
GABRIELA BABNIK

GORAN VOJNOVIĆ

excerpts translated by:

Hannah Bryant, Katherine Edwards and Olivia Hellewell

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Gabriela Babnik, born 1979, is an author, literary critic and researcher of African literature. Her first novel, *Koža iz bombaža (Cotton Skin)*, received an award for the best novelistic debut of 2007, her second novel *V visoki travi (In the Tall Grass)* was nominated for the Kresnik Prize in 2009, and she published her third novel, *Sušna doba (Dry Season)*, in 2011. In her novels the European (or more specifically Slovene) world meets with Africa, a meeting which the author presents with an exceptional sense for language and detail.

GABRIELA BABNIK

excerpts from the novel *V visoki travi*
(*In the Tall Grass*)

In the Tall Grass
from the Chapter 1 – *Advice for Good Love*

I used to dry my hair in the cold air and I didn't know which side of the sky to watch. But that morning I had got up early, so I could go to the hairdresser's. I didn't want to call Zvezdana or any of the women with unrealistic names and hands, which always shone with nail polish. I wanted a real hairdresser. One where you can see yourself in the adjustable mirrors around his salon. Where you see yourself a lot skinnier than you actually are. A hairdresser who has a Mohawk because it's fashionable. And who sends his androgynous assistant to get tea with milk, juice, a morning whiskey, and at the same time opens the drawer full of money. That day, I had to be pretty. Tidy. Prim and proper, as they say. When my husband's mother was lying on the bed, her skin entirely loose, and I was wetting her lips with a cotton swab, I was already thinking about which shoes I was going to wear to her funeral. Gold or black. But if chose gold ballet pumps, then everything would have to be black. A black, tailored suit, a black pleated scarf around my neck and small diamond earrings with gold trimming. But the tights' seam doesn't go well with pumps. I know, she was lying on the bed, on those dingy sheets, and I was thinking about everything but what was appropriate. I am guilty and I won't even deny it. I'm not going to say that sometimes I can't control my leaping thoughts. I'm not going to say that she wanted to die, that she decided to do so, and that there was no point, then, in pretending that I was sorry or how hollow I would feel from then on.

My daughter was crying by the side of this prison bed. Outside spruce trees and other such things were growing, and my adult daughter was crying. Maybe I was thinking about the gold and black pairs of shoes to hide the veil of questions gathering inside me. Why do we shed tears when someone leaves? Water won't change anything. Water is a selfish thing. So as to not blame my daughter, and have inappropriate words flow out of my mouth, I preferred to think about the ballet pumps. Although in the end I didn't decide on them. I'd paid too much money for them, that much was clear, but every time I put them on my feet I just didn't want to take them off. My ankles shimmered from the ancient gold. My husband's mother might have liked them. The door handles of her wardrobe were the same colour. I'll never forget how the two of them went to town in the dark green Peugeot and bought that wardrobe. Her and Ivan. He was big like my husband, but just had more bristly hair

and larger ears. Sometimes it felt like he was about to fly off with those ears. But he didn't, at least not alone. He always walked around with her. To the strawberry fields, to the forest, to the quarry. She would stand there, hand on her hip, trying to convince him gently, and Ivan was quiet. Then he would go and do it. He did everything she wanted done. Every day when she went to the spa, he scrubbed the floor and picked flowers. Hawthorn, wild roses, daisies, dandelion heads. And when she returned, the room suddenly became silent. Like those still-life paintings that get hung on the wall.

I had a hunch that she wanted to go for this reason too. Because Ivan was no longer with us. Hadn't been for a long time. She was too lonely. When you're with someone for close to forty years, you know his inner workings, the lines on his hands and on his feet, and then suddenly this is gone. There is only a white day, curtained windows and an empty table in the kitchen.

When I was wetting her lips, she blinked several times. As if she was waking up and falling back asleep. It was the only thing that I allowed myself to think. That, with softened skin like a ploughed field, she was asleep. Her hair was sticking to her forehead and my daughter moved it to the side. With her hand, just like that. I don't know if it disgusted her – probably not, or she wouldn't have done it. I only told her to wipe her own tears, because otherwise her grandmother's whole face would be wet. Although it was already too late, her cheeks, eyelids and even her neck shone with the salty, sea-scented secretion. Oh, my poor daughter, who sadly thought that her grandmother could be summoned back, could take back her decision. Whatever they say, whatever disease they name, uterine or liver cancer, that's what she decided. To go after him, after Ivan, wherever he might be.

