

Ivana Bodrožić
FICTION
(selected stories)

Translated from Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać

Outdoor Fitness

Before going to the outdoor gym, she jogged two laps around the nursery school, then struck out across the park, passed the little substation where someone in red had spraypainted *The land of love and us in it*, after which someone else had crossed that out and under it scrawled *Grass doesn't help* in black. Finally blue came along, angrily crossed all the rest and above the other scribbles, where there was still some room, declared *Dinamo 1986*.

She started her morning workout earlier every spring, it's May, 9 am, the straggling mothers were hurrying with their children toward the nursery school door, thank goodness those days were behind her, she jogged by them and felt the heat of the sun already burning the skin on her shoulders. Springsteen was singing in her ears, *Baby we were born to run*, she wasn't in the mood for jogging but the old rocker boosted her spirits and, without stopping, on she went to the dog park and the outdoor gym.

The dog park's empty, and the outdoor gym's empty with its circle of ten stations of exercise equipment which people almost never use for exercise. They're coated in green metal paint, peeling in places, two have been out of order for a year, but the rest still function. Use physics, your body weight, enjoy the fresh air, exercise a little, you have your life under control. And it's all for free. Whenever she goes there and powers through her workout, she feels smarter than other people.

So, as she'd planned, she jogged first for about ten minutes to warm up. Then she did some light stretches and started with the easier equipment. The first station she went to was, like, aerodynamic, thighs and calves, leg raises in the air, she counted to one hundred, but worst of all was when she climbed onto it and the Spotify ads kicked in. She thought: those women can't be real, the grating voices, they can't be, they've all been hijacked by artificial intelligence. And pretty soon everything else we do will be, too. People don't matter to anyone anymore. They talk you into paying, lure you with a three-month free trial, then latch onto your credit card, whether you're listening or not. Well, not me. I'm fine with things as they are, no need to skip songs, it just irritates me when I'm working out, she thought. After a minute and a half she moved on, the focus now—arms. She lowered her butt onto the ribbed metal seat and began pressing the weight. Damn it, the

night before there was rain and now her metallic leggings were wet. She realized too late she should've sat on the other side, the two seats were identical, one in the sun, the other in shade, no big deal, she thought, she'd dry out by the time she was done.

Hungry heart, I left Baltimore, Jack, left my wife and kids, never went back, but everybody's got a hungry heart, needs a home, a *place to rest*, the Boss explained it all in three verses. First she pressed fifteen times, then five breaths, then repeated the sequence another four times. When she finished, she opened her eyes and looked up, everything was green, she loved the neighborhood, so peaceful, except that an unfamiliar, foreign sound suddenly intruded through her earphones when the song ended. If she'd been thinking all was green, now it wasn't—a black, well, if we're being correct, a dark-brown figure approached from the other side of the park, talking on his cell phone. It's not that he was talking, it's that he had his speaker on, what the fuck? She's always telling her friends there's a special circle of hell for people who talk in public over their speaker, and no, it's not prejudice. If only, if only! Someone on trains was always having to intervene, *sorry, sorry*, using the universal gesture of pressing the forefinger to the lips and then rolling the eyes, why no earphones?

She kept an eye on him for a time, not because of that, don't be silly, but there was plenty of space around her, how rich that he just happened to stand three meters from her third exercise station, where she usually rowed. She planted her feet on the wooden bench, propped her elbow on her knee and rowed. Habla, habla. Still she tried to keep count. She liked knowing how many reps she'd done at each station, she felt good when she hit a particular number, but since she had to keep an eye on him she was losing track. Judging by her sense of time, she felt she must have finished her first round of rowing, but now she couldn't be sure, and this soured her mood. She left the third station and pretended not to look at him, looked straight through him, ignored him, while he, for his part, stared right at her. Flat out. She didn't even have to look at him to know. Don't you have women there?

The fourth station, for crunches, is farther off. She's not planning to give up and no, she's not one to cave, she stands over it and thinks about how to get rid of all the water because it's not just her butt on the surface but her back, too. He watches her. She wavers. Leans partway over and runs her hand across it. Wet, goddamit. She glares at him and goes on to the fifth station, though

this totally torpedoed her concept, legs again. But what can she do, she's definitely not going to make a fool of herself. It's not okay. But hey, just one of those days.

When she grabbed hold of the metal handles and again, though slightly differently, pumped her legs in the air, she was thinking her thoughts, playing Jersey Girl, a song that always appealed to her, she pictured the bank of the river, though she'd never been to America, and how he leaves all his friends behind to be with her, and if she'd understood the song right, and she thought she had, the girl even has a kid, she's a single mother, and he's suggesting she leave it with her mom and he'll take her out on the town. Now that's a guy. He wants you and nobody else. And even with a pack of children, he'd see to everything, and you'd have a blast to boot. She feels so close to all this, as if belongs to her. She loves these narrative talents in music, when they have something to say about life, real life. Tragedies, loves, being broke, humiliation, unbridgeable class differences, breaking through the barriers, it touches, fuck it.

Again, she briefly lost track of counting, dammit, but the song was more than halfway over, they'd gotten to the part with *down the shore* and *Saturday night*, near the end, she'd heard it enough times to know, she woke from her daydream and opened her eyes, and here he was.

Well. He'd planted himself at the biceps station, moved there from the bench, and kept habla-ing away on his cell, why the fuck did he have to sit on it when he's not even exercising, she thought, and what will I do once I've finished my first circuit? Make him get up? Oh Christ. Now she was looking, she didn't care any more. He was wearing those flip flops, of course, he probably wears flip flops all year long and those funny-looking feet with white soles, and the appalling toenails. Now he slipped one flip flop off and rubbed the foot or looked as if he were using it to scratch the other foot, like, utterly nonchalant. She closed her eyes, she couldn't bear seeing that, so—yuck.

