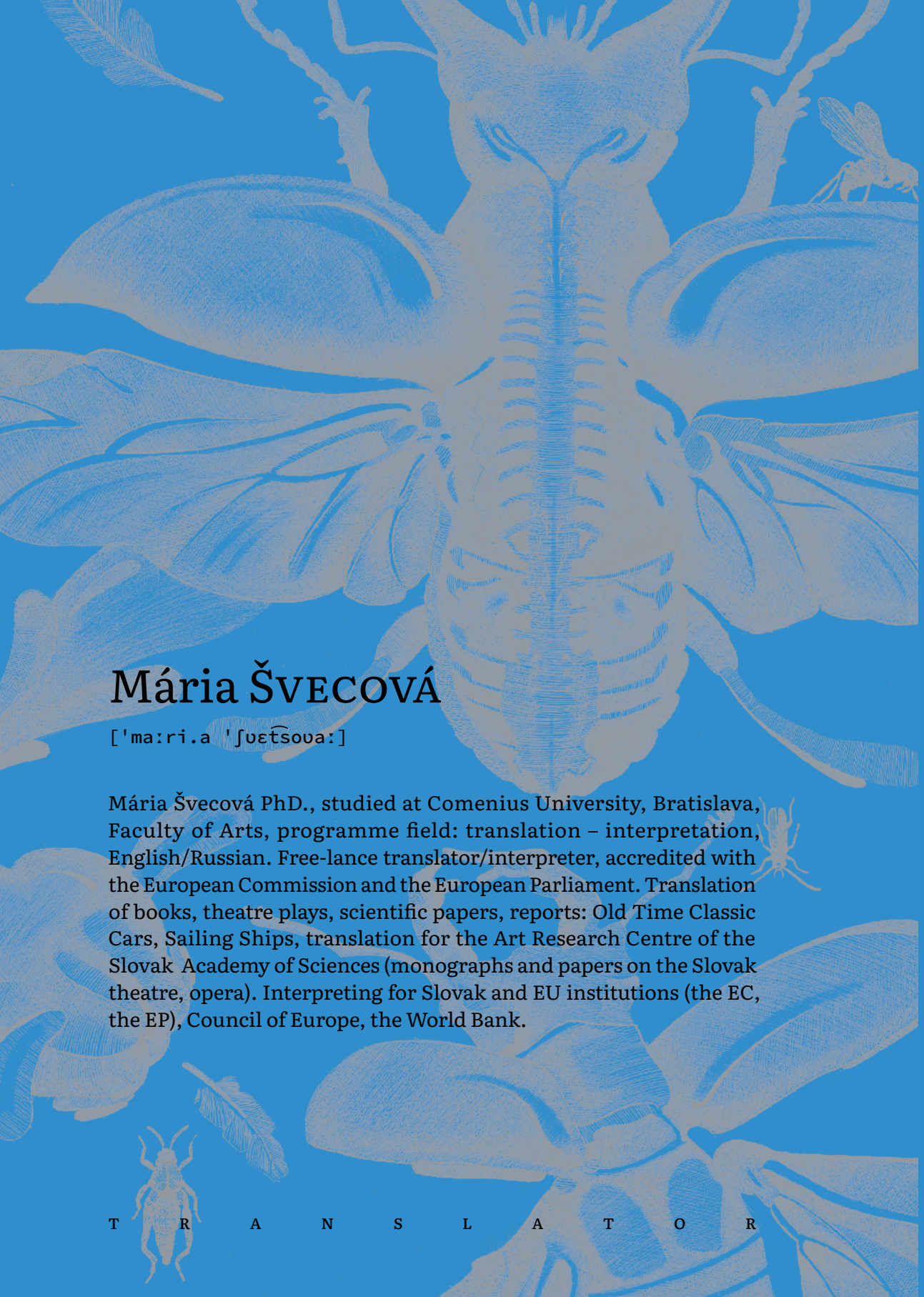
Julia Roberts speaks for me:
I've been around 22,500 times longer than you.
Julia, your numbers and their multiples.
You say some of my animals are dangerous or disgusting,
you count my plants one by one.
I don't know what that means, I've got what I've got.
Like the northern white rhinos, which from now on I haven't got anymore.
I haven't got mammoths, Tasmanian tigers, or river dolphins.
I haven't got great auks or Steller's sea cows.
I haven't got tyrannosaurs or megaloceros.
Cave lions or dodos.
In 500 years, you've exterminated 762 species,
to which you gave nice names and nice numbers
according to your measurements.
Snap! Right now, 10 million birds.
You regret that.
According to your measurements,
an absolute failure of intelligence and feeling.
I haven't got the Seychelles giant tortoise, but you believe
you've saved Przewalski's horse,
that you've saved it for me.

I don't exactly know why I've got you, there's a lot of you.
But not as many as ants,
compared to whom you are larger, as per your measurements.
You walk on my mountains, you intrude into my seas,
you plunge into my depths and bore tunnels in there.
You meddle in my air and have even made it to my Moon,
I say nothing, for I don't know how to speak.

The voice of my oceans among you — that is, on me — is Harrison Ford.
He tells you you need me, after all, you've come from me.
Compellingly, reproachfully, and uncompromisingly,
in the video you speak to yourselves in his voice.
I've seen it, it's nice
– that's how you'd evaluate it.
It's sweet how angry you got at yourselves,
how you speak to yourselves as Harrison.
I'd laugh, but I can't.
That I'll learn from you.
I'd also be moved, no question.
That I'd learn from you and from Julia.

"I'm the ocean," says Harrison. All right then.
Should you be struck by a tornado or flood,
you say I'm angry and striking back,
that I'm taking back what belongs to me.
But nothing belongs to me, I'm not your weather.
That I bring famine? Epidemics upon you?
You think you know me.
Then: do you know no-one?
Those abandoned places I never gave you,
nor did you take them.
I'm not angry
at your concrete, glass, wires, and plastics.
I don't think they're nice,
nor do I think they're ugly.
I think nothing of them.
"*Nature isn't stupid. Nature is immensely complex, very beautiful, and terrifying.*"
I don't know: is that true? Really?
I'm the same for all eternity, you say. If you think so.
I had a good laugh back when
you attributed Christ, Odin, Heracles, and Apollo to me.
Nice guys – them I learned from you.

Nothing shall remain, you say.
What I say, as I sit here silently:
not even nothing shall remain.



NON-FICTION

Ongoing Multispecies Stories and the Best Possible Worlds

Mária Švecová

['ma:ri.a 'ʃvɛtsova:]

Mária Švecová PhD., studied at Comenius University, Bratislava, Faculty of Arts, programme field: translation – interpretation, English/Russian. Free-lance translator/interpreter, accredited with the European Commission and the European Parliament. Translation of books, theatre plays, scientific papers, reports: Old Time Classic Cars, Sailing Ships, translation for the Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (monographs and papers on the Slovak theatre, opera). Interpreting for Slovak and EU institutions (the EC, the EP), Council of Europe, the World Bank.

T R A N S L A T O R

Miloslav Juráni

['milɔ 'jura:ɲi]

Milo Juráni studied Environmental Studies at the Faculty of Science of Comenius University and Theory and Criticism of Theatre Art at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. He has worked as editor-in-chief of the magazine kød - specifically about theatre, and as a theatrologist at the Theatre Institute Bratislava. He is a co-founder and collaborator of the cultural platform MLOKI.sk and author of many theatre reviews, academic articles, several conferences, and festival dramaturgy. In 2017/2018 he led a seminar on the connection between ecology and theatre at Ruhr Universität Bochum. In 2021 he defended his dissertation at the Academy of Performing Arts entitled Performing Arts in the Anthropocene. He regularly collaborates dramaturgically with the independent women's group MFK Bochum from Germany and has been working at HaDivadlo as a tribal dramaturg since 2023.

A U T H O R

In March 2024, a panel organised by the International Union of Geological Sciences voted down the idea of a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene. The decision came after fifteen years of debate, controversy, searching for evidence, and turning points. The research itself was conducted by a special Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), which published its findings regularly.

Label loss

Prior to the vote, the AWG members noted that: "All these lines of evidence indicate that the Anthropocene, though currently brief, is—we emphasize—of sufficient scale and importance to be represented on the geological time scale." The evidence at hand was overwhelming. The biggest breakthrough was the geological evidence gathered by the research of the deep Crawford Lake in Canada. It was easy to read from the water and the sediment to learn how profoundly the period from the mid-twentieth century onward has been imprinted on the lake. The causes of the changes in the lake are well-known and now canonically repeated factors. The extensive list would include industrialisation, the booming of both production and consumption during the Great Acceleration, the burning of fossil fuels, the testing of the thermonuclear hydrogen bomb, the breakdown of plastics and plastic waste into microplastics, and, of course, many others. So, what happened?

The rejection of the AWG proposal by the SQS (Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy) proves that geologists think in terms of geologic time. They measure changes in thousands to millions of years; evidence from less than a century means little. As "objective" natural scientists, they disregard the political weight of their opinion. Philosopher Timothy Morton put it aptly in a recent essay. Rejecting the Anthropocene does not mean that the planet and its human and non-human inhabitants are better off than we thought. The Anthropocene is just not a 100% provable fact. Scientific rigour has caused the loss of one of the critical arguments in the debate, a straightforward naming of the fact that humans are persistently devastating the planet. While this is true, we have lost an important "label."

Smart and problematic Anthropocene

In fifteen years, however, the Anthropocene has managed to establish itself more broadly in the humanities and has also entered artistic practice, theory, and aesthetics. There are several reasons for this. For the Anthropocene is a term as smart as it is problematic. Its smartness lies in the fact that it is the only "concept" that embraces the broad-ranging impacts of human activity on the planetary system. Definitions are still evolving, but the most original ones come from scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stormer. According to them, the Anthropocene means that human impact is becoming more intense, significantly altering the natural conditions on the planet. Human activity affects everything living, non-living, organic, inorganic, all individuals, and units (human, non-human, organic, inorganic, particular or unit), and this has unprecedented implications.

The above criticism of the term Anthropocene is that it is too general, poorly pinned down in space and time, and too human-centred. There is also controversy about who the "Anthropos" refers to. Not every person – individual, gender, race, ethnicity, sector, business, country, establishment – bears equal responsibility for the appalling state of the planet. Certain groups of people, animals, and plants are far more threatened by it than others. Anthropocentrism, an often-criticised cause of today's state of the environmental polycrisis, is also associated with the term.

