

## BLATNIK, Andrej



**Andrej Blatnik**, born in 1963 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where he studied Comparative Literature and Sociology of Culture, received his Masters Degree in American Literature. He started his artistic career playing bass guitar in a punk band, was a free-lance writer for five years, and is now fiction editor with Cankarjeva založba, one of the largest Slovene publishing houses. He is editor-in-chief of the literary magazine *Literatura*. He has published two novels, *Torches and Tears*, 1987, and *Closer to Love*, 1996, and four collections of short stories: *Bouquets for Adam Fade*, 1983, *Biographies of the Nameless*, 1989, *Skinswaps*, 1990, and *Law of Desire*, 2000. His stories and books have been translated into a number of languages, and he has won many major Slovene literary awards. He has given public readings in many countries and received various fellowships. He enjoys travelling, always on a shoestring.

**Andrej Blatnik** se je rodil leta 1963 v Ljubljani, kjer je študiral primerjalno književnost in sociologijo kulture. Magistriral je iz ameriške literature. Svojo umetniško pot je začel kot kitarist pri punk ansamblu, pet let je bil svobodni pisatelj, zdaj pa dela kot urednik za leposlovje pri Cankarjevi založbi. Je glavni urednik revije *Literatura*. Izdal je dva romana, *Plamenice in solze*, 1987, in *Tao ljubezni*, 1996, ter štiri zbirke kratke proze: *Šopki za Adama venijo*, 1983, *Biografije brezimnih*, 1989, *Menjave kož*, 1990, in *Zakon želje*, 2000. Njegove zgodbe in knjige so bile prevedene v vrsto jezikov, dobil pa je tudi številne slovenske literarne nagrade. Prozo je bral v mnogih državah, prejel je številne štipendije, med njimi Fulbrightovo. Rad potuje, zmeraj z minimalnimi stroški.

ANDREJ BLATNIK

## *Too close together*

*out of your shirt, PT*

The man sits in the gloom of his hotel room, dipping his fountain pen into a solution in a saucer. He painstakingly draws additional lines to the stamp on a photograph. He thinks about the ink, how it will dry overnight, he worries whether it really will be indistinguishable from the original. At least at a precursory glance. Yes, that's what matters. He lifts the photo to the dying light and thinks: That's what matters. Matters enormously. It must look as though nothing has been changed. As though no-one has been anywhere near this photo.

A woman's face in the picture. The woman is young, her eyes glitter, even the photographer's inability to take a focused picture could not hide that. This incompetence angers the man more than necessary. He looks at the picture and wonders about the lines he has added to the stamp: Has he drawn them finely enough? Close together enough? He does not ask himself why he is doing it. As is usual in this kind of story, the face reminds him of another woman, a woman he has long been trying to forget, naturally.

There comes a cautious, muffled knock on the door; the man gets up, clears away the passport and the pen, steps to the door and opens it a crack, blocking it with his foot. Through the sliver of light coming from the corridor a woman's face pushes in. The same face, now all in focus, alive, real. The man takes his foot away, the woman enters. She wraps her arms around him and he puts his hands on her hips, slowly, almost with restraint, in a gesture he still seems unaccustomed to.

"Has anyone seen you?" he asks quietly.

The woman shakes her head.

"Did you do what I told you to do at home?"

Now the woman nods. Her words string along in short, staccato volleys. "I did. Left a note. Not to look for me. That I'd write. That they'd follow."

"No baggage. Don't forget, no baggage."

The woman nods again. "Of course. Of course."

"Starting tomorrow, you'll be somebody else. Starting tomorrow, it'll be taken that you, just like everyone else who comes here, have come to look, go back, and then tell about it. As quickly as possible. And people like that, don't forget, travel without baggage."

"I'm not stupid," says the woman impatiently.

The man nods. "No, you're not," he says.

His eyes search her face. You're not, I really hope you're not, he thinks.

"You've got a new name," he says. "Here, in your passport. Don't forget it. Better still, forget everything you've known about yourself so far."

"Okay," says the woman. "I'll forget everything. I like that. I like what's new. New is good."

