

Pia Prezelj: Heavy Water

an excerpt from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh

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She found the chamomile and a few bay leaves, threw them into the pot and boiled them. The slush scalded up her shins as she stepped into it, her previously purple ankles turning reddishly painful. She should go to the doctor, he would have said, ordered her to go, DOCTOR RAVNIKAR – FEET, You could have called earlier, should have, but now none of this is important any longer, she won't need them anymore, not for walking, not for running, not for sitting or waiting, screech, screech, screech across the lino.

She ran often, rushed, jumped around, before she was *Ma'am, well today you really are poorly*, chased through the corn, chased after Milena, tried to catch her, pinch her, until she started shouting STOP IT, IDA, I'LL PEE MYSELF (here and there she really had, in the cornfield, red in the face, If you tell anyone, I will strangle you, you're really mean, just so you know).

Once they lied that they would stay at each other's houses overnight – Of course, said Milena's parents, Of course, said Ida's, and take them some biscuits – and go to school the following morning, but instead sneaked to the field, climbed onto the hayrack, at the top spread out a sheet and stayed there until night time. When the moon was high enough for them to see, they chased each other around, fell into the grass, ants creeping all over them, and grasshoppers and beetles, until their lungs hurt. Then they picked – Do you see them anywhere? – daisies, climbed into the hay, stuffed themselves with biscuits and played loves me, loves me not, waiting for the sun to rise, dragging themselves off to school, hungry, muddy and

Snap out of it.

The stinging pain spread to her knees, into corners and crevasses she couldn't reach, burning, so she wanted to pull herself out of the bucket, but had to persist with the chamomile and bay leaves, she had to think about

The pond they used to go to on Saturdays and Sundays, full of frogs and carp, murky, brown, with benches and a hut used by fishermen who would leave behind cigarette butts and beer cans, who waved at them, whistled, friendly but corny, sunburnt bare bellies spilling over belts, onto Milena and Ida's early teenage years which had yet to crash into the physical, that came later, the sensual, came with plenty of shame, came like frost, like glaze ice that breaks branches, tearing and splitting, when Milena already had hips, breasts, studied herself in the mirror, stood before Ida, asking about this and that, what about this, Will he like me getting fat?

You're not getting fat.

Just a little filled out, you know, the other day he said that I reminded him of Buttercup, apparently we have the same gaze.

Buttercup wasn't a patch on Milena, and besides, a few months later she broke both her front legs. She was shot in between the eyes.

Still standing on the counter was what she now knew – I know it will be bad, but you mustn't forget, make sure to write it down somewhere – the name only of that rounded and you know, spout part, although she knew that the rounded part was where you put the water and soak teabags of chamomile mint rosehip and then hold, pour, blow until someone says The grass won't cut itself, even though he said that they would manage, that they would get through this together. She should have left while she still had a chance, before Milena said Have you lost it, before he said We will have a garden and a house, and a dog, a couple of friends.

Only a sausage has two ends, Ida rhymed her thoughts, but the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like everything has a whole bunch of ends, she too, as does he, and the snails you tread on, crunch and everything is messy, are in front of the door again the next morning, others ones, just like them, the very same, end by end a loaf, end upon end a palace.

Even though they led to the Grand End, Lojze's ends were no easier, they were just called something different. When he dragged himself home after evening Mass,

opened the fridge, took off his socks, scratched his back as far as he could reach, his *I wanted* and *I didn't want* turned into *I would have wanted*. And he would have wanted plenty, wanted fervently, wanted all that he was capable of handling, capable of giving and understanding, and he already comprehends, comprehends as the voices behind the net are disintegrating, as fathers ask for daughters and daughters for husbands, sons, when weddings are quiet and coffins small, when it is all daylight robbery. All this he sees and understands, all this he would want to experience, want to drink coffee with cinnamon and search under the mattress and wake up and be afraid, afraid to death, but not for everyone, just for someone, perhaps two, three at the most. He would want to say How good it is and Come to me and Sod off, he would want to know how it stays stuck on the tongue, how sticky it is, hairy, how it inhabits him, changes him.

His fingers shook as he tried to rid himself of the rest of the shell, when he stuffed the egg into his mouth and there was some strange crunching, when he wrapped the bread in the bag, put the plate in the sink and slid off to the bathroom, when he tried to unzip his trousers, missed the toilet, rinsed his face, when he – not for the first and not for the last time – remembered that He was watching over him and protecting him, as He watches over and protects everything, but will not feed him, will not bathe him when he will no longer be able to do so himself.

