

Things You Can't Tell Your Hairdresser – Proposal for a Book in Translation

Original Title: Česar ne moreš povedati frizerki

Author: Agata Tomažič

Title in Translation (English): Things You Can't Tell Your Hairdresser

Translator (English): Jeremi Slak

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About the Book:

"We should never be doing or suffering things we can't talk to our hairdresser about. If that starts being the case, it's time for a red alert."

Things You Can't Tell Your Hairdresser is the short prose debut of Agata Tomažič, taking its title from the above story fragment *Those Ripping Out Japanese Knotweed Can't Be All Bad*, the first-person account of a woman who meets her future partner at a knotweed extermination project and whose tale, comical at times, addresses the sombre subject of domestic violence. At large, the heroes and heroines of Agata's stories appear to be entirely unremarkable people, leading perfectly ordinary lives until ... the pompous yuppie doesn't start morphing into a frog; the forty-year-old mama's boy obsessing over the largest prime number doesn't fall for a young co-worker; the grieving widow doesn't find a long-forgotten phone belonging to her husband. All thirteen stories vow the reader with peculiar language, dark humour and surprising turns.

About the Author:

Agata Tomažič (1977) graduated in French at the Faculty of Arts and in Journalism at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Ljubljana. She first impressed the readership with her extraordinary journalistic contribution to a central national newspaper house, and her translation of fiction and non-fiction works from English and French. Her departure from the ranks of the press was marked by a travelogue collection of literary reportage *Why Travel to Such Places?*, published in 2016, though domestic letters circles had already expressed admiration over her collection of short stories *Things You Can't Tell Your Hairdresser* a year before. In 2017, the publisher Goga released her debut novel *Right Below the Sky*. She is currently employed at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, keeping in lively touch with her audience as an avid tweeter.

About the Translator:

Jeremi Slak (1980) received his MA in English Language and Literature from the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. With his English translations of noted authors – works of Slovene literary greats in the anthology *Soul of Slovenia*, Marjan Rožanc's essay collection *Of Freedom and God* published by *Litterae Slovenicae*, the Vilenica Festival winners' (Jachym Topol, Goran Ferčec, Antonella Bukovaz) passages in the festival's almanacs and more, he has made a name for himself as an exceptional stylist of Slovene to English literary transposition.

Reviews:

The author engrosses readers in a journey across lives and protagonists, keeping them on their intellectual toes with a plethora of exciting twists.

Samo Rugelj, Bukla

Agata's style is sublime, rich in metaphor yet not over-saturated, with a delightful diversity of motives that command the audience's attention throughout the collection.

Lara Paukovič, Airbeletrina

Stories from *Things You Can't Tell Your Hairdresser* entice with their quirky style, irony and bleak wit, opening fresh perspectives on familiar, serious subjects, bringing jolts of the unexpected with their playful narration of content teeming with unusual characters and bizarre coincidences.

Nina Sivec, www.ludliteratura.si

Sample translation:

Birds and I Share the Sky

It tends to get rather unbearable. The smacking, so noisy it's waking me up. They jostle over the tastiest bites, keeping me from sleeping. The windows are double-paned and the frames tight but I can still hear everything. This one wants pumpkin seeds, that one flax, nice and crunchy, the younglings are snapping after the breadcrumbs, the females too finicky for suet cake. Who would've thought song thrushes, robins, blue tits and greenfinches don't go around stuffing their beaks with just anything? A picky bunch, the flutterers of our park. I know, there's so much people wouldn't have thought of. But once you're tuned into this, there's no plugging one's ears. And no forgetting, trust me.

It all started with natural science day. Our grade school teacher told us the scholars classified birds into a number of sub-species, among them the songbirds with their pleasant jingles. They released us into the woods near the school building to look out for critters, handing out paper sheets for the sketching and scribbling of whatever we'd noticed among the shrubbery and above. The classmates skittered into the undergrowth, emerging with awkward drawings of slugs, squirrels, magpies, tits, the odd caterpillar. Lavish praise went to some girl who returned with a sketch of a boar, no less. It turned out, later on, that the snorting she'd heard belonged to a French bulldog on a forest walk and not the tusked wild pig she'd purportedly been fleeing. In terror. The teacher retroactively lowered her grade which caused quite a stir. Not nearly as big as the one produced by my own worksheet, though.