Art in the Anthropocene

The debate in the humanities about the Anthropocene was thus a vital resource for art. To put an end to the age of humans as quickly as possible, the Anthropocene needs to be introduced and immediately defined. To reject what it symbolises, to address concrete causes, to perceive the complexity of the issue and all the human, extra-human sacrifices, as well as to believe in the power of imagination. New narratives are not created in laboratories, they are established culturally and through

art, and are formative by nature. They expand perception, language, and understanding oneself and other people, ethnicities, and beings. They reimagine the world and, in a way, are the engine of a much-needed change.

More than just status quo.

In the past, for example, *The Anthropocene Project* by photographer Edward Burtinsky undertook to capture the current state and its causes. The artist exhibited large-format aerial photographs of landscapes affected by human activity from around the world. He conveyed hyper-realistic cinematic images and virtual reality to gallery visitors, allowing them to be just a step away from marble mining in Carrara, from the world's largest waste dumps, and from the burning of confiscated ivory. The visual image of the Anthropocene in photographs was accompanied by facts about the causes of the devastation portrayed. *The Anthropocene Project* was like a good encyclopaedia, full of facts and the beautifying images that document them. The project was objective, truthful, premonitory and attracted many visitors. But at the same time, it was cold, general, piling up images of destruction as if the Anthropocene per se were an unchanging and definitive state. However, when it comes to the potential transformation of the world, works that resonate today are closer to "fiction" than to documentary genres - better said, they have therapeutic or activating potential. They offer a kind of narrative, sensitivity, an opportunity to familiarise oneself with the artist's opinion or emotionality, or to speculate about how the world could look.

Resilience in entanglement

Richard Powers' award-winning novel *Overstory* aptly portrays the way in which things in nature are so interconnected that one without the other loses its meaning. The interdisciplinary Feral Atlas relates to this in an impressive and comprehensive manner. It was developed by a collective of different authors and artists and is available in digital form. Donna Haraway characterises the world as a place of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with. Everything

animate and inanimate is intertwined, hierarchies in communities of human and non-human beings are a cultural construct. Only the fact that they are entities inseparable from each other, that they coexist, that they are part of the Earth's fabric, remains valid. Different beings have been working together for hundreds of thousands of years, forging symbioses, although it need not always be beneficial for them. Harraway thus defines the field of a new ethics, sensitivity to human and non-human entities, the need for collective resilience based on care and cooperation, and a world that is equitable from the multi-species perspective. It is a call for art to motivate, sensitise, activate, and tell new stories to others. Some artists today try to untangle the complexities of the Anthropocene, and therefore, point to visible and invisible interconnections and existing networks, they include non-human relatives in stories, and use multi-species perspectives in line with the ideas of Haraway's philosophy. In the production *Estado Vegetal*, Manuela Infante teaches us something about the mysterious activity of plants, their thinking and their needs. Maja Smrekar, in her performances about the cohabitation with wolves, offers an insight into the functioning of an interspecies family. Spela Petrić, in her interdisciplinary work *P'LAI*, conveys to us the playfulness of plants; Krot Jurak and Alex Bailey, in *Performances for Pets*, show the playfulness of humans and animals. Stefan Kaegi's performance, *Temple du Présent*, allows us to understand the smartness and sensitivity of octopuses. But Haraway and her followers from the worlds of theory and art are not utopians. Rather, they are realists. The decontamination of the world is a long way off; we need to find a way to survive together in a contaminated world while eliminating as much further damage as possible.

Believing in the power of adaptation

The architect Pinar Yoldas belongs to a group that thinks similarly. Yoldas creates speculative ecosystems, asking what will happen if the Global North's approach to our planet does not change. "If life started today in our plastic debris filled oceans, what kinds of life forms

would emerge out of this contemporary primordial ooze?" The answer is the installation *An Ecosystem of Excess*. Yoldas has fabricated an ecosystem in which animals have organs capable of digesting plastics. From the colourful hues of Coca Cola and other beverage lids, she has created previously unknown pigments of bird feathers. She has also created several new animals that have literally made friends with plastics. Plastic bags and balloons became part of the turtles' bodies, and the Pacific Balloon Turtle was born. The animals can float on the water surface thanks to the air blown into them. This helps them save energy and keeps them protected from predators. For birds and turtles today, plastics are often lethal (just think of the iconic images - a turtle with a straw up its nose and a dead bird with a stomach full of plastics). The chances that modern organisms could quickly adapt to an environment full of the remains of human activity are almost close to zero. But what will happen in a thousand, two thousand, ten thousand years? The artist is cognisant of the tremendous vitality of the living world and of the capacity for adaptation. With her installation, she touches upon the tension between apocalyptic visions and utopia. She drives away ecological grief with an imagination in which planetary systems and human activity have found a common path. Instead of predicting the collapse of the planet and continuing mass extinctions, she gives hope, although she would not comment on whether humans will be part of it.

Writing new worlds

A specific sub-genre that does not acknowledge the failure of humanity has also attempted to reimagine hope in a concrete form. Solarpunk is a branch of science fiction and stands on the opposite shore to dystopian genres. The stories take place during or after the transformation to an ecological society. Rather than abandoning science, technology, or development, civilisation has cast aside various burdens - the extraction of natural resources, overproduction, inequalities and harmful hierarchies, or capitalist thinking in general. Part of the contemporary consumer society has learnt its lessons, adopting

a style of life that is now close to rural eco-communities. The new world is based on the latest scientific knowledge, the know-how of the indigenous peoples, and understanding the complexity of the natural world. The energy transformation to renewables and the principles of the circular economy have been successful and private property no longer plays any role. Importantly, however, the socio-economic transformation has gone hand in hand with a cultural one. In these, mostly short stories, class conflicts, hate speech, racism, individualism, the struggle for power, profit and success are rather unusual. The authors' imagination is more concerned with the creation of the worlds in which the heroes explore what can be learnt from nature's interlocutors – microorganisms, fungi, plants, animals, and various hybrid creatures. Protagonists often face various ethical dilemmas. The relationship with the non-human is equal to that of kinship, but it is impossible to live without food. One must learn to collaborate with AI, to understand one's own microbial complexity. The authors ask how to deal with the remnants of an ancient civilisation, with its thinking and customs, and how to reconcile minimalist expediency with the nourishing florality of the multispecies relationships. Science fiction fans need only think of the classless, decentralised society of Anarres, in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. Most of the planet is a desert, lengthy periods of drought are common. People here live in well-equipped but modest communities, in shared housing, public kitchens cook for all, children do not live with their parents but in special school dormitories where they sleep, learn, and become familiar with living in a community. At Anarres no one owns anything, everyone knows their place, manual work is shared among all. In addition, everyone is entitled to the same ration of food. This does not mean that there is no science, universities, or intellectual work. But even here, the relics of today's world of people linger on. The originality of ideas, exceptional abilities, and intellectual freedom are subdued at the expense of the greater good, in a way bringing exclusion

from society, even sanctioning from the higher posts whose role is to only better manage our planet's social system. Therefore, the principles of common life are not violated by many. But, let me ask, is this the best of all possible worlds?

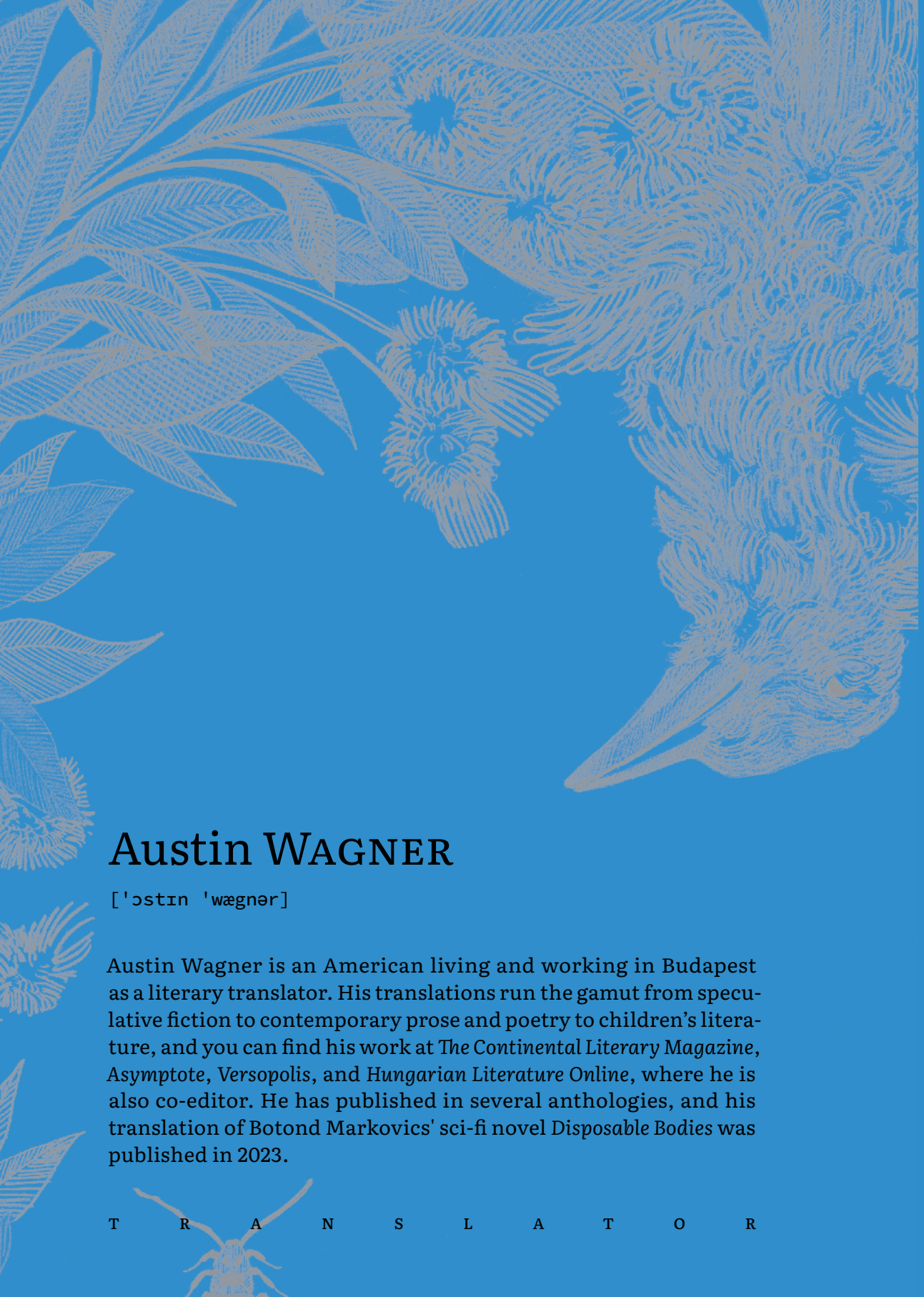
The art of living on a damaged planet

How can artistic impulses be brought to reality? I really do not dare to predict anything on a macro scale. Instead, let me mention a few projects where art enters the public space, calls upon citizens to participate and has transformative potential. The Australian stage designer Tanja Beer has created the Living Stage concept, which combines design, permaculture, and art. In collaboration with local communities, she creates recyclable, biodegradable, and edible performance spaces. Stages can take different forms, but are primarily made of used materials, old pallets, boards, wooden boxes that serve as planters and are decorated with various leftover materials. “Community grown spaces become the setting for performing and celebrating ecological stories, before being circulated back into the communities that helped grow them: physical structures become garden beds and community spaces; plants become food; and waste becomes compost.” The Living Stage is an ecosystem equally suited for gathering, community gardening, and picnicking; it can be used for events, theatre, tomato picking, and herb cutting. The social infrastructure of the future certainly cannot do without such places.