She was waiting for a livelier tune, the next station was glutes, she needed something to pick up her pace while twisting her body to a quick rhythm. At least let it be "I'm on Fire." Sure, it has a macho vibe but, she thinks, when he speaks to her in that voice, *hey, little girl, is your daddy home?* Mmmh... not that she doesn't dream about it, to be honest. Better stop. Once she read how professional runners are barred from listening to music on earphones because it can have a doping-like effect. So this thing which somebody else invented, played, sang totally pushes you,

lifts you, pumps you up. Somebody's completely different ideas, even in a different language. Un-fucking-believable.

Her next-to-last glutes station was tucked behind shrubs planted around the outdoor gym, so now she could lean over without being noticed to see what he was up to. He was standing there, not talking on his cell anymore, and look at that, he stretched. He raised his arms above his head, his palms also strangely pale, he twisted at the waist, limbered up, can you believe it? As if he'd only now caught on to what this was all here for. He sat down on the biceps equipment, the seat in the shade, and jumped up, serves you right, if you'd stayed on the bench nothing would've happened, so now go figure how you'll get dry any way you can, she thought. On a train, once, she eavesdropped on a man and a woman, workers from the Kraš factory, apparently a whole slew of them work there, the woman said they're skittish about water, and her colleague said maybe that's because they worship it. In any case, his butt's wet now, so maybe he'll go home or off somewhere, whatever. At the end of her street there's that old building, but she couldn't say for sure how many of them were staying there, maybe four, maybe forty. No way to tell them apart.

Regardless of this morning's complications she went back to the beginning for her second circuit because the place freed up. He wasn't in her line of sight. She was on a roll, got here first and nobody had the right to ask anything of her. Now he was taking a plastic bag out of his pocket and bringing it over to the bench. She wasn't clear about why he was pacing around, and what he was up to with the bag. The bag was empty, see-through, as if used, and he spread it over the bench. Now he looked at her. It just lay there, the bag, eighth wonder of the world. Then he patted his pockets, turned to peer around, as if looking for something he'd dropped. With the tip of his flip flop and his *ugh* foot he poked at the ground. Maybe he thinks someone's dropped a few coins in the dirt, well okay, now she was out of line, she knew it, but the guy sure was behaving strangely. He stuffed the empty plastic bag in his pocket, and then, bam, plunked onto her first station. Sitting again. His legs strangely akimbo, staring at one of his feet, he leaned over and began picking at his toenails. Oh, Mama, she moaned to herself. On she went through her final exercises, thinking about what to do. She'd completely lost track of where she was, she couldn't tell whether she'd finished them all, she wasn't doing the stations in the usual order so she might easily have missed one. Oh fuck. When she wrapped up she'd always go over to a kid's climbing structure only ten meters away—the surface was soft there—and she'd do thirty jumping jacks and then follow up

with a sequence of stretches. So was she supposed to stretch like that with him looking on while he picked at his toenails? This did not feel comfortable. Her morning was ruined. She definitely would not be jumping, but she needed to loosen her neck because otherwise it could seize up again. Time had crumbled away; she'd already been here maybe half an hour, well, maybe less, usually, when there was nobody here, she'd stay for forty-five minutes, but today she had to wrap things up earlier.

She goes over to the climbing structure, takes her cell phone from her purse and skips songs. If you don't subscribe you can only do six skips, she needs something a little slower, something for stretching and relaxing. There, this one starts with a good guitar riff, maybe one of his biggest hits but not his greatest, girl, ain't no kindness in the face of a stranger, no miracles here, *I just want someone to talk to, and a little of that human touch...* And the video spot for it's not bad, you see him closing his eyes, there's atmosphere to it, people in a trolley car, all alienated, nobody looking anybody else in the eyes, the city swirling with this ominous fog, and then it goes on to violence on the streets, arrests, Black babies, and then Arabs and even an Orthodox priest shows up, fine, she doesn't get why they needed that, but young Bruce... So adorable. In that vest with the guitar in front of him, his arms, his authenticity, his killer gaze. Okay, so some say his face isn't much, but personally she prefers men with character in their face. That, the nose, jaw, chin, give something!

Have I covered all the bases? she finally asks herself, she doesn't know, she can't say, she's already bending over, she probably has done, as much as possible, she touches the ground with her hands, looks between her legs, finally, the air is clear, could have been earlier.

One more deep breath, then she straightens up, oh no, oh no, oh no. He's approaching her. He's coming over and smiling. Christ, when will you finally go away? she almost says this aloud. She hears through her earphones that he's mumbling something while still five meters from her, but she has the right not to talk, the right to her own space with nobody in her way. Won't and can't. She squints, spins on her heel and takes off at a run toward her building. She's not obliged to be available to everyone. Really she's in no mood for chatting, she has nothing against it, but why don't they live their lives and leave the rest of us alone. Lucky thing a person can come home and shut the door. Take a shower, eat her overnight oats and while they're all at school, dive into work. She's working from home today. She's not even going to cook, time flies and she doesn't so

much as look up. Replies to a few emails, has a quick look at Facebook and Instagram, already 1pm. So goes life.

Finally they've got sweet potato fries, but they sure have gone up in price, wait, um, did

I order the sauces? Hurry up, Volt, where the fuck are you? Why go there? He's turning the wrong way. He's driving off, this only happens to me. How hard can it be to follow your GPS? I bet he's not from around here. By the time he circles back, I'll be getting sweet potato sponge.

