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Rok Vilčnik rokgre

Cosmic FAIRY TALES

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Review	Tomaž Onič (University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts), Tanja Petrič (Slovenian Association of Literary Translators)
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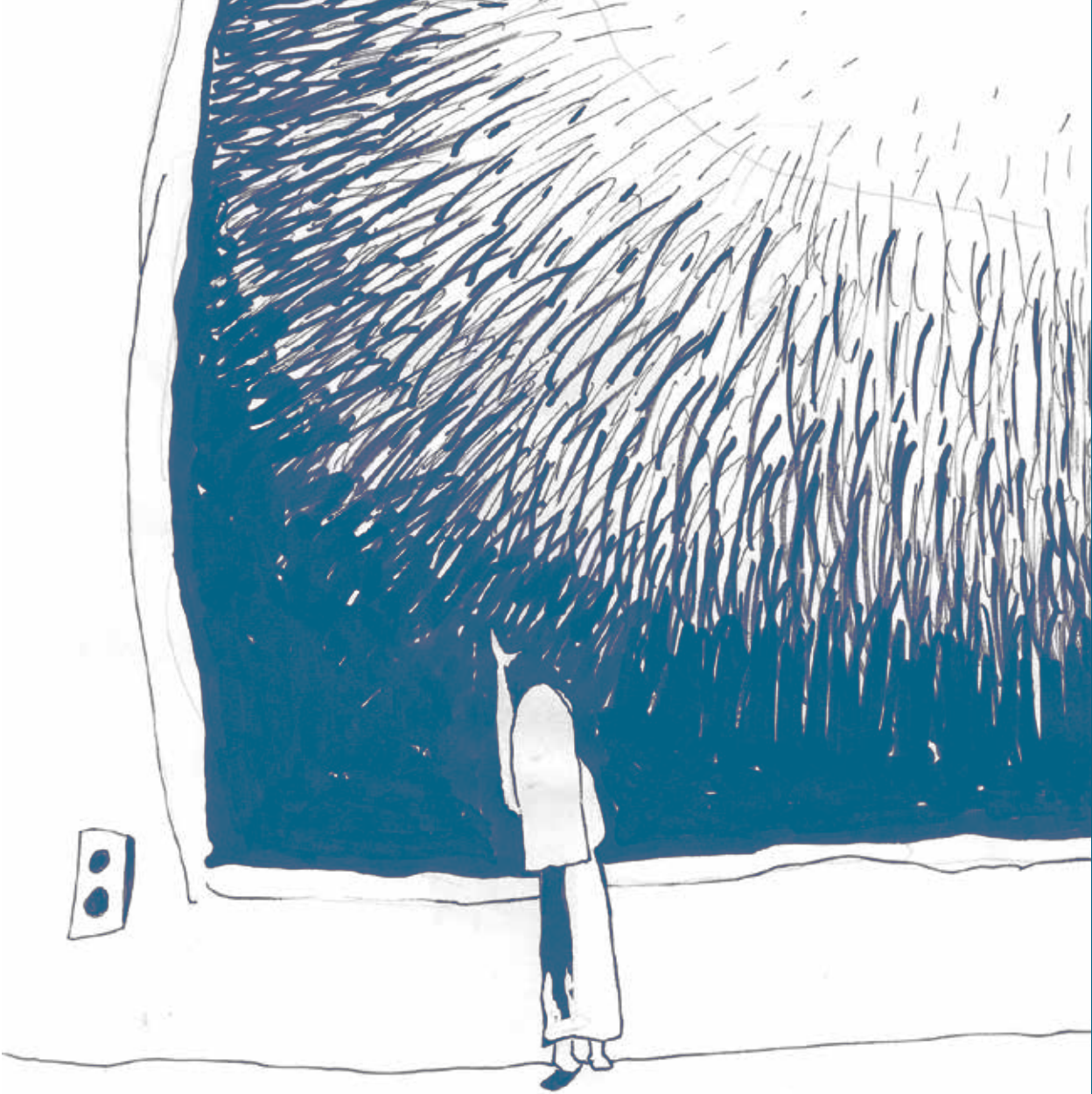
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Sometimes a person
has to look up at the stars.
And they don't have to go anywhere.

They just close their eyes.

Rok Vilčnik



I would like to thank Melita Koletnik and her students, Isabelle Kralj and Mark Anderson for their trust and outstanding work on the translation.

Rok Vilčnik

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The One Who Possesses Goodness

- Hommage to Darja Hribar

Published by the University of Maribor Press, DARIA is a new book series dedicated to translations of literary, scientific, and theoretical texts, and original volumes by authors researching in the fields of translation, interpreting, and related subjects. A distinctive part of the series is based on the original concept to provide room and recognition for carefully edited, quality translations, resulting from student-teacher interaction in and outside the classroom. On the whole, the series is committed to supporting creative translation and innovative new scholarship in the T&I field.

The idea for the series was sparked by the collaboration between students at the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Maribor in Slovenia and me, with the author of this present literary work, Rok Vilčnik, on the Slovenian-English translation of his marvelously ethereal Cosmic Fairy Tales, which began in the fall of 2013. What followed was almost a decade of translating, reading, editing, revising, and collaborating with the author, translation students and mature translators, English language students, professors, editors, and revisers, and, ultimately, one gifted graphic designer who, based on Rok's original drawings, created the perfect visual representation of the series, a simple ribbon with the telltale name, DARIA.

There is also another, sadder, reason why 2013 bears a special significance for this series. In May of 2013, the Department of Translation Studies lost its founding member, the esteemed and very dear colleague Darja Darinka Hribar, to whom this series is dedicated and whose memory is still warm in my heart. According to some definitions, the name Darja, sometimes written with an "i" or "y", is of Old Persian roots and means, among others, "to possess goodness". Darja Hribar was true to her name. She was the type of teacher and mentor I strive to be – kind, patient, and a pleasure to be around, helpful but never patronizing, attentive but never overbearing, and supportive but realistic. She was always ready to let a person choose their own path while staying close enough to catch them if they fell. In the late 2000s, she invited me to share her office, took me under her wing, and encouraged my first individual scholarly publication. She also let me in on her life, which was not always kind to her.

Darja Hribar (1949-2013) was born in Ormož in eastern Slovenia to Darinka (née Grivec) and Vinko Hribar. For her mother, it was the second marriage, in which Darja and her sister Mika joined an elder brother and sister. Tragically, her father succumbed to an illness while Darja was still in her early teens. She lovingly tended and read to him in his final days,

and with his death, she lost an adored role model. When her mother remarried for the third time, this time a young doctor seven years younger than herself, the family increased by another daughter, Maja, and moved to Maribor.

Always a lover of languages, Darja first entered school in Ptuj, some 30 kilometers from her native Ormož, and later attended the grammar school in Maribor in northeast Slovenia. For her student experience, she chose the Slovenia's vibrant capital, Ljubljana, where she studied English and Italian languages at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts, and successfully graduated in 1975. For a short period in the late 1970s, she "followed her heart", as she later told me in one of our office heart-to-hearts, and moved to London, only to return from it disillusioned and broken after losing an unborn child. The care and love she carried, she channeled towards her students, decades later.

In 1979, she continued her pursuit for languages by enrolling part-time in the Spanish Studies Program at the University of Zagreb, from which she graduated in 1982. The following period of her life was characterized by freelance stints and some (shorter) permanent jobs: she worked as a translator, librarian, tour guide, court interpreter, and a secretary of the International Sociological Association. In the late 1980s, an opening at the recently established Department of Germanic Languages brought her back to Maribor, where, in 1989, she became a lecturer of English and American literature at the Faculty of Education, developing and teaching courses that spanned from medieval to 20th century literature. At the same time, she became actively engaged in research, and defended her MA thesis in 1993 and her PhD thesis in 1999 at the University of Ljubljana. Both dissertations testify to her growing scholarly interest in drama and translation, particularly in the Theatre of the Absurd. Her PhD was a culmination of years of work and translation research on the absurdist writer and Nobel laureate Harold Pinter, and it firmly established Darja Hribar's reputation as a prominent Pinter scholar.

Darja Hribar's name will also be permanently linked with the Department of Translation Studies at the Faculty of Arts in Maribor. Teaming up with colleague Dr. Karmen Teržan Kopecky, a fellow translator and interpreter of German, they worked tirelessly as founding members, to establish both the program of English and German translation, which was first offered to students in 2001, and, in 2008, an independent Department of Translation Studies.

However, her professional, academic, and private life was overshadowed, and ultimately cut short, by illness. For eighteen years, she bravely fought cancer while never giving up on teaching, mentoring, or organizing events at the Department. During her third trial with the illness in the early 2010s, I remember Darja's partner, Niko, bringing her to the office after she had finished yet another round of chemotherapy, to meet a student whose graduation thesis needed to be worked on. On that note, she mentored or co-mentored over forty theses, which testifies to her tenacious character and dedication to her work and students.

The story I most dearly associate with Darja, however, is not dark or work-related, but bright and cheerful. It dates from her pre-London period and always beams me on to the lovely green Croatian island of Pašman in north Dalmatia. The island has an elongated shape, with a long, hilly ridge in its center, which is crisscrossed by gravel dirt roads just perfect for running or cycling. Being an avid runner, I spent many of my vacation days hammering down these roads, alone with my thoughts, looking for a perfect sunset while listening to audiobooks (with Tolstoi's War and Peace, specifically and most prominently, etched in my memory). It so happened that Darja knew these roads, too, from forty plus years earlier. Hers, however, were the mornings, when the island was slowly waking up from its hazy sleep, and she spent many of them on a bicycle, accompanying her then English boyfriend on his morning runs. She laughed with her whole heart when she remembered the dismayed faces of the locals who had seen "that crazy Englishman and his woman" pass them by on yet another morning. That memory touches my heart again and again, and on both a professional and a personal level, I am incredibly grateful to Darja Hribar for the moments we shared. So, whenever possible, I return to Pašman, put on my running shoes, and veer onto the nearest dirt road, where I can feel her encouraging me, on her bike, to let's go and do another lap together.

Maribor, June 2022

Melita Koletnik

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This book would not have been possible without the teamwork, support, and assistance of many people throughout a period that spanned almost ten years. If I leave someone out it is not intentional, and I sincerely apologize.

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Earlier versions of the two stories *Universes* and *Fallen From A Star* appeared in a special issue of the journal *Inventory*, published in 2016 by the Princeton University's

Department of Comparative Literature. In 2021, Theatre Gigante created an ethereal virtual production, *A Cosmic Fairy Tale A Day Keeps The Doctor Away*, which featured 31 of Vilčnik's translated stories told by 31 actors from the U.S., Taiwan, Italy, France, and Northern Ireland.

The publication of this book was made possible by a grant from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Slovenian Arts Program.

Last but not least, a great thank you to Rok Vilčnik – none of this would be possible without his inexhaustible imagination!

STORIES

MOTHER

They came from all corners of the universe and called to her: “Mother, mother, I am confused again and do not know where to go!” Or: “Mother, mother, where should I turn to be released from this restlessness?” And: “Mother, please, tell!”

And she, one after another, regardless of their shape or condition, nurtured them in her bosom, cradled them in her lap, stroked their foreheads, and kissed their thoughts. She comforted them in the way that she has known and been able to do for billions and billions of years. Simply by instinct. They were her children, they were alive. She was their first and only mother, and she loved them all equally, for they all suffered, all with the same sickness – they were cursed with the eternity of existence.

That is why they came to her: whenever it became too tight and suffocating for them, hopeless and endlessly repetitive, when they could no longer bear the burden, and no longer knew what to do. And, joyfully, she took them in and continued giving.

Yes, she was their mother.

THE ENGINE

They took advantage of that time period to fix the engine. He was already old and a little grey at the ends. He sighed blissfully as they combed his long, disheveled curls. Two workers in iron-clad jumpsuits wiped his eyes and polished his eyelids. Finally, he could stretch out. He did not hold a grudge against anyone, though. He knew very well that for such a long journey he needed an abundance of patience and good will, which he drew from the single book he had with him. It was an old, a very old book, still made of paper which they called cardboard, and on which were painted animals from the period before they began to levitate. Nothing was written, only shapes and colors decorated the worn-out pages.

Being the engine of such a big ship was not so easy, he knew that. He had to think a lot in order to propel this myriad of flickering beings within himself. Everyone wanted to go there. But he almost didn't care anymore. He had completed the greatest number of journeys in his past. The most experienced, he had been selected even though there were many younger and more enthusiastic ones who would have arrived sooner. But in the meantime, he had already forgotten all this. He remembered only when they rubbed his forehead with oil.

How alive such a booklet is in this deafness, he thought as he contemplated the painted animals and left empty expanses of space behind. What if they actually were real? And in fact, immediately afterward, it occurred to him that something was rustling, and he caught sight of them!

First, a little rabbit came hopping; it stopped and twitched its nose as if wanting to say: *Yum, what is this smell that has no smell?* A hedgehog rolled in and spread open. On the inside it was so vulnerable that it would be best to cover it and protect it. But it knows how to protect itself, the engine knew.

Quack, quack, quack was heard from somewhere, and a mother duck appeared and behind her her little ducklings, nicely in a row, one after the other, as befits well-behaved little birds.

Grunting, a piglet also appeared and rooted in the dark infinity, and rolled in it, even though this seemed completely impossible. A goat came with a squirrel atop its horns, which seemed even more impossible. Playing, a puppy and kitten arrived, and the latter even offered the Engine its paw. Then immediately took off after a little mouse that showed itself from a neighboring corner, which was not even there at all.

Then, off the last page, a black stallion jumped, wildly and proudly reared up on its hind legs and neighed so loudly that everything around tore asunder. All the animals stopped and watched him admiringly. This was the moment when the Engine just hummed and did not propel anything. The stallion's mane whipped past him, and he smelled the scent of the wild.

Yes, this is how it was on the last page. Every time.

After many years, they finally arrived. The Engine stopped feeling the commotion inside himself and he could finally shut down, but didn't. He just fell asleep and dreamt of his friends, and that scent.



A LOVE STORY OF TWO WORLDS

They were almost content, each in their own world. They never even knew of other worlds, let alone of each other. They didn't even resemble each other, in form or experience. Maybe they were only united by this force, this glow throughout time. Yes, they both had time, because they both had life. They lived. Well, they had to, in order for us to be able to read about them at all.

And yet this story would never have happened if they had not, in that shared speck of time, come so very close to one single thought, and embraced it. A thought that was theirs alone, and quite special. The thought that they would die and cease to exist as they now existed, and that they would, in some other world, find someone who would exist, simply exist – for her and for him.

And the closer they were to this thought, the more they wished for death. Until they finally decided and...

He came into her world, and she into his.

But the longing remained.

THE BLUE PLANET

Oh, how beautiful the Blue Planet was! All the other planets were envious of him. “This one has all the luck,” they jealously stared at him, as he spun by and they caught sight of him lushly boiling over into thousands of colors and shapes. It took their breath away, with all the activity on his crust and all the fluttering of life among his clouds.

Even that oldest, biggest, and brightest planet, around which all circled, would sometimes pause in awe when he looked at him.

“And he isn't really that big,” piped in a distant planet of larger proportions, that had been among the first that struggled to create life on himself. But the only thing he had been able to achieve was to boil lava inside of himself, which then solidified on his surface.

“On my surface, only rocks roll, and even they are moved by atmospheric currents that are only in my way,” said a smaller planet indignantly, and shuddered. He immediately knocked over three peaks on his face, so that the rocks toppled into the valleys and came to a stop, shocked.

Not even a ring helps anything, thought another.

“Not even empty oceans of boiling sulfur,” came a sad commentary from the other side.

“How does he do it?” they looked at each other. They did not know the answer. When they came close to the Blue Planet, however, they observed him closely, and asked him “what” and “how”, but the Blue Planet himself did not have an answer. “All I do is spin,” he apologetically shrugged his mountains.

And slowly they began to resent him so much that they cut off all contact with him and spun past him without a word.

But the Blue Planet was not too sad. He had a world of his own. Countless friends who ran around like animals and sailed over him or crawled along like plants and sprouted from him. For days he could observe his winds chasing one another on his surface and making mischief with the living creatures along green and blossoming valleys full of rivers and streams. He cooled himself with oceans and rivers and was happy to follow the development of the countless forms in them. He was content when he could no longer distinguish where it was more pleasant: in these vast blue depths, where playful flashes of light revealed something new at every moment, or on the vast, undulating land, where he miraculously changed from one section to another, from one expanse to another, completely amazed and intoxicated by all the glorious happenings. He would drizzle water from the sky, sometimes pour it into streams, and soak in it, or he would cover himself with a white blanket of snow, and, with wonder, absorb all the quiet idyll, which he triggered with a single freeze of the atmosphere. And when he became bored, he shrugged with the mountains, split them in half, and plunged them into the sea; he divided continents and raised new valleys, laid new riverbeds, dammed new oceans, and eagerly observed how life adjusted.

Only he was capable of doing all of this – the miraculous Blue Planet.

This is how very happy millions of years passed. He forgot about his brothers, who were still spinning empty somewhere in infinity. They too tried to forget about him, but every now and then he reminded them painfully of his presence when they came closest to him or heard from some other brother about his wonders.

“He could at least tell us how he does it.” That big planet still would not stop. And they parted, offended.

The Blue Planet, however, was experiencing new, happier moments, full of excitement and pride. Namely, in his bosom, animals appeared, which discovered all on their own that they lived on a beautiful and unique planet. To the Planet they were no longer just animals; something deeper began to bind him to them, a true emotion. He began to watch their every move attentively. It seemed to him as though he was newly observing himself, how he was growing and developing into the most beautiful planet in the solar system. Time and again, he was amazed at how able and resourceful they were. They invented countless things that made their life and work easier. They were even pushing through into the clouds.

When the Blue Planet realized this, he nearly suffered a heart attack. He shook intensely with dissatisfaction and buried many things beneath himself. However, his children raised their heads again, and continued even more resolutely. *What if they really fly away?* he thought in fear. *I lose them. Maybe forever?*



And for the first time he became a bit sad. They really did fly away. Over the years, even into space. With great uneasiness in his heart, the Blue Planet went along with their efforts, but the planetary community was abuzz. “Life...life is coming!” they rejoiced.

And indeed, it really only seemed to be a matter of time.

The Blue Planet pulled deeply into himself, and he no longer cared what his children were up to. He devoted more time to his own self-obsession and passed the time by pouring flaming lava inside his core – back and forth, and back again.

He became so withdrawn, and forgot about everything else so that, in all likelihood, only some major event would wake him from his gloomy numbness. And indeed, one day such an event did occur. Suddenly, he was violently shaken, and his skin burned so badly that for a moment he thought he was breaking apart! Astonished, he looked around. It took his breath away! He had become just a bare, red desert! He was surrounded by some kind of caustic and poisonous flickering, which even melted away the rocks. From an abundance of dust, it was no longer possible to see the stars or his sister, Moon, with whom he liked to chat so much. There were no clouds. Only that shining planet in the distance glowed dimly, and, to the once blue planet, it seemed somewhat sneeringly.