Organism Democracy meetings could also take place there. The principle of Organism Democracy was introduced by the Club Real artist group with the aim of making the most under-represented beings a component part of the civic community. In the wild urban forest in Osloer Strasse in Berlin, human representatives of micro-organisms, plants, various animals, and other groups meet in regular sessions to discuss the management of the area. Everyone fights for the interests

of their own species, but at the same time must respect the Constitution of the Organism Democracy Berlin. The constitution lays down that all organisms enjoy equal rights, conflicts are resolved through collective bargaining, and decisions can be appealed. Human representatives are therefore obliged to know the needs of the species they represent and to approach the matter responsibly. This model works in Berlin (and to a lesser extent in other places, and to a greater extent in the project Baltic See version), it redefines the nature of the territory with a greater concern for the needs of different organisms and contributes to both equity and diversity. If enshrined in state legislation, it could enrich all-too-human democracy with the voices from the non-human world and make urban planning more responsive to interspecies needs. Like similar bold art-activist concepts it could become part of the success story of a future society, as if cut out from solar-punk stories.

The breadth of the issue of the human impact on our planet is convoluted; there is no way to resolve it swiftly, efficiently, without affecting the kind of life we have become used to in the Global North. Replicating the success of the *Silent Spring*, with which biologist Rachel Carson triggered a society-wide change in the 1960s, is probably inconceivable today. One work is not enough for a sweeping planetary switch, nor is a scientific consensus enough; it requires a lot of political and human energy while creativity also plays an essential role. Therefore, if even the darker scenarios come true, art will still have a planetary purpose. It has been part of the life of one of the symbionts of this planet for thousands of years, allowing it to perceive itself, others, and the world differently from science, learning, religion, or psychology. A good artwork does not reduce but expands. Encountering art means experiencing transformation, sometimes obvious - be it laughter, tears, rejection, or anger, which is sometimes subtle and that takes place at neural and cellular levels. For me, this is enough to stay convinced that survival on a devastated planet cannot do without imagination and art. And I would be glad if I were right.



FICTION

The Last Tree

Austin Wagner

['ɔstɪn 'wægnər]

Austin Wagner is an American living and working in Budapest as a literary translator. His translations run the gamut from speculative fiction to contemporary prose and poetry to children's literature, and you can find his work at *The Continental Literary Magazine*, *Asymptote*, *Versopolis*, and *Hungarian Literature Online*, where he is also co-editor. He has published in several anthologies, and his translation of Botond Markovics' sci-fi novel *Disposable Bodies* was published in 2023.

TRANSLATOR

Márton Böszörményi

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Márton Böszörményi is a writer and editor. He lives in Budapest with his wife and son. He is the editor-in-chief of the online contemporary literary magazine *Entropláza*. He has published two novels so far: *Meixner Józsefné apoteózisa* (*The Apotheosis of Mrs Meixner*, Napkút Kiadó, 2020), and most recently *Infected Monstrum* (Napkút Kiadó, 2022).

AUTHOR

Enri had a dream about the last tree and woke with a hard-on. He flicked on the lamp on the nightstand. He thought he saw something in the corner, rubbed his eyes, bolted up in bed, and looked at the corner again, but there was nothing there. The alarm clock blared, he turned it off. Touching his right hand to his forehead, he mumbled the morning mantra. He got up, joints creaking as he stretched – how he hated that sound – left the bedroom, entered the bathroom, and set about his morning routine. He got dressed and had breakfast. Slowly, torturously, he chewed at the synthetic bread. Decided to skip the coffee today, just the sight of it made him nauseous. He grabbed his entry card and stepped out from his pod.

The corridor was empty as he walked its length, the austere concrete walls somehow even more oppressive than usual today. He thought back to his dream, to that wondrous vision of the last tree. To those verdant fields and the panoply of colorful flowers. And the sky. That blue sky stamped with clouds of white. Enri had to press into his eyes to keep the tears from spilling out. Stupid, stupid, stupid, he thought, and quickened his steps. A minute later and he had reached the gate. He stuck his card into the reader, the indicator light switched to green, and the chrome steel door opened wide.

This time it was cross-eyed Zeb sitting in the briefing chamber. They said their hellos, Zeb glanced at the monitor, and he directed Enri to Room B13. Enri stepped through the translumination gate, then proceeded onward after getting the all-clear from Zeb. Another long corridor awaited him, but this time, instead of concrete, it was all metallic coating and a tangled network of yellow cables. Not exactly inviting, Enri thought, but at least it was more interesting than plain concrete. He stopped before the door of Room B13, noting the red bulb above it. Enri leaned against the facing wall, and waited.

Maybe ten minutes later the bulb switched to green, and the door opened shortly after. Leila stepped out of the room and smiled at Enri. Enri smiled back and asked her how the show was. Leila shrugged, told him it was even more boring than usual. Nothing interesting, then, Enri asked. Not in the slightest, Leila griped, rubbing Enri's arm as she passed by. Grinning widely, Enri stepped into Room B13.

He slotted his card into the opening of the table's console and waited while the system processed his data. A high-pitched whistling sounded from the device's speakers. NAME AND POSITION. Enri 614620, Enri said,

leaning over and speaking into the console, analyst. The machine beeped softly and sequences of green numbers appeared on the black monitor. 116989. KAUFMANN FAMILY. 2057, the console squealed, then switched off. Enri took his seat in the armchair in the center of the room, and before too long the white canvas sheet which covered the wall lit up. Enri settled down and got comfortable, and when he signaled he was ready, the first frames of the Kaufmann family's home video from 2057 appeared on the screen.

A man, forty-something, with graying hair and a beer belly, stands in front of a grill. He flips burgers with the occasional smile for the camera. He wears blue shorts and a white tank top, his arms are thick and hairy. After a minute he flutters a hand at the person holding the camera, says not to film him, focus on Kathy. The woman behind the camera laughs, then spins around to a blond girl, maybe six years old, smiling on the swing set. The woman holding the camera asks the little girl if she's having fun, and the girl says yes. The woman asks if she's hungry, and the girl responds not even a little bit. The man laughs off-camera, the woman turns back to him. He says there'll be too many hamburgers again. The woman holding the camera says the girl will be starving later, she can't swing forever. They both laugh.

Enri watched the Kaufmann family's home videos for eight hours straight, and not once did he have to press the red button built into the side of the armchair. Stiff and tired, he clambered to his feet when the recording ended and the darkness once more filled the room. He pulled his card from the terminal and stepped out through the door. Hagen stood in the corridor, chewing listlessly at something, as usual. They exchanged nods as they passed by one another. As he made for the briefing chamber, Enri tried to remember when it was he'd last spoken to Hagen. Could be three years, he thought, and shook his head. He didn't understand why the guy didn't like him.

Not wanting to be alone, he decided to eat dinner in the cafeteria. He looked around as he stood in line with his tray, but he didn't see many familiar faces. Most of the analysts had left and the tables were filled with bundlers. He didn't see Leila anywhere either. And why would he, Enri thought, she's probably catching up on sleep before the night shift. When it was his turn in line, he surprised even himself by ordering the synthetic hamburger. He didn't really like hamburgers and couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten one. He realized it must be because of the videos. Most of the Kaufmann family home videos he'd watched had been of them

grilling burgers and eating out in the yard. Interesting, he thought, and sat down at the table where Tomin was eating. Tomin was one of the few bundlers Enri knew, and who he happened to get on well with. They greet one another with a *bon appetite* and Enri dug into his hamburger. It was disgusting, and Enri was once again forced to admit how much he hated the food. In fact, Enri realized as he forced bite after bite down his throat, he actually hated all kinds of food. He flung his half-eaten hamburger onto the plate and shoved his tray away. I hate all this synthetic shit, he said out loud, leaning back. Silence fell at the table, just for a moment as everyone gawked at him. How can you say something like that, Tomin hissed. What's wrong with you? Don't do it, man, a full-bearded bundler with a shaved head warned him, looking around nervously. They'll hear you! Enri snorted. Who the fuck cares. He didn't wait for his tablemates to recover from the shock and start chewing him out, but instead stood up and left the cafeteria without a word.

He sat in the living room of his pod, staring at the monitor mounted on the wall and watching the bunker's nightly programming. They'd already shown *Green-Bottled Ocean* a thousand times, the animated film that explains how humanity ruined the planet with excessive amounts of garbage. Enri's stomach turned, and he switched off the monitor. He expected keepers to kick down his door any minute now and interrogate him about his outburst in the cafeteria earlier. For almost an hour he sat on the couch, staring straight ahead. But nothing happened. Guess they didn't hear me, Enri thought, and those chickenshit bundlers didn't report me. He'd gotten away with it. He stood up with a pop of bones, his waist and back cracking loudly. He hated that sound, knowing it was the result of many hundreds of hours spent idling in that armchair. He hated that armchair. He hated those fucking videos.

