

## **Breathe In. Breathe Out. – Proposal for a Book in Translation**

Original Title: Vdih. Izdih.

Author: Sebastijan Pregelj

Title in Translation: Breathe In. Breathe Out.

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First Published: 2016

Pages: 191

Layout: Hardcover, 13x20 cm



### **About the Book:**

Adam, a man hunting mute birds, visits the big city. He returns to his house on the shore with an empty birdcage and a parentless boy, who soon grows to love Adam and his roommates, Ema Olivia and Kan. Everything seems mundane, except that the adult residents of the house sometimes vanish in the night and then spend the morning doing work they never talk about. The boundaries between reality and fiction are fragile and thin – the book seems to be a dark dystopia, yet each page reveals more and more resemblance to our real world. Inhale. Exhale. is a brilliantly written simile while also being a socially engaged book with a unique response to the refugee crisis.

The novel speaks on the current topic of the refugee crisis, achieving universality with its delightful use of the fantastic and a loosely defined geographical setting. The leading protagonist spends his days writing (compiling, inventing) the personal stories of the people who perished on their dangerous journey across the sea, breathing life and consciousness back into the individuals we so frequently reduce to the technical term "refugee", a word ostensibly absent from the text. As such, the narrative carries great relevance in our zeitgeist and will certainly appeal to the broad circle of readers invested in the consideration of humanity's global social issues.

### **About the Author:**

Sebastijan Pregelj was born in 1970 in Ljubljana and is a history graduate. He has been publishing short stories in literary magazines since 1991. In 1996 he released his debut short prose collection *Jesters, Defilers, Oathbreakers*, and in 2004 his first novel *Years of Mercy*, nominated for the Kresnik Award, the novel of the year award bestowed by the daily newspaper *Delo*. He published five more novels, three of which were translated to German. Sebastijan's recent work is profoundly characterized by social commentary. Since 2014 he's also been writing children's literature. He lives and works in Ljubljana and is a member of the Slovene Writers' Association.

### **Reviews :**

"Slovene contemporary literature has seldom produced such a sublimely moving and unpretentious entwinement of reality and imagination."

#### **Maja Šučur, Literatura**

"Inhale. Exhale. continues Pregelj's streak of "poetic engagement". Though the novel shines brightest in its first part, where skilled use of the fantastic cuts sharply into the living tissue of society, the conclusion brings a meaningful change in the protagonists' worldview: reality has become so terrifying stories can no longer conceal it. The pang of this realization resonates in Pregelj's work."

#### **Ana Geršak, Dnevnik**

"Since the novel's creed is that everything has already happened – and is destined to happen once more – we may suspect the apparent resemblance of the setting to the northern African coast of the Mediterranean implies the next people in the boats could just as easily be us. In our far more visceral, less benevolent circumstances, without a happy ending."

**Matej Bogataj, Critic's Eye, Cankarjev Dom cultural centre, October 2017**

## Sample Translation:

### Seventeen

Lun sleeps tight. He hasn't had a dream yet since arriving to Adam's, and if he did, it would most likely have been about birds.

Like every evening after supper, he heads to the bathroom to wash, then from the bathroom straight to the bedroom. Along the way he says *bye* to Adam who, like every evening, wishes him a *good night*, then slips into bed, curls up and covers, closes his eyes, counts to ten and falls asleep.

In the night he hears strange voices. Eyes closed for a while, he waits for them to go away but instead they grow louder, so he wriggles out of bed and approaches the window. The night is bright enough for him to see the sea, and on it the two boats, the origin points of the yelling. On one stands a tall man, brandishing his oar against the people on the other. The people are reaching into the water, trying to pull out something heavy, but the man from the other boat isn't letting them pull it out. Each time they almost manage, he edges close enough for his long oar to reach their vessel, poking and sending it rocking, or swishing right over their heads so they must let go of whatever they're dragging or risk plunging into the water. They curse and shake their fists at the man, but eventually, they turn their boat and row away.

Lun doesn't know what he's seen, but he thinks it can't be good, so his heart keeps on pounding even after he's back in bed, eyes closed and counting. He stops at one hundred, scared of something vague, tossing, pondering, till at last he's overcome by sleep. He wakes up when the sun's already high in the sky.

