

Agata Tomažič

Right Under the Sky

Original title: Tik pod nebom

Author: Agata Tomažič

Title in translation: Right Under the Sky

Translator (English): Gregor Timothy Čeh

Published: 2017

Contact:

rights@goga.si



ABOUT THE BOOK

Agata Tomažič's novel is an admirable, serious civil gesture with which she invites the reader to discover though fiction the truth about how the media, until recently so indispensable, is now rotting alive.

Mojca Pišek

Metód and Ožbej could not be more different: one, a man close to sixty, the sedentary chief editor of a formerly influential newspaper, the other a thirty-year-old new millionaire from Silicon Valley who helped shatter the Gutenberg galaxy. Despite Metód being habitually stuck in the past and Ožbej with one eye constantly on the screen of his mobile phone and his thoughts in the future, their paths, which seem to be leading them through parallel universes, still meet. Will the proponent of the analogue admit defeat and give way to the bearer of the digital? Which are of greater importance, words or bitcoins?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Agata Tomažič (1977) graduated in French at the Faculty of Arts and in Journalism at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana. She first impressed readers with her extraordinary journalistic contribution to a major national newspaper and her translations of fiction and non-

fiction from English and French. She ventured into the literary scene with her much admired collection of short stories *Things You Can't Tell Your Hairdresser*, published in 2015, and a year later with a literary travelogue *Why Travel to Such Places?* In 2017 her debut novel *Right Under the Sky* was published by Goga. She currently works at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts and keeps in touch with her audience as an avid tweeter.

An excerpt from the novel

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

To Metód the man with shiny black hair and olive skin who was selling the street newspaper outside the delicatessen looked almost like a figurine from a weather house. He was not there on his selling pitch everyday. On some days he stood there, unobtrusively offering the newspaper, on other days he must have wandered off on paths only he knew, and the space outside the entrance was empty. Whenever he spotted him outside the shop entrance on his way to work, looking kind in his hopelessness and at the same time proud in a clearly unenviable situation, the man stirred a sense of unease in him and Metód believed seeing him was not a good omen.

The homeless man whose looks unequivocally testified to his exotic, probably Middle Eastern origins, of course did not pose any kind of threat to other passers by. All he did was stand there all day long, holding out the magazine, always rewarding anyone who happened to actually buy one with a respectable nod that he would occasionally enhance with an awkward 'Thank you!' Almost like some butler, trained to serve, skilled in refined manners so as not to give his employers a guilty conscience. His cheerfulness made it almost look as if he was enjoying what he was doing.

He could not fool Metód, though. Not for a moment did he fall for it, nor did he think that the newspaper seller might have been some kind of servant in his previous life. Or that wherever he had escaped from he had been doing any kind of manual work. His hands were far too well looked after for anything like that and, observing him for a while, it soon became

obvious that his complaisance was staged. That this was only playacting, intertwined with and unable to hide the pinch of patronisation and cynicism afforded by those who know more. Metód was no fool. It was clear even by the second or third time he saw him – when, unlike their further encounters, he managed to take a longer look at the man – that the guy was simply cunningly playing his role. His staid deportment and innocent Mona Lisa smile – all just screamed out the fact that he had figured out the best way of extracting the most money from passers-by. Loud pushing of a street paper and invoking poverty do not work, people feel they are being attacked and are more likely to be offended and turn away rather than reach for their wallet. The man clearly knew his work. Metód was also convinced that the black-haired man was also very well aware whose smile he was mimicking. And that he could boast a solid knowledge of Leonardo and his work, including his inventions, most of which never got beyond sketches – after all, that was general education. This much he must have been exposed to, even in the world where he had come from. Indeed it was there that the first civilisations had emerged and indispensable matters like monotheism, irrigation systems and codes of law had been introduced; now all that came from there was bad news. So the only sensible thing to do was leave.

Metód would have sworn that his weather-house man had been some kind of nuclear scientist in his previous life, perhaps in Pakistan, and therefore certainly a part of the local elite. A member of the upper caste which – providing they continued to nod to their leaders – had no need to fear for its survival. He must have lived in a house full of servants. Strolled through gardens kept by at least three groundsmen. Was driven around in the back of a chauffeured limousine. As he spent most of his time in air-conditioned rooms, he was not at all concerned with the humidity that makes living in Islamabad in the summer months almost unbearable. Of course he did not even need to regulate the temperature switch himself; others were assigned to the task.