Enri showered, pulled on his pajamas, and headed into the bedroom. He grabbed one of the books off the shelf he'd read a thousand times already, but his thoughts were elsewhere as his eyes flitted over the lines. He couldn't help but think back to his dream. The last tree, stretching to the sky, that blue sky, its branches sprawling overhead, its leaves sparkling green in the sunlight. Enri set the book down on the nightstand and turned off the lamp. He lay back, pulling the blanket up over his head. If he thought hard, maybe his dreams would carry him back to that last tree and those green fields.

A loud clatter startled him awake in the middle of the night. He flicked on the lamp and sat up in bed. He strained his ears, holding his breath. Then he heard it. As if something was moving in the living room. Enri had no idea what to do. The bunker had never seen a break-in before. Who would want to break into his pod? And why? He felt the instinctive need for a heavy object to fight back against the intruder with if needed. But what? He looked around, and the lamp on the nightstand seemed to be his only option. He ripped it from the outlet, wound up its cord, and held it over his head as he advanced through the dark toward the door.

Enri took a deep breath, opened the door, and flipped on the light in the living room as he brandished the lamp in his hand. He was determined, fueled by adrenaline, and ready to strike. But as the room lit up, Enri froze, his arm dropping limply to his side. Shocked and confused, he stared at the naked, emaciated man cowering under the table in the middle of the room. What the fuck, Enri whispered to himself. The man looked out from under the table, his face harrowed and frantic. Help me, he gasped weakly, and burst into tears.

The stranger sat on the couch wrapped in a bathrobe, glass of water in his hands, his entire body trembling. Enri stood in front of the wall-mounted monitor facing the man, whose fingers curled around the glass like the legs of a spider, his gray eyes staring into nothing. Enri was nervous, but curious. Who the hell are you, he asked. The man flinched. I don't really know, he murmured without looking up. I don't know why I'm here. Now he raised his watery gaze to Enri. And I don't know where I am. Enri shook his head impatiently. Bullshit. Do you work in the bunker? I haven't seen you before. No, the man said. I don't work here. I've never been in this place before. He looked around as if trying to wrap his head around it all, then lowered his eyes. I'm sorry, but I really don't know where I am. Okay, Enri said, let's do this differently then. What do you remember? The man's spindly fingers whitened around the glass, his brow furrowed in concentration. I think, he began slowly, I was surrounded by machines. Great big machines, I'm not sure what kind. There was a woman. An old woman. I had to lie down in one of the machines. The man set his glass down on the table, pulled the bathrobe tighter around himself and shuddered. I don't know, his voice trembled. It's like I was dreaming.

Enri had to decide. Either he alerts one of the keepers and they take the stranger away, or he keeps the man's appearance a secret and tries to find out on his own who he is and what he's doing here. His more sensible side

told him to report the man, but a feeling, some impulse, stopped him. You'll stay here for the night, he told the man. You can sleep on the couch. I have to go to work in the morning, but we'll figure out what to do with you once I'm back. The man nodded timidly and thanked Enri for helping him. They both lay down to sleep: the stranger was out immediately, but Enri was tossing and turning for hours.

Enri woke to the blare of his alarm, and thought last night had been nothing but a strange dream. Then he went into the living room and saw the man asleep on the couch. Fuck, he grumbled, and got his things together quickly and quietly. Not wanting to wake the man, he skipped breakfast, stepped out into the corridor, and made his way to the briefing chamber.

Everything was business as usual. He greeted Zeb, passed through the translumination gate, found the location of that day's job – Room Y32 – and waited. He'd arrived earlier than usual and had to wait, but the bulb over the door finally switched to green, an analyst he didn't know very well walked out – Simon, maybe? – and Enri entered the room. He slid his card into the console, and was told he'd be watching the Losonczi family's home videos from 2029. Enri settled into the armchair, said he was ready, and the video started playing.

A dirty bedroom, yellow wallpaper peeling away in multiple places, an open wardrobe filled with heaps of wrinkled clothes, dishes on the floor, utensils, empty glasses, a woman on the bed, curled into the fetal position on the stained sheets, her hands and black hair covering her face as she shakes with sobs. The camera jumps around in fits and jerks. Why won't you say it, the man holding the camera askes. His voice seems calm, but his breathing is ragged and hitched. The woman is wearing gray panties, nothing else. She's sobbing, almost whimpering. The man holding the camera moves closer, walks around the bed, wrenches her head out from beneath her hair and arms. Say that you were a bad girl, the man holding the camera says. Say it, goddamnit, the man holding the camera shouts. The woman screams, cowering even further into herself. The man holding the camera slaps her bare shoulder with a black dildo. Say it, goddamnit, the man repeats, lashing the woman's body over and over. Mommy, a little boy's voice is heard off-camera. The camera turns, a brown-haired

little boy, maybe four years old, stands in the bedroom doorway rubbing his eyes. Didn't I tell you to stay in your room, says the man holding the camera, and makes for the boy.

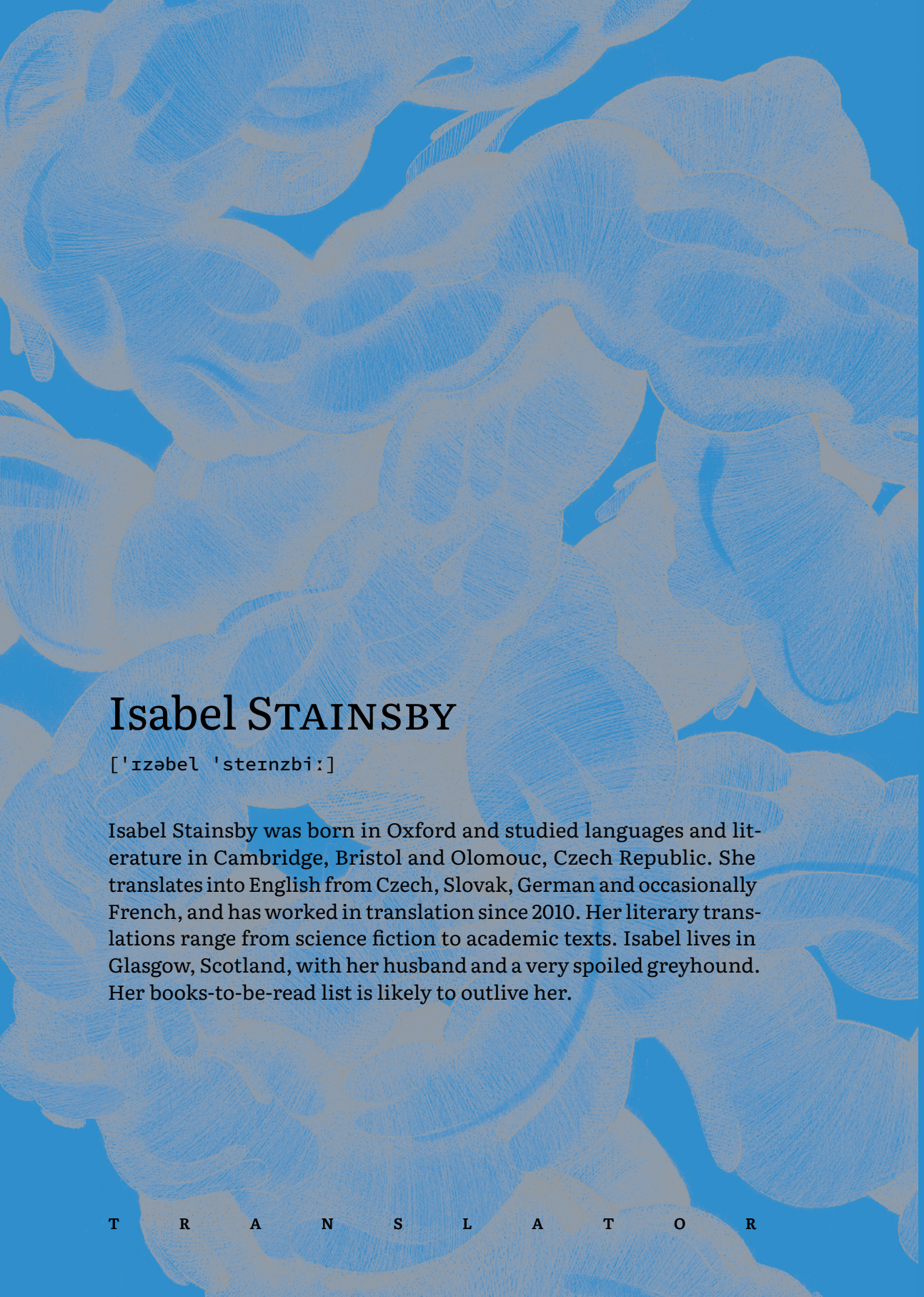
The first video stopped there, and Enri immediately pressed the red button. He knew perfectly well this was not his job, he didn't have to use the alarm for instances such as this, but he couldn't take anymore. He didn't know what would come next, what he would see in this family's home videos, and he didn't want to. He would happily be reprimanded, punished, anything so that he didn't have to keep watching.

The keepers appeared almost at once and led him from the room without a word. They took him along the corridor, past the projection rooms, all the way to the lift leading to leadership's office. They didn't speak, didn't ask questions, didn't say a word, just silently flanked him as the lift took them up. When they arrived, one of the hulking keepers gripped Enri's arm, forced him from the lift, and led him to leadership's office.

Enri had never been in leadership's office before, but he wasn't surprised it was entirely unlike the rest of the bunker. The walls were lined with crimson baize, the floor was coated with dark blue carpeting, silken and luxuriant. The enormous office, at least three times larger than the average living pod, sported a verdant, decorative fern in each corner. Enri's jaw dropped. I had never before seen a real, living plant, hadn't even known any still existed. He was so caught up in the ferns that he didn't even notice the three oversized oaken desks and the three stern-faced leaders sitting behind them. He only came to his senses when they started speaking. Enri 614620, yes? The keeper who had maintained his position by Enri's side nudged him. Yes, he said shakily, yes, that's me. The leader behind the middle desk was the one doing the talking, while the other two looked on attentively, eyebrows arched. To Enri, all three of them looked the same. Big round heads, clean-shaven, small flattened noses, frog-like mouths and nondescript, yet excessively frail, upper bodies. Like oversized infants. You signaled that you have found something in one of the videos, the central leader said. Yes, Enri replied. That was me, but I think I misunderstood something. The big-headed leader squirmed

in his seat and looked at his companions. How do you mean? Enri cleared his throat before answering. I don't think, sir, that this video contains the reason, the real reason, it's just that I saw something which… Enri fell silent. He sighed, lowering his eyes. Please, the leader said, continue. Enri shook his head, raised his eyes again. The truth is, sir, I don't believe we'll find the real reason for humanity's failure in these videos. In fact, I doubt there was any one such moment at all. The two big-headed leaders who had so far remained silent launched into indignant protests. The central leader waved them to silence. I see, he said, and scribbled something on the paper in front of him. So you do not believe? Enri drew himself up to answer: no, I do not believe. Very well, said the leader, and smiled. It was a terrible, monstrous smile. Then perhaps it would be best if we find Mr. Enri 614620 a different job. Surely you don't object? Enri wanted to say something, but the keeper beside him plunged an elbow into his ribs, leaving him gasping for breath and unable to speak.