Hallelujah!

But the way they evade your eyes when you open the door, I don't get it. Elementary courtesy, the basics, if they can't do anything else, she thinks and slams the door behind the delivery guy.

The Pole

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver

Marta was the one who talked me into it. Back while we were still friends she told me, you have no idea how great this is, how freeing, I've ordered mine and it's coming from Slovenia in two weeks. Once I've set it up, come over if you like and I'll show you a few of the basics. Just for you. She gave a devilish laugh and two weeks later I went. First it felt strange, right there in the middle of the attic, a floor-to-ceiling metal pole. The space isn't large, there's an old armchair in one corner, and scattered around it are discarded things, Ikea shelves, the cardboard box for a TV set and so forth, and until the light dims the scenography is bizarre. As my late granny'd say: all we're missing is a priest astride a mare. And then Marta lowered the blinds, put on high heels, slipped into a tight black top and shorts, let her hair down, turned up Bowie with "Lady Grinning Soul," and went for it. I watched my friend as if seeing her for the first time, and honestly, I think I really was seeing her for the first time. I haven't called her in a while, nor has she called me, our lives are quite different these days.

I was late to my first class, I'd been stuck in traffic, missed the entrance to the parking lot, was ready to give up, and when I arrived at the front door to the club I suddenly felt so tired. Above the entrance was a sign reading: *Happy Women's Club*, oh Mama. Fine, now that I've come this far I'll go in, I needn't ever come back, and with a sigh I entered. The hall was nearly dark, only a muted glow from a lamp in the corner, and the music for exercising on the mat was loud and sensual. While my eyes were adapting to the light, I saw only the contours of moving bodies guided by the instructor's soft voice. In no time I caught on. At first I couldn't do everything, but the low lighting, good music, dance helped, and it had kind of been my thing, something I'd never had the time for, there was always something more urgent. Or maybe, it was the music I'd been missing. Now for the sixth year in a row I've been blasting Sunday blues in that dark hall. Sometimes I take a break for a month or more. A bad back. Kids home sick. A sick mother. The pandemic. Loans and being short of cash. Insomnia. My back, my hip, my tennis elbow. When I return to the hall, I

have to start again from scratch, the firefly spin, low to the floor. And then gradually build up to the next level. *Master* has always eluded me by a hair. Each time it takes me longer, each time the other dancers are younger.

Why go shoving your cunt in my face? I don't get it and never will, so there, go ahead, bite my head off! How can you enjoy rubbing your rear end on a pole? Please, enlighten me!

Petra joined us from another group, the one meeting on Wednesdays. I watch how she moves. She has a spindly body, but firm and sturdy, and flies in like a young cat two minutes before class begins. She lets loose her smooth hair, which falls halfway down her back and never snags on her bra straps. Her tresses, silken and thin, have a mind of their own. She sits on the mat, legs crossed, and in the forward fold she stretches her endless arms with tender joints. Her skin is all of a piece, no striations, no leaks. On one of her incisors, when she greets you with a grin, there's a flash of glassy zirconia, her only finery. I'm always behind, in the background, watching her straight back, her shoulder blades closing and opening like little wings, and the whole time it makes her look as if she's a few inches off the floor. I'd say she's twenty. Twenty-one. When she's not in the hall she doesn't take her earphones out of her ears, she doesn't need anybody, she's deep in her comfy pink interior, and I'd like to be there, too. Sometimes after class she stands outside by the front door, leaning on her bicycle with its front basket, chatting with somebody on her cell, juggling to roll a cigarette, tapping on it with her red nails, her laughter like scattering coins, the lightest ones, made of copper. On the pole she can do everything from the snake, the batwing, the batwing with one leg crossed, even the thinker, the helicopter, all the way to the angel spin. In the swan she can spin twenty times. Though she's strong, her body's weightless and it rises like dust, you never know which direction it'll sail off in. Soon she'll be taking the test to qualify as an instructor and she never misses a session, except on some weekends when she's off climbing in the Paklenica river canyon, and then she brings her friends back a bottle of homemade rakija and they clink plastic cups out in front of the hall. Though she does a good job for her age at choosing music, there's no trap, but always drum & bass, and it's not that she dances to the music but that the music is inside her and dictates the waves that propel the hall, bend the floor, the pole, raise the ceiling to make room for her when she's hanging upside down and extending her legs straight up. Yet another wave is made by the little dent for high heels. I can't take my eyes off her. My hands sweat, months had

to pass again for me to make the transition, to stop fearing I'd fall, that my hands would slip, that I'd hurt my neck and shoulders, to bring back the feeling: relax, just hang, listen to your body, ignore gravity. Before, there was no fear. When I'm able to attend regularly, I'm thrilled to do beginner's acrobatics, sometimes I fly, but sometimes I land on my bare knee, skin and bruise it, aching for days, for a time I rub my shoulder, the muscles of my arm, check my elbow. Now take each of the elements we worked on today and bring them together. You bet. Nobody tells her to go first, she does it both for us and for herself, she does all she can. And I'd like to. We the others, who are older, are lounging on the radiator. Jadranka left early, no dancing at the end, she had to pick her son up from his coaching session. The radiator pulls down t-shirts, underpants, pulls up bra straps, they smoke, I spent the whole day ironing, that damned vineyard, what did we need it for. Is my kid going to get a D in math in third grade? Enough, our coach warns us, give yourself the gift of time. The light dims even more.

