Svetlana Slapšak: Where Are We?

a Ljubljana steganogram

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

Introduction

The drawn curtain in a carriage, the passage in between train carriages somewhere by a river, a horse and rider in the rain, waking up in the car, a star above low-lying mist reflecting the streetlamps: somewhere here is the town we have to go through.

Where are we, you ask.

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According to the legend mentioned by historians Sozomen and Zosimus in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D., Ljubljana, known as Emona in Roman times, was founded by Jason and the Argonauts when they escaped with the Golden Fleece, sailing from the Black Sea, up the Danube, then the river Sava and eventually the river Ljubljanica. Ljubljana's educated elite of the 17th and 18th centuries was very proud of its famous founder. The prestige was all the greater since that made the town a few hundred years older than Rome, not to mention Vienna. Many believe that the dragon depicted in Ljubljana's coat of arms is the one allegedly killed by Jason as he set up camp by the river Ljubljanica.

Another story talks about how the Argonauts dismantled their ship somewhere near the source of the river Ljubljanica and carried or transported it across the Karst Plateau to the Adriatic Sea. Many years later (in 1955) the Slovene mathematician Ivo Lah (born 1896, Štrukljeva vas – died 1979, Ljubljana) expanded on this legend to illustrate his mathematical formula: as there are numerous routes to the coast, he considered the possibility that each piece of the Argo was, for security reasons, taken along a different route in order to confuse their pursuers and reduce the possibility of losing the Golden Fleece.

In their article titled *The Lah identity and the Argonauts* (IMFM/ TCS, preprint series, yr 40, 2002, Ljubljana), Marko Petkovšek and Tomaž Pisanski present the matter as follows: For every positive integer, Lah proved the following identity between two n-degree polynomials with x:

$$\prod_{i=0}^{n-1}(x+i)=\sum_{k=1}^{n}\frac{n!}{k!}\binom{n-1}{k-1}\prod_{j=0}^{k-1}(x-j)$$

The coefficients n!(n-1)L(n,k) = k!k-1 are called unsigned Lah numbers. Here we present a combinatorial proof of Lah's identity. Bear in mind that it is sufficient to prove it for enough values of x. In fact, we will prove this for all integers x2:n. The story with the Argonauts will help us visualise this proof.

Let n be the number of Argonauts. Let's say that each Argonaut is assigned a number. The numbers are: 1, 2, … ,n.

Let x2:n be the number of paths from Ljubljana to the coast of the Adriatic.

And finally, let k:n be the number of indivisible parts into which the Argo was dismantled for transportation.

We further assume that each part is being carried by a positive number of linearly aligned Argonauts along separate paths.

Table of values for Lah numbers:

k n	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
0	1										
1	0	1									
2	0	2	1								
3	0	6	6	1							
4	0	24	36	12	1						
5	0	120	240	120	20	1					
6	0	720	1800	1200	300	30	1				
7	0	5040	15120	12600	4200	630	42	1			
8	0	40320	141120	141120	58800	11760	1176	56	1		
9	0	362880	1451520	1693440	846720	211680	28224	2016	72	1	

Steganography is the practice of concealing a message within another message or physical object. The product of this is called a steganogram. In computer / electronic contexts it is a computer file, message, image or video hidden within another file, message, image or

video… In recent years, Lah numbers are used in steganography, the data is hidden in the image.

What I understood from Lah's equation is that it operates with indivisible parts (of the ship). The number of is carriers arbitrary, the number of parts is arbitrary, the ratio of each individual carrier and each individual part (of the ship) is 1:1. Within the realm of 'arbitrary' an equation is generated. So what I am interested in is the indivisible and the visualisation; with the visualisation, the mathematician created the invisible, the steganogram. The visualisation is the story that changes in relation to the indivisible. The indivisible cannot be a mythical story but a way of imagining something, a performative structure. *Mythurgy* is everything together, the arbitrary and the indivisible, the visual and acoustic, the story, different every time. The transition and transportation end in an invisible message that we can, when lacking the knowledge needed to decode it, understand as oblivion, the point at which the mythurgy dwindles away. My intention was not to defeat oblivion but to mythurgically expand memory and simultaneously remove the techniques of forgetting. The key element here was the indivisible part. It cannot be part of comprehension because it is the basic unit, by definition beyond reason. It is the result of technique, craftmanship (manipulation), habit, sound and image. My intention was thus that I see something and hear something, then first knit this into a mythurgical fabric: left loop, right loop, then various patterns – knowledge. The second key element is the transportation, the trip. For me, Ljubljana is a point on the path, the flux, stalemate, the danger of forgetting, a halt from which we need to carry something away to unknown shores, to which we must bring something that has nothing to do with Ljubljana, that does not concern it, that it is not concerned with, something it does not see and does not hear… Be it an elephant, a revolution, love, a bird, death. The Argonauts multiply up to Lah's number. They carry messages and remain invisible, except to connoisseurs, who observe them, describe them and sing their praises. There are very few connoisseurs and very little knowledge, especially such that might be attracted by some elephant, revolution, love, bird, death. Mostly it is death. That is why I devoted part of my attention to the transfer of indivisible death. I imagine indivisible death only as a conversation with those I knew. The second part of the book, Conversations With the Dead, is an attempt to define the pieces that those I knew carried along. If Lah's numbers apply equally to carriers and to the pieces they carry, then the relationship between the carrier and the carried should have been easier to grasp. But it wasn't. This is why my descriptions of the parts carried are not aligned with the carriers: the advantage is in that I know how they would react and at what point they would resist. So to