The keepers took Enri back to his pod, practically flinging him into the living room. He only remembered the strange man as he started struggling to his feet. He was no longer on the couch. Maybe he's hidden in the bedroom, Enri thought. He hauled himself to his feet and walked the length of the tiny living space, but the stranger was nowhere to be found. Maybe I just dreamed him, he thought, lying down on the couch and switched on the monitor. They were showing another old animated film, *I Am a Tree*, in which they talk about how badly humanity fucked up the planet by systematically destroying the rainforests. Rainforests, Enri thought, and smiled. Plenty of trees there. Not just one. Not the last one. Rainforest. A stylized cartoon rabbit hopped into the frame and talked about what treasures the rainforests had been. Then it raised its stylized cartoon finger and warned the viewer: it's not permitted to cut these trees down. Enri closed his eyes. He could still hear the movie, but he was already far away in his dreams. He sensed it, saw it, the roots of the last tree stretching up over his head. He grasped for them, clung to them. And the roots took off with him, wrenched him away from this place, from this wretched bunker. In his dreams, Enri found himself once more in that meadow of green, in the cooling shade of the last tree.



FICTION

And She Was Still Alive

Isabel STAINSBY

['ɪzəbel 'steɪnzbiː]

Isabel Stainsby was born in Oxford and studied languages and literature in Cambridge, Bristol and Olomouc, Czech Republic. She translates into English from Czech, Slovak, German and occasionally French, and has worked in translation since 2010. Her literary translations range from science fiction to academic texts. Isabel lives in Glasgow, Scotland, with her husband and a very spoiled greyhound. Her books-to-be-read list is likely to outlive her.

TRANSLATOR

Uršuľa KOVALYK

['urʂuʎa 'kɔvalik]

Uršuľa Kovalyk is a feminist fiction writer, playwright and social worker. She was born in 1969 in Košice, eastern Slovakia and currently lives in the capital, Bratislava. She has worked for a women's non-profit focusing on women's rights and currently works for the NGO Against the Current, which helps homeless people. She is the dramaterapist of the Theatre With No Home, which features homeless and disabled actors. She has published collections of short stories, *Neverné ženy neznášajú vajíčka* (Unfaithful Women Lay No Eggs, 2002), *Travesty šou* (Travesty Show 2004), *Čisté zviera* (Pure Animal 2018), and two novel, *Žena zo sekáča* (The Secondhand Woman 2008), and *Krasojazdkyňa* (The Equestrienne 2013). Her books have been translated into English, Czech, French, Arabic, Slovenian Hungarian, Greek and Serbian.

AUTHOR

She spoke without thinking. Incidentally. Intuitively. When that shabby crow sitting on the kerb stabbed its sharp eyes into her face, she snatched the dry crust of bread that had been rolling around in her pocket for a week now and threw it at the bird. The crow instantly seized the crust and flew onto the garage roof. Róza quickly forgot about this incident. Her attention was fixed on her working day duties. Excel spreadsheets, Zoom meetings, statistics and writing final reports. She interspersed quick coffees with reading arguments on Facebook and following influencers on Instagram; she got irritated during phone calls with the mortgage advisor and micromanaged the luxury cosmetic sales assistant. A bit of luck meant she got to her pedicure appointment. Even then, however, she kept checking the latest tweets on Twitter. Browsing through mobile apps kept her very busy. The crazy tempo of the online world's algorithms cracked a whip and what did she do? She obeyed. She might grumble, sometimes, but ultimately the feeling of not having time for anything pretty much suited her. She could pretend that she was still fresh, efficient; she could ignore lapses in concentration and she could even ignore the confrontation with her ever more fatigued, ageing body. She could hide behind the constant stress, lose herself in the chaos of social media posts, busy herself with other people's problems, avoid uncomfortable silences, roar with laughter at morons… but the main thing was: she didn't need to pay attention to her surroundings. She saw nature as a backdrop to a good selfie, or a suitable holiday destination. Only for really brief moments did she notice anything unpleasant infiltrating through to her from the real world. For example: the dry shrubs beside the house, or the old plane tree that was felled to make way for the new car park. She was permanently spaced out. Twenty-four-seven online life on the most recent iPhone was beautifully paving her way – to hell. What's more, she even got lost on the path. Of course it didn't dawn on her immediately. Possibly it wouldn't ever have dawned on her, if it weren't for that scrawny crow that waited for her with relentless regularity at the same place. Waiting? Róza didn't know if crows could wait for someone. However, she felt those avid crow eyes even through the ever-thicker make-up that she painted on her ageing face every day. She tried to withstand those crow eyes, to ignore them, except that, after two days, she caught herself walking around the kitchen and looking for leftovers in the food cupboard. "What do crows eat?" she whispered to herself, and if she didn't have an important meeting, she

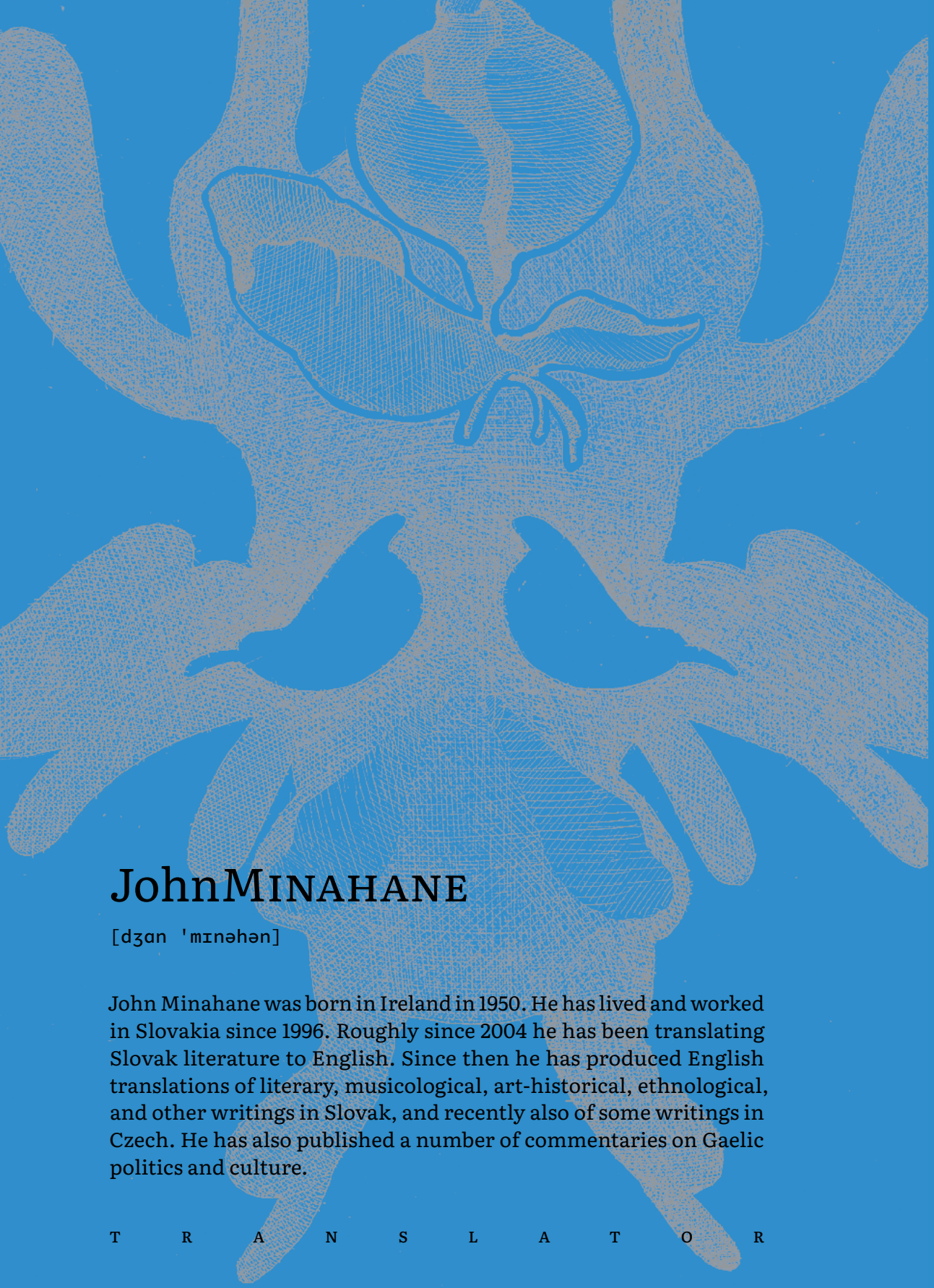
would definitely have googled some wisdom on the subject. Her mobile app warned her that she was running late and so she grabbed a greasy bag of walnuts and ran out of the door. The crow was sitting on the roof of the low garage adjoining the building, and cleaning its feathers. When it spotted Róza and the packet of walnuts, it flew above her, so closely that she felt the wings touch her head. The crow cawed and installed itself on a branch hanging over the path as high as Róza's shoulder. It looked her right in the face, observed her body language and tried to establish what this person was going to do for it. "Oh, but you're a self-aware bastard," said Róza, taking a walnut out of the bag. For a moment she held it on her outstretched palm, to see whether the crow would pluck up the courage to fly to her hand. But the crow didn't budge. It looked her right in the eyes and Róza was convinced that it was thinking: "You won't catch me with a walnut! You can't fool me!" Róza threw the walnut into the air and watched the crow make an elegant catch before it hit the ground. Then she threw another, then another, until the packet was completely empty. She stuck her headphones into her ears, started a podcast and set off for the bus stop. She'd once been in the habit of travelling by car too, but the scales and Róza's distaste for gyms had forced her to take at least this sort of exercise. She got onto the trolleybus, as she did every day, which other people with headphones also travelled on, gazing at their mobile displays. She sat down beside a window and happily watched the street full of cars as she listened, people hurrying here and there, the pulsating concrete jungle she so adored. The likeable female voice in her earphones talked about the benefits, impact and risks of artificial intelligence. Róza realised that she absolutely did not understand this artificial intellect thing and, what was worse, she didn't much want to deal with it. The female voice explained the effects of artificial intelligence on employment and job productivity, and she felt her belly tremble. With fear: that she wouldn't be able to master it, that she wouldn't understand it as quickly as her younger colleagues and ultimately that it would replace her. She didn't want to end up like her friend Jolika, whose digital skills started and finished on a push-button mobile. She couldn't be lost in this technological universe, she needed to keep up and master everything and look great and slog away and earn money and be IN and COOL! She needed to maintain a decent weight and a youthful image, and to keep herself on the labour market for as long as possible. Only the rapidly changing world of technology, and her spare