And I also mentioned this at the funeral. It was raining or it just seemed that way to me because of the tears on my face and I stood there with my hair up, which in the end I'd had done by the androgynous assistant and not by the one with the drawer full of money. Someone was holding an umbrella over my updo. He probably wasn't doing this because of the wind. And it was good that I hadn't put the ballet pumps on.

The pumps would have to be for later. Red fish-bones were dangling from my ears, the black suit was cinched in at the waist and I was talking about the decision of the deceased. First of all, I explained how she had lost her parents at a young age, how she once got lost in the snow on the way to school, how she didn't like fish, because they were poor in her youth and she and her brother ate too much of it. I didn't mention her love for Ivan because their attachment was generally known. Somehow it was there, like milk in tea, like the gold handles on the wardrobe. And as I spoke, I wasn't thinking about anything. The words were flying around like curved aerial animals, landing on people's clothes, on the heads of trees, on the corpses of clouds. I could think about how the two of us used to drink tea at that very table. From her, and nobody else, I learned how to drink tea. I could also think about how the decision changed her face.

She aged like someone who loved and dreamt at the same time, but this decision took everything away from her. Her grace, her short hair, even her stubbornness. It watered her down, tore her to pieces, and it left her hollow in the middle of the hospital room with the television switched off. However, I didn't think about that at the time. I repeated over, over and over again, the sentences in my head, so that they changed into wild animals and didn't leave the room for anything.

Sometime towards the end I recalled that the man holding the umbrella was my husband. With big, but not too big, ears. He was holding the umbrella and crying because his mother had died. Or because of something else, I don't know exactly. Our thoughts rarely overlapped. If they had overlapped, then he would have known it would have been better to close the umbrella. Despite my hairstyle and suit and black patent-leather shoes. If he ever did understand, even just once, he would hug me around the waist, and together we would fly away. We would stick ourselves to the sky, above the spruces, above the corpses around which people were weeping weep, above the children who were thinking by the grave about how someone can get lost in the snow on the way back from school. But there he was, standing in his sodden shoes, clutching onto the handle of the umbrella.

translated by **Katherine Edwards**

In the Tall Grass
from the Chapter 3 – *The Flight of a Bird above the Snowy Field*

“So then your mum shot you,” he said, when we drove to get meat one evening. The sky was visible through the car window, full of veiny clouds covering the moon.

“What?”

He repeated the question and added that he was thinking about those dreams about the fire.

“Oh, that, I’d completely forgotten about it.” Then my hand moved towards his hair. I didn’t entirely understand the situation that I found myself in. Sometimes I hated this man of mine, at other times I felt an endless longing towards him. He knew how to forget the most important things and remember the smallest of minutiae. Just like now. “No, she didn’t”. I didn’t want to say any more than that, I didn’t want to waste words. Maybe it would have been better if he hadn’t asked me at all, if it had been left unsaid between the two of us. My mum with a gun (who knows where she’d found it) pointing at my temple, then no bang. I don’t remember anything else. And in truth, an ocean of time has already since past.

He looked sideways at me and shook his head. He didn’t like me bothering him whilst he was driving, and least of all when we were going to get meat. In his head he was calculating how much we needed: twenty, thirty, fifty kilos. For the workers, for himself, Laura, and me. The man, small and stocky with a moustache, was supposedly keeping the cow under special conditions. Some vitamins here, some vitamins there, and it wasn’t even too expensive in the end. When I looked away, which happened to be towards the hands of his equally fat wife, he squeezed one more, two more salamis into the boot. So that we’d come again next year.

“I will breed the best cow,” he promised whilst with his pink tongue he licked his lips. From afar they were reminiscent of Laura’s heart-shaped hills, of those blood-flushed lines on a dark face. Once again I looked away; in the right-hand corner of my eye the wife of the breeder furiously waved behind the car. By the way, it seemed to me, almost unbelievably, that on nearly every nail she had white spots (as a sign of vitamin

deficiency) and that on every surface of the sky she saw only thin blotches, left behind by the veiny clouds. Not a single moon.