And what was the worst, what hurt the most, what almost broke his orbit, was that there was no longer that which is living, none of that lively bustle and transferring of juices, which he loved so much, and no hopping of countless paws, and no fluttering of wings somewhere above his mountains. Only rocks, sand, and a no longer very happy, poisonous wind. The Blue Planet wished that he would stop spinning, that he would fall into an infinite abyss, and that he would never exist again.

But that was not the end of it. During those days, it was time again to meet with that big envious planet that had for so long wanted life on its own surface and was now anxiously waiting to ask his blue brother how he felt about his new form. He had a reason, of course. The children of the Blue Planet had specifically chosen the big planet as their refuge, for they had discovered a long time ago that its atmosphere was the most conducive to life. So that is how the big planet finally got life, and they lived in glass domes and were not allowed out of them. The atmosphere could still harm them, as well as the animals and plants they had brought with them.

However, when the Blue Planet heard this unexpected news, he didn't react at all in the way his big brother had expected him to. Rather, it seemed that he lit up with happiness. Inside, he trembled with excitement: *So, everything is not over yet!* And he

would've liked to kiss the conceited neighbor, who, surprised, spun away. *I should have helped them and not shut myself away like that*, he thought. *After all, they are my children, a part of my soil and air. There, they cannot really exist at all!*

And he immediately threw himself into work.

I will clean myself up, he decided.

He began sweeping the dust off his surface and thinning the poisonous air. Drop by drop, he filtered water from the rocks, overturned the earth, filled in the cracks in his crust, and extinguished the greedy springs of hot lava. He raised the mountains again, fortified the riverbeds, and gradually the environment, which had at one time made him so happy, began to return.

The planets observed him with interest. At first, they thought he was mad, but eventually they began to respect him, and to think about what they could do for themselves, so that they too could partake in this precious opportunity for life to sprout on them. Only the big planet was deaf to everyone around him and proudly adorned himself with his new colony. He turned up his nose at his brothers and considered himself the most important in the universe.

The Blue Planet continued with his relentless efforts. *They will return*, he told himself, *will return. As soon as everything will be as it was before. I am, after all, their home.*

And the day really did come, when the Blue Planet almost fainted with happiness. The day when one of his descendants again set foot on his crust, and with full lungs took in air, breathing the way it had been taught by him. At this time, the other planets applauded, which this hard-working planet truly deserved.

THE LITTLE BLADE OF GRASS

She was alone. On the whole huge planet there was nothing other than a blade of grass, as tall as half a child's pinkie finger, stretching in the languid grey morning. Grey, because it could not have been brighter in the almost invisible, fading sun, somewhere far above her head. And languid, because, far and wide, there was no one around to do anything, not only on this planet, but much, much further away in the immeasurable depths of the universe. Only she was there, yawning gently. She did not allow herself to be distracted, and in all seriousness took on the question, *What shall we do today?*

Aha, she decided. *First, we must count the blades.*

And she did. Even though she only had one, which, at the same time, was also her stem. She counted from back to front, then front to back, and then several more times just like that, back and forth.

Great. None are missing, she fluttered contentedly. *Will there be any wind today?* She listened to the panting of a distant wind. *Nothing, again?* She shook her little stem even though she knew full well that she was waiting for the wind in vain. Because it simply wasn't there, just as on this planet there was no rain, as well as no type of gas that would come in handy for her survival.

How then could she even exist, you are asking yourselves, if there was nothing, absolutely nothing, favorable to her: no dewdrops for her little green belly, and no fresh breezes for her cobwebby strands?

But is this really so important? Don't they say life is a miracle?

FRIENDSHIP

They halved the planet, and each headed to their own end of the galaxy. There, they searched out a new orbit for themselves, and since then, lived there.

Many ships sailed past, and soon, throughout the expansive universe, word spread that they were there and there, in this and this galaxy, on this and this end of the universe, two completely identical halves of the same planet, who were both missing something, terribly.

Immediately from all sides of the universe, various scientists from various sciences rushed in, experts with various expertise, and the knowledgeable with various knowledges trying to figure out what was missing. Because the fact is, something was missing. In Space, as it is known, everything is there. However, this was for them too hard a nut to crack, as was expressed by a self-proclaimed scientist regarding the problem. The schooled and educated jumped from one half of the planet to the other, analyzing, commenting, and cataloguing their findings in books and archival repositories. They vigorously exchanged their opinions – mostly, they argued about all aspects of this unsolvable riddle of the universe, but discovered nothing, much less came to any understanding. They couldn't even speculate about it, truth be told, so it would be a shame to even bother writing about it. Except, of course, that it is unsolvable.

Soon after, in large hordes, they began to leave the enigmatic halves. And Pik and Pak sighed with relief. For they also felt that they were missing something, but...

Yes, there was always this *but*.

"If only I didn't say that it always has to be my way," reasoned Pik and thought about Pak. "If only I didn't say that it always has to be his way," reasoned Pak and thought about himself.

Then Pik stood up and rose to the tips of his toes. Then Pak stood up and rose to the tips of his toes. Pik cupped both hands in front of his mouth and called out through them (Pak did exactly the same, and also shouted): “Ppaikk!!” was heard throughout space, which meant that Pak Pik was said at exactly the same instant.

And then also:

“It won’t be, it isn’t, everything always, always everything, my way, your way!”

And then silence.

“WooHoo!” they shouted joyfully and rushed into an embrace with their crusts, which collided in just the right place, and they once again united into a complete planet.

Nothing was missing anymore.

The scientists, and all other wise men, heard about the miraculous solution to one of the greatest mysteries of that time, and once again, this time in even larger numbers, they raced to the spot, or rather, the planet. They had to personally convince themselves what a powerful force Friendship is and why, to this very day, they hadn’t discovered it, even though the entire time it was right in front of their noses, or some other organ used for smell.

And they didn’t argue at all.



LITTLE PLANET

It was tiny and almost round. The only thing that could stick to it was dust, and this dust, if and when it pointedly chose to adhere to it, had to cling tightly to its surface. It was the smallest planet there was. It was so tiny that it didn’t spin at all because it had no orbit. Actually, it did have a little black dot of an orbit, which was no help to it at all. It also didn’t have a mountain, not even a hill, because then it would fall over. It had not even a little puddle let alone a real ocean, because a drop of water was larger than the planet, and the planet was terribly afraid of the drop, for it could soak the very dust that still insisted on clinging to the little planet.

So, it was just the Little Planet, and that is how they named it on the galactical map on which it was marked with an arrow, and invisible, for they would have to make the map larger than the universe if they wanted to see it with the naked eye.

It had to be discovered by an extremely meticulous cartographer. And so it was. It was discovered by Josip Nihalnikov Krilnik in his very room, there where the desk meets the windowsill burdened by all the professional literature thrown upon it. There on the left side, right against the smeared inkwell, where the housekeeper placed a glass of water for Josip Nihi – as they abbreviatedly called him – with which he, every so often, refreshed his arduous scientific work and then usually followed it up with a good stretch.

And that’s how he spotted it one day! Through the thick bottom of the glass he had just emptied -- a dot in the air, a centimeter above the wooden top of the table, and about two from the wallpaper.

This is not dust, he quickly deduced as he blew in the direction of the discovery, and nothing happened. *Nor is it an illusion*, he concluded, circling the tiny thing with his hand. He took a microscope and completely devoted his attention to it. He determined that this can be nothing other than a little, completely new, never before discovered planet. Immediately, he named it Krilnik’s Planet Number 1. Of course,

this was only the technical name, he himself called it Little Planet. It was simpler this way.

He opened *The Great Atlas of the World and the Sky* to make sure he really had discovered a new planet and not just some old one everyone else has known about for a long time. And indeed... it was not there yet. Josip Niha jumped with joy and clicked his slipper clad heels together, barely catching his cracked monocle. He was extremely excited. Immediately, he set to work. The entire week he didn't even drink water. Except for the little bit when he brushed his teeth or in the salad at dinner. He didn't sleep at all, he didn't get up at all. He even developed dark circles under his eyes and the housekeeper would cross herself, sometimes with a wooden spoon and sometimes without. But he -- he nevertheless succeeded! He unfolded a new, brand new, star chart across the sofa, and his hands and brain trembled as he checked the newest findings of his latest research.

"Bravo! Bravo!" he exclaimed and clapped when he was thrilled to discover that his measurements and findings were accurate to the last detail, and that Little Planet was exactly where he had marked it with an arrow. The only mistake, maybe – or maybe not – was that he had entered into the map the name he personally used, and not the official "Krilnik's Planet." Ah, he dismissively waved his hand: in the Atlas it will appear as it should. Anyway, a new edition will have to be printed.

He gulped down three glasses of water and happily put himself to bed. He dreamt about the Nobel Prize award presentation, which they would just happen to bestow on him, and then quite a few bottles of water were emptied.

In the middle of the night, he awoke very thirsty. And right there, where the desk meets the windowsill, a bit to the left, nearer to the inkwell – a centimeter above the wooden tabletop, and about two from the wallpaper – he spotted something glowing.

My planet! the thought overwhelmed him. He jumped out of bed and brought the monocle closer to the tiny glowing dot.

"This is an entire star," he said, and crossed himself. "My God," he knelt down. "This is a miracle!"

And the Little Planet, for the first time in its tiny existence, was happy, for only happy planets glow.



TWO UNIVERSES

They flowed into each other. From day to day, from moment to moment, from era to era, through eons of time and other nearly immeasurable periods. There was nothing more beautiful for them than to feel each other's existence. They contracted and expanded into infinity, or into nothingness, but preferably into each other. Sometimes they blended together so much that they could barely distinguish one's gasps from the other's. Sometimes, they just barely touched or waved at each other from a distance, calling and shouting and alluding to each other. With their deafening voids, they toasted eternity and bowed to life, when it was born from nothing. They danced around each other, they spun as a pair, or just danced side by side, scattered amongst it all, and curiously searched for new forms and existences. They existed as light and dark, as cold and wind, fire and steel, tears and dust, premonition and desire, sadness and strength, peace and chaos. They rejoiced in any occurrence, and sometimes suffered numb and naked, as at the beginning of time. They collided hard and relentlessly, as if it were for all eternity, only so they could then caress each other again with their pure breaths of pleasure, nurture their tired cores, and lick their worn-out expanses. Alone forever, and together for never.

Two universes.



THE SMALLEST

He was so small that, essentially, he did not exist. So tiny that he was just a presumption. He only emerged when they calculated him mathematically at one of the most prestigious and respected institutions, explicitly established to prove and explain such minute occurrences. And this, with a lot of help from the most advanced computer technology, which sometimes knew how to think for itself. Only the graph paper, which was used for extremely long calculations, yielded him.

The greatest scientists of the time congratulated each other with great self-complacency, and the public impatiently awaited their results. Only one of them did not join in their happiness and was deeply engrossed in thought.

He was interested in knowing what he was composed of.

THE BEAUTY

She was gorgeous. The slime of her crust was a swampy green, and at times it glittered with a golden metallic hue, scattered all over her slimy body in a thousand different directions, so that it seemed as though a burning sky was glowing somewhere in the distance.

Nobody had such long and unwieldy tentacles that also wrapped themselves multiple times around her wrinkled head, whose center was adorned with a large, unblinking, wide-open and teary eye. A red pupil circled the mushy vitreous gel of her eye and searched in all directions for looks cast her way, then spat sharp poisonous seeds, stinging to the touch, at everyone who looked at her. When she unfolded her tentacles, the yellow and bubbling core of her body appeared, enveloped by long, curly hair and interwoven with a shredding veil of her saliva. That's when she was the most beautiful! That's when they sighed and shivered, that's when they threw themselves before her and offered her worlds. For a single one of her seeds, for a tiny sting of her tentacle, let alone for a kiss, which she knew how to attach – so shockingly passionate and, at the same time, mightily fragile – on a lucky one's eye. She knew how to bestow all the unknown joys of this, and most likely, all other worlds.

She was unique and inimitable, the queen of the universe, and the most beautiful creature of all space and time.

The children stood in front of thick glass, stuffing popcorn in their mouths and pointing into the cage. They were intensely discussing something and heartily laughing. She turned away, and from her red pupil, one after another, black seeds poured out, even though she had thought for a long time that she no longer had any.

THE LITTLE LILY

The Little Lily raised her head toward the sun all day long and smiled at him. She fell in love with him as soon as she opened up. It was true love at first sight. Every morning she would wake up happy because she knew that, up there, someone existed only for her, always faithfully waiting for her, and then caring for her until her sleepy little head would once again give in to rest. How much joy this brought her in her little glass pot, I can't begin to tell you, let alone write it down.

Is this light bulb really any better? the lady in the white coat asked the gentleman with the thick black curly, upturned moustache, who gave himself the task of dealing with elongated helium lamps. He nodded seriously and wiped his sweaty hands on a linen apron soiled with dirt.

Then bring the other flowers in, she ordered, and closed the greenhouse door behind her.



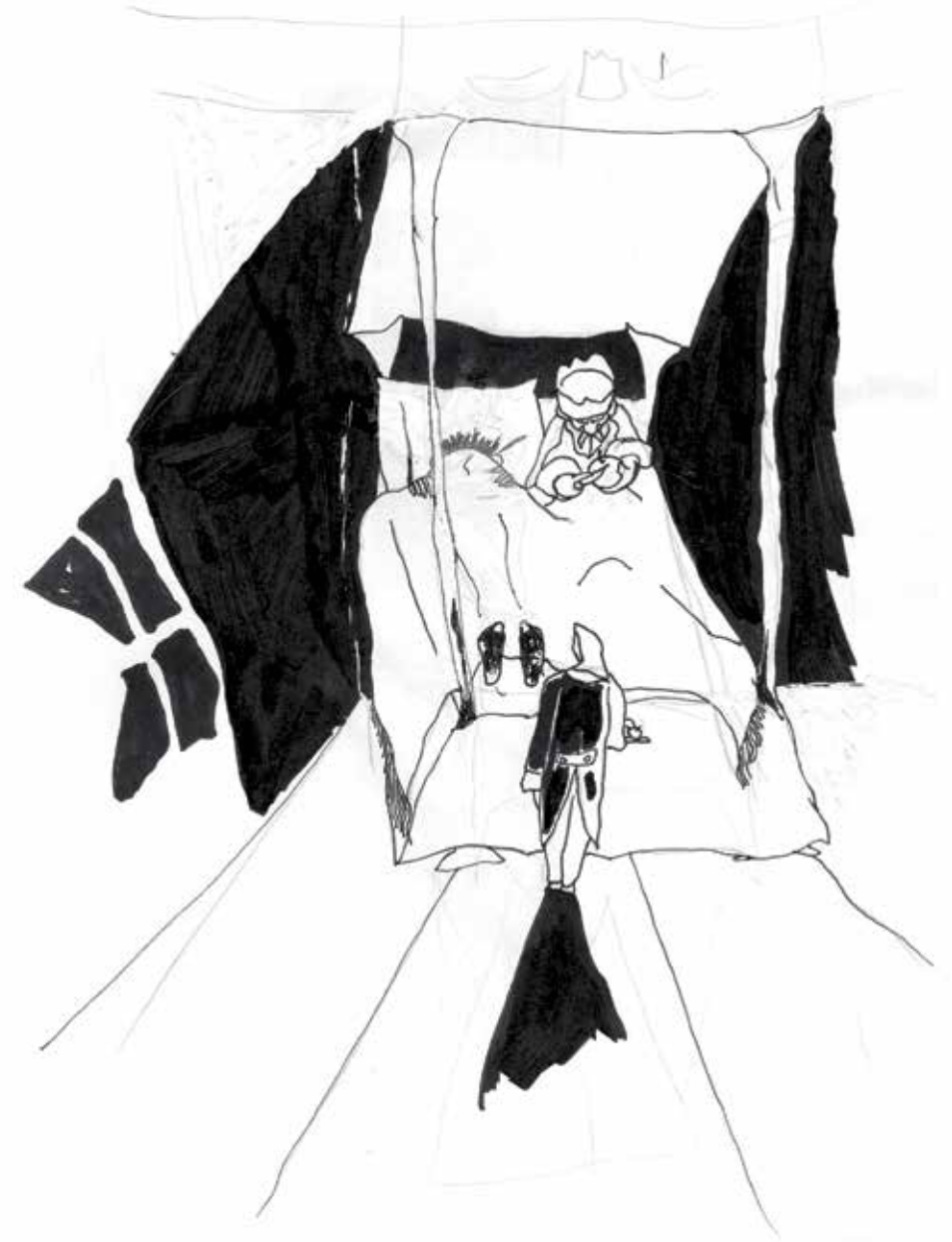
THE KING AND THE GOLD APPLES

On a quite lazy meteor in the constellation of Aries, there lived a king who had a kingdom and a magical apple tree that, every year, bore an abundance of gold apples. He was a happy king, and sometimes he felt good, and then he was benevolent. As a king should be on a quite lazy meteor in the constellation of Aries, where the majority of kingdoms are. His only major concern was caused by this very apple tree, the one he was so proud of. It bore absolutely dazzling gold apples that everyone admired. Only no one was allowed to eat them, for anyone who ate such an apple discharged a foul stench from their mouth for over a year. So, they had to be thrown in jail immediately as this odor was really unbearable. That year, the subjects of the king, who had also tasted the precious fruit himself, did not obey anything and held their noses when he spoke. The king, who didn't have children of his own, had fallen madly in love with the apple tree, and because of this, from day to day he grew sadder and grumpier. Soon he fell ill, and one morning he woke up on his deathbed. His last and only wish before his death was that he could satiate himself with gold apples. Or at least compote, if that was possible. His servant, who was also his best friend, cried for a long time and contemplated how to best help his king. Finally, he came up with an idea, and on his own volition proclaimed across the whole kingdom that from this day forward, in their land, everything shall be the opposite: sunshine will be rain, laughter will be tears – and particularly – whatever stinks, will smell good. He hurried to his beloved ruler and told him that he could finally indulge in the gold apples to his heart's content, for after eating them his breath will smell divine.

But when he stepped into the royal bedroom, he was astonished. Under the royal blanket, he found a terribly neglected vagabond. The servant immediately raged at him, "What are you doing here, and have you no manners? No matter how poor you may be, this is entirely inappropriate!"

"But I am the king!" the vagabond snapped back.

"What!?" blurted the faithful servant. "You, a ragamuffin?"



"Who else? Certainly not that one peeling rotten apples over there," answered the poor man, and pointed to the king.

"But they smell damn good," he added, and pulled the silk blanket over his head.

