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VINKO MÖDERNDORFER



RUMMAGINGS

Proposal for a Book in Translation

Original Title (Slovene): Brskanja

Author: Vinko Möderndorfer

Title in Translation: Rummagings

Translator (English): Gregor Timothy Čeh

Owner of Foreign Rights (World): Goga Publishing House (Založba Goga, Slovenia) Ana Schnabl ana.schnabl@goga.si

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About the book

The collection of short stories *Rummagings* is a tightly linked whole, a mosaic containing the best attributes of Vinko Möderndorfer's writing; the reader will feel the blood throbbing though the veins of his protagonists, the warmth, forgiveness, the refined social criticism. *Rummagings* are a virtuoso omnibus of stories about how the individual confronts a past that is dragging them down, and loneliness which lifts them into the air.

About the author

Vinko Möderndorfer (born 1958) is a writer, playwright, essayist, and a theatre, film and TV director. His writings have been translated into several languages and he has received some of the most prominent Slovene literary awards, two of them for his short stories, the Župančič Award for his collection of short stories *The Circle of Small Death* (1994) and the Prešeren Fund Award for *Some Loves* (2000).

About the translator

Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying at UCL in London he taught English in Greece and then completed a Masters at Kent. He now lives in Cyprus and regularly translates contemporary Slovene literature for publishing houses and authors in Slovenia, with translations published in both the UK and US.

Reviews

"Stories marking loneliness, ageing, love, misfortune, remembrance... The author melancholically and with sensitivity observes and follows his protagonists. He does not judge nor explain."

Jedrt Jež, in Slovenia's main book-review magazine Bukla

"A fresh and delightful play on everyday themes and human reflections in the author's inevitable spirited, calming and sincere manner."

Katja Krajnc, on Slovenia's culture and society web portal *Koridor*

"The virtue of this collection is particularly in how composes the world it writes about; it bets on pauses, intensifies the atmosphere in keeping with the rules of drama, his characters sailing to places where no one feels at home."

Matej Bogataj, in the Slovene weekly magazine Mladina

Short Summary

What hides in forgotten boxes of letters, historical archives, the confused mind of a demented old man who gives a mouse the name of his deceased wife? How does history, the stories of our ancestors, affect our future? As we watch the news or tearjerker films, are we even aware of the absurdity of our present? *Rummagings* does not settle for an instant solution, instead it reveals a palette of the most intimate, deepest human emotions.

Sample Chapter

LIFE

The man stood at the roadside, white as stone.

I don't know... don't understand... he stuttered, she came at me out of the blue... She wasn't there before, then suddenly... The man, around thirty-five, kept running his fingers through his thin hair. It was as if in doing so he was trying to wipe out from his brow, his vertex, his head, all that had just happened. At first I thought I'd ran over a dog... he said to the young female police officer, then he realized that such a comparison with the dead woman lying on the road was inappropriate, so he tried to correct himself; I mean, I didn't know, I had no idea what I had hit, it all happened so fast... It seemed as if something had fallen onto the front windscreen. Some piece of cardboard. I thought it was kids mucking about. I saw some kids at the roadside moments earlier... Then when I heard the thump, at first I didn't even hear it, it was as if everything had a slight delay, only then did I realize that something had jumped out in front of the car...

The woman he had knocked over was sprawled on the tarmac behind the car. Quite a few metres back. Her legs were bent out onto the road as if she had wanted to pull her knees up to her body to protect herself; from the waist upwards she was lying on her side next to the pavement, her cheek leaning against the granite kerb, almost as if she was resting. Her bicycle lay about twenty metres in front of the car and was totally twisted, crumpled like a piece of paper.

The police officer picked up the phone which lay on the pavement. Its battery had fallen out. He looked around to see whether he could find it. Then he stopped looking. In an accident with a fatal outcome, a phone battery did not seem a priority.