The man nods wearily. He examines his handiwork. It could do with a few finishing touches, he can see that, but it is too late now. Darkness has blotted out what's left of the town, and there will be no electricity. Besides, the whole building shakes with the explosions; his hand could tremble. And in a stamp, if you examine it closely, it's the details that count. The nuances.

It's nighttime. The man lies in bed, staring at the ceiling, imagining the many possible courses events may take. Thinking about the body of the woman sleeping by his side. About the days and years to come. He can picture some sort of bungalow, with plenty of framed photographs on the walls, a door opening onto a garden, a lot of washing hanging there to dry. The picture is very vivid, his nostrils even fill with something akin to the smell of home-cooked soup. The kind of coziness usually found only in old family snapshots. He wishes for children's laughter to ring out in the background of the picture, for letters from abroad. And he feels slumber washing over him.

Then his eyes tingle. Light crawls over him, the dawn is breaking and everything is different, other smells, sounds, images. But the woman is still there, asleep, she was not just a dream. It is all true, this woman, this place that seems so unreal, the patter of gunfire in the hills nearby, the skeletons of torched houses all around, their departure that is no longer a night away.

He touches her bare shoulder and she opens her eyes.

"Is your mind made up?" he says.

The woman's eyes betray surprise.

"I made up my mind a long time ago," she says. "Long ago."

"I mean," he amends, "you haven't changed your mind? Because if you have ... This is your last chance. You know."

The woman looks at him for a long time. Then she slowly shakes her head.

"I know this is my last chance," she says. "I know that."

As they exit the charred hotel lobby the man looks one more time at the brownish smudge on the sidewalk in front of the entrance. Though he has

taken a picture of it over and over, in all kinds of light, it always tells him the same thing. If only I could, he thinks again, photograph the eyes of the man who fired the shot, just once, instead of all these drying puddles of blood, then maybe for once I'd have a different story to tell.

A haze seems to be rising off the pavement. The man hands a folded hundred-dollar bill to the boy who's poured a plastic bottle of gasoline into his car tank. The boy shoves the money into his boot, nods grimly, grips his hand in a handshake, and disappears behind a corner. The man looks after him as though he has a question to ask. Then he shrugs and tosses the bags with the cameras onto the back seat.

The way out of town has changed, thinks the man. When he drove in, there weren't so many burned out cars. And they weren't all facing in the same direction. It's changed. So much has changed. Perhaps too much.

The soldier standing by the barricade has unbuttoned his shirt to the waist. He is smoking. Bending forwards to the car in front of them. The man can hear his voice as he asks to see the papers. A hand stretches out of the window and the soldier looks at the passport from afar, with a grimace barely concealing disgust. The man can see: It's a foreign passport, just like his own. And now hers.

The soldier gestures. The driver in the car up front carefully negotiates the scattered gasoline drums. The soldier bends over and stuffs the bottoms of his trouser-legs into his boots. Then he glances at the next vehicle.

The woman in the passenger seat, whose eyes are sunken from months of hunger and fear, seems as beautiful as the angel of destruction to the man. Just like the first time he laid eyes on her. The passport is in her lap. The man wishes he could pull over and check that smudged stamp one more time. He does not pull over: He knows it is too late.

His colleague. His girlfriend. His wife. What sounds better? Which one sounds right, so right that the soldier does not need to dial a number and ask if anyone else knows about her? Because if he has to go into explanations, the story has several holes in it. Too many. They could just disappear down one of them.

As a matter of fact, thinks the man, he's gone too far. I'm too old, he tells himself. I can't focus very well any more. Things have begun to flow together, the dividing lines are increasingly unclear. It's time to quit. Step down. Cash in the savings. Sell the equipment, sort out the negative and positive prints, put things in order, yes, leave things in order. Prepare for the final hour; next to an open fireplace, in loose-fitting slippers, poring over a chess problem, with a sleeping cat in his lap.

The soldier motions for him to drive on. The man smiles. He knows: You have to smile, then everything's easier. Beads of sweat trickle down his face.

The woman looks at him through slit eyes.

"I don't like your shirt," she finally says. "It has too many stripes. Too close together. No, I don't like it. When we finally get out of this hellhole you'll get yourself a new one in the first town."