The teacher wouldn't even grade me. After class she summoned me to her desk, taking me gently by the arm, suggesting in a quiet voice my parents should come see her. Though I wasn't really a star student it seemed quite undeserved. In fact, I felt like I'd tried my best, so my eyes sparkled with tears just a little. She reached for a consoling hug which I gawkily escaped. Finally, she handed over the worksheet, the single comment on it a giant

red question mark. You should have seen me bawling my eyes out! A nasty red scribble, dismissing all my scientific findings, all the – how to say, transcripts of talks reaching my ears from the branches. The difference between my report and those submitted by the rest of the kids was that my classmates, when spotting a woodpecker or such, drew the silhouette of a bird poking a trunk with its beak, underwriting "Toc, toc, toc..." or something. I drew the bird, too, but wrote literal commentary: "Fuck me, how long do I have to hammer this piece-of-shit bark to get to the first layer of beetles? I'm freaking starving here, sheesh!" simply recording what I'd heard. Even the stuff I couldn't understand: "Hey! Somebody come here and fertilize me already," as cawed by a perky blackbird. A male turtle dove whose mating frequency I intercepted offered another angle: "Any cutie pie birdies fancy a shag?"

My parents, hitherto not overly strict – psychologists are like that – were pretty ruffled. Not the correct word, actually: they began slinking around me, speaking in whispers, sending me off to piano class and expressive dance on the prodding of grandma. I hated both these with a passion, but Tuesday and Thursday afternoons turned into my opportunity to go to the city all by myself, eavesdropping on the frisky talk of urban pigeons those few minutes before my suburban bus rode along. On warm days I'd linger around the fountain, spellbound, watching them frolic in the shallow water. They'd spray one another and crack jokes, piquant at times but never crass. I would have given the world to join them! Perhaps they sensed my inclinations, since they let me inch right up to them, wonderfully close, not a single one ever flinching or flitting.

The sight of a child splashing about with some pigeons in a city fountain might be endearing, postcard-worthy if you will, but a prom-tripping teenager who's more into seagulls than your typical pubescent perversions is showered with mean names. In the final year of high-school I was about ready to believe their insults, too, and just as ready not to care. "So what if I'm weird," I told myself that early morning, on a pier somewhere on the Spanish coast, staring wistfully at the cloud of seagulls flocking a fishing boat. I didn't give a damn my alcohol-soaked classmates, sinking right then into labyrinthine slumber in their cheap hotel rooms, weren't even aware I wasn't around. I scanned the sky, endlessly blue, intently listening. As the fireball spilled over the glittering surface, I stretched out my arms in the grandeur of the moment, releasing a perfectly proper seagull squawk, startling the old man patching the fishing nets whom I'd completely missed in the dawning twilight.

My parents, in the meanwhile, abandoned all hope of their daughter ever following in their footsteps by studying some kind of humanities. It was readily apparent I wasn't remotely interested in people – of any gender. Mom performed a discreet networking move, facilitating my enrolment into biology studies, though my grades in the natural sciences were pretty stinky.

Expectation cruel destiny would introduce me to a kindred human spirit in college, at least, turned out to have been naively misguided. The classmates and professors were a pack of heartless curmudgeons, fawning over the morphological and anatomic distinctions of invertebrates, caloric equivalents and respiratory quotients, never once wondering what the animals we were dissecting – not just on paper, mind you – were actually *thinking*. My happiest times weren't spent in the lab or in class but on a pebbly parking lot by the university, where a colony of grey crows had made their home in the surrounding treetops. The clever birds were just as bored with the daily routine as any sentient being, so they came up with a complex little game involving the license plates of incoming vehicles. I was able to decipher the rules from their constant bickering, the reciprocal accusations of cheating and misdirection. The gist was a betting play: a crow bet on a particular sum of numbers on the license plates of the cars arriving to the lot, with side calculations performed depending on the hour and day of the week, pretty complicated stuff and I've forgotten most of it by now, anyway, being less deft than the feathered players.