When nobody's watching, we do as we like. These may be our true feelings, or programmed ones, who cares, we're working freely. It's like when we're in the dark, meditating on the pole, or when we're being watched only by women. We dress up to look like other women, sometimes like men, we gnash at things with our teeth, flick back our hair, glue on whiskers or strap-ons, dress up like witches, prophetesses, we wear ties, sometimes a broom, *I want to break free*, all fetishes are as ordinary as a glass of water. There's not a single mirror there, nor in any of the halls; with our bodies we tell our stories from memory. Banned ones, ones condemning or trivializing, sometimes dance thrashes us, there are times when we're crazy and do nothing but lie there on the floor, twisting from one hip to the other while running our hands over our bodies, dancing the way dance was done when it was invented, but in this modern progressive world we still attract jerkoffs or nuns poised to condemn, ah, so unfeminist.

Marija is about fifty and works for the police. She's short, with hips carved from the primordial marble block and on her thigh she has a tattoo of a dragon. She never works high on the pole, but on the floor she becomes a snake, sometimes poisonous, sometimes only wise. Her hair is like a lion's mane, especially in the dark, like blazing tufts of grass, giving her dance fierce accents. When it frees her, someone always claps. We plead with her to do a dance in uniform, if only once, at least to muss up her blue shirt and lay down law and order. I was in an intervention, she said, wearily, one evening, he beat her and his kids, mostly she dances to local tunes, sometimes "Pelin

i med,” sometimes “Sjaj u tami,” sometimes Meritas. Once we ran into each other at City Mall, hugged, and that’s all I know about her. Her skin is no longer all of a piece, nor is mine, the visible striations, my children gave me them. Two people left their marks on my body and when I run my hands over my soft belly I can feel how they grew inside, every line, every stria burst into silver when they survived yet another week, grew their bones, lungs, hearts. These shiny stripes dance with me in the dark, and Marija’s dance with her.

If you ask me, sheer pornography is not the least bit sexy. In fact it’s tawdry. I find the high heels repulsive, the halters, all of it how you don’t want guys to see you.

But there are no guys here.

Andrea’s a psychologist. Instrumentals and weird tribal music are her thing. She adores scarves, long skirts, everything around her is always ethereal, many-layered and I can’t imagine where she finds those things. In the light of day she’s stiff in the shoulders, her movements are almost robot-like, but when she kneels on the floor and starts circling with her torso, when she takes off her glasses (mostly she keeps them on during class) she looks like an ancient shamaness who knows even what she doesn’t know she knows. She conveys knowledge to us through her moves. She almost always dances barefoot. Her language amazes and intrigues us. I think there’s nobody who fully understands her, our lives are too different, but when she finally does a helicopter at the height of a meter and a half, we all applaud her, we all hug her. She hugs Jadranka when Jadranka tells her how her little girl had a panic attack at school, screamed, Jadranka couldn’t be reached, she was out in the field somewhere, my mama’s not here, she kept saying, I don’t know where she’s gone. She’s worries that it’s because of the divorce. She’ll be fine, Andrea tells her, she knows what we don’t know and she doesn’t know she knows.

So degrading. You know—the worst possible stereotype from guys’ wet fantasies.

But there are no guys here. Nobody cares about them. What’s in the hall is the special smell of the damp, women’s damp, dark-green tropical jungle, and nothing has penetrated it from without—it’s healing.

Tina's like wrapping paper. A student of pharmacy, she battles with what she introduces into herself and what comes out of her. As light as a feather, there's always heavy pressure holding her near the floor. She blasts only metal and hard rock. She's furious and that's so good. Her fury comes out with drama and pain whenever she takes hold of the pole with her scrawny little hand, when her music starts, when she throws herself on the wall, when she pushes off from the floor. When she kneels like a rabid fox. Fuck your mothers, every last one. On her there are always rivets, latex, ribbons, a million bracelets and a sense that there's a whole mess of things she can't prevent. That's why one of these days she'll burn down the whole hall and all of us in it, and sometimes, after finishing her routine, she sobs. When the lights go on, she transforms into a timid presence, smiling shyly and looking nobody in the eyes.

Sanja works on Catholic radio and nobody there knows she has the best costumes, she always comes to themed classes dressed as Madonna, sometimes with a whip, sometimes a cross.

I'd seen each one of them cry, whether from pain or heart, I know how each smells of sweat and I'm familiar with each of their laundry softeners. Which of them likes to drink, who's divorced, how each pulls her shirt over her belly or lifts it to glue herself to the pole, I see by their faces how the weekend went. That's what I know about these women—is it nothing or is it everything?

But why go through all of this if you can't see yourself in the mirror?

Ana's head is shaved. She's unbearably sensual, dangling earrings always fly around her, she never closes her eyes, with her feet she literally slides as if, instead of shoes, she's wearing ice skates. Each year she adds another tattoo. Once she punched a hole in the wall with her high heel when doing a shouldermount flip to Rage Against the Machine. Her head and elbows are planted on the floor when she lifts her body into a headstand along the pole. Jadranka holds her feet, Ana's not afraid, we hold each others' feet, our lives are different, we hold our ass, we lend each other shorts if we forget to bring our own, trade halters, tops, short skirts, there are some whose perineum scars throb in their underwear, someone's hair turns silver, some go for a monthly Brazil shave. We take care not to fall, the older among us watch out for the younger ones, the younger ones can do everything but the older ones watch out for them anyway, they watch with a tinge of sadness,

there's so much they can no longer do, but they know the true tests are yet to come. The younger ones don't mind the watching, most of them have mothers at home, though these mothers are different, they enjoy their lightness, our sadness, our admiration without a single mirror. We are the mirror. Although they're still of a piece, the passage of time will wear down their skin. This may sound tragic, it may sound unstoppable, but only behind this angle is there hidden a certain freedom which you cannot attain without enduring for a long, chaotic time. A duration which at its core raises the question of: who am I, really? And what part of me is who I am. Is it this ass, is it these breasts, is it my skill, my music, is it my child, is it my thoughts, is it my hope for yet another love? Is it the blue iris next to the head of the bed, is it maybe the brain because without the brain there can be no thoughts? Without it there's no heart, but it, too, changes over time—I was Petra earlier, I used to be Ana, yesterday I woke up as Marija, and twenty years ago I was all of a piece.

