Jani Virk: Homecoming

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

All hope is lost.

We must return to where it was lost

if we want to find it again.

Louise Glück

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It was a beautiful day.

Pine trees spread in all directions, reaching their needled tongues like cool flames into the grey rocky mass. A waterfall winds its way across the stone cascades, reflections of the sun dotted across the strips of water. Further up, above the hollow with permanent ice, the mountains close off the horizon, keeping time in a still moment. Scree extends on the left edge, a narrow path meandering across it, to the right, an undulating carpet of pine trees above the precipitous wall abruptly comes to an end and continues in the blueness of the sky, dotted with the occasional cloud. A white jet trail winds a thin thread through them so they look as if someone has strung tufts of candy-floss together onto a long piece of string.

In the middle of this scene, sitting close to each other on a rocky outcrop surrounded by snow, are a young couple, their arms and gazes entwined. It is how lovers or friends who are more than lovers look at each other. This is how they look at each other when everything is still possible, when life is open in all directions, and nobody considers it might ever end.

Through the dregs of endless hours, thousands of days, tens of years he can in his memory, his lungs, with his entire body once again sense the intoxicating smell of pine trees mixed with the delicate scent of a young girl, her fresh perspiring skin covered in a thin layer of body lotion. This scent of life emanates from the picture, wraps itself around the thin bright threads of being and spreads in all directions, into the past, into the future, into the endless expanse of the universe.

In his Berlin flat, Blaž Rowenski sighs and looks at the back of the photograph. June 1987.

Damn it, more than thirty years ago, soon it will be thirty-five, he counts the years in his mind as he walks towards the kitchen, a cold draft of air coming from it. He wants to breathe in the scent of pine trees and the young girl once again, but his lungs catch only the cold autumn air coming through the window that has been open for too long. Before going to work his wife lit a cigarette with her coffee and opened the window to air the kitchen while he was in the living room, looking for the envelope with the photographs. He didn't hear her tell him to close the window in a few minutes' time. He often missed what his wife was saying, looked at her, saw her opening her mouth, but not discern what she was talking about.

The envelope contained ten, perhaps fifteen photographs from his youth, and on the living room shelf he had a couple of dozen books in Slovene, dictionaries, poetry, and novels by Marjan Rožanc and Lojze Kovačič. In his German home this was all that connected him with his former homeland. It had been years since he had looked at the photos, now he was looking for one from his freshman year in which he and his colleagues from the Slavic Studies Department were leaning on a bar in a joint under Castle Hill in Ljubljana, looking straight at the camera. It was not hard to find, it was the only group photo in the envelope. He glanced across the faded images of young men and women sunken in the badly illuminated darkness of the pub. Almost everyone had their hair the same length and occasionally he needed a moment longer to determine whether a face was a man or a woman. He was looking for a schoolmate, Pavel Krnelj. A few months after their fresher party, Pavel had switched from studying linguistics to theology. They were not particularly good friends, but they once prepared for a seminar at their student residence, later he only met him in passing in town. And now this Pavel Krnelj has turned up in Berlin. Somehow he had found out that Blaž lived here. He had sent him a mail that he would be based at the Slovene Catholic Mission in Berlin for a few months and that he would like to meet up. Although Blaž was not even certain he would recall his face, he spotted him easily in the picture. A stocky, serious boy with a prominent Adam's apple. It occurred to him that he had probably, like most priests, with age turned into a large, mellow man with chubby cheeks and he would probably not even recognise him in person.

Once he put the class photograph from the fresher party back into the envelope, in passing he glanced at a few others, before his gaze lingered on one of himself and Petra, a friend from his youth, school friend at secondary school and later also at university. He picked it up, staring at it motionlessly. Suddenly he was overcome with the unpleasant realisation that he had very little in common with the young man in the photograph, more or less only the same name. The tall, handsome boy with a sparkle in his eye now only existed in the photograph, here in his place was a slightly tired middle-aged man with a little too much fat around his waist, eyes that were beginning to look sunken and grey strands in his hair. He did not so much long for those times, what he longed for was the feeling that the world could be new, fresh and pure. A feeling that had abandoned him years ago.