each of my dead, I had to describe who I am, what and why I could not tolerate. In this way their transfers became true steganograms, hidden in images, on the one hand understood as eternal and hopeless resistance of the dead against stories that the living create about them as authoritarian colonizers of memory, and on the other as a true message that we rarely read accurately: The dead are not evil, the dead are critical.

Nostalgia has nothing to do with all this, as we will see: The term is contemporary, made up of the Greek words *nostos*, homecoming, and *-algos*, *-algeia*, indicating an ailment. It was coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer (1669 – 1752) for his doctoral thesis in Basel, and he used it to describe the mental suffering he discovered with Swiss soldiers, mercenaries, especially in the flat areas of Western Europe. Based on this, such a psychological state or illness was for a long time simply called the 'Swiss disease.' In medicine, nostalgia was taken seriously for as long as melancholy; modern psychoanalysis uses different terms for such states and explains them differently. Despite this, nostalgia in culture has been preserved as a term describing the mourning for some other time or place. The first person to suffer from nostalgia in European culture was certainly Odysseus. But the word *nostos* covers a much broader semantic field, describing all kinds of return, not just the return home, but also, for example, what plants return to us – fruits and seeds. Its meanings are related to wealth and pleasure. In Modern Greek, the adjective *nostimos* means tasty and is used for describing food, clothes or the orderliness of a place.

In recent times nostalgia has gained an entirely new meaning, especially when concerned with the former socialist world and new capitalism. A good example is *Ostalgia*, a TV programme on German TV that at the end of the last century showed objects (and the memories these objects stirred) from the former German Democratic Republic. Another interesting example is Y*ugonostalgia*, memories of Yugoslavia that are documented in books, dictionaries, encyclopaedias and numerous websites with images and stories. In the early years of this century I was at a Christmas market in the former East Berlin, wondering what the point was of buying ten-year-old (fake) chocolate spread, yet there was a large queue of takers in front of me who most certainly didn't want to go without. In this respect, Yugonostalgia is even more persistent, for there are signs everywhere that it could be the basis for some kind of new civic stance; it makes sense to see it within the context of experiences of capitalism and the progressing crisis. Nostalgia is the yearning for lost tastes, childhood or objects that marked a pleasant life, and this may include cultural aspects from Proust's madeleines to memories of Bruco processed cheese. Clever salespeople have managed to utilise this potential: here I am thinking, for example, of the Gavrilović tinned

liver pâté. Cheap food like that, which people used to groan about, gains a positive connotation with nostalgia. Delighting in devouring your past, your youth, making it exclusively yours – what better way of appropriating something that is impossible to return to? In any case, such appropriation ends up in the stomach and has no other collective consequences.

Other forms of nostalgia, collectively acknowledged, carry with them much greater danger. On the one hand these are collective symbols such as flags, uniforms and rituals, on the other they are complexly interwoven elements of memory such as, for example, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Fascism, Socialism, a certain religion, etc.

Many theorists of nostalgia, such as Linda Hutcheon and Svetlana Boym, believe that nostalgia is unreflective and that it can only make sense in relation to irony, criticism, re-evaluating the past, with every kind of distance that does not flatter the individual's vision but challenges the person to think about the past. Many would agree that commercialisation of nostalgia and the abundance of kitsch that goes with it are reason enough not to take this culturally psychotic condition seriously. On the other hand, nostalgia is a system into which we are pushed by the greed of those providing it and the institutions that live off our obedience – the Church and the State, for example. During the festive season this becomes even more obvious than elsewhere. In this sense, the youth who burned the large Christmas tree in the centre of Athens a few years ago, was not expressing its criticism of nostalgia itself but its resentment and resistance towards all systems that manipulate with nostalgia. Their actions may also have reflected their resistance to a globalised Christmas, always the same images that are forced upon us, always the same messages forcing the loving family from the fake serenity of the festive evening into shops, the same absurd man in red clothes, the same scams that unemployed actors make money with at the expense of children…

In recent years, horror or black humour versions have appeared even in Christmas pop-productions, for example the animated film The Nightmare Before Christmas directed by Tim Burton. It seems that the exaggeration of nostalgia in the period around Christmas has gone beyond the boundaries of acceptability. What is it then that adapts to Christmas nostalgia in the European anthropological knot? In the north of the continent, the shortest day in the months-long winter darkness and the birth of the new sun subconsciously call for light: regardless of my appreciation of the ecological initiative with lighting candles, I must admit I cannot resist colourful Christmas lights. Introducing festive street lighting that turn night into day has significantly reduced winter depression in Finnish and Swedish towns: increased

activity, sociability and improved work skills were observed. With flavours, so important in nostalgic evocation and spreading ethical concern, regardless of its religious or rational foundation, Christmas is a time for asking questions – especially unpleasant questions – about our own individual and collective past. Christmas lights, Christmas kitsch, shooting or firecrackers (the purpose of which is to reduce the number of fingers on your hands by the age of eighteen) should not interfere with things that were indeed tasty in the past and still deserve being thought about today. Calendar rituals in many European countries call for travelling at this time of year and often it is guests or these other carriers of the ritual news of the birth of the young sun / god. No religious feelings will be hurt if these visits also include aid.