“Why don’t you like me touching you?” I said on the way back, when weighed-down with beef, we drove along the street. “Not even when making love...”

He tapped on the steering wheel. I had to wait so long for his reply that I’d forgotten the question in the meantime. Up until the point when he came around the bend and completely defeated me with unexpected flying words.

“I’d rather not do this now.”

“Why not?”

“Lidija, don’t be difficult...”

I don’t know where I read that in the long-term love should be like *a shop window, decorated with wonderful dresses in blue and white*. Just at that moment Laura took them out of the wardrobe and tried them on. She left the zip undone at the back, as her hands were too small to reach that far round. But they were nevertheless big enough to apply pale pink make-up to her face and a thin black line right under her eyelids. We lost ourselves in this gaze for some time.

She hadn’t received my mother’s make-up skills through me; the two of us had to learn this from Lili. When I had wanted to become independent, and I applied light purple to one half of my eyelid and black to the other, she took some cotton wool (only Bernard licked his finger) and wiped it off. “Just a little, not all at once,” she said softly. I wasn’t so soft with Laura, though, when we returned. She didn’t know how to put the dresses and jewellery back properly, especially not the pearls. If she had known, I wouldn’t have pulled her hair. A few times he had actually come between us, but when he didn’t intervene this time it made no difference. It was just that every single time she was at home by herself she had to unlock my wardrobe.

“I have to tell you something...”

I leant my hands on my thighs, so that it would be easier to outline my thoughts.

“What, that I’m dishonest?”

“Yes, you are. For more than ten years you have been asking me about my dreams, you always slander my mother, and you don’t know how to explain to me why I’m not allowed to touch your hair, or especially your stomach...”

He uttered the sentence which followed so innocently that I almost started to hate him again.

“You make me laugh, you know.”

I puffed like a Trojan horse, eternally torn. Back in the boot waited half a cow, which was going to need chopping up this evening. Bags to open, pieces of paper to be cut up and on the smallest bits to be written in slow, capital letters, STEAKS, GOULASH, SOUP. That was our only real family ritual. Laura leant on the kitchen counter, drew lines with a compass, tried the marker pen (a pencil isn’t permanent enough for deep freezing), her small - too small - hands pushed through the meat, whilst I was responsible for the bags. At Sophia Loren’s house they’ve no doubt already bought that kind of machine which sealed all that was worth sealing all by itself, but at our house everything was done by hand. And when I noticed how thoroughly he cut the pieces for the GOULASH section, I felt completely sorry for myself. This, something which he could not stand about himself, he could not afford me either. There would be no more sucking of nipples. There would be no more tongue-strokes upon the stomach.

“I would be tempted to say that this has a lot to do with your relationship with your mother.”

That, I know, I should not have said. He hadn’t seen her for years. Ever since I told him how Ivan drew my legs up into a triangle, since I blurted

out how I ought to return to that Peugeot seeing as he hardly ever touches me (desire betrayed me, nothing more), he took a knife and cut the cord that linked him with his parents. Maybe he cut that part, the part which linked him with his mother, with an even greater fervour. It crunched, his tears crunched so loudly, that not even the rain rasping on the roof of the car could have drowned them out. So I closed the window and left a crack open at the top so that I wouldn't forget to breathe.

“No doubt you know better than I,” his tongue hissed.

translated by **Olivia Hellewell**

Goran Vojnović, born 1980, has worked on a number of short films both as a director and screenwriter. In 2010 he directed his first feature film, *Piran-Pirano*. His 2008 literary debut *Čefurji, Raus!* (*Southern Scum, Go Home!*) uses inventive language to present the lives of immigrants from the former Yugoslav republics now living in Ljubljana's Fužine district. The novel was well received, and was awarded the Prešeren Fund Award and the Kresnik Prize for Novel of the Year. The novel has been translated into several languages, including into English in October 2012. Vojnović's second novel, *Jugoslavija, moja dežela* (*Yugoslavia, My Country*) speaks of the tragic fates of individuals, the search for identity and the collapse of countries which were once united.