They had arranged to meet in the coffee shop next to the municipal library. He called her in the morning, knowing that she got up early. He was at her place last night and took the last bus home. The owners of the flat she lived in did not allow visitors. They liked him and he was her serious boyfriend, so, as an exception, he was, just sometimes, allowed to stay over. They preferred, however, that he left with the last bus at around midnight. He could see them, peering from behind the curtains in the top floor, as if to check that he really did get on the bus. She walked him to the road and waved at him as he ran across to the other side, and when he pressed his forehead against the back window she was still standing there. They sent each other kisses until the vehicle was so far that she was just a tiny black dot dissolving into the darkness of the night. He would stay against the back window all the way to his stop in the centre of town, staring towards her long-disappeared image.

They loved each other very much. They wanted nothing else but to be able to wake up together each morning. Every morning. For the rest of their lives.

Last night they had made love. They always made love. Whenever they were together they burrowed into each other. They had known each other for exactly one year, thee months and seventeen days, as she reminded him last night. And they quarrelled again. Whenever they talked about how long their love had lasted, they quarrelled. Not seriously, of course. More like a joke. In fact they acted out their fight. He would insist that they had known each other a week less as he counted the start of their relationship from the moment they had slept together. She, of course, counted from the time they had first talked, held hands and drank a coffee together. Their tiff which was not really even a tiff but a kind of foreplay, always ended with a hug which continued into a kiss, caress, removing their

clothes, tearing off each other's clothes and finally passionate love making. Their quarrel was just a useful and sympathetic excuse to remember their first meeting and, a week later, their first lovemaking which, at the time, had happened entirely unexpectedly, like an explosion. After the premiere screening at the cinema to which he had invited her, they strolled around till late at night, talking about the film, about the protagonists' terrible loss, when their child falls through the window just as they are making love and reaching their orgasm... They strolled through the nocturnal streets of town and then accidentally touched each other. Although the tension had been increasing all week and had already dangerously approached boiling point during the film screening, the touch happened in the alley of silver-birch trees, an isolated spot on the edge of town, amidst sleepy suburban villas. One hand touched the other and then came the explosion, a hug, kisses, tongue, saliva, groping, and her skirt that slid high up on her hips, his trousers that dropped down to his knees, and the tree trunk which adjusted to her back, a leg that rose, and her underwear, hanging around one ankle - she didn't have a clue how they got there, what acrobatics had happened in the meantime; all this had happened and then came the tide, damp, wet, enticing, brief, impetuous, like a night storm, and that was it, just that. Worth repeating again and again. And repeat they did. Again and again. Every day, afresh, again and again. And whenever, over the next year, three months and seventeen days, they remembered this event, they also always recalled the feelings. She said that the fatal moment was when they looked into each other's eyes, igniting a spark, and not the following week when they first slept together, as he maintained. And they always got wildly excited when they argued about from what point they should truly start counting their love. It was like an aphrodisiac. A chance to recall an event that would lead to a new event. Into seeking a repeat. He too

felt the same. He tried to convince her that counting the days they have been together means counting days of love and that means not including the days when they just knew each other as likeable people. Love only happens when chemistry speaks, he kept telling her, when you find out that the body you are making love to is your body, that her hands are your hands, her saliva is yours, her teeth are yours, when you don't feel embarrassed about her sweat, when you want to drink her juices, devour her meat, have her hair in your mouth all the time, her fingers all over you, when you go crazy with desire to kiss her, suck her, lick her for days on end, to feed not only on her thoughts, but on her birth marks, her tiny warts, her dandruff, her heavy scent; love happens when you wish you would gorge on her blood, bite her buttocks, when you madly want her to dig her nails into your back and embrace you so strongly that it steals your breath, and that you embrace her so strongly that you can hear her bones crack, and then fall asleep with your mouth on her vagina and she falls asleep with your cock in her mouth, so you are safe because she is looking over you and she is safe because you are looking after her, that you are one also in your sleep, when you dream, when you fly in your dreams, when you scream in your nightmares, and that is love. That is why you have to start counting from then. From the body. She believed him. She still repudiated his version, insisting