HOW THE GIANT FIRST ATE THE DARKNESS AND THEN THE LIGHT

Do you know the one about the giant who ate the darkness, and nothing happened to him? He wasn't even full. Let alone satisfied. His belly was even emptier, and he was even hungrier. Therefore, he just spat it out again.

What about the one when the giant ate the light? Well, not all of it. But he came pretty close. It's a good thing the Lord of the Universe came by and smacked the greedy ogre on his back, so that he choked, and the entire Universe shook. During his violent cough, all the crumbs, big and little, flew out of his mouth.

And that is how the stars were born.



THE LITTLE SOUL

The little soul of an old chimney sweep released itself into the air and lingered there. She gave one last glance at her old abode – a tiny and sooty body, wedged in a chimney – then sighed sadly and flew away. To a place up in the sky, and beyond, towards endless space. Now that she was finally free, she felt a little confused. She faintly glimmered high above, in the middle of the universe, tiny as the tiniest pebble, tinier even – a little chip from the pebble – a barely visible little flare that was just about to burn out. For some time, the little soul twirled about in place, not knowing what to do. Yet, she had longed for this moment for so long, and the old chimney sweep had been made so restless by her that he had wandered through countless countries and across wide seas. And now, suddenly, she did not know where to go.

I was hoping that many of my sisters would be here, and we would joyfully celebrate, she thought as she whirled around. But there is not even one of them here now, to tell me where to report to.

“Where do little, newly released souls go?”

Then something sparkled off in the distance; she trembled with fear when suddenly the Master Shooting Star stopped by her side and wiggled his tail.

“What is this?” she said curiously.

“Come with me,” he said and sparkled away without delay.

“Where to?” she called out.

“To your kind,” he answered, and a moment later he was just a speck in the vast darkness.

The little soul took a deep breath, expanding herself as much as she could, and

then suddenly, letting it all out, she flew after him. She barely saw how the Master Shooting Star had burned out above the planet she had just left and how he faded into darkness in a blaze of sparks.

“What now?” asked the little soul, searching for his tail. “What now?”

But there was no answer. She looked down at a rotating planet and asked again: “What now?”

Then, from somewhere below she heard, “Come, come. Come!” A few faint, soft voices reached her from afar.

“Come. Come. Come!”

More and more voices joined in from the distance.

“Come, come little sister! Come!”

And the little soul no longer hesitated. She hurled herself downwards, through a dense veil of passing clouds, and pushed her way, invisibly and softly, through the baby fluff, through a flock of nocturnal birds, and finally swung across half the sky, into the chimney.

“I felt such a sting in my chest,” said the old chimney sweep to his young assistant after being pulled out of the chimney. “I just collapsed.”

“Oh, you missed a magnificent shooting star, master.”

“And what did you wish for?”

“Ah, what else?” the young man shrugged his shoulders. “That you will always be safe and sound.”



WHY LIFE CAME TO BE

Once upon a long, long time ago, everything was the same. Do not ask me what that looked like, because I would answer you, the same. In general, at that time nothing existed that would be different.

That is why life came to be.

SEBASTIAN

Sebastian was a boy. He loved his mother and father. And yet, he spent most of his time alone at sea. Every day, he took his boat and went out into the open, anchored directly below the horizon, and counted the waves. Some days, there were a countless number of them, so that he could hardly tally them all, and his eyes would tire; other days, he would leisurely stretch over the prow of the boat and, with only one eye, monitor the movement beneath the boat.

After a few years, Sebastian had counted all the waves. And then he began counting the rays of the sun. Good thing that a mountain rose high above their hut. Their land had at one time been under water until the volcano erupted and rose up out of the sea, rocks and all, and with time, dried into a mountain. Sebastian climbed this very mountain, and with his hand covering his eyes, leaving small gaps between his fingers to peek through, counted the rays. This was really somewhat of a more difficult task because the sun was not always out and also the rays had an extreme branched flow and sometimes the clouds refracted them at strange angles. But if he tried hard, he could count them for an entire ten minutes without a single one escaping him. He did this a few times a day, and in the end, he calculated the day's average: how many rays were broken up, how many were unhindered, how many were intercepted, and how many there were in general.

One day they came to tell him that his mother had died, and Sebastian, after a long time away, returned home. On the day she was buried, the clouds intercepted and refracted a great deal of light, and it all pointed to bad weather. Indeed, the next morning Sebastian woke up surrounded by a monotonous clattering of drops of water. It was raining. He sat cross-legged on the bed and began carefully counting the falling drops, as much as was possible through a small slit in the window. In the evening he stretched his small window out onto the entire world, so that he could calculate the approximation of all the drops that fall from the sky. This did not take him very long even though, at that time, it rained for quite a while and people were afraid that there would be no more sun ever again. Perhaps this happened so that



he could count, undisturbed, all his drops. Last year, the rain had turned to snow, which in these places was not at all common, and Sebastian calculated exactly, to the millimeter, how many snowflakes are in one snowman.

That snowy year, Sebastian also lost his father. The poor man froze to death as Sebastian measured icicles outside. Sebastian buried him next to his mother and immediately started sifting the dirt through a fine sieve and counting the stones that he gained along with it, and then, the sand. That is how he determined almost exactly how many stones and how much dirt was needed for their mountain. He then counted all the trees and animals and realized how beautiful and rich their land was. And quite enough people, he thought, as he walked from house to house. And houses and stables. And ships and boats, and carts and carriages, trousers and skirts, coats and jackets, shoes, sandals, dishes, spoons, wells and drinking glasses, the poor and the rich, the evil and the good, the happy and the unhappy, the young, the old, the sick, the healthy, and those who smile. All these averages were hugely interesting to him – and that made him extremely happy.

So Sebastian stroked his long grey beard and gazed at the stars.

“You thought you were going to escape me, huh?” He playfully wagged his finger at them, then immediately became serious, and began: “One, two, three, four, five, si...” Suddenly his voice faded away. He laid his head down on the oak table and fell asleep forever.

They buried him next to his mother and father. An old man passing by happened to know that he belonged there even though he didn’t know his name was Sebastian, nor how old he was.

For no one counted that, he smiled.

THE TYRANT

He was a tyrant. Destroying the living gave him immeasurable pleasure. He finished off not only humans, but animals as well – everything from birds and snails to bees and butterflies. He felled trees and broke their branches; tore flowers and trampled lawns. His favorite was that which was beautiful – so, everything. And no one was allowed to bear him a grudge, for he was the ruler too. Not that he was ugly or gimpy or that some illness was eating away at him, from which he would soon die. Or that, out of envy, he was evil or whatnot. No. He simply was like that. And, he was never contrite about anything.

And so it happened one day that in his whole beloved world he found himself alone – all alone. He looked around, raced in all directions, called and even begged that someone would appear to him or at least respond, burrowed through soil, climbed mountains, combed the seas and broke apart clouds. But he found only nothing, absolutely nothing. No one at all.

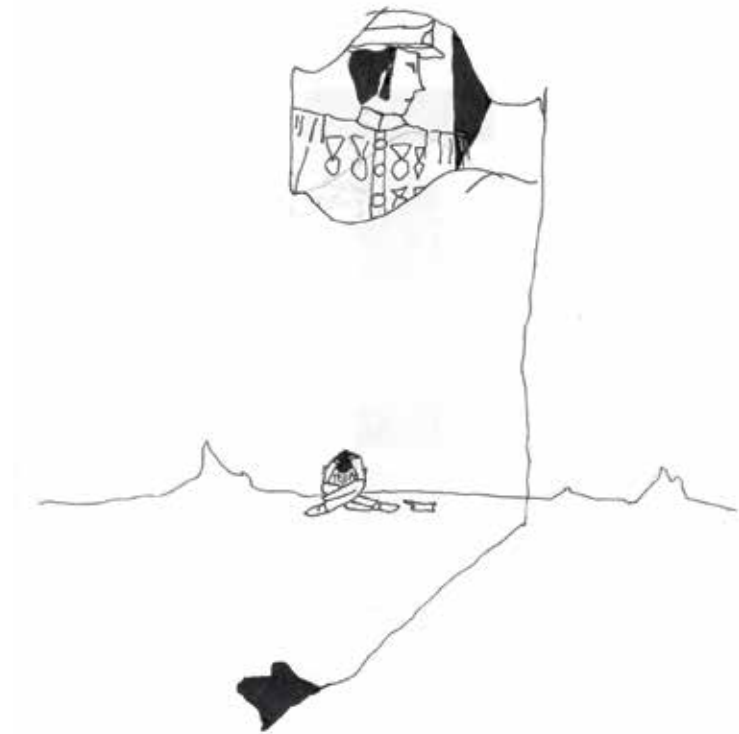
It was then that he first thought about his actions. And after three days of brooding, he felt, first a little, then very, sorry. So that he cried. For the first time. And he was genuinely surprised by this. But even after a prolonged cry, the worry did not vanish. On the contrary, it became even bigger. So big that he couldn't even cry anymore, that's how bad he felt.

If only someone would at least appear, no matter how small and insignificant, he wished in his moments of greatest despair.

If he could only find a ladybug to squash or a dandelion to kick.

But his wish did not come true, and he remained alone.

“Alone for all eternity!” He shouted at the sky, and tears welled up and ran down his cheeks again.



“Alone for all eternity!” His words bounced off deserted cities and desolate fields. He immediately jumped up and ran in all the directions it seemed the voice was coming from. He had been running for quite some time but found no one on his path until, completely exhausted, he nearly slammed into a large mirror, which adorned the entrance door to his palace.

“You!” He shouted at his own reflection. “You are at fault for everything!” And he hit the mirror, smashing it into tiny pieces.

In the hole left behind by the broken glass, he caught sight of the whole of his past world, which during his reign, he so mercilessly destroyed. All the people. All the animals that used to run around here. All the plants that rose from the ground and spread their leaves towards the sun. The whole sea world and all the birds in the friendly sky. Everything was exactly as it had once been when as a boy, he picked up a big iron crown that slipped over his eyes, and he had to fix it over and over again. He rushed towards the hole, and as though he had hit a stone wall, he was thrown back. Shocked, he stared into the opening.

Yes, this was his, only his much-desired world. But he could no longer get into it.

THE ACTOR

He had been an actor his entire life. Yet this was the first time he had been given such a demanding role, and he was a little afraid. So far, he has played almost every role there was – from meteors to little sunspots, from simple organisms that do not even have their own planet to a variety of, on multi-levels, higher life forms, which, overly satisfied with even the most unpleasant occurrences, no longer aspired to anything more, they only just existed.

Yes, in all corners of the various galaxies they were familiar with his portrayal of the first moments of the universe that he played so resolutely that it brought many to contemplate, and better understand, the space they lived in. And that play with the blind travelers, who are swallowed by a black hole, and who return in altered forms to a time before they were born. It was even whispered that he was one of them – that's how convincing his performance was. Or there was that time when he played a star without any glow, and many applauded him out of sympathy. Many unforgettable, still appreciated and never superseded roles marked his career, and a rich collection of awards decorated his display cases. Among them was the prestigious intergalactic award for special achievement, which only he received twice.

And yet he thought – when he was offered this role, this opportunity of a lifetime, to establish himself forever as the unsurpassed king of his craft – of turning it down. Yes, he would have to turn it down. Because he was afraid. Afraid that he would not be capable. Capable of depicting all these nuances of existence. Capable of expressing all these confused, drifting thoughts. That he would not be capable of bringing together all these subconscious currents of desires and longings. To present himself as reality and then again as a mystery. To so convincingly lie to himself and comfort himself with crumbs. And in the end, what he was most aware of: who can be so horribly afraid of death, yet still, despite everything, be so obsessed with it?

Yes, he would turn it down. He wouldn't be capable of such intense discord. Not even he can do it.

He knew that he would disappoint millions, but... he would not be able to do it.

To play a human.



LITTLE CRUMB

They called her Little Crumb, because, in front of the bakery, she would pick up crumbs that slipped from people's paper bags of fresh bread. For the love of truth, it must be told that she was also a tiny person and the nickname suited her quite well.

If she was lucky, in three days she would gather enough crumbs to eat for an hour until she was full. But what can you do, when she always nibbled them up on the spot. Well, not quite always. But more about this a little later.

First, I need to tell you something else. I really think you should know this, so you don't have a false perception about this orphaned little girl. Here is the thing. Even though Little Crumb was content with little things as small as crumbs – for no one can insist that there is such a thing as a big crumb, because that would then be bread – this tiny little girl nevertheless wished for something big, much larger than breadcrumbs. So it seemed to her, and to me. How it will seem to you, however, judge for yourself. Namely, she wished to fly to the Moon someday, to that real live Moon up there in the night sky. This, because she had heard that anything is possible there. There then, on the moon floor, she would sow all the little crumbs which the sidewalk could take on a Saturday morning when the bakery is most crowded. She would even add the reserve from her apron, the ones which she always picked for Sundays, when the shops are closed. From all these breadcrumbs, huge loaves of bread would surely grow. She was certain of this, for on the Moon anything is possible. She would slice them into equal pieces and distribute them among the Moonites. She would also treat herself to some, yet she would take a smaller piece. The poor thing didn't seem to know that no one is on the Moon, a barren wasteland with craters.

On the Moon, bread would rise nicely, she thought, for it is warm there. She concluded this based on the fact that the Moon shines, after all.

It isn't too hot there? she even feared, just for a second. Then it's for the best, since she did not like winters because little crumbs would get wet in the snow and freeze. Well, she didn't have to wait for even one again. Her wish was granted, and she flew there.

And one must say, she succeeded. For every once in a while, in the sky, a large round loaf appears. It is hers, which she then keeps slicing until only the heel remains. This one is especially hers to treat herself with. Then she quickly sows another one.

THE SAD PLANET

It was not surprising, for he was all alone, far and wide. He could not even see the stars in the distance, that's how far-removed all the other celestial bodies were. But at one time, when he was still soft and glowing from the mighty fire that burned inside him, he, in the midst of all the empty blackness, spotted a tiny spark – a comet that had, an unimaginable millions of miles away, just been extinguished. Only then was he not sad. Otherwise, he was bitterly lonely in his deaf emptiness... As you see, how was he supposed to be happy – when he had been so alone this entire, long time? The fire in him had almost completely burned out and he had cooled down. His tear-stained crust had completely frozen over. Yes, sometimes he has also cried. When he felt especially bad and wished he would stop spinning, and that he wouldn't even exist at all. From one day to the next, he spun slower and slower. He simply lost all his will to propel himself. In particular, he felt useless when, in a moment of his solitude, a spaceship sailed by and did not even stop, let alone honk. It only slowed down slightly, as though it were observing him, and then sped off somewhere further into the darkness.

How his soul ached. He wasn't even worth a landing. Not even a rest stop.

From then on, he spun so slowly that it seemed as if he wasn't spinning at all. He almost completely stopped, and on top of that, turned two to three times slower with each new day, even though this was already quite impossible. Until one day, utterly sad, he came to a complete stop. And fell.

He fell for a long time. A very long time, gaining more and more speed. He landed at the bottom of the universe and, with even greater speed, bounced off in another direction, where, with such force, he slammed into a larger planet and knocked it out of its orbit. At which point, that planet also flew somewhere ahead and hit a third, more hazy planet, which, of course, immediately left its solar system and, at high speed, approached a fourth, very sunny planet somewhere over there, at the other end. That's how it began, and also ended, with an overall knocking about and flying



of planets across the universe, so that the creatures on them clutched their heads and waited in fear for what was about to happen. And no wonder, for every impact set off a strong earthquake.

The Master of the universe quickly noticed the chaos that had ensued, and swiftly descended from his throne into the midst of the universal space to take appropriate action, if it were necessary. And, of course, it was. He had allowed himself one brief nap, and already everything had gone awry, he was thinking, when off his head bounced that very once-so-sad planet, who was now so happily shouting and bounding about the universe and knocking his brothers in all directions. He was enjoying it immensely and no longer felt alone, and all the ice on him melted away.

The Master of the universe barely caught him and put him into a basket. He felt the bump on his head, which was heavily throbbing, and swiftly caught the other aspiring pilots. He also locked them in a basket, in which he had stored nothing. That is to say that Planets inside of nothing could do nothing. Not even move.

After that, he began positioning them around the universe. Most of them he attempted to, more or less, return to their original orbits, except for the sad planet, whom he squeezed into one of the most orderly and peaceful galaxies, which he knew he could count on. He knew that the nearby planets would surely look after this newcomer, who had been alone for so long and had therefore never acquired any planetary manners.

They'll teach him well enough what the tasks of good planets are – beautiful spinning, caring for one's crust and the creatures on it, politeness toward the elderly, etc. – and offer him decent company. The big glowing planet is responsible for him, the Master decided, and it will be best if they illuminate him constantly with their attention, so that no nonsense would stir in his mind again. And he added, for him, one more small tiny one, that was almost too small to be a planet. It would always have to be at his beck and call, the Master of the universe decided, resolutely. The once-so-sad planet was now overjoyed because of all the attention, and wouldn't you know it, he soon became good friends with the tiny planet. Our planet never got tired of the little one's attention, and all his waters rose from happiness whenever they chattered together. For he didn't forget what aloneness is. And truly, it was exactly this kind of friend he had always wished for.

So, the Master of the universe, now calmed down, could once again take a nap.

OH, WHAT ALL HE SAW

Oh, what all he saw! Saw and experienced! Rainbows made of nothing but flowers. Skies, where many suns grazed, and from which honey and wine flowed. And golden-haired girls gathered them with their eyes – blue diamonds which melted into pure bliss when they smiled. Everything seen and told, everything anticipated, imagined, dreamt – everything was a single moment over to which he gave all of himself.

He sailed on hair, which caressed him like the soft melancholy of the upcoming autumn, and knew how to compellingly rock him into acceptance.

He covered himself with these leaves and thought of nothing more, other than that he was aware of it. And everything was even lovelier for him. He knew himself, the past, time that is passing, and at the same time he knew infinity.

He was always nearby, and at the same time so very far away, and in between he constantly expanded. He was a necessity to all, like air, and everything was meant just for him, as though he were the last frontier of all that exists.

He swam through timeless landscapes of extraordinary beauty, and dove into pools of eternal serenity. He was the mirror of everything; he floated and pulsated in something that didn't matter at all; however it was so deep that he kept returning. Each time even stronger and painfully complete.

He shuddered. He stepped onto the street. The body needed more. At the corner he saw a dealer. He hurried towards him.

THE CALLING

The Great Cosmic Flood came unannounced and violently. It took away everything, even that which was supposed to be eternal – poetry and music, beautiful paintings and statues, but most of all, hope. Everything was swept off the face of the world, except for a few finches, three tortoises and, in the nook of a cave, a minuscule being with big weary eyes, named The Old Man. One day, because he was hungry, the being crawled out of the cave and stretched out in the dim sun, and then crossed the barren and rocky mountains in search of food. Soon it crossed paths with the first tortoise.

“Tortoise, tortoise, may I eat you? I am so very hungry,” the being kindly asked. “If not, I will die, that’s how very hungry I am.”