So where are you off to for vacation? I asked the young nurse who hits my elbow every week with a pistol, at first it made me cry, feel free to cry, she said with empathy, but after a whole summer of therapy now we can converse with only the occasional whimper. We had a wedding this spring, she says brightly but with a conspiratorial air, and now it's Egypt, I've only been to Austria, that was my wish. I concentrate on her ponytail, her hair is thick and fat, like mine used to be, I call it Slavonian hair, though Slavonia may have nothing to do with it, but I can precisely conjure the feeling when you hold your live mane in your hands and brush it. In front of your apartment building in August when only one friend's left in town. Your hair or hers. Or when you shave it all off one summer—everybody has that one summer. Just a few minutes more, she always says near the end.

I dislocated my elbow, probably genetics and my years, though I don't yet have a surfeit of years, but my age no longer allows me to be up off the floor. At least for a while, a while that runs out and I take another break. I worry it might be for good this time. On Sundays in the evening now I jog or stroll, in a muddle, around the local hills. I put in my earphones, sometimes play my pole list, and in my thoughts I'm running through the moves, nestling into the dark, summoning the freedom of spinning, the attractive danger while I'm hanging upside down and holding on with only one leg bent at the knee. Then out of the corner of my eye I see a hand beckoning to me from across the road. I check, nobody else is near, the beckoning is for me. I take off my earphones and

cross to a rundown house with a big yard. Leaning on the metal fence in the shade of a walnut tree stands an old woman. She's wearing a brown kerchie and has sharp white hairs on her face, her gums are empty of teeth, her hands are blotchy and with them she's gripping the metal. Her gaze is alive, it couldn't be more alive. Are you okay? Is everything alright? I ask. She looks me in the eye, but she's not all here, my dear, I love you most of all, can you help me? she asks, wounded. I look at her, I'm still here and can't figure out what it is that she's asking. Whatcha after? as my granny'd say. She extends a chain to me that's attached to the fence, she says, it's okay for rakija, for juice, for everything. They pranced there under the walnut tree, see, my goodness, they laughed so hard, she points to the damp shadow of the tree, the fragrant dark-green damp. Then she looks down, and spreading her dry hands, she says, I take care when I walk, here, over clean ground, my mama's not here, I don't know where she's gone. Just take care you don't hurt yourself. My granny used to say that whenever she'd go somewhere by car. Have you seen my mama? That's what my granny asked when she lay, diapered, in bed before she died, she was at a village dance, I couldn't find her, she added, sad. I told her I hadn't seen her, I was twenty and my skin was all of a piece. This time I caught her firmly by the hand, I told her she'll come, don't you worry now, she's here, close by, I know now. Come to me, little mouse, I kissed her hand on the fence, who am I, really?

Mary said: now when I'm free to do whatever I like, obviously I'm no longer needed. But here, I still exist, in this hall, in the dark, where I spread my shoulder blades, where I catch your feet, where I hug you around the shoulders, where I kiss your hand, where you kiss my wrinkled skin, where I open my eyes for real and see myself in each. And I dance, I dance on in the dark.

At the Table

My mama cleans. That's how your daughter put it, they were talking about occupations at nursery school, chuckled Miss Anita while leading her by the hand, Patrick's dad sells and fixes cars, Mia's mother draws people's blood and then tells them whether they're sick or not, Tea's mom's a housekeeper, Franko's dad's a referee for soccer games. You chuckle with Miss Anita, the girl stares at the floor a little, scowls at you a little, protests right away, she always protests and that's how she'll be her whole life. So what did you say about daddy? you ask, curious, with a barely visible thorn of bitterness, though you know she's just a kid and all this is silly. She pouts, he edits books and writes stories. Well, Mama writes stories, too, sometimes, you say in a thin voice in the car while you're trying to park, don't unbuckle the car seat, you say with the knee-jerk hassled tone of a mother of two small kids, I just forgot, she huffs. Every day you drive to nursery school and from nursery school down a dusty road intersected by two railway crossings, and the interior of the auto body rings at times with sobs, at times with full-throated laughter, at times with silence, but always with anxiety—have you done everything you were supposed to do? On your way back to the apartment the car is full of loneliness, and if it had a scent, it would smell of lilacs, of the orchards to your left whose greenery fades in the distance.

You're sitting at the computer in a room which is, in fact, a balcony off the bedroom, but you enclosed it with a glass wall, it's three square meters, so hot in summer that your brain melts, and in winter you keep a heater on under the desk and when it's on, the heater smells of burnt plastic. The desk is missing a drawer, you removed it so both of you could fit while you're sitting at the desk. You're writing a novel, but you haven't yet told anybody about it. While one child is at nursery school, the other, smaller, a very small baby, is wrapped onto you with a shawl. That's the only way he'll be still, so you curve your back, bend over to reach the keyboard but without squashing him against the desk, and that's the way you write. You don't recognize your own scent at the time, it fuses all of the life in those years—a mixture of laundry softener, the baby's stomach acid, the sweetness of his silken head, Dr. Pavlović baby cream for his bottom, ointment for chewed nipples, the hydrogen peroxide you use to clean his bellybutton, Domestos for the potty, mashed bananas, blended apple, ground-up petit cookies, iron drops, boiled rubber nipples for bottles, milk