She believed him. She still repudiated his version, insisting that love is something far superior, a matching of souls, not only bodies. But he always pressed her into a corner. In these appetizing quarrels he always won in the end. The fact that they ended up in bed was material proof of his claim. Not only that, he sometimes also convinced her with a different argument. The easiest way of neutralizing her was by reminding her of her skirt. She never wore skirts. Always just trousers. She said her legs were too fat. In fact, over the one year, three months and seventeen days, he had only ever seen her in a skirt then. And as a psychology dropout, he would remind her that the time he invited her to the film premiere and they walked through town at night was the only time he saw her in a skirt. Had she not worn it at the time with a specific intention? Perhaps only because she had planned their lovemaking and anticipated that a skirt would be easier to pull up. So love is after all not merely something superior, and the matching of souls is not as prominent as she claims, but it is the body which finds another body that is in fact real love. She never replied to him, never agreed, though she knew that he was right. This was exactly what she was thinking that evening when, just before attending the film screening, she changed out of her jeans and decided she would wear a skirt.

Last night, the last time they made love, though they did not know that at the time, was something special. For some months they had been looking for a flat they could move into together. He had found a job as a night guard in a multi-storey car park, she was finishing her degree and worked part-time as a waitress. They had saved some money and, fed up of subtenant arrangements, were trying to find a suitable flat. They could not use his shared room in the serviced accommodation. Thus they would meet almost in secret at her place and always had the feeling they were making love almost illegally, a covert operation. Perhaps today is the last time we are making love in this flat, he said. They had found a one-bedroom flat. Separate entrance, owners in another town, rent paid to the bank. The young man who managed the flats his father had acquired many years ago from naïve and helpless old people, sometimes even tricking them a little, as the son admitted in passing, told them they could do anything they wanted as long as the rent was in the bank by the fifth of the month. And that they paid the maintenance fees regularly. That was all. They could not believe their luck. They wouldn't have much money left over, but they would manage. They would be alone, living together, plan their life together. And at least now,

she thought but never expressed her thoughts, she would be able to groan and even scream during their lovemaking, without embarrassment and as loud as she wanted to. But the whole thing, though it looked well, was not that simple. The young man told them he would let them know in the morning if he had chosen them – he had a few more people coming to have a look that day.

Perhaps, she said when he embraced her, kissing his way to her groin, perhaps today really is the last time we're making love in this disgusting flat.

He was a little surprised when she said disgusting; previously she had always spoken with affection and gratitude about the room she rented above a garage. He closed his eyes, moved inside her, slowly to start with, then with ever-greater speed, fusing with her body with each sensual thrust. He imagined their life together in a year's time, in five, ten, fifty years' time... He envisaged himself by her side. He envisaged a child. Two. No, three. Two boys and a girl. No, two girls and a boy. The boy the youngest. So his sisters can look after him. He saw the flat, first just a single room with a bathroom, then a larger flat, and later even a house with a garden. He envisaged her getting old. How beautiful she is as her hair turns grey. He saw himself, holding her hand. He saw a car, trips to the seaside and elsewhere, a room filled with toys. He envisaged the sailing boat he wanted. And her, sunbathing on the bow. He imagined the children all grown up, grandchildren. He saw moments of sadness when she was beautiful because she was indispensable, he saw it all clearly as if it was set out along a long white road ahead. She too had vivid images come to her during their last lovemaking. Pictures of them both, sitting in front of the TV, walking through the market stalls, holding hands. She also saw a small girl that wasn't her. And a young boy that wasn't him. She saw a sparkling kitchen, a new washing machine. She saw bookshelves, filled with beautiful and unread books. She also saw a meadow,

and herself walking though it barefoot, the grass first reaching up to her ankles, then as far up as her waist. Higher up with every step. She could see him, standing at the edge of the meadow, far behind her, waving and shouting something at her that she could not understand. She has a feeling he is calling for her to come back, back to the shorter grass, back the road, but she just wades on, further and further until the grass reaches up to her chest, her neck, and eventually above her head and everything is green... And this image repeats itself over and over again until it has supplanted all others. In the end, when she orgasmed and their common body began shaking in the short, intense heat of love. In spasms of pleasure she stopped breathing for a moment, all that remained was the image of grass.

He called her in the morning, as soon as he got the message that the owner had decided to give them the flat and told them to come immediately to sign the contract and pick up the key. They had arranged to meet an hour later in a café near the library. If they didn't turn up he would rent the flat to someone else.