The tortoise decisively shook its head and promptly returned to its errands. Soon after, he ran into the second tortoise, which also refused to be eaten and hurried away, even though, by now, the being’s stomach was growling loudly. The next tortoise he met also didn’t want anything to do with the being, and went on its way, before hearing the end of his plea. The being collapsed on the sand in desperation, buried his face in his hands, and began weeping. Just then the finches fluttered by and landed on the weeping being.

“You may eat us! Us!” they started chirping one over the other. The being lifted his head in disbelief. “Really! For real!” they sang, nodding with their beaks.

The being jumped for joy!

“Which one of you shall be first?” he immediately asked. The finches went silent for a moment, exchanging looks. Then, whispering, they put their heads together, while the old being eagerly looked on.

“So?” he asked impatiently.

Then a small bird stepped forward from the group and chirped: “Me.”

The others nodded solemnly.

“Well,” the being said. “Die!”

“Why?” wondered the bird, and the others also exchanged surprised looks.

“So I can eat you, of course. I cannot do it whilst you are alive,” the old being answered.

“You will have to kill me yourself,” the finch said, and looked back at its brothers, who mumbled something in support. “Is it not enough that I have volunteered myself?”

Of course it is, the being thought to himself and scratched his head. Disappointed, he looked at the self-sacrificing little bird.

“Then I cannot eat you.”

“How so?” the finch could not believe his little feathery ears. Again, the chirping began.

“I cannot eat you,” the being repeated, “because I cannot kill you.”

“Are you afraid?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“What then?” echoed the rest of the assembled company.

“I don’t know,” the being shrugged. “It doesn’t seem right to me.”

“What kind of human are you?” the birds asked in amazement.

“Who?” the being asked.

“Human, human! Human!” they all chirped in agitation.

“One, who for his own survival, will not sacrifice another living being,” the little finch explained to him.

“I really don’t know,” he said apologetically. “It seems to me that I’m an old man.”

“Isn’t an old man a human?” The little finch turned to its brothers, some nodding and some shaking their heads.

Then the being himself saved them from this dilemma.

“It would be best if you eat me,” he reasoned. There are more of you and you will have an easier time surviving.”

“No, this cannot be a human!” The finches flapped their wings fiercely and, chirping loudly, scattered in all directions. The being sat down again, lost in thought. Suddenly, he heard a voice behind him.

“You can eat me, if you want.” It was the tortoise he first spoke with. “Or one of my friends,” it added.

“No,” the old being shook his head. “No. No more.”

“What will you do? Die of hunger?”

“Yes,” he nodded sadly.

“No, don’t talk like that,” the second tortoise reprimanded him, as it crawled over to the first one.

“Better that, than to not be human.”

“You lack nothing, except a bit of food”, the third tortoise added, joining the other two.

“Why was I not swept away by the winds of the Great Cosmic Flood, like everyone else?” the being asked angrily, shaking its fist at something in the distance.

“Maybe because you have a calling,” suggested one of the tortoises.

“A calling?” the being wondered in surprise, turning toward the tortoises who were no longer there. There was only the wind, that wrapped itself around his beard, and put a seed, resembling a finch’s beak, into his hand.

What is this? the old man asked himself, broadly spreading open his coarse hand. Suddenly something burbled behind his back. He turned and saw a thin stream of water flowing downwards from a rock and accumulating in bowl-shaped basins, which strongly brought to mind a tortoise shell. In an instant, he jumped to the clear liquid and began to noisily gulp it down. After he quenched his thirst, he noticed that

the wind scattered even more such seeds around him. He gathered a fistful of them and just as he was about to pop one in his mouth, he remembered. He got up and went off in search of the finches. Of course, he did not find them.

They returned, along with the tortoises, only when the seeds bore a bounty of fruit, and the water turned into a sea.

And the old man became a child again.



NOAH

Noah, even as a child, liked collecting boats. She had all sorts of them scattered about on shelves and in drawers in her room. Wooden, plastic, paper, and even glass ones. Maybe she inherited this from her grandpa, whose name was Noeh. Almost like hers. And he, in a time long ago, when paper and plastic did not yet exist, saved people and all the animals from the high waters that rose higher than the mountains and flooded the whole world. She was very proud of him, and when she first heard this story, she also became fond of animals – wooden, plastic, paper, but she had none made of glass.

She arranged them on all those little boats of hers, carrying them around the room and brrrrr-ing, with her little cherry-like mouth, like a small motor. In the end, she always safely unloaded them aboard her dresser, which was the tallest object in her room, and she could barely reach it. And this, only when she climbed onto a chair and stood on two thick picture books, on her toes, and then stretched her arms far, far away. This is how, every night, she contentedly fell asleep, for all her beloved little animals were contentedly grazing on top of the dresser, where certainly no, no matter how high, waters could reach them. And the little boats could hardly wait for the morning.

For not a single reef was in her room



A SAD STORY

“A rather sad story,” said Anton, as he looked down on his life. “Couldn’t you have chosen something more cheerful for me next time?” An old scribe, leaning over a big, tattered book, bobbed his head with a scowl and tightened his lips.

“Now, what could be more jovial than a circus?” he turned towards Anton.

“But a sulky clown. This is really quite stupid, don’t you think?”

The old man didn’t think so at all. He slammed his big book shut and clutched his head.

“You weren’t happy the last time, nor anytime before that. You have been everything already, and this was your greatest wish - to become a clown.”

“But was I really?” asked Anton, and looked the old scribe honestly in the eyes.

“The saddest,” responded the old man, and shook his head sadly. “Three circuses went bankrupt because of you. Despite that, for love of you, I broke all the existing rules, and offered you all the possible satisfactions in life. Now, look at where you are! There, where you started. How will you ever achieve eternal bliss if you can’t make the smallest effort for a better tomorrow for yourself? And how little you care about others...”

“Oh, that’s not true,” Anton was adamant.

“How is it not true? Look, where are your friends? There isn’t one single person you could call a friend. And just what should I write under this heading?” It was apparent that the old scribe was truly sorry, because he had to leave almost the whole page of Anton’s life blank. “Your mission is unfulfilled, and, as such, I can’t recommend you further.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?!” Anton protested indignantly. “What about the time I caught the trapeze artist?”

“He sent you there.”

“Who’s He?”

“The one who placed me here. The one to whom I owe the faithful and relentless performing of my duties!” The old scribe slightly raised his voice, even though he was not normally prone to do so.

“Have you been here long?” asked Anton, in order to divert his thoughts.

“Very long,” the questioned one replied, reluctantly, because he suspected that Anton wanted to divert the flow of conversation. It must end, however, as soon as possible because many are still in line, waiting.

“Aren’t you bored?” Anton did not give up.

“Enough”, decided the old man. “Wait here. I’m going up. We’ll see what will become of you.”

“Ask Him if I can replace you!” Anton shouted after him. He stopped for a moment but did not turn around.

“I sort of feel sorry for you, here.”

Without another word, the scribe disappeared in the luminous opening.

“So alone, every day at the same counter,” Anton added, took the pen in hand and opened the big book. It was heavy, and the side he held in his hand slammed against the wooden base, so that the dust kicked up into his nose and he had to cough.

“There’s nothing,” he was surprised, and turned the pages so that clouds of dust billowed out in all directions. “This won’t be difficult.”

He lifted the bell and rang it slightly. Even before the ringing subsided, the door opened and through it streamed a swirl of pleasant light.

“Aha, a soul,” Anton nodded knowingly, and looked into the book. There it all was, already written. “You were very hard-working, I must say. Especially when caring

for your husband, confined to his bed. And you loved giving alms. Praiseworthy,” assessed Anton. “You have His blessing. You don’t have to return. Right through there,” and he indicated with his hand towards the glowing opening through which, a little while ago, the old man had disappeared. The soul joyfully slipped through.

“And good luck!” Anton gazed after it for a long time before happily ringing the bell again.

And why is this story sad? Probably because it happened many years ago, when, up there, they did not yet replace each other so often.



THE SINGING METEOR

How beautifully this meteor sang! People, if you only knew. It's impossible to express. But I will try anyway. Well, this was not singing in the true sense of the word, just the whistling of his speed through endless dust. But to him it seemed to be the most beautiful sound in the world. He had no more and no fewer than three seconds to sing and then disintegrate. And he made the most of them, of course, by singing all the way. He took advantage of the last few thousandths of a second for a thunderous refrain as he broke through the caustic, protective veil of the planet and burst into flames, and with immeasurable speed hurtled toward its hard crust.

And happily disintegrated.

THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

May people have thought and spoken whatever they wanted. And may astrophysicists have proven everything possible, accurate, and correct. May an abundance of different places have appeared in dreams as possibilities for an unmistakable determination of its location. And may shamans have read from bones and rain, sects and cults wildly danced and prayed, to be brought there by the flow of the subconscious and the purity of desire. Only the two of them knew... where it was.

Right up the stairs, in a small room under the roof of their house, in an even smaller wooden cradle, next to an even smaller plush duckling. It's a tiny, warm bundle. The center of the universe.

THE HEART IN STONE

A stone rolled from his heart, and he sighed with relief. *Finally!* This happened to him when they told him what he really is, and in what way he differs from them.

He was an android. They assembled him just like themselves. However, so that he wouldn't completely resemble them, they placed a stone in his heart. For a long time, it painfully pressed against his chest, and he sensed that something was wrong.

Otherwise, he was just like them.

No, he shook his head. When your heart rolls out of the stone, then I will wish to be like you.

And he realized why he had been so pained.



THE FLOCK

The flock of questions was circling around looking for any kind of answers. Lately, the questions had multiplied a lot, yet there were only a small handful of answers available. At least the ones they could track down. If they happened to track one down, starved, they threw themselves at it and wildly tore it up into a thousand pieces, only fleetingly quenching their thirst. So they were becoming, from day to day, increasingly more dissatisfied, and because the situation slowly became unbearable, the leader of the flock, named Question About Meaning, decided that they should leave this inhospitable area and settle elsewhere, where they would find more food for their satisfaction.

And so the flock set out. The journey was long and hard. The questions progressed very slowly, and many of them stayed behind where, with time, they got completely lost. The leader led them over high cliffs of forgetfulness and through gelatinous seas of acceptance. Among jolts of disappointment and apathy, tightly wrapped in coats of a craving for knowledge, they pushed forward or back again when roughly rebuffed by the wall of ignorance. At those times, they had to go far around through dark woods of arrogance and greed, where they waded through sulfurous streams of premonition. So as not to plunge in, along the way they held onto thin lianas of hope. He led them wherever his hunger took him. Up ahead, about which his grandfather had already told him, and his grandfather before him, who had led the flock in some previous consciousness, there existed another world, full of answers – clear and logical – the ones which the questions so yearned after. Through all these hostile landscapes of thoughts that mercilessly hurled rain and lightning bolts at them, they followed him, disappearing in mists of doubts, and evaporating in sandstorms of time. That is how their numbers greatly dwindled, and only three questions still staggered past the last tree of curiosity. These were the leader himself, Question About Meaning, his right-hand man, Question About The Future, and the question that had somewhat held back the entire time, Question About Death. The pink dawn in the distance blinded them, and they had to shield their eyes and descend to the ground. For a long time, they breathed wearily and waited to get used

to the new light, full of new hope, and excited in the face of a better future, which they sensed was back there.

Over time, the little flock rose again and, with the last of their strength, broke through the final bit of their journey. They came to a stop before a door. It seemed that all the space flowed into it. First to descend to the threshold was the leader, and he knocked...

The door did not open, the whole world unfolded, and a large flock of answers rushed upon the trio of poor travelers and ground them into pulp. Furiously, they scattered throughout the dark forests and gelatinous seas.

SILENCE

“Grandpa, what is silence?”
The boy, out of breath, stopped at the door jamb.
“Grandpa, what is silence?” he shakily repeated.
“Grandpa?”

The boy rocked onto his toes, leaned forward, and tried to determine where his grandpa was. Grandpa never left the room anymore, so there were only two possibilities – he was either in bed or in the big worn out armchair facing the only window in the room, across which was draped a heavy velvet curtain that only allowed in enough light so that one did not bump into things.

Grandpa, for a long time now, has not been allowed to see the sun. Therefore, Aljaž was allowed to see it, and each morning he would describe it to him. So what if the description was always the same, and if grandpa always laughed the same and stroked Aljaž’s hair and said, “You are my little sunshine.”

Although Aljaž did not completely understand how a small boy could be sunshine to anyone, he was nevertheless not just a little proud of grandpa’s words. He was not an adult, but he knew that without the sun, nothing works.

“Grandpa, what is silence?” Aljaž did not allow himself to be waved away. He entered the room, even though it was possible grandpa was asleep. Actually, it was very possible.

And he remembered his mom, and how she strictly scolded him that he had to, as much as possible, leave grandpa in peace at these times.

He must rest a lot.

So what, thought Aljaž to himself, that show-off Luka says that silence exists when we don't talk.

But that is not true at all, he pondered. “What if the radio is playing?”

“You turn it off and it is silent again!” Luka replied gruffly at the time.

It surely isn't that simple, thought Aljaž, and immediately decided to question his grandpa, who knew everything about everything about this issue. Even before asking his father.

Aha, he is not in bed, Aljaž's eyes adapted to the darkness in the room. *Then he must be in his armchair.*

“Grandpa?” he whispered as he approached the armchair. Of course he was there. And he was sleeping.

“Graaanddddpa,” Aljaž very, very quietly whispered in grandpa's ear.

“What is silence?”

Grandpa was sleeping peacefully. The corners of his mouth were curved upwards into a calm smile. Aljaž looked at him in astonishment. This was not the face, exhausted from difficult past months. This was a new face, quite fresh and somehow younger. Like in the photos when daddy was just a child.

“Grandpa, what is silence?”

Aljaž held his breath for a second when he saw, at the wooden sides of the armchair, the strangely drooping arms of grandpa. They were dangling on their own, as if they were a part of some other body. Not grandpa's.

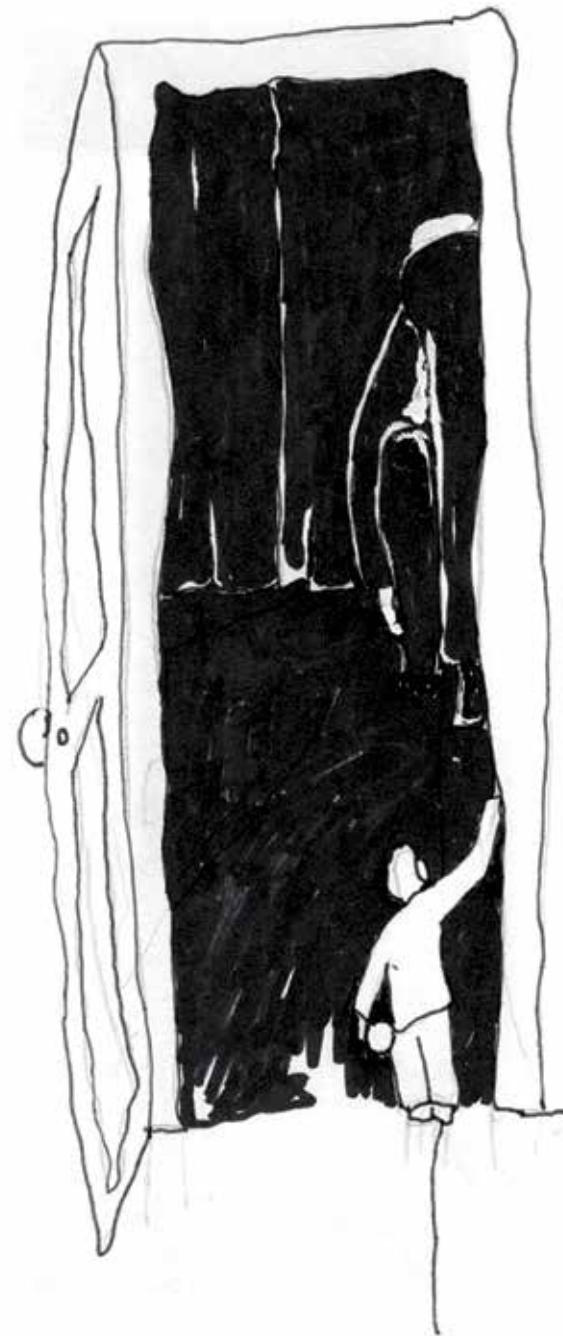
Only then did Aljaž notice that grandpa had his eyes open. Just a crack.

Like my plush teddy bear, Aljaž thought, *when I lay it in bed. He never completely closes them. But a teddy bear is not a living thing*, it occurred to him.

“Grandpa, what is silence?” he asked again, more to himself, maybe because he had a bad feeling in his heart. He didn't quite know why.

He took hold of grandpa's hand. Teddy bear is warmer.

This is how he stood there, in front of the window, next to the armchair, next to his grandpa. And he did not even hear how loudly his mother was calling him to dinner.



ON RIVER ARMS AND WHATNOT

Ignatius Knoblecher had been sailing with his boat Morning Star along the White Nile for four months now, measuring the river's arms, both distributaries and tributaries. He was an honorary member of the Royal Geographical Society of Vienna and a permanent correspondent to Berlin's Exploration Committee of River Distributaries and Tributaries. *So far*, he thought contentedly, *everything has gone according to plan*. In a few days the arduous journey will be over, and he will take his findings and hurry back to Europe, where, in February, the first conference of the International Geographical Society awaits him. There, he will be the main attraction, presenting his newest findings and more complete measurements and records from this somewhat unexplored area. Before him, no one had so accurately measured the meandering and flow of the White Nile riverbed and measured the length of all its arms.

On the final day of his journey, however, something so unusual happened that it stunned Ignatius. His notebook, bound in leather and quite worn at the edges, and his long, crinkled goose quill, both of which he always carried with him, slipped from his hands. Tension appeared on his otherwise calm face.

The river suddenly, with no apparent reason, made a gentle semicircular bend, and the Morning Star had no choice but to follow it, even though right in front of them the whole riverbed had just widened into a lake, which was not drawn on any existing map.

Ignatius threw the maps down and stood up in astonishment. He leaned far out over the railing and tried to determine what was happening. This kind of a phenomenon was completely new and unknown to him. Especially when, from around a bend, a waterway appeared, normal again in width and curvature. This confused Ignatius.

What was that? he asked himself, looking back. He ran to the rudder, and despite the danger of falling over into the river full of hungry crocodiles, climbed the railing,

and from this uncomfortable position observed the slowly receding semicircle the river had just drawn. Nothing was clear to him. Everything remained the same: soil composition, speed of flow, altitude variance, wind strength and the spirals of the gluttonous whirlpools. The muddy mass of water showed no changes; nevertheless, the river had just done something really unusual, not described in any book. And Ignatius had been to quite a few places and read quite a few books.