Instantly he remembers the nocturnal event, hopping over to the window. Down there he sees Adam next to Kan, a row of human bodies lining the shore. He throws on some clothes and runs out to see what's going on. Adam tries stopping him when he reaches the two. Too late. What happened? the boy is asking. A big one capsized at night, the adult informs. The people inside are all dead.

Lun stares at Kan, feeling his blood freeze, cold spilling over into his extremities. It was him! echoes in his head. He was the one pushing away that boat at night, with those people grasping at the water to help those swimming inside. Him! he backpedals behind Adam,

glancing terrified at Kan who says there are seventeen. They haven't taken off with anyone. Good, nods Adam, then turns his head to look for the boy. When their eyes meet he understands they should walk away. Come, he nods, heading for the house. The boy follows.

When Lun is certain they're far enough so Kan can't hear them, he blurts: I saw everything at night! It was him! Him! Who was that? Adam glances quizzically, slowing his pace. What happened?

It was Kan! states the boy with conviction. There were two boats in the bay! Kan in one, the people trying to help in the other, but he wouldn't let them! He swung an oar at them until they gave up! the boy is nearly screaming.

Oh, no, no, shrugs Adam, patting Lun's ruffled hair. I was hoping I could tell you about it some other day. I thought we had time. You see, I'm not quite sure you'll understand. Try! begs the boy in a voice attempting to sound grown-up. Well, here's the, Adam bites his lip unsure how to begin, choosing his words for a long while. After all, the boy is one of them. He starts by saying this stretch of land is closest to the other continent; that a ferry used to sail between in better times, needing no more than four or five hours for the journey, perhaps even less. The ferry hasn't been around in a decade. People looking to cross, desperate for a better life, float over in skiffs and discarded barges. Many are swallowed by the sea. Most of those who make it are rounded up by the soldiers and border police who send them back where they came from. Some even succeed. But evading capture doesn't mean they've found peace or the life they've been after. It still means nothing, Adam shrugs.

I saw it! persists the boy. Kan didn't let them help those in the water! No, no, counters the man, those in the water were already dead. Carried into the bay by the current. It's the same every time: a boat shatters on the reef or turns over, the people drown. Even the best swimmers sink before reaching the shallow, the current dragging them back to the open is too strong. In time, as if playfully, it floats them into the bay. Dead. The people on the other boats aren't there to help, aren't there to rescue but to scavenge. They come foraging for belongings they could snatch from those who ended up in the water. Stealing. That's why Kan was chasing them off, like he chases them off every time there's an accident. I'm not sure you can understand, the man steps into the slipstream of the house. The boy is right behind him.

### **All the birds are here!**

Adam repeats Kan wasn't in the boat at night to harm anyone. He was there to drag the dead out the water before they're eaten by fish, or worse, plundered by the people in the boats. They're on solid ground now, and it's all good. Kan, Emma Olivia and I will take care of them.

You haven't met Emma Olivia yet, the man turns for the straight behind the house, opposite from the garden. On the plain, a rope is strung between wooden posts, clothes drying, from regular white and grey shirts to windbreakers and light coats, some stretched and torn, others brand new, almost.

The boy, too, gazes at the clothing swaying in the breeze. It seems as if it's covering people holding hands, dancing in two long lines. Lun can practically see them. They look happy. In their ball they're raising their arms and legs, twirling and untwining, gregarious. Never, not even once does a forgetful dancer let go of his companion. If that ever happened, the dance would be over just like that. They'd all be scattered apart by the wind. And then, they'd just be clothes again.

While Adam and Lun observe the twin rows, Emma Olivia appears between them, stretching her arms out as she goes, running her fingers along the hanging fabric. She stops by the man and the boy. Well finally! she smiles, looking straight into Lun's eyes. I'm Emma Olivia. Adam has probably told you about me. She says she's drying the clothes outside, too light for the season, mostly, though that doesn't matter anymore. No one is being cold in them now. They're almost dry and ready. You're probably not interested in that, she smiles. You're a boy and boys care about other things. We could visit the garden together while Adam is working. How about that? The boy looks at the man who nods in agreement: Sure, go. Then come back and see me, he slides a cap over the boy's head, checking if his jacket is buttoned.