At first she didn't pick up the phone. Either the first time or the second. Or third. He was furious. She can't still be sleeping! On the most important day of their life, she decides to have a carefree lie-in. For a moment he even thought that living together might not mean as much to her as it does to him. But then she picked up. She had been in the shower. Didn't hear it ring. He was nervous. They had less than an hour to turn up. Come immediately. This is important. The guy wants the both of us. We both need to sign. We can move in this afternoon. We will sleep there tonight. Then he paused for a while and said, as soon as we step into our new flat I will fuck you. There and then, on the floor. A thousand times. She just laughed. She was pleased. Excited. Happy. For the last time in her life, she was happy.

I'll just get dressed, she had said. I'll take the bike. No need to wait for the bus.

Right, right, he was nervous, I'll go straight there. I'll wait for you outside the library. Then they were silent. Neither of them said anything. They did not hang up, they were just silent and listened to each other breathing. 'Are you alright?' he asked her after a while. She didn't reply. Hello? Are you still there...? he asked though he could clearly hear her breathing. I am so happy, she said quietly after a while. Her voice sounded as if it was not hers. As if she was not speaking to him but expressing a thought to herself. It was not a response, it was a conclusion, like a calculation under the line of her life. He didn't know what to say. It felt as if he had heard something he wasn't supposed to. He stayed silent for a while and then said, I love you. Come right away. And she said, I love you too. I'll be there in half an hour. He nodded and smiled, as if she were in front of him, as if she was seeing him, as if they were standing opposite and looking at each other. Bye, he said and was about to move the receiver away from his ear when he heard, I hope it won't rain. He pressed the phone back onto his ear, but there was nothing. She was already gone. She had always had the habit of saying some thought out loud after their conversation was over, before she hung up. He smiled and dropped the phone into the pocket of his jacket, hanging from a nail above his bed.

He got dressed, brushed his teeth at the sink mounted on the wall by the front door, combed his hair, put on a clean shirt, polished his shoes, wore his jacket and grabbed the door handle. He looked across the room which had two beds at the far end by the window. His roommate, a philosophy graduate who had been doing various temping jobs over the last year, was sleeping with his face turned to the wall. He was snoring. He had dragged himself home drunk when dawn was already breaking. He cried. He wanted to talk. But he had just pretended to sleep. Then the crying philosopher undressed and climbed into bed. He tossed and turned in the dark. Moaned, groaned, and in the end drunkenly started masturbating. He could hear him spit in his palm, sigh and rasp, smacking his cock faster and faster, any embarrassment totally erased by the alcoholic vapours. He could hear everything intensifying in the abandonment and misery of mechanical strokes, then he stood up, quickly, without making much noise, and tried, as discretely as possible to creep out of the room, leaving the philosopher alone in his desperate desire to briefly and delusively overcome loneliness. He wandered up and down the dark corridor on their floor, thinking about the following day which just might mark a new chapter in his life.

Before he left the room and hurried off to the municipal library, he looked back once more. Never again, he thought, never again will I need to put up with a night like this, no more walking up and down the smelly corridor, no more listening to nocturnal groans, a stranger's breathing, no more brushing his teeth with the yellowing water from the antiquated plumbing, gone will be his reflection in the cracked mirror, gone the philosopher's questions in the middle of the night, his well-intended hopelessness. Never again this room – this is the beginning of a definitive upturn in his life.

He closed the door behind him.

He hurried through town. His heart beat fast. He was excited, as if he was going on a first date. Half an hour more and they will sign for a new life.

Then he waited outside the library. The coffee shop entrance was just around the corner. He wanted to wait for her, so they would go together, holding hands, out on a date. A young, happy couple in love. He kept staring towards the clock tower on the town hall. Another twenty minutes. Then he called her. No answer. He called again. And again. First he heard some noise, a hum, then he heard her breathing, and she said, Yes please? She never answered her phone like that before, it was always, hi there, or, darling, where are you? Have you missed me? It was never just yes please, so official, as if answering a stranger. Is it possible she is not as excited about all this as he is, perhaps she has changed her mind, perhaps she does not want them to live together... Will you be long? I am waiting for you. How much longer do you need? He flooded her with questions. I'm on my bike. At the roadside, she said. He could barely hear her, her words drowned out by the noise of cars rushing past. Ten more minutes and I'll be there. I will hurry. He looked towards the coffee shop entrance. Right, right, hurry then. And he hung up.