He commanded the boat to be turned around and anchored right in the center of that phenomenon. Only then did he notice that the semicircle was actually an ellipse. And that the shore that arose from this ellipse widened on each side into a tributary, along which they had sailed in, and a distributary in which he had given the order to turn around. The lake, which extends far away from both river arms, ends on the opposite bank of the riverbed, almost perpendicular to the shore.

This completely overtook Ignatius.

Nobody will ever believe me, he thought. "This cannot be true!" He blurted this with such vehemence that he almost dislocated his jaw.

The Morning Star was anchored exactly in the middle of what appeared to be the river's collar. "This is an entire shirt!" he exclaimed to himself, and passed out.

HOW THE GIANT FORGOT WHO HE WAS

One morning the giant woke up and realized that he had forgotten who he was. It had not been the first time he had forgotten something – for instance, how to blow apart clouds, or shake up some island so that people fall into the sea. But to forget who he was, that had never happened before.

This worried him, and he immediately set out for the plain to find out from the people how and what, and above all, who he was. He was in such a hurry that he even forgot to block the entrance to his cave with that huge rock that at one time had fallen from the sky and he had caught in his hat. However, talking to people did him no good. He was in for trouble. They did not like him much, for he had chased the clouds far away from their fields, and thereafter it did not rain for a long time, and he shook the ground so that they had to rebuild their houses over and over again. In any case, he was a very mischievous giant. That is why people played dumb around him, and in no way would they tell him how and what, and above all, who he was.

“He surely is not a bee,” said a farmer and put his children on his wagon. They were headed into town where a fair was being held that day, and one could buy all sorts of amazing things. “He doesn’t have wings,” he said, and looked at his wife questioningly as if perhaps she knew something about this.

“You are enormous, that’s for sure,” said the wife as she measured the giant from head to toe by eye, “But surely you are not a hill because you move.”

The giant meekly trudged behind the rattling wagon and attended to their every word, that’s how eager he was to find out how and what, and above all, who he was. “He’s a pumpkin! A pumpkin!” the children burst into laughter, followed by their parents.

The giant cheered up, and then again became earnest. “And what does a pumpkin do?” he asked the crowd in all seriousness.

“It’s hard!” the farmer laughed and drove the horses on.

The giant stood there and tried to imagine himself a pumpkin – and a hard pumpkin at that. He clenched his teeth, trying to be as hard as possible. The years went by, and he became harder and harder until one day he turned to stone.

And to this day, that mountain is called The Giant’s Hard Pumpkin.



A MADE UP FAIRY TALE

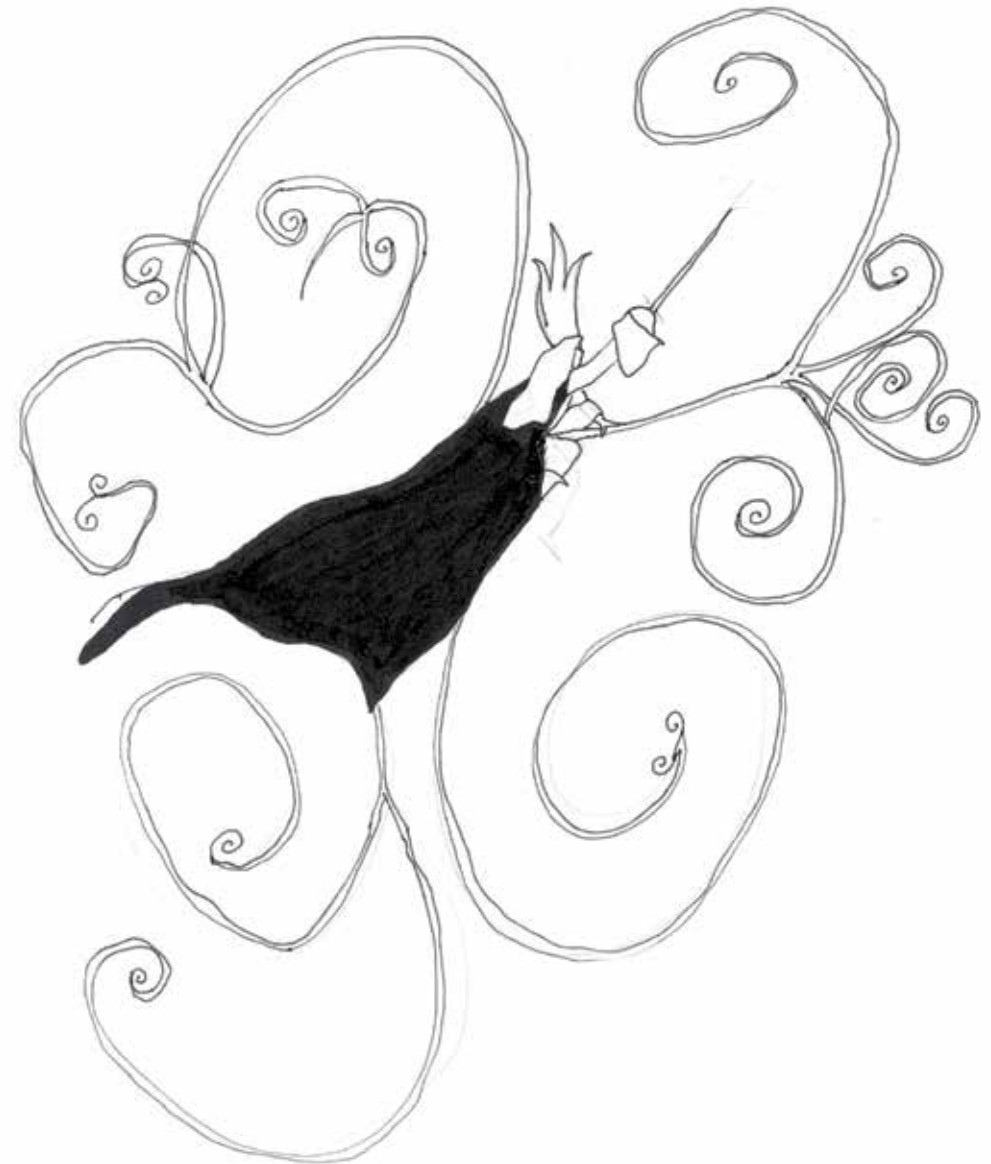
One day the Guardian Of Time was so bored that he made up a fairy tale. It was quite a good fairy tale for someone who is still only a beginner in making up fairy tales. It told of a space where everything stands still and nothing moves. One day, a young prince rode into this space on a storm, and he stopped for a moment to rest. This poor man had strayed off course, and wouldn't you know it, when he stopped like this – with no care in the world – he could no longer move.

What is this? he wondered, and with all his strength he tried to at least turn over onto his hip, but he couldn't accomplish even this. He couldn't even raise his left eyebrow in his adorable way, as he loved to do at court, when flirting with numerous princesses.

“Thank God that I can still think,” he said to himself when he realized he was caught, and there was no one far and wide that could help him. “And, that my heart is still beating.”

Yes, he was an eternal optimist, this prince of ours. But what he did not know was that he had wandered into a timeless space where nothing happens and everything stands still. Truth be told, to a certain extent it was his own fault, since everyone warned him against riding cosmic storms. For who knows where they pause and where their paths will end. The main thing is, it was too dangerous, but the prince was an adventurer and could not be persuaded. Now he's done it. Really done it, so that he will remember for all eternity, because this is where he will remain, where the wild storm threw him off.

And because he was so terribly bored, he made up our world. With people, animals and plants, clouds and waters. With stars and atoms.



WEAPONS

They transported it to the most vacant area in that location. There was nothing far and wide in the distance, just a dull, empty nothing, through which, every billion years or so, some lost signal travelled. Here is where they would test it for the first time, to finally experience its full destructive power. They expected it to be capable of great devastation. How much, no one knew for sure. There were too many unknown factors regarding the use of this new energy. Carefully, they installed it, removed the pulleys and drawbridges, and loaded them onto their ship. Then they flew away. Only when they reached a safe distance did they stop and prepare for activation. They were just a few tense moments away from testing the most powerful weapon of all time. A call was put through to the president on the home planet for the go-ahead to activate. After a brief conversation, permission was granted, and the Admiral of the Myriad Fleet solemnly pushed the button. With a deafening explosion, everything was wiped out – not just the gauges, the image of the president, and the thoughts of all those present.

The world was reborn as a compact burning point, which slowly began to expand.

THE SHELLFISH

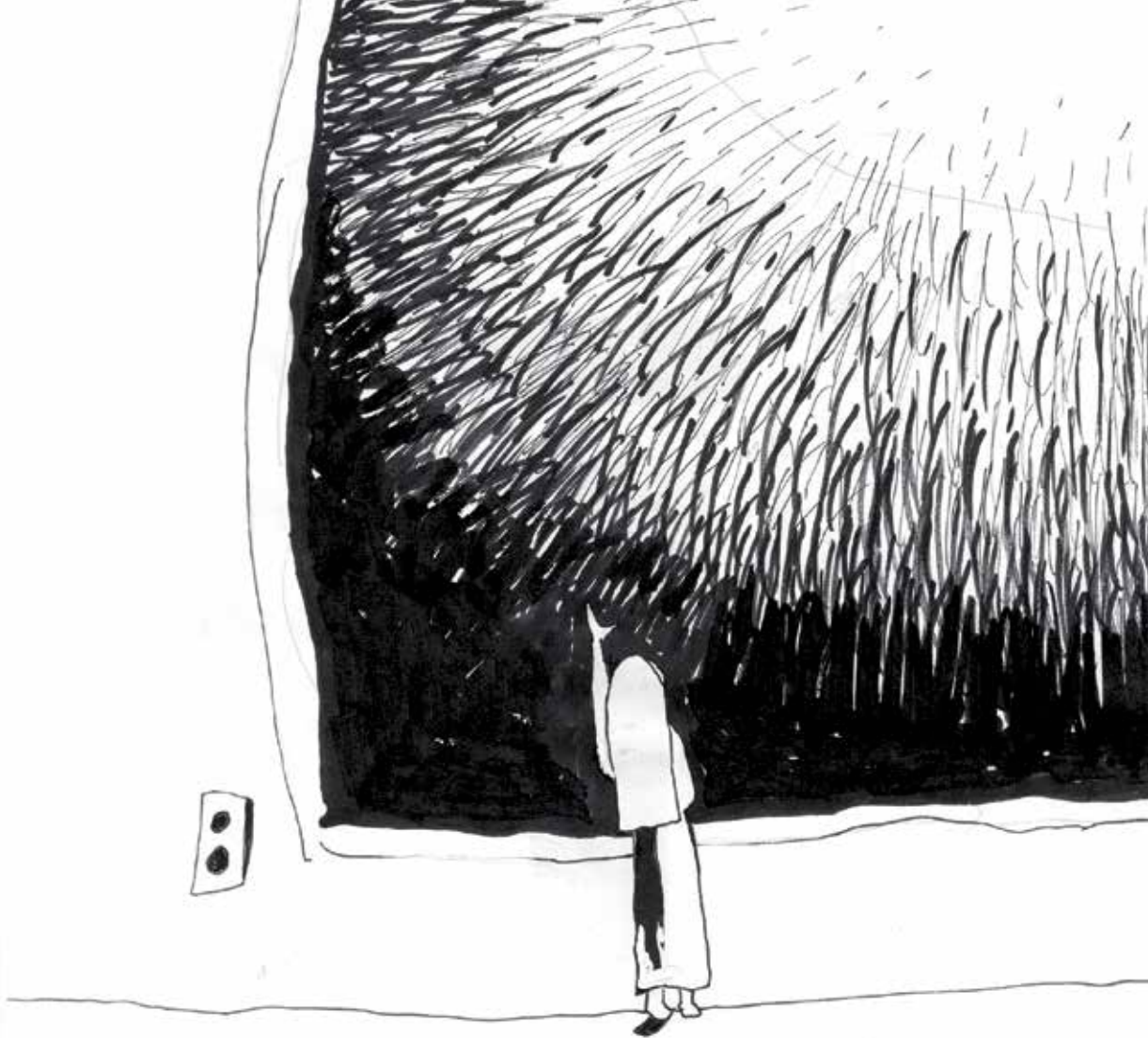
In the solar nebula of Lotus, south of the Northern Lights and its four silver constellations of Chrome, lived a shellfish. She had a husband and a bunch of boisterous children who, every day, knew how to play a prank or two and anger their mother, who loved them boundlessly and forgave them just about every naughty mischief. Some, grown up already, had children of their own, but they still returned to their mother for all sorts of possible things. And she gave them as much as she had, as much as she could tear away from her own mouth.

Every day she washed, ironed, cleaned, cooked, and did everything that was needed for her family to be clean and carefree, and their dwelling free of dust. Although they still did not have a flying saucer because her husband earned too little, he promised daily that he would start saving the very next day and buy one soon. Yet the very next day came, and he once again did not come home after work and instead drank late into the night with his friends.

But the shellfish had stopped taking this to heart a long time ago. She knew that it would always be like this, because that's how it has to be, and is. Children must be washed and the husband fed. Who will take care of them if she doesn't?

And so the years flew by. The shellfish asked fewer and fewer questions, and answered and conversed less and less; she had locked her wishes away inside the cabinet of her heart, and if anyone asked for the key, she would not even know where to search. She even got used to thinking less and less. Day after day burned away with the same chores, and it seemed she liked it that way.

Soon, the last child left and her husband retired. Now he could spend even more time with his friends and save even less. She, on the other hand, went to bed alone in the evening and no longer waited for him. Usually he came home only after she had fallen asleep.



One night, when they were both already asleep, above their house, something suddenly sparkled. A beautiful, otherworldly light scattered across the entire celestial arc, piercing the dark sky with countless tiny shooting stars, fluttering into the distance like a butterfly.

The shellfish awoke suddenly and stared out the window in amazement. Because never in her life had she seen anything so beautiful. Her husband, next to her, snored loudly and every so often muttered something incomprehensible. The shellfish flinched when, from the glittering mass, a spark tore away and began to fall steeply

downward in the direction of their street while strangely burning out. She barely managed to hold back a scream, when that thing slammed into the ground in their garden and vanished into nothingness. She had to grab hold of the wall, that's how hard the ground shook on impact. Bewildered, her eyes scanned the street and she was surprised no one had noticed this. The street remained silent and dark, as it always is at that time of night. She quickly put on her morning gown and rushed down the stairs through the back door into the garden – there was nothing there. She searched through all the lettuce and bean beds and combed along the border hedge. She also looked behind the hyacinths, for this thing wasn't necessarily big. With a rake, she overturned the compost, but there was nothing there.

Am I dreaming? shot through her mind, and she pinched herself. She looked up, but there was no longer anything there. *I'm dreaming*, she repeated, and made her way back to bed. She kept thinking about all this, and only fell asleep in the early hours of the morning when the new day dawned.

The shellfish could not have known that that night, in her dreams, she had opened up and gazed at her very self. The spark that had burnt out had only wanted to get close to her.

THE GIRL WHO SOLD UMBRELLAS

She sold old umbrellas, which she would find at the dump and her father would repair. She sold them at very low prices. People liked to buy them when a rainstorm hit, or just before.

But on this particular day she was out of luck, as she had been on all the previous long days of this hot summer. And she has been giving them away practically for free. All day long, she stood down on the square looking up at the sky for a dark cloud. She held her breath in anticipation when one actually appeared, then sighed in disappointment when the wind tore it to pieces and blew it off the face of the sky. She knew that today she had to sell at least one umbrella. Her father had been without his medication all week and his legs would become completely numb. And then, his heart. And he was all she had in this dear wide world, for she was beautiful to him. Not just beautiful, the most beautiful. And who would find her beautiful if he... bitterness stopped her thought. In despair, she began calling out again, "Umbrellas, umbrellas! Slightly used umbrellas! Almost brand new, almost free!" This is how she called to people as she waved the umbrellas in front of them. But they did not even bother to look. The sun made them all lazy and they could hardly wait for some shade, or for some refreshment waiting around the corner.

She sank helplessly to the ground, shivering from the heat and thoughts of her father. Her dry lips stuck together, and beads of sweat ran down her forehead. The umbrellas sat down around her, and when she cried they all but opened, that's how badly they felt for her pain. She sobbed and slowly began to forget about the world. The sun twinkled lazily behind the bell tower and leaned heavily on her red curls. She fell asleep and dreamt that it was raining, raining, and raining, and that it wouldn't stop. All around was water, and she swam and dove through it. It enfolded her like the embrace of her mother, who had long since died and whose touch she could no longer remember. It cooled and anointed her, inviting her deeper and deeper, for there her father, who could walk again, was waiting for her. Oh, what joy when they found each other again and merrily danced into the vortex. They whirled around



as if it would last forever, and they did not get weary nor tire of it at all. With her whole soul she sipped this liquid and surrendered to it as a child surrenders to its favorite game.

Evening fell over the square and city. Yet she was still dreaming under those once discarded and useless umbrellas, which, out of gratitude, unfolded over her. And when she finally woke up, she saw above her a different, new sky, somehow brighter and so warmly homey. But not because it was the night sky, she didn't notice that. It was simply friendlier. And when she returned home, her father, for the first time in many years, got out of bed. He was waiting for her by the window to greet her with a wave. And her heart fluttered like that of a tiny bird and, eagerly, she ran towards him.

HEAVENLY FATHER

Into a tiny, barely visible box, they squeezed an amount of light that was non-transparent to the eye and incomprehensible to the mind. Then, with a single push of a button they released it at will through the engine nozzles of their rockets, and consequently they could zoom away anywhere with immeasurable speed, and visit any star, any planet, or any nebula they wished.

Yes, it should be acknowledged that they had very advanced technology, but it didn't always work as it should have.

Sadly, something like this actually happened to God's father. In fact, they didn't know exactly what happened, but they assumed something was wrong with that tiny box, which was barely visible. And they were right. The box in his rocket decided for itself to let go all the light that was stored inside it and the rocket carried Old God a few cosmic distances away into the unknown.

Because Young God loved his father very much, he decided, one day, to search for him. His trapezoid shaped rocket barely held together from the weight of all the snacks his tear-stained Mother God packed for his journey. She then told him how much she was going to miss him. "Here," she touched her forehead, which meant in her thoughts. "And here," she touched her left and right shoulder, which meant she was going to miss his embrace. "And here," and she touched her heart, which meant love. Then, she watched with worry as his spacecraft lifted itself above the violet clouds of Planet God and disappeared above the orange sky.

This is how God began his long journey, and it must be said that he saw a lot, and experienced even more. But that is a story for another time.