Looking at the photograph, it occurred to him that he would have much preferred if instead of his acquaintance from his student years it had been Petra who now contacted him out of the blue. They had lost contact years ago and even though it didn't really bother him at the time, after all, that was life, he now felt a pang of regret. She had been his first love and they were best friends, whatever that meant at the time. Only when she began dating some guy from the year above did he realise that he was in love with her. He regretted having taken her hints when she was changing in front of him in her room, asking him whether he could do up her bra, asking whether she should wear a black or white lace bodice to go out, and similar things, merely as a sign of friendly trust. Too late he had realised that she was not only testing his patience but also his affections. She was playing with him as young people like to play when they initially discover what kind of delights their body has to offer, but he was too reserved and serious. All he needed to do was reach with his hand towards her, embrace her and kiss her, and their friendship would have grown into something entirely different. Instead it lasted throughout secondary school, throughout their student years at university and for a few years afterwards until it faded away, gradually subsiding until one day it had dried up entirely.

At secondary school they had both been in the mountaineering club run by their geography professor. They would go for walking trips in the mountains every spring, and at least five or six times a year, usually on Saturdays. On the photo they

were both sixteen, it was towards the end of their second year at secondary school, in mid-June. The club went on a trip from Jezersko to the Czech Lodge at Spodnje Ravni under the north face of Grintovec, and then on towards Kočna. Their geography professor brought his ten-year-old son along. They had their first break at the lodge, after well over an hour of walking. The professor gathered his students around him and began a long explanation about the geological makeup of the Alps and their creation, about the glacier under Skuta and on Spodnje and Zgornje Ravni above the lodge. It was around eleven o'clock and the professor took some sun cream from his backpack and applied it to his son, then almost forced the students to also apply some. He also handed out hats with visors to those who had, despite his instructions, come without.

Chernobyl last year was a terrible thing, but it is nothing compared to what is to come, he had said. Two years ago, British scientists discovered the ozone hole above the Antarctic. And you can imagine what that means. Unfiltered sun rays reaching Earth and eating into our skin. It will peel us like oranges... And if not us, he continued and placed his hand on his son's shoulder, then our descendants, he concluded without a shadow of doubt in his voice, as if pleased more with the acuteness of his own reasoning than saddened by the fate of humanity.

Nobody took the professor entirely seriously. Even during lessons he had often deliberated on catastrophe theories about comments that would sooner or later inevitably crash to Earth, about the rising sea levels that will engulf entire countries, about global warming that will result in entire continents beginning to turn into waterless wastelands, about the Sun that will in a billion years cool down, causing the complete destruction of life on Earth so that all that will be left of our solar system will be cold pieces of matter floating through space.

Despite this, most of the students applied the sun cream, if nothing else to pre-empt him ranting away again.

The world might soon be as blue as a peeled orange, a boy from their French class muttered mockingly to the back of the professor who was walking off towards the hut with his son. Only those from the French class knew where he’d got that from, as they had recently been reading Eluard's poetry in their lessons.

And we will soon be nice red segments, another student added.

Or perhaps blue, one of the girls concluded.

They continued to joke at the professor's expense and then walked up along a well-trodden mountain path from the lodge to the nearest snow in a gulley a hundred or so metres away. At the edge of the snow, Petra held his hand and they skidded along to a rocky outcrop in the middle of the snow, climbed it and for a while watched their friends playing around on the glacier, throwing snowballs at each other as if it were the middle of winter. Then they hugged and posed for a schoolfriend to take a photo.

In early summer Petra and Blaž returned to the lodge alone and spent a week there. They walked up nearby peaks, climbed a few easy routes in local walls with the caretaker's son, and in the evenings in the common dormitory cuddled up in their sleeping bags and held hands, talking quietly late into the night, experiencing everything necessary for the start of a great, lifelong love, which, however, never developed and remained untouched, caught in the dreams of youth.