He paced up and down outside the library. Up and down, up and down. He thought about the flat. A mattress against the wall would be enough to start with. It had a kitchen. A new one. The flat had been totally refurbished. Pink tiles in the bathroom. Nobody has ever taken a shower there, nobody has sat on the toilet... That was what the young man said to them. And the built in cupboard in the hall. It will be big enough for all their stuff. They don't have much. They will need to find a table and two chairs. Later buy a bed. Curtains perhaps, to make the flat look nicer. It even has a balcony. Flowers. They can put flowers on the balcony.

He closed his eyes, wanting to imagine her watering the flowers and observing her through the curtain. Her. Holding a plastic watering can... Her. Bending over... Her. What is she wearing...? Her. How...? He can't envisage her. He cannot recall her to his memory, he cannot see her standing on the tiny balcony... Her. He closes his eyes more tightly. As if there is a pain in his head. Her. Why can he not imagine her...? Why can he not envisage her in their flat?

So you're already here? Great. Where is the young lady? he heard a voice behind his back. The young man in a light blue jumper steps out of his Porsche. He slams the door and presses the remote so the car beeps briefly and the indicators flash.

On her way. Coming by bike, he replies.

Right, says the young man. Just in case I called another person who is interested.

How ?! he calls out, unable to hide his surprise, almost fear. It feels as if the world is falling apart, disintegrating. Is that why he could not imagine her on the balcony, he wonders. This morning you said you had chosen us.

And what's the panic? the young man grins. I did choose you, but if you two were to change your minds, I need to have some backup. I just don't have the time to arrange all those viewings again, get it?

He was relieved. The young man, at least ten years younger than him, in fact just a spoilt brat, turns towards the coffee shop and says, Let's go then!

You go ahead, I will wait. We'll be with you in a short while.

The young man does not reply, he does not even turn round. He enters the coffee shop.

Up and down, up and down on the pavement again... He checks his watch. Up and down. Impatiently. He looks through the window into the coffee shop.

The young man is sitting at the table. Someone approaches him. They shake hands. What if that is the other person who is interested in the flat? he wonders. She does not come. What if she has changed her mind? He does not know her that well. A year and a bit is not that long, perhaps she is having doubts. But no, he thinks, no way, she is always almost on time. Not as on time as he is. He always arrives a few minutes early – she always comes a minute or so late or right on time, out of breath, but she comes. Why is she late? She took her bike. Perhaps she miscalculated how long it would take by bike. What if she really has changed her mind... He looks through the window again. The stranger sits down opposite the young man. They are talking. Seriously. Without doubt this is the other tenant. He panics again. He quickly finds his phone in his pocket and presses one. She was one, on speed dial. Another proof of how much she means to him. Does he mean that much to her too? It rings, rings, rings...

She pedalled at full speed. When she turned out of the side street onto the main road, the cycle lane came to an end. She was now riding along the side of the road. Cars sped past her. If a lorry came by, she would hear its noisy engine and move right to the edge, riding her bike on the grit next to the tarmac. If the noise was particularly terrifying, she even stopped and put one leg on the ground. Whenever a large vehicle drove past her, a gust of air would hit her and almost blow her over. Then she got back onto her bike and pedalled on as hard as she could. She did not want to be late. She thought about them together, about their flat, the things she would need to put into suitcases and boxes...

It rings, rings, rings...

She could feel her phone vibrating in her pocket. When there were no cars roaring past, she could also hear it ringing.

It rings, rings, rings...

I can't stop now, as soon as I get off the main road I will answer him, she thought. And pressed on the pedals with even greater determination. Cars overtook her, she struggled to keep up the pace going up a flyover. Downhill the other side, she thought, and I will answer it. He knows I'm coming anyway!

It rings, rings, rings...