*Translated by Tamara Soban*

ANDREJ BLATNIK

# *Preblizu skupaj*

*iz tvoje srajce, PT*

Moški sedi v mraku hotelske sobe in namaka nalivno pero v raztopino na kavnem krožničku. Pečatu na fotografiji dodaja previdne črte. Premišlja, kako se bo prek noči črnilo posušilo, sprašuje se, ali ga potem res ne bo mogoče ločiti od prejšnjega. Vsaj v naglici ne. Da, to je važno. Dviguje fotografijo proti svetlobi in premišlja: važno. Zelo važno. Biti mora, kot da ni nič spremenil. Kot da ga ni bilo tu, ob tej fotografiji.

Ženski obraz na sliki. Ženska je mlada, oči se lesketajo, tega ne zapravi fotografova nespretnost pri ostrenju. Nespretnost, ki moškega jezi bolj, kot bi bilo potrebno. Moški gleda fotografijo in premišlja o črtah, ki jih je dodal pečatu: jih je potegnil dovolj na tanko? Dovolj skupaj? Ne premišlja, zakaj to počenja. Kakor je pri takih zgodbah v navadi, obraz spominja na neko drugo žensko, na žensko, ki jo, se razume, moški dolgo skuša pozabiti.

Nekdo previdno, tiho potrka; moški vstane, pospravi potni list in nalivnik, stopi k vratom in jih, pridržana z nogo, nekoliko odpre. Skozi režo svetlobe, ki pada s hodnika, se v sobo prerine ženski obraz. Isti obraz, zdaj ves izostren, živ, resničen. Moški odmakne nogo, ženska vstopi. Ovije roke okrog moškega in moški jo prime za boke, počasi, kar zadržano, tega giba še ni vajen, kaže.

“Te je kdo videl?” vpraša moški tiho.

Ženska odkima.

“Si doma naredila, kot sem rekel?”

Zdaj ženska pokima. Njene besede se nizajo v kratke, prisekane rafale. “Sem. Napisala sporočilo. Naj me ne iščejo. Da bom pisala. Da pridejo za mano.”

“Nobene prtljage. Ne pozabi, nobene prtljage.”

Ženska spet pokima. “Seveda. Seveda.”

“Od jutri boš nekdo drug. Od jutri bo veljalo, da si tudi ti, kot vsi, ki prihajajo sem, prišla, da vidiš, greš, in poveš. Čim hitreje. In taki, ne pozabi, potujejo brez prtljage.”

“Nisem tepka,” reče ženska nestrpno.

Moški pokima. “Nisi,” reče.

S pogledom potuje po njenem obrazu. Nisi, upam, da res nisi, si misli.

“Novo ime imaš,” ji reče. “Tu, v potnem listu. Ne pozabi ga. Pozabi raje vse, kar si doslej vedela o sebi.”

“Dobro,” reče ženska. “Vse pozabim. To mi je všeč. Novo mi je všeč. Novo je dobro.”

Moški utrujeno pokima. Ogleduje si svoj izdelek. Lahko bi še popravljaj, vidi, a zdaj je prepozno. Mrak je pretil ostanke mesta in elektrike ne bo. In še trese se zaradi eksplozije; roka bi lahko zadrhtela. Pri pečatu pa, če ga pogledaš od blizu, odločajo nadrobnosti. Tenčine.

Noč je. Moški leži v postelji, gleda v strop in misli o tem, kar lahko pride. Premišlja o telesu ženske, ki spi poleg njega. O prihodnjih dneh in letih. Vidi nekakšno pritlično hišo, po stenah veliko uokvirjenih fotografij, neka vrata se odpirajo na vrt, tam se suši veliko perila. Ta podoba je živa, še v nosnicah mu lebdi nekak vonj po domači juhi. Domačnost, kakršno človek najde le na starih družinskih portretih. Želi si, da bi v ozadju svoje slike slišal otroški smeh, da bi dobivali pisma iz tujine. In čuti, kako ga preliwa spanec.