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HELP ME I CAN'T GET DOWN, she shrieked, hanging from a branch. They often climbed onto the walnut tree next to the fire station, tearing off the green shells in early autumn and hurling them at the ground so they cracked, fell apart, stuck to the asphalt. Climbing high enough, you could see across the fields, to other barns and belfries, and as they each clung to their own branch gazing into the *that beyond*, they often talked about *when I will* and *if I will*.

When I will be as old as Mum is now, I will already have at least three children, Milena once said. And we will go together for daytrips and trips to the seaside and to fairs to buy toys. And I will take them to the Hotel Dolphin, Dad told me they always

have pancakes with cottage cheese there for breakfast, and that we would go when he comes back.

Where is he?

I told you, he went to help his brother, apparently a couple of his co-workers fell ill and they needed new people, and the money is good.

That's great.

It is and it isn't, Mum is worried that he might want to stay, his brother is trying to convince him that we should all three move there.

What?

Yes, he said that the difference was in the standard, although I don't know what that means. Mum says she doesn't want to go, I heard her shouting down the phone that she doesn't care at all about standards, that he should be thinking about me a little. But I think he is thinking about me, you know, because if he hadn't gone there we couldn't even go to the hotel, but I didn't say anything so she wouldn't get angry with me as well.

Ida picked a leaf and began tearing it apart, throwing piece after piece into the air. So does that mean that you will move?

No, probably not, I don't know. I did tell Mum I didn't want to go either and she said I shouldn't worry, that she would make sure all was well in the end. What about you, do you want children?

Yes, but not three, said Ida and crumpled up the rest of the leaf, Perhaps two, a boy and a girl, my mum always says she should have had another child, a boy, and that then we would really be a family.

Milena propped herself up on her hands – left first, then the right – stood up and leapt onto the lower branch that creaked.

Do you think I'd break my leg if I jumped down from here? she said while Ida studied the back of her neck, her hair matted with sweat and earth.

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what good is a mountain

if I can't climb its peak

what good is a lover

if I can't kiss her cheek

rang through the barn while Marta cleaned out Biba's stable, throwing the muck into the wheelbarrow, pushing it out, returning, pushing it back out, returning. She had a pain in her wrist so she had to support the shovel with her thigh in order to shift it more easily; if she was lucky, the dung flew away from her without her having to even turn the handle. She pressed against the edge of the shovel with her heel, pushed harder where it was dried hard, while Biba shifted her weight from one leg to another, swatting flies with her tail. She should be outside, but she had calved a few weeks ago – it was all too early, the calf was dead when they pulled it out – and now she refuses to leave the stable, refuses to eat and drinks only rarely. The calf had defects in its tooth alignment, a jaw that was too short, brittle bones and probably also some sort of vascular problems, the vet had told her as if wanting to say It is better for her, as if that would console her. She didn't tell the other cows, although by the way they huddled around Biba the following days, licking her head and neck, she thought they knew. She only told her son but spared him the details about the bones in which spongy bone tissue grows in place of bone marrow (she didn't ask what this meant, merely nodded, Tone would have done the same), just as she never mentioned to him how heavy a beech tree can be and how fragile a skull. He had a stroke, she said to him when he asked what had happened and whether this now meant he would have a new dad, not to spare him but to shake off at least a little of the guilty conscience that Tone's martyr death instilled in her. For a martyr's death it was – and during Mass, Martha saw him above the High Altar, gilded, a plastic bottle of nettle water in one hand and a chainsaw in the other, surrounded by chubby cherubs and men with

sceptres, and when she received Communion she deliberately stared at the floor so she wouldn't have to look him in the eye.

She changed the shovel for a pitchfork, threw them some fodder and sat against the wall opposite Biba. She liked to talk to her, talk *at* her, her pink muzzle, slimy and dumb, told her about the farm, or about herself and the villagers, about Ida who walks with a limp and takes pills and is all pale, Lojze doesn't want to help, I don't understand what's up with him, does he really not see that she needs company, and she needs to get out into the fresh air every day otherwise everything will go to pots, well I know it's not my business but I feel obliged, you see, I owe her as much, I felt sorry for her even before, she doesn't have anyone, God only knows if she even goes into the garden, everything has probably died off there, things are so dry now anyway and need to be watered every evening, and she doesn't even pull up her blinds, stick her nose out of the house. Martha massaged her wrists, hopped to her feet, stroked Biba on the forehead and returned to the house where she filled a basket with a dozen eggs, half a litre of milk and biscuits she not only doused but dipped in rum when she couldn't sleep.

The basket found itself on the doorstep accompanied with loud knocking, with, Ida, hello, are you home? I've brought something passing through, we have a whole load of eggs these days, so I thought of you, thought I could call in and see how you are doing. Ida, can you hear me? Have you been to the chapel yet?