How does Odysseus's nostalgia, longing for return to his birthplace, end? Instead of falling straight into his arms, wise Penelope questions her husband long and hard in order to confirm his identity beyond a shadow of doubt. Her questions relate to his knowledge of their common past. After our critical Christmas questioning about our identity come the festivities of hiding and greatly distorting our own identity – the carnival season. This is why our Christmas self-questioning, be it, if there really is no other way, tinted with any form of nostalgia, needs to be thorough and successful.

Nostalgia is no longer considered a disease but there are a suspiciously broad range of medication, dressings, placebos, instructions and advice for it – all of them to be paid for. This is why the only way one can deal with nostalgia is to make sure it is modest, free of charge and profit. Once it becomes like that we can talk about selfless pleasure. This cleverer and more entertaining nostalgia is very close to what is today an almost forgotten philosophical term – happiness. This is why the books that can help us in our search for making a new sense of nostalgia should also include the short discourse on happiness by madame Émilie du Châtelet who also translated Isaak Newton's Principia from Latin and was Voltaire's lover. She believed that the greatest happiness is to be constantly learning, adding to this enough resources for an orderly life, kind friends, happy love and playing cards occasionally. Apart from its scope and structure of argument, this is not very different from the Roman satirist Martial's epigram 'The Happy Life', describing a simple and leisurely life. I can think of one other element that connects them: a winter night.

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Much later... It is always much later and it is never too late to read the message or write it anew, or to attribute the message to anyone, in any way. History itself is steganography

because of the existence of historiography. Numerical and digital Argonauts can or perhaps do not kill the heraldic dragon; it still creates them in its mind because it could not itself live outside the world of myths and mythurgy. The dragon did not participate in creating Lah's identity based on a Lah number. Because it was uncountable it could outlive the Argonauts, moved from one myth to the next, from the top of Ljubljana Castle to the underground water sources used by Ljubljana's brewery, in adverts, from children's games to touristy T-shirts and mugs. Much later... A Viennese Secession style dragon, rather masculinely muscular (though without a penis), now poses on bridges that steganograph the town. Ljubljana is thus a steganogram of dragons, written into a steganogram of Argonauts. Or vice versa. The Argonauts stepped out of the myth because they carried parts of their ship, fragments that were supposed to confuse any possible attacker on the Golden Fleece; they most certainly steganographed their personal, fragmented stories, in which there is no space for dragons. They also dismantled the collective and became a professional group with a common goal. While dragons demand hierarchy, hereditary lines and monarchic power, Argonauts facilitate democracy: each with their own role and action towards an agreed goal. In their case, through Ljubljana on their journey west, towards the sea. They had arrived by sailing up the Danube, then the Sava, along one of the possible routes into Hellenic space, coastal and island towns. By disassembling their boat they had to choose individual routes instead of sailing – the river had narrowed and disappeared. But all of them had to go through the place that would become Ljubljana… much later. This is the point in the legend that has confused historians and archivists, because they imagined that Jason and the Argonauts built the foundations of Ljubljana. They did not. They reached a point at which each one of them carrying their own piece of the Argo, thought their own thoughts and carried out a joint task. They were also able to continue their relationships later, on the coast, where they rebuilt their ship. The Argo after Ljubljana was not the same Argo it had been before… Ljubljana changes, fragments, reassembles, glues together, every shape is inscribed into the next. Jason might have felt that Medea with her superior intelligence, witchcraft and strong will was driving him up the wall while the others might have returned to their own feelings, memories, dreams and knowledge – they had had all the time in the world and enough solitude to allow them to simmer.

And with each and every one of them, this transformation began or ended during their passage through Ljubljana.

This novel is written as an attempt at a literary verbalisation of Lah's formula. The only genre appropriate to do so is *Menippean satire*, a genre that developed in the late Hellenistic

period. It is a mixture of essay, rhetoric exercise, verse and a plot that can also be a parody of a Hellenistic love novel. In essence it is a deconstruction of all these genres that begins with the definition and fragmentation of each one, then continues with transferring the fragments so they can be reconstructed in parody. None of Menippus's works survive. The satirist Lucian depicts him as a traveller through the Underworld where he meets various well-known figures: fragments, transfer, deconstruction, reconstruction of memory – all elements of knowledge, depicted to achieve pleasure. Because knowledge creates the distance that is essential for pleasure. And the purpose of the Argonauts' lustre, alive and dead, is precisely creating distance. Transfer, victory over space, the hope that it is possible to reassemble the pieces of the boat that will take us far away, far from death and close to those we love.