Until one day he had had enough of it all. He had had enough of the dry airconditioned coolness, enough of seeing limping, dirty beggars in the streets and aspiring but impoverished boys at the main arteries into town, offering, for small change, to clean the windscreen of his limousine. The few coins would not change their life, the course of which has been decided in advance and he had no power to change. He had had enough of arrogant generals who would lick the knife at official lunches and had no clue about who Leonardo was but knew all about what kind of tanks, airplanes and nuclear warheads they should buy. He had had enough of the time-wasting security checks at the entrance to the underground laboratory where he worked

and where he was kept under strict surveillance as if they were trying to protect humanity's greatest secret.

One day he got up, had his attendants shave him and serve him breakfast as usual, sat in the car, threw some loose change at the child beggars at one of the traffic lights, and then, when the car became stuck in rush hour traffic, without saying anything, opened the door, grabbed his briefcase and got out of the car.

The humid heat that hit him initially almost paralyzed him, then he got used to it. Amidst the sound of car horns – one lost in the cacophony of noise also from his own personal driver – he jumped across the fence dividing the traffic on the highway and sat in a taxi. Twenty minutes later he was at the airport and a few hours later he was in Europe. Metód could not think of a reasonable explanation about how and why the man had then ended up in Slovenia, but this was of little importance. The main thing was that the Pakistani was able to leave everything behind – by the looks of it a great deal – and set off for a foreign land with only the basics: himself and the confidence that his decision had been the right one. Clearly he had realised that in order to reach freedom one sometimes needs to leave the beaten path and sever all the links with the past. Freedom begins where fear ends. The man's courage was also the reason why Metód hated him passionately.

[...]

He should have felt triumphant. At least according to the rules of a Hollywood hit movie. Of course the story would have a rich protagonist – well, let's say financially well placed for the next fifteen years or so; young – alright, in this discipline his youth was not something that particularly stood out; handsome – though beauty is always in the eye of the beholder, a female beholder in his case, though she seems not to have been particularly moved by it. Whatever the case, at least as far as the first two points go, he fitted the type. In his youth (meaning when he was even younger than he is now) the protagonist had left his homeland where he had been oppressed and discriminated against, and is now on his first brief return visit. The story would be a kind of mix between the fairytale about the ugly duckling and the most straightforward realisation of the American dream. His new homeland knew how to build on the protagonist's talents, future and resourcefulness. American orthodontists also assisted his transformation into a swan. Now he was also about to also be recognised where he had previously been denied acknowledgement – his home town. On the other side of the world. It was only a matter of time

before she too would recognize his virtues, though all this time the impression given has been that she was not interested. But she would change her mind and come running after him. She would be portrayed by Catherine Zeta-Jones – a young Catherine Zeta-Jones, of course. Or perhaps Jennifer Lawrence – on the condition that she would dye her hair black as in *The Hunger Games*. He would be played by Ashton Kutcher, of that he had no doubt.

At the first airport in Europe where he would transfer, he would find a friend from his youth. A mate from primary school whose fists once crushed his nose. The same guy who, when they were still in sixth grade, once invited the prettiest girl in class to the cinema – he too had liked her but never dared show his feelings. The class thug had not aged well and looks rather pathetic. On top of everything he has missed his flight and has no money to pay for another ticket. He wants to fly back home this very same day and is trying to persuade ground staff to allow him to board the plane. To no avail, the young lady incessantly shakes her head, explaining in an ice-cold voice that she cannot break the rules. The schoolmate is becoming desperate and feebly winks at her, a supposed flirtation that turns out to be an even worse strategy. The young lady raises her voice and eventually threatens to call security to have him removed from the airport. In desperation the school friend tears at his hair and is on the verge of tears.