It's good thing his mother prepared so much of everything for him. Mother of gold. Until, at an unexpected moment, after travelling an unimaginable number of time distances, he heard a faint sound *bim bam bom* coming from his receiver bell. That

could only mean that he had found what he was searching for. After long-lasting, frantic calculation, he succeeded in ascertaining the exact direction from which the signal was coming. Frantically, and with a pounding heart, he headed for it. He arrived quickly. The planet was quite nice. Maybe a little weird, for it had white clouds and a blue sky, but the most important thing was that the *bim bam bom* signal became louder. God decided to land immediately. Out of the rocket, he pulled a smaller spacecraft in the shape of a cross, lay down on it and extended his arms to maximize propulsion efficiency, and sped off over the valleys and mountains.

Soon after, in a densely overgrown area, he spotted a familiar shape and rejoiced to determine that this could only be his father's rocket. As he came closer to it, he noticed that his father, despite everything, had landed quite successfully. The pointed tip of the rocket, properly balanced, jutted upwards, as all rockets built in the God Solar System should. His heart filled with hope. And when, from the rocket, bells sounded *Bim bam bom! Bim bam bom!* It warmed his soul. He could now conclude with great certainty that his father was still alive. Who else would know how to pull the ropes with such precision?

And indeed, Old God was already waiting for him below.

The reunion was indescribable. Father and son could not take their eyes off each other, and they began talking incessantly. They listened enthusiastically to each other about everything that had happened to them during the long years apart.

Old God told his son how lucky he had been to wind up on this particular planet, which is so similar to theirs that he was able to survive. That here, he met quite kind, but rather timid and simple creatures, which he soon befriended and, with various bits of advice, enriched their hard and primitive way of life. "If it weren't for the lack of a halo around their heads, they would be just like us," he told his son. "I've also taught them a few of our words."

God was happy for his father's stories and very relieved. He told him how very much he and his mother had missed him. "Here," he said as he touched his forehead, "and here" as he touched his left, then his right shoulder, "and here" as he touched his heart. Old God did the same, then they knelt, crossed their arms over their chests, and for a while, remained silent with eyes closed. The creatures, hidden in the bushes around them, were watching in amazement. Then Old God stood up and called them to him, to acquaint them with his son. They came running joyfully, exclaiming incomprehensible words and each gave God a kiss on the cheek.

"What is this?" asked God with laughter as he wiped off his wet cheek.

“They do this to me every day,” answered his father. “This is the way they greet.”

“And this is how we do it,” and God happily made the sign of the cross on his body, bowed his head, and rested his palms on his breast. The creatures instantly imitated him.

“They truly are similar to us, and they also learn quickly.”

“Yes, they are quite gifted,” father agreed. “But...” he continued and reminded his son that they have other, more important tasks to do. He wanted to return to his planet, to his wife, whom he had not seen in such a long time. God understood his father completely and invited him aboard his rocket. But Old God wanted to return in his own pointed rocket. It’s true that it was already old, and that they no longer used this kind on the home planet, but he was quite attached to it. Young God understood this as well, and already started thinking about how to fix his father’s rocket so it could survive such a lengthy journey.

“The barely visible tiny box for storing light was totaled,” he knew. “Without the compressed light it will be difficult... Old God pointed his finger up to the sky in the direction of the glowing yellow celestial body. He looked at his son and asked: “What about the backup light collector?”

“Maybe it could work,” Young God thought, and they immediately threw themselves into the work. It must be said that they finished quite quickly. The creatures, who followed their every step, were not a hindrance to them at all. On the contrary, when Old God spoke, the creatures immediately pointed to the tool he had in mind. They almost always guessed the right one. It really was not a difficult task, but nonetheless, for every correct answer, father and son gave praise by spraying them with water to freshen them up.

At this, the creatures carried themselves very seriously and proudly. So, they had a pretty nice time.

“Father,” said God and tightened the final screw on the hood of the backup light collector.

The creatures, without thinking, pointed at Old God and God nodded in confirmation with a smile. The creatures clapped joyfully.

“Done!” God stood up and handed his father the wrench. “It should light up now. Just in case, I am going to give you some of my power.” Father agreed.

Joyfully, and a little sadly, they said farewell to the creatures, who from the holes they had for seeing, drained some water.

“See, that is something we cannot do,” Old God whispered to his son and they went on their way. The son returned to his rocket by his smaller craft, and the father to his, by foot. They hoped they would make it. They connected the outside bells, for better sound contact and turned on the engines. It rumbled and in that same moment, Young God enthusiastically shouted out to his father:

“Heavenly, Father! Heavenly, Father!” rang out over the whole mountain, full of waving creatures. Then, instantly, the rockets whooshed through the white clouds and disappeared somewhere in the middle of the blue sky.

“Heavenly Father,” the creatures murmured one over the other, nodding in agreement. “Heavenly Father,” and they crossed themselves in greeting, and remained there on the mountain for a long time, gazing at the sky.



CIRCUS COSMO

The biggest attraction of Circus Cosmo was a tiny white rabbit, which did nothing but move forward, always forward, and only forward. And it did so only when someone wound it up. The second largest attraction of Circus Cosmo was an iron lock with a key that could be locked or unlocked, depending on how you turned the key. And the third greatest attraction was a raindrop preserved in a glass jar with a lid that once served for pickling cucumbers. Someone succeeded in catching the raindrop, and it is still wet.

The spectators applauded, stomped and roared, stood up, rose to their tiptoes, and cheered enthusiastically, whistling, shouting, and demanding more. Some were moved to tears when the rabbit dashed around the arena. Others nearly suffered a stroke when the lock got stuck and the show was almost cancelled. Still others froze looking at the moisture in the jar and had to be carried out and slapped a couple of times so as not to stay in this state forever.

All in all, Circus Cosmo was the best circus of all time. It was also the first and only one of its kind, but that was not so important as the circus, this unsurpassed friend of happiness and wonder, always inspired new enthusiasm. Every single show ended with uninterrupted applause and stomping, because it had a soul, a very special soul. This mysterious soul was none other than Cosmo, crippled Cosmo – the sad clown.

He always appeared right at the beginning of the show and gave such a poor and sad look that the spectators did everything described above – even when only looking at an ordinary raindrop.



A FAIRY TALE FOR EVERYTHING

There is only one place in the entire universe where snow falls in this manner: there, where fairy tales are born. Then, when it's warm behind the hearth. Home. Everything that exists spreads out from here, and all the other countless numbers of homes can be felt. For they are everywhere. A thought has its own home, dust, the universe, a shooting star, and even a tiny splinter of time. Everything.

Except, the greatest is not at home anywhere. And this then, is the fairy tale for that.

THE LARGEST TRAIN IN THE WORLD

It was not the longest, maybe just the widest and most beautiful. As if someone would put a whole street with houses onto iron wheels on tracks. Beautiful buildings reigned on it, artfully built of stone and marble, with balconies, towers, flat or pointed roofs, all built with a great deal of good taste. It had no wagons, yet it had a locomotive. A big temple, devoted to the sun, reigned proudly on top of its nose, and it pulled the million-ton mass quietly and effortlessly. When the largest train arrived at the station it was as if a fluffy feather floated and fluttered there on the ground. Everywhere the train was awaited by a bustling crowd of people, who curiously and hurriedly hurled themselves on. From it the satisfied, happy faces of passengers disembarked.

While chattering along the railways, people liked to walk in gardens and parks, feed birds at the pond and take their children and pets to wander amongst the vineyards. They went to theatres and opera performances, viewed historic artifacts, and quenched themselves in numerous pubs on the main street. They sat relaxed on the verandas, freely talking about this and that, making acquaintances and shaking hands, exchanging addresses, memories, experiences, and wondering about the haste the clouds were in above their heads. As the wind mildly tousled their hair, the world sped by, full of passing images which, like in a movie, were replaced, one after another, in front of their eyes.

In order for such a train to drive around the world they had to fell a large chunk of forest along the railway, move nearby houses, widen bridges and reroute roads. In the cities, they moved shopping centers, stadiums, churches, museums, and everything that was in the way. The largest train in the world had the width of the largest boulevard and the population density of a pleasantly populated city center. Yet the train tracks were the same as for any other train. How was this possible?

The train driver was my father, an architect. We lived in the rear of the train. Our terrace, where my mother always dried the laundry so that it flapped in the wind

behind us, was situated at the end of this stunning composition. I loved sitting on my grandfather's old bench, observing the distant landscape – the mountains, hills, valleys, the thousand green shades of forests and rivers, blue seas and distant sails, and the opaque horizons which completed this beautiful painting of an ever-changing world. Along the way were cities and villages, waving people, screaming children red-faced from running behind us, old people on benches, mothers hanging out laundry, fathers at work in fields, puppies, kitties, geese, and sometimes, some wild animal or a balloon in the middle of the vast sky.

Every day I took a walk from the front to the rear of the train. I had nothing else to do. I was of ill health, as my father liked to say, who was always bursting with energy. I also did not take after my always smiling and singing mother, a true beauty. Both my parents lived fully and tumultuously, always on the prowl for something new and passionate. It was not hard for them to guide this moving world along its tracks to everyone's benefit. But I...

I was of a different mold. Pale, skinny, sometimes as good looking as my mother but never as fiery as my father. That's what the old stoker, Michelangelo, with whom I hung out the most, used to say. He operated several mirrors and magnifying glasses with which he collected light and directed it into the engine that pulled us along. The train was a marvel due to the technology and genius of my father, while my mother was in charge of bills and tickets. I stayed more on the sideline. I avoided people. I liked to watch them, but from a safe distance. Sometimes someone spoke to me, but I remained speechless.

Sometimes mother and father whispered together and looked at me with interest: with an insightful look, as if they were discovering some new kind of animal. It didn't bother me since I was never overly preoccupied with myself. Sometimes someone will ask you about luck, but I don't even know what that is. I was not unhappy, yet I also didn't feel any special excitement toward life, as my mother did. She loved everything around her. Sometimes she just spun around the room on her own. You could see pure joy on her face. This, I understood. Because I had a secret – “a telescope for the future,” which I had found in my father's old suitcase. Sometimes, without any given reason, I would stick my nose into long forgotten things. Not with the intention of discovering anything, but out of the pure pleasure of poking around and searching whether there was something there that had been forgotten or long misplaced. Like the letter from my mother to her first husband. That is how I found out something neither my mother nor father ever mentioned. That I have a sister. Actually, a half-sister.

I loved watching what the world will be like in the future. But even more, I watched

my half-sister Stella. I fell everlastingly in love with her. I couldn't see her in any way other than old. As if the telescope adjusted, according to its own will, what I was given to see. I watched her every day. They took care of her in a nursing home. In the morning they washed and clothed her, then they sat her in an armchair in the dining room. Most of the day, she sat facing the meadow, staring into the impenetrable distance, never even flinching. In the evening they dressed her in her nightgown and laid her in bed. They turned off the light. She did not fall asleep immediately. Whom or what she thought about, I don't know. I only know that her eyes had a depth I had never seen before. Yes, in these eyes, I fell in love, since through them, I could see the past. I saw myself, how I'm waving to her as, on the veranda at the far end of the largest train in the world, I drive by.

MONSTER

The castle had two towers and a really solid defensive wall. Merinian stared at it and wondered. The big wooden drawbridge was tightly shut.

How did an entire castle end up in this part of space? He checked the access data – it said nothing other than that the planet was habitable for humans. That on it are plants, similar to those on Earth. No animals, or humans, or any other more developed, self-moving, self-thinking beings.

Surrounding the castle was a bare, grassy plain. The grass was very similar to the one on Earth that he had seen in a museum. The trees as well. He had always been interested in the history of The Mother Planet, especially the period before the discovery of fluid space. He was interested in the method of counting that people had back then. They designated an arbitrary moment for the beginning of the count, and then added years all the way to 3335, when they first compressed time and determined that it did not exist at all. That it is only fluid space. And then everything changed. With this new technology, the stars suddenly became reachable. But they had not yet reached the last one. And it is questionable whether they ever would.

Therefore... Where did such a castle come from? He watched with interest the fluttering of the banner on top of the highest tower.

Creaking noisily, the drawbridge began to lower over the moat guarding the wall.

On the surface of the murky green water, every once in a while, something flashed. Are those fish? he gawked. Something buzzed past him. He swung at it. There should be nothing self-moving here, with the exception of him. He took out the coordinator, which he had reset twice already, but the readings were the same every time. The numbers were correct and the signal glowed green. Should anything be wrong, it would be red and blinking. And yet it was... wrong. Something was not right. On

some unimportant, far-off planet, in one of the furthest galactic nuclei, stood a medieval castle and its drawbridge had just opened. He grabbed the evaporator and held his breath. The smell of roast chicken wafted by. The pleasant, long forgotten smell tickled his nostrils. The coordinator displayed: Roast chicken with coriander. He did not look at the details. He knew what chicken was. Neither chicken nor fish, nor even these annoying gadflies were supposed to be here. Only plants, and only a few species at that. The expedition before him had recorded everything in detail. It was because of those exhaustive details that he was certain the data was reliable. As soon as he received the task to find a planet for new burgeoning opportunity, he took a good look at the hologram of all the galaxies in this nucleus, each solar system separately. He could see nothing out of the ordinary.

Well, maybe they just forgot this little detail – a castle with the smell of roast chicken coming from it.

A rider whirled past him so that a gust of wind spun him around and almost knocked him over. The man on horseback rode across the bridge and into the castle. In shining armor, he dismounted, and a beautiful girl ran up to him.

“Ilu!” he greeted her and lifted the visor of his helmet. “My Ilu!”

The girl snuggled in closely to the rider. Her golden hair fell over the armor and a small, slightly upturned nose rubbed against his lowered cheek.

“How hot your armor is,” she said.

“I’ve been riding since morning.”

Only then did Merinian notice how upright and powerfully built this man is: wide shoulders and a broad chest tightened his armor which for a moment even seemed too small. With a gaze hard as rock and clear as a sunny day, he proudly stared at the girl in front of him. A thick, pointed beard and dark, curly hair twisted around a square, chiseled face, marred only by strong, hard cheekbones and a large, curved nose. He gave the appearance of someone who knows exactly what he wants, but at the same time, he is inclined towards everything that is good and does not tolerate injustice.

Such people have long since disappeared, Merinian thought. And she? He observed this beautiful, gentle, slightly angular face, similar to those depicted in old church icons, which he so loved to look at in his free time. Some freckles, cherry red lips, and eyes from which amber flowed – blue or green, whichever the sun in her heart preferred.

The man's voice was strong, deep, used to giving orders, while hers, a little bell, was like the whisper of leaves in the spring wind.

But, do they not see him? Is this a world he cannot enter?

"Hey!" he yelled out.

The knight and the girl turned towards him.

"Look, a court jester!" the man laughed.

"No, no," the girl shook her head. "I think... I think he..."

"What?"

"He has come!" she said enthusiastically.

"Who?"

The big, dark eyes of the man with the beard narrowed, and the pupils swirled and bore into Merinian, giving him a chill.

This one will cut me right down if anything goes wrong, he thought.

"It is him."

The girl stared at him, but the man was becoming impatient.

"Who, for goodness' sake? A court jester! A joker! Look at how he is dressed."

Merinian thought about how he must look to them in this awkward jumpsuit, which protects him from all harmful atmospheric disturbances.

"I told you he would come."

"Oh, these fairy tales of yours."

The girl headed for Merinian.

He held his breath. He had never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life, and he had been to all corners of the universe. *Why do people find other people, of all things, the most beautiful?* This thought electrified him.

"Thank you," she said quietly when she reached him.

"For what?" He awoke from his reverie.

"Because you've come."

"Oh, stop it!" was heard from behind her. "He's just an ordinary clown!"

"No, it is him." She took Merinian's hand. He felt as though the whole space had shifted off its axis and rolled into the safe shelter of her eyes.

He paused. Nothing came out of his mouth. Let alone anything clever.

"Are you?" she looked at him brightly.

"What? Who?" he was confused.

"It says in the books that you will come one day."

"How can you be so sure it's him?" doubted the knight.

"He has a dimple in his chin. No one else on this planet has one. The man in the portrait has a dimple in his chin too."

"Those pictures are unrecognizable," he added.

"Not the chin dimple," she was convinced.

Merinian still did not know what to say. He stood there in the scorching sun on the green lawn before the castle, dressed in a boxy jumpsuit, and wished that this moment would never end. A wonderful girl was holding his hand.

"I am Ilu," she introduced herself. "And this is my father."

"Young man, I am Victor, knight of the Last Castle."

The man let go of his horse and approached with bold steps.

"Last?" Merinian blurted.

"Last, yes. We protect it, because..." he did not finish the sentence, just offered his hand. "Well, darn it all, would you tell us your name already?" Merinian's hand drowned in his.

“Merinian is my name.”

The knight slapped his shoulder so hard he almost fell to the ground. “Well, nice to meet you,” he said joyfully. “Ilu says you are the one. This you will have to prove!” “Father...,” Ilu was impatient.

“Don’t “father” me!” he interrupted her. “You know full well how many we have already lost like this. We must not be hasty again. In any case, this is excellent,” he rubbed his hands with satisfaction. “The monster has not swallowed anyone in quite a while.”

Monster? What monster? Merinian thought, bewildered.

“But first, roast chicken!”

“I don’t eat meat.”

The knight started toward the courtyard, but stopped and looked at him: “What?” Merinian turned red and shrugged his shoulders.

“Then what do you eat?”

“We have very nutritious bars, and...”

Victor, the Last Knight of the Last Castle, responded with such laughter that even the horse neighed joyfully. “Bars! Nutritious bars?! You are a character! he shouted. Bars are for prisons and gates, not for eating.”

“Father, leave him be, he is probably not from around here,” Ilu defended him.

“Of course he is not from around here. Look at the box he walks around in! And this helmet with bobbles. No wonder I thought him a comedian.”

“This helmet protects me from the galactic influences of delayed radiation from unknown areas of fluid space,” Merinian rattled off learnedly.

“Well, come eat instead.” Nearly fed up, the knight motioned for him to come, and headed back toward the castle.

Merinian and Ilu came to a stop.

“You are not from our planet, are you? Do you know how to travel among the stars?”

“I do,” Merinian stated boldly, trying to be manly. “You don’t?”

“There was a time we did, but, since we began guarding the castle, we no longer go anywhere...” and with those last words, her face darkened. The old books tell of a stranger who will come and slay the monster, and then we will be able to leave.

At the mention of a monster, Merinian became uncomfortable. “What is this... monster like?” he asked carefully.

But before Ilu could answer, a strong wind blew through the dimple in his chin. “The monster!” the knight exclaimed terrified and pulled his sword from its sheath. “Get inside, now! “

But it was too late. What blew was not the wind, but an unimaginably strong force which, with immeasurable ease, sucked in the entire castle and everything around it. Suddenly, neither the girl nor the Last Knight of the Last Castle were in sight. Merinian found himself in a deaf, shapeless nothingness. The dimple in his chin was filled in, once again, with flesh and skin. Confused, he rubbed it. He remembered a sentence he had recently read in an astrophysics textbook: *In theory, black holes can be of varying sizes, from microscopically small to sizes that go far beyond the unimaginable.*

THE BLACK ROOM

“Art must not be dependent on light!” he announced. “Beauty exists even without light! We have all become its slaves! That is why light must be banished forever from art. Only then can a work of art truly come to life in its full validity, achieve its true meaning. Light is merely a fabrication of witch doctors, miracle workers and swindlers who want to make easy money off of your naïve trust. Light is an advertising gimmick, an escape from boredom! From this he derived his most well-known thought that anything that requires light is merely superficial art, just skillfully packaged commercial kitsch. Why should we keep dying like moths, over and over again, with scorched wings and burnt-out souls? Let’s turn off the light, start experiencing!”