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Part One

The Lustre of the Argonauts

Shera

Much later… When the carriage stopped, Shera pulled back the curtain on the window. It was still dark, they had had to complete the last part of the journey before dawn; dawn was just breaking in the east.

- Where are we? she asked Maturno.

- Emona, we have arrived at my station. Wait for us to find lodgings and transfer everything. Cover yourself and Abgar up, it is cold outside.

The fire in the portable stove had almost gone out but it still kept the inside of the carriage warm if the curtains were tightly attached to the window frame. Shera closed the curtain, sat back down, and took Abgar into her arms. He muttered something, then turned around, his eyes still closed, and began sucking loudly on her breast. Shera smiled. His face was thin and cold, his body thin and warm.

The carriage moved. She could hear voices, clanking of weapons, lowing oxen, neighing horses, the disorderly trampling of many feet and her husband's voice, all slowly falling into a certain rhythm. A short while later they stopped moving, the voices became louder, something rumbled and she hears Maturno's voice once again. The troops had begun to unload.

Maturno appeared at the door

– We're here.

She disembarked and looked out into the cold sunny morning. The house was the second from the crossroads. She entered with the child as the soldiers were bringing their belongings inside. From the corridor there was a door to the bathroom and one to the kitchen, further along two rooms and at the end of it the courtyard. The soldiers left the crates in the first room, set up the portable ceramic fireplaces and lit a fire. They also lit the bread oven in the kitchen.

– The hypocaust will start heating shortly and the place will warm up. Now I have to leave. As soon as I find a nurse I will send her to you. She can help you unpack. You can take a walk around to see where we are, just make sure you wear warm clothes.

From the window she could see a garden with rows of frozen cabbages on tall stalks and a few fruit trees, one of them probably a cherry. There were a number of pumpkins stacked on the shelf in the kitchen. All the windows were glazed. All in all, it looked much better than their wooden house in the fortress next to Hadrian's Wall. Before they left, she had found bulbs there that had begun sprouting. Maturno and she ate them with garum, baked in ashes, for their son she mashed them with honey and goat's milk. To the left of the house, probably on the opposite bank of the river, she noticed a high hill. Another hill to the right. In the distance there were mountains everywhere; the town was in a valley. The warmth slowly spread through the house. Shera arranged a few things, looking after the child until around midday when someone knocked at the door. It was the nurse. A tall, strong woman who spoke a few words of Latin. She immediately put down the basket of eggs, some vegetables and a bowl of honey, picked up the child and nursed him. The child noisily enjoyed her breasts and then fell asleep. She indicated to Shera to sit down, then picked some of the cabbages from the garden, peeled off the frozen leaves and put the rest to cook with the leftover dried pork shoulder they had been eating during their journey. She added some wheat and herbs. A pleasant smell began spreading from the kitchen and Shera fell asleep again in the safety and comfort of her new home.

I first imagined Shera in Newcastle, visiting a museum. A number of Roman inscriptions had been found on Hadrian's Wall, some of them dedicated to soldiers' wives. They are funerary inscriptions. Many different connections, people from various parts of the known world of the time, sometimes with very touching emotions. Military families travelled around the empire, stopping in a place for a year or a few months, then moving on with the army into

another province. At Hadrian's Wall I experienced a November cold that is impossible to describe, wind that cuts the skin and then the bones, reaching deeper, to your gullet and your heart, freezing you from within. The death of that other body, the one waiting to give you warmth in the evening, must have been a terrible thing. This other person, the wife, was the only thing the soldier could see as constant, something that was his own, she was what today's backward minds consistently distort into homeland. Being with someone, on the road and in uncertainty, in the hope that in their old age they might live to see a plot of land of their own, peace, waking up in the same room with the sun rising on the same side, wherever that might be. What kind of sense of belonging are we talking about? In an army that speaks a thousand tongues and is commanded in one, where everyone is bi or multilingual, the sense of community is a matter of professionalism, regular pay, fear of punishment. At home, in the underground shelter, in a tent, a house, a cave, a different sense of belonging was created, one in which the help from an otherwise helpless person was of key importance. I am convinced that these women were aware of the mobile stability they were able to provide, their own belonging to themselves and others, their ability to stop the outside world and horrors every time they needed to in order to achieve something protective, safe, however small. A sanctuary, until the next packing, the next journey, a new sanctuary.

A journey into old age, constant transition, children being born, dying, growing up, leaving… They too, fathers, often dying, mostly in battles. Then there are the new protectors, lovers, husbands, masters. Only if they die early and were loved and respected, will they have a monument. And how not to be loved in winter, in the heat, in a storm, on the road, if she is the only one offering moments of happiness in their personal life? I called her Shera, of Syrian origin, Aramaic language…

- Where are you from, Shera? Do you remember anything of your childhood?