Emma Olivia and Lun head for the garden. The trees in the back are full of birds, says the woman. Can you hear them? Whenever there's an accident, all kinds of birds fly over, the manner of which aren't seen around here, or seldom at least. It's like they were the

companions of those who didn't make it. Like they were their dreams, hopes and longings, arriving to the other side for nothing, since their people did not. As if they were the eyes of the relatives and loved ones, witnessing doom, sitting there weeping on the branches until they cry out all their sorrow, rising back into the sky, departing. Back. For some time the treetops are emptier then. It's quiet again.

When they reach the trees, Lun stops dead in his tracks. He stares at the birds, utterly amazed. All those birds! he shrieks. They're all here!

### **The boy under the tree**

Lun squats under a tree crown, staring up. Emma Olivia is a few paces away. She can't know what the birds mean to the boy, what he's thinking about, what's stirring within him, but she can understand he needs some time alone so she's standing far enough not to disturb him, yet close enough to get to him if need be.

The boy under the tree reminds her of Adam, most of all people. He, too, lingers under the trees, focusing his eyes on the branches and the perching birds. Adam also loses sense of everything around him except for the birds. He's not bothered by the blinding sun, the glacial rain or wailing wind; the screeching trains and the noisy honking; the rattling cars or the clattering trucks; the voices of the people. He's only interrupted when someone walks up to him and wants something. Which almost never happens.

Emma Olivia watches the boy squatting under the tree, thinking him endearing, not that she knows anything about him other than what she'd heard from Adam and Kan. Still, she's convinced a boy who gazes at birds in such wide-eyed wonder can't be a bad one. No child is bad. Fate can be bad, children cannot. She realizes he could easily have been hers, had she had a child, had she decided on it late. It wouldn't have been too farfetched.

If he were hers she'd be having different thoughts now, knowing all there is to know about him, so to speak, and imagining the rest. She'd know he keeps secrets, like any child will, but if he were hers she'd imagine the secrets weren't too big, weren't too dark, just childish little things. He didn't tear up that nest and kill the young, he just cracked an egg and lied about it, scared Adam might be mad at him. The fledgling chicks were ravaged by a seagull

or cat that ran off frightened by who knows what, leaving the naked bird corpses behind. The plate Adam had told him belonged to his mother, her lone surviving memory, it wasn't broken on purpose, he accidentally shoved it so it fell to the floor as he was clambering on the counter to see out the kitchen window. Fearing rebuke, he smuggled the shards to the pier and cast them as far out into the ocean as he could. He didn't intentionally splash muddy water all over the laundry behind the house. He was flying a kite, and he couldn't see the big puddles before it was already too late. He untied the rope on one end, making it seem as if a knot had gone loose. The clothes fell to the ground getting soiled. Emma Olivia had to wash them again. If he were hers, she'd believe him and she'd understand; she'd know the boy wasn't being mean, wasn't being wicked, just anxious of punishment, doing what he had done boyishly. It would be her responsibility to teach him about right and wrong, her responsibility to encourage the good and dissuade the bad.

Emma Olivia is looking at the boy. If he were hers she'd be wondering about the future more, wondering how to raise him, who to raise him into. She knows she has no answers for the future, only the present, and even those aren't necessarily right. She'd want to prepare him for later, for everything life brings, though she has no idea what that could be. If he were hers she'd wish for his life to turn out for the best, always, or fine at least, and that he'd never get into serious trouble, out of sheer luck if nothing else. Man needs good fortune, Emma Olivia knows. Still, luck isn't something to rely on, something to count on every step of the way. Like that, more or less.

Is it any different with another's boy? Is she supposed to be worried? Emma Olivia is looking at the boy squatting under the tree. She thinks things are going rather well, for now.

### **While Kan sleeps, Adam writes happy endings**

Adam, in the meanwhile, is in a large chamber. There's a broad long table filled with the many kinds of objects belonging to the people Kan retrieved from the water and undressed, so that Emma Olivia could wash their clothes. Adam is going through the items. Not too many today, so there's plenty of time to carefully examine each small piece of paper spared by the water, each photograph, each trinket. No valuables, those are almost always lost along the way, traded for water, food and safe passage, the ferries and boats charging

the rest. In fact, they'd better hold on to a couple till then, or they might be hurled into the sea though their ride has already been paid for.