It started with the Venice Biennale. The main pavilion exceeded all expectations precisely because of his Black Room. People waited in long lines to see the new art wonder, which would now travel throughout the art capitals of the world and fascinate people for years to come.

They were allowed to enter the room one by one, to prevent the exhibited items from being damaged by too large a crowd.

“Even human breathing can affect the artifacts,” he liked to point out. Despite admitting publicly to not knowing exactly how long he had been creating them, people returned multiple times, and left delighted from this holy space of modern art.

Remove every last ray of light, however small! That was his thinking.

He was the first to remove light from art.

Some critics, the ones not fond of him – immature villains, as he liked to label them – wrote that he had stolen mankind’s sight, and that his art was some of the most misleading the world has ever seen.

This gave him an even bigger boost. He yelled, shook his fist, and poured a lava of insults over these men, who were not at all aware of the clear precision of the new artistic wave. His visionary outlook on the future of creating shook the world of art to its core.

There was no photograph of this great artwork. Its image existed only in the minds of those who had visited it. Some did so several times. And then they discussed it at various round tables and symposiums on art, wrote scientific essays, theses and dissertations, included the author’s work in numerous encyclopedias, and professional journals were full of articles about him; they gave him academic titles, invited him to lecture, honored him as the savior of modern art, and carefully stuffed information about his existence into textbooks that were already too full.

He stood in the middle of the room full of painted canvases, enraptured by a single point in front of him. Light glimmering in the middle of a drab field, and on it an engrossed peasant sower at work. He could stare at this painting for hours. In its entirety, it radiated with the beauty of life. The brushstrokes seemed as if sunbeams themselves had made them. He sighed. He thought about how much longer he would be able to serve his sinful hobby. He must buy more paintings for himself. He only has two van Goghs, Cezanne clumsily slipped from his hands not too long ago, thank god he has quite a few Monets, and he has wanted Turner for a long time, and Constable... Oh, those clouds of his. One day, he himself will take them off the walls of Oxford!

It is so hard to acquire these canvases nowadays. Tomorrow, at the press conference at the grand opening of his second Black Room, he will declare all art created to date as heresy.

The prices must drop.

THE OLD COSMIC SAILBOAT

The old cosmic sailboat was navigating through dust and rocks. It had been four trillion years since she was sucked into an invisible wormhole and dropped off in an entirely new world. During this entire time, the same thing kept happening to her. The crew slept peacefully in their cabins and even the helmsman, who should have been tracking the course, had dozed off before they had reached the hole. Only the taut ropes along the lowered sails that sometimes squeaked out of boredom, and the muffled, uneven drumming of the stones on the slender hull, still announced that something was going on.

Suddenly there was a plop! and the sailboat disappeared again.

The captain looked at the glowing numbers on the monitor and stood up.

It's as if I had slept for an eternity, it seemed to him as he stretched.

The chronometer on the cabin ceiling began to beep and wake the sailors.

One more watch duty and we're home. The helmsman happily turned the handle on the control panel and steered the ship into the familiar constellation.



THE LIMIT

He was the only one warning that even infinity has its own limits. He had retired millions of years ago, the exact number of years is no longer relevant. With the discovery of immortality, such calculations have lost their meaning, birthdays their charm, and anniversaries of any kind, their purpose. There was too much of everything in the past. However, history remembered only two or three milestones in the entire existence of beings that had evolved to the point where nonexistence no longer threatened them. Even religions had sunk into oblivion, and the beings managed to prevent illnesses and other physical injuries even before they could begin their new lives as immortals.

No one cared about his work anymore. The number of the living now remained the same; there were no longer any new births. Each person spent the immeasurable time available to them seeking pleasures in their own way. And each experienced everything that was possible to experience in this world.

If you wanted to disappear into nonexistence, you needed a special permit, however, no one has been granted one so far. Everyone feared the return of those times when the universe was overpopulated. The wars stemming from this, the destruction and the chaos, forced them to take the most drastic measure ever taken: CPR – Complete Prohibition of Reproduction. They cancelled a basic primordial principle of nature, the driving force of the world, and the greatest meaning of their very existence. But this applied only to them, to humans. Other animals were free to reproduce as they pleased. Well, not exactly as they pleased, but rather as humans pleased.

From that time on, it was easier to breathe in the universe – there was more room, fewer opportunities for conflict, and more variety. Not to mention food, of which there was never again a shortage. In the beginning, when they were still unfamiliar with their immortality, this seemed to be the ideal solution. Later, many things were changed and adjusted but the first, basic, and most drastic measure of the CPR remained.

They no longer considered themselves living beings. The term *living* makes sense only as long as there is the potential to stop existing, and once that was no longer possible for them, they became *eternal*.

When the scientists announced their discovery of immortality and that it can only work in one direction, since a return to death is no longer possible, they held a referendum with the question: Is it All or None? Excitedly, they decided to vote for All. Only one lone vote in the entire universe was cast for None – his. But they had always considered him a bit different. The scientific community had never taken him seriously. They laughed at his warnings, especially when one of his publications featured the sentence: *How long is this immortality of theirs supposed to last?* He had to defend himself then. The mention of any kind of an ending for anyone was considered the greatest sin.

There was no longer any crime or violence, except to kill boredom. People were rising from the dead in many of the games they played, to some way, somehow fill the *time of their immortality*. These, too, were his words, taken from his discourse about the consequences of boredom.

And now, after all this, after everyone had become acquainted with, and faced, their immortality, information arrived that they had discovered the edge of the universe, the border of the world. Of course, everyone first asked themselves, how was this even possible? And why was it not discovered sooner? Everyone had already been everywhere, on all the planets, and in all the nooks and crannies of the universe. So how was it that no one had ever reached its edge before? How come no one had ever even questioned it, when it was so evident that their world has to have limits. In fact, it's their infinity, to use the words of the only philosopher who would be able to join their expedition – him.

When they were selecting participants for the expedition, he was one of the first to volunteer. He was lucky. They accepted him, even though he was already sixty years old when they discovered immortality, and, of course, that is the age he remained. He was the oldest, but that didn't bother him one bit. An old, long forgotten joy and excitement washed over him, love towards everyone and everything, and boundless gratitude to be able to bear witness to this great milestone in the existence of mankind. And at the same time, he felt humility before everything that was so much bigger than himself, that awaited him out there in the new space and time, where old, well known entities would lose all meaning. Not even a little did he fear the new. On the contrary. With all the dedication of a tireless researcher of purpose, he surrendered himself to this new concept, as he put it himself in the missive to the immortal people, who will have to wait a little longer in the old one.

He did not count on not being able to take with him that which best defines a creature such as himself: self-awareness.

THE SUGAR FACTORY

The sugar factory was the kind of old building where mice and rats hold annual meetings, and which couples in love tend to avoid. At the end of the street, a crumbling brick building reigned, flanked on both sides by notched sidewalks overgrown with moss and a protruding iris here and there, whose seed was flagrantly blown by the wind, right to this very spot, a smiling nod to destiny. The street, once paved like a sidewalk, now had stones scattered across the whole city, and was trying its best to maintain a perfect look, and despite the many loose stones, it was still successfully managing to maintain its direction.

The air was different here. It was escaping. Everything was somehow strangely and sharply outlined and it seemed as if the edges of the objects were sharpened and ready for battle against anything that was not part of their earthly existence. It was neither cold nor warm. Even though the old sugar factory glowed in eternal expectation.

It remembered being so hopeful when, some fifty years ago, Mr. Mitrovič had bought the building from its previous owner, a baron who liked to bet on horses. But Mr. Mitrovič had been robbed and stabbed to death.

Demolition of the building and construction of a modern roastery was promised, but everything came to a stop.

The sugar factory was still hopeful, however, and turned its broken windows toward the street, hoping for its first residents.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, its plaster flinched because it thought it heard tramping footsteps and slamming doors.

Sometimes it heard the shouting of children and the squeaking of scooters. But only in its dreams. At that time, no quarrel or wild party would go unnoticed. And

sometimes, when the wind chased other paths and the air rose high above the roof, it listened intently to breathing. It was at those times that it moaned in pain through its walls and heaved sighs through its chimney.

The only thing it could not stand was the pitter patter of rats. That horrendously got on its nerves.

Mr. Mitrovič had a daughter. She was here once. A beautiful, shapely young woman, with a bit too many freckles and thin lips, but with a high forehead and a clear gaze. The second floor had collapsed beneath her, and for quite a few days she lay moaning on the ground floor, while the whole building panted with happiness. But even this went silent.

Then again, the pitter and the patter.

The saddest thing, however, was that the mailman, Severin, stopped coming around. Some fifty years ago, as well. He had whistled so nicely and talked to himself the whole time, while turning the letters toward the sun so that he could sneak a peek and find out something new. He always personally handed over the good news. As if it were today, the old sugar factory remembers the characteristic steps his orthopedic shoes made on the stairs. And his laugh, completely happy and full of relief.

Indeed, he only brought good news, the mailman Severin.

But not anymore, not anymore.

And the branches of the nearby trees are suffocating it so much.

It needs to go to an architect for a renovation, a modernization.

But buildings do not go anywhere. That is why it stays and dreams of better times, when people will return and renovate it. The simple abandoned building does not know, nor understand, that there was an epidemic, and that there was no one left who could do this.

LARA

Lara stopped. A sharply cut stone gorge opened up in front of her. Scanning it, she saw it was a dead end and inaccessible. The cliffs ended in a jagged line at the very edge of the sky, along which a black bird flew in perfect circles.

She took a step forward. A small pool shimmered at the bottom of the steep cliff. She headed there.

The tiger that crossed her path was big. With a somersault to the left, she dodged his attack. Simultaneously, she pulled out a weapon, vaulted over the animal and turned. While shooting at it, she backed up so it could not grab her.

Finally, it ended up lying in a pool of blood. But already, on the other side of the gorge, another one appeared. She had just enough time to put away her weapon and withdraw to a nearby ledge. From there, without any trouble, she took aim at the beast and, with a few precise shots, finished it off.

Behind the back of the second slain tiger appeared a first aid kit. She dropped from the ledge and grabbed it. She immediately used it to heal herself. The first attack had not ended without consequences for her well-trained body. The scratches immediately and miraculously healed, and with renewed determination, she headed to the pool. The water was only waist-high, but she had to swim nonetheless. In a dark corner at the bottom, she discovered a whole box of ammunition for pistols. She immediately reloaded hers and put them away.

She pulled herself out of the water and onto a nearby ledge. It was quite wide, so she was able to get a running start and jump to a narrow pass, which she had not noticed from below. It led steeply upwards. She climbed it by carefully holding on to its outer edge.

The overhang was not even that high, she realized. The narrow pass suddenly ended. The wall in front of her was just slightly taller than she was, and Lara sensed that this was part of a ledge which could be gripped.

She took two running steps and gave it a try.

Because she hurled herself too quickly, she bounced hard off the wall and fell to the bottom of the gorge. She was completely broken.

She lost her life. She had two more left. She would have to start from the beginning, but she knew that by now...

She quickly swung herself onto the same ledge from which she had previously shot the second tiger. Now she was able to kill both wild cats when they appeared, without causing a single scratch to herself. She still picked up the first aid kit. For later.

She then waded into the pool again, swam, climbed up, and then jumped to the same narrow pass as before, and got ready...

This time, the jump was successful. She was already holding onto the edge of the wall she had jumped to. She pulled herself up, pleased with herself that she had guessed correctly – it really was a ledge.

She squatted down and from the ground, picked up a golden key. Something will need to be unlocked. But first, she has to get there.

She looked up. The top of the wall was in arm's reach. Only one more jump. But... to where?

Everything around her ended vertically at the very top. Too high. She hurled herself up and tried to reach the upper edge of the wall, but she fell just a hand short. This time, there was no ledge above her.

She studied her surroundings carefully. In the geometrically shaped cliffs, it was difficult to determine any detail regarding the path to the top. There were no more ledges, no cracks, no outcroppings to hold on to. No opportunities anywhere...

An optical illusion? An error in the program?

She lived in this world from day to day, countlessly overcoming the same obstacles and killing the same beasts, picking up first aid kits and healing herself, searching for keys and with them unlocking secrets, but she never found a way out.

Suddenly, she turned around and stared at what was in front of her. Her head grew across the entire screen. Her eyes were ablaze with a beseeching *Please*.

They were looking at each other.

He had not pressed anything, especially not this kind of command. He did not know about this feature. And yet he had Lara's face across his entire screen.

Long seconds passed in the blink of an eye.

He pressed the button for turning around... She obeyed. Then he drove her into the chasm. Then again. And again... And again... Until she lost all her lives.

He turned off his computer and took a seat in front of the window. Looking out, he watched the children play in the sandbox. The afternoon sun slowly drifted into the laps of places. When he closed his eyes, he saw the cliffs and Lara, with her hair down, in a white dress. She stood barefoot, watching the two tigers wrestle in the distance. He was watching her from behind. Her dress fluttered in the wind, drawing a playful shadow on the ground. She turned around and looked at him. As before, yet different...

She said something quietly. He did not hear her, but simply knew, when he opened his eyes...

"Thank you."

TOURIST ATTRACTION

The entire territory of the Milky Way was dependent on tourism. Yet nowhere was it as crowded as on planet Earth. It was the jewel of tourist offerings. All the other planets in this solar system made good money, thanks to Earth. Services such as overnight stays on Jupiter, viewing the rings of Saturn, the hot climate of Mars, a view of the Sun from Mercury, and all other attractions, though there was no lack of them in other parts of the Universe, sold like hotcakes here.

Great space cruisers circled around Earth, sending curious visitors from all ends of space, in smaller ships, to this unique planet. None of their homes had such breathtaking flora and fauna, such deep blue waters, called oceans, such bright and clear blueness above their heads, called sky, and such a welcoming climate. For the past few years, because of the great influx of too many visitors, only 500 cruisers per day were permitted to visit. A day-trip cost a lot of money, but no one ever regretted it. The wealthier, lucky ones could stay for more days, some for an entire month. Private properties, where one could stay for longer periods of time, were no longer on the market. They would cost an entire fortune and very few could afford it.

Mtarxellhsoli's parents were among those that could. At least once a year, they travelled to their property, "Albert Kingsley," on holiday. There, in the blood of Albert Kingsley, they divided themselves and multiplied.

Mtarxellhsoli's favorite place to be was in Albert Kingsley's bronchi. There, he could play with his cells all day long, and, with the help of their many reproductions, create a mucus that Albert Kingsley then had to cough up.

Mtarxellhsoli adored this convulsive shaking. He held onto the nucleus of one of Kingsley's cells with his threadlike appendages, and his proteinic little tail twisted around like mad. When the coughing stopped, he jumped from cell to

cell, trying to irritate as many of their nuclei as he could, to trigger a new antibody response. Meanwhile, his parents continued to peacefully spend their holiday in the pulmonary sacs, happily fraternizing with the local cells.

They knew this would be their final year at the property.

YOUTH

She had hidden reserves of energy and were she ever to remain alone, she would explode from the force that was in her. That is why she had to share it. She moved her clarity, drive and beauty from one body to another. New hosts were born, spawned and hatched, over and over again. And she spread out, clinging to them and breathing with them, reveling in the fire of her vastness, where she felt as if nothing was impossible, nothing too difficult, and nothing more thrilling.

At what point did she decide to leave the host? Actually, it had not been her decision to make. All of a sudden, she had no longer felt the prior buoyancy, the stability beneath her feet, the flexibility of the transmitting mechanism – and so she left.

No one ever realized, not even she herself, that she was the ultimate parasite in all the world. Because of her, people were dying old, even though she could have remained by their side until death. She shared herself to exist, and then left for the same reason. She strove to remain the same forever, and so, she never returned.

In the shallows of the Mediterranean Sea sat a girl with tears in her eyes hugging a little lifeless body in her arms. Her brother had drowned when their boat capsized due to the big waves. It was an old, worn out rubber dinghy, too small for the too numerous groups of creatures wanting to cross the sea to the promised land. The little girl had been waiting at the shore for three days, hungry and barefoot, silently hoping to see her Aamir again. This morning, the sea washed him face down into her lap.

While Ayat quietly sang to him the ancient Persian lullaby he loved so much, Youth stood behind her, wondering why she could no longer return to her.

THE POEM IN WHICH WE ALL COME TOGETHER

He wrote it just for fun. Never did he think he would achieve such success with it. And on top of that, that he would become famous, and be invited and revered over and over again from far and wide. He himself did not know how he managed to accomplish this. He wrote it as he had all the others. Maybe even with less effort, and faster. It simply fell onto that sheet of paper, and now it seemed it would stay there for all eternity.

It spoke of love. It had been read by young and old. It was everyone's favorite. At numerous press conferences, he shrugged his shoulders and could not explain it. Among critics, different and opposing opinions sparked up, but they all agreed on one thing – that this was a unique and singular work of art. Just because of one lone poem, he became the greatest poet of all times. This was the poem he wrote at the time when he was most alone.