- I remember a town, a big town. I have no knowledge of my father, but I remember my mother well. She was a slave, an embroiderer at the Roman Villa where I was born. I remember her face, her body, I remember the matron who appreciated her and also liked me. I remember the coastline, the garden, fruit. My mother never mentioned my father – nobody knows who he was – another slave, an official who had raped her… My mother and the matron taught me to read and write, Greek, Latin, Aramaic. When my hands became nimble, I began sewing. I was twelve when the matron's husband was transferred: the matron gave my mother some money she had saved and at the last moment my mother was able to buy

her freedom. The matron left, my mother found a simple house and set up a company. I helped her. She did well, she was well known by the Roman ladies. Then all the Romans left, there was a war. One night they broke into our house, killed my mother and took me on board. We sailed to Crete. There they sold me. I gave birth to my first child, some woman wanted it very badly – I didn't even know if it was a girl or a boy. I was sent to look after sheep, so I wouldn't say anything about the child. At least there nobody scolded me. Then I was sold again and I ended up in Massalia where I worked as a washerwoman. I was protected, only the older women were allowed outside. We slept on soft clothes, everything smelled nice. We would trade a little and I began, like my mother had taught me, to save money to buy my freedom. Then my mistress sent a message that I should give birth instead of her. She also sent a slave with whom I was supposed to carry out the task. I dared ask for money. And she agreed. I gave birth to a daughter and a son, both children survived, my mistress was very satisfied and grateful, even paid me a little extra.

She presented me to the household as the wet nurse, so I was able to feed my own children. They were born free and would have a good life. In Massalia I met Maturno, as he waited to see my master. After his meeting he found me in the laundry room and offered for me to go with him. He wanted to buy my freedom, but I wanted to do so myself. With Maturno I started as a soldier's wife, a free woman. He kept changing army camps, across Gaul and into Britain. I had three children with him, the first two did not survive much over a year. He is a good man, does not ask too much of me, grateful for everything I do, and was pragmatic about the death of his children. How long will we stay here, will my son survive, who knows… I have seen the world. The best place was Crete: the air, the scent, the flowers, and I have never had milk like that anywhere else. And there were not many people, just a few of us, shepherds and shepherdesses. We only met each other to exchange food and salt. I was protected by my dogs. Nobody could do anything to me. They even brought me some game sometimes. I usually hid some of the cheese I made and I never went hungry. I had a nice time in Massalia too, especially when I was feeding my own children. And got paid to do so!. But Massalia itself was not a pleasant place, it is too hot, often too humid. I got used to travelling with Maturno. Now it still doesn't seem like I am really here, as if we are just passing through.

- Sleep, Shera. You've had a hard day.

In the following days, Shera began going out for walks. She went to the riverside market, bought fish and crayfish and a pot of honey. It had a dark colour, horse chestnut honey; she

had never tasted anything better in her life. Her son liked the new food. The nurse baked them a greyish but tasty bread, brought eggs, milk and fresh cheese. It was still winter and it snowed a number of times. In the evenings Maturno would return from the encampment, shivering with the cold, and he would sit in the bathroom for a long time. After that he would, happier than ever, have dinner with her and the child, joke, even sing. Clearly there were not may marches or patrols, things were peaceful here.

- Shera, where is Maturno from?

- I don't know. When he was young, they called him the Thracian. He worked in the wheatfields on Sifnos. He was sold twice as a child, then, as a young man, he was sold to the owner of a gladiator school in Lazio. He survived the schooling, and the battles, people bet good money on him. He managed to earn enough money to buy his freedom. It was his former owner who gave him the name Maturno. He joined the army and since then goes where he is ordered to go. Since he was promoted, things have got better – the pay, residences. He is a simple person, mild and silent. He has never hit me. When he was a gladiator he learned numbers, and I taught him how to read and writet. I sometimes hear about how relentless he is in his work…

- Love…?

- You mean love, poetry? That is for those who own property, host feasts. For the town. I like it when we make love.

- Who does he sacrifice to?

- Mithras, like all other soldiers. He also has a figurine made of wood, wax and cloth. It was given to him by his master when he became a free man, it is his Lar, his guardian deity. He carries it everywhere with him, places it in every new residence – a home, the camp. He calls it Mesena.

- And you?

- My mother had a small altar where we lived. It had a statue of Astarte on it. She taught me to ask for her help, especially when giving birth, to regularly give her offerings, all the plants, fruit and grain I can. And I called upon her every time I was in labour. Sometimes she helped, other times not. In Massalia all the slave girls respected Christ and kept inviting me to join their meetings. Most of the time they listened to a story and then prayed in silence. How can you pray in silence? The stories were beautiful but this Christ had a terrible

fate. If he had been a god he could not have died that way. Every time we move, I imagine where my Astarte is, invisible, and I drop upon the earth a seed, a slice of fruit, a walnut. After a while my offering is gone. I know it was taken by a mouse or a bird, but they are her messengers. Perhaps the souls of my mother and my dead children also travel on the backs of these mice and birds and are grateful I feed them. Otherwise they could also be angry. There's no messing with souls.