In his Berlin apartment, Blaž walked up to the window, closed it and stood there for a while. Flashing in the distance was the light on the tower near the exhibition ground that since the beginning of the week had hosted a fair on erotica. Traffic on the road below flowed like a river in both directions, walking in a line along the pavements below his window were kindergarten children with their teachers. On the opposite side of the road people were walking into Aldi and returning with full shopping bags. To the right of the shop, a fast-food joint had two thick spits of meat turning slowly, a Turkish immigrant skilfully slicing off thin pieces for a kebab. Next to the kebab shop was Jelinek, the funerary services, the illuminated sign above the shop window with the owner's surname and the slogan *Good prices with us for the journey into the unknown*.

Whenever Blaž looked out of that window, his gaze inevitably fixed on the sign and the large dark shop windows. When he and his wife and two children moved to Neue Kantstrasse in Berlin three years ago from Cologne, the place was still a shop with musical instruments. Through the big shop windows he could see white and black Steinway pianos, and Spanish acoustic guitars hanging on the walls. He often glanced across towards them and seeing the instruments calmed him. It has now been a year and a half since the vista is dominated by the funereal business. The

window displayed funeral items instead of instruments, coffins, urns, mourning wreaths and catalogues with the latest offers. He could not get used to it at all, every fleeting glance from the window at home reminded him of death.

The owner of the business had only just stepped out onto the pavement and was filling his pipe with tobacco, looking at a group of five colourful people who were coming out of the nearby hotel and were making their way towards a van. Clearly they were on their way to the fair, three starlets, pole dance artists or perhaps performers in erotic shows, wearing white fur coats, pink tights and high heels, and two guys in elegant coats with fur collars.

Blaž had no way of avoiding Jelinek. He met him every day in one way or another; he walked past the shop to the garage on the other side of the road to pick up his car, to the shop, to the metro, and he saw him whenever he looked out of his kitchen window. Since his wife and he had come to Berlin, the three-bedroom flat was also his workspace where he spent most of the day. Moving from Cologne, he had abandoned his lecturing and devoted himself entirely to translation. At home he translated literature, professional texts or official documents. He only went out a few times a month, whenever a Slovene delegation came to Berlin and needed simultaneous translation, or, even rarer, when he was needed at the court. If he had had a court interpreter exam in Serbo-Croatian, he would have had a great deal more work; there were fewer Slovenes in Berlin than people from other areas of the once common homeland and mostly they were hard-working, exemplary, boring inhabitants of the metropolis, most of whom also had a good knowledge of German if they happened to find themselves in court.

His workspace at the computer was in the living room. On an Ikea table he had his laptop, next to it on a bookshelf (also Ikea) his grammar books, German and Slovene dictionaries, phraseological ones, etymological ones, anything that came in useful when he was translating and he couldn’t access from his computer. The window looked out onto the inner courtyard, a broad concrete platform with garbage bins and a patch of soil in the middle where a sad-looking tree was trying to grow. With regret he watched its leaves wither. The yard was claustrophobically enclosed by the four sides of the large square building with monotone plastic-framed windows. The only thing alive in the yard, other than the withering tree, were the

people who occasionally came skidding along in their slippers, separated their garbage into the multicoloured bins and then disappeared back into the building. And during the times he was working they were mostly pensioners who spent most of their time in the block of flats anyway.

While translating, Blaž would often get up, stretch himself, walk to the kitchen, put on the kettle for a cup of tea or coffee, and have a little snack. It was easier to get back to work if, out of the window, he spotted a group of children from the kindergarten, students hurrying to the university, an attractive woman he could rest his eyes on during his monotonous work, anything that reminded him of real life out there.