The crows greeted sight of each new automobile with locution my colleagues and people in general misinterpret as the screeching of obstinate birds, but I knew they were cheering this or that number, encouraging a pal on a losing streak, the haughty ones celebrating their imminent triumph. It was pure pleasure listening, pure longing imagining being able to mingle and play along. Hours upon hours I'd be staring up, watching them leap from one poplar branch to another, eavesdropping. Strangely, I never caught them gossiping about me, though they had much vitriol to caw when it came to my obtuse colleagues who'd invented a game of their own: leaning out the windows of the classroom, they would ridicule my activities, one-upping each other with mocking barbs.

We found no common ground during those four years, needless to say, and I was relieved to have completed my exams, with only the graduation thesis to go. I chose the ethology professor as my mentor, pitching the working title *The effects of climate change, specifically the drying of wetlands, on the mating calls of the hen harrier, the Eurasian curlew*

and the whinchat. These bird species all live on the Ljubljana Marshes, and so I spent a year and a half in the flooded meadows, in all kinds of good and bad weather. In the spring I'd be freezing before dawn, gazing into the mists wafting from the peaty soil, and in the summer breathing relief as the furnace in the sky sank beyond Mount Krim, relinquishing its stage to the birds who sing most eagerly before sunrise or sunset. I fashioned myself a handy laboratory on top of a hunting observatory, arranging with the hunting club I could stash my research tools up there: a sound detector, a portable telescope, my headphones and a notebook.

It was a late August day. The air was sultry, announcing a storm. Clothes stuck to the skin. I swatted at pestering gadflies and mosquitoes, the air so suffocating even the birds were silent. And then, a flock of swallows. They arranged themselves across the power lines, chirping excitedly about the best time to start travelling in the morning, peeping about the lakes and rivers to traverse, the unending blue over which rest is impossible and wings are never folded, reminiscing of the verdant expanse where they'd wintered in years past – once more, no doubt – graced with plentiful food and kind warmth.

I knew it: it was now or never. I put down my headphones. I didn't care about the diploma. I didn't care about the credentials, the professors and the colleagues, mother and father. In fact, I couldn't think of a single person that would have missed me if I just left. Joined the flock and departed. Why not? I clambered onto the railing of the observatory, performing my arm flapping tests, releasing my swallow cry. Then, I took off.

A hunter found me late at night. They said he'd phoned for an ambulance, rushing me to the hospital. It took them two weeks to patch up the injuries, which I don't care to mention. Concussion was one, and mom, who'd often come visit, articulated her hopes the impact had knocked some of the madness out of my dome; like, for example, bird talk. Her exact words, which I interpreted as an aversion to my continuing the scientific endeavour. Perhaps even shame. Here, I decided to acquiesce on all fronts, and so I consented to treatment.

From one hospital, the trauma section of the Ljubljana University Medical Centre, I was relocated to another, a marvellous castle-sanatorium in Begunje, Gorenjska. The chambers here are exquisitely furnished, I have my own room and nothing to complain of. I plan on soon asking the doctor I frequently talk to – not about birds, mind you – if he'd perhaps allow me to bring over the gear I'd left behind in that marshland observatory. I wish

to continue my work, though mother must never find out. This place might not have any whinchats, curlews or hen harriers but there's all kinds of other avians just as chatty. In fact, the family of thrushes frequenting the birdhouse in our park is hilarious. I could be listening to them for hours, crying with laughter at their quips. I'm most fond of a bijou male who hatched just last year, I can't imagine a single day without seeing or hearing him! He's got brilliant wit, and I record all his remarks into the left side of a dedicated notebook – with my repartees on the right. I know he can't understand me, but my deepest longing is to someday read to him from my secret diary.