- What will you do today?

- I will set up a loom, so I can begin to weave. Maturno has already brought me the beams. Some of our clothes got torn on the journey and the nights are cold here. I have some spun wool and we also bought some unspun yarn on the way, very nice and clean. If it will be warm, I will take my son out into the field to see if there is anything I can pick. In the afternoon I will cook wine for our meals, the nurse will look after dinner. Boiled eggs, mushrooms, dates with honey, we can bake some bread, we have garum… then I will bathe the child and me, and wait for Maturno.

She smiled.

- I do much the same as you. Do you have children?

- No.

She gave me a puzzled look.

- I thought you already had grandchildren…

- Things are different with me. Now go to sleep. We can talk more another time.

In her sleep, Shera turned, gently stroked the child's face and with a sigh of relief placed her hand under her head; the boy was breathing deeply, his skin was neither hot nor damp.

The commander's house is right on the crossroads. For the first days he stayed there until they set up the camp. After that he spent most nights with the soldiers. Quintus Maecius Laetus was satisfied with the comfort of the new quarters for his wife, Septima Vitalia. Through his assistants he found two housekeepers, young and healthy, willing to serve for a reasonable fee. Septima liked them, they spoke a little Latin. The first meal they had together was good – boiled eggs, mushrooms with garum, baked quince with honey. They sat next to the portable stove in the evening, dipping pieces of dried bread into spiced wine. Septima's

cheeks blushed. Wrapped in a woollen dress with fur around her neck, she looked younger and very seductive.

He had never stopped wanting her: it was thinking about her that he achieved his greatest military successes and finally also won her over. Septima was from a noble and respectable family, Quintus from a lower class, insignificant one. She did her part, persuading her father, and thus got her beloved, strong and quiet man; nobody in her family could have known how their favourite daughter turned this serious creature into a chatty, entertaining and imaginative lover, and how Septima, well… the girl that liked most to read quietly in some corner of the garden and was always a little absent in the presence of others, in his arms laughed loudly and was fervently passionate. They maintained their masks for the outside world. They had no luck with children: Septima lost two giving premature birth and after that never became pregnant again. Unlike other women of her class, she joined her husband on his military expeditions. The life of a woman in Rome, full of intrigues, gossip, boring visits, flirting and banality was not for her. With constant changes, conspiracies and coups, the City was probably more dangerous than the Libyan desert or the British fog. The happiest time of her life was when they were stationed in Pergamon where she spent her days in the library. A small selection of books she was particularly interested in were not too big a burden on their journeys and Septima knew what she wanted. She often spent her evenings reading as Quint wrote. After he completed the set number of pages, he would sit and listen to her, rarely falling asleep. Tonight, even before she had a chance to think about reading, he lay on the floor, held her bare feet, and began kissing them. When he reached her knees, she opened her legs slightly. After her bath, she smelled of sweet oil. They kissed on her overcoat, on the floor, in the heat of the hypocaust that was at full power. Much later Quint carried her, naked and sleepy, into their bed, covered her carefully, extinguished the portable stove and lay down beside her.

- Septima, what are you doing here?

- I am with him.

- The soldier?

- Just as well we are not in Rome. There you would publish your book, make some mistake, pay highly for friendship, perhaps even with your head. Here or wherever, nothing can reach us.

- What is Quintus writing?

- The latest is a discourse with Strabo and Pliny, proving that there is no river link between Emona or Nauportus and the Adriatic Sea as was claimed by older writers. He was truly happy to be able to visit the place where the source of the river is and finally see it.

- So Quintus believes the story about how the Argonauts dismantled their ship and carried it to the Adriatic?

- Quintus is not interested in either the myth or the story. What he is interested in are measurements – how many Argonauts there were, how long was the ship… and then geography, river currents. He wrote about the history of Iberia, about Massalia, compiled a manual on crossing rivers – the army uses it everywhere. He also wrote about metals.

- When does he find time to write?

- He dictates his thoughts to a scribe in the camp, sometimes to me, and writes himself in the evenings.

- And what do you read to him?

- Poetry, philosophy.

- You are very rich. Could you two not retire to one of your properties and enjoy a peaceful life?

- Quint needs to see, measure, calculate places. The army is his only chance to do so, and I am here with him. We live a good life, he with a few scars, limping a little, me… childless. Our hair is already turning from golden to silver. And you found me right after we had been making love.

- What is love for you?

- Should I quote you Sappho and Catullus? Symptoms of love? Hippocrates? We desired one another and when we finally found each other, Amor gave us the best thing one can get in love – that our desire does not subside. What about you?

- Amor did not give me the best.

- The best doesn't exist anyway. We shape it ourselves.

They both laughed.

Shera and Septima met a number of times, on the paths above the river, at the side of the road leading through town, in the forum, on the fields under the hill, behind the settlement

on the left bank. Septima always waved first and came to stroke the young boy in Shera's or the nurse's arms. They exchanged a few pleasant words and Septima would walk on with her maids, Shera go on with the nurse. Once Septima commended her cloak, the friendly chat ended with Septima's order and a good price. Shera pleasantly surprised Maturno and the work was not too demanding.