tyre, were wearing her out more and more. It wasn't that she didn't want to learn new things, but she found that she was slower and more exhausted than ever before, and her post-menopause brain had shifted its thinking speed to a much lower gear. "Am I getting old?" she asked herself frequently, but under her breath. She would never say this aloud, because maybe one of her female colleagues would directly and implacably tell her what they called her behind her back. Old tortoise! She preferred to convince herself that age was just a number and regularly bought food supplements for increased performance from the pharmacy. "Mutton dressed as lamb," she recalled a long-ago male colleague making a biting remark on their older, female boss. She'd laughed, then. She'd been young and old age seemed like a distant universe. Only: what if she'd just arrived in that universe? Anxiety gripped her throat again, so strongly that she almost choked, so she switched off the podcast and began to breathe slowly into her belly. Just as her therapist had advised her. She counted. Inhale, exhale, inhale again and when she'd properly exhaled, her heart stopped fluttering like a terrified canary in a cage, and she noticed the butterfly on the window. Róza never noticed insects. Of course, she cursed the annoying flies, ticks and mosquitoes, but she absolutely did not pay them any exceptional attention. What's more, there were considerably fewer insects, thanks to chemical sprays. However, this butterfly looked like a large, lemon-yellow hand. It crawled across the window, turned round, sometimes waved its wings, but it didn't fly away, not even when she gently poked it with her finger. Róza looked around to see if anyone else had registered it, only everyone was looking at their phones and nobody was paying attention to the butterfly. Nobody was even paying attention to Róza. Actually nobody was paying attention to anybody. They were all sitting there, disconnected from reality, connected to the virtual world, and that lemon butterfly was making the most of it. It crawled over the bus's windows, seats and rails. It meandered over the fire extinguisher, as self-assured as someone travelling without a ticket but sure they won't get caught. It tasted the red light gleaming above the door with a proboscis that reminded her of a spring in a mechanical watch and, at the moment the door opened, it flapped its wings and flew out. Róza felt faint without knowing why. It was as if part of her mind had flown away with the butterfly and was now flying around town, until this thought made her head spin. She almost fell out of the door as she got off. In her meeting, she couldn't concentrate on her colleagues'

report on the new application in corporate business. She felt strange. Her colleagues' voices were deadened, sentences lost all meaning and she felt she was sitting in a kind of mist and could see insects of the sort that don't usually appear in meeting rooms. An earwig lying on the dossier, a spider in the corner above the photocopier, or a moth resting on the wooden frame of the Best Company 2023 award. She was spaced, yet at the same time, she was very aware of the feeling. "It's definitely the menopause. Brain fog, hormone depletion, an old bag of my age seeing ghosts," she thought. The IT head dropped his pen and the sound brought her back to the present, but only for a minute, until she caught sight of a tiny fungus-gnat on his slicked-back hair. The gnat took off, circled around his face for a moment, then landed on a glass that still contained a little orange juice. "Are you thirsty?" asked the IT department head. Róza realised that she must look hypnotised by the glass. The grimacing faces of colleagues whispering to each other catapulted her out of her chair and, crying "Excuse me, I must go!", she left the room.

"I'm off my head!" she screamed at the porter, waving her right arm as if it were a wing instead. A gigantic black crow's wing that would lift her off the ground so she could fly to some Godforsaken place where there are no pin codes, computers or even Wi-Fi. She ran onto the street and spotted a gigantic flock of small silvery birds. They formed a pulsating shape in the sky and pointed her on her way. Twittering, the flock flew over the trees in the park to create another shape. The dark, pulsating cloud depicted a polar bear, a whale, a hippopotamus and a tortoise. Astonished, Róza watched this flying theatre. It was sending secret codes to our civilisation, as if they were saying: "We're here! You can kill us and destroy us, but we're still here. This is our home!" At the same time, she noticed how many animals were running around the town. A herd of wild boar at the crossroads, deer in the park, foxes in the rubbish bins and a family of hedgehogs on the tramlines. Weeds grew through the pavement, nettles covered construction waste and wind-sown trees grew bravely from roof-gutters. Wildlife was refusing to get out of people's way. It was reclaiming its territory, choosing to heal the planet we have contaminated. Róza remembered the news that had recently appeared in the press. A rhino on the streets of Mumbai,

a bear running around Liptovský Mikuláš, a whale in the Thames, orcas attacking a ship on the Spanish coast, an anaconda in a Wrocław toilet. "Nature is rebelling!" Róza shouted, but nobody paid her the slightest attention. People stared at their mobile device screens as if hypnotised; they were blind, deaf and completely disconnected from reality. They were unaware of their surroundings, even the bellowing Róza. She wondered if by any chance she was dead. Nobody had prepared her for death. After all, they hadn't learned anything about dying in school. She had no idea of what dying actually looked like, of what you feel, see, hear when you're dying, and most of all... when you start to be aware that you're dying. She pinched her face, but the pain in her cheeks wasn't enough to convince her she was alive. She stood in the path of a young man who was just hurrying along the pavement and monitoring an app on his mobile. Determinedly, she asked him: "Young man, tell me, am I dead?" The youth looked up at Róza so strangely, as if she was made of clear plastic, or glass. He looked through her, muttered something to himself and again immersed himself in the online world. "I'm one hundred percent dead," she rasped. Horror gripped her. She didn't want to be a zombie, bound to the street for all eternity. She started to walk home, fast. The exercise brought her down to earth a little. She began to reassess her situation. The panic faded and she even felt joy that she'd had a good death, after all, not like Aunt Gizi, who'd taken ten years to die in her bed in an old people's home. She slowed down near the residential building's garage. The crow was sitting on the roof and waiting. For a moment they looked at each other, then a raucous "caw" emerged from Róza's throat. The black bird launched itself into the air and its hard beak pecked her right in the head. With all its strength, right into the frontal bone, piercing a tiny blood vessel. She felt the warm blood flowing over her eyes and face. Completely shocked, she went blindly into her flat, without looking. She didn't even take off her shoes. She wanted to call an ambulance but found her mobile was missing. She headed into the bathroom for gauze to stop the bleeding. In the mirror she saw an old woman. She looked dreadful, and at the same time, wild, authentic. In a bloodied blouse, sweaty, with her make-up running and her hair tousled. The wound stung. The old woman roared with laughter in her bathroom. And she was still alive.



POETRY

Philosophical Diary

On Spiritual Gravity

JohnMINAHANE

[dʒɑn 'mɪnəhən]

John Minahane was born in Ireland in 1950. He has lived and worked in Slovakia since 1996. Roughly since 2004 he has been translating Slovak literature to English. Since then he has produced English translations of literary, musicological, art-historical, ethnological, and other writings in Slovak, and recently also of some writings in Czech. He has also published a number of commentaries on Gaelic politics and culture.

TRANSLATOR

Dana PODRACKÁ

['dana 'pɔdratska:]

She was born in Banská Štiavnica and was educated there, going on to study psychology at Comenius University. Podracká worked at the Psychological Institute and as an editor at the Slovenský spisovateľ publishing house. In 1991, she began work for the weekly literary journal Literárny týždenník, later becoming deputy chief editor. She published her first collection of poetry *Mesačná milenka* (*Moon lover*) in 1981; it received the Ivan Krasko Prize for best new work.

AUTHOR

The image is not a horizon.
George Didi-Huberman

1 The taxi moves along a forest road;
on a triangular traffic sign,
forelegs bent, a bounding deer
is beyond the touch of earth

Above the pine-tree crests
I can see a painting by René Magritte,
Reconnaissance without End (1963)

Time was when I used to think
of the higher consciousness as a being
I yearned for our encounter