The flyover was steep. Below it the motorway and cars speeding along. Just a little more, just a little more... She finally managed to make it to the top. Thank God! She stood up from the saddle and allowed the bike to roll down the other side without using the pedals. Now she can answer. She held the handlebar with one hand and reached into her pocket with the other. At the far end of the flyover was a grassy meadow with children playing in it. A dozen or so children were chasing around the tall grass. I will have a child, she thought just as she found her phone in her pocket.

It rings, rings, rings...

The bicycle was going faster and faster. She lifted the phone to her ear. Of course, I need to first press the green button! She dropped her hand again. The handlebar in the other hand began to shake. I will need to brake a little. And she pressed her foot backwards. I will just answer and say I'm coming! and hang up. She pressed the green button. A stone under the front wheel. She slipped out into the road. She wanted to grab the handlebar with both hands but did not want to let go of her phone. A new phone would be expensive. And now they will need money, so she couldn't afford a new phone...

She flew forward. She saw her own legs in the air. And the clouds above her. Something red. A bang. And more red. The roof of a red car. And grey. I'll be late, she thought. Then blank. Everything went blank. As if erased with a wet cloth. And she saw the sky again. The clouds. She clearly saw the rugged outline of the white celestial fluff. Then the fall. She thinks it is a fall. I'll be late. I'll be late. He will be angry. He will have to sign the contract alone. But tomorrow I will help him. I just need to step out into the meadow. And she took off her shoes and walked out onto the grass. At first it reaches to her ankles, then to her knees, her waist. The grass is taller and taller with every step. She saw him, standing at the side of the meadow, far behind her, waving and shouting something she cannot understand. It looks as if he is calling her back, back, back... And she just seems to be making her way through ever thicker grass, ahead, ahead... It feels good, pleasantly cool and fresh. And the grass has already reached her chest, her neck and is then over her head...

Where are you?! What's the delay?! She seems to have answered. At least the signal was like that. No more ringing. It is as if she had pressed the green button... Then nothing. Crackling and whizzing down the line and nothing. Angrily he clenched his phone. A woman who fucks up such an important event in their life is not... He did not want to complete his thought. He loves her. He adores her. So what if they lose this flat! They will find another. They will continue a little longer to snuggle up in cinemas, in her rented room, and whenever the bearded philosopher goes to visit his mother, also at his place. So what! They will find some suitable flat, job... Luck is on the side of those in love, he thought, and peering through the window into the coffee shop once more, to see the young man shaking the other tenant's hand. Nothing is lost, he thought. All our future us before us. All our love. All our lives. Nothing can get in our way. And that is all that matters. He put his phone back into his pocket. He will wait for her and then they will decide what next.

> Vinko Möderndorfer (*Rummagings*, 2015) translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh





Co-financing Publications of Slovenian Authors in Foreign Languages

I. THE SLOVENIAN BOOK AGENCY (JAK)

The Slovenian Book Agency (JAK) is a government institution founded in 2009 that deals with all actors in the book publishing chain, from authors to publishers and readers. The main form of international promotion is the co-financing of translations from Slovenian into other languages. JAK annually publishes call for applications for co-financing translations of Slovenian authors' books into other languages, including adult fiction, children's and young adult fiction, and essayistic and critical works on culture and the humanities, theatrical plays and comics. Applicants can be publishing houses, theatres, and individual translators. In each case, a contract is concluded with the translator, and therefore all funding goes directly to him or her.

More information on the website: http://jakrs.si/eng/

II. THE TRUBAR FOUNDATION

The Trubar Foundation is a joint venture of the Slovene Writers' Association, Slovenian PEN and the Center for Slovenian Literature. Foreign publishers can apply for subsidies to publish Slovene works in their native languages. The Trubar Foundation contributes up to 70% of printing costs. The Board will consider all applications for works of fiction, poetry, drama or literary essays, providing the originals are written in Slovene. They convene at least twice a year, usually in April and October and applications can be sent at anytime.

The Board advises applicants to submit their applications in Slovene or English, in written form, by post.

Address for applications: Slovene Writers' Association for the Trubar Foundation Tomšičeva 12, SI – 1000 Ljubljana Email: dsp@drustvo-dsp.si Further information: http://www.drustvo-dsp.si/si/drustvo_slovenskih_pisateljev/ dejavnosti/567/detail.html/

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