Spring was beautiful, there were flowers everywhere. Shera found out from the local women which herbs were useful. Spring mushrooms also appeared. When it rained – and it rained often – she stayed at home knitting, watching her young boy lift his head, grow fast, laugh, cry, making noises as he tried to draw her and Maturno's attention, crawling along with his stool, or trying to fall asleep with his tiny hands up in the air.

The army didn't have many tasks, but there were constant exercises.

Maturno was busy. They had only one casualty – a soldier who slipped on the mud by the river at night and drowned. He was found by locals lower down the river and was buried next to the road leading westward out of town.

One warm afternoon Shera met a bear with three cubs in a clearing. The animal rose on its back feet. It had scented her from afar. With a growl it dropped onto all fours and took her cubs into the forest. Shera stayed quite still and could barely breathe. She stood like that for a long time, then she suddenly had to bend over to vomit. It was so sudden she almost fell down. She picked some chamomile flowers within reach of her hand and chewed on them. She soon felt better, but she knew: she was pregnant again.

- Quintus, you won't believe it, Septima said to her husband that evening.
- All the signs indicate that I am pregnant!

He looked up from the scroll he was reading.

- Well, I will need to look after you, he said calmly. You are important. We can give sacrifices to Diana for the child.
- Are you not sorry the child will not grow up in the City?
- Not at all. If the Goddesses allow it, he will see the world and Rome, of course.
- Are you not scared?
- A little bit.

He carefully folded two parts of the scroll to the point where he had stopped reading and sat next to her.

- Tomorrow – clams or crayfish?
- Crayfish, said Septima, laughing. And cherries in pastry with eggs, milk and honey.
- Roman dreams; cherries don't ripen here this early.
- I have seen red fruit, I will ask the maid. If there aren't cherries, there must be raspberries, there on the edge of the forest on the opposite bank.
- When are you due?
- It will be winter.

He hugged her. They breathed in synch. At the end of the summer he received the order to set off south. He didn't tell her about it. Certainly not now. She had seen how her mother had given birth seven days before their marriage and when they left the City, her youngest brother was already walking. They will manage.

That summer, the River Po became a hotbed of disease. Floods, then drought, then high tides. People died on the coast, on the plains, entire villages became empty. Many moved eastwards and north, towards the mountains. With the hungry and weary travellers, the disease spread fast and unpredictably, in a way that no stories warning about it preceded it.

So, all of a sudden, it also appeared in the marshes close to Emona. Two soldiers fell ill, one survived. Quintus closed the castrum, supplies were only brought in through one gate. There were many victims in the settlement. Malaria abates and then returns. Septima got over it. For a long time, Shera didn't leave the house. Abgar didn't fall ill; she gave him herbal drinks with honey every day.

When covered in fog in the autumn, a cold wind can blow across the Emona valley, freezing the damp trees and vegetation. When this is over, roads are covered in broken branches, wilted grass and dead leaves, the damp air is filled with the smell of decay. In the same night in November, Septima and Abgar began coughing. They had a fever and abdominal pain. Septima died on the fourth day, Abgar on the morning of the fifth.

Quintus had chosen a spot for Septima's grave at the roadside, next to a large oak tree. Slightly elevated, separate from the other graves.

His soldiers had already dug the pit and placed the sarcophagus next to the grave. A stonemason was waiting for them to agree what to write on the stone slab above the

headrest. Quintus was at the head of a small procession, soldiers carrying Septima, three veiled maids walking backwards, muttering and wailing quietly. They lowered the lectica onto the open sarcophagus. He unveiled her face. It was pale but without any traces of pain. Nowhere, nothing, no one, never again. His armour, helmet, cloak, sword, greaves, will all go somewhere. His body will stay here forever, with her body, with her soul. He picked her up and signalled to the soldiers to remove the bier. Gently he placed her on the cloth inside the sarcophagus. Around her he arranged a number of bottles with her balsams and perfumes. He moved the locks of her hair that had fallen across her face, straightened her bow, her earrings. Out of the basket brought by a servant, he took a blue cup and placed it close to her head. He kissed her. Stood up and turned to proceed with the most difficult part. Then he noticed them. Standing among the graves were Maturno and his wife. She was holding their child covered in a shroud. They appeared a little lost. He approached them. Tears ran down Maturno's cheeks as he explained how had been unable to acquire a grave, another funeral is taking place, they had prepared the grave, but there is no stone, so he should bury his child elsewhere… Quintus immediately knew what he should do. He patted Maturno on the shoulder and extended his arms towards Shera. She understood immediately, unwrapped the shroud, stroked Abgar and kissed him on the forehead, covered him again and handed him over to Quintus. All three of them approached Septima's sarcophagus and Quintus placed the dead child onto her left shoulder. Their heads were touching, he placed her hand onto the child. Now he could cover her face. Someone grabbed his hand; Shera took off her coral and blue glass bead necklace and placed it onto Septima's chest. Quintus indicated with his hand, the soldiers and Maturno lifted the lid and placed it onto the sarcophagus. Septima and Abgar were gone. Later they would lower the sarcophagus into the grave. Quintus beckoned to the stonemason. He was to carve the name Septima, the name Quintus, and the name Abgar, son of Maturno and Shera. He gave him a wooden panel onto which he wrote the names in wax and paid the stonemason for the work. Wherever and whenever he would die, Quintis will be resting there with her, at the gates of Emona.