Then from somewhere Ashton Kutcher appears, in other words, himself. He cheerfully addresses his acquaintance in his own language and, after his initial surprise, his face lights up. *Of course, it's you, I remember you!* And as if the relief of bumping into a fellow countryman who would provide moral support was not enough, in an noble and not at all patronizing way, Ashton Kutcher reaches into his pocket with a smile, produces a credit card and waves it at the airline representative. I will pay for my friend's ticket, he says in a calm, warm voice. This demonstrates that he has forgiven him for everything. His magnanimity floods the airport building and the girl's face softens, though she does not know their history. She nods without saying anything and everything is sorted. He chats a little longer with the girl, in their own language, for it turns out they are all three from the same country. Ashton and the girl at the counter soon discover that they were almost neighbours. Perhaps even went to the same school? Had they ever met in the delicatessen where the kids would go during the main break at school to buy poppy rolls and salami? Quite possible. Why not meet up somewhere in the coming days when she too will return home and take a walk down memory lane. Her lips curl, temptingly sensuous as she pronounces the eights that make up her phone number. Ashton Kutcher,

meaning him, reaches into his pocket for the latest iphone and carefully notes the number. His school friend broodingly stands to one side, trying to make himself as unnoticeable as possible. On the plane they sit not far from each other – Ashton of course has got him a seat in the business class that he always uses himself. The schoolmate is not used to it and the comfort and treatment he is unexpectedly exposed to have a devastating effect – similar perhaps to concentration camp inmates who after years of starvation greedily stuff themselves with everything they were deprived of, resulting in a burst stomach in the first days after being released. The schoolmate orders all the alcoholic drinks he is entitled to in business class and then, just before landing, throws up. The flight attendant, another cute dark-haired girl, devotedly comes to his aid with a paper bag. Then, when it is too late, also a damp towel. From his seat two rows in front of him Ashton worriedly observes what is going on. Such concern touches the flight attendant and before long she too is giving him her phone number. Women like responsible, caring men. Ashton also notes down her phone number but deep in his heart he knows he will never ring her. Or the girl at the counter at the airport. So there is no doubt about how principled a protagonist we are dealing with, the camera explicitly shows him deleting both numbers before landing.

Just as the plane is touching ground, Ashton switches his phone from flight mode to normal and, surprise, surprise, just in time to take a call from her. Catherine Zeta-Jones in her youth or Jennifer Lawrence. Perhaps Demi Moore? No, too broad shoulders, not enough femininity. Let it be Jennifer Lawrence. The shot splits with Ashton on one part, holding the phone to his ear as the plane is coming to a halt, and Jennifer on the other. To begin with it is not entirely clear where she is but once the image settles the viewer sees that she too is in a space full of people; some are queuing in front of a counter, others sitting on seats... Of course, she is at an airport, the very airport Ashton had just left, telling him that she is coming after him, that she is about to board the next plane because she simply cannot bear thinking about being away from him. That she is sorry for all the silly things she did to him when she was still not sure about her true feelings towards him. That she loves him, completely and forever, and wants to be with him all the time. The camera then shows Ashton's blissful smile, and the flight attendant who had previously hoped she might get to know this cool guy better, sheds a tear.

Then they all leave the plane but this is not the end of the school friend's troubles; he is detained by the police when a large quantity of marihuana is found in his luggage. Ashton would be happy to help him again, but this is no longer within his power. Drugs are evil, he says, shaking his head – in one of those good educational moments that Hollywood films relish. Then he sits

in the waiting room, waiting for the next plane that she has boarded to arrive. Together they would head for the country that had so rudely rejected him, Ashton Kutcher, when he was still young. From now on everything would be different!

Well, the second flight attendant and her phone number are probably a bit excessive. And also all this about his school friend is rather far-fetched. But all the rest... must have happened a bit like that. Including her call. Most of all, what was to come should unfold according to plan...

In reality it started out rather miserably: not worth wasting words about the first flight because he slept through most of it, with a hangover. After what had happened there was no contact from J. through any communication channels, and when, on the eve of his departure he got together with his colleagues, their gathering continued long into the night. Right until morning. After merely a couple of hours of sleep, he barely managed to open his bleary eyelids and with great difficulty told the taxi driver where he wanted to go. Even as he stared at the label the airline steward stuck on his suitcase, he still could not believe where he was going. It had "SFO – FRA – LJU" written on it.