from your breasts that stains your shirt every two-three hours. And no more than the palest whiff of cigarette smoke after everyone drops off to sleep. From the bundle there's a little moan every so often; you cock an ear to see whether it's merely a moan and a squirm, or signals waking or even an onset of crankiness that will escalate into wails and shut everything down. Before it escalates, you become quiet, literally you freeze, pull your hands off the keyboard and jounce a little in the chair to coax another twenty minutes. Nothing in the world goes by quite so fast as a baby's nap. Meanwhile the sentences are crowding into your fingers, your brain and heart, they have the power to keep you up at night, but they are also coy, sometimes even sly, and insist that you bring your everyday life to a halt, devote your undivided attention to them; only then will they emerge. Acquire meaning. At moments like this you feel the joy of your life split in two, growing beyond yourself and breaking through into the logic of the world—you'd fling yourself headfirst, never to return. You get up from the desk, keep up the jouncing, disoriented and dazed by this world of yours which, it seems, is always just out of reach.

You sit at the massive wooden table in the dining room. You bought it a few years back at half-price, it was one of the floor models at Lesnina, gorgeous and solid, with only one flaw in the middle of the surface. During its lifetime on display, a dish of artificial fruit had made a small pale circular stain which you cover with an assortment of tablecloths. Since then it has acquired several other traits, a visible dark spot near a corner when a perfumed candle burnt down and set its dish on fire, not far from it a gash from the blade of a knife your kid grabbed from his high chair and plowed with all his strength, as well as several permanently hardened drops of hot glue when you were making him a sword and shield for masquerades.

It's almost 2 am, every few days the bickering goes on for hours—the marriage has already come apart. You're still reluctant to admit this, you can't understand how it could be happening, your husband is handsome and charming, the children are healthy and smart, you wrote a book. They accepted you. The sentences you're saying are still not yours, both of you are being exceedingly polite, you argue only while they're sleeping, he, however, is far more eloquent, behind him stands the entire history of a pre-determined system, an untouchable tradition that guarantees he's right, an arsenal with which he tries to persuade you that things are not as they seem to you. You're sitting on the edge of the bathtub in the bathroom, crying. You clap your hand over your mouth. When you calm down you separate the whites from the colors and set the machine to 60°. Decompression has been gripping you for several days. You seem to want out no

matter what. You do not, however, have a place to go, you're not yet even thirty, you have no real job, you have no job at all, you're still completing your university degree with four exams to go, and you're back and forth each day to the nursery school, the store, the kitchen, the pantry, you cook, wash, iron and fold laundry, you make all the beds, you know where everybody's things are, you take the car to be serviced, you do all the housework, you take the kids to the doctor then to the park, then, again, to the doctor, sometimes, every few months you write, as if you're learning to walk again after a stroke. Short on confidence, you write poems. You write a story about four women at a clinic who are waiting for their medical appointment with a doctor for an abortion. When you have coffee with your mother, she eyes you with suspicion. Behind her there's also an entire history of a pre-determined system, an untouchable tradition that guarantees she's right. Days repeat with the same routine. If their scent could be extracted you'd get whiffs, in a breath, of plasteline, collage and paper glue, fried chicken, Escada perfume, the smell of the library and books you start to read again, the smell of the children you've met, a petit-cookies-and-vanilla girl, a grass-and-metal boy, the smell of a gin and tonic on the occasional evening out when you're invited to literary events, the smell of the man who's becoming foreign and repellent to you but you still sort his clothes every day, the smell of the spring when you fall in love again. The smell of grief for your former life which has now become so colonized by the needs of others that your inner world is holding on by no more than a thread of the web which, maybe, you're thinking, should be sundered. You'll write your first story collection while amid the repetitive process of the theft of time, the violent rupture of your double life, the nocturnal bickering, crushed and shamed by the envy you feel toward others who have the time to indulge their passions. The sentences will be sturdy, vengeful and occasionally they'll blaze with insight, and you'll pretend that this is your best. In reality, this will barely be enough for you to survive, you had no more. Gradually you'll master the voice needed for the nocturnal disputes, here and there you'll use your own language when you speak, you'll demand justice. In the blur of the genre of a man's and a woman's deteriorating relationship, one of his sentences will stay with you, well you were never much of a student, I had no idea it would suddenly matter so much to you to finish your degree. A few years later you aren't able sell the table for even 1000 kunas after you buy a new one. You'll give it to your ex.