When he arrived in Germany in the late nineties as a lecturer in Cologne, he first saw his wife-to-be Sabine at a press conference at the Heinrich Böll Foundation on the occasion of a new reprint of *The Clown* (his favourite book when he was studying). Soon after he met her again at the university; as a journalist she was preparing a piece on language courses for Cologne Radio and among others also interviewed him. She was interested in Slavs, she loved Chopin and Tchaikovsky, she liked Russian authors, Gogol, Chekhov, Turgenev, Pasternak, and of the modern ones Sorokin, but she knew next to nothing about Slovenia and Slovenes. But merely the fact that Blaž was also a Slav had clearly raised her interest, a sufficient change from the pedantic German nature that so irritated her with her father.

She and Blaž met by chance in a bookshop a few days after the interview and began chatting. He liked her and invited her for coffee, and the following day for lunch, and before they first slept together a few weeks later, they also went to the cinema and theatre a few times. Soon she moved into his attic flat with a view of the cathedral and the railway bridge across the Rhine. They stayed there until their daughter Anne was born when they moved to a larger flat on the outskirts of town. When Anne was five, they decided they wanted another child, so their daughter would not grow up alone, but due to an infection after her caesarean with her first child, doctors advised against a new pregnancy. After a complicated procedure lasting many months, they adopted a little boy Anne's age from the Russian orphanage in Perm and thus extended the Slavic branch of their family. They did not

change their son's name and he stayed Oleg. In just over a year he was fluent in German and at school later even overtook his talented sister. He finished secondary school with top marks and received a grant to study at the elite Technical University in Munich where he took a course at the Faculty of Engineering. The same year Anne went to Freiburg to study Romance Languages and Linguistics, so, only two years after moving to Berlin, Blaž and Sabine were left alone in their flat.

Blaž had intended to set up his translation corner in the room that used to be shared by his now adult and mostly absent children, as the window there looked out onto the main street, like the one in the kitchen. When, after months of careful coordination with the family, he was finally ready to actually move there, the shop on the opposite side of the road selling musical instruments was vacated and after three weeks of refurbishment, Jelinek moved in with his funereal equipment.

It put him off the idea, a number of times he even thought of talking to Sabine about moving, but somehow didn't know how to broach the subject, basically knowing that he did not really have a strong enough argument to support the idea and therefore no real chance of convincing her. He liked their flat in Neue Kantstrasse, felt more than comfortable in it. Her job was at the radio opposite the Fair, less than fifteen minutes' walk away, a rare privilege for someone living in a metropolis. They had moved to the capital three years ago when she was offered the post of cultural editor at Radio Berlin-Brandenburg, and it did not even cross her mind that she would go anywhere else, this was the peak of her career. She had only less than a decade before she would retire and certainly didn't intend to start anew somewhere else. Jelinek across the road did not bother her in the least. She once even mentioned to Blaž that they could call in in his shop at some point and enquire about where in Berlin they might get a good location at a cemetery.

He was only just over fifty and did not want to discuss this issue for many years yet, it seemed absolutely too soon, even though he could not hide from himself the fact that for him the subject would always be absolutely too early. And no spot in any cemetery anywhere in the world would be good for him. We need to think about these things as well, she had said to him when he didn't respond to her suggestion, you're from Ljubljana, I'm from Hamburg, we probably won't each be buried in the graves of our parents, will we?

If you want, call in on your own, I have no interest in such plots, he eventually managed to say. I'd be more interested in a plot in Erzgebirge or on Lanzarote. When you retire, you can leave Berlin.

Jelinek would certainly give us a discount, after all, we are neighbours, she joked, but this only annoyed him more.

Right, Blaž grumbled, but until I finish this translation, he pointed to a thick volume by Rüdiger Safranski about Goethe, I would prefer not to have to deal with Jelinek. And if we really need to talk about this, I'd much prefer to have my ashes scattered into the wind or be buried under some tree.