Adam is carefully flipping the scraps, mostly dry by now. He's matching the notes and scribbles to the photographs of the people and their loved ones, addresses and telephone numbers, sometimes long lists or pre-written letters to the family. He's sorting their stories, giving sights to the names, plans to the sights. He's reassembling the dreams that disintegrated on the reef, writing for each one a happy ending.

In the time since he's been there, on the coast of the old sea, he's learned all sorts of languages, all kinds of writing, and it seldom happens that he's holding a letter he can't read or decipher. He stares for long hours at the photographs, scanning, pondering, till the soggy paper starts peeling with sounds and with voices, distant and barely audible, then louder and closer, soon as present as if the people were right there, right in front of him. When that happens the images begin to move, swirling with the life in the photos, sometimes far beyond the edges. Adam only has to watch and listen. Then, a happy end is easy to see.

Today, one of the stories he put together was that of a boy who'd embarked on his journey two months ago. A few days before, his girlfriend, he and his cousin took pictures in a car workshop. The girl in the photo is pregnant. Two months to go. Just enough for the boy to make it across and handle his papers. When that's settled, she and the baby can follow without risking danger with the smugglers. The cousin will take them to the airport, which is under UN protection. They'll board a plane and fly over. Looking at the three young faces, Adam smiles and whispers: The boy made it. The girl and the baby came after him. They're together now, in a modest little apartment. He's working and they're slowly about to recover.

He then assembled the story of the mother of three. Her eldest, a son, is fifteen, the daughters twelve and ten. In a wallet he found a folded photo taken on New Years' Eve. They sold everything before leaving. Mom told her children things would be better on the other side. No more gunfire, no more explosions. Slowly, we'll get used to the peace, used to the new people, she said. You'll go back to school, making up for the couple years you've lost. They did it, nodded Adam, rubbing his forehead. In the mornings the kids are in school. The boy is at football practice in the afternoon, the older girl babysits the neighbour's little one, the younger keeps company with a lonely old man who teaches her to play the violin. Mom



is leaning out the window, watching. She still can't believe they made it across, can't believe she's no longer haunted by worry and apprehension. Everything turned out for the best. She looks out the window, drumming her fingertips in the rhythm of the tune coming from the ground floor.

Adam put together another story, that of the old man who set out on his journey after he'd buried his wife, his children, his grandchildren. He didn't want to leave at first, but the others managed to convince him his death would serve no purpose. He brought his violin along, padding the instrument with photographs, postcards and old letters. It was his son's violin. His son, a promising musician, was forced to trade his instrument for a rifle. When the old man learned of his death, he took up his violin. The right hand tugged at the bow, the fingers of the left charging nimbly across the neck. The old man played as if he'd been playing all his life. He now lives on the ground floor of an apartment block, spending most of his days with his photographs, postcards and old letters. When he's not reading, he brushes against the paper with his fingertips, as if caressing. Nearly every day he's visited by the girl from the upper floor. The old man teaches her to play the violin. The girl is talented. She quickly remembers the pieces, playing by heart. When she leaves, the old man returns to his photographs, postcards and old letters. He imagines they'll be together any time now. And until then, just enough time to teach the little girl how to play.

Adam opens his eyes, saying this is good. With his thumb and index fingers, he rubs his sore vision.

Kan is still asleep. He finished working when the day was already white. Exhausted, he sank into bed, plummeting into a dreamless sleep with the smell of cigarette smoke in his nostrils. Kan doesn't like to dream. When he's not dreaming, he can rest.

The previous noon Kan took a cart, hauling the shore people into a stooping brick building, once a small warehouse. There he undressed them, sorted the clothes Emma Olivia later washed, then raised each body onto a stone table to clean and tidy up. He shaved the men and clipped their fingernails, fixing the women's hair and putting on just enough makeup to cover the bruises, tears and gashes. He handles the people gently, as if they're sleeping and he's trying not to wake them. Here and there he'd whisper, a remark, an apology, to the women mostly while untangling their hair, when the comb got stuck and he had to pull, to

the men while shaving and the blade had slipped, opening the cold skin. He'd usually say something like: no worries, it's just a scratch, a tiny cut. Finishing, he set each one onto a white sheet, pressing a round stone in their fist and covering them up, walking then over to the grated window where most of the glass is missing. He took a pack of cigarettes from the shelf and lit one up, blaming the smoke for the water swelling up in his eyes.