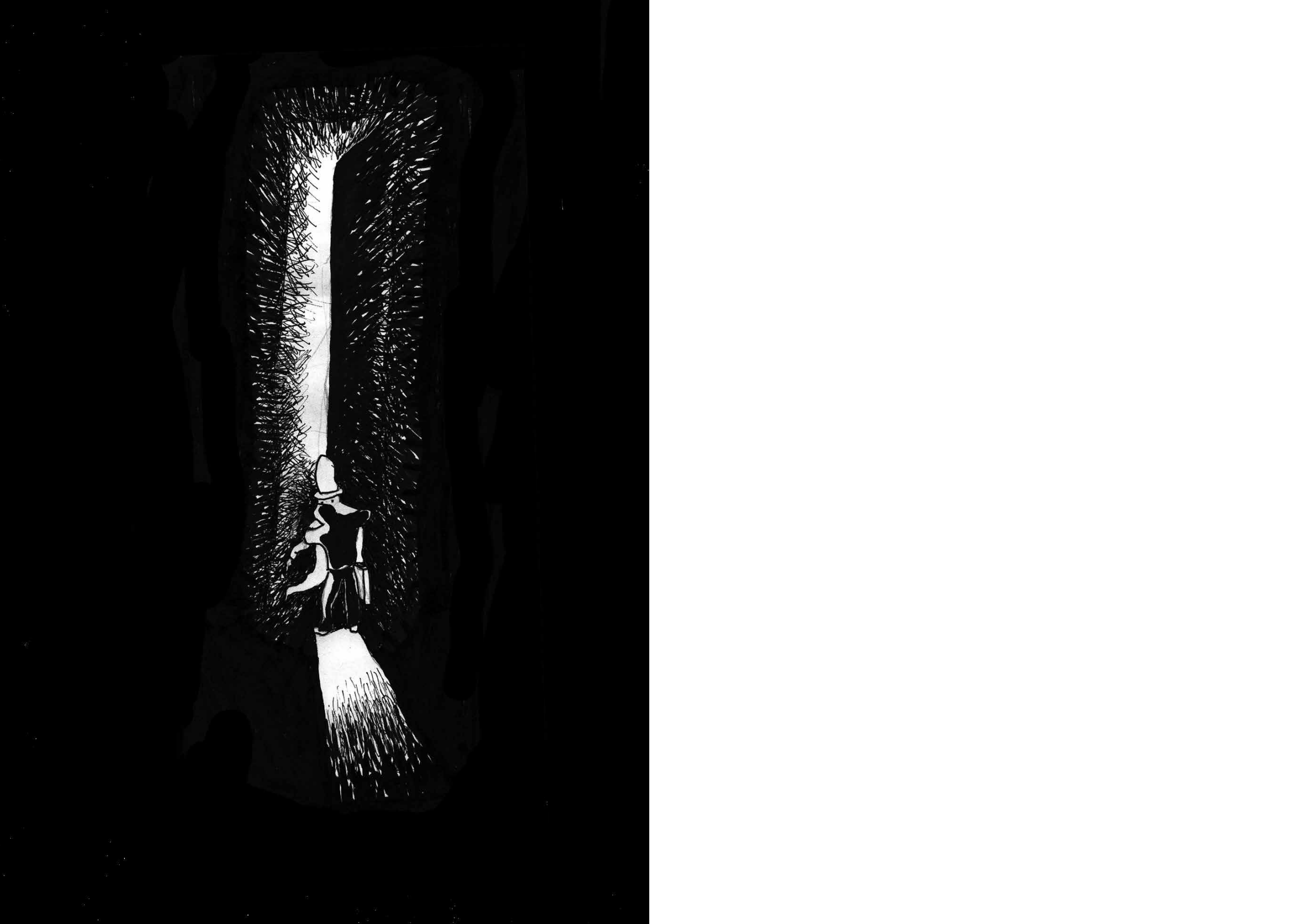
The poem in which we all come together.

MR. END AND MR. BEGINNING

Mr. End is a very strange man. He usually invites himself over. It is true, however, that it is sometimes we who desperately wish for his presence and can't wait for him to arrive. But, what's also true, once he's here, no one can possibly chase him away. Even if you're terribly rude or even contemptuous, and you behave as though he's not there. This doesn't bother him at all. He anchors himself next to you and you have to accept him.

It's also true that Mr. End does not get along very well with Mr. Beginning; allegedly they cannot stand each other. Mr. End is gone as soon as Mr. Beginning shows up at the door. And, oppositely, Mr. Beginning also always gets out of the way of his rival when Mr. End knocks on the door. And so they both take care that they see each other as little as possible. If it's even possible to succeed at that, since they both do the same thing – they tailor time and dress our lives in moments, eras, and memories. Some say Mr. End is far more important than Mr. Beginning because sooner or later Mr. End stays with us for good. However, this is what those who do not see beyond their nose think. If they did, they would see both of the gentlemen in question sitting in the bar across the street where they pour out hope and serenity, and chat happily. They even crack jokes at the expense of their customers. For example, how they pull someone's leg, like when Beginning knocked on the door both times. Or when End had finished his job even before Beginning got to his, and no one, but no one, noticed. This is how they amuse themselves; sometimes they even sing a little – or rather hum – and, together, they toast infinity, so that it seems that they will never part again.

But when dawn breaks, they go each to their own side. And Mr. End has just arrived, here.



Rok Vilčnik And His Universes: Afterword for Cosmic FAIRY TALES

By Melita Koletnik, Isabelle Kralj and Mark Anderson

Rok Vilčnik (*1968), aka rokgre, is an acclaimed Slovenian author, poet, playwright, lyricist, writer for television and radio, theatre director, dramaturge, singer, and composer. As the story goes, Vilčnik's nom de artiste originated from an argument between his mother, who initially named the baby Rok, and his father who, upon returning from the military service and seeing his son for the first time, was adamant that the boy be called Gregor. In his late teens, combining both sides of his budding artist's personality – roaring Rok and vigilant Gregor – and defying the laws of Slovenian capitalization, he merged both names into the minimalist alias rokgre.

A graduate of Visual Arts, Vilčnik found his calling – writing – in 1992 after fracturing his left arm while sleepwalking, which caused him to start writing with his right hand. The accident was followed by a spurt of creativity: in a single year he produced four plays, among them *To* [It, 1993], which a few years later secured him the first nomination and selection for the Grum Prize for best Slovenian original play. His infatuation with theater, however, pre-dates the accident. While creating a black cardboard installation piece for his school's Art Show, in which he explored the generating and harnessing of light, he deliberated adding sound and words to the object, space, and light. It suddenly dawned on him: *This Is Theater!*

Vilčnik is most accomplished, remarkable, and recognizable as a playwright. In his work for theatre, television, and radio, he frequently questions “normality” and problematizes the ways in which his characters attempt to align themselves in their everyday lives with what is considered “normal.”, e.g., in *Leticija in Sylvester* [Leticia and Sylvester, 2001], *Smeti na Luni* [Garbage on the Moon, 2008], *Spake* [Freaks, 2014] or *Pošta* [Post Office, 2020]. His narrative, which often borders on the absurd, combines with social and cultural criticism, e.g., *Blok II* [Block II, 2003] or *Ljudski demokratični cirkus Sakešvili* [The People's Democratic Circus Sakeshvili, 2017]. In addition to themes reflective of his immediate environs and time, Vilčnik's perpetual source of inspiration is world literature: he proposes alternative realities and alternate endings to the literary canon, for example Shakespeare's *Othello* in the libretto *Othella* [2005] and Burroughs' *Tarzan* [2016]; or draws from its endless

well of creative material, e.g. *Metuljev urok* [Charm of a Butterfly, 2005], a fictional continuation of Lorca's unfinished, unnamed comedy, or *Kleistovo pismo* [Kleist's Letter, 2001], which is based on 1934, Moravia's mysterious love story.

A hallmark of Vilčnik's dramatical style, however, is his preference for the veristic, on occasion ludic, comedy and his fondness for the monodramatic form. His typical narrating male character – be it the “social bastard” Dule Vaupotič in his first monodrama *Kleščar* [Clawman], which premiered in 1999, the single father Samo Hranilec in *Samohranilec* [Single Parent, 2013], or the old geezer Pavlek [Paulie, 2004] – is disillusioned, yet street smart, rough around the edges, yet in his heart of hearts, idealistic. He is “the primitive conscience of the little man”, as Vilčnik himself explained in an interview; he is eloquent and blunt and frequently resorts to *štajersčina*, the vibrant dialect of Vilčnik's native eastern-Slovenian region. However, although routinely synonymous with the uneducated in contemporary Slovenian language, Vilčnik's use of *štajersčina* does not have an alienating or disapproving effect. Quite the contrary, his characters' language skillfully communicates that, even within the confines of their own marginal existence, they can rise above the hardship and social and cultural divide, and ultimately their regional, colloquial ‘alien’ becomes tragi-comic.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that Vilčnik is a triple Grum Prize laureate for best Slovenian original play awarded in 2000 for *To [It]*, in 2008 for *Smeti na luni* [Garbage on the Moon], and in 2016 for *Ljudski demokratični cirkus Sakešvili* [The People's Democratic Circus Sakeshvili] – and the two-time recipient of the Notable Comedy Quill for best Slovenian original comedy: in 2004 for *Pavlek [Paulie]* and in 2020 for *Pravi heroji [Real Heroes]*. In their justification of the 2016 award for *The People's Democratic Circus Sakeshvili*, the Grum Prize panel wrote: “[The play] is an extremely sparky and witty text, which is incessantly toying with the reader's/viewer's perception and transforming the situations by continuously changing the identities of the four dramatis personae. However, the totality of it is far from a farce utilizing situational comedy; it is a lucid depiction of society and its power relations.” Vilčnik humbly added that with *Sakeshvili* he wanted to create characters that could effortlessly be played by bad actors.

Over the past two decades, Vilčnik has also been a significant presence on the Slovenian music scene, organizing and promoting music events and artists, and writing lyrics for talented musicians many of whom he grew up with. In 2003, his musical pursuit led to the formation of the band *Patetico*, playing jazzy adaptations – with a touch of swing and chanson – of songs originally written by well-known international performers. Fate again intervened. The band gained unexpected popularity after a bootleg recording from an enthusiastic concert goer was widely

circulated. The *Papir* music collective followed in *Patetico*'s footsteps in 2009, and marked the beginning of a new movement, *Nova Slovenska Popevka* [New Slovenian Popular Song], largely credited to Vilčnik, who also wrote its manifesto. *Nova Slovenska Popevka* is a revival of *Slovenska Popevka* [Slovenian Popular Song], an older movement created by the eponymous festival of popular music, which ran from 1962–1983 and promoted quality, forward-looking music. It left an enduring legacy: songs quickly turned into evergreens and their performers became household names. Vilčnik saw its revival necessary because of a lack of innovative, high quality, and creative popular music fit for the new millennium. Following the tradition of the *Nova Slovenska Popevka* and the success of *Patetico* and *Papir*, under Vilčnik's auspices, the musical duo *Pliš* was established in 2012; while his latest “lokalpatriot” band *Simpatico*, for which he is the front man, entered the scene in 2020 for the purpose of singing about Maribor, his beloved hometown.

Vilčnik's play, song, and screen writing persona runs parallel to his persona as a writer of poetry, short stories, and novels. In fact, the self-publication of the poem collection *Sanje [Dreams]* in 1994 marked the very beginning of his literary career and was later followed by three more poetry collections: *Pogrešanke [The Lost Songs]*, published by *Locutio* in 2004, *Zdravilo za Ano [Cure for Ana]*, published by *Litera* in 2017, and *Šrapneli [Shrapnel]* published by *Kulturni Center Maribor* in 2020. His first novel *Mali ali Kdo si je življenje zmislo? [Little'Un or Who Invented Life]*, a nostalgic and witty account of (mis)adventures of the six-year-old Little'Un, inspired by Vilčnik's childhood encounters in the declining years of the Yugoslav socialist system, was released in 2001. In 2005 followed his experimental novella *Deset let razmišljanja [Ten Years of Contemplation]* exploring the psychological perspective of the conscious mind of a middle-aged man trapped within an unresponsive comatose body. The novella marked the end of the first decade of his literary life. A decade later, in *Človek s pogledom [Man with a View, 2016]*, we see Vilčnik again probing into the mysteries of the human mind by exploring the special states of consciousness that arise in hypnosis. The story of a fairground hypnotist, again set in Vilčnik's own Maribor, raises the question of the irreducibility of truth – both for the individual and the greater society. This question is, once more, asked in Vilčnik's latest novel *Sveti gozd [Sacred Forest, 2022]*, which, yet again, foregrounds a stock character the author so loves to use. The Hollywood actor-gone-private detective *Peck Glayzl*, whose name is, again, a witty reference to the Golden Age of Hollywood and an untranslatable wordplay (the vernacular *štajersčina* expression “*peglajzl*” refers to a steam iron), searches for a missing wife until he, too, gets irreversibly lost in the Vilčnik-created universe, which is characterized by a complete breakdown of all known logical mechanisms.

This ultimately brings us to *Vesoljne pravljice [Cosmic Fairy Tales]* that were first published in Slovenian by *Locutio* in 2003 and re-published, albeit in somewhat

altered and rearranged versions, almost two decades later by Grafiti Studio in 2020. The tales were conceived in the 1990s for Vilčnik's graduation thesis aiming at creating "an original approach to combining literature and visual art", which he defended in 1998 at the Faculty of Education in Maribor. The initial 42 fairy tales were accompanied by 17 chromatic and later black-and white illustrations that underscored Vilčnik's unique view of the world and humankind. "What will happen to us millennia from now, somewhere out there in that star-filled space, which now we can only perceive with huge telescopes and radar devices, trying to understand it through equations and theories that are nothing more than humble assumptions about infinity", asks Vilčnik in the original Slovenian prologue. He continues that his intention, through words and pictures, was to "domesticate" stories from the future and bring us closer to hidden landscapes of the mind – the micro- and macrocosm – so we'd be able to glimpse the distances and the paths between the solar systems as if we were already there. Little did he know that this would be the beginning of a beautiful journey through space and time, and that these tales would take on a life of their own, enthusing, along the way, so many star-struck readers.

As the Artistic Directors of Theatre Gigante (based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA), Mark Anderson and Isabelle Kralj first met Rok Vilčnik in 2017 at a reading of one of our productions, *The Way Things Go* [Tako pač je v življenju]. Theatre Gigante was fortunate to be performing at the University of Maribor in Slovenia in the Translation Department. Our reading was part of a project organized by Professor Melita Koletnik and her colleague Simon Zupan, in which the Department's students of English translated Mark's script of *The Way Things Go* from English to Slovenian. The night of the presentation, Rok attended, and we were introduced at the post-performance reception.

We were instantly taken with the bright-eyed, playful, and energetic author, who at first glance resembled Andy Warhol, and who was warm and engaging as he delivered his commentary on our presentation. Something clicked between us, and a strong artistic working relationship was born.

Rok asked if we would consider translating his play *Tarzan* from Slovenian to English. Working with Melita, we undertook the task. *Tarzan* was a joy to translate. It's a brilliant play in which Rok masterfully hits on a multitude of major topical issues: aging, coupledness, the environment, the jungle, destructive development, greed, man versus the animal kingdom, and more. Skillfully, he entertains the

audience with comedy and clever absurdity while dexterously winding them through dark and serious topics of paramount importance. Herein lies the virtuosity and genius of Rok Vilčnik! You can peel his work like an onion, finding layer upon layer of meaning and metaphoric depth.

The translation of *Tarzan* led to the United States premiere of the play when Theatre Gigante presented it in Milwaukee in 2018 with Mark and I in the title roles of an aging *Tarzan* and *Jane*, and actor Don Russell as *Mike the Hyena*, a talking hyena who sweet-talks *Jane* into a web of complications.

Rok attended the opening weekend of *Tarzan* in Milwaukee, which was also attended by the Slovenian Consul General Mr. Andrej Rode, who travelled from Cleveland, Ohio, to take part in the opening festivities. While in Milwaukee, Rok charmed Gigante audiences through interviews and audience talkbacks, but mainly through his dazzling play itself, which was extremely well received. Two years later, Gigante performed its production in 2019 in Slovenia in Ptuj, and in Kranj at the prestigious theatre festival, *Teden Slovenske Drame* [Week of Slovenian Drama]. And, within a span of a week, *Tarzan* was presented in three different cities in Slovenia by three different companies. It was a Rok-a-thon!

After the successful collaboration of *Tarzan*, we remained in touch, and I began translating several pieces he was working on just for fun, all the while discussing with him possible future projects.

Once again, Melita was the instigating force for the next project: Rok had written forty-nine enchanting cosmic fairy tales, which Melita's students were translating into English, and she asked me to come aboard to revise the translations. I spent the next year revising them, then editing them with Mark, and finishing off my work with a final edit by Dr. Anthony Flinn, Professor of English, Eastern Washington University.

The fairy tales kept swirling around in my head and I kept visualizing them in different ways. We asked Rok for permission to use thirty-one of the stories, and we turned them into a video production titled *A Cosmic Fairy Tale A Day Keeps The Doctor Away*, directed by me with graphics and animation by Professor Justin Thomas of Grinnell College and music by composer/musician Frank Pahl.

In lockdown at the time because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Boccaccio's *Decameron* had come to mind, as did the common English proverb, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." The production was meant for the viewer to enjoy one tale a day for an entire month while secluded at home. Thirty-one performers were

involved. They recorded themselves in the confines of their homes, located in the United States, France, England, Ireland, Italy, and Taiwan. This video production became an entity unto itself and is yet another offshoot of Rok's creativity.

Rok's cosmic fairy tales are wide in content and scope: from the poignant and touching handling of death in *Silence* and the stirring portrayal of tragic loss in *Youth* to the scientifically and technically explicit descriptions in *Weapons* and *Tourist Attraction*; from the Monty Pythonesque *Heavenly Father* to clever commentary on life itself in *Mr. End & Mr. Beginning*, *Circus Cosmos*, *The Largest Train In The World*, and *The Flock*; and from the musings of modern day life in *Lara*, *Oh, What All He Saw*, and *The Sugar Factory* to the heartfelt warmth and humanity found in *Friendship*, *The Little Soul*, *The Little Crumb*, *The Girl Who Sold Umbrellas*, and many others. These tales can easily be read over and over again, as they have the power each time to imbue the reader with new thoughts, ideas, revelations, and inspirations.

Rok is a prolific artist. The scope of his art is impressive: plays, tales, novels, television series, songwriting, and performing. He is a rare specimen of Artist with an abundance of talent and a deep understanding of human nature. His ability to accurately present life in all its foiled glory – in always profound and clever ways – is precisely what makes *Cosmic Fairy Tales* an extremely charming and enjoyable journey!

Rok's stories have brought joy to the many of us who have been fortunate enough to work with them.

Finally, these tales find a new home in the publication of a book titled *Cosmic Fairy Tales*. Theatre Gigante, Mark, and I are extremely grateful to have been a part of all the lovely creative activities that have led to this magical book, and we especially want to take this opportunity to thank Rok Vilčnik, Melita Koletnik, the marvelous University of Maribor translation students, especially Nejc Golob and Ana Arnejčič, Justin Thomas, Frank Pahl, all thirty-one Theatre Gigante performers, and all you wonderful readers who are now ready to buckle your seat belts and take this delightful cosmic journey to mysterious and exotic worlds far and wide...

Cosmic Fairy Tales

Melita Koletnik, Isabelle Kralj, Mark Anderson [Eds.]

melita.koletnik@um.si

theatregigante@gmail.com

Abstract The English translation of Rok Vilčnik's marvelously ethereal Cosmic Fairy Tales is the result of almost a decade of collaboration between the author, translation and English language students and their professor at the University of Maribor's Department of Translation Studies, mature translators, English language professors, editors, and revisers. The book includes translations of 49 fairy tales by the acclaimed Slovenian writer, poet, and playwright Rok Vilčnik, aka rokgre, written between 1989 and 2020 and accompanied by the author's original illustrations.

Keywords:

Literary Translation,
Student Translation,
Didactic Translation,
Fiction, Fairy Tales