Sabine was an orderly, sensible woman. In all the years they had been together he had not once regretted that they had got married. She never pointed out that she brought more money into their household than he did, she had a feeling for when she could interfere in his way of life and thought and when she needed to leave him alone. She was caring, practical, and reliable. She had both her feet firmly on the ground, unlike himself who kept getting carried away, inwardly into melancholy, outwardly into space. Alongside all this, she was well-read. You could talk to her about literature, translating problems, solutions in German, anything that was related to his work. As an editor, she followed what was going on in culture generally, she was up to date with contemporary film production, during the Berlin Film Festival they would together go to see at least ten to fifteen films every year, she knew what was on at Berlin galleries, they had a season ticket for the Berliner Ensemble, and she was always being invited to premieres at theatres or the music-opera house, which they often attended. It meant a lot to her that he went to these events with her. Even in his field, Nobel Prize winners for literature, for example, she would usually find out who had been selected and send him a message, won by Ishiguro, won by Handke and Olga Tokarczuk, won by Louise Glück, won by Gurnah, whoever it happened to be that year.

And it wasn’t just her constancy that contributed to their marriage lasting for years and decades; Sabine was still attractive, no less so than when she was thirty. She went for a five-kilometre run three times a week and at least twice, while he was still asleep, at seven o’clock in the morning, she would go to the gym. Her only

unhealthy habit was that, before going to work, she would have a cigarette with her coffee. Once cigarette and that was it.

Blaž admired the strength of her character, he was jealous of her being able to light a single cigarette with her coffee and then stop. He could either smoke, or, like the last five years, not smoke. When he did smoke, he devoured cigarettes, choked on them and could not stop, as soon as he lit his first cigarette in the morning, the race for his lungs was open, and he could not stop until the evening.

The only thing he really missed with Sabine was an ear for his fears. She simply did not comprehend them, didn't want to venture beyond the edge of her safe, predictable, orderly world.

When Anne was born, he didn't sleep for days, worrying she might choke on her pillow, that her heart might stop, that their Siamese cat might sneak into her room and sit on the baby's face. He always found reasons to worry.

Bad things can happen at any moment, he once told Sabine when she finally asked him one day why he kept getting up in the night and walking across to the crib, waking her and the child up when holding his finger under her nose to check she was still breathing.

Blaž, yes, in theory something terrible can happen at any moment. But you can't go on like this.

And with this, the debate was over for her. She went straight back to sleep.

But he continued to be troubled by thoughts too onerous for himself alone. They were present all the time, hanging in the air, and, unlike his wife, he believed you can't really live if you are not aware of them. That this is simply part of trying to understand what kind of world we live in.

At any moment, some idiot can press a button and in a nuclear cataclysm the world will go dark; at any time some fatal virus might appear and take out all humanity; unpredictable things can happen at any moment... He often wanted to talk about this in order to rid himself of the anxiety he had felt, after all, words enable one to extricate matters from your head and distribute the burden, among others. Whenever, albeit increasingly rarely, he did raise one of these issues, her answer was more or less the same.

Blaž, you can’t live thinking like that. There is no point pondering about things you can’t change. Unless you want it to drive you crazy.

In literature too, those who veered away from tangible reality, delving into insoluble questions about the transience of God, got on Sabine’s nerves. She found Kureishi, constantly writing about his phallic experiences and trouble an easy and entertaining read. Or Elena Ferrante and Annie Ernaux with their feminine traumas.

What do you think of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky? he once asked her during a conversation about Russian literature.

Oh, great writers. But old-fashioned, very old-fashioned, typical examples of a male view of the world, wanting to get to the bottom of things where there is no bottom. Or wrapping the darkness of phallic lust into a literary apology for hating women.

That’s how you see them? Is that not a rather limited view?

Yes, that’s how I see them. And I can’t see why that would be limited. If that’s how you see it, every view through your eyes or mine, through the eyes of anyone, is limited. I put down *The Brothers Karamazov* before the end of part one, and *The Kreutzer Sonata* after the first page.

And you can judge so quickly?

Sometimes, yes. Definitely with Tolstoy. Though I did read *Anna Karenina* to the end. It's part of general education.