Who's looking after your little ones? While you sit at a low wooden table on the small stage of a cafe that hosts literary events, you think about the question asked by the nice moderator. You smile, though you're already deeply fractured inside, and you make an effort to blunt the impact of the humiliating question and preserve your dignity and his. Instead of a sincere answer, as this is hardly the time or the place, you can see ever more clearly how they see you, both of you. It feels at times like a revelation, much like when you're in the midst of writing and then a sound from another room rattles you and reminds you that you're somebody's mother, even though, most of the time, that's what you are. Next to writing, that's inconsequential. You don't take yourself at all seriously, but written sentences—those you do. You're shocked when, caught up by articulating a text, an insight like this shakes you out of blissful complacency. You would find it next to impossible to explain to the moderator what you have in mind even if you two were condemned to sit together at this low table for a thousand years. Elena says: "A woman who wants to write has unavoidably to deal not only with the entire literary patrimony she's been brought up on and in virtue of which she wants to and can express herself but with the fact that that patrimony is essentially male and by its nature doesn't provide true female sentences." As you disentangle yourself from the awkward and clumsy start of your conversation, you recall how it has always been awkward and clumsy with them and frequently still is, and while you'd like to hold forth with true female sentences, you might sound terrible and scandalous. A poetry prize twenty years before, a night in a Rijeka hotel and a member of the jury who wanted to come into your bedroom at two o'clock in the morning: he needed toothpaste. You were twenty-one. Rides at night on your way back from a book launch and the eternal two-sided yet sadly unidimensional jokes about sex, discrete attempts that don't make big waves but could be brushed off at any moment as having been *taken the wrong way*. So who gave you your first push forward, you never thanked me, who published your first poems, who wrote about you, who found you a translator, who edited your book, who was it who always dipped his moist hand, squid-like, between waist and armpit and slobbered all over your hair when preparing a speech about serious literature? At the publishing house party who was it who said—and you heard him say it while he was ducking behind bushes and speaking with a buddy on his cell phone—that there are cute little whores here, maybe there'll be some action? Who was it who, when moved by literary texts, highly intellectual and yet modern and broad-minded, tried to slip a hand in, bring you down a peg when you'd started to fly, remind you of your place, that you can't get ahead without patrons and arbiters who are willing to include you in a

series of books that cater to women readers? Who told you your big advantage is that you're pretty, so milk it while you can? Who showed you what to write and how to write it? All this was one and the same mindset, moving from one bearded mouth to another, and then it shows up here again with you at the low table, moderating a conversation about your trauma, about ticklish topics, about your kids, about how you managed to break through so well. This is bewildering, all of it, but you haven't yet had a chance to take it all in. Your attention is fragmented, watching chicken-pox scabs fall off, he picked one off his cheek with his fingernail, the scar will always remain, then the question of questions, what to cook for dinner tomorrow, and the last exam on ontology and you have the primary and secondary reading lists for it, but even a passing glance makes you feel tired, you were never much of a student, and you feel so immature, dwelling in the realm of philosophers who stroll along rivers and gaze at the stars. You have a feeling that the true temptations and repudiations are yet to come, soon, when you're on your own with the kids. After you finish taking all the exams you try to get back to writing. There's not a lot of time. You fear you've lost your voice. Feverishly you pace around your desk like a wild yet taxidermied animal. If you sit down at the wrong moment, you might jinx everything. At night you lie awake in bed. You're beginning to get involved, you're involved, this is an insult that will dog you and the filth with which you desecrated serious literature.

Writing takes you, farther and farther, to places you weren't expecting. You're sitting on a plastic chair at a small police station, waiting for a clerk to come and fetch you so he can take your statement. Your involvement and composition of sentences which you extract from reality and your gut and filter through fiction have brought you to the edge of the law. It would be funny if it weren't a little unsettling, that last night, while you were making palačinkas, a policeman came to the door, and then you had to invent a story for the children so they wouldn't be upset. Luckily, that's your superpower. Now you're sitting with a brown leather bag in your lap, an umbrella by your leg, and across from you is a man who's been beaten up, whose right eye is caked in clotted blood. When he looks at you with his left eye, you don't know whether to smile at him. Sometimes you receive threats, usually in writing, some from totally illiterate people whom you've never met, others from prominent members of parliament, ranging from threats of rape worse than the Chetniks to very sophisticated and ambiguous threats, keep it up why don't you and we'll see what happens. The worm has turned, now they're disowning you. You sit at the low table in your

mother's living room, your brother's across from you, he says, I can only look at you through the sight on my gun. Nothing but your writing brought you to this. Purely your attempt at telling a story about the world around you, as it truly is for you, and while your story becomes ever more logical, your life gets complicated and grows ever more illogical. Why don't you ever write something nice? asks your mother. Every year you have a few truly free days when everybody else goes off to the seashore and you imagine what life would be like if it were possible, you put yourself in your room, place your hands on your keyboard and feel about to start to play. Excitement and awe are as present as they were in the beginning, but now you feel anxiety, too. Will you be able to stay consistent? But after the first, thin atmospheric layer of humdrum reality and its consequences evaporates, you dive into the very magma of life. You catch sight of a red thread with its end poking out, you tug it and follow it. Everything surrounding you transforms into golden nuggets, you sharpen your oblique gaze which shows you people and objects of daily life gleaming in their uniqueness and you follow them back to the very origins, to meaning itself.

This gives you remarkable courage and pluck to bridge what people fear, what you yourself fear when you forget that feeling, to bridge the uncertainty over future income, paying bills and loans, responsibility for the lives of the children, the lack of a steady job. You read *The Life of a Woman* written by poet Dragojla Jarnević in the mid-nineteenth century and you begin to see that nothing much has changed other than technological advances and timesavers such as using a Dyson instead of a broom. Only on separate islands where the more attentive and sensitive fathers happen to land. How can you support yourself with writing? they sometimes ask you snidely. If we were to sit at low tables for another thousand years, we'd be hard pressed to answer that, you seek simple words when nothing else will do, simple it is, one lives brilliantly and uncertainly, brilliantly and terribly.