The first thing he did when he got to Frankfurt was cram into the smoking room with the strongest cigarettes he could find at the airport shop. He smoked two and felt sick. He had not dared carry anything stronger with him in his suitcase on a transatlantic flight. Then he went to the airport restaurant for a steak. It was half past six local time. At ten to seven he vomited the steak and its side dish into the Villeroy & Boch toilet. Still looking rough and grey in the face, he crawled to exit A23 where he was supposed to board the plane to Ljubljana an hour and a half later. He sat at the giant glass wall through which he could watch the airplanes taking off and landing. At least seven of them were Boeings 777 with the United Airlines livery, just like the one he had arrived on. He began to regret his actions. He thought about flying back. He checked his phone. No new calls, mails or messages. He looked at the planes again and noticed a small one with the word Adria emblazoned across its fuselage. A Canadair Regional Jet. One very similar to it was used to tackle forest fires in California. The thought that it might crash and that it would be better not to board it crossed his mind. This sudden dread stayed with him until half past seven when he went to vomit for a second time. Boarding was announced at gate A23. Ljubljana. He checked his phone. Nothing. Resigned, he obediently stood in the queue. He did not care what would happen to him. He thought that he recognized one of the people in the queue, a school friend from primary school whom he had once had a fight with, resulting in a suspension. Wrongly so, because it was the other boy who had started the fight, inciting

him with the usual provocations, and so he had kicked him in the shin. The fight had ended with the schoolmate limping for a few days – almost certainly pretending – and him with a broken nose. And not pretending.

The schoolmate was now no longer limping. He was dressed in a formal, grey business suit, was pulling a business case on wheels along behind him, and had an attractive blonde hanging off his other shoulder. On the airplane he was fortunately far enough away not to have to concern his mind as to whether this really was the same person who had caused his nose to be bandaged for a whole month. Too tired to take any of the newspapers passengers were offered as they boarded, he immediately regretted it, but it was too late. The flight attendant he asked for one shook her head. They had run out of the one he asked for but she could bring him a rival paper, if he wanted. *No, thank you, I don't want that one.* She shrugged her shoulders in a couldn't-care-less gesture. He ordered tomato juice. It was stale and watered down. The flight attendant who served him had a withered face and one of the buttons on her uniform was missing. Instead a knot of black thread poked out through the buttonhole. The man sitting next to him was fat, part of the flab around his waist hanging over into his seat. He also stank of body odour. Nothing was as he imagined it. Nothing triumphant.

When he passed through customs, he stopped for a moment in front of the crowd of people in the airport building. Wives, mothers, children, grandfathers and grandmothers, some even came to wait for their relatives with their dogs that then jumped rapturously at those arriving. Huddled together were also drivers holding cardboard signs with the name of the passenger they were waiting for. Shit, the only country in the world where the hosts would probably correctly spell his name: Ožbej Ključevšek. He had always thought diacritics were a nuisance and unneeded clutter. And something he was born with that he had no influence over, should by laws of nature, drop away over time. Probably rather like swans; hatched with ugly grey down that moults and is replaced by glistening white feathers. And so it is with parents, the chief culprits for all the unfortunate, unpronounceable names of the world. You are born with them, or because of them, but over the years they become redundant. If they don't drop away, you have to remove them yourself. He stood under the overhanging roof, drawing on his cigarette, wondering whether he would finally manage to do so.

[...]

On the day the newspaper, under Metód's editorship, moved to its new premises, the bright rays of the sun reflected on the glass façade of the skyscraper. The bottle of champagne they hurled at the steel construction during the opening of the new building, had shattered with a healthy bang. Only the most malicious could have thought that, instead of the bottle, one of the glass plates might have shattered. Or even that the bottle might damage the entire structure, which, held up only by bank loans, could collapse in on itself. Looking at the wonderful new building, nobody thought of comparing it to a pile of candyfloss, doomed to sooner or later subside and dwindle into an insignificant pink stain.

Looking back however, the glass skyscraper was most certainly the beginning of the end. Metód often even thought that he had been punished in a similar way to the builders of the Tower of Babel. Luckily for him the younger generations no longer looked at the past, so there was no danger of them thinking of a dusty biblical allegory and accusing Metód personally for the disaster. The younger generations were in fact themselves part of the catastrophe. The skyscraper was built as a showy structure from where one could see further than from anywhere else, and compared to which all others seemed inferior, but the younger staff draped a tarpaulin over it, which cut off any view. They were not interested in what was left or right, and even less so in what used to be.