Nice.

I don't know whether it's nice, but that's how it is.

The fact that she was so pragmatic and controlled reassured him and gave a stability to his life, on the other hand, it allowed him to withdraw from real life and let her deal with many matters. Were it not for the translation that kept him busy, and the cat dozing next to the keyboard and occasionally climbing up onto his shoulder, rubbing onto him some warmth of life, he would probably have long gone crazy in Berlin. Ever since the children had left home he had begun translating poetry, even when he did not have orders, for himself, in order to withdraw from deliberations that lead nowhere, that he could remove himself from the world, pressing down ever harder. He would walk around the flat, thinking about a verse, sit

down at the computer to write it down, then get up again, walk around, find a better solution, and return to his work desk.

He was now translating in this way the poems of his favourite writer Michel Houellebecq. Until recently he had only known his novels. He was interested in the themes Houellebecq wrote about, sexuality, death, life after death, clash of civilisations, estrangement, the unreliability of human nature, all the things he would himself write about if only he had a little talent and the courage to speak and write about matters he often thought about.

Last week, Sabine and he had gone to the cinema to watch the film *Thalasso* featuring Depardieu and Houellebecq. One of the advantages of their flat was that the cinema was only a short walk away. Everything along the way had references to the Königsberg philosopher. Along Neue Kantstrasse, then down Kantstrasse, arriving at the Kino Kant a few steps later. It played a decent selection of films all year round. *Thalasso* was not really Sabina's kind of film but Blaž found Houellebecq rather amusing. Two politically incorrect men in a kind of rehabilitation spa ponder upon their views of the world. Despite looking like a vagabond, Houellebecq appeared clever, witty, a person of spiritual elegance, on the other hand Depardieu looked quite normal by comparison, shallow, cynical to any excessive idea, decadently softened.

The following day Blaž took the Metro to the bookshop in the centre of town to find anything he had not yet read by Houellebecq and in the French section found his personal anthology of poems *Non réconcilié*, Unreconciled. His French wasn't brilliant but good enough for him to manage, with the help of a dictionary, to read or translate things for his own use.

As he closed the window, averting his eyes from the street below to prevent himself automatically glancing towards Jelinek, he was shuffling the words of the first verse of the poem *The Clouds, The Night*, to match the rhymes in the third and fourth lines with the first two which he had already translated: They keep coming from the depths of my damp eye / images endlessly sliding… fly, goodbye, stand by, high, he muttered, looking for the word with the right sound that would be closest to the desired meaning. He checked the time, it was barely just past nine, he had

another two hours until eleven when he had arranged to go and play badminton with his (only) German friend Horst.

Horst and he played badminton twice a week, and on Friday nights they usually met at the bowling club not far from Kurfürstendamm and had a few beers. He had met him a year after arriving in Berlin at a literary evening of some young Slovene poet at a bookshop in Savignyplatz. Blaž went there out of curiosity. He liked poetry and at the Frankfurt Bookfair which he visited every year with Sabine, he had made contact with Slovene publishers who then sent him their newest issues, so he was able to follow most contemporary poetry, including the youngest generation.

There were a decent number of people there and the editor of a very prestigious German publisher presented her protégé, a not yet-thirty-year-old with curly black hair, gentle features, gazing rapturously at the audience, like the boy from Mann's Death in Venice, deserving a (man's) lustful glaze.

The editor had a stern, rather wrinkled face, an indeterminate age, she could have been forty-seven or seventy-seven. Choosing her words, carefully moving her thin lips, she praised the young poet, predicting that he would, over the years, become the new Slovene Prešeren, the new Šalamun. The boy looked confidently around with a narcissistic smile and after the audience accompanied the editor's departure from the stage with a soft applause, he, to the accompaniment of a violin, read about ten of his poems in Slovene, all in a strong Lower Carniolan accent, while the translations appeared on the screen behind him. At the end he himself also read a longer piece in German. The editor stood, expressionless at the side of the stage, listening to her protégé's every accentuation as he read with a pathetic enthusiasm, glancing towards her a number of times during his recital. He then stood up from his chair and flapped his hands, and it took Blaž a little while to comprehend that this was part of the performance, having initially thought that the boy had realised as he read his own poem that this was bad, very bad poetry, and had decided to leave the stage.