Nato ga v očeh zaščemi. Čezenj se plazi svetloba, dani se in vse je drugače, drugi vonji, zvoki, podobe. Vendar je ženska še tukaj, spi, ni se mu le sanjalo. Vse je res, ta ženska, ta kraj, ki se zdi tako nenavaden, pokljanje po bližnjih hribih, ožgana ogrodja okoliških hiš, odhod, do katerega ni več nobene noči.

Dotakne se njene gole rame in ona odpre oči.

“Si premislila?” reče.

Ženska ga začudeno gleda.

“Že zdavnaj sem premislila,” reče. “Kdaj že.”



“Hočem reči,” se popravlja moški, “si se premislila? Kajti če si se ... Zdaj je zadnja možnost. Saj veš.”

Ženska ga dolgo gleda. Nato počasi odkima.

“Vem, da je zadnja možnost,” reče. “Vem.”

Ko zapuščata ožgano okostje hotela, moški spet pogleda rjavkasti madež na pločniku pred vhodom. Čeprav ga je slikal vedno znova, v vsaki svetlobi, pove vselej isto. Ko bi mogel, spet premišlja moški, enkrat slikati namesto vseh teh sušečih se luž krvi pogled človeka, ki je ustrelil, potem, potem bi bila to morda enkrat druga zgodba.

S pločnika se dviguje sparina. Moški izroča večkrat preganjeni bankovec za sto dolarjev fantu, ki mu je stočil plastenko bencina v avto. Fant si zatlači denar v škorenj, resnobno pokima, stisne roko in izgine za ovinkom. Moški gleda za njim, kot da bi ga moral še kaj vprašati. Nato zmigne z rameni in vrže torbo s fotoaparati na zadnji sedež.

Pot iz mesta se je spremenila, premišlja moški. Ko se je pripeljal, še ni bilo toliko zažganih avtomobilov. In niso bili vsi obrnjeni v eno smer. Spremenilo se je. Veliko se je spremenilo. Morda preveč.

Vojak ob barikadi je razpet do pasu. Kadi. Sklanja se k avtomobilu pred njima. Moški sliši njegov glas, kako sprašuje po dokumentih. Roka se iztegne iz vozila in vojak od daleč, s skremženim izrazom na obrazu, ki komajda zakriva gnus, ogleduje potni list. Moški vidi: tuj je, tak kot njegov. In zdaj njen.

Vojak pomigne. Voznik pred njima previdno zavijuga med razmetanimi bencinskimi sodi. Vojak se skloni in si potlači hlače za škornje. Nato se ozre po naslednjem vozilu.

Ženska na sosednjem sedežu, katere oči so vdrte od mesecev lakote in strahu, se moškemu zdi lepa kot angel uničenja. Enako kot takrat, ko jo je videl prvič. V njenem naročju leži potni list. Moški si želi zapeljati vstran in še enkrat pogledati tisti razmazani pečat. Ne zapelje: ve, da je zdaj prepozno.

Njegova sodelavka. Njegova znanka. Njegova žena. Kaj zveni bolje? Kaj zveni tako, da vojaku ni treba zavrteti telefona in povprašati, kdo še ve zanjo? Kajti če bo moral razlagati, ima zgodba veliko lukenj. Preveč lukenj. Lahko se zgodi, da bosta izginila v eni od njih.

Pravzaprav, premišlja moški, je šel predaleč. Prestar sem, si pravi. Ne morem več prav izostriti. Stvari so se pričele prelivati, črte, ki ločujejo, so vse bolj nejasne. Prenehati bi

bilo treba. Se umakniti. Izkoristiti prihranke. Prodati opremo, urediti negative in pozitivne, narediti red, res, pustiti red za seboj. Se pripravljati na zadnjo uro; ob tlečem kaminu, v prostranih copatah, med reševanjem šahovskega problema, s spečo mačko v naročju.

Vojak mu pomigne, naj zapelje naprej. Moški se nasmehe. Ve: smehljati se je treba, potem gre lažje. Po obrazu mu polzijo tople kapljice potu.

Ženska ga gleda s priprtimi očmi.

“Ni mi vseč tvoja srajca,” končno reče. “Preveč črt na njej. Preblizu skupaj. Ne, ni mi vseč. Ko končno prideva iz tega pekla, si boš v prvem kraju kupil novo.”