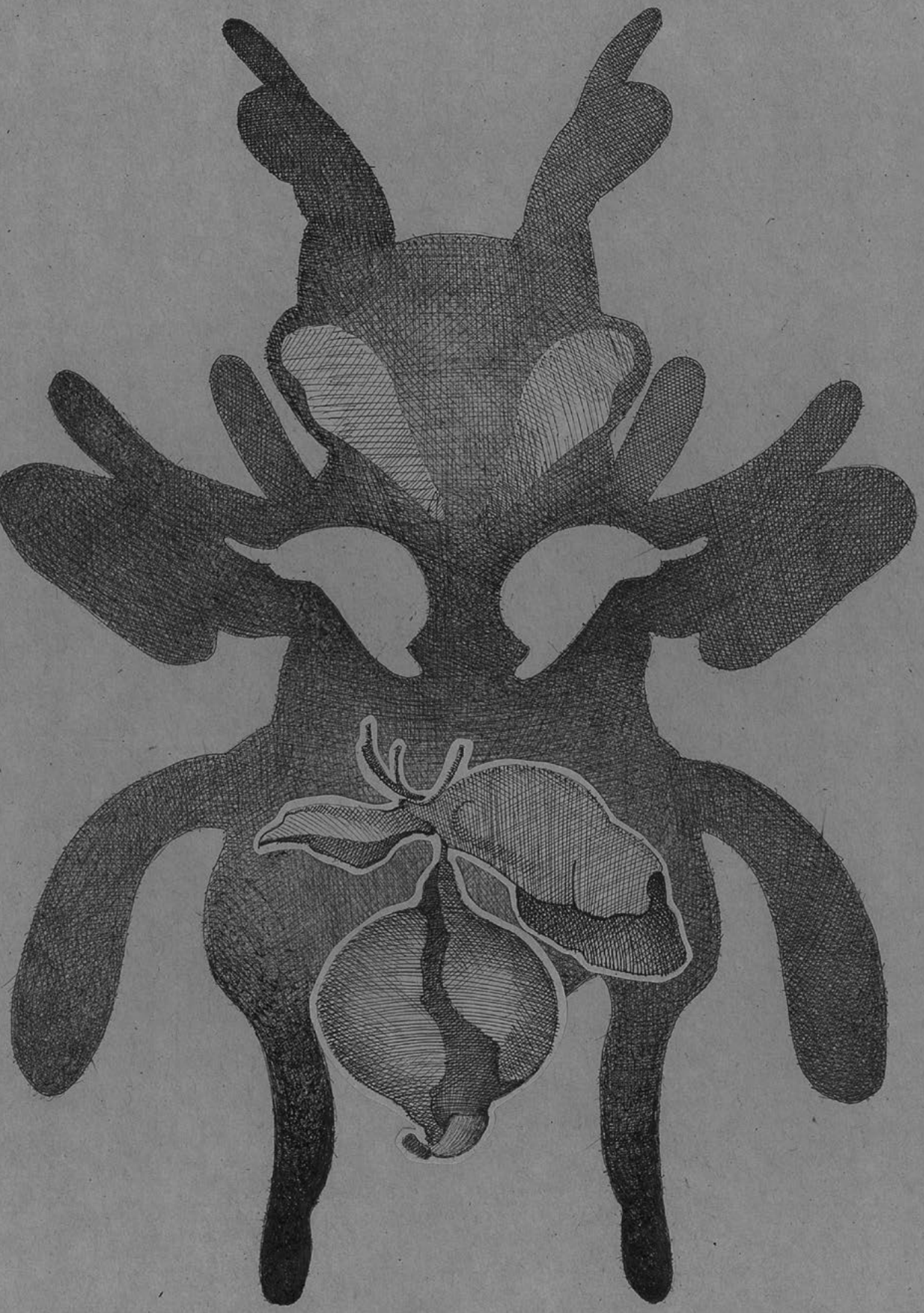
The interested deeds of the human person
are measured out in heaven

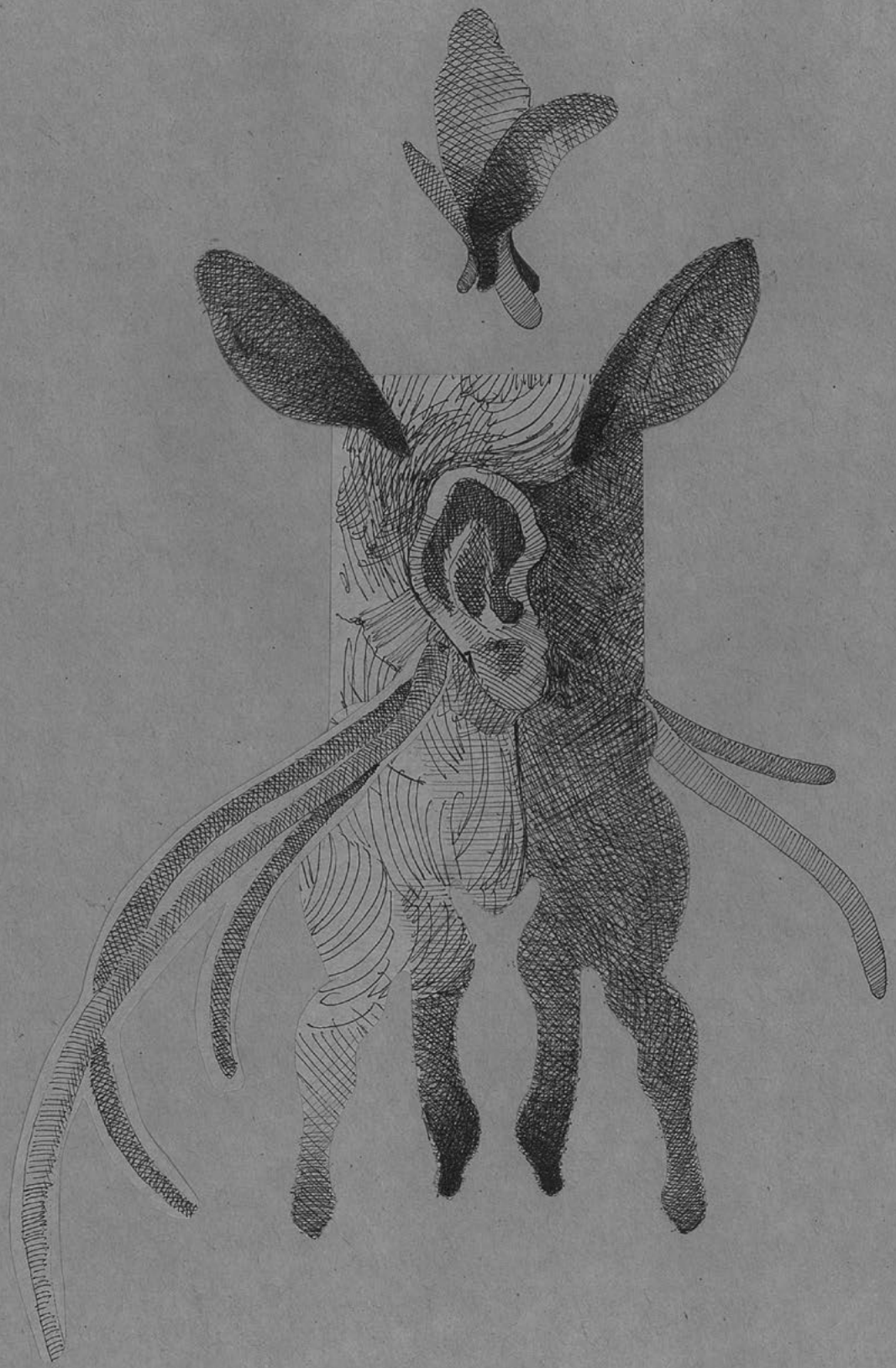
Now and then clouds envelop the pair of men
whose primary care is the spirit

One of them leans with a staff
upon a second horizon

2 A quiet pathway
Salamanders dare to emerge from under the bushes,
they weave a crown of scorch-marks

Mother and son at a trolleybus stop, between them
supporting a girl, they walk in trinity





They have come from the hospital, the girl was in for X-ray;
she is young and pale, her skin is luridly white,
one leg in her black shorts scarcely gets by the other

One might suppose (not knowing where they've come from)
that love had overwhelmed her, a love so boundless
as to be unendurable

They have to hold her up, or she would faint,
her feet would slide
on the soul's glassy lid

A pomegranate flares on a fruit stall

That girl recalls Matilda of Magdeburg († 1281),
who wrote a tractate about liquid light

I suffocate with cries: Heal yourself! Free yourself! Live!
Oh, Earth, mother Gaia, bear her up in flight, grant her
a high embrace

3 Banská Štiavnica is burning (18. 3. 2023)
Roofs ignite one from the next
Above the museum of love the balcony's burning downwards,
from the dome

The old wiring sparked,
phase-to-earth short-circuiting

The town bent its legs, leaped over the fiery site

Miss Pišlová fills buckets from the world's
longest love poem, *Marína*

In rembrandtian light she creates a cloudy place
where one can breathe

(15. 4. 2019 Notre-Dame burned, short-circuit too: in order
of probability, a raven pecked the wire and it sparked; and
the rafters caught fire from a cigarette butt)

An old world succumbs to ruptures,
but construction of the beginning is ever budding

Newton's apple
overturns the laws of falling from down to up

René's weightless boulder makes me tranquil,
hovering over the waters
Clear Ideas (1958)

Spiritual gravity is the spine of the cosmos

Olga Drenda
Forcing the Hand of Chance

Edited by Sean Gasper Bye

"Great fame is but a joke," say the Polish lyrics to the famous "Als flotter Geist" aria from Johann Strauss's *Der Zigeunerbaron*. The quote itself has become a popular colloquial catchphrase, and we might wonder whether it owes its popularity to something beyond its melodic properties and the operetta's lasting charm. We could also suppose that it reveals something about Polish beliefs about fame: that it is a fleeting gift from capricious fortune, offered to mortals carelessly and arbitrarily, rather than an earned status achieved through consistent work. It is as fleeting as an unexpected gift, so make the most of it while you can. Adopting such an approach offers an alluring key to understanding reality. It coulda perhaps help rationalize the inexplicable popularity of certain public figures who cannot be described as talented, people ostentatiously lacking in any qualities, seemingly perfectly run-of-the-mill, far from the awe-inducing stars of yesteryear—and yet they remain in the spotlight, enjoying a mass following. We might tell ourselves that it's merely nepotism and inherited money that fuel such careers, but this risks driving us toward bitter cynicism. When we think instead that there must be an element of cosmic randomness to this, a factor of pure accident, we concede that we can't understand anything with pure reason, we abandon objectivity for humility in the face of mystery, and perhaps we even leave ourselves a small margin for "what-if" thinking: who knows if a moment of fame could be granted to us one day as well?

If everything is truly in the hands of fortune, then no one can guess the outcomes. In *24 Hour Party People*, a brilliant depiction of the golden age of the Manchester music scene, Tony Wilson (played by Steve Coogan) is a bona fide Situationist in the position of an entertainment manager, the founding father of Factory Records and the Hacienda club. He encounters Boethius, the author of *The Consolations of Philosophy*, incarnated in the body of a homeless tramp. "Inconstancy is my very essence," says the philosopher, explaining the concept

of the Wheel of Fortune. "Mutability is our tragedy, but it's also our hope." Wilson and Factory's somewhat unbelievable career, translating the conceptual and subversive into the language of dance and pop, provides a striking example of the unexpected and unprogrammable forces of fame. Hardly anyone could have predicted that New Order, a band that emerged in the aftermath of the tragic loss of their frontman, would later record *Blue Monday*, one of the most successful dance singles of all time; that the morose postindustrial landscape of the North of England, haunted by economic and social collapse, would briefly become the heart of the ecstatic and the Dionysian; or that a bunch of crude, drug-loving street slackers discovered by Wilson could also be poetic and musical geniuses, contributing to Factory's heyday as well to its eventual bankruptcy. Wilson launched a fair number of unsuccessful projects on the way, but this only adds weight to the overall parable.