He turned to Maturno and Shera. Maturno was no longer crying. He noticed Shera's pregnancy, her deep dark eyes, her elegant hands holding onto her husband's arm.

- Tomorrow we leave, he said to Maturno.

He just nodded. Everything had been prepared ten days ago, only a core team would stay in the encampment. New soldiers would come before the first snow falls.

- You will come with me, said Quintus. It was against all the rules and it meant Maturno was being promoted. Are you ready?

Slightly confused, Maturno once again merely nodded.

- Then let's go, said Quintus, walking off towards the settlement without turning around. The rest of the procession followed.

Where? Why? Without desires, without aims. He would give the best carriage to Shera. The journey to Sirmium would take a number of weeks, perhaps longer if they are attacked or encounter bad weather along the way. There will certainly also be battles, which is why they are being sent there. He is leaving forever the warmth and comfort of her presence, their conversations, her knowledge, her sweetness, her elegant habits and movement. He has fallen out of his silky net. Someone has to pick him up. It will be this couple, different, strangers with which he will have to get on, help himself, forget about himself. What remained of Quintus, reduced to his essence, left Emona. Septima is going on her own journey with her child – with two – the one inside her, and the one who will successfully navigate her past the horrors of the underworld. Well, if all goes well, he will expect her visit.

- *How much did you love her, Quintus?*
- *As much as it is possible to love the unattainable.*
- *Just because she came from an excellent family, crowned with military glory…*
- *Her family wanted a lot of money and glory, perhaps, with a little luck, their daughter could have become Empress. Yet she wanted me. Why? I don't know myself. She managed to secretly find the money for the dowry and gave it to me, persuaded her father and mother, and wanted us to leave Rome as soon as possible. I would have done anything she might ask me to do, if she had wanted me to go into politics, I would have.*
- *I think I know why she loved you.*
- *Perhaps women understand each other better.*
- *What will you do now?*
- *The body can deal with everything. When it cannot, I write. When even that is not possible… I have been caught out, I sing songs; silly, amateurish, love songs. If she were still alive, she would fall about laughing.*
- *Don't stop, please! Perhaps there is a great poet inside you!*
- *Writing out of sorrow? I don't believe in that, not since Ovid. He withered in self-pity. Writing only makes sense if you convey verified information, if it is useful to someone.*
- *Lucretius wrote science in verse.*

- *Yes, but still, my science falls apart when I begin tripping over verses. Because then I think only about her.*

- *And what if you also became a poet when you left her and yourself in Emona? What if that is your argonaut burden, your duty? And now you are searching for the parts of your and her poetic soul in order to reassemble them? And what if you could once again fall in love, with words?*

- *In Latin? I doubt it. Everything has already been written and that is why love put into words seems frivolous, irresponsible, after all, everything written in Latin is dedicated to women who are also like that…*

- *This is the soldier speaking. Why not write in Greek, then?*

- *That would be sacrilegious. But I like the idea as an exercise, synchronising, chiselling away, perfecting. After all, before me is an empty, dull road. Why not?*

- *I will read you, Quintus.*

Ὤμοσ᾽ ἐγώ, δύο νύκτας ἀφ᾽ Ἡδυλίου, Κυθέρεια,

σὸν κράτος, ἡσυχάσειν ὡς δοκέω δ᾽, ἐγέλας,

τοὐμὸν ἐπισταμένη τάλανος κακὸν οὐ γὰρ ὑποίσω

τὴν ἑτέρην, ὅρκους δ᾽ εἰς ἀνέμους τίθεμαι.

αἱροῦμαι δ᾽ ἀσεβεῖν κείνης χάριν, ἢ τὰ σὰ τηρῶν

ὅρκι᾽ ἀποθνήσκειν, πότνι᾽, ὑπ᾽ εὐσεβίης.

‘Yet I swore, Kythereia, by your powers, to stay

away from Hedylium for two nights, but you laugh,

knowing, I think, my wretched plight, for I cannot endure

another, and will cast my oath to the winds,

I chose for her sake to be impious, rather than,

by keeping my oath to you, Goddess, die of piety.’

This love epigram is preserved in the Greek Anthology collection created mostly on the basis of a Palatine manuscript. The author, Quintus, has been identified with the Roman general Quintus Maecius Laetus, the *praefectus* of Roman Egypt during the reign of emperor Septimius Severus. Perhaps our Quintus really did go on to have a career in Egypt. He was considered fair and reliable. Some identify him with the prosecution of Christians, but this was attributed to almost every Roman in positions of leadership. Did Quintus find his new love in Egypt?