Perhaps this was what was the most ruinous of all, Metód realized one day. Living in the present where all that counts is here and now. Where those who come out best are those who can take advantage of momentary circumstances – instantaneously and instinctively, without the past knowledge and experience that used to be considered helpful. In the present, which relies merely on itself and does not seek answers to questions in the time before, any such baggage merely weighs you down. Younger generations seemed to float on the surface like some oil slick, tossed about by the winds and currents. But they remained floating and resisted adversities with the tenacity typical of all youth. At first the degree of lightness and superficiality of their existence drove Metód crazy, over time his fury watered down to resignation; if only he, as an editor, had something to offer them, then he would also have the right to demand things in return. But the equation was simple and he could not blame himself for anything: for nothing you get nothing. In fact in some respect this realisation made him happy – finally here was proof that Father's claim that knowledge is a currency that is always valid was false. This would perhaps have given him a greater sense of satisfaction were his father still alive.

He had long stopped circulating round editorial offices, getting into conversation with sectorial editors, for he did not expect to find out anything new from them; their obvious intellectual limitations just put him in a bad mood. He stopped inviting interns to his office, male or female – there were unfortunately more and more women interns, which meant that apart from lowering the average intelligence quotient, they also brought to the department an irritating competitive and quarrelsome henhouse atmosphere. Metód’s presence at editorial board meetings was that of a stone-faced Egyptian sphinx and he only responded to questions addressed to him directly. He would react with enigmatic, ambiguous answers worthy of Pythia, the Delphic Oracle. When he finished, everyone knew less than they had before. In all honesty, Metód did not know the answers to all the questions, but at least in his work environment the sinister saying that *in the land of the blind the one eyed man is king* stood true.

He did, after a long time, speak of his own accord during one editorial meeting. He was sitting in his chair, observing as usual the comings and goings at the railway station, a wonderful view of which he had from the window. His calming thoughts about locomotives, train compositions smoothly running along the tracks were interrupted by the voice of a young female editor. With one eye still fixed on the colourful freight carriages that were speeding somewhere towards the south, he inadvertently pricked up his ears to the words coming from her mouth.

“Hammurabi received the Nobel Prize for Literature, should we put that on the back page?”

The editor of one of the smaller redactions, an ambitious redhead who always wore lots of makeup, glanced at all those present. Most of them were bored, staring emptily ahead or at their phones; culture was well below their radars and they could not care less about it, and some tiny news item about the Nobel Prize for Literature did not threaten to radically change the layout of the newspaper for the following day.

“Excuse me, dear colleague, who was it who received the Nobel Prize?” Metód asked and, with all eyes suddenly staring at him, instantly regretted his own wordiness.

Confused for a moment, the editor then repeated, “Well, I mean, we normally put this kind of news on the back page, don’t we?”

“Yes, right, but who was it who got the prize? Hammurabi?”

“Yes, yes, that Japanese guy, you know...? What’s he called... Matahari?”

A few people managed an embarrassed smile but most continued to stare indifferently ahead.

“Yes, great. Hammurabi Matahari goes on the last page,” said Metód. “Just make sure that you write that his real name is Haruki Murakami,” he added in a quieter voice and turned back to what was happening down below on the railway lines. He did not speak again for the rest of the meeting. His colleagues nodded and began talking about other, more important subjects.

At the end of the meeting he broke his own promise and called the young colleague into his office. They sat at either end of his large dark oak desk, one of those with which the company furnished the offices of its leaders at the height of lucrative times. The colleague smiled excitedly, straightening the edge of her skirt and generally giving the impression that the least she expected from a visit to the chief editor’s office was a promotion if not a pay rise. Then he realised that his work was in vain. Opposite him sat a being who had just confessed to not possessing a shred of general education. Her head was filled with an ignorant drivel in which everything from the first written code of law to the most famous female spy of all time was muddled up. Clearly she had never read the most prominent author of contemporary Japanese literature. Metód folded his arms, his brow furrowing in a feverish attempt to think of a way of carrying on the conversation without it becoming clear what the reason for it was, as she coquettishly kept fixing her hair, looking at him expectantly.

In his darkest moods Metód often thought that his work as the chief editor of the newspaper was comparable to that of a special needs teacher in a centre for the mentally impaired. But now he knew that he had been kidding himself. In actual fact he was like the care nurse on the infirm ward of a nursing home. Without a hope that the situation would ever improve. The patients simply get older and more helpless until one day, to the relief of all, they pass on. And just like the medical scum who decide to shorten the anguish of fatally ill patients with a deathly serum, he too decided to hasten the agony, “Dear colleague, your enthusiasm for your work is praiseworthy. Have you ever thought that you might prove yourself further by heading an additional redaction? Our paper needs people like you.”