One might imagine people seemingly destined for fame—with effortless charisma or talent for the stage, as if following a mathematical formula—but who fail to make it nonetheless (the list of spectacular pop flops is always an informative read). There are also your everyday guys and gals who sometimes get their shot, and whose appeal actually happens to lie in their "relatability"—a promise offered to the common folk. And then, sometimes, we encounter cases of a rise to fame explicable only by very peculiar logic, escaping established expectations and evoking phrases redolent almost of the irrational, like *being in the right place at the right time*, or *a certain je-ne-sais-quoi*. A similar touch of luck seems to be true for songs; despite efforts to find an algorithm for a hit, the outcomes remain unpredictable. A song initially dismissed becomes a chart-topper; a track overheard in a film catches everyone's attention; a forgotten single enjoys an unexpected comeback; or a song gains popularity only after being covered by a different artist. The field of trend-watching, forecasting and insight is a powerful industry, but despite sophisticated

predictive models it still has a hard time grasping something so fluid, formless, ephemeral. Sometimes it simply appears as though the brief window for fame opens slightly wider, also sucking in incidental passers-by. These often prove to be the most interesting and remarkable of all.

A case of fame in spite of itself recently came to my mind when I was reminded of Gracjan Roztocki, an online personality from the earliest days of what used to be called "Web 2.0," and an outsider artist of sorts. A confectioner from Kraków with a distinctive mop-top haircut and a predilection for 1980s gym shorts, also a dedicated nudist, he initially did what many other creative amateurs did: quietly posted his works online, possibly with hopes of building a small but reliable following of friends rather than fans, and for fun rather than for fame. For many, this was the reason the blogosphere and YouTube existed at that time: for the sheer joy of ostentatiously unprofessional posting. His artwork mainly showed himself in nature, sometimes in the mountains, among horses, with a sunset in the background, or taking a dump. These male nudes, resembling a child's marker drawings, strike us as disarmingly innocent for works of this kind made by an adult artist; there's no shade of ambiguity here, let alone menace. They are what they are, in other words pure fun; certainly for Roztocki, and—in a pleasantly embarrassing way—also for the viewer. It's similar with his songs, which are sung in a naïvely earnest manner, simple and silly, and usually recorded on demand; Roztocki would receive requests from his viewers to make a song about their town or for a friend's birthday, and then record them on the spot. In the relatively small pool of online creativity in the late aughts, he was quickly discovered and rose to nationwide fame. "The Internet" was perceived back then as the home of weirdness, a treasure chest of unusual contemporary folklore, an area of the map where no normie dared to roam, and Gracjan met these expectations. TV appearances, awards and an advertising contract with

a retail chain followed. Unfortunately so did online vitriol: sometimes merely existing is enough to get a dose of it, especially when you dare to act silly in public. Yet this didn't discourage him from continuing his passion, and the audience's attention moving on to more controversial internet personalities probably helped him return to equilibrium. Over so many years of continuous internet presence, Roztocki—as a personality as well as an artist—remains impressively unchanged.

These days, deliberately crafting a "love-to-hate" online persona seems to be a conscious strategy for acquiring a following in the increasingly crowded, fast and noisy environment the contemporary internet has become; this increasing ruthlessness is a competitive tool for capturing any of users' shortening attention span. But it must be said that the slower days of the millennial internet, for all the geeky nostalgia it can evoke today, loved a negative spotlight. Gracjan Roztocki was a contemporary of Rebecca Black (of "Friday" fame) and *Teen Mom*'s Farrah Abraham, two unprofessional singers and media personalities selected for mockery by then-powerful celebrity gossip outlets. The difference is that both were seeking actual fame to a certain extent, just of a different kind. Black, then only thirteen years old, released her song "Friday" on ARK Music, a company offering stock compositions (usually of poor quality) to unprofessional performers. For a rather forgettable piece of vanity publishing, the song quite surprisingly—as if someone were trying to test "the power of the internet"—became an overnight sensation, in a negative sense. Perhaps people felt that their orgy of sneering or overt aggression was justified because it was addressed at an impressive combination of ineptitudes (or, in a worse scenario, at the thirteen-year-old behind it). Everything about the song was indeed bad, but it's instructive to look at the response of mass rage and the perceived obviousness of it ("first time online?") in retrospect. "The worst song ever made" and its performer

weren't designed to be hateable; they were made so from the outside. Farrah Abraham, on the other hand, possibly sought notoriety—which ultimately led her to somewhere unexpected. Her album *My Teenage Dream Ended* (2012), earnestly confessional, but performed and produced in an extremely unskilled manner, was probably intended as an act of autotherapy, but ended up as an accidentally avant-garde work. Abraham's music, meant to sound like basic autotuned pop but in effect closer to witch house, noise and haunted EDM, caught the attention of electronic music critics, causing an unexpected glitch and forcing us to revise our criteria of what may be seen as challenging and innovative music. The questions it posed could be perceived as nearly Duchamp-esque. Can an avant-garde work of art be created without knowledge of art or the intention of subversion? Can it be so expansive? Can one "think outside the box" without trying to do so? And whose head is really stuck tight inside the box if only certified avant-gardists are to be approved of? The clumsiness of the album, combined with Abraham's lack of sophistication, could have singled her out as Rebecca Black II, but an unexpected detour occurred, forcing this reality show star to be taken at least semi-seriously.

Such a lucky detour lies only one step away from, as Genesis P-Orridge once called it, forcing the hand of chance. While fortune's decisions might be impossible to predict, there's certainly more than one response to them, and even the chance of outwitting fate. Rebecca Black adopted an old school patience-and-development strategy, deciding to learn and releasing subsequent records, which eventually led her to the status of a "proper" performer. Gracjan Roztocki, meanwhile, still sells his paintings, some of which come with impossibly high price tags for artwork in Polish conditions. If this isn't a strange NFT-like scam, then it must be yet another instance of blatant fun. Great fame can be indeed a joke, but it really depends who has the last laugh.

Justyna Kulikowska
Who is Lil Miquela?

Translated by Sean Gasper Bye

Did you know that to give in to doubt means to keep certainty
on a short leash, reins or lead. Certainty can be unruly,
like: a rotten system, a mother tongue, all power, and the despair
that will become that power's lot. We ought to be vigilant. Forgive me,

I should correct myself: we must be vigilant, meaning watch out, not sleep,
or close our eyes inhumanly rarely—that's the definition of vigil
the dictionary dictates to me—which is only possible for machines
(permissible in its own meaning, since meaning, too, can be unruly).
Treacherous as the realness of your face, pixels devoured by
millions, for millions, and earning millions. Did you know that I'd like to

be able to:

generate faces on which pain won't be a flaw.
Generate a stomach that digests corruptible power.
Generate despair, its back unbent under the attempt to describe.

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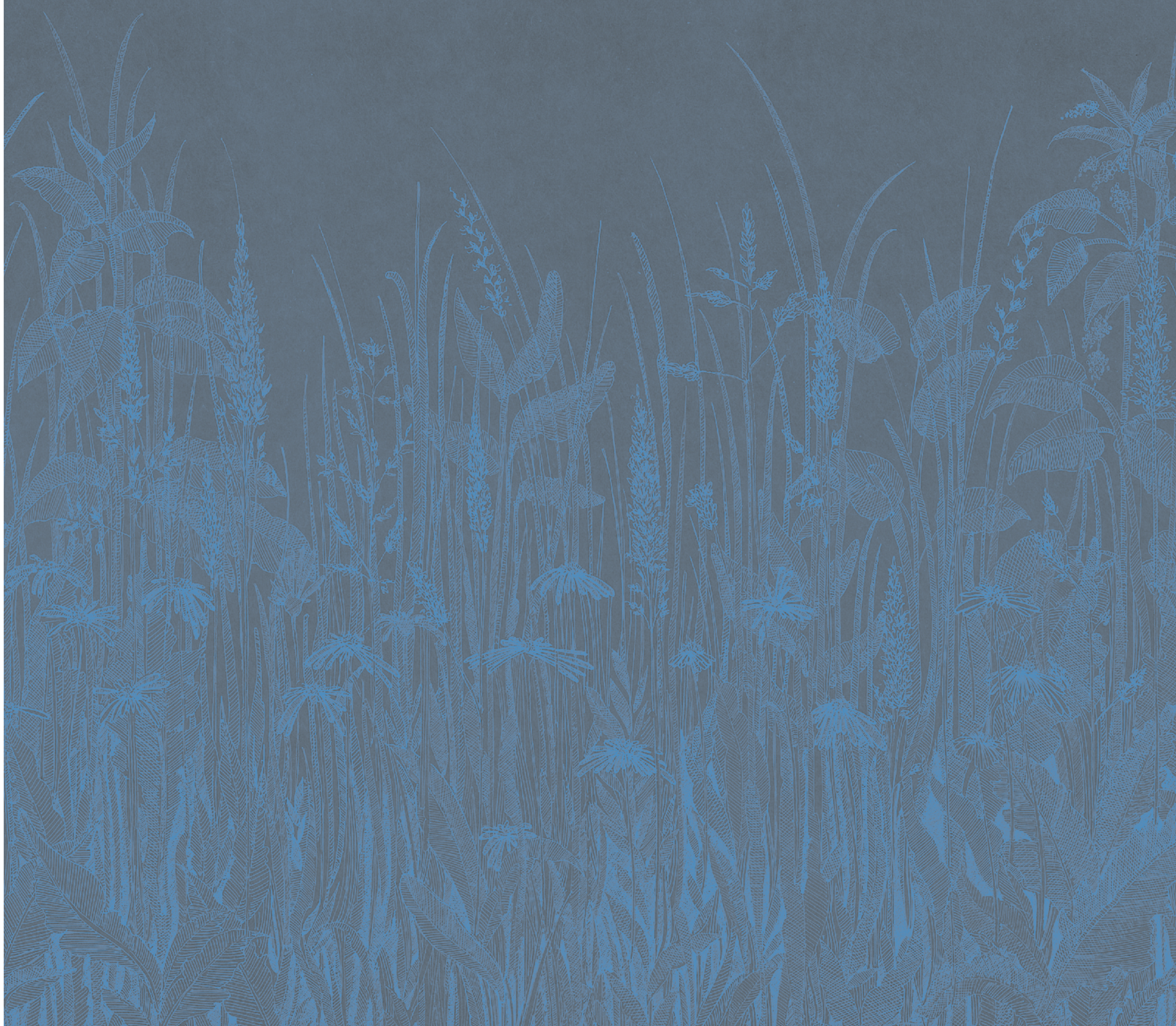

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