Perhaps she finally managed to get herself out of the house, Marta thinks to herself, perhaps she is now standing right before the Immaculate Heart of Mary, pierced but blooming.

But Ida sat there, listening to her shouting, until it eventually stopped, until she finally noticed that the water had turned cold, that the chamomile flowers had dissolved and dispersed, the bay leaves had sunk to the bottom, to her swollen toes and toady skin, to the skin of summers they spent in Metajna where they dressed their salad with wine and left the door open at all times, where they got up at five and walked among the cicadas, rosemary and acanthus, among white and purple.

Because she was afraid of the waves, afraid of the current, they would swim with her putting her legs round his hips, clinging on, using her hands for balance. They looked like a pair of mating octopuses, like a *she-he*, a contorted dual that then still twisted in bed, where something in her body would open up with time, she believed, where something will at last *give in*.

When she pulled her feet out of the bucket and dragged herself to the door, leaving a wet trail behind, the basket was no longer on the doorstep and she could hear water sprinkling. She saw the hose winding among the pear trees, saw how it was attached to the tap, pushing, spitting the water out, watering everything right down to the peppers and tomatoes that someone had tied with string and carefully picked the overripe ones. She saw the slugs, once again saw the bees; then she returned inside, leaving them in the air, flying.

She didn't even like lakes, their dark, murky, muddy bottom, she couldn't stand her legs dangling above all kinds of possible things. When at weekends they would take dips in the pond, jump in from the deck that the boys had built themselves, A little wobbly, push yourself off from over there to the left, and not too hard so it doesn't fall apart, she would respond to Milena's Oh, come on, Ida, with I don't want to, don't push me, and instead search through the reeds, looking for the hiding places of tortoises, looking for frogspawn among the bulrushes. She loved catching tadpoles, carrying them home in jam jars where they could stare into a world of scrambled eggs and arguments, and she stared at them, black balls and then tails that grew larger and longer, wiggling inside the jar. Here and there he would feed them – lettuce, grass, dried bread – and occasionally she would shake them, to keep them awake, alive, but regardless of how quickly she jumped up and down with the jar, how enthusiastically she shouted Look at them, how fast they are, look at how it froths up, look, she was sooner or later forced to change them, pour out the old lot under the ivy with the two cats, a rabbit and a goldfish.

She dried her feet and pulled on a pair of tight, thick socks that made it hurt less when she walked, poured the swill into the sink, rinsed her face, shoulders, back of her neck, her armpits.

She should probably have something to eat, she thought to herself when she saw her teeth grinning at her from the edge of the basin, strangely white and strangely smooth, *dignified*, the doctor said as they pulled on them, while the mould was cast she continuously choked, trying not to throw up, You'll see what a smile you will have, respected, truly beautiful. How could he have known that respect and dignity for her were nothing more than ashes lost in the hearth that never existed, at which she never sat but was still so tangible, so crucial – and in this somewhat like God. She left her dentures on the counter, reached for the cupboard, dissolved the powder in a glass of water and with it drank two pills, gazing at that, what is that thing, that – teapot, yes, she realised, of course, a teapot, what else, at the teapot and the pan, and the bread bin and the radio and the jar of pickled gherkins. She stepped to the drawer and found the sticky labels, arranged them onto the counter and finally wrote out everything that she could see so as not to forget again that the white and liquid stuff will be MILK, the powdered stuff SALT and FLOUR and that the room will be the KITCHEN.

Only when she sees the place covered in yellow, squares that both draw out and defend her boundary, does she realise how fast she is slipping, how slippery everything around – and within – her had become.

Even in the worst evenings when she sat at home drinking pine needle liqueur and playing solitaire, wondering when he might return or whether it was her fault, of course it was, who else's and whether he too felt like he was stealing from her, taking from her, even though she is the one who does not give, not nearly enough, even in the evenings when all that could have been appears before her, if only she hadn't been so damn scared and so damn stubborn, convinced that she had made a mistake, but that such mistakes can be eliminated, that slips are quick, short, when she thought that Milena was sitting by her side, telling her about all that she had missed, was missing, about metres, not metres, kilometres of fabric that she is cutting, unstitching, sewing, about the articulated bus that picks them up outside the factory, crowded among the villagers and total strangers that she has learned to recognise with her eyes

closed, the sour acidity of the pickle preservers, the metallic smell of black powder, and the stench of lime solution that wafts from the sweaty necks of tanners – even then she was still capable of returning to the table, to the cards, to the life she had chosen, she had built.

But not this time; not from now on.