When the reading was over, the editor, with dry, unrhythmical clapping accompanied the young man off the stage and stood up before a slightly confused and reserved audience, right in front of the violinist still trying hard with his melancholic tune, indicating with gestures to everyone to join in with her clapping.

Moments later the entire audience was clapping in a slow beat, stifling its echo back into the palms of their hands, apart from a man around Blaž's age standing right at the back with his back against the wall, a Brechtian worker's cap on head, casually flipping thorough one of the publisher's catalogues.

Blaž hurried out of the room even though he had initially intended to stay until the end and exchange a few words with the young poet. Listening to his poems, however, he had not felt like it and any kind of kindness would be tasteless flattery, he was too old to play dumb. The man with the cap left straight after him. Blaž held the door for him and then released it slowly so it would not bang when it shut.

Thanks, said the man. When they were already outside, he stopped a couple of steps in front of Blaž. Interesting, no? he said with an ambiguous smile.

Well, yes, probably not.

Horst, the man introduced himself and held out his hand. Blaž muttered rather than said his own name. They both then, slightly embarrassed looked back through the window where participants were gathering around the counter near the till where there were some glasses of wine and canapés.

To recover from this, I'd need a little more than that, Horst pointed to the events area where people were mingling, holding miniature sandwiches. At least a solid Wiener schnitzel or a pork shank, he added.

Yes, Blaž responded with restraint. He didn't like this man making fun of his young compatriot and he liked even less that despite so many excellent Slovene poets, the reputable publishing house chose a boy who spiced up his lyrical poems with a few reworked Paul Celan verses that were supposed to give bland high-school poetry some kind of weight and depth.

In an awkward moment they both continued to stare in through the window, then Horst invited Blaž for a beer.

There were a number of decent joints on Savignyplatz and they chose the one furthest away to avoid the crowd from the literary evening in the bookshop coming after them once they were out of canapes. During their conversation it emerged that Horst was an editor in a small Berlin publishing house, held afloat by translations of French comics. This otherwise specialised in translated poetry, especially Spanish and Latin American, but also published annually an anthology of poetry from the

Guest of Honour country at the Frankfurt Book Fair. This was also the reason he attended the literary event, as in a couple of years' time Slovenia was going to be honoured at Frankfurt. He knew almost nothing about Slovene poetry, so he had hoped that he might meet a Slovene editor at the event and establish contact with the young poet presented by the publishers as one of the fresh voices of European poetry, the new generation, comparable with the power of expression of the young American Amanda Gorman and her reading at Biden's inauguration ceremony.

Young authors normally have little to say, Horst said after their first beer, and don't even know how to say that. Thomas Bernhard already knew this.

Yes, Blaž said, once again with restraint, although he did not know this statement by the Austrian grouch.

The women editors at this publishing house are among the best in Germany, Horst continued, definitely better than their male colleagues. I don't know where they found this one though, she reminds me of the head of some educational institution in East Germany fifty years ago, preparing her charges for performing at the celebration to mark Honecker's birthday. And she claps at the dumb phrases she instilled in her brats' vocabulary. The poetry of this young man was not much better, he added.

Yes, Blaž responded to his words.

The only true food for poetry is life itself, its vulnerability and exposure. Love. Passion. A blade that slashes the veins. Suffering and compassion...

Death, Blaž added, relaxing after his fist beer, no longer feeling uncomfortable in the company of this chatty man. In fact, quite the opposite, after a long time he was out talking to a person whose interests were clearly similar to his own.

Of course, death also, in the middle of all this life and everything, also death, Horst nodded.

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