GORAN VOJNOVIĆ

excerpts from the novel *Jugoslavija, moja dežela*
(*Yugoslavia, My Country*)

column *Mednarodna skupnost, to smo mi*
(*We, the International Community*)

Yugoslavia, My Country
from Chapter 4

The day I first heard the word “deployment”, my mother also switched off for the first time. I don’t know exactly what my father said to her because after we returned from the market, he didn’t allow me to go home with him, rather, he ordered me to play in the courtyard until he called me for lunch. This was the first and the last order I received from Colonel Nedeljko Borojević in my life and it was uttered in such a manner that there was no doubt of his military nature. So with not a word of protest, I obeyed.

I loitered around aimlessly, while father passed on the terrible news to mum that we would move to Belgrade that night. When I came home an unforgettable silence already reigned over the flat, and so ever since then, whenever I am in an empty flat, I always turn on the television or radio first of all so as not to accidentally hear the drone of the refrigerator, and thus remember the scene in which my mother silently pulled out her clothes from the wardrobe and carried them over to the bed. There was one lone plate of macaroni with mincemeat on the table, already sprinkled with parmesan, which made it quite clear that I should eat up and ask no questions. My father said to me in passing that we would go to Belgrade for a while because of his job, and that my mum would pack for me. When he passed me the next time, he added that I could go outside again or watch the television, but that in any case I shouldn’t hang around the flat as it was necessary to clean everything before we left.

In the evening the telephone rang and father, with the voice of a television presenter, announced that the military truck would be in front of the shop in ten minutes, and that we should start to carry our things outside. My mother began to cry and father tried to hug her and place her hand on his shoulders just as he had done when we found out that her cousin Gregor had died in a traffic accident. But she pushed him away this time, grabbing the largest suitcase in the hallway and began to drag it towards the door. Father tried to pull it out of her hands and insisted that it was too heavy, that she shouldn’t be so stubborn, but in one single stroke she carried it out, down the stairs to the front of the block of flats, then from there to the car park in front of the shop, where she dropped it, clearly exhausted, as it struck the floor with a thud.

She then sat on it and continued to cry while father, slightly confused, carried the remaining things out of the flat, and said to me that it was best to stay with my mother, in case she needed anything.

Our neighbour Enisa, who would always see what happened in front of her house, no matter the time of day or night, suddenly showed up in front of the shop and quite literally came running over to say goodbye to us, wrapped carelessly in her dressing gown and wearing her husband's shoes. Father tried to convince her that we would soon return, but Enisa only nodded and repeated: "*Good luck to you and may good fortune follow you, wherever you are.*" She then kissed me on the cheek and the forehead and said to me that I should be well-behaved and obey my mother and father, so that in such a situation they would not have problems with me too. I didn't really know exactly what kind of situation this was, but rather than explaining, she held me firmly, saying: "*Oh, my poor sweet child!*" and started to cry even more than my mother.

The truck finally arrived and the driver Shkeljqim greeted us all in the military fashion, and then started to load our suitcases and boxes into the boot. Mother finally stepped away from her suitcase and hugged Enisa, and so they were both crying, watching how Shkeljqim and father, working in unity with one another, passed our luggage piece by piece. When father passed Shkeljqim the last rucksack he instantly started to tighten the tarpaulin, something shook me and I felt as though I were about to cry. All of a sudden, something came over me, a bad feeling: that my summer was over before it had even started, and that father would no longer take me to Zlatne Stijene where I could jump into the water from rocks of different heights.

When we turned from Vitezićeva Street onto Omladinska Street, Shkeljqim said that as he was there, we need not stay awake and that we may as well start to sleep because the journey in his "Speedy Gonzales" would be long and tiresome. He was a happy young man, who talked a lot and laughed even more, but we remained quiet and watched for the last time, as we passed the theatre, the Golden Gates and the Arena. Soon it was my birthplace, just a heap of remote lights

scattered across the dark horizon. The lights my mother had so loved to tell me about, but which she now turned away from, so that she wouldn't be able to see them.

translated by **Hannah Bryant**

***We, the International Community
column from Dnevnik***

Whenever someone utters a sentence that begins with “*the international community strongly condemns...*”, I’m tempted to bury the very same international community alive under tonnes of its hypocritical bureaucratic convictions, and to somewhere lock up all of the Annans and Ki-moons of this world and to read to them aloud, mercilessly, all of the press releases which have been written over the course of the United Nations’ history. I’m tempted to read them, slowly and deliberately, from the first letter to the last, all their utterances of deep regret, about how someone, somewhere, only a short time earlier, has brutally killed dozens of children and about how time and time again they are shocked and appalled that someone could feel more sorry for these poor guys than for the victims of which they speak.