And then inside men. You start observing them. Throughout your schooling you've learned their verses by heart, their wisdom about life, both spiritual and material, how they idolize women's beauty, sometimes even intelligence; the descriptions of the tragedy of war, formative clashes with fathers, unhappy love for fatal saints or whores, moral quandaries, and so on. But this helps you see that you haven't learned much about them. You need to start observing them. Daddy's now going to write, and you take the children and go to the park, when the afternoon isn't enough, the daddy who writes goes off to a different city or a different country. He needs peace and quiet. You,

on the other hand, write with the drawer removed or when you ask Mama to babysit. But she's torn between wanting to help you and help her own mother, who suffered three strokes in a year. Observing men you conclude that most of the strokes of the older, ailing members of the family rain down like hail on the heads of women and spare the men. Diabetes, too, cancers, anorexia, decubitus, diapers, most of the shit of the helpless, old or young, passes through the hands of women. This includes most of the hysterical sobbing, most of the meat to be sliced up for the freezer, the toilet paper rolls to be replaced, most of the receipts from the doctor, the vaccinations, check-ups at the orthodontist, washing the floor. You crouch in the bushes and observe them obliquely as they wield their fantastic skills, for instance how they leave their children with someone else, they really leave them, how they read and block out what's going on in the next room, how they swim, venturing out far and don't come back in for a long time. When it's time to decide what to do about yet another unplanned pregnancy, they lay their hand on your shoulder and say, whatever you decide, I'll support you, although they had also said, I took precautions. Another life will play out before your eyes which will deform you in every sense, whatever the case you'll bleed, you'll sit on the edge of the bathtub and think you're crazy, and everything will one day end with the refrain: this is all my fault. They also say, ask if you need anything, I'm no mindreader, and off they go. Meanwhile they're known for exceptional psychological portrayal of female characters. In literature. With your books, you compete in the same category, you watch how they rear up, proud and firm, sometimes reaching quite high. And you'd jump high too, but the problem is that you haven't been getting in shape for that. You're in shape for much more than that while your language is devalued, stuffed away in a drawer of a niche kind of writing, although recently, the truly feminine is slowly starting to break through into the human. You cover life equally along the horizontal and the vertical. Each jump of yours aiming only upward, striving to compete with theirs, diminishes your own skill. To come to this revelation, your feet must have gone numb from crouching in the bushes, your vision must be blurred from keeping watch. You must be conscious of the real threat that's in the air when you speak frankly; don't shrink from it. Don't apologize. Ultimately you must internalize the idea that their words about your words are neither confirmation nor negation of your value. At the same time you should foster sincere sympathy for women who are ecstatically thrilled by their patronizing praise. This is part of the path which most traverse. Despite it all, you aren't bitter. Most of your life you're in love with men and deeply loyal, seldom cynical, but occasionally you do slip up. Although your partner, lover

and best friends have qualities which you love to call a woman's heart, at the slightest inkling of misunderstanding you take out your knife and relish the silver shimmer of its blade. The new apartment you moved into is marvelous, he cleared away all the things, took care of everything he could, waited for the tradesmen, when the curtain rod smashed his nose he still gazed at you fondly and for nights he pored over furniture with you on the Ikea webpages. He always said exactly what was needed: I'm excited by your mind, you have beautiful fingernails. For the first time in your adult life you have your own room, you have piled everything into it, a wardrobe, a large bed and a night table, a bookshelf, and you imagine a desk under the window. It's a little crowded, you say. Maybe you don't need the desk, he answers hastily, meaning well, you have the big table in the dining room, and their desks when they're not at home. You spin around on your heel and plunge the blade full-length into his thigh and twist it slowly, calmly. Greetings for all those beyond the system of slavery, you whisper softly, you step over him, pour yourself a Pelin Antique, go onto the balcony and light a cigarette. You'll get over it tomorrow, you're aware of your excessive use of force, but you don't intend to apologize. You're collecting on a thousand-year-old debt. The desk is your last line of defense.

Come on, have another, says your mother while you sit at her oak dining-room table, and she fills the glass in front of you. You too, you say back to her, but she won't, she's on meds. Recently you've been stopping in to see your mother. You come by in the evening, she's already in her bathrobe, preparing to watch a Turkish soap opera, but her door isn't locked yet, she's hoping you'd come. You two have been through so much already, intense closeness in childhood and your teens, which at one phase of life resulted in identification. The long and painful emancipation that usually arises from this had its phases, laws and refrains: you don't understand me, things aren't the same for you as they are for me, why don't you get a job, you worked in a factory, how do you know my needs, I'm unhappy in my marriage, well so what, as if others are happy, people don't get divorced over that, you're bitter because you're alone, you're alone because you're selfish, you're selfish, you'll see when you grow up, you don't know what children are like, you'll see, you can't imagine how much I love you, then let me go, but what about me, you don't even call to see if I'm alive, you don't care if I'm truly happy, that's all I care about, that's why I'm saying, try to understand me. Walking away without a goodbye, ignoring a missed invitation, reinterpreting the past to fit it into the presence, gradual acceptance of a modern narrative of a mother's guilt

wherever the system failed. Despite it all, she's here, you're here. Now you sit and drink together at least one evening a week. The day dawned. You laugh at the ordinary. What will you write about when I die? she asks you, joking, she reads everything you write though she doesn't always comment, she skips the parts where the character of the mother is exposed to your merciless oblique gaze. When you are completely sure she'll be insulted or angry, she says with misty eyes: I can only imagine how this must have been for you when you had to write about it. And she says, write about me, it doesn't bother me, leave the others alone. Your mother understands fiction and truth which can only be dealt with that way. She tells you, let me know when you need me to cook, just tell me the evening before, let them be off on their way. Finish the book. She says, don't worry so much, take care, they'll leave anyway. Miserable, you ask, how did you survive it all, all of it and me, and us, she says, it wasn't easy, but it's possible. She says, come on, have another. When you have gotten what you came for you go home and sit at your desk without the drawer. She's behind you, and your children are in your lap.

Utterly calm you lower your fingertips onto the keys, gold shines, everything you ever learned about writing and literature you learned from your mother. Your mother cleans, like your daughter's mother does, until one day the clarity of the true female sentence shines forth.