Sentences that begin with “*the international community strongly condemns...*”, when translated into layman’s terms, can only mean that the international community is not actively participating in these crimes, as opposed to crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, to which in general it doesn’t have any objections and doesn’t (yet) plan on hindering the work of these criminals.

And whenever that same international community announces that it is “increasingly concerned” due to the violence in Syria, I am all the more enraged because I know that at least another thousand people will have to die before the international community becomes “seriously concerned.”

Because for the international community, whether you believe it or not, there exists something which they officially term an “acceptable level of violence”(which could be translated as violence which only affects the victims of said violence, and not, as far as I know, the feelings of some Monacan princess or the atmosphere on French golf courses), and for this reason you should not be surprised if from the mouth of this very same international community you hear that “the violence in Syria is exceeding tolerable levels” (this of course does not mean that any one of us can start upon any of their visible or invisible representatives with ‘tolerable levels’ of violence, and anyway such wishes must always be reined in).

You can therefore probably understand why, after recent reports, I need at least one or two hours to calm myself down and to come to terms with the fact that our twisted international community is less interested in the murder of Syrians than it is in England's European Cup team, the backstage happenings of the Eurovision Song Contest, Mark Zuckerberg's honeymoon, the success of Men in Black III, the casino antics of JP Morgan, Kim Kardashian's future plans and thousands of other things which, unlike the Syrian tragedy, have a visible impact upon the growth and decline in value of stock market shares on the biggest global markets (and this is the real trigger for concern amongst the international community, which is not something that needs circulating, should there be an interested public audience).

The international community, just like a large majority of its members, lives in increasing fear of its own fat backside, and just like we all would rather these days see Homs bombed to smithereens than to take a half-degenerate French-German train, it is easier for the international community to accept, and to live through, the cremation of Syria, rather than a bankrupt Greece.

Because we, the international community, the armchair humanitarians, who because of events in Syria are day by day "increasingly concerned", will occasionally "widely condemn the current events" publicly over a cold beer, and we loudly and clearly strive for "peaceful solutions of this complex communal dispute", but from here on in tremble once again over our government's austerity measures and wake up sweating due to the predicted drop in GDP for 2013.

The sad but truthful fact is that as long as the war in Syria isn't going to affect our wallets and they aren't going to charge us for every Syrian death personally, every one of us, just like the bureaucrats in the New York Palace of the USA, has thought to ourselves that the violence inflicted by members of the Assad regime upon its own innocent civilians is still within "tolerable boundaries".

And for that reason, when someone utters a sentence which begins with "*The international community strongly condemns...*", I really get

angry at myself, because I am once again appalled and aware that I am just as concerned about the fate of unfortunate Syrians as I am about the fate of the Slovenian Film Centre. And every time that I see the United Nations, which like a Miss World candidate with a moronic smile calls for world peace, this is exposed not only in my own powerlessness, but also in all of my indifference and ignorance.

That's why it is necessary to understand all of this message for the public, who in the name of the anonymous international community "condemn the massacre of Homs", "increase pressure upon the Syrian regime" or in mid-May 2012 "fear a civil war", as a small but deserved punishment for us all, the insensitive members of this famous humanitarian majority, who would very much rather deal with personal and, in life and death terms, completely banal problems.

For this reason all of us, in our own social autism, deserve to hear at least one article in the evening news with Kofi Annan in the headline.

translated by **Olivia Hellewell** and **Katherine Edwards**

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Beletrina*



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

EMBASSY OF SLOVENIA IN LONDON

Nottingham, March 2013

*I used to dry my hair in the cold air
and I didn't know which side of the sky to watch.*



*All of a sudden, something came over me, a bad
feeling: that my summer was over before it had even started.*

